Distracted

by Sara Jane Bailes

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Distraction comes easily, and when it does I pay attention.

Often when I was in the library I would take books off the shelves surrounding me to relieve the monotony of the book I was reading. Or else I would glance about me and open up a book from the random piles left at my table by earlier readers now gone. I liked to interrupt my own reading in this way. By chance, haphazardly, and with intention; as if there might be a reason for what came my way.

Usually I found myself in the medical and science section on the 10th floor where there were books with graphic pictures of traumatic injuries, and extreme and unsightly skin diseases; or wounds inflicted to the soft pink interior of young children’s bodies, the graphic evidence of brutal maltreatment and neglect.

These were books for nurses and doctors; disturbing books, hard to look at without a trained eye that observes with a critical distance. I flicked through them, eyes half-closed to soften the blow. I wondered why it was these books I accidentally picked out. I looked at them even though I didn’t like to. Other times and on other floors there were books on geography, and tattered atlases with graphs and charts. Occasionally, I found slim displaced volumes full of equations and fractals, or else pleasing art books with huge colorful pictures to dwell upon. I lingered often with these last, guessing the names of the artists. Secretly, I revelled in my knowing.

One day, whilst pursuing this pass-time of opening books that were no business of mine, I came across The Book of Lists, Volume III. It was an old and worn book with a hard pale lavender cover. Nobody had checked it out for a long time and the seam was falling apart. The lists in the Book of Lists varied, and fell under many different categories and classifications, detailing all sorts of peculiar and incidental facts. And all these lists and their numbered entries sat side by side, lovingly gathered into one medium sized book. There were simple lists like ‘10 Top Ice Cream Flavors,’ or banal yet overly complicated ones like ‘13 Famous Fathers-In-Law of Famous Sons-in-Law’. Then there were those that seemed hyperbolic in their ambition, such as ‘The 5 Most Hated and Feared Persons In History.’ Flicking through the pages, it was impossible to track the logic of the list-maker editors. I began to wonder how each list had come to be there, and why they were compiled in this chosen order. What had been the organizational logic determining their peculiar provinces? How had each list started out? What desires had led to these disparate incidents, people, objects and details being arranged together? Even lists grouped under larger categories like ‘Health and Happiness’ or ‘Encores’ seemed to have no apparent reasoning behind their being grouped in this way. I couldn’t fathom why anything belonged where it did.

This was slightly thrilling to me, midway through my day, as I hit my usual afternoon lull. I sat at my table on the 10th floor, floor to ceiling windows in front of me, and quietly surrendered to my discovery. The titles in The Book of Lists were random, specific and compelling while the information included in the entries was less consistent in its ability to beguile. I don’t think I ever finished reading any one list in its entirety. Instead I drifted - listlessly - through the book. It provided instant relief from the sustained concentration required to read Marx or Adorno or Freud, or the French theory books, all of which seemed to be written by men with beards, books that I was obliged to read on my lengthy visits to the library. Sometimes I remained there well into the night as others drifted off to meet lovers, friends and strangers. This particular day, I lingered as the books gradually stacked up on the tables around me, until there were no people left, only the piled remains of an afternoon endured by each of us in our separate worlds, swinging between hard concentration and the flutter of distraction. I watched as the sky turned slowly black, and the Empire State Building surprised me with whatever colors would light up its towering head that particular night. When it was solitary blue I was happiest.

My newly found compendium of lists gave me many small surfaces to spin across, detours, undemanding snippets that required minimum engagement for maximum return: names of towns, countries and dates; the fragmentary nature of peoples lives glimpsed through professions and titles of books and songs and obscure productions; numbers of things, and handsome but brief accounts of isolated events. The kinds of sprawling and abandoned informations that make up histories are here arranged and relegated to a more humble and lowly status, stripped of their narrative context and
Entry 10 in the list ‘Ten People Who Became Books’ reads as follows. At the Takstang Monastery in Bhutan in the Himalayas there is a small volume consisting of black pages written alternately in gold and white. The gold ink comes from real gold. The white comes from the skeleton of one of the monastery’s former inhabitants, a great lama whose bones were crushed into a fine paste. In the list, ‘7 Almost Indestructible People’ you will find entry number 6, simply titled ‘David Hargis’. This entry recounts the story of Carol Hargis who, along with her accomplice Natha Mary Depew, tried several times to kill her husband David Hargis, a Marine drill instructor from San Diego in the summer of 1977. First, she went to the woods to find a rattlesnake and instead found a tarantula which she baked in a pie. After a few bites, her husband David gave up on the pie because he didn’t really like it. Undeterred, the women tried to electrocute him in the shower. So they poisoned him with lye; then ran over him with a car; then laced his beer with amphetamines to try and make him hallucinate while driving; then injected a bubble into his veins with a hypodermic needle to cause a heart attack – but the needle broke. Finally, the women together beat David Hargis over the head with a 6– pound weight while he slept and finally, on July 21, he was murdered. Both women went to prison, discovered while dumping his body in the river. A black and white grainy photo shows Carol Hargis as a short plain woman in white trousers and a patterned shirt with a large collar, walking diagonally across the photo. Her hands are cuffed behind her back, her head bowed, her straight brown hair falls forward covering her hardened mouth. She is walking away from the cameras.

