

DEAR DIARY

Almost-True Journal Entries From History's Famed

Lucilio Vanini

A K H E N A T E N

Nile Delta, Egypt
 Fall 1330 BC
 Friday

Dear Diary

I got the pharaohship through the bloodline, and like the bloodlines up and down my bowed legs, I wear the purple on the outside and warm red on my innards.

My passion is crimson, exposed now to the world for some time, bleeding, as it were, onto our cut stones and sarcophagi. I hope it's indelible, like the sticky pimples of gum this gnawing populace drop from their mouths onto my city streets. A disgusting habit, perhaps brought on by the perfection of our teeth and our inborn inability to keep our mouths at rest.

I was never expected to be ardent. And little did I think I would possess theological genius, along with a passion for imperial persuasion on that front. My persuasion has not reached the fever of the pinprick, however. I never hurt when my intent is to heal. And heal the people, I must do.

There is only one God and he is the burnt yellow disc who breathes life, the sun, the fiery orb with its licking arms. (More than once, through double-layered cotton, I could see his feelers whipping out, as if to me). Aten is his name, as everyone in Egypt and beyond now knows. Aten. Peace and Blessings Be Upon Him.

I have met resistance. Priests of the countless gods and temples. Pious layabouts. I've sent them packing, picking grass spurs from our wooly sheep in the hinterlands, which is a good use for their overgrown fingernails. The architects too have opposed me. Aten brooks no rivalry. Not that these antique Egyptian gods that deface every building in my city are anything but a wisp of shredded thread in Aten's eyes. I imagine imagery matters mostly to me. Why do I brook no rivalry? Why do I feel offense when I monitor the idolatrous scrapes of talented fingernails upon the walls of my city? Why? Because it's my city. And because I am right.

Can right permit wrong? Does wrong have rights? My monotheistic motto shall be NO RIGHT TO WRONG. Will that adage last the ages through? If I am remembered as the first monotheist, and if monotheism persists, will my motto persist with it? *Wrong has no right.*

Nefertiti, the most darling of my wives, a believer like me in Aten, has advised cautious restraint. The people (by which she means the gravel workers, the date growers, the dye-stained fabric makers, the transsexual performers, and all the rest of the rude mechanicals) need the flourish of their superstitions. Ignorance, Nefertiti says, excuses. And besides, she says, ignorance finds its circuitous route to knowledge: the gods the people bow to in ignorance are as nothing, are nothing, to Aten. And Aten may accept offerings made to nothing as if they are made to him.

Amusing camel dung, say I.

There's a thing called a labyrinth in Greece. It has many routes on the way to a single exit. All of these routes are dead ends, but one. You may spend a day or two lost in these labyrinthine alleys. If a circuitous route is nonetheless a dead end, then it cannot lead to liberty from the labyrinth. There is only one path out. One way.

Akhenaten, a 14th century-BC Egyptian Pharaoh, was the first monotheist in history. He destroyed or defaced polytheistic temples in Egypt.

B U D D H A

North India
Fall 503 BC
Tuesday

Dear Diary

The monks' robes are see-through and that's bad for two reasons. It's getting cold and the draft chafes. But, more importantly, sunlight silhouettes the monks' personals. It's getting to where the local women we beg food from can tell what a monk is thinking. Perhaps two layers of silk will cloud perception.

I caught a monk hiding a mutton curry in his begging bowl today. He hadn't eaten it yet. He's very young and I was overwhelmed with compassion for him. I recall the early days of my meatless dieting. My stomach became a nautical knot suitable for tie-up at a typhooned Taipei pier. I never slipped up like this boy did today, but I did feel desire. No more of that though for me. I can exist on just a whiff of buttered rice and a swish of murky river water. I can't remember the last time I ate a meal that was larger than my thumb. I'm as thin as a bamboo shoot. But I wouldn't call it asceticism, not like those bramble-wearing Brahmin whose arms and legs have withered into dead tree trunks. Unlike them, I don't promote death-defying tricks. I just like to keep life simple. I felt compassion for the boy, but I did have him deliver the mutton to a nearby orphaned Teacup Maltese puppy that had licked my heel earlier in the day. I also made this errant monk stand on one foot in a rye field in a rainstorm pinching two grains of rice in each of his thumbs and pointer fingers. I was amazed that he stood there like statuary for thirteen hours. I observed him with one eye while I kept the other eye closed in meditation. Then I put an end to the matter with the long arm of love, holding out to the boy a fist of buttered rice and a clay cup of river water. He sobbed into my sleeve.

