

Cuban Missile Crisis: an Unexplained Air Raid Siren

After Kennedy went on television October 21, 1963, to proclaim the blockade of Cuba, most classes in high school proceeded as if nothing had changed. Prescribed routine provided a wall of defense against unthinkable futures.

Was the world surrounding you one you wanted preserved? The sounds of a basketball dribbling and kids pushing each other, the slapping of feet darting across the shower room, the taunts and mocking words inscribing a pecking order, the smells of chili con carne and of boiled hot dogs, mashed potatoes, of soft buns, the crowded jostling on the bus home, the unemployed men hanging out in front of the liquor store squabbling with each other about gambling debts, the gang members with their do's and duck tails and tattoos.

If the world was to survive was this what you really wanted to see, hear, and feel?

And what about the people who surrounded you?

If the world was to survive were they who you really wanted to have by your side?

And then one week later, Saturday night exactly, home from my girlfriend's, a few minutes before midnight, a siren shrieked filling the streets with a loud pulsating wail. Up and down the block, lights flipped on. People came out into the street.

No explanation on the radio.

We went downstairs to join our neighbors on the street. We looked up at the sky. The handful of stars visible in the glare of city lights gave no hint of what was to come. "They must have started shooting," our neighbor said. "The boys are shooting at each other, the missiles must be in the air."

And they'll say it was for our own good."

On October 27, 1962, at fifty-one minutes past eleven o'clock in the evening, a lone air-raid siren wailed over the city in California where I grew up, terrifying those who heard it for the full six minutes it sounded. Then the siren stopped. The following day, neither newspapers nor television mentioned the strange occurrence. The news focused instead on Khrushchev's decision to turn around the Soviet vessels carrying nuclear warheads to Cuba.

History moved forward.

One crisis concluded,
the next waited in the wings.

Princes have always ruled as though government were theater.

I still resist the implication that my girlfriend and I
kissing on the floor while listening to records performed in another genre of theater.

If everything is performance then everything has a script,
often fluid, designed for improvisation,
but still with a story arc built into it from the get-go.

The forms will prevail and the promises my girlfriend and I made
to live each day as if morning has sprung fresh
would mean nothing, just immature, wishful posturing.
An obligatory scene in the drama.

We would fall into the paths
prepared for us by the previous generation,
with enough variation to delude ourselves that we weren't.

In the midst of the great cataclysmic drama Kennedy and Khrushchev
orchestrated, as people saw their lives diminishing
and their merely personal troubles appear trivial,
an inner wail rose.

A continuous piercing wail

that said enough of drama!

Before chaos, structure, justice, there must be a being alive
flowing out of the heart continuously.

One evening, being alive took the form
of an air raid siren most likely switched on accidentally
by a nervous civil defense employee
testing his equipment because
he was terrified
he would have to use it for real
in the next twenty-four hours.
He needed to make sure
that it was working.
Woke up a whole city for his pains.

He scrambled like hell
to shut it off not because
he was scaring the shit
out of thousands.
His superiors were going to be furious and
nail his ass.

Against the articulate monologues,
the dialogues, and assorted set pieces of history
that channel each actor into a character and a dénouement,
there must be flowing, erratic, unplanned
sounds of being. Almost always in the background,

but ever present in the murmuring emanating
from every heart as it faces whatever the fates propose.

As each person dreams and hopes, the sounds
of their just being there

well forth in sobs and tears, in the banging of doors,
in the stomping away of feet, in the muttering you hear
from behind a locked bathroom door.

In laughter or the sighs of satisfaction after a good meal
or an evening making love.