



BRETT BUSANG

Interview with Brett Busang

THE BACON REVIEW

TBR: First, middle and last names?

Brett Flemming Busang. (My brother is named Bryan Foster Busang.) Cute, huh?

TBR: Any nicknames growing up?

Much as I would hint at wanting one, I seemed to be nickname-resistant. At a time when nicknames set you on that Yellow Brick Road down which celebrity beckoned with a ready smile, not to have one constituted a character flaw that was impossible – even if other character flaws were considered lovable – to live down.

TBR: Who'd you learn from the most?

Hard to answer, which would suggest a learning disability that hobbles me to this day.

TBR: What was your first job?

I mowed neighbors' lawns for something like twenty cents on the dollar and felt gloriously overpaid. I wish I could find work as easily today.

TBR: You ever hate working? How come?

Almost anybody can ruin a job if they're in a position to lord it over me; appropriate that position by force; or assume it is theirs for the asking. I've quit – or been fired from – every job I've had. In fact, if any particular act, event, or phenomenon defines me, it would be my eagerness to punch out – to use a phrase that may be obsolete by now – or get punched as I flee a given workplace. There is no better sort of work than the sort you can at least pretend you're doing on your own. If, however, you can be on your own, you are God's little green apple and the Buddha's chess-set.

TBR: Got a good handle on life? Explain.

No. Can't

TBR: What would you build if you could?

A townhouse such as Piranesi might have designed,

after which I would dismantle it and make special gifts of its ogee roofs, its dizzying platforms, and its depthless catacombs.

TBR: It's clear place is important to you. You study it well. How do you do that?

It all started in a closet, which I ran across as I was cutting through the immaculately manicured front yards that were part of a Kennedy-era homeowner's Triple Crown. (The other two parts consisted of a bar-be-cue pit and a swimming pool – particularly if one or the other made it impossible to do anything else but happily suffocate as plumes of smoke billowed up from a fully loaded grill or accidentally drown after having consumed a case of Schlitz by the bottle.) Had I not been trespassing in this way, I would have missed the closet and become a rather different person. But I found it, I made the door swing open, and, amidst drooping shelves and a cold concrete floor, I found letters from a great gilded age that made of hotel stationery a Book of Hours; I pored over antipodean guide-books; and I became instantly enamored of a sepia-toned sensibility that has haunted me ever since. I regret that I shared these treasures with callow school-mates. I wish I had

kept every flourish and curlicue to myself. (In the fifty-plus years that have passed, I have lost everything.) Also: immersion has come, like spelling, pretty easily. In addition to that, I prefer the inanimate as a starting-point. Stories don't fuel my imagination so much as ironbound machinery, piles of rusticated stone, or hand-painted signage.

I'm also a painter, which has allowed me to get to these things more directly. Yet, when I paint, I think of the stories that might be hovering around.

TBR: What's the best story you ever got told?

My late friend, Peter Bowman, should have become famous for the paintings he did as a young man. They were vibrant, slathery-colored things for which a place like Memphis had no use or patience. They did not resonate with a social order that started at the top and trickled down only as much as good housekeeping would allow. They shocked the plumpish matrons who dabbled at connoisseurship and ended up with clown-faces that could never laugh – or hollow-headed abstractions that reminded these people of sunsets and slow kisses. Rather than brave a marketplace that existed only for such old ladies and their "artist" friends,

he took a teaching job out of college and stuck with it for the better part of his life. Yet, as a way of defusing the tension he felt, not only when he got out of his car and faced the school-building from which he would never escape, but during the still watches of the night, when he dreaded going there, he developed a narrative structure that would somehow restore a sanity that was under attack on the job. “So I get out of the car,” he said, “with the gas chambers in sight and I feel an instant hammering. Are there hammers? Yes. And a great many of them too. I hear them every day as I traverse the parking-lot, think of the classroom with its filthy-looking sink, its PTA-stickered windows, and its fly-specked linoleum, which not only covers the floors, but the walls and ceiling. Linoleum, symbol of all that is wrong in our culture, covering every possible route of escape. It doesn’t matter how good I feel before I enter this room, every time I go in, I know my life is being hammered out of me one stroke at a time. When I go in, I can stand. By the time I leave, it’s shrunken down to the extent of my despair and makes a hunchback of me. Does it affect my students? No. They’re the same obscenely healthy specimens they were over the weekend, when they were passing a football or ogling a neighbor’s wife who will, in good time, polish their

