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## Festival of Life

by CHARLES L. MEE

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I love this café

I mean  
for breakfast  
or lunch  
or dinner  
or just a café au lait in the afternoon,  
or a glass of Chateauneuf du Pape

I love the Place de l'Horloge  
I mean this is like being backstage  
at the biggest play in the world

In the Place de l'Horloge you're in the middle  
of the café and some plays  
and the city and the countryside  
all at the same time  
and half the people here are actors and dancers  
and singers and violinists and drummers  
and trumpet players and acrobats  
and clowns and people wearing costumes for Moliere plays  
and tap dancers with saxophones  
and they all perform all the time.

You can sit here in this café  
and see 667 plays walk past you

and the other people in the café  
are part of the play, too

See that guy over there? That guy!  
Is he just a person  
drinking coffee?  
Or is he a character  
in one of these plays?

this is life  
this is all of life  
this is the perfect life

and plus I'd love to go for a ride over there on the carousel. Would you?

No?  
You think the carousel is not for grownups?  
Is that what you really think?  
Does that mean life is not for grownups?

I'd like to get out of town, too,  
but the truth is  
I even just love to take a walk along the river  
and see the famous bridge.

[singing]

Sur le Pont d'Avignon?  
On y danse, on y danse?  
Sur le Pont d'Avignon?  
On y danse....I forget.

Do you like to walk by the river too?  
or just get in the car and take a drive  
through the trees  
through the vineyards  
through the sunflowers  
through the countryside  
to St. Remy  
and that little café on the circle street  
that goes around St. Remy

the little café that has a little carousel for kids INSIDE!  
And you can sit outside, too,  
and see the other people passing by  
and you hear them talk  
and you think:  
they have lives, too.  
Your life is not the only life.  
There are a lot of lives.

Sitting in a café is all about life  
Sitting in a café IS life.

[sip of something here]

and you know that story people talked about  
about those guys  
in the garden café  
at that hotel in Villeneuve  
the Prieure Hotel  
that used to be a monastery like 500 years ago  
you know the one  
and it has this restaurant in the back  
in the garden  
and an herb garden around that garden  
and these guys wanted to get Patrice Chereau  
to direct a Broadway show they would produce  
and they were having a glass of wine with Chereau  
in the garden in the afternoon  
and they had brought that famous lighting designer  
from New York  
what's her name?  
Jennifer.....Tipton!  
Jennifer Tipton,  
(who does the most beautiful lighting design  
of anyone in the world  
gorgeous)

and she didn't ever wear sunglasses in the garden  
because she said she wanted to see the world

in all its natural beauty  
and it was okay if she eventually got cataracts  
from not wearing sunglasses  
because she needed to see the colors of the world  
the way they really were  
and Chereau didn't want to do anything on Broadway  
and Jennifer Tipton was just sitting there quietly  
at the table in the garden, saying nothing,  
and then for no reason  
she just said very quietly, to herself,  
"oh, that's beautiful"  
and so of course  
everyone turned right away to see where she was looking  
and they saw,  
on a table over near the herb garden,  
someone had left a half-finished glass of rose wine,  
and the late afternoon sunshine was shining  
right into the glass of rose  
and it was the most beautiful thing any of them  
had ever seen.

And this is how it is.  
You come here for the festival  
and you see all these shows  
and you see the Place de l'Horloge  
you see the sunflowers on the way to St. Remy  
you see the people in the café  
and it's the festival of life  
it's the most beautiful gorgeous thing ever  
and we get to be here.

And then don't you think it's awesome?  
You're sitting here in the café  
and all these people in lunatic costumes  
come wandering into the café  
and hand you postcards and pieces of paper  
all about the shows they are doing somewhere  
and then some of them will do a little act  
from their show

a little bit of their show  
and if you just sit here long enough  
like 500 people do little bits of their shows  
so just sitting here seeing the clowns and the carousel  
and the bits of 500 shows  
it's the greatest show on earth

ok now take something edible from the table  
a piece of bread or a sip of something or whatever  
hold it in your mouth  
close your eyes – really close them!  
and choreograph the dance of food with your tongue

I'll hum some accompaniment...

[hums about 40 secs of music]

so that's what we call a dance  
and  
that's what art is  
it's a matter of taste

Do you remember that guy a few years ago  
who brought out this wooden box  
over there in front of the  
what is that?  
the municipal building?  
that big building where all the performance artists  
are doing their thing in front of the building?  
that guy brought out this wooden box  
and put it down on the ground in front of the building  
and threw like 15 or 20 wine bottles into it  
threw them so hard they all shattered

and then he stuck his head down into the box  
and did a head stand  
and he got a guy to stand on his neck  
(or the back of his head?)  
to shove his head down hard into the box

and you thought wow this is an amazing trick  
and then he stood up  
and his head and his face were covered with blood  
and it wasn't a trick  
he didn't have a trick  
he just cut himself up all over his head  
and so we sit in the cafe and look at him  
and we think  
oh, this is theatre!!

this is why we came to Avignon

and then there was that clown  
who kept pursing his lips  
every time a woman would be walking near him  
passing him by  
he would purse his lips  
and point to his cheek  
and purse his lips  
and point to his cheek  
until finally she would feel sympathy for him  
or think she didn't have a sense of humor  
if she didn't play along with him  
so she would purse her lips  
and lean forward to kiss him on the cheek  
and he would turn his head suddenly  
and kiss her right on the lips!

