

also by Todd McEwen

Fisher's Hornipe

McX: A Romance of the Dour

Arithmetic

The Five Simple Machines

How Not to be American

WHO SLEEPS WITH KATZ

Todd McEwen

 editions

To Lucy Ellmann

*This girl is almost awkward, carrying off
The lintel of convention on her shoulders,
A Doric river-goddess with a pitcher
Of ice-cold wild emotions*

—Louis MacNeice, ‘The Kingdom’

This edition first published in 2020
by CB editions
146 Percy Road London W12 9QL
www.cbEditions.com

First published in 2003 by Granta Books

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Printed in England by Blissetts, London W3 8DH

ISBN 978-1-909585-32-4

The Old Mental Capital

*Well, I am often taken for a Yale man, by Yale men. That pleases me
a little, because I like Yale best of all the colleges.*

—John O’Hara, *BUTterfield 8*

You’ve got to think of everything.

—Louis-Ferdinand Céline

A guy can’t always be thinking.

—Tom Kromer

—have you ever heard anything so stupid? said MacK. You know what I mean—the whole problem in this god damned town was never hippies, yippies, yiddies, dippies, nimbies, dinkies, darkies, dorkies, chinkies, hunkies, yuppies, eyeties or The Yankees—the problem has always been *Yalies*. If only they would stay in New Haven, and hadn’t been led to believe they have any need or ability to poke their pusses into New York’s affairs, or a *duty*, yes a duty to jump into their J Press pajamas and run the Stock Exchange, some God-given seat awaiting them . . . —You don’t have to shout, said Isidor, I know what you’re . . . —I mean this is the pernicious thing, said MacK, perhaps really the only pernicious thing in New York—I’m really not kidding—Yale. *Yale* and its *foreign insistence* on maintaining whiteness at the altars of, in the citadels of power—I’m telling you it’s the one thing which prevents New York from running *utterly smoothly*, man, the dream of polyglot democracy that it is and must become.

—Polyglot! said Isidor. Pretty big word for a guy who hadda be excused from his foreign language requirement. —Yes which it *must become* said MacK, his famous vocal cords hitting the perfect resonating frequency of the carbon diaphragm in the telephone on the marble table—the achievement that must mock the rest of this country for what it is—that *does* mock. It. —Why are you quoting John O’Hara to me at eight o’clock in the morning? said Isidor. —Well, there is a point, said MacK, I was looking at it last night. He’s part of this White Culture which I’m just completely at the end of my—I’m flabbergasted and unable to comprehend any longer why and how anyone can continue to defend it, celebrate it, reinvent it—what does this great white culture, this white civilization, which all the idiots want to cherish,

to keep pristine from the blacks and the Japanese and the Europeans and the gays and the Jews and the women—of what does it consist? I mean, let's really think—John O'Hara? Pearl Jam? Lawrence Welk? Elementary school book and Bible watercolor depictions of the past? CBS? —Not leaving out *your* great employer, said Isidor.

—The Carpenters, said MacK, Fenimore Cooper, John Grisham? Red Skelton? Hallmark, Microsoft? Mobil? Bill Clinton? Jane Fonda, Walt Disney, American Gladiators? Pat Robertson, Gene Scott? John Willie? Loni Anderson? Jaclyn Smith? The AFL? I'm asking you, man, said MacK, I mean I'm asking all of the religionists and cross burners and anti-abortionists and professional athletes and cheerleaders and militiamen prancing through the woods in camo, waving Bowie knives and their third-grade spelling, I'm *asking* the gymnastic child-abuse coaches—*this* is what you've got? THIS?

—Yeah, yeah, I know, said Isidor. What *I* got is a gut with no coffee in it. Whadda you got? —Oh, well, he called ... —You mean the doctor called? —Yeah. —Yes and? —Hm. News for you. —So! Gee Whizz, it ... —Let's meet up about six. —Where? —The Hour? —Okay. All right.

—Aside from my rambling and now, for me, useless analysis of the ills of New York, that call was an absolute *hymn* to male brevity, said MacK. He looked out the window in abstraction. —This music is not blending with the traffic, he said. —*What's* the matter? said the Non-Anglophone.

