

The Riddle of the Turd

(A Comparative Analysis of Two Large Places)

Dan Maginn

1. Straightness

Arthur Bryant's is straighter than Italy. It does not lean. Italy is old, and sometimes parts of it lean. In Pisa, for instance, there is a famous tower that leans. It is falling down, unlike Arthur Bryant's. The Leaning Tower of Pisa is good, but not as good as Arthur Bryant's. Arthur Bryant's has ribs and cigarettes, and it does not lean. Although it is considerably shorter, Arthur Bryant's stands straight and true. It is much safer than the Leaning Tower, although some people do not feel this way. Some people do not like going there. It is located on the east side of downtown Kansas City. Pretty far east, some people think, although it's nowhere near as far east as Italy. Many people think it is dangerous to go there. That if they go there, they may be pushed down and shot.

Earlier this week, as I swept behind my couch, I was struck by the odd resemblance of a desiccated cat turd I happened upon to the country of Italy. The toe of the boot, the heel, even Sardinia and Sicily were all represented in precise miniature. I hesitated for a moment before sweeping it up.

2. Fatness

Many Italian cities constructed protective walls in the past centuries to protect their good citizens from attack. There is, in Lucca, a perfectly preserved 300-year-old wall that completely surrounds the city. It is a fat wall. Fat enough to walk on. Fat enough to have bicycle races on. The Luccese tool around it like hamsters on the wheel. The wall was initially built to protect them from the good citizens of Pisa and Florence, who wanted to push them down and shoot them. Now it protects them from fatness and from nachos and from similar things that seem to collect near places with undefined edges. Arthur Bryant's walls are skinny. They offer little protection from siege.

Later, as I emptied the dustpan into the trash, I noticed that the Turd appeared to have lost Sicily in the shuffle, and had bent a bit in the middle. It was no longer Italy. With a rolled up newspaper, I tried to reconfigure it back to its previous shape. But it was no use. I cursed myself for treating it with such disdain.

3. Hardness

Although it leans, Italy is well defined. It has a variety of different textures, colors, and flavors. Arthur Bryant's is a singular place. There are many colors in Italy. It's like an old map. A wealthy child's full-scale play map. It is fun to play on the map. Many parts of it are plush and soft. The rolling hills of Tuscany are soft. The sea, as it washes ashore in Liguria, is soft. Arthur Bryant's is not soft. Arthur Bryant's is a hard place. A city place. It's more of a line drawing than a plush map. Food is the only soft thing there, and even some of the food is hard. But a wonderful thing happens there, within its hard sepia lines. Amidst the concrete and asphalt and dust-covered weeds, simple and perfect food happens. So simple and perfect, in fact, that it rubs off on the simple brick building that houses the food, and makes it perfect, too.

In the warm daylight of my kitchen, the desiccated Turd now looked uncannily like a French fry from Arthur Bryant's. Crispy and dented, with a little dried-up sauce there on the end. This made me happy, for Arthur Bryant's is perhaps my favorite place in the world. I deposited the Turd into an ashtray for safekeeping. There, it rolled on its side and

changed shape a third time. Although Sardinia was back, sort of, the Turd wasn't quite Italy. And it wasn't a French fry, either. It was half-Italy, half-French fry. It looked like a question mark.

4. Incompletion

Italy has more churches than Arthur Bryant's. Many of these churches are almost, but not quite, as good as Arthur Bryant's. Such as the Pantheon, in Rome. The Pantheon is a type of church. At one time, it was for many gods: PAN-theon. Now it's just for the one. The concrete dome at the Pantheon in Rome has coffered sides like the inside of a big Lego, or the inside of a big whale. It also has a whale-like blowhole in the top that takes your breath away and makes you want to fly up and out like a bird. It is the oldest concrete building in the world with such a blowhole, and it is a testament to the plastic potential of concrete and to the power of well-intended and precise incompletion. It is old and alive and a bit grumpy. Although it is tired, the building breathes. As is the case with famous old buildings, many people have visited the Pantheon. Many people, both good and bad, have been there and looked around as I did. Looked up and out, thinking vastly different thoughts. Lou Reed, Adolf Hitler, Sammy Davis Jr. They've all been there. I've been there. The Pantheon is a concrete parenthesis, grouping all who visit it together. Grouping them throughout time, in reference and in reverence, to the many, or the one, or three or none, gods that might or might not peer back at us through its big blowhole. Arthur Bryant's does not have such a hole, although it is ceaselessly, effortlessly holy in other ways.

