

# Capital Impressions

## Emil Pitkin '09

### *Rabbit Hunting*

The riders in front of me were treated to a piercing, reverberating, existential yawp. We were inside the tunnel of the Arlington Memorial Bridge, midway through the bicycle leg of a triathlon, and I had taken account of how many miles I had to go before I could sleep. Compounding the suffering was a curious sight: hundreds of riders on high-performance, titanium space-age machines, and one eccentric fellow on a City Bike accessorized with iron cage for the bicycle lock, pedaling uphill the whole race.

Stalin and Prokofiev died on the same day in 1953. There were no wreaths or flowers at Prokofiev's funeral because everything floral in Moscow was commandeered for ex-Comrade Stalin's obsequies. So too, the bike shops of DC had no bikes for me to rent the morning of the largest race in town. You might ask why I hadn't attended to securing the only piece of equipment one needs to complete a triathlon, say, the day before. I would answer that if Tanya had told me before Friday at 5pm that there was a triathlon on Saturday at 8am, and that she was competing in it, I would have.

That Friday, I had just finished giving a sales demonstration to Tanya, a policy specialist at the National Governors Association. The NGA, unlike its partisan cousins, the Republican and Democratic Governors Associations, exists to support the governors of all 50 states. To have NGA as a client conferred legitimacy in a town with a nose for pretenders. I would have this quarry.

We got to talking about weekend plans. She went first, and volunteered that she'd been training for a couple months for tomorrow's DC tri. Thus I was informed about my weekend plans. "What a coincidence!" I said. "I'll see you there." I went home that evening and signed up for the DC triathlon.

As soon as I heaved across the finish line, jelly-legged, I took a Gatorade and jumped into the fan section to be ready to clap loudly for Tanya when she crossed the line. I had expected to finish well before her and have a few minutes to recover myself. I was surprised when she tapped me on the shoulder in two or three minutes, already changed into street clothes, fresh, and smelling of shampoo.

"Good morning!" she beamed. "Have a nice race?"

"Not bad. Really impressed by your time though."

"Don't be. I didn't feel like racing today. Just came by to cheer on my friends."

As I rode back to Union Station on my City Bike to drop it off, I remembered the best laid plans of mice and men and cracked my first smile of the day.

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This was the first time that I'd gone "rabbit hunting." The term originated with my friend Tory, who lent a hand of friendship when I told him we were trying to do business with a three-letter government agency. We were building a product that we thought they would need, but they wouldn't disclose in writing what they actually needed—understandably, they didn't want to tip their hand about the ways and means of their investigations. I needed to speak to a senior at the agency. Tory was professionally acquainted with their Senior Counsel, and invited him to a coffee in the Hart Senate Office Building. My job was to arrive five minutes after their coffee date started, recognize Tory, feign surprise, and introduce myself to the Senior Counsel, Mr. Devon Rabbit.

Nothing came of the fortuitous meeting with Mr. Rabbit, but a few months after the triathlon the NGA accepted our proposal to become a client, the first time we had bested our competitors head-to-head. When I got the call with the news, I put the phone on mute and let out a rapturous primal scream. I'd hunted my first rabbit.

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### ***My Favorite Painting***

On the second floor of the National Gallery of Art, the Old Dutch and Flemish Masters murmur in their native tongues. You walk up to the fountain underneath the rotunda, you turn left, and in the corridor you pass two galleries without looking in. At the third, you glance inside to see if anybody is walking toward you, you let them pass, and then you close your eyes and take some measured steps, aiming directly at the back wall and one painting to the left.

You're inside the Rembrandt gallery, where you are surrounded by 12 of the only 300 Rembrandt paintings extant in the whole world. But today you've come for only one. You stand before it with your eyes closed, remembering the uplift of the last time. You breathe in very deeply because you want every sense taut, and then you open your eyes and feel restored.