Today some women petitioned me to join us in monasticism and itinerancy. And what should I call them if I do permit it? What is the feminine form of the word monk? Mink? Deepthi is devout and as smart as a coiled cow whip. Her mood is calm, still, like a leafless shrub in one of those tiny Himalayan gorges that are a leg's length across and a thousand horse heads deep. I am impressed with her. Still, I would expect humor in a person who holds to my regimen. I am no dour saint. If I see Deepthi smile tomorrow I will permit female monks. I think it's minks. In any event, without a smile I will not commit minkery.

I suppose I should give some consideration to sex appeal between the monks and the minks. Sex is slippery, after all. It can get inside a person. I absolutely must sermonize upon it. I have always repeated one thing when unbidden sexual thoughts disturb, and that one thing restores my chaste equanimity: "Every Little Nanny is a Ninny to Me." I sing it. It was a childhood ditty, performed in the castle of my youth.

The old-timers have been with me since my Deer Park sermon, which was not quite a sermon but more like the recitation of a short pastoral poem that came to me under that now famous banyan tree. Anyway, these old-timers are never above the practical joke. They put a poultice in my loincloth today and it gave me an irresistible itch just when I was preaching to the Dal and his two hundred hangers-on.

I've no doubt that rustic yogis in the crowd viewed my kinetic performance as instruction for two new yoga poses and three fresh ballet moves. A spin-off Buddha sect is undoubtedly in the making.

Buddha, a prince at birth, was the founder of Buddhism in 6th-century BC India.

M O S E S

Sinai Desert
Summer, 1232 BC
Monday

Dear Diary

I wish I had brought some of my manuscripts with me, something to while away the hours. G-d knows I can't rely on these bricklayers to offer me an enlightened conversation.

I hate sand, I hate sand flies, I hate shadeless heat, and I hate boring people. Either this desert or these bucolic yokels I drug out of Egypt are going to be the death of me.

I could have laid down my brittle bones in a sparkling sarcophagus, but NO, I'm going to die in the sand and the whisker weeds with sun burnt human chattel all around me.

Promised Land! Ha! It had better be green, that's all I know. There had better be more shades of green in this Promised Land than stars in this Arabian sky.

I have moments of self-doubt. I'm not sure at all about that bushfire. I seem to recall now that some naked and creased desert hermit was running away from that plant. I think he started that fire. And there was a large crop of boulders very near that tallow shrub. Anybody with a mellifluous voice could have secreted themselves in those rocks to play a cheap trick on me. Those boulders would have afforded a bit of an echo. Ha! "Take off your sandals." Ha! What a pasty patsy I am! I wonder who it was? Probably Ishaq, that mischievous toad. I should have walked around those stones and walloped him with my shepherd's crook. But I was so dizzy with the waterless heat. I might have believed anything in that state of mind. I might have believed in a drowned continent or a one-horned horse on that day. I went a bit too far and for too long without water, that day.

Pharaoh will miss me as much as I'll miss his court. He really didn't require obsequiousness from the family. And he wasn't given to suspicion. I loved his cat jokes. I think I learned humor from him. He kept a chamber with all the mummified cats of his youth. He used to give his cats chemical names: Camphor, Alabaster, Clove. Intellectual rigor was expected in a pharaoh's household. I could pluck the Pleiades out of a night sky of a million stars when I was three. I was a linguist by the time I was eight. I designed a drawbridge when I was eleven. I could navigate the Nile all the way to the cerulean Mediterranean when I was fourteen. And when I was fifteen I could turn a live cobra into a nightstick or a nightstand with simple powders and proper words. Pharaoh never spoke harshly to me, never wagged a finger in chastisement. He petted my hair with his reed-like fingers and tapped my scalp with his inch-long nails. I smiled and so did he.