That night, I couldn't sleep. Or rather, I slept fine until 3:00, and then couldn't sleep. Why had the Turd come into my life? What was it asking me? My mind raced with images of Italy and Arthur Bryant's. Of Arthur Bryant's and Italy. Sometimes the images were distinct. Sometimes they overlapped suspiciously. It occurred to me that these two places were related on some otherworldly plane. It occurred to me that they were equal, somehow, or nearly so. I began to wonder how they differed, and which, in the final reckoning, was better. I got up, put on a pot of coffee, sat down at the kitchen table, and began to methodically disentangle this most enigmatic and sleep-depriving conundrum.

5. Hotness

At Arthur Bryant's, there is an open brick fire pit in the kitchen. It faces the patient and goodly souls as they wait in line. You can see it through the filmy glass and plastic-wrapped loaves of Butternut Bread, as you wait in line. The pit's open doorway is guarded by a sweaty man with a stick. Meats slowly roast away in there, lit dramatically from some mysterious light-nook. Poked to and fro by the sweaty man. It is good to see this, and to smell the meats, and to be allowed the opportunity to think the types of thoughts that one thinks when one sees such things. Sometimes I find myself thinking about Hell, and conversely, about Heaven. This scene of meat-poking and fire and sweaty men is not unlike many Underworldly images ingrained in my Catholic memory. In these images, we are the meats. Hell is a dark place in the images; dark red and dark orange. It is hot. The place glows, with disappointment and pain. It is not fun. We are the meats in these images, poked and

prodded and otherwise rudely touched by big red men with hooves. But at Arthur Bryant's, we are not the meats. This is significant. At Arthur Bryant's, and perhaps in Heaven, we eat the meats, with the famous orange sauce, and we wash everything down with delicious ice cold drinks in big yellow cups.

Italy and Arthur Bryant's. Arthur Bryant's and Italy. Images and sense memories gathered in my mind, introducing themselves to one another, grouping themselves into like-minded clumps. I cleaned off the clumps a bit, knocked off the irrelevant nodules, and recorded the remaining clump-essence in words, as closely as I could manage. I sensed the Turd's approval. I could not put my finger on why it felt compelling to compare the two Places in this manner, but it did. I decided not to question the process, and for an hour or so, my pencil scratched out many nouns and verbs.

6. Simplicity

Italy is somewhat confusing. People speak Italian there, and have for many years. I really don't know what they're saying. Arthur Bryant's is refreshingly simple. All you need to know is up on the board. It is a place of meat. There are no vegetables, except for French fries and beans, which aren't really vegetables. The only green things in the entire place, aside from the dollars we trade for meat, are pickles. Italy doesn't have pickles. But it does have many statues of Naked Men. There is, in Florence, a famous statue by Michelangelo, called David. Although David has very large and intricately formed hands, his "pickle" is not as big as you might think. (Not that I was looking very closely. I just happened to notice, as one might notice a light bulb or a bird. It's an approachable "pickle", a nice "pickle", one that allows the average male to nod his head and say to his companion "here, now, is a clever and pleasantly situated statue.") Pickles at Arthur Bryant's are not as complex as "pickles" in Italy.

