

**THE PERFORMANCE
OF
BECOMING HUMAN**

Daniel Borzutzky

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The Performance of Becoming Human
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FIRST EDITION

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THE PERFORMANCE OF BECOMING HUMAN

On the side of the highway a thousand refugees step off a school bus and into a sun that can only be described as “blazing.”

The rabbi points to the line the refugees step over and says: “That’s where the country begins.”

This reminds me of Uncle Antonio. He would have died had his tortured body not been traded to another country for minerals.

Made that up.

This is a story about diplomatic protections.

The refugees were processed through Austria or Germany or maybe Switzerland.

Somehow they were discovered in some shit village in some shit country by European soldiers and taken to an embassy where they were promptly bathed, injected with vaccines, interrogated, etc.

Their bodies were traded by country A in exchange for some valuable natural resource needed by country B.

There was only one gag, says the rabbi, as he tucks his children into bed. So the soldiers took turns passing the filthy thing back and forth between the mouths of the two prisoners. The mother and son licked each other's slobber off the dirty rag that had been in who knows how many other mouths.

You love to write about this, don't you?

I am paid by the word for my transcriptions. Just one more question about the gag.

He wants to know what color the gag was, what it was made of, how many mouths had licked it. Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands?

They used their belts to bind them by the waist to the small cage they were trapped in.

Everything reminds me of a story about an ape captured on a boat by a group of European soldiers who showed him how to become human by teaching him how to spit and belch.

Everything is always about the performance of becoming human.

Observing a newly processed refugee, the rabbi says: "I have seen those blue jeans before."

At times like this, he thinks: I can say just about anything right now.

This is, after all, a bedtime story for the end of the world.

I am moving beneath the ground and not sleeping and trying to cross the border from one sick part of the world to another.

But where is the light and why does it not come in through your bloody fingers?

You hold your bloody fingers before my eyes and there is light in them but I cannot see it.

You say: There are countries in my bloody fingers. I am interested in the borders.

Or: I am interested in the gas chambers in your collapsible little fingers.

You put them to my face and I see your hands open and in them I see a thick wall and a sky and an ocean and ten years pass and it is still nighttime and I am falling and there are bodies on the ground in your bloody hands.

Think about the problem really hard then let it go and when you least expect it a great solution will appear in your mind.

The broken bodies stand by the river and wait for the radiation to trickle out of the houses and into their skin.

They stand under billboards and sniff paint and they know the eyes that watch them own their bodies.

A more generous interpretation might be that their bodies are shared between the earth, the state and the bank.

The sentences are collapsing one by one and the bodies are collapsing in your bloody hands and you stitch me up and pray I will sleep and you tell me of the shattered bus stops where the refugees are waiting for the buses to take them to the mall where they are holding us now and there is a man outside our bodies making comments about perspective and scale and light and there is light once more in your bloody fingers.

All I see is the sea and my mother and father falling into it.

Again? That's like the most boring image ever.

The water is frozen and we are sleeping on the rocks, watching the cows on the cliff and you tell me they might fall and break open and that sheep and humans and countries will fall out of them and that this will be the start of the bedtime story you will tell me on this our very last night on earth.

Come closer, you say, with your eyes.

Move your bloody face next to mine and rub me with it. We are dying from so many stories. We are not complete in the mind from so many stories of burning houses, missing children, slaughtered animals. Who will put the stories back together and who will restore the bodies? I am working towards the end but first I need a stab, a small slice. The stories they are there but we need a bit more wit. We need something lighter to get us to the end of this story. Did you hear the one about the guy who picked up chicks by quoting the oral testimonies of the illiterate villagers who watched their brothers and sisters get slaughtered?

Or:

Andalé andalé arriba arriba welcome to Tijuana you cannot eat anymore barbecued iguana.

Have you met Speedy Gonzales' cousin?

His name is Slow Poke Rodrigues.

En español se llama Lento Rodrigues.

He's a drunk little fucking mouse.

His predator, the lazy cat baking in the sun, thinks he will taste good with chili peppers but there's something I forgot to tell you. Slow Poke always pack a gun and now he's going to blow your flabbergasted feline face off.

It was 1987 and my friends from junior high trapped me on the floor and mashed bananas in my face and sang: It's no fun being an illegal alien!