The jazz wasn't working with his view of the Drive. Rain darkened the pavement and tail lights shone on it in a way which usually pleased him. There were still bright trees in the park. All his life he had been pursuing a soundtrack, yet he balked at the *literal* application of it, those things you stick in your ears that go sss! sss! sss! sss! until you think you must go mad. He just liked looking out of the window and playing the correct record, or to carry the music in his head. What do you think is the meaning of this? Is it composition of a new sort? —You could make a piece, he mused aloud, for prerecorded

Bach, low-angle sunlight and falling leaves. And the stagehands have a script so that the leaves fall the same way each time. —Très arty, she said. —Would you cut that out? said MacK, you're not from France. —You don't know where I'm from. —Yes I do. —What's going on out there? —'Light rain', as we say on the radio. —Untie me? I want to see.

This recalled him to himself and his surroundings. His small pink 'music' room, the only one in his apartment which faced Riverside Drive. The marble café table from Paris and the inguinal hernia it represented. Coffee and bread and butter. The cat in the chair opposite the one she was bound to. The cat adored her. It jumped down and rubbed against her restricted ankles. —Sorry, he said. He loosened the ropes round her ankles, and calves, and thighs, and wrists. He wore his usual black shoes and trousers, white shirt, black waistcoat and long white apron. She hadn't spent the night but had only just come upstairs for breakfast, which he'd fed her. —Can I get you something else? he said. —No, she smiled. Just the check.

For rain and snow you need brushwork. That or Bach. You need cool jazz if nothing else is to hand. You need Ed Thigpen. *There are moments when you need Ed Thigpen*. But where *was* Ed Thigpen when you needed him? Mr Taste. But today of all days ... —Do you know what was funny about jazz? said she. The explosion of people named Benny. Blowing into things. Was that not a surprise to everyone? The Bennies? Suddenly thousands of pieces of the shellacs and hundreds of people named Benny exist. No? Formerly an outré name, a name of a man with a gun. Also, later, Oscar.

He found some Bill Evans in which there were brushes.

—What's the *exact* relationship of jazz to traffic? he said. —Of course I do not know, and neither do you, she said, but if you get the right music it will always look right. I love it best for the evening cocktail this month, and all winter long. You always balance the lights with the outside. And the martini. The sushi. And dear cat, she said, tickling it. For breakfast I think it a little nicer in the summer, I like that, the coffee with the window open so you keep discovering the aroma maybe in the breeze?

This music reminded MacK of West 58th Street, the old studios there. How the nightly iterations of the show's orchestra fused with the slim traffic and particular lights of that street. West 58th felt like a *New Yorker* cover in the Seventies, or maybe *The New Yorker* imposed that. They impose so much.

Cars left colors behind them like leaves; the rain shaped them. Music will stop time in the city occasionally. But always there is duty.

He looked at the taxis especially, yellow against the black road and green and red of the park. He put on Lester Young's 'I Didn't Know What Time it Was'. —Bye bye, she said. She kissed him on the neck and tickled the cat, put her coat on over her lurid, unbreakfast attire and went out through the kitchen and down the back stairs chez elle.

The usual folderol extricating himself from the door man before he heard something utterly stupid. He was sure that he caught something damaging out of the corner of his ear as he fled up the side street towards Broadway.

Upper Broadway

It's about my first love, he said, looking up at the traffic light—it changed and he stepped off the curb. When he first came to this neighborhood the stop lights were old, with only red and green lamps—no yellow—they trusted you back then. They thought you were an adult who could make up your mind. When he discovered the stop lights, he had immediately wished them older again, of the type which gonged and put out a little flag STOP or GO. Never had been much to say about these few blocks, the incredible merchants who surround a university, selling knock-offs of fashionable shoes, roach traps for twice what anyone pays in the rest of the world or even below 110th Street. It is likely, MacK thought, that a sandwich costs fifty dollars here now.

The bar where he and Isidor learned to drink gone for years,

replaced by the hamburger chain where no one learns anything, though they study misery. Here is the hardware store where he did buy his first roach trap, here still the small grocery where a wild-haired man caressed your hand in giving change, baggy eyes shifting. All in all a gentle introduction to town, one roach and one pervert.

Paused a block south. Had thought there wasn't much to do with him and Isidor here, had thought that for a long while, but how? It hadn't been the university neighborhood to MacK for years, not till today. That was where the bar had been, and here was where we learned to smoke, where we took it up seriously for good and all, MacK thought—ruing it, and ruing that he had drawn Isidor into it.

THE CITY SPEAKS: OF COURSE WE SELL TOBACCO SIR.