The clock read 4:30. My words began to dwindle. Dirty clumps were prematurely recorded, and subsequently jettisoned. Much yawning occurred. In the distance, I noticed many sounds. The ice maker in my freezer dropped off a load of cubes. Blocks away, a police helicopter chopped along, presumably searching for some bad someone. I wondered what the bad person had done, and if he was running my way. A car alarm sounded, which woke up a neighbor's dog. The dog began to bark. Rhythmically drifting Woofs intertwined with the sleepy horn of a freight train in the distance. Together they created a third creature, slightly animate, which tried without success to find a companion of the same rare species. To find another dogtrain, in the darkness. Its search, like mine, seemed sad and increasingly ridiculous.

7. Flavor

There is, in the verdant hills overlooking the rooftops of Florence, a dark and flavorful stone church called San Miniato. It is a profoundly humble place, extravagant only in its honesty, subtleness, and scale. The details that reinforce this spirit begin with the worn stone-edged and gravel-filled steps that lead up to it from the street below. The steps lead to more gravel at the entry. Your feet crunch along as you approach, a sound typically reserved for a more worldly and budget-driven experience, like buying a Christmas tree or a used car. Once inside, the colorfully painted ceiling,

faded frescoes, and wooden altar carvings are revealed slowly as one's eyes adjust. (In this respect, it is a far more patient place than Arthur Bryant's, which opens up in one's face like a beef-flavored firecracker as you enter.) One gradually notices many mysterious and wonderful things at San Miniato — like that the floor is constructed entirely of worn marble gravestones. People are buried under there. These stones, like tatami mats in a Japanese house, lend a sense of human scale and order to the place. They ground the place, literally, with an unexpected and creepy joy. The details of San Miniato bridge the typically distinct boundaries between building and memorial. It makes you happy and sad, somehow, at the same time. On a recent visit, I leaned in and licked one of the simple iron supports that braced the walls of the church in lieu of more elaborate flying buttresses that often adorn similarly scaled structures in France. I could not help myself. San Miniato tasted ferric and salty, like off-brand cat food must taste. Later, back in Florence, the building's taste stayed with me. Long after the images of San Miniato began their inevitable descent into eternal unremembrance, I could still taste it. This began to concern me. Fearing infection from some dormant bubonic virus, I spat surreptitiously in dark corners, and drank lemon juice.

I became fixated on the dogtrain. I took a break from writing and tried to draw it. After a couple boggy attempts, I became discouraged, and commenced a bout of mirthless poly-yawning that filled my eyes with sleepwater. As the yawning waned, I noticed that the lines of the thing I had drawn looked more like letters and words than a drawn thing. Which led to more words.

8. Musicality

There is background music at Arthur Bryant's, but it is turned down so low that you cannot hear it unless the place is empty. The place makes its own meat-based music: the oddly complex squeak of the door as it opens and closes, the hiss of city busses as they careen past, the undulating drone of pleasantly conversing meat-eaters, the hypnotic hun'L hun'L hun'L of the meat slicers. These natural rhythms form the foundation of the experience at Arthur Bryant's. Music in Italy tastes differently. It tastes more like a building. There are walls of music, domes of music in Italy. There is, in the Trastevere District of Rome, sitting on the steps of the fountain in Piazza Santa Maria, a busker from Trebbiano who plays classical guitar. His name is Beppo, which sounds like a clown's name, but he is no clown. Like so many other street musicians, he is an Architect, controlling space and shaping events as deftly as Brunelleschi or Scarpa. His music forms a boundary around the square; a duomo of sound, sheltering the fountain from barren air. His guitar is a wood bell, exquisitely struck, precisely marking time and place.

My air conditioner kicked on, drowning out the dogtrain with its louder mechanical drone. My mind searched for a new entity, but came up short. I grew, at the same time, sleepier and more alert. Things began to lose definition and pull apart. Formerly distinct boundaries between things were compromised and hastily redrawn. Newly blended things appeared. My eyes drifted shut and my conscious mind followed suit.

