

HOODED CROW, PART 1

Richard Hell



photo: Stephen Gill

“I felt the story was revelatory while being impossible to interpret.”

— Joy Williams*

When I have a new book out, I find myself compelled to continuously re-read it, because just being aware that others are reading it makes it into a different thing to me, and I need to try to account for that. Then before too long I get sick of the book and can only see what’s wrong with it and that drives me to write another one to compensate. (Which is convenient, because a person needs to have something to do.)

So I’d been doing that, absorbing my book *What Just Happened*. First, it contains about 70 pages of poems from lockdown, then there are another 70 pages, divided about in half between an essay from 2019 called “Falling Asleep” and a 33-page section of 88 numbered entries from recent years’ notebooks. The essay contends that reality most resembles the state between wakefulness and sleeping, like a dead man walking, which could also describe the condition of the entire human race, most inescapably in our apocalyptic time.

One of the books I was also reading as I kept obsessively returning to my own was Joy Williams’s novel *Harrow* (2021). Its setting is post-apocalyptic—climate change, pollution, death of species, collapse of societies—and it is quite grim, if also funny and intimate and super alive. In it, towards the end (ahem), there are running references to the five-page Kafka tale, or incident, “The Hunter Gracchus” (and its briefer companion, “Fragment”). After coming across a third or fourth reference to the story in her book, I went looking and found the text.

Kafka arises in my book too: in the poem “Past Is Past,” which begins, “Is Kafka about being polite / and ignoring how everything / takes place in an oppressive / cyclical eternity? That / and laughs” and in a list in that poem of examples of the conspicuous intelligence and empathetic capacities of Jews (“Kafka and Freud. Einstein, Groucho, Bob Dylan and Susan Sontag. Mark Rothko.”); also where the opening paragraph of *The Metamorphosis* is quoted in the “Falling Asleep” essay for being like a nightmare (dream); and, lastly, in a note, #47 in the list, that concerns a Kafka story fragment, “Crossbreed,” which is about an animal that is a mixture of a cat and a lamb. I didn’t and don’t think of my book as leaning on Kafka, though. He awes and owns me when I’m reading him, but he doesn’t happen to be in my personal pantheon of writers who’ve affected me most, so far. Those passing three or four moments in the new book are the only times I can remember referring to him in print.

He’s now seeped in further though, via “Gracchus.” The remaining, final content of my book is its graphics: a series of nine scattered elegant, tangled, abstract images by Christopher Wool and one photograph by Stephen Gill that is reproduced twice on two sides of a page—first reversed horizontally, then straightforwardly—dividing the initial poetry section from the rest of the book: of a crow, a Eurasian Hooded Crow, to be exact.

“Gracchus” is the story or sketch of a man who’s dead but alive. He’s a hunter from deep in the Black Forest who died centuries before (the story presumably takes place in the teens of the 20th century) but is doomed to sail forever on the ship that was meant to transport him to “the other world” because the ship randomly lost course and is now rudderless. The story begins:

*A character in Williams’s *Harrow* says this about Kafka’s story “The Hunter Gracchus.”

Two boys were sitting on the harbor wall playing with dice. A man was reading a newspaper on the steps of the monument, resting in the shadow of a hero who was flourishing his sword on high. A girl was filling her bucket at the fountain. A fruit seller was lying beside his wares gazing at the lake. Through the vacant window and door openings of a café one could see two men quite at the back drinking their wine. The proprietor was sitting at a table in front and dozing. A bark was silently making for the little harbor, as if borne by invisible means over the water. A man in a blue blouse climbed ashore and drew the rope through a ring. Behind the boatman two other men in dark coats with silver buttons carried a bier, on which, beneath a great flower-patterned fringed silk scarf, a man was apparently lying.