You know you can die from so many stories.

The pudgy cat guards the AJAX cheese factory behind the fence, right across the border.

The wetback mice see the gringo cheese.

They smell the gringo cheese.

Your gringo cheese it smells so good.

They need Speedy Gonzales to get them some ripe, fresh, stinky gringo cheese.

Do you know this Speedy Gonzales, asks one of the starving wetback mice.

I know him, Speedy Gonzales frens with my seester (the mice laugh). Speedy Gonzales frens with everybody's seester.

Ha ha ha the little border-crossing, sneak-fucking mouses think it's cute that they're invading our culture to steal our cheese but it don't make a difference because you and I (cue the rhythm and blues) we are taking a stroll on the electrified fence of love cause I feel a little Southern Californian transnational romance coming on right about now.

I feel like Daniel from the Karate Kid because I too once had a Southern Californian experience where I wasn't aware I was learning ancient Japanese secrets when I was waxing on and waxing off.

And I am with you Mr. Miyagi in Reseda.

I am with you Mr. Miyagi in Pasadena.

And I am with you Mr. Miyagi at the All Valley Karate tournament.

And I am with you Mr. Miyagi in Okinawa where you went in Karate Kid II to meet your long lost girlfriend when you discovered she wasn't married off when she was just a teenager to your fiercest Okinawan rival.

And I am with you Mr. Miyagi in Tijuana where it's murder and diarrhea and always kinda kinky.

But seriously, friends:

What *do* you make of this darkness that surrounds us?

They chopped up two dozen bodies last night and today I have to pick up my dry cleaning.

In the morning I need to assess student learning outcomes as part of an important administrative initiative to secure the nation's future by providing degrees of economic value to the alienated, urban youth.

So for now hasta luego compadres and don't worry too much about the bucket of murmuring shit that is the unitedstatesian night.

What does it say? What does it say? What do you want it to say?

IN THE BLAZING CITIES OF YOUR ROTTEN CARCASS MOUTH

*Too bad we live in a world so uptight that we can't
have things like the Frito Bandito anymore.*

-Comment on YouTube

The children were eating the bushes outside of their former houses that had been crushed by The Bank of America.

There was a boy in a bush singing an improvised song about a bulldozer that obliterates the bureaucratic centers of the earth.

Do you remember cheese, he sang to his friend.

Te acuerdas de la piña?

Do you remember ferries, he sang.

Te acuerdas de los patos?

Do you remember school bells and cowards and the boys who would come to our yard to eat the scraps of food we threw to them before the city started to blaze?

Bienvendios a CVS. Si cuenta con tu Extra Care Card please escanea it now.

There really wasn't money anymore or at least there wasn't money for us.

The man with the camera kissed me and took photographs of the blood that dripped from my fingers.

Everyone knew he was CIA.

He knew for example that the blood that dripped from my face tasted like the blood of the workers assassinated by the Fatherland.

Then I found a dying shack and I met a man with a chain and he was snoring and talking in his sleep and he smelled like pee and complained he had lost his pension when they privatized the city in the dying days of the rotten carcass economy.

Looking after the world is a shitty job if you're really not a people-person.

He slept on the floor with a chain tied to him.

It rode over his crotch and for twenty-three dollars he would bless you into heaven so you would not have to remain in the purgatory of the blazing city.

The further I fall the smaller I become, he chanted.

This poem would be better if it took place in The Saloon of Good Fortune. It would be better if a man jumped off the bar and onto my back as I was reciting it. If I caught him on my back and smashed him into a table. If one of his hoodlum buddies smashed me over the head with a bottle of tequila. This poem would be better with just the right amount of sex, alcohol, violence and 1950s border-noir.

The chained man was moaning about how he had gone from office to office to see what the Good Lord had to offer.

And all I have now, he sang, is a chain and a basket full of fingernails.

An old brown dog was tied by another chain to a rafter.

The dog wouldn't stop yapping and I understood I was being refused absolution.

But I'm Jewish, I told the dog. I am a member of la raza de Moises.

He barks love, the chained man sang, and he wouldn't stop singing and I needed to rest so I would be able to find the boat that would help me get away.

I sat on the floor to sleep, woke up in chains and there was no one to tell my story to.

