

# Midnight at the Arcanum

*a monograph*



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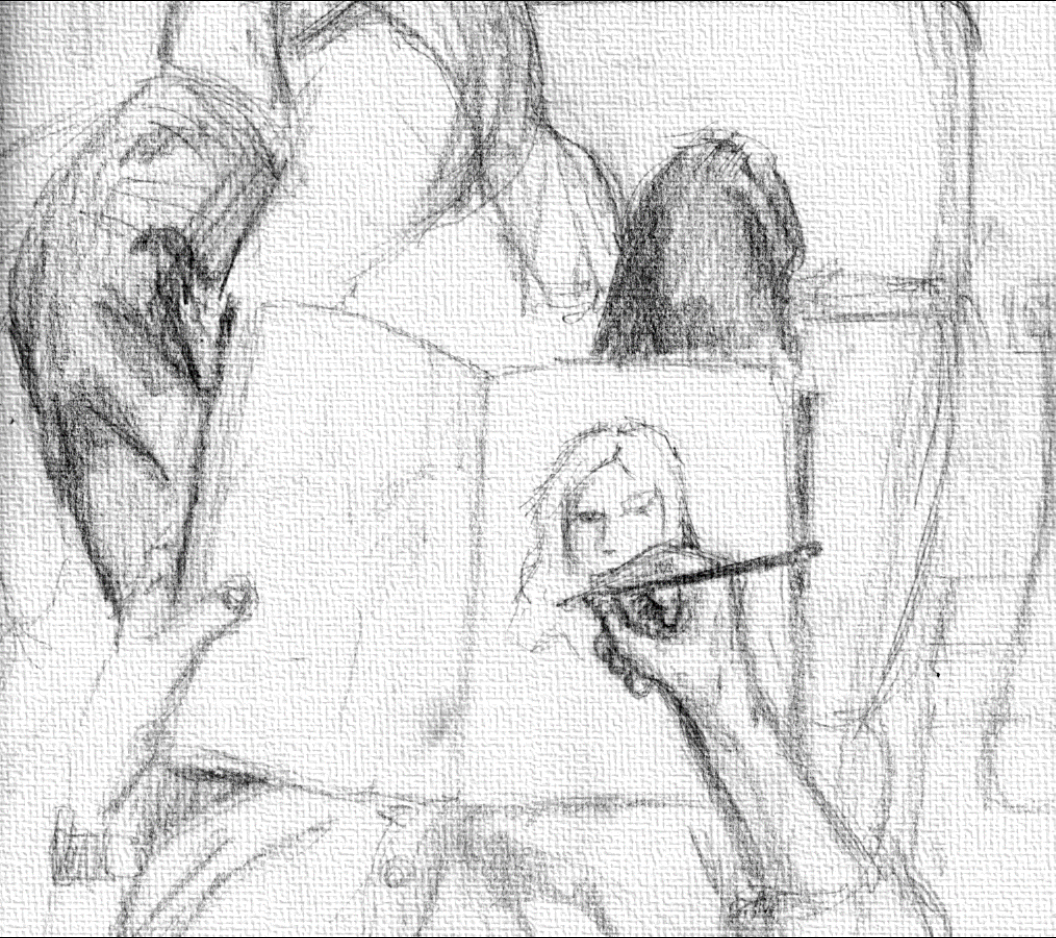
**Quinn Tyler Jackson**

**Digital Edition**



## meta-autobiographical monograph (*noun*):

A meta-autobiographical monograph is a self-contained and self-referential literary study that blends autobiography, self-reflection, fiction, autotheory, and literary analysis. It strives to simultaneously challenge and entertain readers through its interpretations, focusing on the reader-author dialogue in a milieu of broader social themes.



**TO BE READ AT MAXIMUM VOLUME**  
**CARPE DIEM SED FINEM RESPICE**

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# Midnight at the Arcanum: *a monograph*

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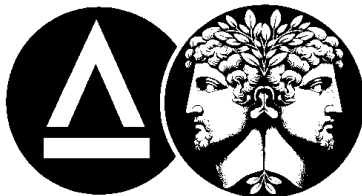
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# Midnight at the Arcanum

*a monograph*

*audere, scire, tacere*  
ὅπως ἐπάνω, ἔτσι καὶ κάτω

*Quinn Tyler Jackson*  
CSci FIScT FRSA



**Knight Terra Press**  
*littera manet sed lector oraculum*

est. 1995



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Portions of this work were developed from earlier forms:

**Poems:**

- “Gazebos,” *Apotheosis*, July-August Issue 2001.
- “The Aweds of Time,” *MOTU*, January 2001.
- “*Tapis de Perse*,” *Cerebrals Online Journal*, January-April 2001.
- “*Zerstörung*,” *Drop the Buddha*, November 2000.
- “When the Bird Descends,” *Drop the Buddha*, November 2000.
- “For Zeus,” *Perfection*, Vol. 1 No. 9, October 2000.
- “A Divine Understanding,” *American Atheist Magazine*, April 1987.
- “My Love, You are the Scented Wind,” *Words*, 1987.

**Play & Novel:**

- Empty Rooms: a play in 3 acts*, Chevalier Editions, August 2006.
- Janus Incubus*, PlaneTree UK, Wales, June 2002.

**Article:**

- “Self-Portrait of a Deconstructionist,” *Ubiquity*, Vol 2. No. 1, 2001.