It already feels like a dream. It's like a de Chirico plaza. Or also maybe Balthus... Lying on the bier is Gracchus, deceased, under that flowery fringed shawl (later he tells his interrogator how, after he fell to his death many centuries prior, and was approaching his death ship, he "slipped into [his] winding sheet like a girl into her wedding dress") and he's being carried to a room in an inn where he will be visited and interviewed by the town's burgomaster, apprised the night before of the hunter's impending arrival by "a dove but as big as a cockerel" who'd flown in the official's bedroom window and told him to expect and welcome the dead man.

So these touchpoints between *Harrow* and "Gracchus" and *What Just Happened* began appearing to glow and flicker in my head. Doubtless half of them were warning signs: failing brakes, dead ends ahead, but I had to keep going. I started looking for commentary on "Gracchus" and the first thing I discovered was that Gracchus and Kafka both indicate "crow." "Gracchus" is thought to be derived from the Latin stem *gracc* which imitates the cawing of crows, jackdaws, and ravens. "Crow" is the overriding way of referring to the large number of species of birds known as Corvids: crows, ravens, rooks, magpies, jackdaws, jays, treebies, choughs, and nutcrackers. The crow in my book was photographed in Sweden, where it is known as a *kråka*. Kafka's father had on his business letterhead a picture of a *kavka* which is Czech for jackdaw.

Harrow opens:

My mother and father named me Lamb. My mother believed that I had died as an infant but had then come back to the life we shared. As I grew, her intention and need was to put me in touch with where I had been when I was dead, what I remembered of it and what I had learned. She believed I was destined for something extraordinary.

Later in the book, for unstated reasons, Lamb will be known as Khristen. What is known is that Lamb's mother insists that when

Lamb was four months old she died but shortly afterwards came back to life, was resurrected, and the mother is greatly saddened that Khristen can't remember this. The mother bewails how her child is thereby "denied access to the most important part of your life, the future you had in death!" A character will also point out a word derivation: "Cemetery—from the Greek *koimeterion*, sleeping chamber, akin to the Latin, *cunae*, cradle."

There is a strange atmosphere throughout these researches also of sensing that Kafka had secret homosexual urges. This will also get hinted at in W.G. Sebald's novel *Vertigo* (1990), I would soon discover, most conspicuously in "Dr. K. Takes the Waters at Riva," the section in the four-part book that deals specifically with Gracchus. (Riva is the port on a lake in Northern Italy that Gracchus's death ship visits. Dr. K is Kafka.) But is there anything corresponding in my book?

In *Harrow*, Williams has a character remark about "Gracchus" that "Kafka's story was so heavy, so masculine. Gracchus was so crude, so filled with thoughtless violent happiness as he lay in ambush, as he slayed the innocent. Everything was masculine, stubborn, ponderous, heavy, even the wine was heavy." He died by falling from a cliff as he was chasing a wild chamois in the great forest. Though he takes to his winding sheets like a girl to marriage, and on his bier he's covered by a frilly "flower-patterned fringed silk cloth." Also *Harrow* has it that "Gracchus had been given his wearying sentence because of his guilt. He had roamed the fruitful earth and had taken from it in a contented stupor and when he died his death was as incomplete as his life had been."

On consideration, the gay leanings could also be seen as present in the cat-lamb sketch that's referred to in *What Just Happened*. In "The Crossbreed" it's emphasized that the pet was a gift, "a legacy," from the narrator's father. "I did not inherit much from my father, but this legacy is quite remarkable." The dominant (!) feature of Kafka's life story is his oppression by his tyrannical, disapproving father. One suspects that the two stories, "Gracchus" and "Crossbreed," are at least partially analogs of feeling in oneself both the masculine and feminine, and/or carnivore and herbivore, predator and prey. There is a poem in my book, too, that turns out to be about anal sex, and includes the lines, "Shall it / be male or female in the tub? / Tub is but backwards, and but / is almost butt, which is / a person's ass." Just to be thorough in my hunt for these nodes...

Which is a good place to proceed to Sebald.

[To be continued...]

📖 Richard Hell's most recent book is, *What Just Happened* (Winter Editions, 2023) .

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