

Summer 1996

The Look of Being Lost

Daniel Hayes

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Hayes, Daniel (1996) "The Look of Being Lost," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 46 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss46/11>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

THE LOOK OF BEING LOST

1

Everyone was talking about insects, how this summer there seemed to be more insects, and more kinds of insects, but before long you managed to change the topic of conversation to incest. You had a way of taking a conversation to the forbidden, and moving it there in a hurry, making the most of sudden and arbitrary transitions. It's hard to disagree with transitions — they seem to appear naturally, never because of any one person. But suddenly, because of you, we were talking about incest, and it was your idea — hardly surprising for anyone who knew you — that there was no excitement in anything not forbidden; that anyone who claimed that a cousin, say, was fair game was taking away from the impulse whatever spark there'd once been. What you wanted to do was desire your cousin, or your sister, or even your stepmother — bask in the desire, stew in its juices, but never act on it. I waited for you to tire of the topic, as I knew you would; I waited for you to come up with another transition, to shift to another topic of your choosing, fooling everyone into thinking it wasn't your doing. I waited and watched, and I couldn't help loving you.

2

We were arguing, on the way home in your car, about whether Carolina was cute or whether she went to any

effort. She had been wearing one of those hats of hers — a military camouflage cap, I think, a size too large — and she had the bill flipped up, slightly askew, and our discussion centered on that hat, on where it was bought, exactly when the bill had been cocked upright and why, whether she knew it was askew, whether it was deliberately askew. Carolina *was* her hat for all intents and purposes. We'd been talking about her in more general terms, but soon enough we started in on the hat: we tried it out and couldn't agree on anything about that hat — not one thing — and that made it a good and useful topic of conversation. You gave Carolina *slack*. I remember liking that word because it expressed the uncharacteristic attitude you had toward Carolina. She was special, or at least at that point she was. There were too many impostors in the world, you said, but Carolina was different, original, without affectation. In your mind there were people who thought and then acted, and others who acted and never paid it much thought, but Carolina acted and thought all at once, in the same moment. For you it was never about being natural; it was about a way of moving across a room that didn't come instinctively and yet wasn't predetermined, put-on, decided upon even so much as a second before the actual steps were taken. That was how Carolina moved.

3

My father told me you were the only person he'd ever met who made life more complicated than it already was, which meant more complicated than he'd found it. After that first meeting my father took me aside and said he liked you and thought you should see a psychiatrist. I told him that you *were* seeing a psychiatrist, that you'd

been seeing one for most of your adult life, mulling over what had led to what and what had led to nothing. I wasn't there for most of that conversation between the two of you; but I remember how later my father seemed confused as he repeated your side of the conversation, which amounted, I could tell, to another of your meditations on pain. What was it? Something about mental and physical pain and how they worked essentially the same. Hit your thumb with a hammer and you'd get the pain but also the consolation that this pain would not last forever. And when you committed the faux pas of forgetting an important person's name, you'd feel a pain so real it was almost physical, and then came the knowledge that the day would come when you wouldn't any longer be able to remember not remembering the name, let alone the pain that followed. Time heals. Of course what you didn't say, what you never said, was that there are also memories that don't ever go away — little mistakes that eat away at us, sit all the while on the other side of the door; and when we want to, for whatever strange reason, we can summon one of these past mistakes and feel immediate, intense regret. When I think of the two of us, for instance, and if I'm not thinking of the good times, which were most of the time, I'm left with a regret that makes me wish I'd chosen instead to smash my thumb with a hammer.

4

Right off the mark you could make a person feel wanted and worthy of being your companion in conversation. Never wanting only a listener, you asked that someone accompany you out on the dance floor, so to speak, and then move with you, never the one person before the

other — both of you inventors of whatever ideas got spoken, whatever humor carried you away. After we would stop talking, I'd always feel confronted by the sudden silence, the absence of words — like a challenge to say nothing. Also I'd feel silly for having lost all track of time. On the night we met, you finally drove me home in the wee hours of morning and we sat in your car, in my driveway, and talked for an hour-and-a-half. Like silly kids, we couldn't stop. No one else I've known has been as interested in or as capable of the sheer speed of conversation. I always felt lost in all of it, like a dog sticking its head out of the car window. Everything at full throttle. And yet for all that speed, the talk never reached any real destination, never traveled to that place where words get shy and come out slowly, painfully, one at a time, as if each mattered more than anything else in the world.

