



Edvard Munch, *The Dance of Life*, c. 1900

## WANDERING INTO YESTERDAY'S TOMORROW

by **Rey Armenteros**

*He would play guitar at these get-togethers, pull at arms for a dance, lead a whole group of guys and girls, step outside to talk to the smokers who could not do their thing inside the bars, and then fall into step in a gutter with genuine words to a homeless man as they danced the talk.*

**C**LICKING AROUND THE INTERNET, I found someone I used to know. Through her webpage interactions, I found photo after photo of her and other familiar faces. A face awash in flash photography was smiling at me. She had sent a message to an old co-worker of mine who used to be crazy about her, telling him she's been an aesthetician for about eleven years. He responded by saying that maybe they could meet again—though they were now thousands of miles apart—and that they could make new memories, and I knew exactly what he had in mind. I was right there with him once upon a time when I was infatuated with some of these ladies, before they became aestheticians and other things, before returning to their homelands.

The first girl was looking back at me in another picture with the same face from back in the day. It was unbelievable. Mari looked even better than when in her mid-twenties; her hair was done up like a marble sculpture, her earrings dropped down to mirror the glitter in her eyes, and her makeup was just right for the shape of her face and her small eyes. I was still blinking at the image when I recalled the fact that she had had a thing for me for a short while, but it was something I never jumped on. I simply wasn't into her, and today, I find myself wondering why. But memory, in its hindsight and conclusions, distorts reality when you question past facts, when you wonder why it was we never got it on in the first place, raising a fervor of hopes never realized, never registered, because they never existed.

Going through more pictures and clicking to more pages hosted by others, I found more faces that tickled old hopes in my memory banks. They'd all grown older.

This period in my life didn't even comprise two years; I was gone by the time everyone here was

returning to their countries. But in those days, I was teaching ESL to these young adults from around the world. They were in San Francisco to learn English and have a good time. After school, we would continue the English practice at a bar or outdoor cafe. There were drinks, much curiosity of how things were done in Japan or Brazil or France. But beyond these friendly interactions, we were not to get involved with any of these people, and yet some of us did.

These days I don't give much thought to those days, but they meant something to me back then. Now I can see in their faces the hopes I had for friends and lovers. Any woman I met at the school went through a quick sizing up, and when I decided I liked one, I could never get her out of my thoughts unless I was thinking about any of the other ones. That was my life back then: girls, women—I was always on the lookout. Instead of forwarding my art career by trying to get it to the next stage, I was engrossed in searching for that kind of action; I was devoting long tracks of conscious thought to it. My mind was bent in only one direction.

So, I was far from perfect, but though I don't have such chains today, I am no closer to perfection; I am now missing something. All these other things happened. I got married, I got serious about my art, I have carried on in a responsible way, and I never once thought about all I had lost in the process. Right along with those twisted hopes of romancing women, that joyous spirit has also abandoned me. Though it was not quite half-real, that love of life brought a spontaneity and a yearning for human interaction that was completely real—and that today I shun.

Look at all these people I used to know, but never that well because outside your loved ones, who do you know, really? But I did know them, somehow, and they knew me, somewhat, even if the me they knew was not transparent,

not out in the open about those inner demons that had been tickling his eye when it caught a smile, a tone in a phrase directed at him, a female form walking away.

And what could such things mean in a continuum of time that has never stopped, never divided itself into neat stacks of chapters in a life? It's not until you start looking back that the flow is gone because it's now chopped to bits that are easier to comprehend and to peg into the meaning you want to give each particular era of your life. And what is almost always lost to memory are the old hopes that can no longer be realized. If my hopes used to be shallow, they still came with a curiosity for people, and today I have shrugged off all interest in the casual stranger.

Everyone grew older, which is that thing we see coming but it always takes us by surprise. It's a thing we get ready for but then gasp when we witness it in the flesh, in the creeping truth of creased surfaces and hobbled thoughts and adjusted gestures.

These pictures of this young woman who is now older but better looking than when she was in her prime present fanciful hopes; for though I rejected Mari, I nevertheless enjoyed the attention. I was secretly going out with one of her closest friends, which forced her to cease talking to us when she found out, until I dumped her friend and started going out with another one of our students. And then we were friends again.

They were all adults and they knew what they were doing, as I would tell myself. It was true, but it was also true that I was a conniving bastard. There were other instructors at the school who were doing the same thing, but I was a fraud because I pretended to be uninterested in all that, secretive to the degree that I thought no one knew a thing about my proclivities.

