

What Does Bubble-O-Bill look like?

Come to think of it, how do you even write his name? Have I spelled it correctly? He's always been such a vivid figure in my imagination that he seems to transcend language.

But that's a side-note. Let me start with what I was really going to start with. I was going to start by taking a page out of Hillery's book. Every time Hillery has to write one of these things she starts out by talking about how she has to write one of these things. It is, I think, her way into the substance of the process. She starts with known quantities. She'll talk about what a pain it is, or who started the thing, or how long she's been working on it, or what Sarah and I might be doing. So that's how I'm going to start (I suppose I already have).

I thought all I had to do was talk to Sarah about this. Which I didn't do—but I came close. I left a voicemail for her. It said something like, "If I'm forced to say, I'd say BOB looks something like that marshmallowy figure on the Michelin commercials—round, puffy, and layered. But I'm not comfortable with saying, because I think the key to BOB's mystique is the fact that he can look like whatever he wants to look like. He can take any shape. He can assume any form the imagination demands." OK, that wasn't exactly what my message said, but you get the point (the point being that I was—and am—hesitant to describe BOB in any concrete way).

But that probably won't do, so I'm going to talk about one thing that BOB is in his essence. In his essence, BOB is the sound of a voice. This is the voice we heard as we fell asleep as kids—the voice we heard when we were in a state past hearing. The voice blanketing us with BOB's stories and adventures and acts of heroism was palpable to me, like bubbles of thick honey against the dark background of my closed eyes. This voice transformed and transported us as it transformed and transported BOB himself. Its low, soft, soporific phrases felt like they could go on forever. They felt like they had some infinite spring of ideas and possibilities propelling them forward. And they did—or did to us.

What BOB taught us was that things could expand beyond themselves without losing what remained essential to them. And what remained essential to BOB was what we always knew to be true about him, the basic facts—the known quantities: his name; his diet (which consisted of soap for dinner, washed down with shampoo, and conditioner for dessert); his commitment to his family; and that he knew everything.

How to know everything seemed too much even to know how to imagine being possible. But in the warmth and comfort of that voice, everything seemed possible, even knowing everything.