5

Do you remember Carolina's father? You never had much of a memory, and we saw him only for a minute. He had bushy eyebrows. He was wearing a black silk shirt. On our way to a movie, you decided that we had time to pick up an umbrella you'd left at Carolina's. We argued about that, of course, about whether we had time, but you won out. I remember she answered the door in polka-dotted capris, blue or black on white, the same ones you'd talked about earlier in the car. Her father, visiting from Spain, was sitting at the kitchen table with a glass of wine, looking very much like someone visiting from Spain. He was older than she'd described him. She introduced him, and then you went off and found the umbrella exactly where you'd left it. Carolina said, You better go, you'll miss your movie. She was right, but it

seemed silly to leave so quickly. Almost rude. Two weeks later her father was dead, and for once Carolina showed what she felt, or maybe it was that she felt something she could show. We'd barely met him, but what struck me, even then, was how his singular gesture — raising up his wine glass in greeting, in a kind of salute — seemed practiced, polished to the point of habit, and yet he'd done it just for us, it seemed, in a spontaneous motion of hand and arm.

6

I admired your resilience, the way you kept on looking for whatever it was you wanted. You anticipated the worst, expected the best. You were, at least from an outsider's point of view, tolerant and forgiving at the start of a friendship or romance, enthusiastic to the point of making the other person feel special, almost chosen. You didn't see it at the time, and it would have changed you to see it, to admit it, but your enthusiasms were produced by none other than you — by your blindness, by your imagination — as much as by the other person. You imagined that *this* had simply led to *that* — friendship like a gift unwrapped. At the beginning you were always on your best behavior, a gentleman in every respect, especially in your willingness to accept the other's differences. Your willingness was temporary, of course. Once the gift got unwrapped, you were always a little disappointed. With romance, there was a limited number of times that a woman's clothes could come off and produce the same thrill. It was the process of getting to know someone, of revealing things and having them revealed to you, that interested you. If a person continued to withhold, or gave things away only reluctantly — I'm think-

ing of Carolina, of course — then your interest held on longer. When you asked for so much and so quickly, some of us naively figured that you'd be happy to have what you said you wanted. Pronto. That was foolish to assume, wasn't it?

7

Whether you knew it or not, I was always nearby, watching you as you talked to people and took on opinions that weren't really your own, moving your mouth as though words were as physical as any shove, any punch. You contradicted yourself as well, on purpose, setting out the discrepancies for those stupid enough to take the bait. But there were other times, I want to remind you, when you were much different, when the particular group of people stopped you, intimidated you, forced you to try to come up with an idea, an opinion, something to say. Anything. In the presence of so-called important people, you changed. Do you remember? And when you thought too much, or became frightened, those people became even more important. In those social situations where you weren't intimidated, you must've felt an upsurge of relief that made you giddy, so that you talked more than you should've talked because it was easy. You'd be saying one thing and resting confident that in a moment you'd be saying something else, something equally compelling. You'd be in a groove, tasting your articulateness, manipulating words as though it took no effort whatsoever. Whereas at those other times you'd either say nothing at all or run into a verbal maze where you had no choice but to keep talking with no clear way out of any given sentence or topic. You'd be lost before you'd even begun.

Carolina was tall, I remember. Brown eyes and olive skin, a perfect nose, and a mouth that seemed poised for no reason. I still have the picture — the one you liked, the one I stare at. We disagreed on why or how she was attractive, whether she'd stumbled upon it or just what, but I was under Carolina's sway the same as you. She was the most alluring person either of us had ever met, even as she gave off no hint of sexuality. Not innocence on her part, but indifference — enough of it to make you want her. Carolina's power existed in absentia, in her silence, in the expressions that never came across her pretty face — the ones that typically give us away. And what you liked about me, whether or not you could admit it at the time, was that I was nothing like Carolina. Never silent. I always had something to say, disagreeing with you on the smallest points. What you wanted was a woman who'd tell you you were wrong, even when you weren't. I knew that, even if you didn't. You resented me, but you liked what I had to say, how I wouldn't let you be right, and for that I had respect for you and couldn't help desiring you. You were the one man I knew who not only fought with me but played by the rules and gave away points when they were mine to get. You could even take pleasure in defeat, but for me, it was always a pleasure that came with a cost.