But students know, and the dynamics of a classroom, as they instructed us at the TEFL

crash course I took, is ruined once a teacher begins going out with one of the students. I tempted job termination as it was outlined in our employee handbook. And by risking this kind of occupational doom, I was warming to the fact that I was getting away with murder. There was only one instructor who outdid me; Mikael was out in the open about everything, and he carried out his wickedness with a flair for style, a conscious quest for the lust for life. And he never got fired. He did go out with one student after another, but he also enjoyed people; he would play guitar at these get-togethers, pull at arms for a dance, lead a whole group of guys and girls, step outside to talk to the smokers who could not do their thing inside the bars, and then fall into step in a gutter with genuine words to a homeless man as they danced the talk.

If I could do it again, I would hop into Mikael's beat to match his positive energy because he had style, and I did not—my looks were reserved, my words careful. I used to tell people I was undercover, and this joke was the one detail I ever revealed about myself. I enjoyed believing that I had a mask that smothered my real expressions. It made me feel cool because there was nothing cooler than a blank expression. Maybe. But who truly befriends the silent plotter sitting in the back of the room, scoping it all out, coming up with the correct tactics for interactions?

Who knows? But it didn't matter in the long run because even if my smiles were sometimes forced, I was no less happy.

I was living it up. If I didn't have as many girls at my arm as I would have liked, I was certainly not one to complain. My entire life was stretched out before me, and I was stumbling through it with romantic deviations that were interrupting my lifelong ambitions as an artist. Indeed, I was an artist twenty-four hours a day,

but these plans I had for drawings and artistic concepts always took a backseat to the social allure that surrounded me.

My future in art, as it was perceived in those scatterbrain days, was going to be glorious. In those days, it was entering my head that, as far as the art world was concerned, the products of most creative endeavors were unfortunately akin to the jetsam that drains out into the ocean, enjoying its short time at a gallery before the city finally buries it and its creator. My art was not going to travel down those waterways.

I remember this conviction. It was the belief that there must be other artistic paths to take, and that success came in different forms. I feel obliged to describe my work from those days in order to support such a conviction. I would here offer examples in the studio of yesterday, but I can't think of any right now. I can't retrace the formations of the great discoveries I had while drawing with brush and ink deep into the night. The origins of old ideas are all but gone. Nevertheless, the main concept behind everything was that this work touched on the connection between drawing and writing. In my impromptu drawings, black lines represented both pictorial aspects and words as if I were trying to reconcile both branches of symbolic mark-making. It was easy to reconcile them because the same lines that formed the letters of the alphabet were made to represent the textures of trees and the motifs of bricks and the contours of figures. Words populated my pictorial world in the sky of a landscape and in the dress of a dancer. That meant words were tickling my pictures with their own chronology and beat. Syntax and sound became pivotal to my drawings, and the construction of fragments and their more polite brethren, sentences, was fascinating to me.

For the longest time, I never knew a drop of grammar, but that TEFL crash course I took started me on a long mission, and I

was learning verbal tenses and their aspects, and this, above human anatomy and artistic shading, is what now fascinated me. There was so much to learn. It would take me the rest of my year and a half in San Francisco to get a holistic view of it. There was so much, I was overwhelmed by it. Nevertheless, that San Francisco era of my teaching career can be best symbolized by one grammar point whose name I found hilarious. Future-in-the-past was a verbal tense that enthralled me; I would return to it again and again in my classes and my own ruminations. In use, it is the tense that draws out past intentions whose results may or may not have come to pass, may or may not have happened. Sometimes, the statement is vague; it might not be clear if these things happened or not. Why, I wondered, were such expressions reluctant to reveal outcomes? I wanted concrete results from my words and would choose language in my drawings that could only level its utensils to literal meaning without any of that linguistic ambiguity people kept going on about back in art school days.

But even though I was fighting it, I already understood that tangible, unequivocal results were almost impossible with words. So I explored the force behind words in my art and outside of it. Words were always tricky, and I might have latched onto grammar because it was a system of rules that invited no deviations. Once the apparatus of grammar embedded itself in my head, I wanted to comprehend the entire system that made English English.

