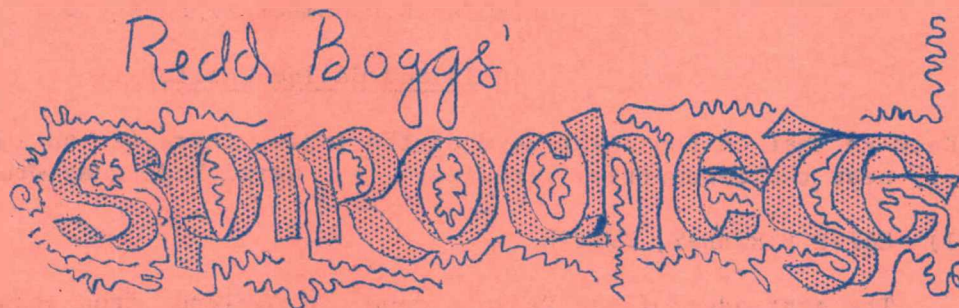


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THINGS IN BLOOM

Every January I go to look at the acacias. There are many other flowering trees around town, the redbuds in particular, and they bloom about the same time, in January and early February, but the acacias are my favorite. Berkeley and environs are full of acacias. Some acacias, such as those often seen in Mexico, are white-flowered, but ours here are commonly yellow. A little stand of them gleams in the spring along the north side of Parker street near College avenue. A cluster of them shines in aureate splendor on the freeway embankment near the Children's hospital in Oakland, and there's a pretty tree along the creek on Richmond boulevard. A small but attractive acacia once enhanced a bleak cranny of the parking lot of the University Avenue Co-op, but it is gone now. The acacia I always think of first, though, is the big one at the corner of Grove street (now called Martin Luther King Junior way) and Berryman in Berkeley. I usually pass by there in the ordinary run of things once or twice a week. If I don't, I go around there in the spring especially to see the acacia in bloom.

In poems I have called the acacias golden-blossomed, but most of them around the East Bay really aren't, as Gretchen once pointed out to me. There are more than 450 species of the tree worldwide, mostly in Africa and in Australia, where I believe the "golden wattle" is the national flower, and some of them obviously must be an orange or a darker yellow than ours here. In Berkeley the flowers are generally a clear yellow, more lemon than gold, frail fuzzy balls or spiky cylinders among grey-green, fernlike leaves. They usually have the tiniest fragrance imaginable. The blossoming tree seems to tilt earthward under the burden of flowers, which at their brightest nearly obscure the foliage, but this is probably an illusion, for the blossoms are impossibly light. A ton of them would weigh about 30 pounds. After a couple of weeks the spent petals begin to sprinkle noiselessly onto the ground, profuse and fragile as snowflakes, if not the right color, but the flowers are firm on the bough for a while. Those are the glory days of the acacias.

Last year (1984) the acacia at Grove and Berryman bloomed earlier than ever before. At least I thought it did. I don't keep records or compile statistics about such things. Anyway, on 7 January 1984 I went past and to my surprise found the tree in full flower. I wrote of this in my journal intime as if it were the Second Coming. Again this year on 7 January I drove by. I wasn't thinking of the tree at the moment and was dazzled by the sight of the acacia in bloom, for it was rushing the season again. Perhaps that particular acacia flowers a little earlier than some of the others hereabouts. The second and third weeks of January is the usual time.

There it was, at any rate, with its usual overwhelming abundance of yellow blossoms. A misty rain was falling, and as I approached the tree seemed to glow in the grey light like a tall, half-visible ghost. The softness of the color resembled that of a Japanese painting on white silk. I crept around the corner onto Berryman and pulled to the curb to look at the tree. No one else seemed to notice the vision, and I was glad, for I felt selfish just then, like a Turkish pasha with his harem. The traffic along Grove street went grinding on, unaware of the peril of the lovely cascade falling upon us in the Berkeley springtime.

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." -- Garci Rodriguez Ordóñez de Montalvo (1510)

(1) HAPPY BIRTHDAY, YVETTE!

