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FLEXING THEIR MUSCLES

Pitcher Chris Codioli of the Oakland A's winced visibly as he threw a third strike past Tony Fernandez of the Toronto Blue Jays the other night. Noticing this, A's manager Jackie Moore hurried out to the mound, and -- according to Bruce Jenkins in the San Francisco Chronicle of 19 July 1985 -- Codioli explained that he had "felt some pain around the tricep" as he threw. Well, maybe he did say that. Ball players, after all, have changed a lot in the past 60 or 70 years. Jack Keefe of You Know Me Al might have said, far more simply, "I threw my arm out of kilter and I shouldn't never have went against Fernandez." Nowadays most professional athletes have gone to college and have read books. Probably this is true of Codioli, but maybe he has just been reading the Chronicle's "Sporting Green." Without being completely bush league, his remark was ungrammatical enough.

I read the Chronicle sports pages myself, as a welcome antidote to the terrors of the front page and the tedium of the "entertainment" section. But now and then I fumble for the Dramamine while I'm reading, much like Jack Speer must have done when reading Don Rogers. Sports pages aren't written by H. W. Fowler or Strunk and White.

A long time ago, in Low Man on the Totem Pole, H. Allen Smith told us about "a third-rate British novelist, visiting America," who proclaimed that "the finest writing in the United States may be found on the sports pages." "That was," Smith protested, "a hell of a thing to say." He criticized the miserable "ineptitude" of sports writers: "Day by day they have traffic with the most amazing people on the face of the globe. And day by day they write about those people in labored, uninspired and uninspiring prose." He admired a few sports writers of that earlier day, such as Henry McLemore, Dan Parker, and Bob Considine, but the others, he said, "grind out dreary stuff for the simple reason that they are lousy, unimaginative writers."

For the most part, the situation hasn't changed much since Smith wrote that criticism, except that nobody can claim any longer that sports writers are "unimaginative." Only creative geniuses like the Chronicle sports writers could have come up with such a wonderfully outrageous word as "tricep." The word appears occasionally in their copy, and I suppose that Chris Codioli must have learned the word from the "Sporting Green." Even more commonly the word "bicep" appears. Athletes frequently bruise or strain their arms, and then the Chronicle reports that the player in question has injured his "bicep" or his "tricep," as the case may be. Hardly ever does a player damage both arms at the same time, and therefore -- with remorseless logic -- the term is rendered in a singular form, a very singular form, in the Chronicle, i.e., without the final "s". One memorable day the "Sporting Green" even reported injury to a player's "quadricep." I read the sports pages every day in the burning hope that in some game or other a ball will bounce and hit some unfortunate man painfully in the crotch. Then the writer can report damage to the player's "peni," which is the singular for that organ, I'm sure.

But such triumphant coinages are still confined to the sports pages, it seems. I happened to check with Merriam-Webster, and was sorry to discover that this old stick-in-the-mud reports that the muscle running along the back of the arm, the muscle that pained Mr Codioli as he threw, is called the "triceps" -- with an "s". It's from the Latin, meaning "three-headed." No such word as "tricep" is listed. The same source says that the large flexor muscle of the front of the upper arm is called the "biceps" -- again with an "s". That's Latin for "two-headed." For some reason the dictionary doesn't list the word "bicep," either.

To make doubly sure I brought down Gretchen's ancient copy of Gray's Anatomy, or to be more formal about it, Anatomy, Descriptive and Surgical, by Henry Gray, F.R.S. When I checked the word "biceps" on page 476 I found that Gray writes as follows: "The biceps (Biceps flexor Cubiti) is a long fusiform muscle, occupying the whole anterior surface of the arm, and divided above into two portions or heads, from which circumstance it has received its name." Note the agreement of subject and verb in the sentence: "The biceps...is..." The anatomist of the old, buried past actually supposed that "biceps," despite the worrisome "s" at the end, is a singular term. He also believed that "triceps" is singular. Mr Codioli felt pain in a triceps.