It was purely mechanical. To learn this system in order to be able to teach it to students, I needed a monkey wrench and pliers. And in order to teach, I had to think of analogies. But I was a new instructor, so I couldn't come up with any. In future-in-the-past, these actions either come to pass or they don't. What more is there

to it? Future-in-the-past also has the sound of some kooky science fiction time traveling story. I would laugh about such analogies at the head of the class, complicating the grammar lesson with fond anecdotes of anachronous moments in old B-movies and comic books, granting my students a slice of American humor and receiving nothing but blank expressions. I savored the thought that there were an infinity of future plans that were locked in the past. Since these things never came to be, it is interesting to see such things as events that could have gradually brought about a different world.

Among the verbal tenses, this is the patron saint of the unborn pieces and positions of our existence. Certain moves become events that seem to be inevitable, while others can never be brought to fruition, no matter how strong the passions that drive them.

In my world, the future in my past included ambitions of such high expectations that making it into galleries was simply not good enough. My art was destined for greater things, transcending art and philosophy. This art was in the act of becoming something new, something never seen before by the art market and its art-consuming populace. My work was allowing me to discover the dynamics by which we arrive at images in our brains. I was systematizing this according to my own experiences with drawing from the imagination. I was calling this work "technosophy," a neologism of mine from the fragments of ancient Greece that comprised one part craft with one part wisdom. For that year and a half that I was filtering all my work through carnal desires and foreign substances, I was coming up with theoretical solutions that had nothing to do with my perpetual diversions. In these loftier pursuits, I was coming up with incredible conclusions. And

I was putting these conclusions together in entirely original ways.

I thought I had all the time in the world. I had it all figured out. But forwarding an art career is like moving a mountain, and it needs all the help it can get. It needs a head start, and going at it without one could be the crucial factor to stalling a career—perhaps forever. The head start I needed was that of nurturing public presence, which takes years. I was getting none of that done, convinced that by just making the work, the venue would arrive at my door. I had no idea what was in store for me, what my art career was not going to look like for years to come because I was plotting my real moves at the bar. I was busy tripping and grooving to the here and now and not at all concerned with later. I was moving to the music of social interactions in loud, dark rooms with people I knew at the school, laughing it up with my fellow instructors, winking and giving high fives. We were all learning languages with a couple words here and there and mixing in this soup of translations and sexual attraction.

And then there were these students we were drinking and dancing with, and who knows what they were thinking? I wanted most of them to at least respect me. I recall this one older woman who had a family and was a dentist in Korea; we had mutual respect for each other. She was always the smart one in the class, and her English was quite accomplished. This was the type of student I taught for, the type that appreciated whatever lesson I was giving them. Though never interested in her in that other way, I sought her reticent approval and was confident that I had a good portion of that.

In that same class (to contrast), there was a girl who had just started at the school. She was fresh and new like a spring flower, yes, and I think I strived for her approval too. I don't

know why I was attracted to her; she was not my type. I guess you could say she was so wholesome, and that raised curiosity in me.

Well, I never thought we would ever consummate anything since I wasn't going to

though hardly anybody knew about us. But this somewhat girlfriend of mine, Mari's friend, knew I was in the process of going out with two people from outside the school. She had a boyfriend back in Japan, so we were both



Edvard Munch, *Dance on the Beach*, c. 1900

go after her. I never would have come up with where it was soon going to go.

As it stood, Mari's friend was my girlfriend, we could say, when we were still an item,

deceptive, but I guess she estimated that I was the bigger traitor because of the additional lover. When she left her boyfriend for me, she wanted me to at least give up one of my other

girlfriends. I told her I would in good time, but I was vague about the details.

Even then, our relationship was not out in the open. She would secretly visit my apartment because we couldn't be seen outside since the dorm where most of the students stayed was only four urban blocks from my place. Since we couldn't even go to a neighborhood restaurant, she spent nothing more than nights with me, which worked wonders on my pocketbook since I didn't have to spend a cent. I felt a profound satisfaction by the direction our relationship was taking—at her being the prettiest girl at the school and at my having to do no work for it.

In the middle of the early morning hours, she would walk back to the dorm from my apartment. I never accompanied her for the sound reason that we could get caught even at three in the morning by a student coming back from a night club or whatever. So I let her go by herself in that questionable stretch of Sutter Street, never entertaining the thought that something could have happened to her.

