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Portents of War



Max Ernst, Two Children are Threatened by a Nightingale, 1924. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Dread

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I don't know why I am so obsessed with the war in Ukraine. I have no family or friends there and I'd be hard pressed to name a single Ukrainian I have known. Apart from higher gas prices – which hardly affect me since I don't drive much – I'm untouched by the conflict. And yet I am very moved, even stricken by it. Is it compassion for those killed, wounded, and made homeless, or something else?

Empathy runs in the family — to a point. My mother could be cutting, even cruel about her children's appearance or behavior, but if a bus went off a cliff in India, tears would well-up and she would say “*Oy Gut!* Those poor things!”, to which I'd reply with unwelcome logic: “Mom, those people are 8,000 miles away and complete strangers! You can't mourn every death in the world.” She'd look at me, shake her head, cluck her tongue, and repeat, “Poor things.”

I feel truly sorry for those hurt or killed by the fighting in Ukraine, especially children and animals. I also have sympathy for Russian tank drivers – poor schmucks – subject to sudden incineration from a rocket, missile, or drone. But when I'm honest with myself, I realize I don't feel empathy for the victims so much as fear of a wider, nuclear war. That's the reason for my dread – I'm sure many others feel it too. And I search everywhere for signs and portents of what's to come. And wherever I look, I find them.

Bluebirds Threatened by a Snake

Here in Micanopy, Florida, it should be easy to forget there's a war on in Europe. The days are hot and sunny, punctuated by late afternoon thunderstorms. When that happens, the Spadefoot Toads, Leopard Frogs, Green Tree Frogs, and Cuban Tree frogs in our pond create a din: It's mating time. The Spring flowers – Tickseed, Spiderwort, Blanket Flower, and Black-Eyed Susan — are mostly shot now, and the Summer blossoms – Blazing Star, Partridge Pea, Hibiscus, and Swamp Sunflowers – not yet emerged. Cardinals cool themselves in the birdbaths. Swifts sweep and dart at Sabal Palm height, and Vultures circles high in the sky. The Southern Lubbers – colorful grasshoppers the size of spoons – are too clumsy to hop, so they cling to the sides of our screen porch, dropping off, from time to time, for a meal of spider lilies before climbing back up.

We've been terribly concerned about our Bluebirds. When the first brood was about to leave the nest, we were convinced a Black Racer snake – they are a frequent sight — had gotten into the bird box and killed them all. Except for the birds' absence, there was no evidence of a crime; they could have fledged and flown off when we weren't looking, but we were sure they were dead. Harriet cried piteously and so did I. Life lost its savor. A few days later, we saw mom and dad and two chicks, alive and well – there had been no

snake attack. Now, a month later, a second brood is about to hatch, and we've again become anxious. All appears well, but we keep catastrophizing. The future is a dark cloud. I can't get Max Ernst's most famous painting and collage out of my head. I first came to know *Two Children are Threatened by a Nightingale* (1924) when I was myself a child and visited the Museum of Modern Art with my dear friend, Andy. The picture was based on a nightmare, or what Ernst called a "fever vision," that the artist had as a boy when he was stricken with measles. It depicts a landscape containing two little girls, one prostrate on the ground, and the other holding a large knife. She is running toward a small bird in the sky and toy gate at left. On the roof of the doll house at right, a man holds a child in one arm and with the other reaches out to touch the wooden knob protruding from the picture frame. In the background of the scene is a ghostly arch and domed building, recalling the Arc de Triomphe and L'Eglise Sacre Coeur in Paris.

The assemblage possesses the logic of a dream, and indeed, Ernst had read Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* a decade earlier and took it to heart. And while lots of the Surrealists, including Dali, Miro, and Tanguy, created "dreamscapes," none so fully incorporated Freudian method in their compositions. I'll resist the professor's impulse to discuss "the dream work" — condensation, displacement, and revision — and Freud's idea that dreams are disguised fulfillments of repressed desires, and just say this: *Two Children* is as close as it gets to the physical realization of a dream of vulnerability, flight, loss, and rescue. But to my mind, today, the nightingale is a Luftwaffe bomber and the picture is a mini-*Guernica*. It portends aerial attacks on civilian populations during the Spanish Civil War, World War II, and all the major conflicts that followed including the current war against Ukraine.

Cannons

Last week, I was in Chicago for three days to see my daughter, Sarah and visit old friends. I spent most of the time up in Highland Park at the home of the art historian Hannah Higgins, hiking with her in the local forest preserves, and talking about work and our families. Sarah came up one day with her dog, Ada, and we went to the vast, Prairie Wolf Reserve dog park, the world's happiest place. For lunch, we ate outside at a new, vegan cafe run by Billy Corgan of the rock band, The Smashing Pumpkins. For a "libertarian capitalist," as Corgan calls himself, his café is surprisingly niche — it sells obscure architecture books, \$500 raincoats made of umbrella material, and New Age arcana, as well as the delicious chick-pea-tuna-melt sandwich I ate.