**Short Stories:**

- “Ashtray,” *Daily Love*, 3 February 2013.
- “Misery and Glass Frost,” in *When a Stranger Wandered In*, February 2013.
- “Clean,” *Perfection*, Vol. 14 No. 1, January 2013.
- “Wake Up Steven,” *Apocrypha and Abstractions*, November 2011.
- “Barefoot Sonata,” *Gold Dust*, Issue 10, April 2007.
- “When a Stranger Wandered In,” *Apotheosis*, Vol. 8 No. 1, March 2007.
- “Midnight at the Arcanum,” *Apotheosis*, Vol. 7 No. 6, December 2006.
- “Neck and Neck,” in *Janus Incubus*, PlaneTree, UK, June 2002.
- “In the Shadow of Clay Pigeons” *Ubiquity*, Vol. 3 No. 3, April 2002.
- “It Ain’t Never Gonna Happen,” *The Kudzu Monthly*, March 2002.
- “Stand-In,” *Ubiquity*, Vol. 2 No. 3, July 2001.
- “Elspeth Stood on the Edge,” *Apotheosis*, July-August Issue 2001.
- “Unshaven,” *Apotheosis*, Jul-Aug. Issue 2001.
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## About the Author

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Quinn Tyler Jackson CSci FIScT FRSA has been a silkscreen printer's apprentice, a bookseller's assistant, a gas pumpist, a freelance editor, a literary agent, a researcher, a Chief Architect, and is currently a Chief Scientist (Mathematics). Jackson is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, a Chartered Scientist, a Fellow of the Institute of Science & Technology (UK), a Senior Member of both the Association for Computing Machinery, and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, and a Member of the London Mathematical Society, the American Mathematical Society, and the Writers' Union of Canada. His award-winning publication history spans three decades, and he has had three novels published in the UK and has had short stories and poetry published in various littles and online journals.

**Content Advisory:** This monograph features literary depictions of severe psychological distress, disorganized and disordered thinking, extended periods of physical hunger and its impacts on health, and brief but injurious personal violence. There are stylized scenes of consensual sexuality, and characters consume alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis. The short story entitled “Elspeth Stood at the Edge” centers on a suicide attempt and “In the Shadow of Clay Pigeons” centers on grievous personal injury due to childhood negligence. Reader discretion is advised due to mature themes.

**MA-LSV** (alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, self-harm, starvation)

**Note:** This monograph is explicitly designed such that two identical readings, even if done in the same order, will not offer the same reader-response experience: per Heraclitus, we cannot step into the same river twice. While this book is presented as a single, unified monograph, intended to be read from cover-to-cover, the author understands that some might prefer to avoid “spoilers” and thus may wish to read the 42-chapter novel *Midnight at the Arcanum* with minimal prior knowledge going in, and these readers are invited to begin reading at page 46. Those wishing to read the 3-act stage play *Empty Rooms* first are invited to begin at page 339. Furthermore, those wishing to first read the short stories as such rather than as chapters will find them listed in the Table of Contents by title. The author emphasizes that the order in which the reader ultimately elects to read this work will likely tailor the bespoke reader-response experience of the work as a whole, due to its meta-autobiographical, co-constructed, and self-referential nature and structure. The text is static, but you, the Reader, are the *only* Oracle.

**Typesetting:** This monograph was typeset by the author using a font size of 10.5 points in Times New Roman. Inset poems have been set at 10 points and footnotes at 8.5 points. In order to maximize the utility of accessibility tools, care has been taken to avoid breaking sentences between pages, without altering font size or layout schemas to achieve this end. Further to this same end, pages have been numbered exclusively in Arabic numerals.



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## Front-matter

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[...]

*Werk des Gesichts ist getan,*

*tue nun Herz-Werk*

*an den Bildern in dir, jenen gefangenen; denn du  
überwältigtest sie: aber nun kennst du sie nicht.*<sup>1</sup>

[...]

—Rainer Maria Rilke, from “*Wendung*”

---

<sup>1</sup> The eyes' work is done;  
go now and do the *heart's* work  
on the images held prisoner inside you;  
for though you conquered them,  
you do not yet *know* them.

## **Acknowledgements**

---

The content in this monograph was created and composed on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Nations of the **xʷməθkʷəy̓əm** (Musqueam), **Skwxwú7mesh** (Squamish), **kʷikwə́ləm** (Kwkwitlēm), and **səlilwətał** (Tseil-Waututh) Peoples. Gilford Island is the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the **Kwikwasut'inuxw Haxwa'mis** First Nation. L'Île de Montréal (Tiohtiá:ke) is on the traditional, unceded territory of the **Kanien'kehá:ka** (Mohawk) and **Anishinabeg** (Algonquin) Peoples. We thank the Peoples of these Nations who continue to live on these lands and care for them, along with the waters and all that is above and below.

The list of all of the mentors, fellow authors, peer reviewers, readers, educators, colleagues, family, friends, confidantes, and supporters of my work over the many years who have made the present work possible, including many, sadly, who have since passed away, is lengthy, as this is a work whose production has spanned much of a lifetime. Many, though by no means all, of the most influential of these key figures have been mentioned herein, and while others remain unnamed, they are not forgotten.

Dania Sheldon, DPhil, was commissioned to provide peer review and assessment, and her comprehensive and insightful analysis resulted in impactful revision and polishing on the final manuscript.

Cover art, "Orpheus at the Arcanum," done in acrylics on commission by Julia Hedge (@coppersongbird). All interior illustrations dated 2023 derived from art generated by OpenAI's DALL-E 3β algorithm with the author's artistic direction. The pencil-sketch self-portrait on the back cover is due to the author, 4 December 1986. Song of Songs 2:1, Lao Tzu, and Rilke translated from the original languages by the author.

Finally, the author wishes to acknowledge you, the reader, for it is ultimately the reader who actively completes an overtly poststructuralist text such as this.

