

# Avatar Review

Issue 14

Poetry: *Ned Balbo*

**Ned Balbo Bio • Nora Sturges Bio**

## Marco Polo Writes in His Journal

“Nearing the end or not—I cannot say—  
I’m grateful for the calm: ‘port in a storm,’  
I might have said if traveling by sea,  
and storms were forecast. Grateful for the breeze

I still can feel, new leaves under a sun  
nearing its end or not (I cannot say),  
that shade this cafe table I secured  
by walking up without a reservation.

Maybe I’m famous here? A tired waiter—  
rotund, genderless—rescues my water  
from the kitchen’s limbo, while the square’s  
scrubbed slate and stone abound with duplicates—

yes, hers, or his, cast in assorted roles:  
garrulous bore, street-sweeper, walker of dogs,  
phantasms of past or future who cannot stray,  
uni-browed, gruff: alternatives, alter egos,

or harmless siblings? No one walks alone,  
these dozen doubles prove, except myself.  
And when I call to mind those I’ve cast off,  
(not always honorably, it’s fair to say),

I feel the end’s near, whether I go or stay.”

## Marco Polo Avoids a Naked Man



“It’s not that I’m Victorian or prudish,  
nor that seeing him provokes some longing  
for a naturist’s lifestyle, long denied.  
I know that nakedness is everywhere—

beyond all lust or gymnophobic fear,  
plowed furrows, beasts, bald heads, and more, possess  
that beauty which true nudity requires,  
unknown to those Victorian or prudish.

That’s why his body haunts me. Flawed, un-furred,  
paunchy, ordinary, it’s not one  
I’d match to brief encounters on the path  
to grocery stores and back: short errands fraught

with dangers underfoot, and worse waist-high—  
thorn bushes, sharp sticks, hive-swarms, sudden clamor  
of their industry, vaguely Victorian  
in their tireless labor. Worse, his gaze

(placid, lobotomized) proves he’s sleepwalking,



*Marco Polo Writes in His Journal*, by Nora Sturges



*Marco Polo Avoids a Naked Man*, by Nora Sturges

neither prudish nor Victorian  
but tireless, too, unclad, his last great quest  
reduced to one blue bag. Do I look naked,  
too, like him?—victory-obsessed, or foolish?”

### Marco Polo Gets a Blister from New Shoes

A kingdom not exactly peaceable  
is where you find yourself, footsore and sweaty  
on the sand, sock off, curious locals  
turning out to greet you: snakes again,  
striped this time, writhing toward unseen oases,  
kingdoms not exactly peaceable;  
a vulture fixed on flesh, where flesh is weak;  
horned lizard, spiked and sea-green; two wild boars,  
one having left his offering of turds.  
You're thirsty, wrung dry by this arid realm—  
*A kingdom not exactly peaceable*  
is putting it politely. Black wings flap:  
gourmands of carrion whose scaled talons  
clasp green cacti, patient, fascinated  
by you, Marco Polo, who dares brave  
a wilderness all but impassable,  
oblivious to all except the blister.  
Pilgrim or exile, look up: in the caudex  
of green flesh, spine-drenched and succulent,  
water persists, unseen, yours for the taking—  
Rise and seek. Nothing's impossible.

### Marco Polo Sightseeing

*Another porter soon to quit*

“He calls his monkey ‘Adam.’ I’m his slave.  
His treasures travel boxed up in the hand-cart  
that I push or pull, as roads require  
or stairs persuade. I hold my brother’s leash,  
his thirst for stealing quenched, his eyes dismayed:  
Adam the monkey, cheerless as a slave.  
What does he see in my eyes, when he looks?  
A servant desperate for reflected glory  
from an expedition newly joined?  
Brother, you see too clearly.... There’s more haggling,  
‘Madam, that’s too much money. I could save  
a bundle in Kobiam’—the usual stuff  
she hears from tourists, know-it-alls, and cheapskates  
who pass briefly through her lean-to’s shade.  
Can’t he just buy and go? I see her face—  
tired of money and men, the stone macadam,  
the rainforest’s penury.... I tug the leash,  
just to make Adam jump: he squeals and lunges,  
then retreats.... The Great Man shoots a look—  
murderous rage—my way. Whom does he hate  
the most right now? I will not be his slave.”

