

R.F. Tripp

Ducks

It was on the news today, thousands dying in Pakistan and India, and Kashmir—I think Kashmir too. An earthquake. Three hundred died in a girl's school, just like that. They think maybe fifty thousand could be dead. Then there was this duck. Seriously. On TV. After the segment on the earthquake. Something about a bird flu that's supposed to hit us. And I can't get him out of my head, the duck. He was one of, I don't know, one of a quadrillion birds and ducks they're trying to round up and exterminate as quickly as possible. Kill the ducks before they kill us. Anyway, there was this bin. Maybe it was a basket. I couldn't really tell. But they were tossing ducks in. You couldn't really see them, the ducks, just the commotion, dust and feathers everywhere. But then the camera catches this one duck sticking his head out of the basket, like he's looking up at the people as they stuff his brothers and sisters in on top of him. And he had this look, like he knew something, or sensed something. Like this wasn't going to be your usual trip across town. He looked for all the world like that dog in that Goya painting. I can't get that dog out of my head either. He's looking over a log I think, with his little muzzle sticking up in the air. And you know right away he's dealing with something metaphysical—God maybe, or being abandoned by God, or toyed with, like the Greek gods were always doing. Or maybe it was more like, what—remember that Twilight Zone, the one with the couple that find themselves in this New England-looking town, but no one's there, just them? I remember that couple standing on a platform at this train station, and this train rolling in. They decide to get on, because no one's in the town, and I guess they think they better get the hell out of Dodge. But no one's on the train either. And little by little they start to put two and two together—that they're playthings, for a giant baby—a brat god, that's what I always figured, although this was never made clear. But the duck, he had the same look the dog had, and the couple. And the way I see it, they're us: the duck, the dog, the couple on the train, and those girls in that school—suddenly dead, dead as ducks.

I just found out the other day—I swear, I have to stop watching the news—I found out that the flu epidemic of 1918 killed something like twenty million people, or maybe it was forty. Anyway, millions. And I hear this guy talking on the radio about it. A survivor mind you. How old would this guy be! He was from Boston, or somewhere in New England, and he’s talking about caskets lining the streets—little baby caskets, white ones. But get this, they’re not just lined up, and for blocks, but stacked up, six high I think. Or maybe just three. But here’s the point: all this went away, wiped from the nation’s memory. Like it vaporized or something. Until now. Now it’s back, because of the bird flu that’s going to hit us. Then I think: the Civil War went away, and World War II went away, and of course the Black Death went away. Maybe they have to. But you don’t think they’ll ever be back, right? Not in America. But they do come back, and I wonder if I’ve been living in a bubble. And now I’m getting to the place where nothing goes away. And I think about what Eliot said, that thing about mankind not being able to stand too much reality.

I heard about this Mexican once living on this ranch in South Texas, right on the border. He spoke some English, but not much, and somehow he gets caught up in World War II, gets drafted into the American army mind you. And get this: they send him to China of all places. The story is, they are in this cave, whichever outfit he was in, and they hear planes overhead. Japs. And maybe because they thought he was expendable, just a Mexican maybe, at least not an American, but anyway they send him out to count the planes. So he runs out, looks up, then runs back in. They ask him how many, and he says: *too much, too many, no number*. That’s Eliot again. Best stay in the cave. Stay put. Too much, too many, no number. Plato would roll over, right? Best stick with the old ways, sing the old hymns. But I can’t. That’s the problem, because of the couple on the train, the Mexican, the dog, and now the duck.

Anyway, I’m back watching the news, and there’s this rescue team, I think from Switzerland. And they’re pulling this boy from the rubble. Another school mind you. One moment this kid’s doing his multiplication tables, thinking about soccer maybe, and the next moment he’s watching the pencil in

his hand start to shake, and then the ceiling comes down. Ducks and dogs everywhere. But here's the thing: God rarely gets a bad rap for any of this. You would think the churches would empty, be turned into movie houses or something.