9. Smoke

A cord of wood works out to about two

average-sized trees. Arthur Bryant's goes through about a cord every week, to fire its glorious minivan-sized fire pit. The logs, as they await their destiny, live in a fat and porous wall of potential energy on the south side of the complex. It is my favorite wall in the world, aside from the fat and actively energetic wall that surrounds Lucca. Like an ancient sacred temple, it is constantly being eroded by forces beyond its control, and faithfully restored by the humans that feed on its power. In this regard, the wall also resembles a tool or musical instrument. To a tree, it's all the same. Some trees get made into guitars or buildings. Some get burnt at the altar of barbecue by sweaty men with pointed sticks. Either way, a magical transformation occurs, and in the case of Arthur Bryant's, this transformation is marked by fire and smoke. Arthur Bryant's does as much with smoke as Italy does with music.

I dreamt of fast laughing chickens. I chased them with sharp sticks in my blue Chevy chariot. A cool sea breeze washed over me and carried me skyward. As I floated above the whitewashed houses of a coastal village, I speared a fat dill pickle from a brine-filled jar at my feet. It was the size of a brisket. I turned towards the water, wind in my hair, to deliver the big pickle to its new home. The rightness of this journey pleased me, but I soon discovered that all was not well in my chariot. The engine was sputtering! Precious Hydrogen was leaking from its glossy blue tubes! This canceled out my pleasure with an equivalent and sad-making displeasure. I held my pickle tight and braced for the imminent collision. I feared strongly that if I fumbled, we would lose the game.

10. Dirt

Sometimes Arthur Bryant's is a little dirty. Italy is also a little dirty, except for monasteries and convents, which are often spotlessly clean. Italy does more with dirt than Arthur Bryant's. In Italy, many roofs and walls are made, in large part, of dirt. The Italians are good at making the most of what is available. This is true of their food and of their architecture. There is a lot of red dirt in Italy. This is why many Italian hill towns blend into the environment so effortlessly. This blending results in an intensely pleasing phenomenon. One drives by these towns and pulls over and rests one's hands on top of the steering wheel, and says to one's self: "God damnit, but that's pleasing." There is an essentialness in such construction, a foundation of simplicity and directness that is present in so much of Italian culture. Even many large buildings, like the Duomo in Florence, have tile roofs. If clay tasted better, even slightly better, the Italians would find a way to prepare it and eat it, and they would make roofs out of something else. Or maybe they would just use the burnt tiles for the roofs and eat the good ones.

I awoke with a snort to the baffling confines of my ill-lit kitchen. Although the bagel and chariot were nowhere to be found, a healthy pool of yibble had labassed from my descenderix, all over the dogtrain words. Awakeness rescinded slowly. I remembered my name and my mission, and slowly returned to Self. In my conscious absence, a new crop of Image Clumps had queued up, ripe for the picking-up, looking-at, cleaning-off, and recording. I poured another cup of coffee, hand shaking like eczemic poodle. On the sofa, the cat slept, in the midst of her own shuddering mousechase. I could see her dimly from where I sat. Her tail formed a question mark. The rest of her looked like a wad of breathing black socks.

11. Cows

At Arthur Bryant's, one licks and eats the

burnt parts and the good parts both, but not the bones. In Italy, one does not usually eat the burnt parts, nor the bones, although one often uses the bones to make broth. So, in essence, they eat the bones. And sometimes they make churches from them, the Italians do, though not so much any more. But this is beside the point. One thing is for sure. In neither place does one eat the Horses. Most Gods have told us that it is bad to eat the Horses. The Horses are not as delicious as the Cows. Horses have little black floppy hairdos, like Brian Ferry. Plus, the Horses are faster than the Cows. They are harder to catch. So we ride the Horses and then we eat the slower and more delicious Cows. This is all written down in the Bible, plus in many of the books of the other Gods. Except in the God Books of India, which forbid the eating of the Cows. It is my opinion that India is not as good as Arthur Bryant's, nor Italy. Although it is better than Ponak's.