### Marco Polo at a Restaurant



*Marco Polo Gets a Blister from New Shoes, by Nora Sturges*



*Marco Polo Sightseeing, by Nora Sturges*

1.

“A restaurant lurks beneath the catacombs  
where diners wait for service in my dream.  
A dream it must be: alcoves stuffed with bones  
stare, hollowed-out, from cave-walls; pigeons quake

along the floor for stray crumbs, undeterred.  
A restaurant lurks beneath the catacombs.  
Beyond the cave-mouth, walls—carelessly plastered,  
sun- and lantern-lit—betray a window

where one lamb looks down and almost smiles.  
Daylight meets grotto-dusk; a waiter walks  
from fire and kitchen down to catacombs,  
the human foot that occupies his plate

ungarnished. I don’t want to meet the chef,  
whoever he is, although I pay him praise—  
Nice job! Murder will out!—whatever works  
to please or placate one whose catacombs,

here in the earth’s bowels, fill our stomachs up.  
The specials are a late lunch and Communion.  
The cigarettes stubbed out on ancient stone,  
as if life, too, were stubbed out, lie unswept.

Who’ll feed me, take me from these catacombs?”

2.

“I’m too fastidious, even in dreams  
where, finally, I could kick back, take a break,  
and let things slide, let others take the heat.  
Instead, I breathe the damp air of the caves,

bones mildewed in this underground cafe,  
and wipe my glass, fastidious in dreams.  
I have to lay a clean cloth on my seat,  
sweep off the dirt, unknown contaminants,

small candle spilling wax, burning away,  
while earth-bound pigeons look up quizzically.  
It’s tedious, each night. I waste my dreams  
on trivia when I could order steak—

cooked flesh of some kind, burgundy like blood—  
consume my fill, and have a woman, too.  
Instead, I’m here, trapped in the crypt-cafe  
where cavern-walls hold bones for nightmares, dreams

from which no one returns. Even the sign  
that hangs nearby—black slate with arm and leg  
unsullied by words—is testament to Death.  
No one escapes, clean glass or dirty plate,

and my turn’s next....Oh, wake me from this dream.”

3.



“Somebody upstairs plays Exquisite Corpse  
to while away the hours. By now, it’s late.  
The door is barred. Nobody gets to leave  
until somebody upstairs says it’s time.

It isn’t time. A new page, folded over,  
makes the rounds; one more exquisite corpse  
emerges from the careful strokes of guests—  
the careless strokes, the angry strokes—until,

unfolded, each unwitting author’s part



*Marco Polo at a Restaurant, by Nora Sturges*

in augmenting the image joins at last,  
collaborators in Exquisite Corpse  
amused and horrified. Downstairs, I wait,

thinking of bodies blessed, one more lost guest  
who hopes the bread arrives before the meat,  
the meat before the bill. I know I'll make  
somebody sometime an exquisite corpse,

as those abandoned in these reliquaries  
carelessly maintained once did as well.  
Who struck their flesh from bones, mismatched remains?  
Whose every pen-stroke left them monstrous, changed,

with every new round of Exquisite Corpse?"

4.

"I wake afraid—who doesn't?—but the light  
brings back the world: outside, my porter smokes,  
boys mark the road in chalk, carts rattle past,  
and vendors ring their bells. A woman sings,

somewhere, and I think only of my mother  
singing me to sleep one night at twilight—  
twilight: the time of two lights, when we rise,  
asleep, awake, our bodies visible

yet out of reach, our souls' eyes opened wide.  
A child's fears, the body's appetites  
forgotten, I can almost touch the light  
and grasp it in my hand, moth-dust that glitters

as it falls like stars. My mother's singing  
carries me, as she did, falling silent  
when she lays me down, in dusk, to sleep.  
Today, I wake and find myself in light,

all that the dream encrypts already fading—  
Death, the time of two lights; at my feet,  
degraded doves, stone-gray, treading the tombs  
from which, awake, I free them, and myself,

forgiven, not forsaken, by the light."

## **Avatar Review**

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