

THE LAST STANDING PROTESTER
by Lydia Stryk

(A woman of indeterminate age stands outside the barricades to the White House. She is sunny, open, if a little shy. She is expressive and appealing--not a whiff of the peacenick or the intensity of the crazy. She is funny and engaging in a playful, gentle and seductive way. Her humor comes from her self-deprecation, misplaced anguish, the intimacy and immediacy of her connection with the audience, which is complicit, reassuring, apologetic, confessional, empathetic, even hurt at one point. She does not speak for some time, taking in individual members of the audience with eye contact and smiles. She shivers, impressed. The sound of a helicopter circling above her is heard, very loud and close. She looks up. Her eyes follow it full-circle as it circles her. She looks back into the audience.)

WOMAN

(knowingly) Military helicopters. They're circling.

(nodding) "Bad times in which to live."

Like the blind prophet, Jorge Luis Borges said. Well, what he *actually* said was. "Like all women and men,"--

(she stops, to acknowledge the audience members)

-like *you*. And you and you. And you.-

‘Like all women and men, I was given bad times in which to live.’

Like all women and men who ever lived or will live, I was given bad times. And so were you.

Aren't these times bad? Aren't they . . . ?

(She seeks agreement from the audience, noting nods, nodding.)

Mind you, the truth is. And I hate to admit it.

(a pause, she struggles)

But here goes. I'm letting myself in for it.

(she sighs, readies herself)

(like it's the worst imaginable sin) I had a happy childhood.

There. It's out. (She lets out a relieved sigh. She studies the audience) Go glassy-eyed. I see you. Smile condescendingly. That's okay. Your indifference bordering on disgust. I'm used to it.

Have I not failed the great litmus test of all martyrs? Around the dinner table with my best friends. A litany of woes and outrages. Each story topping the last. Abuse, neglect, discrimination, poverty. Bad genes, bad luck.

And then there's me. Yes, my childhood was wildly happy. Setting in motion a youth of contentment and inner stability. I know, I know, it borders on obscenity. I have floated on a charm. Bathed in love. Corn fed. Strong limbs pushing towards the light. Like a fucking sunflower.

That I end up here, is it any wonder? In these bad times in which to live.

Borges also remarked, that despite the worst, fear is meaningless. As is hope. Because they always refer to future events. 'Events that will not happen to us,' he tells us, 'who are the minutely detailed present.'

Don't you love that?

Nothing to fear!

(She looks up at the sky, a little worried, then back at the audience.)

No fear, no hope. No future!

(She seeks a response in their faces.)

No future!

Don't you find that the least bit reassuring . . . ?

(she tries again to excite them to the idea)

We are the 'Minutely. Detailed. Present.' !

No future! No past!

So, I don't know how long I've been standing here. Or better put, there is no end. To my standing here. I just am!

(a pause, she gasps a little breath)

Last night I dreamed of a steak. I was cutting through it, slicing open its steaming flesh, bit by bit. But was that me dreaming? Or the steak? Was it, perhaps, the steak dreaming of being eaten. Seared and peppered. Was the steak dreaming me?

(A pause. She suddenly realizes something.)

Am I perhaps dreaming you ... ? Or are you, in fact, dreaming me ... ?

I wasn't always alone out here. No, siree. There was once a man I wanted forever. Like Borges said, 'I was standing on my corner, feeling eternity', when he joined in. Right here, next to me. I never knew his name. He was a practitioner of Falon Gong-aligned to the principles of Truth and Compassion. He sat in peaceful meditation, and he said, 'stay by my side'.

He sat here, black hair, jeweled onyx in the sun. Then he was gone.

You're wondering what I am doing here. You're suspicious. Like the swat teams on the White House roof.

(She looks quickly over her shoulder at them, turns back to face the audience.)

They've got their assault rifles trained on me.

Well, I am not waiting for a bus!

It's cold. It's always colder when you're standing still. But then, you go inside your body. You are inside your body, working. I'm my liver sloshing around, my heart pumping away. I'm my lungs whooshing, my stomach churning ...

I stopped carrying signs -- Stop the Killing. End the Greed. Feed the Planet. Save the Children. Enough of your Religious Hypocrisy. -- I stopped shouting slogans and singing, 'We shall overcome'. I stopped marching, I stopped joining. I stopped. Stopped still. And my protest. It just grew and grew!

I started. Standing. I stand. Stand still on the planet. I feel the inside of my body, but also outside it. Underneath it. I don't feel my feet. I feel the planet spinning me.

Tell me. What hauls you under with despair? I will carry it for you on my silent protest. Tell me.

The extinction of the leather-back turtle? ... Reality shows ... ? Trips to the Mall ... ? Fox news ... ?