Recharged, my pencil lobbed assorted novelties on the page with passionate vigor. A sense of well-being flooded my brainstem. I made great progress in my quest to understand the Riddle, until a horrific crash collapsed my concentration and took me back for an instant to the assumed conclusion of my previously dreamt dream. But this was no dream! In an unprovoked and thoroughly pre-emptive strike, my formerly-sleeping and now inexplicably wide-awake cat had knocked the ashtray over and then batted the Turd with surprising velocity from its ashy nest. It scooted across the room towards me like a bug. She ran over and batted it again. It came to a rest within a few inches of my foot. This displeased me. I distracted her with noises of guttural disapproval, and surreptitiously rescued the Turd with my pencil. The cat did not see my slight of hand and became confused. I looked at her with my head cocked, like a Good Dog, and plotted a small revenge. My gaze did not waver.

12. Horses

Although it is widely perceived that Kansas City is a "Western" town, horses are a Bigger Deal in many parts of Italy than at Arthur Bryant's. Twice a year, the Palio is run in Siena. It is a wild-ass, bareback horse race, comprised of three laps around an impromptu dirt track constructed on the main square. The Palio is an extremely Big Deal, and it determines Siena's societal hierarchy until the next race. The race is appropriately dramatic: there are spectacular and bloody crashes. Parts of the crashing horses fly off into the crowd, like tires at a Nascar race, and are kept as souvenirs. It is very important, as it is in most races, that the things-that-are-to-be-raced start at the same time. Thus, before the beginning of the race, a wire is stretched across the track and pulled to an incredible tautness. This wire is very important. Coiled up, it would fit into one of the 24-ounce Coke cups at Arthur Bryant's, but stretched out on race day, for a few tense minutes, there is no more important piece of metal in the world. I became fixated on this wire during a recent visit. Once "erected" it is solid — more solid than Arthur Bryant's log wall, nearly as solid as Lucca's — yielding only slightly as a dozen highly agitated horses are pushed against it, jockeying violently for position. The wire, and all that it stands for, is incorruptible. Even the wild-ass horse riders (shouting a mysterious language that even I recognized wasn't Italian) respect the message implied in its thin black line. As I saw this, fingers in ears as I awaited the cannon shot that signaled the start of the race, squinting in preaction to the big boom, I was somehow reminded of a dream I had as a teenager. In the dream, after an enormous earsplitting report, I found

myself exiting a blue-black steel tube and existing as a bullet-sized mini-Dan, floating towards a Technicolor JFK in his open-air limo in Dallas. I proceeded in slow motion, in a straight slow line, sadly forward. There was an inevitability in my path that could not be deviated from. I awaited the termination of my journey, and its wet, vectored path. Time advanced with a horrible slowness. I could not stop yawning. I could not wake up in time. Inevitability in Italy is of a different order. The cannon will sound, and the horses will run, but in the confusion of the Palio, it is hard to tell exactly what neighborhood has won the race. Sometimes the winning horse has lost its jockey along the way, and will continue to run madly in circles until it collapses.

We stared at each other in this manner for a number of minutes. This made her sleepy. Slowly, and with great yogic effort, I lowered my eyelids, as if I were falling asleep against my will. My head lolled forward and to one side, as my breathing slowed and deepened in the relaxing pre-snore exhalations that typically mark the commencement of a long nap.

13. Thermal and Moisture Protection

There is an off-duty policeman that serves as a security guard at Arthur Bryant's. He is larger than most of the policemen in Italy. Italian policemen are small and have guns with white handles. They are fit, and it appears they can run very fast. Perhaps this is how they fight crime. They enforce Italian laws. Apparently there are few laws having to do with cars, or littering. Italians drive fast... faster, apparently, than the Policemen can run. Italian drivers toss their litter onto the street for all to enjoy. It is collected later by friendly sanitation workers in colorful uniforms. There are no penalties for littering inside Arthur Bryant's, provided you keep your litter on top of the table. This litter usually involves a mountain of wadded sauce-stained napkins. The napkins are essential to the feeding ritual. They shelter us from Sauce and Sin, like tidy white prayers. We are all naked beneath our napkins, in God and Arthur Bryant's eyes.