I was in a church once, years ago, in Boston, where they were showing these silent movies because they got to use the organ. And they had this one guy playing his own original scores for movies like *Potemkin* and *Birth of a Nation*. It was weird. I grew up going to a church like that. But there we all were, all stoned and looking at this Eisenstien film. Remember that one scene, in Odessa, and a baby carriage bouncing down some steps? Wasn't there a mother running after it? And I kind of remember an old man there too. Didn't he die? I think he died. Anyway, listening to that guy play his original scores I thought about how horrified my parents would be, us profaning that sanctuary like that, and then how you can mix a church with a movie theater and you start to see how Dali's mind worked, and the Dadaists maybe.

That's what's happening with the news now—more mixing than matching. TV news used to be a distinguished looking man speaking in complete sentences for four, maybe five minutes even. Then there would be a commercial. Nothing too frenetic though. A jingle and a pitch. Then back to someone like John Cameron Swayze or Walter Conkrite. More words than pictures, maybe some thought even—with actual facts. Now it's get the news out and check the facts later. And it's all delivered by skanks wearing choke-chains, with music in the background, and sentence-crawls along the bottom of the screen. It drives me crazy.

So I go back to watch them pull the kid from the rubble, all limp and covered with powder from the cement ceiling. Then they cut to a commercial. And when they come back we're looking at the mother of the dead boy. And they're trying to hold her up, but she keeps collapsing. And I think, why don't they just let her sit for a while? And her arms keep flapping around, like broken chicken wings, and she's holding her palms up to where the world has fallen on her son, and the sound man is getting

some of her words, but of course I can't understand them, although I bet God can, and I'd bet the duck *and* the dog that she's engaged in the metaphysical conversation of her life with the Creator who gave her son life and promise and her a reason to drag herself out of bed each day in spite of the government, the police, and the local bullies.

But it's too much so I change the channel and land on what could be another planet but it's only a soccer game in Japan, and the camera is panning the crowd, and there are these huge, absolutely stunning team flags that have this lightness to them, like gossamer maybe, and the fans are waving them around, and the whole scene is awash in a visual aesthetic that's hard to resist, and I think how no one there has any earthly idea about the powdery boy holding a pencil no one will probably ever want to use again, and of course there's the damn duck. But get this: I start to feel guilty, like I need to get back to the woman and watch the Swiss do their work; like I need to be a witness or something.

Someone said once that sometimes all you can do is witness. I read once that there was this girl, and she was burned all over with third degree burns, and there was this young doctor with her—I think he was a resident, or maybe just an intern—and he was supposed to hold the girl's hand each day while they changed her dressings. And he was supposed to, I don't know, give her moral support or something, because it was so painful when they took the bandages off. The young doctor, he hated it. He felt it was useless—him talking to her—inane, maybe arrogant even. But then it came to him he should stop talking, that he should just be there, to witness. So to get this going he asked her what it was like, being burned like that, being in pain like that, and low and behold the girl started talking. And in a moment or two he felt the girl's grip relax. And this was like an epiphany for him, one of those moments as they say. So I switched the channel back, thinking I could witness, albeit in absentia. But the segment was over. I missed it, missed being a witness.

Well, about this time the phone rings. It's close to dinnertime. I get up to answer it. Outside, the sun is going down. It's one of those fall evenings with colors that remind you of when you were a kid,

when you were playing outside, right before your mom calls you in to eat dinner. And as I talk on the phone I'm looking out the kitchen window at some kids I've never met playing in the yard across the fence behind my house. They're running around like crazy, laughing to beat the band, and falling, and kicking up leaves. And they have this dog with them, and he's all caught up in the excitement too. And the person on the other end of the line fades in and out as I try to anticipate which kid is going to pile on top of which kid. And the dog, he's crazy with it all, like he can't believe his luck. He dodges and scoots around and leaps these master leaps and barely escapes being clobbered, first by one kid then another. But then I see the dog suddenly run from the melee and start circling. He stops, starts to run back in, hesitates, pulls back, until finally he's joined first by some of the smaller kids and then the rest, all but two of the older boys, who are posturing now and circling one another. I see one of the boys slam the palms of his hands against the chest of the other. Immediately the other answers back. Then the circle of onlookers begin taunting for a fight. I wonder if I should go out and stop it, before it gets out of hand. But then someone tosses up a pile of leaves and it stops just as suddenly as it started. And the laughter comes back, and the leaves start flying up again, and the dog, he's back, and I'm back to my conversation, and all I can think is, if they just had a duck it would be perfect.