

Signs and Wonders

by Rebecca McClanahan, from Short Takes: Brief Encounters with Contemporary Nonfiction

Artillery sounds wake me: car alarms screeching, honking, beeping--you know the drill--and a jackhammer breaking open the sidewalk outside our window. No, not our window, I remind myself. The window of the apartment we've been subletting these past four years--and the lease is almost up again. Another two years? My husband's leaving it up to me. He could live anywhere, he's that kind of guy. Easy, adaptable, like the ducks in the park. Things just roll right off his back.

When we first moved to the city, we couldn't believe how cheap the flowers were. "What a city," we said. "We can buy flowers every week, fill the apartment with them, the bathtub. What a city!" Then we went to the grocery store, and when I saw the prices I started to cry. "How can we possibly afford..., we'll have to give up... Oh my God," I shrieked, "what will we eat?"

"We'll just have to eat flowers," he said.

Last week, I would have signed a hundred-year lease. After all, this *is* the best city in the world, and I was just coming off one of my New York

highs, the kind that hits when you least expect it and suddenly it's like first love again, first lust, and you wonder how you could possibly live anywhere else. Then a steam pipe bursts, the couple in the apartment above you straps their steel-toed boots back on, you step in a puddle of urine on the subway platform and some guy with three rings in his nose calls you Bitch and spits on you because--who knows?--you look like his second grade teacher, or some president's wife, or his mother, and you think, *Live another four years in this jackhammering, siren-screaming, piss-puddling city? In someone else's apartment--because who can afford their own? Someone else's bed, plates, forks, spoons?*

Maybe it's the wrong day to decide. Maybe I need some air. Maybe I need a sign. So I go where I always go when I need a sign--the park, and oh look, a day so beautiful you'd gladly pay the universe if it were charging. The leaves on the ginkgos are falling as I speak, gold coins upon gold coins. And there in the pond are my geese, my ducks, how I admire them. Look, one is passing up bread crumbs to catch a blossom. He's eating flowers. Along the promenade are the skaters in their T-shirts: *Kickimus Maximus Assimus. Are you talking to me? Fun loving criminal.* One guy's skating backwards, a small compact black man so graceful he doesn't need skates, his hip joints are on ball bearings, rolling in one smooth movement. But I know it's harder than it looks, isn't everything? Even for the ducks. If you peek just beneath the surface of the water, you can see their little paddle-wheel feet working, churning. It breaks your heart: little New York ducks have to keep moving all the time.

I stop at a bench beside a ragged guy in a black hat. His shopping cart is plastered with handmade signs. New York is a city of signs: Curb your dog. Curb your dogma. Love your neighbor, your neighbor's dog. His signs are bright red painted on cardboard: *Society of Jesus Christ. Society of Disabled Artists. Call me Ray.*

“So, Ray,” I say, “you’re an artist?”

He rummages in his cart and pulls out a painting of a bonfire, flames breaking into bloom.

I ask if he’s ever seen a flame like that, or is it imagination.

“I like to think about Moses,” he says. “I was seeing the burning bush.”

My Bible knowledge is rusty, but I’m hungry for a sign. “God spoke to him in the fire, right?”

“That’s right.”

”In words?” I ask.

”*Through* him. Spirit.”

I tell him I used to be in a gospel choir, but I was only a lowly back-up singer.

“Never call yourself lowly,” he says.

Closer now, I can see his face beneath the hat: almost handsome. But the smell is ripe, and I won’t be staying. Anyway, it’s his bench; I’m just subletting. A lowly subletter, I think for an instant, then stop myself. But it *is* his bench and I should respect that. I don’t like it when people come to *my* gazebo. It took me months to find it, the most beautiful place in the

park. There's even a place to fish. I can lean my back against the wooden slats, put my feet up, watch the geese form their predictable patterns. A limited vocabulary can be a good thing: that V, I mean. It's a comfort knowing you can always count on the geese. They won't slip into some ragged U or split into individual I's. It's good to have something to count on, like the gondola that glides through about this time of day, sliding under the bow bridge, the gondolier always singing badly *O Sole Mio*, which is the perfect song for New York, right? O sole mio, oh my sun, my ducks, my forks, oh my anything. Crazy, isn't it? When so much of New York is about we: *O sole wio*.

Still, it's a beautiful spot, my gazebo, and I'd tell you where it is, but what if word got out? A few weeks ago, on my birthday, no less, I couldn't even get a seat. It hadn't been a good week, the odometer of my life was clicking too fast, too many zeros stacking up. Birthdays can do that to you, especially in the city. Especially when you do what we did--wait until middle age to move here. "Like, isn't that backwards?" my niece had said. "I mean, like, don't most people go to New York when they're young?" So I really needed my gazebo that day, but some homeless guy was stretched out the whole length of it, beside a grocery cart with a handmade sign sticking out of the top: *I'm at the peak of my life*. I wondered if the sign was meant for me, if it was trying to tell me something. Because the homeless guy seemed fine with his life, more than fine, actually, lying there in my gazebo, one hand on top of the blanket, the other beneath, and, well, how do I put this delicately? Pleasuring himself. While looking directly into

my eyes. Later, walking home, I had to laugh. Maybe at my age I should take it as a compliment, that I could inspire such... peaks. How much longer do I have on that meter? A few more clicks, and I'll look like those two ancient women over there, sharing a bag of peanuts like an old married couple.

Ah, the partners we make, the families we create in this city of strangers. Like that big guy on Ninth Avenue--big as a truck, I know you've seen him, he rides that little bike everywhere, with the little basket on the front. In it is one of those Cabbage Patch dolls that were popular a decade or so ago. He dresses her for the weather, secures her in with a seat belt, places a helmet on her head. Such care. And yesterday, beside the carousel, a teenage boy was strapped into a wheelchair, his head lolling, large brown eyes rolling up to the sky, his mouth opening, like a bird's, on a spoon lifted by a large, dark Hispanic woman. Caretakers, they call these women, or caregivers: give, take. You see them all over the city. The two were facing each other--he in his wheelchair, she on the green bench, their knees touching. Steam was rising from the thermos of soup. First she dipped the spoon in the thermos, blowing on it to cool it. Then she put it to her mouth and tested to be sure the soup was safe, that it wouldn't burn him.

When you see things like that you just want to break into lullaby. Sing someone to sleep in this town that never sleeps. Adopt an artist, a duck, a whole Cabbage Patch family. Look, here's a family now, spilling out of my gazebo, with their fishing poles, their buckets and bait, their beautiful children--black eyes, black hair, dimpled hands--the kind of

children you want to touch but you can't of course, especially in New York. The little boy is wrestling a bright red carp the color of the fire in Ray's painting, and now his sister is catching the carp in a net. Don't they know it's against the rules posted all over the park? *Catch and release*. Catch and release. Look but don't touch. Enjoy for the moment, then let it go--the fiery carp, the brilliant day, the black-eyed children with the dimpled hands, the coins on the gingko trees swirling down, down. Our lives are sublets anyway, and too quickly gone at that. And what better place to live out our leases. Curb your dog, your dogma, love your neighbor, your neighbor's dog. We're at the peak of our lives. O Sole Wio. Catch and release.