

'In the time it takes to finish a sandwich, we could build worlds' to be published in the short-story collection *When I Saw the Animal* by Bernard Cohen, September 2018 (UQP).

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*In the Time it Takes to Finish a Sandwich, We Could Build Worlds*

*You and I, my dear sister, you and I, just as we have always been: with my vision and your pragmatism, your receptiveness and my intensity, your catering and my generosity of spirit, my artistry and your critique. I have the sandwich in hand and, with it, trace out my words in the air ...*

... and if the idea about the furniture rental system doesn't work out – and unfortunately it's not for the moment in my control but is in the purview of those without the expansive, entrepreneurial outlook you and I share, that is, those who follow a set of procedures based on what has worked in the past and not at all considering what will or is likely to work in the future (and I know this because I emailed it through using the official corporate online contact form, attentioned properly to the Innovation Team) – but should it come to pass that at some point the idea about the furniture, or plan, really, more like a plan, much beyond an idea, should this not proceed owing to failures of vision or for whatever reason, you may also like my idea, or plan, for the Orchard, which doesn't depend so much on the capacity or incapacity of others but only on the use of a patch of land which is not being used for anything at all and so there is no

reason whatsoever why it should not be available to plant a few trees once we've cleared away the weeds that have taken over the site.

*At this point, I reel back in my free-flowing sandwich and take a bite. As I had been running through the plan or plans, your left-hand index finger had been doing the conversational work for you – tappity tap tappity, allegro nervoso four bars and two bars ritardando, minim rest and a tempo – but now I can see you've been assiduous in your attention, for despite appearances and despite the weird breathiness in the tone as you set out, you ask me where this land is, what access we have to it and what checks, if any, I have made. I've always been the risk-taker and you the risk-averse of us, and now I chew for a while, chewing in the manner that shows that I'll swallow as soon as practicable in order to answer your questions, no matter how constrictive they appear to me. You draw out your sandwich, wrapped in greaseproof paper, from the café-branded bag, carefully fold back a paper edge so as not to lose a strand of whatever those sprouts are called, take a perfect-sized bite.*

So if this table is the city, the land is approximately on your left shoulder, far enough away that it has been ignored for all these years – for all eternity as far as I know – except by lantana and bamboo and blackberries and privet which pays attention everywhere at all times, and even if someone does actually own this land, they may be completely unaware of it, so the choice to be made is whether to simply clear and plant or whether to try and find out who the owner is (the owner in black letter law, that is, if not in practice or in any connected sense), and to offer them some proportion of the proceeds, gross or net, even though this may draw attention to the value of the land and they may try to take over my plan notwithstanding that they wouldn't have even thought of doing anything, and might not have been aware of the land at all, but for us drawing their attention to it, that is, if the land is actually owned by anyone and not just sitting there unowned (even by the black letter of the law), and if that's the case I'm almost certain that the land would become ours (or mine if you decide in your careful way against joining me) after only a very short time, something like three years or maybe seven years – it's called something like

ownership through possession, maybe there's an extra adjective that goes in there, not sure, but not that important by comparison to the potential fruit to be taken to market.

*A small piece of tomato has slipped from the side of my sandwich onto the plate. I pick it up and pop it into my mouth, and you take this opportunity to fill the atmosphere with negative thinking, further elucidating and elaborating all the blocks to my plan, drawing on your multitudinous yet unbacked boasts to know more about land law and its operation than I do and in immediate subsequence explaining how little I understand of the complexities of providing evidence for and attaining the right to claim land through what you call adverse possession. When I chew at the sandwich, you bite. You bite at me.*

I'd expected your scepticism, as you have always been, of the two of us, the more defensive and the more sceptical – well, different when we were young and when bruises healed faster – but can I just say that nothing, really nothing, depends on any type of claim, inverse or converse, adverse or obverse or transverse, to that or any particular piece of land, so that if we were moved on, or given your hesitation, if I was moved on after a few years and before being able to keep the land through any verse or the universe of possession, by that time I or we would have built up plenty of fruit-growing skills and it wouldn't matter if we needed to shift – *plus* I'm very confident we'll have saved up enough to purchase our own Orchard, even if we sold only, say, twenty kilograms of fruit per day, just a couple of boxes for, say, fifty or seventy dollars per box, you can see how that would all add up – the object is not to get something for nothing, some cargo cult variation, but simply to turn a good idea into a good and satisfying life and can I say it grieves me that you, rather than embracing what could be, instead turn your mind to fault-picking and hole-finding, but no matter.

*And what are sandwiches for other than biting and punctuation? I pierce the doubled bread and you pierce my soliloquy. You, somewhat submerged, swim for the surface, and you're spluttering, I think, or so it seems, with a desire to simultaneously reassure and deflate, that of course you mean nothing but good for me, and that your desire*

*to chip away at any ideas or plans I have been thinking about and developing over days, or weeks, your desire is only that I find fulfilment and a measure of success.*

Thank you, of course, for recognising that such ideas don't just fall out of sleeves but are matters of great consideration, but if lands and Orchards fall through, fear not, for we have back-ups and fall-backs and stand-ins: in these times, one must prepare for drought, and droughts strike so very slowly such that we find ourselves in the middle of them even though we haven't sensed them coming on, and preparations for drought cannot simply be the setting aside of water; instead, we must set ourselves up for dehydrated life and hence, in the event of furniture provision being less promising than estimated, and if an Orchard cannot grow as previously empty land withers, there is always one more idea, or plan, for the hard times, and this plan derives from the propensity of people to prepare themselves for the worst – sharing your pessimistic persona, I suppose, but without the wit – and after raising a small amount of capital in partnership with existing insurance industry players this new kind of insurance won't simply compensate for loss of income and desiccation of economic opportunity but will translate that loss into sustenance – in the future, cash money may be readily available but given likely severe shortages of furniture and Orchards, it will be difficult to trade it for anything solid and sustaining – the system of trade and purchase on which we have built our expectations may break down irreparably, so imagine, my dearest sister, that compensation will be supplied not in cash but in water and food, which we will warehouse from the proceeds of premiums, and I'm in the process of making appointments to speak with senior management at several major insurance service providers to offer them this chance, once appropriate non-disclosures are entered into, of course, and of course I would prefer not to do this all on my own, so if this is the plan which is most appealing to you ...

*You seem a little glazed, translucent carbonates or oxides through which your underlying earthenware skin may be glimpsed. After all, some people are lucky to have a single idea in their entire lives, and here am I sharing plan*

*after plan, each one ready to act upon, to action, as I've heard said in corporate circles. I slice the remaining part of the sandwich into bite-sized pieces, partly for convenience and partly just to allow you a little more time to consider, to choose among the offerings I have laid out, and you have finished your sandwich. You lean back and cross your arms, perhaps too closed-off, perhaps still thoughtful.*

Would you like some notepaper? A pencil? Would you like me to run through the Orchard again? I'll be making a few appointments tomorrow or the day after. Perhaps you'd like to come along, but I'd definitely have to let them know ahead of time, given that these are senior executives who can't just have unexpected team-members showing up in their offices without appointments.

*I press my finger onto the remaining two or three crumbs and pop them into my mouth. Good sandwiches, I say. Thanks. You're offering to lend me twenty dollars – another twenty dollars you say – because you're my sister and because these ideas or plans, these plans, might take a little while before they begin to produce significant returns.*