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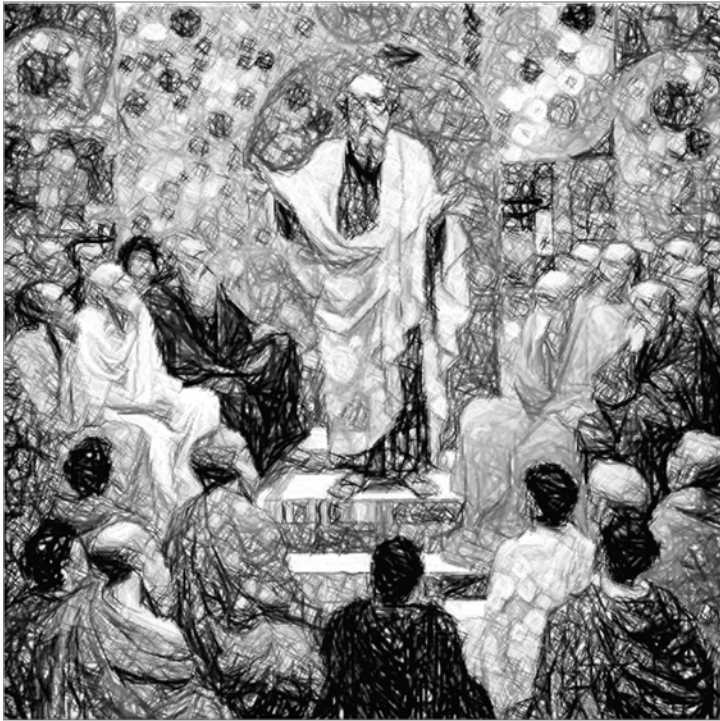


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## **“Reclaiming the Narrative Pedagogy”**

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Meta-autobiographical fiction is an intricate literary genre in the rich tradition and practice of metafiction wherein the author deliberately integrates personal autobiographical experiences into a fictional narrative, creating a reflective, and oftentimes intentionally blurred literary exploration of identity. This raises questions about the boundaries between the actual and the imagined, by intentionally analyzing the act of storytelling itself, with the author’s experiences becoming central themes within the work. The distinction between meta-autobiographical fiction and pure autobiography can be explored as an example of how language and narrative inform our collective understanding and not just as the bare details of particular life timelines. We might argue that all texts are inherently unstable and that there is no single objective truth that can be derived from them. Instead, meaning is constructed through a process of interpretation that is shaped by social and cultural contexts.

The notion that “we henceforth agree that this is truth” can be seen as a stark expression of a certain kind of negotiated essentialist thinking, in which our individual identities and subjective experiences are seen as fixed and self-contained within closed systems. However, this kind of thinking can be seen as a product of the hegemonic social and cultural contexts in which it emerges, and it obscures the ways in which individual experiences are shaped through contingency by larger social forces. That we are bound to a hegemony is evident in the fact that we do not fully declare *I am* without first considering *who* that even *is* when held in *unrelenting* juxtaposition to the dominant hierarchy.

As its name suggests, meta-autobiography places the author in a position of true self-agency above the singular isolated self and sets the *you are* of the contract into the second-person domain of the reader, thus making stating “*we know to be true*” an act of broader collaborative liberation, since it is only by communicating our authentic personal truth to another that anything even beginning to resemble a dialogue forms. Readers in Western cultures have participated in such dialogues and self-reflective and subversive accounts at least since Plato’s “Apology,”<sup>2</sup> circa 399 BCE:

Perhaps someone might say, “Socrates, can you not go away from us and live quietly, without talking?” Now this is the hardest thing to make some of you believe. For if I say that such conduct would be disobedience to [Apollo] and therefore I cannot keep quiet, you will think I am jesting and will not believe me; and if again I say that to talk every day about virtue and the other things about which you hear me talking and examining myself and others is the greatest good to man, and that the unexamined life is not worth living, you will believe me still less.—“Apology” (37e-38a)

When we apply deconstructionist thinking to the distinction between meta and pure autobiographical fiction, we see that, rather than being dichotomous, both genres are shaped by larger discourses. While pure autobiography may appear to be a more objective (and thus essentialist) form of self-examination, seen through a poststructuralist lens, it is still directed and shaped by higher hegemony-informed narratives about and expectations informing what constitutes a “good” life and what experiences are seen as of great enough “importance” or “interest” or “merit” to be “worthy” enough for sharing with a readership. Meta-autobiography, however, originates from a somehow-liberated autonomous self and need not request permission from the Gatekeepers-of-Art, as it is Self-Affirming, the final byproduct of the well examined life put forth in narrative to a readership.

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<sup>2</sup> *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 1, trans. Harold North Fowler; Introduction by W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1966.

Meta-autobiographical fiction explicitly acknowledges the constructed nature of individual experience and uses narrative strategies to disrupt the dogmatic idea of a monolithic objective truth. By incorporating fictional elements, authors can highlight the ways in which individual experiences are shaped by larger social forces and open up new possibilities for interpretation and meaning-making. In this way, the distinction between pure and meta-autobiographical fiction can be seen as an example of how deconstructionist thinking can help us to socialize and make more accessible individual experiences and to understand them more fully as products of our larger shared exogenous systemic contexts.

Instead of viewing individual experiences as self-contained and fixed, we can recognize them as contingent parts of larger narratives and thus engage in a more open and inclusive process overall, thereby reclaiming agency to our own stories. Meta-autobiographical fiction can thus be seen as an avenue toward a pedagogy of the oppressed, in that it can empower individuals to reclaim their own identity. In this sense, the genre can be seen as an accessible and productive tool for resistance and subversive reinterpretation.

