

Monument to an Intrusive Thought

The psychoanalytic clinic is a place where one should feel free to say anything. The art gallery is not. Different rules govern the communication between artist and viewer; different outcomes are expected from the encounter. I want to tell you a story about gay sex, and I ask myself what language I should use.

1.

R__ let another string of saliva fall into his hand and worked it slowly in and out of H__'s hole. R__ slipped in a third finger and asked H__ how he was feeling. "I'm okay," he mustered. "You're pretty loose," R__ answered. "Do you want to try having sex? Here, get on top of me." By the time he positioned R__'s cock properly, H__ had clenched up once again. Nerves, and a lifetime of trying to keep it together, made cowgirl quite difficult. H__ tried to relax, tried to ignore the pain. "I'm not sure this is going to work," he admitted. They decided to switch: R__ got onto his hands and knees and H__ fucked him from behind. It was his first time having anal sex—whether as "bottom" or "top"—and he was concentrating so intently it was hard to give in to the sensation. A strange distance separated his eyes from his cock, gently held by a ring of muscle. He came eventually. "Let's take a shower, and then I want to suck your dirty dick," R__ said. Although bemused by the illogic of it, H__ found the suggestion endearing.

"So, how was it?" R__ asked. "Different." "Different from your girlfriends?" This retort felt somehow infantilizing to H__, who was younger and just beginning to explore his queerness. But it was what he had meant. In the shower, R__ studied H__, commenting on his body hair and keeping up the sexual energy. "You know, I often wonder what's going on in your head. What are you thinking about?" H__ reflected a moment and decided to reply honestly: "I'm thinking about a kind of bird called a 'cock-of-the-rock.'" He described the bird, its strange appearance, and how it fascinated him as a child. R__'s face fell.

2.

I first came across the cock-of-the-rock as a child on a visit to the Harvard Museum of Natural History with my mother. In her work as a children's book illustrator, my mother often had to draw animals, and she would sketch the taxidermy in the museum for reference. Sometimes she would bring me along, with my own little sketch pad, to wander between glass cases filled with curious specimens. The cock-of-the-rock stood out to me because of its remarkable crest, which obscures its beak and makes it hard to distinguish the shape of its head. With its foggy glass eye protruding from a mass of dingy orange feathers, I found the bird deeply uncanny. Its name only increased its allure; the silly rhyme, echoing the dandyish phrase "cock of the walk," and the first word's

double meaning made the name at once innocent and obscene. I don't remember if I drew it as a child, but it certainly drew me.

3.

Why did this bird spring to mind that day in the shower? Perhaps the cock-of-the-rock is what Sigmund Freud calls a "stimulus-word" in his "Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis" from 1909, commonly known as the case of the "rat man." Freud explains that his patient's fear of a torture method involving rats burrowing into the anus does not have a simple meaning because the word "rat" is part of a chain of associations linking rats with money, gambling, and marriage (from *Ratten* to *Raten*, *Spielratten*, and *heiraten*). And the animal itself is linked to disease (and then, in the patient's mind, to syphilis, sex work, and the penis), and, through a childhood case of ringworm, to anal eroticism. And more besides. In my case, the meaning cock-of-the-rock is just as obscure, and just as rich in associations. The more I try to fill out its content, the more it takes off. The cock with a missing beak is like a visual pun on being and having. The male's brilliant plumage, meant to stand out as he poses among his competitors in a mating display known as a *lek*, calls to mind masculine flamboyance, peacocking as gender trouble. The pedagogical space of the museum becomes a site of mother/son bonding, of the kind of proximity historically held responsible for effeminacy. In bringing up the cock-of-the-rock, perhaps I was answering my boyfriend's question with a question: "Am I a man or a woman?"

4.

It seems to me that in asking what I was thinking, my boyfriend hoped that the unknown in me would be replaced by something familiar, reassuring him of my regard for him. But when I answered his question, the unknown was replaced by something equally unknown: an exotic bird, recalled from a past experience foreclosed to him (and not just any experience: a mood-killing reminder of the mother in a moment of sexual intimacy). The presence of this bird in the shower with us was the evidence of an absence between us.

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