And then there was that time  
over in front of the Palais des Papes  
when that solo dancer in a red dress came out  
and these musicians started playing  
and a guy came out  
and another guy in a suit  
and people were coming in from every direction  
—all sorts of people,  
a construction worker, a pole dancer, a secretary  
and I'm thinking  
is this the real world of daily life

or is this an act  
(or is this some people who got lost  
and can't find their way where they're going)  
and the music is wild  
and all 10 or 12 of the people  
are making the same gesture together,  
scattered all over everywhere  
but dancing the same gestures and moves  
and then  
silence  
and a solo talker starts talking  
and then she takes a cell phone call  
and I'm wondering  
is her lover breaking up with her?  
and all the others sing a song  
as though that's their response to the sad cell phone call  
all 12 people on cell phones at the same time  
having the same conversation  
about a love affair  
a breakup  
each taking different lines of the same conversation  
or of archtypical conversations around this event  
archetypal lines  
then music  
and they all sing

and then  
after I paid the check  
and walked over toward the Rue du Four  
there was this live video cameraman  
and a girl was auditioning for a TV show  
and then everyone was auditioning for a reality tv show  
someone walked on a beam  
while a couple kept falling down a set of steps  
like rag dolls  
a blonde sang a nasty duet with a guy  
and a guy was drumming on an upside down water jug  
and there's no a-b-c narrative in any of these productions  
there's no 19th century law of cause and effect

sometimes shit happens  
often shit happens

and usually it comes as a shock to me,  
a revelation  
a whole orchestra comes out  
but they don't really play these instruments  
and yet they can make amazing sounds with them  
ending with a Big Noise  
and then a guy comes out of it with a guitar solo  
and then talk about how bugs have sex  
a lottery ball is used as a percussion instrument

a woman puts a soft cello case over her back  
so she looks like a cockroach  
and does a cockroach dance on the floor  
everyone sits in a semi circle singing  
and making music with their instruments  
finally one woman's harsh almost screaming singing  
dominates the room  
and people leave one by one  
the last guy tries to stop her  
and she kicks the shit out of him  
gets him down on the ground  
pounding and kicking him  
while she finishes the song

a 25 year old gay guy sits and solos about his lesbian mother  
and we are meant to understand  
now there are new ideas of family, new relationships  
and all the while the rest of the cast is behind a glass wall  
moving in slow motion like fish in a fish bowl  
so we are meant to understand even still,  
and despite the explanation we are hearing,  
we don't understand the infinite possibilities  
of human behavior,  
human nature

And it turns out that this and that

and that and this  
they're just all part of the same life in Avignon  
whether you're sitting in the café  
or going to see a show  
or walking down the street  
or having a nap  
and, meanwhile,  
there is this man and woman at a table  
eating rice cakes and spitting them out  
as they sing

And it was right after that  
that I drove down to St. Remy  
and went on down a little further  
to the hospital where Van Gogh spent his last year  
and he wrote this letter  
to his brother  
where he said  
"Here are the colors I need to have you send me now:  
large tubes  
3 emerald  
2 green  
2 cobalt  
1 ultramarine  
1 orange lead  
6 zinc white"  
And you think  
But!!!  
where is the yellow for the sunflowers????  
And the thing is  
you think he was mad that last year of his life  
but he painted a painting like every two and a half days

And so you're driving through Provence thinking about  
Van Gogh and sunflowers  
and people spitting out rice cakes  
and clowns getting women to kiss them on the lips  
and having another glass of Chateauneuf de Pape  
in the Place de l'Horloge

and all of this together is the life you love  
more than any other life on earth

And the cicadas

I love the cicadas  
Do you hear them?

There was a time long ago, in prehistoric times  
when cicadas were human beings  
back before the Muses were born.  
And then when the Muses were born  
and song came into being  
some of these human creatures were so taken by the pleasure of it  
that they sang and sang and sang.  
And they forgot to eat or drink  
they just sang and sang  
and so,  
before they knew it,  
they died.  
And from those human creatures a new species came into being  
the cicadas  
and they were given this special gift from the Muses:  
that from the time they are born  
they need no nourishment  
they just sing continuously  
caught forever in the pleasure of the moment  
without eating or drinking  
until they die.