We'll probably starve out here in this desert sand, although the rubes began eating some falling flakes today, probably leftover ash from the belch of some inland volcano.

I can only hope I'm not deluding myself in this trek. Self deception is a bit of a paradox, isn't it? I am at once the deceiver and the deceived.

I've had my eye on a nearby mountain with a gurgling cloud on its peak. I'll climb up and have a look-see at it tomorrow, a close up look-see.

Moses purportedly led the Hebrew people in a daring escape from 13th-century BC Egypt.

WYATT EARP

Tombstone, Arizona
 Fall, 1881
 Monday

Dear Diary

Those McLaurys are as dumb as a waterlogged one-legged hitching post. I don't give two centavos if they re-branded forty-six cows from the federal herd. That ain't my beef. But I'll be slipped into a coffin made of china tallow leaves before I let them get away with theivin' the cashbox, cause some of my money was in that box, bound for the Thinwall Bank in Dodge City. McLaurys ain't got enough muscle to make me see it their way. Still, I don't want no shootin'. I don't got the dead aim that Bat Masteren and Doc Holiday do.

My dry eyes once witnessed Mastersen shoot at and hit a *bullet* that Holiday shot at the moon. I mean that's how good that guy is. As for Holiday, he's always doin' stuff like that: shootin' at the moon. He claims, in that colorful southern drawl of his, that the moon's visible pock marks are all his doin'. I trust his information on the general hygiene of the mouth, inasmuch as he purports to be a doctor of dentistry, but I don't go so far as to credit his astronomical declarations. For instance, I don't believe in things called the moons of Jupiter. Holiday is a genuine Southern eccentric, and he's good with a gun and at three-card poker, and I never laugh so hard as when he relates stories of those dirt-stupid Mississippi rebel soldiers. And never have I heard a better argument against an intelligent Creator as from the lips of Doc.

I put down my pistol some years ago after it discharged in my holster at Becky' saloon in Dodge. I had tipped my chair back on its hind toes at one of those round tables of hers and, I'll be cursed to everlasting flames, the chair slipped and the gun went off, piercing my new calico pants and my cherry-blossom long undies just above the knee. The bullet went through the pants, the underwear, *and* the ceiling, where it caught hold of a naked cowboy on the cusp of concluding a pecuniary arrangement with one of Becky's muscular bar girls. The cowboy was okay, but the brush with death put the girl back in the mood, and so the cowboy ended up spending two dollars more that day than he intended, albeit laying on his un-injured side. I myself blushed so much that Becky thought the bullet penetrated my temple. (For a time in Illinois in my late teens I wore a green three-cornered musketeer chapeau with a foot-long pink feather on it, and since then, as anyone might guess, I could never endure public shame with the poise of a philosopher.) And so, in mid-blush, I let slip the buckle of my holster and allowed the gun to fall to the floor. I left town on the 2:13 stage goin' to Tombstone. I had a heart as heavy as solid-oak buckboard the whole ride over. I never picked up a firearm since then, even in my marshaling days and up to this moment.

I find, by the way, that most of good marshaling is soft talkin'. I swear, I could convince a pistol-wavin' desperado that slippin' his leathery neck into a loose noose will afford him the best of all possible futures. I got a way with words. My vocal delivery has caused many a rustler to weep.

Anyway, those dense donkeys, the McLaurys, sent me a note today saying they'll be tying up horses at the O. K. Corral tomorrow morning and they expect to talk with me there. The note itself is a monument to their idiocy. There are as many errors in it as words.

Bat and Doc say I should dust off the Winchester, just in case. But I cut that thing up a while back. Last I looked, a bit ago, little Claire was outside in the slight shade of a large cactus tree smoothin' mud pies with the gun's sawed-off barrel. As I peek out my window right now, I see her scorin' those pies (for equitable distribution) with the pointy remains of the rifle's rusted firing mechanism. I'll just borrow a firearm from Doc: the one with the ivory cut into big and little stars on the handle.

Wyatt Earp was a famed lawman in 19th century American West.

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[to be continued]