*The Mill* is my favorite painting at the National Gallery of Art in DC. Gunmetal gray cloud in the top-left corner, thick. A few small incidental figures at the bottom of the frame: a mother or a governess walking a small child down a sloping path; a young woman crouched over with her washing in the river. In the bottom right-hand corner, the stern of a rowboat, a rower, and two oars; two more strokes and he'll make landfall beside the washing girl. You don't notice any of this until you tell yourself "I will notice everything about this painting." Because what you see first, and continue to see long after you have left the gallery, is a harsh brown cliff, the river curling round it, and atop the cliff, like a statue atop a pedestal, a proud and solitary Dutch windmill.

The foreboding cloud behind it has made way for a clearing sky, some almost-open sky above the windmill's blades, innocent white clouds filtering clean light over the wood across the river. But the opposite may hold too. Like Benjamin Franklin who was asked whether the sun's half disk over the horizon in Independence Hall represented the rising or the setting sun, it is fair to ask whether the storm has given way to the clearing or whether the calm must give way to thunder.

Unapproached and unapproachable, alone against the elements, monumental, the mill dominates the painting. It is no wonder. While the governess walks her charge to the river, the man rows, and the lady washes, they owe their afternoon to the windmill that has kept the river's waters from rising high and drowning all of Amsterdam, governess, child, rower, washer, and the rest. From their lowly vantage point, they can't even see it, maybe forget it, but woe to them if the blades stop spinning. The windmill stands, heralded and unheralded, harnessing nature's winds to beat back nature's currents, doing what it must, doing all it knows.

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### ***Chicken and Piano***

Whenever the Washington cutthroat of *House of Cards* renown, Frank Underwood, needed to recede from the world, he traded the crisp linens of elite DC and stepped over the threshold of Freddy's BBQ Joint to roll up his sleeves and gorge on ribs. Secluded in his booth, he enjoyed the double incognito protection from the simple fact that nobody would ever think to look there for him.

I had a Freddy's of my own. Whenever I felt the world was too much with me, I walked up Rhode Island Avenue, turned onto the 14th St. corridor and just after S street, ducked my head and walked into *Chicken and Whiskey*, a refreshingly descriptive name for a joint bisected by a heavy steel door: chicken in the front, whis-

key in the back.

Always “half a *pollo, por favor*” to which the Incan-looking chicken cutter always smiled and cut a little more than half of the *pollo* with his chicken-cutting scissors. Some sweet fried plantains, rice and beans, mounds of yellow sauce and orange sauce (they were unmarked, unnamed), all piled on a greasy sheet, a can of guarana, what the Brazilians call the drink of happiness—the antipode of my sociable club dinners—and I’d settle apart from the other people, along the rail that ran the whole perimeter of the joint. I’d take a fork and knife (a civilized instinct always gripped me for a moment in front of the silverware cups), lay them aside, and maul the chicken, alone, apart, silent, and happy. I wonder what Epicurus would have thought.

Other times I followed in the steps I had serendipitously first taken in 2008, a 20-year-old summer intern. Out and across Key Bridge into Georgetown, up the slope until the gothic spires of the university, like spectral stalagmites against the night, signaled that I had almost come to where I needed most to be: Up the entrance into Healey Hall, up three flights (“walk in like you own the place,” as the Social Security actuary once taught me, whenever I stepped into places not my own), open the heavy wooden doors into the hall announced with a “Gaston Hall” plaque, remark on how the stained-glass ecclesiastical hall reminds you of Sanders Theater in Harvard, and that when you returned from DC for your senior year of college and you went to Sanders Theater for your roommate’s a cappella concert, it made you think of Gaston Hall here (but ten years have passed) hop onto the stage, settle onto the black leather bench, lightly pull up your trousers and flip the tails of your blazer over the back, as my mother had taught me, and get up two hours later, after bringing Chopin and Rachmaninoff, Liszt and Scarlatti and Schubert to sit with you, not alone, though apart, silent, moved, and happy.