The groundbreaking concept of a pedagogy of the oppressed was first proposed by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire,<sup>3</sup> who argued that traditional education systems often reinforce existing power structures and perpetuate inequality. According to Freire, this pedagogy should be focused on empowering marginalized individuals to become active critical thinkers who can challenge cultural expectations and work towards societal equity, in large part by engaging in constructive and deconstructive dialogue both with the oppressors and with others who have yet to learn the language of liberation from their current entrapment. The six principles of this pedagogy are, at heart: critical consciousness, dialogic problem-posing education, liberation from oppression, contextualized learning, praxis, and emancipatory education.

As a literary genre, meta-autobiographical fiction promotes expanded critical consciousness by encouraging individuals to reflect on the constructed nature of their own lived experiences.

---

<sup>3</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Seabury Press, New York, 1970.



It prompts self-awareness and an understanding of how larger social forces shape and perturb their personal stories. Just as knowledge is not passively bank-deposited into the students' minds but rather the students all become active participants and co-creators of knowledge, the meta-autobiographical author is an active participant in the interpretation of the events of his or her own life, entering into a discussion with the participant reader, rather than depositing static historical anecdotes and facts of space and time into some imagined memory bank of human knowledge and homogenized posterity.

Moreover, such oeuvres foster Socratic dialogic problem-posing education by inviting readers and authors to engage in conversations about the complexities of personal stories and the many perspectives one must fully consider as one interprets one's life events. It encourages the active questioning of the dominant cultural ethos and invites readers to become active participants in their own meaning-making process. Next, it can empower individuals to find or reclaim their authentic truth and voice, allowing the previously marginalized to be heard clearly. Through its self-representation, meta-autobiography becomes a platform for empowerment and constructive resistance.

This literary form embodies the integration of theory and practice, encouraging individuals to not only reflect on their own experiences but also to act upon their newfound awareness. By using story-telling strategies to disrupt traditional structures and challenge the entrenched power dynamics, meta-autobiography becomes an avenue to fuller transformative praxis. Finally, meta-autobiography effectively aligns with emancipatory education as it empowers individuals to tell their own stories on their terms and according to their own lived experience.

Through the process of writing and sharing their stories, individuals can gain a sense of agency and empowerment that may have been denied to them in other contexts. They can also contribute to a broader process of collective meaning-making and thus open up new possibilities for understanding the world, thereby more actively contributing to a broader project of social equity and liberation.

## ***Apologetica de Polyphonia Veritatis***

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“Autobiography is an unrivaled vehicle for telling the truth about other people.” — Philip Guedalla

The notion that openly writing prolifically and analytically about oneself is inherently self-indulgent or narcissistic is a reductive view that not only undermines the depth and breadth of human experience but also overlooks the transformative, liberative potential of this type of narrative.<sup>4</sup> For us to more fully understand meta-autobiography as executed herein, let us first review the present core rationale for undertaking such a layered, nuanced, and, yes, at times painfully (and what may appear at first glance excessively) self-referential fictional presentation.

### **Polyphonic Truth**

To decry autobiographical content as being too egocentric perhaps set limits on the *self* as a relational construct. *Être-en-soi, être-pour-soi, être-pour-autrui*: all these Sartrean notions are therein encompassed. We humans are not isolated islands, but intersections of myriad influences, dialogues, and relationships. The “I” of autobiography is a chord of voices, experiences, and contexts, and meta-autobiography makes the polyphony *explicit*. The meta-I *can* ring loudly as *we*.

### **Autonomy of Narrative Control**

Meta-autobiographical fiction provides an opportunity for authors to reclaim ownership over their own stories, rescuing them from the reductive labels that society might otherwise impose. It serves as a self-authored palimpsest that overlays collective assumptions and prejudices, not merely to distort or mystify but to reveal greater depths of complexity.

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<sup>4</sup> cf. Anne Rüggeheimer & Maren Scheurer, “Autobiography and/as Narcissism? Psychoanalysis and Self-Reflexive Life-Writing in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *A Dialogue on Love* and Alison Bechdel’s *Are You My Mother?*” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, Vol. 34 No. 2, 25 June 2019.

## **The Act of Reclamation**

Meta-autobiographical fiction can be enlisted to serve as a narrative act of self-enacted emancipation and reclamation. For those marginalized by hegemonic domination—whether due to neurodiversity, cultural background, or social circumstance—the act of crafting one’s own narrative is an act of deliberate reclamation of agency and declaration of self-affirmed identity.

## **Dialogic Education**

The Socratic method of questioning life, values, and the very nature of knowledge invites us to see meta-autobiographical fiction not as a self-aggrandizing sermon but as a potentially transformative dialogue. Through the text and its structures and artifacts, the reader is engaged in an active conversation with the author, weighing the evidence, questioning conclusions, and bringing their own experiences to bear upon the narrative, thus co-creating the “truth.” These techniques and perspectives can then be shared with others as they create and explore their own stories.

Meta-autobiographical fiction plays out as an intricate dance between the individual and the collective, between the concrete and the conceptual, and between lived experience and the larger cultural and social frameworks that shape it. Rather than being a self-centered endeavor, it is a deeply relational one that offers both the author and reader a complex, vibrant canvas upon which they can project, reflect, and construct their own understandings, adding to a more robust, collective tapestry of human existence, thereby, one might sincerely wish, participating in enhancing both wisdom and enlightenment.

知人者智自知者明

“Social-knowledge is wisdom; self-knowledge is enlightenment.”—Lao Tzu

## **Author's Foreword**

---

That I have taken some of my own past published work and restructured, reconsidered, and conflated it herein as the newly entitled monograph *Midnight at the Arcanum* leaves me wholly unapologetic. Full details of the materials incorporated into this work are given on page 2. Some of the revision and conflation required to bring this work together was already done in order to produce the novel *Janus Incubus*. Even this already published text has been reconsidered, however, sometimes by referring back to the original published short story to recollect original intent and sometimes through new insight or vision for the work. Thus, *Midnight at the Arcanum* is the meta-autobiographical work that *Janus Incubus* was never fully capable of being, given my maturity and circumstances at that time of my life.