The east edge of San Pablo avenue in Oakland from about Grand avenue to 34th street is clustered with hookers in the evening (and perhaps during the morning commute hours; those girls work hard), but now it was only noon of a bright and sunny day and no hookers were in sight. The only person along the curb at the moment was a tall, big-breasted, narrow-hipped black woman who stood in the shadow of the freeway overpass, vigorously jerking her thumb. I thought she was hitching a ride. I pulled over and unlatched the passenger's-side door of little blue Poco, my VW bug.

She said she wanted to go to some address in Emeryville, near one of the several gambling clubs that do business there. But as we drove in that direction it became apparent, as it wasn't at first (for I am naive about such matters) that a ride wasn't primarily what she had in mind. "What's your name, honey?" she asked, batting her big brown eyes at me. She adjusted her blouse a little lower. She wasn't wearing a bra. I avoided broadsiding a truck just by a prepubescent whisker. "Howard," I gulped. "Howard Lovecraft."

"Mine's Yvette," she said. "Would you believe it, Georgy-Porgy, it's my twenty-second birthday today, and I'm real hungry. No money, baby. Why don't you come into my apartment for a good time?"

Being of high moral character I was shocked and besides, as I told her, I didn't have time to chat with her. (I figured that's what she had in mind.) Actually I had a doctor's appointment in an hour, but as I glanced at her breasts, which were topped with blunt purple nipples, I explained to her, a little wildly, "I'm in a hurry. I'm going home to write (my god!) 'At the Mountains of Madness.'"

She wouldn't take no for an answer. I parked in front of her place and waited for her to get out, but she sat there urging me to come inside with her. She looked strangely inviting as she pleaded with me, a vision of wet pouting lips and sidelong sexy glances. She was terribly hungry, she said; it was her birthday, a cheerless one for a poor girl without cash. "If you're in such a big hurry, how's about a quickie right here in the car?" she asked, pronouncing it "cah." "Just ten dollahs, that's all, baby." "In broad daylight, on a busy street, right here in front of a sleazy gambling den, in the front seat of a VW?" I gasped. It was a pretty long gasp, verily.

I fumbled in my lefthand trousers pocket, where I had carelessly shoved my money after purchasing at Arvey's a ream of mimeo paper. (FAPA forever!) I found that I had two twenties and five dollars in one-dollar bills. I peeled off the small bills and gave them to her. I returned the rest to my pocket. "I've really got to go. 'The Colour Out of Space' faunches at the platen," I said. "Buy yourself a Big Mac, maybe, and a pint of booze."

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"Oh, come on, baby. Come on to my house. I'll fix you up real nice, and it won't take a minute." To my real consternation she threw herself upon me, still crooning interesting invitations. I noticed the fascinated expressions on the faces of people passing by on the sidewalk, but being draped over by one hundred twenty pounds of warm and wriggling female for some reason shortcircuited a synapse or two. After a few moments I didn't notice much of anything. Just how many fuses blew out at that time I didn't discover till later. I steadfastly refused to go with her, however. "Think of my public," I wheezed into the abundant hair falling over her left ear. "What will Helen Wesson and Alain Everts say if I don't get 'The Dreams in the Witch-House' finished?"

She straightened up, and quit pawing my adamant (if only just barely) and moral person. She said more calmly that at least I had time to drive her somewhere, a few blocks away, where she wanted to "pick up a key." I considered the matter and decided not to inquire too closely into the nature of that "key." Glad to have the whole situation resolved so easily I drove her to a dilapidated house on a dead-end street abutting highway 580. I waited in the car, as she asked me to, while she went over to harangue a sinister-looking old black squatting among the junk in a yard enclosed by a half-collapsing board fence. So far as I could tell no key of any description passed between them.

She walked hippily back to the car and asked me to drive her to a house on Brockhurst street. Another disreputable black man was slouched on the front steps of another dilapidated house. "Is Suzie here?" she yelled at him out of the car window. "Ain't nobody here," he growled, not bothering to move a finger. But there was a shout from an unscreened window in the upper storey, and I glimpsed a fat black woman gesturing down. I presumed that this was Suzie. At any rate, Yvette climbed out of the car, saying to me, "Have a nice day, baby." I wished her the same -- I noticed that at least she seemed to be enjoying the afternoon much more than before -- and drove away.