And then you think  
when you drive through the trees down toward Aix  
you remember  
Napoleon had those trees planted  
so his soldiers could walk in the shade

And then  
when you think of Napoleon  
you think

a lot of these directors in the festival  
when they can't think of anything else to do  
they resort to violence of all kinds  
men and women fighting  
screaming  
shoving  
is it puerile?  
or is it basic, fundamental, the foundation of drama  
and all an audience wants  
like the ancient coliseum in Arles  
where gladiators fought to the death  
and that was enough entertainment for everyone  
no one needed dialogue  
or complicated plots

omigod  
It seems not so long ago that the Roman empire was here on earth  
omigod  
and the French Empire  
omigod  
and the American Empire  
and you think how  
when you go to Delphi in Greece  
and you go to the top of the hill  
first you see the ruins of the old houses  
and above those you see the ruins of the old government buildings  
and above that you see the ruins of the temples  
and above that you see the ruins of the Oracle at Delphi  
and above that  
above everything  
you see the ruins of the theatre—  
I mean, until Delphi sank into degeneration  
and then above everything else was the athletic stadium—  
but in the great days  
above everything was the theatre  
where people would go from their homes  
and see the actors on the stage  
and behind the stage, behind the actors  
they would see their own homes

and their own city  
and down in the valley the vineyards and olive trees where they worked  
and they would watch Agamemnon on stage  
and think  
could we do better than that?

and then you remember  
that Aristotle said human beings are social animals  
we become who we are in our relationships with others  
and the art form above all of human relationships is theatre

and that's why we think when we're in Arles  
omigod  
we need to get back to Avignon  
to see that show again where  
the lead actress is attacked with  
cotton candy, and mustard, and cake

and a woman in a full-length black dress  
with a living room floor lamp  
walks around with the lamp,  
not knowing what to do  
so she finally puts the lamp down and does a solo dance  
while a guy sings a love song into a mike  
while he wears a roller blade on one foot  
and he goes in circles  
and another guy rolls around with yellow high heeled shoes on his hands  
and a man and a woman, both in black underwear, do a dance  
behind a glass wall  
and she takes off her top

and then the music turns into deafening hard rock  
and the dancers hit themselves in the head  
with stuffed animals  
and you are sitting there thinking  
and this is civilization???

and then the whole stage floor is paper  
on which the dancers draw with pencils

and blood red and black ink with a sponge  
so in the end you have a raked stage floor that looks like  
an Arshile Gorky  
the red and black ink runs down the rake into the gutter  
a woman lifts her dress up above her head  
hiding her upper body entirely  
exposing herself from the waist down  
and takes a long, slow exit  
so, alone, covered with red and black ink—  
after a pervasive feeling of tragedy has overcome everyone  
spattered with blood and dirt  
looking wrecked  
and then a couple dances  
really tenderly  
to a heartbreaking piano solo  
while 2 women bathe in a pond  
with their backs to the audience  
like Rembrandt's Bathsheba  
and a third woman dances like a fish out of water  
the women wear white underwear  
and no one is going to hide it

so far, in every piece, the women have shown their underwear  
and the men have shown their underwear once  
this could be called The Festival of Underpants

and then the couple returns  
for another partner dance  
not a romantic dance this time  
but rather now they are mature partners with a history

you notice one woman is crying  
pairs run around and around in circles  
with arms outstretched, smiling happily

no warm up  
no cool down  
no transition  
no motivation  
no motivated entrances and exits  
just:  
life happens  
you get suddenness this way  
and surprise  
and miraculousness  
An amazing life

#### STEPHEN'S SONG

Si tu veux me trouver  
Cherche-moi au sacré palais  
Cherche les boutiques,  
    p'tite et mignonnes  
Cherche-moi sur Avignon

Cherche-moi dans le beau jardin  
Ou on regarde la vue sans fin  
Ou l'air est plein d'accordion  
Cherche-moi sur Avignon

Sur Avignon tu me trouveras  
En buvant du Gigondas

Si tu veux me trouver  
Cherche-moi sous le soleil  
Les comediennes font leurs grand sons  
Cherche-moi sur Avignon

Cherche-moi ou les gens sont nus  
Lorse qu'ils se promenade dans les rues  
Lorse qu'ils se battent avec les faux gascons  
Cherche-moi sur Avignon

Sur Avignon tu me trouvera  
Avec un bonhomme dans mes bras

Si tu me trouverais  
Je serai dans les cafés  
Avec tout ces comediens de cons  
Trouve-moi sur Avignon.

Omigod!  
Look what time it is!?!?!?  
I'm going to miss my show.  
And you might miss your show!  
Or maybe you're not going to a show...  
Maybe you're just going to take a ride  
in the country  
Or walk around the streets a little more...  
The show, the ride, the streets,  
the café, the Place de l'Horloge  
it's all life  
it's all the same life all together.

Do you know where you're going?  
Do you care where you're going?  
Let's both just go!  
Let's both just jump into it!  
We'll see!  
OK!  
We'll see.

OK I'm going!  
I'm going.  
Are you coming or are you staying here in the café  
in the Place de l'Horloge.  
We know what this is.

This is  
heaven on earth.

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