Tell me. Tell me. I'll carry it. Tell me . . .? What hauls you under with despair? . . .

(Throughout this section, she attempts to actively engage the audience, and should they speak out, repeating what they tell her in a kind of 'confirmation of receipt'.)

The disappeared peoples of the earth? Imprisoned in dungeons? Dropped from airplanes in rice sacks? Tell me . . .? (imitating) The upward inflection? At the end of every sentence? *That* hauls me under with despair. And you? Tell me . . .?

Give me your daily and your seasonal tragedies. I'll take them. Transborder, transgender. And along with the anguish, I'll carry your rage. A rage so loud it shuts out all sound.

Tell me, what enrages you? Tell me. Let me carry it. Wal-Mart? . . . Car Alarms? Your boss's tyranny? Battery chickens? Nail bombs? Immigration policy?

Gourmet Magazine? Tell me. Tell me. Somebody's cruelty? . . . It hurts you. I see it. Yes, I mean you. You don't have health care. Clean air. You're angry, aren't you? You've lost your sanity. Your peace of mind.

What hauls you under with despair? You, yes, you. Let me carry it. Telemarketing? Fast food? Private beaches? Pre-emptive war?

Tell me. Tell me. What enrages you? Child soldiers? Sex slaves? The last living elephants, poached for trinkets? Oil slicks? A world without tigers, the panda, the snow leopard? By-catch? PCB's? Vapour trails? Black snow?

Tell me??

The drop in the human sperm count? Precision bombs? Chained dogs? The disappearance of the Norwegian salmon? The collapse of the West Arctic Ice Sheet? Lost soil? Overfishing? Taser guns? Sick buildings?

Shanty towns? Depleted uranium? Rhinoceros slaughtered for aphrodisiacs?

Tell me. You, yes, you. Please. What enrages you . . .? Murderous criminals occupying the White House? --

(The roar of a fighter jet overheard is heard—it sweeps in very low. She looks up suddenly, then hunches over and ducks her head, covering it with her hands. After a time, all clear, she looks back to the audience.)

Fighter planes. I'm on their radar.

(Noting concern or perhaps something else in the audience, she stops, studies them.)

You think I should go home, don't you? Just go. I know. I see you thinking that. Live my life. Just get on with my life. I hear you saying to yourself. She should just go home and lead her life. Like we do. Live! We just go on living our lives. Why can't she? Enjoy it. Enjoy. You're not going to change anything standing out here. At least do something practical. That gets results. You might even be laughing at me. Are you? Are you laughing at me? Or is that smile pure, unadulterated pity?

Did I ever, even once, ask you to join me? Did I ever, even once . . . ?

Tell me . . . ? What is it? Credit card companies? CO2? The death of the sea lions of Monterrey? The oysters of Chesapeake Bay? The Caribbean monk seal? The green-lipped mussel?

Cell phones? Land mines? Life as a photo opportunity? The vivisection of chimpanzees?

What hauls you under with despair? . . .

The endangered trees of the world? African Blackwood. Himalayan Yew. Zambezi Redwood. Tambourissa Tree?

The destruction of the U'wa Cloud Forest People? The Yanomami of the Amazon hills?

The blind eye turned on the genocide?

(Suddenly, she looks out over the heads of the audience, there is the sound of something rumbling and ominous approaching. She turns her attention back to the audience.)

The tanks are rolling in. Headed this way.

(She finds her stature and continues) Tell me . . . ?

Road kill? Dead zones? The disappearance of the wetlands? The Sea of Galilee? Half of all birds? Honeybees? The refugees? The disappeared? Mercury? The blotting out of the sun's rays . . . ?

Tell me? What enrages you?

Monster rains? BSE. The stoning of women. The war on gays. White Supremecy.

Water boarding.

Plastic bags.

The end of America.

Feed lots.

Downed cows.

(She falls to the ground under the weight of it all and perhaps something else. She lies spread eagle flat on her back. She stays like this for some time. She turns her face to the audience.)

Like Borges said, ‘if you suffer starvation, you will suffer all the starvation there has been or will be.’

(She takes a labored breath, she struggles with inhuman effort to get back up on to her feet.)

(apologetically) So I stopped eating. I no longer remember when.

(She tries to get up. But she is simply too weak. This goes on for some time. Like a downed animal, she uses her four limbs and rocks on her back, trying to gain momentum to rise. She is using all the last energy she possesses to try to stand, but she can’t. She rolls onto her side away from the audience. She stays like this for some time with her back to them. But after a time, she turns just her face--over her shoulder--towards them.)

Could you, possibly, help me up?

(Blackout.)

(The End.)