As luck would have it, I stopped next at PIP on Center street to Xerox some pages from a book for Marion Z. Bradley. I used the self-service copier and as I fished out some coins to pay the woman clerk I was puzzled, then horrified, to find my pocket empty of paper money. Shakily I put down 26¢ on the counter and walked out, feeling a little blank. A strange grey dawn was breaking over my broad mental horizons.

What in hell had happened to those two twenties in my trousers pocket? Well, let's see, I thought nervously, after I had unwarily revealed my cash to sweet little Yvette she had wrapped herself warmly around me, pushing her half-naked breasts against me and caressing me all over with her long, insistent fingers. And of course I had been extremely diverted and preoccupied at the moment....

As I glumly jingled 73¢ in my pocket, the pitiful few remaining coins she had so kindly left there, I considered the astounding chutzpah of the woman. She had cleverly light-fingered \$40 from my pocket; then she had persuaded me to drive her to one place, to wait for her there for several minutes, then by god to drive her to a second place in darkest Oakland. Maybe I was lucky she hadn't asked me to drive her to Sacramento or San Luis Obispo.

Feeling suddenly bereft and poverty-stricken I decided not to go to the doctor's appointment after all. I figured I had better return home and take a couple of aspirins. I felt gloomy enough just now to write "The Dunwich Horror." As I drove home I shook my head and began to chuckle. "Happy birthday, Yvette!" I said ruefully.

(2) BADGER UNDER A BUS

The afternoon was so warm that on impulse I stopped at a little neighborhood grocery in South Campus of Berkeley for an It's-It. The store was one of those places where the proprietor -- in this case a small surly Chinese -- regards you with dark suspicion when you walk in and creeps around to peer at you when you go to the back of the store to select your purchase. It was also one of those places where the freezer on a hot day is barely equal to the task of keeping its merchandise even marginally cold. The It's-It, a vanilla ice cream and cookie concoction with a chocolate covering, was so soft that I decided to chomp it immediately before it melted in my hand. My Volkswagen was parked in the shade of a tree, and I leaned against the front fender and enjoyed the ice cream while I absently watched a softball game being played in a vacant lot across the street.

I was aware of a woman walking toward me along the street. Abstractedly I saw that she looked gaunt and careworn, but rather attractive nevertheless. She was a brunette in her 30s, perhaps. For some reason she paused alongside the car. "Do you live around here?" she said. It took a moment for me to focus on her and to reconstruct her question in my mind. I said, no I didn't, and asked, "Do you?" She indicated vaguely that she lived a couple of blocks down the street. We stood silently for a minute or two, both of us watching the ballgame with heavy eyes, narcotized by the summer heat.

"Stay away from him," she said suddenly. Answering my perplexed look, she pointed to a man sitting in a battery-driven wheelchair parked near home plate at the ballgame. Even from across the street I could see that he looked burly and even formidable, a gross polygonal hulk slumped in the chair. His round pudgy face was set in malevolent lines. He didn't seem to be enjoying very much the game he was watching. He was no jolly fat man. Not without reason the man didn't love the world or anybody in it. But I didn't see how an invalid in a wheelchair could be dangerous, and said so.

She laughed bitterly. "His name is Finley. Everybody calls him Badger. Stay out of his way. I didn't. Every time I saw him he kept hitting on me, and I couldn't make him stop. One day he slammed his chair into me, grabbed my hand, and bit it." She thrust her left hand into my face, and I saw with consternation that it was horribly cut and mangled, as if it had been caught in the cogs of a machine. I touched the wound gently. It had healed long since but in a terrible disfiguring scar. "The man did that? Can't you do something about it? Have him put in jail or in a mental institution? My god, can't you get the bastard for felonious assault?"

She shook her head. "A woman like me -- and a man like him, a helpless invalid in a wheelchair? Are you kidding? Stay away from Badger -- a long way away." For the first time in my life I pictured myself shoving a man in a wheelchair under the wheels of a bus.

She walked slowly down the street. Twice she paused and looked back at me. I watched her out of sight. The last chocolaty hunk of my It's-It melted in my hand and slid unnoticed down the front of my shirt.

NOTE: These sketches, and others to follow, are intended as a continuation of the series "A Wanderer in Cockayne," that appeared, circa 1964-1965, in my former fapazine Bete Noire.

There's only one solution for wrong numbers: don't answer them.