At the time of the original publication of *Janus Incubus* by PlaneTree in 2002, I had not yet rediscovered the stage play that had inspired the short entitled “The Play” that eventually drove much of what became the earlier novel. Having new access to this play, *Empty Rooms*, with new but more mature eyes allowed further discovery of shared themes between *Janus Incubus* and the play itself, included herein as revised to current thinking as an appendix.

I hadn't had that play in hand, nor had I yet endured three more bouts of the existentially threatening hunger that permeates the original. I had not yet left my first marriage until 2007, five years after *Janus'* original release. Indeed, I had to walk away from writing fiction altogether in 2013 to finally learn in the meantime what I wanted my work to say in a way that was to be my peculiar and authentic offering.

## **Early Childhood**

The very first word I ever wrote arrived at about the time I was set to enter kindergarten in the mid-1970's in a small coastal town called Gibson's Landing, on the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia, Canada. My mother had married Ron, my stepfather, a logger, while we were there, and from that day forward in our lives we followed Ron from small town to small town, from logging camp to logging camp, in the Pacific Northwest, living the nomadic life of a lumberjack's family in perpetual tow.

My mother and Ron went out for dinner one night and asked the neighbor's teenaged children to babysit us while they were out. During this time, the babysitters wrote a number of interesting words on the refrigerator with the magnetic letters my mother had put there for me to start getting used to the idea of letters.

I watched in fascination as they formed words in their many colors on the fridge. I knew what the words meant and had heard them all spoken, and now was learning firsthand how to form them from inside my inner voice. But I only observed. I did not try to form any words on my own.

The next morning, after Ron had gone to work and everyone was about their business, I took a felt pen, went outside, and on the most visible side of the house from the street leading to it, I wrote, in letters as large as my arms would stretch:

**#\$!%**

Ron was the first to notice as he arrived home down the road from work. I was pulled outside by my ear, shown the side of the house, and asked if I was responsible. I knew what was coming. I looked squarely at Ron and admitted to it.

I will use no damp euphemisms nor make poor excuses for the beating that followed. Ronald was a complex, bluntly flawed, and sometimes anachronistically brutal man, and my payment from him for this transgression was to be no exception.

Once I had recovered from the thrashing, he came to me with a bucket of soapy warm water, handed it to me, and told me to scrub every last bit of the permanent marker from the siding of the house, which I did, in front of the whole neighborhood as they all now returned home from their own jobs.

I learned that day that *writing* a word can have far more impact than simply *saying* that same word. I was around loggers: Gibson's Landing was the setting for the Canadian television series *The Beachcombers*. Loggers and their entourage were everywhere thereabouts, and while Canadian television was clean and proper, in the real world they cussed up something of a storm over morning coffee without skipping a beat, without any regard for the age of the audience, and that word had slipped from my young mouth more than a few times before that day, which sometimes earned a sideways glance, but never so much as a reprimand.

But to *write it* and to *write it so plainly for all to see*—this was an awakening. Writing carried consequences that simply saying things out loud did not. While I did not intentionally set out to explore the sheer vastness of this notion, my voyage with language and writing nonetheless became a lifelong journey of sometimes choppy exploration.

As already alluded to, we moved a great deal; from Gibson's Landing and the exciting world of *Molly's Reach* to Vancouver, where I was enrolled into Grade 1 at Renfrew Elementary. It was here that I was to have my first confrontation with someone other than my stepfather about my writing. Like everyone else my age, I began with the famous *Dick and Jane* curriculum of reading. I put my utmost into learning to print and form words of my own ordering, rather than words from books and handout sheets. At first, I made excellent progress, but eventually, my hyperlexia caught up with me<sup>5</sup> and made a serious foe of my new teacher, Miss B.

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<sup>5</sup> Hyperlexia is sometimes experienced by autistics, but I was not diagnosed as autistic until 2018, and so it was not considered during my youth. This was the mid-1970's and it had only been first formally named and discussed in 1967 by Silberberg & Silberberg, "Hyperlexia: Specific word recognition skills in young children," *Exceptional Child*, Vol. 34 No. 1, pp. 41–42, September 1967.

A kind babysitter over one weekend showed me how to write in cursive script, rather than print. I took the time to learn the script forms of all the letters. On Monday, on my first assignment to hand in, I carefully wrote out my answers in this new font, fully expecting that Miss B. would at the very least be happy that I was using “adult” script, something she wrote and read every day in her own papers, whether or not we children in class used only the printed forms.

“Quinn! What is *this*?” she barked, calling me to her desk.

“I learned to write over the weekend,” I declared.

Her face flushed with what could easily have been mistaken for rage. “In *this* class, we *print*. There will be *no more* of this!”

Curse word or cursive script, it seemed the written word was going to be an important part of my life from that point forward. It took me most of the week to finally resort to simply printing, but I eventually relented. When the school year finally came to an end, I received a very poor final mark for my Printing, and Miss B. made a point of saying to my mother during the final parent-teacher interview: “I don’t know why, but I am going to pass Quinn into Grade 2.”

## **Apple River**

And so I moved forward. And so we moved onward again, this time to a logging camp we all just called Apple River. This was my first of several exposures to extended immersion into an almost entirely adult cohort. Although a few other families brought their children into the camp, for the most part we all were left to run feral amongst the whispering trees. Logging camps are dangerous; forestry is first career on the list of such dangerous occupations. Apple River is where I first saw the aftermath of this level of jeopardy and its human toll.