Their first purchases here at Ben and Nat's—the yellow pouches of 'Teddy', MacK's calabash with a porcelain bowl—ah, later Nat and Phil's after Ben *succumbed* to his self-prescribed ten imitation Habanas i.d., which they all thought ironic and even—funny.

Now that my lung cancer is here, has *finally arrived*, MacK thought, tipping his proverbial hat to those who had predicted proverbially it would—including himself and his loving, paranoid parents, whom he would now precede in death—he set himself the task, on this walk, of deciding, as a poetic and furious concept, which cigarette in the whole world had given it to him.

$$30 \text{ cigarettes per day} \times 365 \text{ days} \times 25 \text{ years} \\ = 273,750 \text{ cigarettes,}$$

of which how many might you recall? But it is axiomatic among tumorologists that it is not 273,750 cigarettes that you puffed away to nothing, rain or shine, yours or someone else's—and what does *that* matter?—you going to go find them? Blame them? They won't even remember, you, Bud—filter or no, happy or sad—but *just one*, a single speck of a fleck of smoke from one mean-minded piece of horticulture.

Really, quite a lot has to do with the old neighborhood. MacK thought

that it could have been the *first* cigarette he ever really smoked, a 'True' (Blue) in the resonant, tiled bathroom his sophomore year, where he declaimed Chaucer on advice, and became an Announcer—but *smoked* in imitation of his Renaissance professor, who exhaled the pure thought which killed scholasticism oddly and ironically in this smoke. *Ass Hole (Blue)*. *Ass Hole (Green)*. But what bad luck that would be—it wasn't fun enough for MacK's poetic and furious concept.

He'd told the doctor he wouldn't want to fight it, and with some repugnance, an attitude which seemed to be left over from the national treatment of *conscientious objectors*, the doctor agreed to send MacK to another who 'sympathized' with patients who, *inexplicably*, believed that when your number is up, it is up. A physician who would help MacK manage, at least experience, if not enjoy, his dying, rather than frustrate it, filling his last months with a lot of morpheated *pep talk*. (You read the papers.)

—*You want a doctor that sympathizes.* —Yeah—scuse me.

When he was twenty five, his hated long-time family doctor told MacK he would contract it, just as *he* had. Good news! It was his last appointment with the man—and in fact MacK was his last patient. Good! —Why do you think I should get this too? said MacK. —*Because you're a bitter little shit just like I am.*

Cold breath of the river up 114th Street; a wink of frost bright on the stones of the park, which MacK could see beyond the building on the north corner down there, where he'd lived for a year. It is remarkable how you cannot remember your personal history of every thing and every place in town—you'd go nuts—even though you touch upon these every day. The cold burnt-coffee smell of the West Side in winter. The airshaft apartment he'd thought grand, and the depressing fact that the girl he would spend ten years getting over had moved into the *next building*, that he could actually see her fluorescent desk lamp—which he had loved—far below his kitchen window. The many wind-cooled hopes of Riverside Drive.

But it *was* with her that he'd smoked one of the first. An endless, cried-over salad of the 1970s—you remember them. You know the feeling of the new-democratic gourmet foods sticking in your

throat—*quiche lorraine, guacamole, Mateus*—all this crap jamming up your gullet was why everyone constantly burst into tears between 1970 and 1980. In a dark steak and ale emporium—Lincoln Center, to his dismay. —Buy us some cigarettes, she suddenly said, I could do with some raunch—as if she'd awakened to the fact that she was playing a part—the Breakup Scene—they were suddenly to be adult, *to wallow in their own disaster*. Always good news. But how had their tenderness become raunchy, he thought—his tears, though splashed on a lot of turkey and Swiss cheese, were *genuine*.

She looked cute with the 'Kent' and it tortured his sense of loss. 'Kents' from a machine!—which he never smoked again because of that deep, turbulent scene in that dark stupid place—also because 'Kents' smell of the shit-heaps in burning termite nests.

'*The Broadway?*' someone'd written him when first MacK came to town—how seldom you think of Broadway with the name ringing; just a long street with an intense multiple personality disorder. Was Broadway, in midtown even, ever conceived to be glamorous any more? Who has stranger ideas, SAILORS or PEOPLE FROM OHIO? All anyone *thunderstruck* by the word Broadway needs for the disabusement of magic—and they do need this—is a stroll down Broadway in the 100s, thought MacK, as he waded through discount shops, bales of socks, misspellings: Shot of *Whisey* 50¢. But having not walked in the 100s since returning to the neighborhood he was a little surprised that the university had managed to drive wedges of pretense into the place—now there was *espresso for white people*; before there was merely Cuban coffee—for everybody.