I lay stiff, holding my breath, trying to be anyone but myself.

Imagination challenge #1:

Imagine there is a matzah-ball bandito in your house. You buy lots of matzah balls and mix them with jalapenos and Fritos and light them on fire and then you survive the apocalypse because Fritos can stay lit forever and you don't need to find kindling or any of that other stuff so you finally have time to study Karlito Marx while watching Manchester United's Mexican hero Chicharito Hernandez score a poacher's golazo in the waning seconds of the Carling Cup while eating hallucinogenic mushrooms while watching Eric Estrada on *Chips* on another screen and listening to a podcast of the Book of Leviticus on your iPod Touch while Skyping with your mom while sexting with your boyfriend who works for the secret police.

Write a sonnet or a villanelle about this experience and do not use any adjectives.

Then I clutched a man trapped beneath my body.

He refused to stop breathing and so did I.

It was 98 degrees.

There were echoes trapped in the wall and they belonged to the broken bodies waiting for the boat on the river.

And the man in my arms said: Are they ordinary people, these trapped voices?

They are ordinary, I said. Demolished, relentless, alone.

And we sang:

Once I made \$60,057 a year working for the city. This was before it blazed.

But then one day I came to work and there was an incinerator outside of the building.

My colleagues were scuttling around, trying to salvage things from their offices.

I told this to my boy and all he could say is what, daddy, is an incinerator?

A container for burning refuse, I answered, as they incinerated my desk and a photograph of you that I loved.

I saw them putting my plants and books in it and there was no explanation why.

There was only an automated voicemail on my cell phone from the incinerating bodies who said they were serving the city and that soon all of the city would blaze.

I dream of a giant parasite to feed on the infested bones of the rotting citizens.

There are sirens that won't stop blaring and rotten teeth in all of our mouths and when I asked an authoritative body what to do now that my life had been incinerated he told me to go to the river and ask to be put on a boat.

I went to the river and found a body builder who would not stop running.

He was enormous, wearing only boxer trunks, and he complained that his lover was overusing the word "cock."

He was frantically running and he couldn't stop running and I was looking for the boat and the body builder was screaming about his lover's overuse of the word "cock" and for a moment he spoke of a Jewish centaur on the bank of the river and he kept running and he wouldn't stop running and his boxing trunks were red and silky and when I asked why he was running he shouted that his life was a symbol for something that doesn't exist.

It was 98 degrees.

The evening star came out.

A limp, stale moon hung over us.

And this is where the story should end.

But bedtime stories for the end of the world don't end where they are supposed to end.

They end awkwardly, in the middle of some mess that was probably not worth making to begin with.

Here's an alternative ending.

Imagination Challenge #2:

It's nighttime. You're decomposing in a cage or a cell. Your father is reading the testimonies of the tortured villagers to you. He is in the middle of a particularly poignant passage about how the military tied up the narrator and made him watch as his children were lit on fire. He has to listen to the screams of his blazing children but he cannot listen to their screams so he himself starts screaming and then the soldiers shove a gag in his mouth so that he will stop screaming, but he doesn't stop screaming even with the gag in his mouth.

But these are not screams, actually. They are unclassifiable noises that can only be understood as a collaboration between his dying body, the obliterated earth, and the bodies of those already dead.

Write a free-verse poem about the experience. Write it in the second person.

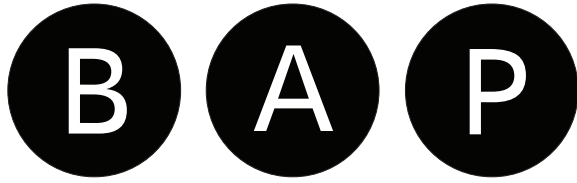
Publish it some place good.

DANIEL BORZUTZKY's books and chapbooks include, among others, *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy* (2015), *Bedtime Stories For The End of the World!* (2015), *Data Bodies* (2013), *The Book of Interfering Bodies* (2011), and *The Ecstasy of Capitulation* (2007). He has translated Raúl Zurita's *The Country of Planks* (2015) and *Song for his Disappeared Love* (2010), and Jaime Luis Huenún's *Port Trakl* (2008). His work has been supported by the Illinois Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Pen/Heim Translation Fund. He lives in Chicago.

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