It is also where I formed my first non-family relationship with a male role model: George the Mechanic. I probably learned more about how to drain an engine during that year than I learned about whatever the correspondence school Grade 2 program had to offer. He and I would stand for hours looking under the hood of an old truck, talking about anything at all I cared to ask him.



It was in the formation of my friendship with George that I came to understand many truths about the world around me.

Our time at Apple River was also the year my sister Corinna and brother Shane saved me from certain drowning in the sea. I had suffered some serious injuries prior to that: a broken clavicle at three, a few dog attacks leading to stitches in my face before five, and more than a few concussions and stitches from various bicycle related injuries by kindergarten age. All those mishaps, however, were far from being existential threats, whereas the near drowning was in a category all its own.

Down at the ocean, where the pontoon planes would pull up, was a long boom attached to a docking wharf. A group of the few children in the camp were on the wharf, fishing. I headed along the boom as I had many times before, with my fishing pole in hand, and my gumboots on my feet. And within a flash of a moment, I slipped and was somehow bobbing up and down as the children on the wharf watched me flail about in the cold water, taking on mouthfuls as I tried to scream for help. My sister and brother realized that I was going to go under, and Corinna jumped in just as I went under and did not come back up on my own. She quickly arrived where I was and pushed me toward the boom where Shane somehow pulled me out and tossed me over the log so the water would pour out of me. Had it not been for their quick thinking, I would have gone down on the last volley before she arrived at my side.

It was perhaps because I had inhaled some of the ocean that day and come so close to death's door that I found London's ending in *Martin Eden* so unsatisfactory as a whole. This was no way for a life to end. This experience was the impetus for the short story, "Elspeth Stood at the Edge."<sup>6</sup>

It was at Apple River where my sister, my brother, and I met John Wayne on a warm day like any other. The family was across the way, visiting the Monk family. The Monks made a living fishing: dropping traps, mostly. As we ran around the yard with their children, we noticed a pontoon plane fly past for landing.

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<sup>6</sup> The original version of "Elspeth Stood at the Edge," was written as an entry for the CBC short story contest. Ron hated it, so I destroyed it in a fit of self-critical despair.

After it landed, from out the plane and onto the pontoon first stepped a bush pilot that I had never seen. It was not common thereabouts to not know the small plane pilots, as they were a small group. Next from the small plane stepped John Wayne. Apparently, he knew the Monks well and would sometimes have his pilot fly up to get a load of prawns and other fresh catch. This was one of those days.

Now that I am older, I am to understand that Emperor Hirohito and Nikita Khrushchev themselves once requested personal audience with The Duke. And I sat on The Duke's knee. Without so much as a written invitation.

"Have you ever heard of Quinn the Eskimo?" he asked me upon learning my name. I nodded that I hadn't.

"I actually named him after Anthony Quinn," my mother admitted to Wayne. "But his father wouldn't have that, so we settled on just Quinn."

In the logging camps, where most others were adults, I felt most at full liberty to be my authentic self. George the Mechanic treated me like I had a place in the world that was not limited by my age, but by my willingness to challenge my curiosity, and in some cases, my fears.

It was in Apple River that I was first introduced to the musical legacy of Elvis Presley. He died in the summer of 1977. Before his death I had very little exposure to his music. There were a few vinyl records around the camp, but I had not yet begun listening to music much. Upon his death, however, Sandra, my mother's cookhouse flunky, asked me to sit with her in the cabin of a camp truck as we listened to a broadcast tribute retrospective of his musical career.

The emotion that his voice and words clearly invoked in Sandra as she and I shared this evening out in the truck, her sobbing over almost every song convinced me yet again of the *immense* power of words. Words written could be more powerful than words only simply spoken, but also words *composed and organized into poetry* could bring another human being to tears. This lesson was reinforced when Ron recited to me poetry and Shakespearean drama from memory with full feeling.

## **Holberg, Vancouver Island**

Life amongst the grizzly bears, diesel engine overhauls, and cedar forest backyards was glorious, but every so often, there were the necessary intrusions of non-camp stays. After Apple River, we relocated to Holberg, a town at the northern end of Vancouver Island. As we re-entered the standard classroom after having spent a year doing all of our coursework by post, I had to adjust to the fact that my mother kept me back a school year, which put me into a different age group than I might best have been. Moreover, I was re-taught the same material as I had already gone over while in Apple River. Grade 2 twice was for many years a matter of contention between myself and my mother, though it was finally reconciled in my Grade 10 year.

In particular, this moment was the beginning of my own nagging self-doubt about my ability with numbers. Hyperlexia combined with dyscalculia had me having to learn the same system of multiplication twice but using two different methods from two different teachers had me convinced that I was doomed to never understand the wonders-beyond-numbers underlying mathematics.

The mathematical references that have permeated my poems and literary work for many years are echoes of this disrupted relationship with core arithmetic rote learning. I learned how to factor numbers in order to multiply before I learned how to simply memorize multiplication tables. Just as Miss B. in Grade 1 had no use for cursive script, teachers in Grades 2 and 3 had no use for factoring as a means of simplifying problems, and I was given the label of daydreamer.

## **Maple Bay, Gilford Island**

After Holberg, we moved to Maple Bay on Gilford Island, an island between Vancouver Island and the Mainland of British Columbia. Two of the best years of my childhood passed here. In “Shadow of Clay Pigeons,” the location of the skeet launcher incident is given as Gilford Island, but that tragedy in fact occurred slightly later in George Creek.