You couldn't remember my name. We'd been together for a week when your friend came up to us in the market and said hello. You couldn't remember my name and out of embarrassment you asked me. I had a notion to

tell you a different name, a wrong name, to invent one on the spot, to remain still nameless by having a collection of names, one for every occasion. I thought of doing this in part because already I had the sense that names were important to you. Others accepted a name, but you saw it as a choice, like the color of a sweater; and maybe I was insecure then and worried you couldn't remember my name because you didn't like it, or because you didn't like me. You never said one way or another, but then you weren't one to go out of your way to tell people that you liked them even when it was clear that you did. You told me that you loved Carolina, as though I couldn't tell, but I can't imagine that you ever told her. Those words never escaped. He loves me, Carolina probably told herself. You gave all the signs of loving her, just as you were in love with me that day in the market when any reasonable person would've been able to remember the name of the woman he loved.

10

You were larger than I'd expected from seeing you when you'd first undressed — you hadn't been excited then, I guess — and there was a playfulness in your expression when you were above me, looking down. The look of a boy up to no good. What I liked most about you was your way of getting lost, which showed up in your eyes — a way you had that touched off something of the same in me. You lost that look after a while. Without knowing exactly what I was doing, I asked for it back. I asked if you could get back the look, and you tried, but by then you weren't entirely sure what I was talking about. Maybe it was silly, but I was thinking you maybe could get back the look of being lost. And then you might get

over again and I wouldn't have to feel that you were only going through the motions, seeking excitement somewhere else, in the back rooms of your mind. Carolina was there, in your imagination, and so were other women, convenient characters in the stories you liked to tell yourself. Your imagination confronted you, I think, but it also comforted you. My own worked much differently. When I tried to think of something good happening to me, the idea would spin off in the wrong direction. The fantasy would get changed, made more real than I'd intended or wanted. I envied you is what I'm saying — I had no other world where I could retreat. I had only you, our conversations, and that look.

11

What you needed but never quite managed was a major setback to sink you for a spell but ultimately set you right, put you on your feet, give you a new, more modest set of expectations. Instead, you thought of your reversal on Carolina, her fall from prominence, as an individual case of disappointment: she was either flawed, never living up to expectations, or it was all along *your* mistake, an error of judgment that in no way meant you couldn't get things right the next time around. And you'd keep trying to get things right — I was sure of that. Whether or not you were willing to admit it, Carolina was for you never more than a dream, something made up in your mind, someone who we together used in order to say what we couldn't to each other. And now I use Carolina for my own purposes, tossing her name around the way we did with her hat that day in the car. Carolina was a real person with hopes and disappointments of her own, though we couldn't see that, and even

now she's nothing more than an idea. We should be ashamed of ourselves. But neither of us could ever keep from seeing people as ideas — least of all you.

12

We talked for an hour before you excused yourself. You said, We have to stop talking or I'm going to go home having met none of these people, and you made a sweeping gesture with your hand to indicate the people in the room next to the kitchen. At the time I might've been hurt by the way you ended our conversation — I can't remember. Back then all comments made about me, toward me, were potentially hurtful. And yet I'd liked our conversation, and I figured that it had meant something to you as well, that you didn't make a habit of talking with women in sixty-minute bursts. I believed in how we'd talked to each other, what we'd revealed almost in spite of ourselves, and so later I wasn't surprised when you came back to the kitchen. I was still there, leaning against the refrigerator, and you suggested we go to a restaurant. At two in the morning? You knew a place, you said, and it wasn't a Denny's. We drove for almost an hour and went inside and sat down a table away from a prostitute and a baggy-eyed businessman. I'd never seen people like that. I ate the best latkes I've ever had, before or since. You spilled sugar on the Formica table and dragged your finger through it to write my name, first and last, as though to remember it, or to proclaim it for the same reason that boys, very unlike yourself, carve initials and hearts in the trunks of trees. Then, and later, it never struck me as strange that you referred to me always by both names, as my mother had when I was young and I'd done something very wrong or very right.