I hasten to point out that Gretchen's copy of Gray's Anatomy is of a very old edition. The last copyright listed is for 1897. A publisher's note reports that this revision of the original work (1858) was necessary because "Anatomy is far from stationary, either in its facts or in improvements in its method of presentation." Perhaps the Chronicle's sports staff is merely attempting to "improve" the presentation of anatomical facts. But I think it's just sheer ignorance, and I say the hell with it. I think any Chronicle sports writer such as Mr Bruce Jenkin who uses the word "bicep" or "tricep" ought to be shipped off to southern California to write for some other newspaper, such as the Los Angeles Time.

THE GREAT WAVE AT CARMEL

"There is no place but the Pacific coast to hear eternal roaring surf.... When I get to the top of the woods behind Monterey, I can hear the sea breaking all around over ten or twelve miles of coast from near Carmel on my left, out to Point Pinos in front, and away to the right along the sands of Monterey to Castroville and the mouth of the Salinas." -- Robert Louis Stevenson, letter to William Ernest Henley, October 1879.

It can be done! The great rock out there in the bay can be overwhelmed by the sea. I mean the rock that, surrounded by lesser rocks, looks like the planet Jupiter among its circling moons. Even seen through the wind-tormented boughs of the cypresses it dominates this rugged point of Carmel bay. Just now the waves glide gently past, low along its base, like leashed hounds, not endangering it at all. But it can be done. Seaweed lies dark in streaming clots on its topmost crags, and black pools of seawater slosh around in the high crevices, almost as if the rock were asway, in motion undetected by the watching eye. Endless torrents of water, detached from the sea, still sluice down the waveworn walls of it, like gouts of dark blood.

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Another wave comes in, very low, the trough of it exposing the mottled green of the rock's foundations and the slime and debris of the sea bottom. It breaks far inshore of the great rock. And the next wave is scarcely higher. All looks secure on the black battlements of the stone castle fronting the sea. But now the heaving water, laced with dark weeds and fishes, booms spray all the way over the mighty rock, and the big wave that follows is curling even higher, a living convulsion of rising surf, cannonades of flying spray, and great flecks of foam. It can be done!

The huge wave plunges everything beneath it, a rising billow, tall and swift and angry, a peril great enough to make even the cypresses cower. The devouring torrent surges up the great rock, breaching its walls, twisting and towering and riding completely over the rock, an impossible feat, yet done with grace and ease. It tops the high crags, and flings even higher, much higher -- tons of seawater floating up like a cloud of gas. Where is the rock now? For a long moment it is gone, under a swirling pool that looks like molten lava. Half the Pacific ocean is heaped over it, as if in revenge for its obduracy. Then, pouring vast torrents down every side, the rock rises like a newborn island out of the sea, confronting the waves again that will subdue it in the end. For an age and an age to come, the war of the universe.

But I wonder about the placid people of Carmel, across the bay, in their houses of mild Mediterranean tints of pink and blue that look like they are made of sugar. Do they watch what goes on in their bay? Do they know how the great rock trembles when the black sea rises, do they know what the sea can do?

(3) A WOMAN OF REAL LIFE

"I live back there," the woman said, pointing into the darkness. "Thanks for the ride." She fumbled for the car door handle as I looked around in dawning recognition. I felt like a character in The King in Yellow, remembering strange shapes and colors. "W-wa-wait a minute," I said. "I'd better go with you. It looks dark back there."

"It's OK," the woman said. "Nobody's going to assault me." Maybe she was suspicious of my reason for wanting to go with her to her room, and I had an ulterior motive all right, but not the one she was thinking of. On the way home from a movie I had picked her up as a hitchhiker, sometime around midnight. She was young and pretty, so far as I could tell in the dark. She had told me her name was Lisa, she was a student in electronics at the University and she lived "near Herrick hospital." Now I had discovered that though it was only a short walk from Herrick she really lived east of Shattuck avenue, on Channing near Fulton street. The place looked very familiar.