On Monday morning, Hannah and I drove down to the Art Institute of Chicago to meet our friend W.J.T. (Tom) Mitchell to look at collections and have lunch. We entered the museum at 10 a.m. sharp, when the place is almost empty, and decided to look at the most iconic works of early 20th Century Art – including Picasso, Matisse, Kandinsky, and Brancusi. We took the elevator up to the third floor, entered the galleries and saw in front of us Matisse’s grand Bathers by a River (1909-17) and to the right, Picasso’s cubist Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler. The former feels like it could have been painted yesterday – or at least the 1960s or ‘70s: It’s divided into four vertical fields of color (one with tropical foliage) upon which are placed abstracted, life-size, faceless effigies of women. The Picasso depicts the great, German-French art dealer, seated in a chair in the artist’s studio. It feels a bit more dated than the Matisse but is funnier: the watch fob at the waist, pencil-thin moustache, crisp collar, and folded hands depicts a man of punctilious habit, a comic inversion of the messy artist’s studio behind him.

As we eased away from Picasso, I saw a Kandinsky painting in the next room that made me shudder, *Improvisation 30 (Cannons)*. I became almost desperate to move in the opposite direction. Tom however, saw my nervous glance and jumped: “What do you think of the Kandinskys here?” I proceeded to discourse, frantically and automatically upon Theosophy, the “sounding cosmos,” “abstract” vs “non-objective” art, Rudolf Steiner, and *Der Blaue Reiter* (the short-lived, Munich-based movement to which Kandinsky belonged). But it was all a misdirection to guide us away from the dreaded *Improvisation 30*.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Improvisation 30 (Cannons)*, 1913. Art Institute of Chicago.

The painting is one of the artist's best known, partly because of its early entry into a public collection, and partly because of its representational hook: a pair of cannons in the lower right, emitting pink outlines of smoke. The artillery looks decidedly old school – more *War and Peace* than *All Quiet on the Western Front* – and indeed, Kandinsky had no experience in the military. But the inclusion of the cannons decisively changed the meaning of the picture. (Try blocking them out with your fingers and see for yourself.) Without them, the painting represents a phantasmagoric tower-city, part New York and part San Gimignano. With them, it's a nightmare of modern war. When asked by Arthur Jerome Eddy, the Chicago collector who bought the picture, why he included them, he said: “the presence of the cannons in the picture could probably be explained by the constant war talk that has been going on throughout the year.”

That's why I didn't want to look at the painting. It reminded me of *The Guns of August*, Barbara Tuchman's 1962 book describing the way in which nations sleepwalked into World War I. That volume was a favorite in my household – my father, a WWII vet, mostly consumed non-fiction about wars — and I read it as a young teen. Leaders in every European country, Tuchman argued, formed themselves into opposing, military blocs and

collectively decided that the assassination of a minor monarch in an obscure corner of the continent required an immediate military response. The result was both idiotic and catastrophic: 20 million killed and a set of economic and political crises that inevitably led to a second, and even more destructive war. The lesson for contemporary politicians was obvious. “I am not going to follow a course,” John Kennedy told his brother Bobby at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, “which will allow anyone to write a comparable book about this time [titled] ‘The Missiles of October’”. He continued more ominously: “If anyone is around after this, they are going to understand that we made every effort to find peace.”

“Sleepwalking into war,” is the expression used by foreign policy analysts left, right, and center to describe the continued, slow escalation of the confrontation between Russia on one side, and the U.S and NATO on the other – with Ukraine in the middle. Defensive weapons can become offensive when directed across the border at Russia, and economic sanctions can become naval blockades. “Waiting for the other shoe to drop” is another cliché that haunts me. Each morning, I check the news to find out if one side or the other has made a fatal miscalculation. I suppose if the misstep is bad enough, I’ll find out about it during the night.

After we left the museum, we went to lunch across the street and argued about the war. I want the U.S. to push Ukraine to cede to Russia territory already lost, or fated to be lost, and sue for peace. Hannah and Tom see Putin as a Hitler who will never be satisfied with nibbles – he wants a whole meal: Ukraine, Georgia, Estonia, Poland etc. I argue that we need to test that idea. A fight to the finish between Ukraine and Russia will mean the total obliteration of the former and probable NATO and U.S. involvement in a shooting war. My friends see that I am fulminating. I know it too and so we call a truce, finish our wine, and ask for the check.

Nightmare Alley



Joan Blondell in *Nightmare Alley*, Edmund Goulding, dir., 20th C. Fox, 1947.

There is nothing more boring than somebody else's dream, so I'll keep it short:

I'm walking on a crowded beach – naked flesh, beach umbrellas, radios blaring, baking sun – when I see a young woman seated in a red plastic armchair, in front of a card table with a folded, paper sign on it that says: "Fortunes Told." She's pretty, blond, plump, dressed like a Roma, and resembles Joan Blondell in "Nightmare Alley. I stop to admire her colorful peasant dress, gold necklaces, bracelets, and tattoos on the backs of her hands. In an instant, I'm sitting in front of her with my palm extended; she takes it and gazes down. Her expression suddenly becomes serious and I find myself running away – now through a deserted city. Uphill and down, past skyscrapers, subway stations, and parked cars. Finally, I descend on a slide – like one in a child's playground – into a dark, close, and empty basement with a single small, hopper window. Try as I might, I can't open it – I'm trapped.

That's when I woke up. Harriet and I embraced. She brought me coffee. I checked the weather on my phone, looked at the headlines in *The Times*, and quickly dressed. We sat outside and watched the bluebirds take turns feeding insects to their newly hatched chicks.

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