At 103rd Street MacK looked again toward the river; halfway down the block on the left was an apartment he and Izzy shared during the Bitterly Cold Winter of 1977, as the newspapers were calling it in November already. Their bankrupt landlord rasped at them through the mouth of the receiver—the Official Receiver—they wouldn't get any heating oil unless they paid their rent—and they said they weren't going to pay any rent unless they got heating oil RIGHT NOW; also the ceiling of MacK's room was like unto a sieve. —That's no reason not to pay, said the Official Receiver. —I can't think of a better one,

said MacK. Isidor grabbed the phone and announced he had begun to ‘chop up’, as he put it, the Mission style oak furniture in the living room and was burning it in the massive Hugh M Hefner exposed brick hearth of the place—it seemed a Playboy Mansion for cockroaches.—I’m freezing, he said to the Receiver, and that is the sound of your client’s dining ensemble warming me up—the oil truck arrived within the hour; the stains of the guy’s heaving splattering rush are on the sidewalk still.

MacK had smoked some ‘Camels’ in that apartment when he and Isidor had the idea of taking Broadway by storm. The theater district, not the 100s. Remembered a number of snow afternoons with the ‘Camels’ in a holder—which always outraged Iz.

—I’ll tell you right now, said MacK to himself, but aloud, in a conscious nod to Isidor, perhaps, today—which cigarette it had better *not* be—any of the damp cigarettes offered me by any god damned drunk *Brit*. Those are the people to get you really smoking, not *play* smoking. Of *course* I’m blaming them! he said to a woman coming out of the smallest laundromat in the world—he remembered it well—they smoke all the time, no sense of STYLE, they call their cigarettes *hairy rags* and to set seal on themselves as the *ashtrays of Europe*, they will actually *talk about death*, thus courting it, while handing them around—not in the *Think on this when ye smoak tobacco*, cut-down-at-eve sense but in grunting through their ‘arses’ about everything being out of your control so you might as well just ‘top’ yourself! ‘MATE!’—the whole United Kingdom one lost, blurry empire of cut silk.

Fuming now, approaching 96th—the familiar large street tube poured out clouds like a big ‘True’ (Blue). The big idiot off whom MacK had taken literally a hundred ‘Marlboros’ in the McAnn’s near Herald Square, always said the same thing as he, smiling, opened the flap, politely pulled one cigarette an inch up from its fellows, and pointed the pack at MacK like a Luger: *I’m not going to go alone*. Well, said MacK, you haven’t. But it would be better if you had. For me.

—But what about every stunk-out bar where I *haven’t* smoked? he said. What of that? And what about those who have bored the crap out of me, offering me thousands of cigarettes late into the nights I was loveless—and now your filthy ‘pretty smokes’ have killed me, what of that?—and stopped to get his breath, leaning on the stone ledge at the entrance to the IRT, seeing himself doing it at the same moment—seeing a man who couldn’t walk, who couldn’t get his breath—*such as you might see*. Implored the god of the IRT—here it was, for worship, succor, or at least for transport off this scene.

The Gods of Town

Most dreadfully sorry but we don’t care, do we, what is going on out there in that god damn country. We got our own problems in this our town—we have needs; ‘*people have NEEDS!*’—we want to LIVE—whereas nobody out *there* can sound a solitary *fart* about being alive—that god damn country is only about death, living death. Consequently we have our own systems of belief. Where is ‘Jesus’ and that crowd, we would like to know, when you are twenty minutes late for a meeting, it has just begun to hail, *painful* big stones, there are no cabs and no public telephones, there is no scarf, no UMBRELLA maybe! This is *important*. This is your *life*. Well—he is not there. But here are these little telephones, the new guardians of our existence—in shape so like the lares and penates of old—they even cradle themselves, benign and observant, in their own altar in the home. Here is the IRT. Here is the doorman.

How *not* to worship as gods, that is the question, the lady who brings you coffee, the delicatessen with the most reliable head cheese in the world, the sturdy humming motor of the elevator which lands you with a soft kiss on the floor where your meeting is? What of the utility and lovable, dependable stimulus of the Non-Anglophone’s goatskin boots? We don’t *take for granted* the egg cream, the smell of roasting chestnuts, the umbrella-vendor, fresh shellfish, the No. 1 train, the