On New Year's Eve, 2002, at a party on Spring in Soho, Manhattan, a woman with a manual label-printing machine carrying a gas mask in her bag in case of emergencies, walked around the party after midnight printing out labels for people to wear across their chest for the evening. She delighted in authorising for each individual an appropriate and personalized label, in guessing who you were and summing it up in a sentence. She looked hard into your eyes for a few seconds like a psychic would before pretending to read you your future. My label read “has a short attention span but doesn’t show it”.

Lists offer efficient, self-contained economies. They are endlessly expandable, defined by the principles and rules of inclusive/exclusive decision-making. Gathered up from the undefined mass and everythingness of the world, they declare themselves as finite and pristine texts, efficient gatekeepers of uninteresting facts or insignificant stories whose details are made extraordinary by intercollision. One aspect of list-making that seems especially pleasing, aside from the accomplishment of such a distillation, and the concomitant satisfaction gained by reading this efficiency of facts, is the list’s inherently regenerative abilities. The lists in The Book of Lists sometimes produce lists within lists, the structure of each calibrated to precipitate ever-smaller worlds within worlds. Indeed, one list can often lead to another, though without extraneous material or labor, without having to explain. In Carol Hargis’ failed efforts to kill her husband, the listing of her repeated attempts creates a singular, ruthless narrative which quickly becomes a hilarious and macabre sequence of events, finally leading to the successful doing away of her husband.

Some entries listed lend themselves to the plain ridiculous and seem to have no real purpose. Perhaps they have made it here through sheer chance. In ‘12 Unusual Accidents’ there is a 1977 traffic jam on a freeway near Los Angeles, in which cars slowed down and skidded around in a pool of 250 gallons of chocolate syrup. The syrup spilled from 50 drums that toppled off a truck carrying them for an ice cream company. In a similar incident in Marietta, Ga., the list-makers report that a truck overturned and spilled $10,000 worth of honey freeing 28 million bees. 14 beekeepers were called in to take control of the situation. Who can guess where the beekeepers are now, or if they even know of their unlikely fame in the Book of Lists, Volume III.

I love the titles in the Book of Lists. They are compact and well defined. Each includes a number - and the numbers seem purposeful but arbitrary, adding to the authority of what follows. Yet even the numbers seem to indicate a certain laxness, as if the list-makers never reached their intended goal. Perhaps they never quite completed their work, or maybe they gave up. Maybe they got bored doing the research. Each list feels at the same time critically important and utterly redundant. They congregate around things that are not quite realised, such as almost (but not quite) indestructible people, or movie stars who work a second job, or slips of the tongue, and ordinary men who ‘play’ king. These inventories chart the modest and poetic journeys of lives distinguished by inadequacy, misfortune and things that don’t work out as intended.

I noticed as the afternoon wore on, and as I now found myself flitting back and forth between extended book chapters and these flirtatious lists, that many of the items included failed to live up to the grand promise of their titles. It seems that the title holds more compulsion than the entries that make up the list itself, as if the idea flourishes and expires right there, with great magnitude and smallness. A choreography of unremarkable and dispensable facts following, the lists become, for an instant, utterly
meaningful before quickly exhausting their potential. I imagine each now as the title for a performance piece, and in my mind each becomes a tiny epic beginning:

9 Ordinary Men Who Played King

11 Days On Which One Celebrity Died and Another Was Born

10 People Who Became Books

8 Surprising People Who Made Billboard’s Top 100 Record Lists

11 Blind Musicians

8 Movie Stars Who Worked in a Gas Station or Garage

17 Movie Stars Who Worked as Waitresses

7 Almost Indestructible People

12 Unusual Accidents

17 More Great Slips of the Tongue in American Politics

Nathan Pritikin’s 7 Hardest-to-Resist Foods for Dieters

Sat at the table, I open up one of the red books I carry with me where I write things down, and see that there is a small paragraph at the bottom of a page which I title ‘Easter Story’. I heard this on the radio late one night. For the first time, the Pope in Rome is too sick and old to fully partake in the Easter Ritual at St. Peters this year. The report stated that the part of the ritual he will abstain from is washing the feet of 12 poor men. I am thinking now of putting the 12 Poor Men (Whose Feet Should Have Been Washed By the Pope) alongside the 11 Blind Musicians in The Book of Lists. I wonder who chooses the 12 poor men each year and how they go about finding them. What would a list include about the poor men? Would it reveal the unfortunate extent to which they fell through the cracks, and describe, briefly, the details of their own particular descent into poverty? Would we know the names and birth dates of the men? Among the 11 Blind Musicians is one Jose Feliciano who gained fame for his 1968 Latin-soul version of ‘Light My Fire’. Feliciano taught himself guitar because he says, “I didn't want to make chairs and mops and brooms.” Another, George Shearing, was a jazz pianist-composer blind from birth and best known for his composition ‘Lullaby of Birdland’. When people used to offer to bequeath their eyes to him he would say, “I am a completely happy man. My life today suits me.”

When something is both large and small at the same time, when the impulse of a thing expands and contracts, when a goal is set though never fully reached - then I think we can say we are in the presence of underachievement, and that the residue of failure is about us. It is indexed by the distance between two things, that very distance the evidence of something that hasn’t occurred but remains nevertheless full of wishes. Such traces and remainders are imbued with a charming modesty. Trickles and interrupted lines of life, where things change course. They achieve their own greatness. The Book of Lists, Volume III (and, I suspect, Volumes I and II, though I have yet to discover), demonstrates this beautifully. I left the library with the book that night, checked it out for 6 whole months and kept it on my priority shelf in front of me. I left behind my Marx, Adorno, and my Freud, the more sustained relationships of my PhD research, to which I always know I will return.

The lists’ titles - or the aspiration captured in the promise they offer - gesture towards grandness and renown. Sometimes they describe an attempt to achieve fame or do something that reaches beyond the ordinary but fails; or they index the often thwarted attempt to perform something worthwhile that might summon recognition, or else announce something recognised through its imperfection. The lists themselves wish to surprise and amaze us, to cause us to marvel at what is now revealed. They want us to think about these people and events as unusual or remarkable. But they do so by speaking of Unimpressive and Unknown Accomplishments from Amongst the Ordinary and the Everyday, and so these lists allow us to notice things just as they are. We become intrigued by the unexceptional. We become complicit in this elevation of incidents and people from the mundane to the noteworthy. We stand squarely as readers, between achievement and inadequacy, pondering our own meandering lives. We wonder ‘which list will I make?’ We ask ‘what list could I become part of?’
Later I found myself thinking of some of the things I had almost done but didn’t, and of how my life is shaped partly by those missed opportunities, and then by those fulfilled. The time I didn’t make it into the best music school in the country when I was 7, because my violin wasn’t as strong as my piano. Or when, years later, I was invited to Palermo to work on Pina Bausch’s production ‘Palermo, Palermo’ in the summer of ’89 but didn’t go. Instead I followed my heart, moved to Rome and taught English. The time I sat opposite Samuel Beckett in the Riverside Studio bar when I was 18 and might have spoken with him had I the courage, but remained silent, deciding instead to take his empty Guinness glass when he left the table. The time when recently I would have performed with a friend at Galapagos in Williamsburg, but didn’t get things done. The man I could have stayed with but who I left. The parking ticket that made me miss a plane. And then the smaller everyday things. The swim I don’t take each morning, which I imagine I will. The early rise to walk and write that never occurs; the papers I intend to throw out and the others I will file; the book that lies on the floor by Helene Cixous titled ‘Angst’, bought in Compendium bookshop, Camden Town, in 1985, and carried with me ever since, but which I now know I shall never read. The one time I wrote a letter to my brother telling him how much I loved him, that got sent back to me from Germany. The performances I imagine and never make.

I think of the paper I should have begun writing that day in the library when I came across the Book of List, Volume III, but didn’t. And of the steady, constant flow of desire tickled by distraction. I think of the acute, prophetic discipline of an impulse, often accompanied by a later giving up. Or the seduction of the world and its endless possibilities imagined from the 10th floor of the library, looking north towards the Empire State Building on a Friday night. It is blue, lonely and clear.