knobs with a sense of gratitude they never get from their spouses. Oh, they try to do their exercises, but we all know how hopeless that is. They agree to try; I agree to pass them along so as not to see the same people in my class again. But that doesn’t work because. . . all of these people are the same. They wear the same blue blazers, they have the same blond hair, and, when they smile, they have such perfectly white teeth, I have to shield my eyes against them. I am in hell, my friend, and I am as comfortable there as it is possible to be. But am I a survivor? Time will tell, won’t it? Time will most certainly tell. And now let’s go have some coffee.”

Over the years I knew Peter, he would tell me a wildly different version of this story every time I talked to him. I wish I could do it justice. My version, however, pales when I consider the zany majesty of a mind that never repeated itself. Nor could it. Peter was so information-averse that he’d wave it away as if it were attacking him. I once told him that he was no more linear than a ball of yarn. He fairly beamed as he took in my compliment. I was glad I was able to please him.

TBR: If you kick your feet up, what’s in your hands?

I don’t answer trick questions. Or can’t.

TBR: *What's difficult about writing?*

It isn't difficult at all; it's either easy or it's impossible.

TBR: *Any favorite books from your early teens?*

I wasn't much interested in books at the time, though I felt guilty about it. I was, however, enraptured with little Stella from *Great Expectations*. Like young Pip, I followed her about the Havisham estate with an idolatry of whose quixotic nature – also like Pip – I was blissfully unaware. To her taunts, I would bow my head. When she berated me, I went moony-eyed. And when she drove the knife in, I yelped, but I asked for more. After Stella is disappointed in love and living with at the old house, I wanted Pip to do exactly what he did: tear down those curtains, let the murky light of England bleach out that bloody old wedding-cake, and, after sadder-but-wiser Stella “sees the light”, apply chaste kisses to the lady's forehead. In my version, these kisses had a sequel, but it didn't seem quite right and I felt badly for wanting Stella in that way.

TBR: *What do your parents read?*

After having gotten over “the classics” my mother read Literature Lite – and lots of it. (She was always trying to pawn off her Thomas B. Costain's on me. Sadly, I got to like them.) My father's reading was even more pedestrian. Yet they almost always had a book in their hands – except when they were throwing things at one another. My brother's literary sophistication was immediate and enduring. While I was running two-mile races, he holed up in his room with Isaac Asimov, Philip K. Dick, and “choice” Stephen King. At the time, I was the uncomprehending philistine who couldn't understand why he sat around so much. Having spent most of my adult life in this way, I've tried to make it up to him. In fact, he was absolutely thrilled to learn that I'd dedicated my “British” novel, *I Shot Bruce*, to him.

TBR: *Describe an editing session.*

There is content editing, which involves necessary deletions, contractions, and full-body slams. On the other side of the spectrum, annexations – which are the most fun – are created to fill out an idea or expand upon something that shouldn't just “sit there”. I'm a stickler for words that fit together. Adverbs like “really” and “literally” are – if they creep in – summarily expunged

unless I want to emphasize their superfluity. Or put them in a snatch of dialogue. I look for repetition and redundancy, which are, in blog posts and citizen journalism pieces, almost universally ignored. (*“After having survived three nuclear blasts in a row, Ippolito pinched his cheek and thanked his lucky stars for his good fortune.”* “. . .for his good fortune” needs to be crossed out. *“When he approached the lion, his temerity did him little credit.”* The writer has mis-described his anti-hero. He (or she) meant to say that his “timidity” did nothing for him – though it probably made the lion hungrier than he thought he was going to be.)

The mechanics of writing fascinate me, but only after I finish up on a draft. When you write, you’ve gotta let her rip. When you edit, you check under the hood; identify missing links; and scrub underneath your fingernails. When possessed by images and ideas, I am an Irishman; when faced with a sprawl I must, with a sensible rigor, contain, I’m as good a German as I can be.

TBR: What else am I missing?

Most writers are failed somebody else’s. (Just thought I’d throw that in.)