One time, a fellow student was on a payphone at a twenty-four-hour place catching this girl's return from my apartment. The students knew I lived close by. This student at the payphone put two and two together but stayed quiet about it. For months, I thought I was completely covered, and eventually, in a casual conversation with my dentist student, she informed me she had always known, that she had seen the girl coming back from my apartment late one night, and that was that. My dentist student was smiling about it, displaying the kind of shrug that meant "such is life." And because of her levity, I did not feel too bad about it, but it haunted me weeks later when I finally realized she was just being diplomatic, and that she probably didn't smile at such acts. And that was when I concluded that

my dentist student didn't see me any differently than she did the teachers who were flagrant about their habits.

And that was when everything got complicated because I chanced on an opportunity with the other girl, the wholesome girl in the same class with the dentist, and found myself in the hazardous situation of having relations with two students that lived at the same place.

My attention span was limited. It could only allow the radar to detect the primped and flord members of the opposite sex. The question is whether my art did not suffer for it, and I can't answer that since it was always in my thoughts and plans, and it is still in my thoughts and plans today. In those San Francisco nights, I delineated my desires in black ink, even if I never brought my art to any public purpose. My contemplations in art arrived at ten at night (if I had nothing else going), and they ceased when I finally went to bed, allowing me nothing more than four hours a night of sleep. Four was all I required in those days. Upon waking, my every moment in public was once again arrested by the possibilities that strode into my panorama. Girls, girls, and more girls surrounded my senses, preoccupied my thoughts on the streets and in the cafes and bars of the city. While I was striding and gazing, my art encapsulated nothing more than a thought balloon I tried to take with me everywhere I went.

That was who I was back then, and I am sure it is still informing who I am today. Even if such drives are the farthest thing from me, they have left their tracks on the pattern of my personality. The drives have turned me around, they have changed me to the point that I am averse to that old behavior; I am now a social aberration, not interested in people at all.

*Why don't you go out and meet some*

*friends?* I hear this once in a while from my wife or some other loved one. This is solid advice, but the time to meet friends is when you are in the right setting for such interactions to happen naturally or when you are overflowing with warmth. I have neither. My friends are the ones I've lost touch with. My only connection to these situations are memories teaming with faces and actions, noises and atmosphere, and they are mixing here and now with these pictures on my computer screen.

Mingling with the pleasure is disappointment at how these former students have changed, how we all lost contact, going back to our respective hometowns around the world or artificially continuing the adventure, never stopping, only changing the surroundings and the people, but still upholding that style of life with aging features, like my old colleague who responded thusly to the aesthetician. Where did we all go and what has happened to that time together? It was a time for some of us but not for all of us. You have to have a mind stuffed with nothing so that you can enjoy it, like Mari, the girl who was now a woman in her mid-thirties, as the pictures proved.

Look at her and how vibrant she still looks, how youthful! Still, there is age there, as there is more tellingly in some of the other women I remember with that kind of fondness. The blurry pictures are them as I remember them but the clearer ones, the ones that have the smiles unchecked and the makeup reacting to the flash of the camera, the signs of more life ten years after the fact are impressed upon your imagination, and they say that if you met them in person again, they would really be different from before.

Mari's image was going through cycles: now a concert and then a concert somewhere else, in darkness with bad flash photography, and

trying a costume and scratching at the viewer like a cat, and hiding behind an ice cream cone and winking simultaneously. There was nothing that ceased her life, that simple way to go about these moments, without thought or repercussion.

That electricity that coursed through all of us, joining us, bringing together even the ones we didn't like, and how we loved it and hated it and did everything by it, on weekends, at bars, after class to form good times and not to advance your career path, but to have a good time, something meaningless and forgotten the next week when you were out again with some of the same people along with some new ones, and then forgetting about things from a month ago, when you were really into somebody then, until she did something to turn you off or to break your heart. How there was somebody else now in your vision and you were wondering how she was going to like you, what she was like. Then, years later, it is the forgotten stuff that one day creeps up on you and your settled life when you are finding a few web pages you shouldn't have wasted your time on, and it all comes back—the empty life you once led, and you never regret a moment of these events, these moments that now brought you here, to this place that lacks the gift of curiosity, that brings more peace and less anxiety over questions of what are the good things in life. Everything has settled and it is difficult to get these things flying around like leaves again because they are damp, heavier and harder to throw than they used to be when they were still swirling around.

Back then as now, when you moved from hope to hope, giving up on the stuff that was coming away too far from your grasp and looking for a reason why you never needed it anyway, you conclude that it could have been easy—but it was never easy. ❖