I left the VW parked in the bike lane out in front, and we walked back along the righthand side of the big ugly house that loomed against the night sky. We skirted a motorcycle chained to a tree, and felt our way in the starlight to a door in the wall of the house. I shook my head in wonder. The night was just luminous enough to show me one thing. This was the place I remembered, although I hadn't seen it in a long long time.

"How many apartments and rented rooms do you suppose there are in Berkeley?" I asked the woman. "Thousands of them, surely. After all, there are around 30 thousand students at the University and most of them don't live in dormitories. So what's the odds that I would have been to this room before? After all, it's back here off the street, and hidden by shrubbery. You don't even know it's here unless

An Island Called California

"Know ye that on the right hand of the Indies there is an island called California, very near the Terrestrial Paradise." -- Garcilaso Rodriguez Ordenez de Montalvo. (1510)

you know it's here. The chances must be one in a hundred thousand, at least, that I would know the person who lived here a dozen years ago. But I do."

"Well, take a look at the old rat-hole," the woman said, opening the door. She wasn't at all interested in the great revelation I was marveling over. She turned on the light, and I saw that she looked pale and worn, and not as young as she sounded. I walked inside and glanced around at the small room. It was a step down from the level of the outside walk, but even so, the ceiling was low. Yes, just as I thought, this was the very room where Betty Vinmar had once lived, although briefly, a dozen years ago. It had changed a little since then, or else my memories were slightly askew. It was a tiny, dismal cubbyhole, empty of furniture except for one straight chair and a mattress on the floor. There was a wash basin in the corner and a toilet in a small alcove to the left. Despite her earlier suspicions of me, the woman went and used it without any visible reticence.

"The funny thing is," I said to her when she returned, adjusting her clothing, "I was so impressed, or depressed, by this room years ago when Betty lived here that I used it as the setting for some scenes in my Berkeley novel. I started writing it after reading a couple other novels about Berkeley that were so badly done that I was inspired to do a Fenimore Cooper. Of course I never finished it. Anyway, my female protagonist, Cathy Helmrick, lived here in my story. She wasn't much like Betty, except that she was smart and pretty. My character wasn't even based on Betty. But she resembled her, and you, in one respect. She was a UC student."

The woman bit her lip. "I was lying when I told you I was a student," she said. "I got thrown out of the University. Actually I'm on a drug rehabilitation program. No," she added in the saddest voice I ever heard, "I'm lying again. I stopped going there too. My life is down the drain. I'm a wreck, that's the honest truth. There's no hope for me, and I don't even care."

I had been peering around the room. In my novel I had changed things around a little. I had put a window where there was none, added some drapery around the bed, like something out of Dickens, and given the place some cockroaches and mice, although I didn't see any now. The cop in my story had stood about here, in the middle of heaps of manuscripts. Of course the cop was really out of a recollection of Avram Davidson's house, in another time and place.... At her words, though, the old unfinished masterpiece glimmered out of my mind. I looked at her, and she looked at me, across the distance of about five light years. I felt a sudden sympathy for her, and the impulse to help a woman in distress. I was as ready to help her as Walter Hartright was to help the Woman in White, or the Little Tramp to help the blind girl. But what could I do for a young woman who was hooked on drugs? I have enough trouble taking care of myself. I reached out and touched her hair, which was rumpled and badly cared for, but she seemed far beyond arm's-length.

"You can turn your life around," I said earnestly, like a minister from the pulpit. Even to my own ears my words sounded hollow. But I tried to bring conviction into my voice. "You're young and smart and strong. You can do it. Why, you're a woman. You can do anything. Get back on that drug rehab program."

She smiled weakly. "Thanks for caring about me. Maybe I can get back on the program. OK, I'll try." But she said it without conviction. She was lying again. I looked at her helplessly. She wasn't the heroine of my story, even if she lived in the selfsame room. I lacked the power I had in my novel to make things happen as I wanted them. The room, grim and forbidding in the yellow light, and the situation were real, and with all my sympathy and good will I couldn't bring about a happy ending for the poor lost woman standing before me. The way ahead was chartless and frightening, and it was very dark.