When I opened my eyes, hers were shut. She has always been easily hypnotized. Her brain is the size of a walnut. Her black sock-body wavered like a drunken sailor taking a leak. I woke her up with a loud elephant sound and a playful poke to her many-nippled belly. She tore off back into the living room, and hid under the sofa. I could see her yellow eyes. I extracted her with some difficulty and batted her about a bit, in a firm yet fair-minded manner. We played "Helicopter" for a minute, a game she dislikes, but that I find fun. I installed her back on the sofa, calmed her down with a chin scratch and whispered secrets, and returned to the kitchen table. As I sat down, the Turd looked smaller than before. And I noticed that it smelled like Toast. But it still looked like a question mark. I found this odd, but not as odd as you might think.

14. Sauces and Related Liquids

As smoke is a bi-product of fire, and Grappa is the bi-product of the Italian wine-making process, wadded orange napkins are the bi-product of Arthur Bryant's Sauce. I am a believer in God and Sauce. It is made up of vinegar and celery seed and desiccated garlic bits and some secret orange micro-particle that nonbelievers find highly problematic. It is the lifeblood of my existence. It commands me with a firm hand, and I am at peace with my role as its faithful servant. There is nothing like it in Italy, except for the lava that descended on Pompeii long ago, when Italians spoke Latin and wrapped themselves in large cloth napkins. Like lava, the sauce is many times thinner than water. It is an elusive element, mercurial in nature. It runs freely

down one's face, disobeying polite attempts to quell its journey, obeying instead gravity's relentless pull towards Mother Earth's dense magmatic core. Like lava, when it is in your world, it tastes of inevitability and hot summer.

The air conditioner kicked off, and I noticed that the neighbor's dog was no longer barking. The train was gone, and in the sub-aural space it formerly occupied, I could hear the soft, rhythmic whizzing of cars. The city was waking up. A truck beeped somewhere on my street, backing up. The clock read 6:00. I yawned enormously, and looked around. The cat was sleeping. One of my feet was asleep. It tingled painfully. And the Turd no longer smelled like toast. It smelled faintly turdy now. And in the light of day, it didn't really look like a question mark anymore. It looked more like a cat turd. I became frightened at this breach of the Poetic Understanding that we had developed together. I deposited the turd back in the litter box and washed my hands. It occurred to me that my work was done. I went back to bed. I fell onto my bed like a sack of gravel. Seconds later, my alarm clock sounded.

15. Largeness

Arthur Bryant's is large in its smallness. Like Italy, it contains distinct elements that stretch across the four cardinal directions in a minimum of three dimensions. Aside from the kitchen (which dominates the east side of the building) and main dining room (which dominates the west), there is a succession of ever-smaller and ever-darker dining rooms to the south. The smallest room of all, aside from the fire pit itself, has only one table in it. It is off of the main room, to the north, like a private chapel. There is a consistency of Authentic Phenomenological Unlikelihood that contributes to Arthur Bryant's Largeness. The asphalt, the long lines, the centrally located trash cans, and the rest of the unlikely components that, anywhere else, would contribute to an overriding unpleasantness, at Arthur Bryant's combine with the Perfect Food to create a bewildering Largeness. Italy is differently large. It is not so much a country as a collection of smaller countries. It is larger than Arthur Bryant's, obviously, with regard to physical size. It would take longer to vacuum. In the end, however, Italy's largeness is worth far less than its aggregate Smallness. It's a beautifully smallish country, where details matter. You don't need to go somewhere, when you're there. You're already there. There's a whole lot of there there. What isn't there, is Seattle. There's no room, nor need, for Seattle in Italy.

My alarm clock continued to sound, but I was too tired to turn it off. It combined with the ringing in my ears to create an immensely pleasing harmonic tone. On a tiny sheet of paper inside my mind, I wrote down the answer to the question the Turd has asked, before it turned back into a turd. It was a four word sentence. One of the words was much shorter than the others. I dedicated my ensuing dream, of Catalpa trees and a mower that would not start, to the power of things to combine into other things.

To Third Things.

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