

## A Ritualized Struggle

Brian Marley's *The Shenanigans*

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Brian Marley is a very funny man, and this is a very comical book. It's also a very sad and tragic book. Human pain is serious, exquisite business, but the sizzle of its conflicts can manifest in all sorts of Rabelaisian rascality and – not infrequently – actual orgasm, the awkward, eruptive, inappropriate kind. Animating the hind end of a pantomime horse, for example, in a theatrical production behind one's partner. *The Shenanigans* is aptly titled: here is an almanac of collywobbles, monkeyshines, and escapades of chimerical éclat. There's a tart-yet-elegant flair to the misadventures of his characters, the kind of language that offers a limousine of well-crafted prose with which to view these grand guignols. This isn't about going from A to B. This is about gaining a broader perspective on the whirl of convolutions we call life. Marley feels at home in this chaos. He is the right name to do the job. The world we currently inhabit has gone completely apeshit, providing Marley's brush with a very thick and psychedelic palette. He reminds me of Gully Jimson painting huge feet on a chic West London wall.

The fun begins with the Acknowledgements page: rather than the usual ho-hum litanies of gratitude, Marley's acknowledgements explode into an odyssey of bizarre complications involving everything from a prosthetic limb to a serendipitous pill dispenser of nitroglycerin tablets. Of notable interest, is the indebtedness expressed to his personal assistant, Marian Fishborne, for – “most important of all” – “preparing my writing room.” “Those of you who've read my Paris Review interview,” he avers, “will be aware that writing is, to my way of thinking, a ritualized struggle with the English language, and the circumstances have got to be just right if I've the slightest chance of winning that struggle.” Marley details a number of strategies designed to mollify, beguile and charm the English language into a compliant, yielding mass of vibrant articulations and fevered eloquence. One strategy is to seduce it with pheromones, preferably one's own urine lightly misted into the study via a perfume atomizer, “which is used to purify the air and establish the ‘right’ atmosphere, i.e., pheromonally conducive to sustained creative thought. Then and only then do I enter the room, dressed in a silk kimono, woolly hat, fingerless gloves, and grey felt carpet slippers.”

There are sixteen stories altogether in this collection, prose narratives of varying length. And when I say vary, I do mean vary: “Running through the City,” about a running competition that occurs in the dead of night with a deeply macabre ambience, à la David Lynch, with a heavy dollop of David Cronenberg, is 55 pages long, whereas two of the stories consist of a single sentence. Here, for example, is “The Elements”: “Earth applauds when water stands up for itself, takes a deep breath and bursts into flames.”

Not quite as condensed as Hemmingway's six word novel (“For sale: baby shoes, never worn”), but Marley gets extra points for theatrics, the sheer wonder of water converting to fire.

Marley's images are often uncannily vivid, words like little pinion gears raising phantasmal lucidities of palpable thought: “It rained heavily, drumming on the roof like a thousand dancing imps in cleated wooden clogs, and however improbably, the rain smelled of strawberries.” “The bull mosquito whine of the bone saw, and the dip in pitch as the blade's jagged teeth bit into my skull, made it hard to concentrate.” “The aquarium is suffused with light from a Caribbean Blu Glow bulb, by which the colonel, an insomniac, likes to read in the

interminable hours after midnight.” The more immersed I become, the more sensations run up and down the spinal cord. Neurons explode at the base of the brain. Glial cells glow like Christmas lights.

The stories are daring exhibitions of verbal burlesque, and tend to skate along on thin ice. You find things operating as they normally do in this world, this dimension, following all the familiar laws of applied physics, until slyly, insidiously, things go sideways, the enchanted world of the story assumes full power and thrusts you into a different universe in which things have the look of familiarity, but behave very, very differently. A bit like the fabled *Twilight Zone*, but without a chain-smoking host in a suit to casually set things up and feed you parabolic insights at the end. They change in that imperceptible way the quotidian dissolves in quiet crepuscular light and becomes a zone of applesauce illogicality and flapdoodle incongruities. This is the power of fiction. It must be tapped into with little hammers and a squirt of mischief. We used to call the hammers type bars and they would whack a platen with maniacal force; now they’re the little flat digits on a computer keypad and barely make a sound as we tiptoe into the shadows of the unconscious. The mischief comes from elsewhere, a need for revenge, a hunger for recognition, a desire to probe more deeply the mysteries that surround us, X-ray the rust of our broken romances, press a stethoscope against the beating chest of the universe, or something to do while you sip a glass of gin and immerse yourself in the gooseberry madrigals of the English language.

Fiction is a strange animal, and this is apparent throughout *The Shenanigans*, writing being the greatest shenanigan of all time, a perpetual gambit with the ignes fatui of human cognition. We always understand more or less than is necessary. Understanding too much obliterates the true weight and intent of a paragraph or sentence; it’s unrealistic to think that there’s a single meaning waiting for our minds to grab it out of the refrigerator on the page, or that if we rummage around a little and move the cheese over by yesterday’s roast beef we’ll get to the nitty-gritty, the true nugget, the squab, the scallop, the squash. And what’s more ruinous is to think we have it whole. That’s the cholesterol talking. Understanding something only partially, incompletely, is better. At least we’re being tantalized, lured further into the darkness of the cave by a glimmer of light, an inexplicable phosphorescence. A true reading remains impossible, observed Maurice Blanchot.

This is the anxiety proper to art. That tantalizing sensation of coming close to comprehending an elusive moment that deepens and illumines a feeling or veracity in our own experiences of life for which we haven’t yet found a word, or language. This is called alexithymia, and is a chief reason I love to read. Because occasionally I find it, and it’s thrilling. It must be akin to what a musician feels when they discover an elusive note or a fugitive melody. That moment, for instance, when Swann discovers the fragment of Vinteuil’s sonata, “a sort of liquid rippling of sound, multiform but indivisible, smooth yet restless, like the blue tumult of the sea, silvered and charmed into a minor key by the moonlight.” The reader senses what he means, but it’s never grasped in its entirety. It can’t be. Because it doesn’t exist. Not in the empirical realm.

So yeah, I think I might try some of Marley’s strategies. Not so much the misted urine technique. But maybe, with the right cologne, the right pillow, the right attitude, I can get the muse to come and sit beside me a little while.

— John Olson