It was on Gilford Island that I published my first newspaper, each edition's copies drawn by hand for each subscriber, and it was here that I opened my first business replacing worn cleats on loggers' caulk boots. This is also where I was introduced to the notion that language was a subject of serious study, as expressed in Tolkien's works. I fell more deeply in love with the sounds and patterns and forms of spoken and written language, the wireframes and polar notations of science, and the absolute interdependence of every living thing on planet earth.

I read all their books and discussed them with vigor when they returned to the bunkhouses after work. I talked their talk and swore like a lumberjack. I breathed their air and was chased by a winter-hungry bear. And I taught myself from the Ministry supplied correspondence course work not only for my own grades, but also for my brother and sister's higher grades.

It was during this time that I discovered Tolkien's linguistic elements in the appendices of *Lord of the Rings* and began trying to fully understand the mechanics of juxtaposing words to carry a meaning and feeling in ways that I one day hoped would impact others the way written words and sequences of word had made me feel and think.

Gilford Island is by far the location where I consider myself and my family to have spent our happiest, most connected, most stable, and most interesting years, and it was there that I first experienced a fully creative and productive path as a student-seeker in pursuit of enlightenment.

## **Vancouver—Nootka Elementary**

When I returned to Vancouver in 1980, aged eleven years, however, I was again and forevermore amongst those of my own chronological age, in a city, not a camp, seated in rows of my peers, locked into a template I had forgotten even could exist, let alone still did. I had become an *outlier*, a solitary point outside the cloud of those around me, with no social or personal tools, preparation, or understanding of how to negotiate my existence in the city and cohort I now found myself in. I was *feral* in this setting, in contrast to the years I had spent on Gilford Island.

Given the many circumstances outside my control, I pushed through it with resolve, with the help of some incredibly supportive educational support staff at my new school, Nootka Elementary. My Grade 5 teacher, Ms. Lawry, was also the Vice Principal of the school, and she did her utmost to bolster me through some difficult times in my cultural and environmental adjustment. It was during this year that began writing full-story length fiction with the intention of showing it to others when finished. I also delved very seriously into figure drawing and the school paid to send me to adult figure drawing classes after a parental waiver was signed, thereby allowing me to sit in on the sessions.

Ms. Lawry approached me one day for a one-to-one talk.

“Quinn, I’ve looked through all your records for your last two grades of schoolwork. I do not understand how you did so well in the correspondence school curriculum for two years and yet you now struggle so hard to find your place in my class,” she confided in me.

“Because I taught *myself* for two years,” I said, causing her to raise her eyebrows at my self-assured aplomb. “My mother was busy working as the camp cook. Here I have to learn it someone else’s way. That’s how I did so well.” I know it now, but did not know then, that it was easier for me to learn this way because, when I addressed learning this way, I only had to learn to solve the problem being posed, rather than first having to solve the teachers’ methodology and *then* decipher the actual problem.

Though such answers as this surely baffled her, as indicated by the raised eyebrows and slightly screwed-up glance she gave me upon hearing this, she listened to me and did her best to consider. She had been the one who had pushed so vehemently to allow me into adult art classes, after all. She also selected me to be in a mixed Grade 6/7 class the following year. The reason Ms. Lawry gave for selecting me for the split class is that the six Grade 6 students in the class were all known to be strong self-guided learners. She had heard and understood my plea.

While this arrangement was ideal for my learning style, other matters in family life came to the forefront. My mother committed a great deal of effort and resources to rescuing other family members, and this incurred costs that she hid from Ron.

The direct impact this had on us was that there were many nights that my mother and I went without dinner during the periods when Ron was in the camps.

One day on a day when we had no money to eat, my mother looked down and saw a twenty-dollar bill. “This is our lucky day,” she said.

“Shouldn’t have to eat on luck,” I replied in an almost scolding tone. “Luck *always* turns. It has to, by definition.”

At thirteen, I was far too young to be such a cynic, but I had lived through cancelled Christmases after unanticipated losses at poker from Ron, and though Christmas is a culturally important day, it comes but once a year, whereas we must eat more than once daily, and underneath my hunger was a core resentment about contending with the pangs—both physical and mental—that came with skipping meals owing to damnable Luck.

My cynicism and unease began to carry to school, and after complaints from parents who had heard stories from their children about me, I was put before a school psychologist and given a long talking-with. I suspect it had originally been slated as a talking-*to*, but talking-*with* is how it ended up proceeding.

At some point in our discussion the psychologist said, “It’s been reported by some of your classmates’ parents that you seem to have a lot of non-standard beliefs and practices.<sup>7</sup> I’ve reviewed your file and it is clear that this has made your time here as a student unnecessarily difficult, and so, we’ve got concerns about your education at this school.”

“What makes my beliefs and practices any less valid than those of any number of people in the world? I’ve read the Bible, the Koran, many commentaries on Hinduism, Buddhism, and other faiths. Some of their traditional beliefs and claims are *far* bolder than my own, and yet *they* all manage to coexist just fine.”

He paused for a moment, finally saying, “Those views are *written* and *published*. Yours are *all in your mind*.”

I thought about what he said for some time and then took a piece of paper from the desk and a pen, and on the paper wrote:

“We are.”

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<sup>7</sup> One of those “non-standard beliefs and practices” was my daily meditation session in the lotus position (*padmāsana*) during lunch hour.

I pushed the paper to him and said: “This is what I know to be true. You and I are here. We are. This is *truth*. It is now *written*, and when I pushed it to you, it became *published* and now it is in *your* mind as well.”<sup>8</sup>

Words could *encode* feelings. Words could *open* feelings. Words could *change* feelings. Especially *written* words. It had been some years since I had seen a face filled with as much suppressed rage as the day I had presented Miss B. with my cursive script. It was almost the same look as Ron had on his face the day he had come home from work in Gibson’s Landing to see #!% scrawled on the side of the house. *That* was the rage on this school psychologist’s face. Words could *enrage*.

I had previously been allowed to continue at Nootka when my family moved out of the school’s catchment zone over the previous summer, but as this was entirely at the discretion of the school administration, on the stern recommendation of the psychologist I was asked to leave the school due to the disruption I caused the student body. Words could also get me *expelled*.

I actually had an exceptional relationship with a number of my teachers at Nootka, including, as already mentioned, Ms. Lawry. My journeys into esoteric matters, however, clashed with the conservative religious beliefs of the parents of the students, and this tipped the scales against my staying on for my Grade 7 year. I was to find enlightenment somewhere else.

I was not particularly displeased with being ejected from the school, since I had a sense that, by moving to another school for Grade 7, I would be free to pursue my interests outside of the constant harassment I was receiving from there. If I played the part of the mildly amusing but incorrigible delinquent, I could get through my last year of elementary school fitting in a bit better amidst my schoolmates than I had at Nootka.

But first, I had to finish out the Grade 6 year. Since I had been doing correspondence courses for Grades 3 and 4, I had never had the multiplication tables drilled into my head, and when it came time to learn long division, I was at a distinct disadvantage aside the students who had rote learned the tables.

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<sup>8</sup> Back on Gilford Island, I had published a newspaper with only a few readers amongst the loggers, producing each bespoke copy by hand with a pen.



This simple oversight on my part resulted in terrible treatment from Ms. D., my split 6/7 teacher, including her indirectly humiliating me in front of my classmates whenever I would get an arithmetic problem wrong because of the time it took me to factor divisors in the long division solution process.

She seemed to take particular pleasure in subtly reminding me that I was useless when it came to arithmetic, and the other students in the class seemed to find intense glee in harassing me over my awkwardness with numbers as well, since that and physical education were my only weaknesses in school. I soon learned to absolutely *hate* arithmetic.

The summer before entering her class, my mother had decided to reward my voracious reading by buying me a set of student encyclopedias, paid over time. I spent a lot of change on bus fare to libraries to quench my curiosity, and she felt I could use a closer source of information. I read the set from A to Z over the course of the summer. This was yet another example of my undiagnosed hyperlexia in action: when I read at this speed, I do not fully process or even remember everything, but instead what seems to happen is that an elaborate network of images, symbols, and connections forms, and future, more focused reading might trigger paragraphs, phrases, or images (or even entire typeset pages) to return to my mind (even many years later).

After that summer, while at the board answering a question in Ms. D.'s class, a question involving a very simple square root ( $\sqrt{4}$ ), my mind asked, "What if that were  $\sqrt{-4}$ ?" A page of that encyclopedia set flashed in my hyperlexic mind, and I could *almost* see an answer, but my experience did not know how to put all of this into English in the anxiety that came from standing before Ms. D. I saw the answer as a sideways 2.

"What about the square root of a negative number?" I asked out loud. I had seen it in the encyclopedia article but could not remember the details. Surely my teacher would guide me. "How do we calculate that?"

"Quinn, there is definitely *no such thing* as the square root of a negative number!"

Most of my classmates laughed uproariously given the opportunity for ridicule the teacher had presented them. Though I knew she was in error, I remained silent on the matter.

Years later, after finally conquering my “fear of numbers,” I wrote the following poem for her:

“Window Gazing”

Today, after my tea  
with Euler and Gauss,  
I glanced out the window  
and saw a truth.

Digit know, Ms. Doorstop,  
that you made a better  
door than a window?

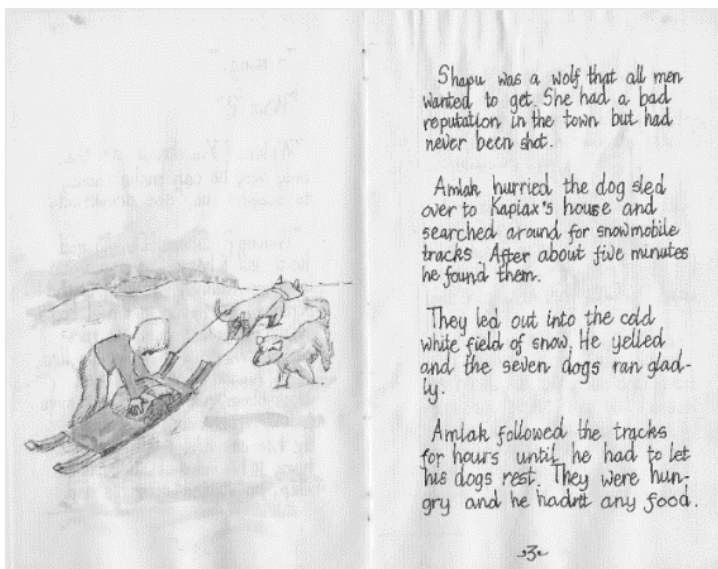
Despite my status as an outlier at Nootka and despite my having been slated by fiat to leave the school before completing elementary, I did manage to keep in the administration’s good graces because of my extracurricular activities and, I am sure, because Ms. Lawry had put in a good word for me, which had some weight because of her position. I also had managed to make a few friends, such as Keith and Leonida (also in the special group in Ms. D.’s class), and Paula.

For some reason, these three always seemed able to ignore others’ taunts whenever the general school population decided to get nasty. Paula and Leonida and I all played *Dungeons & Dragons* together, with Paula’s brother Nick serving as the Dungeon Master, and so I spent a great deal of my spare time in activities that were not entirely solitary. Moreover, I maintained a strong sense of direction, and continued to search for answers to the nature of reality within myself, and also pursued my interests in drawing and writing to such a degree that, for the most part, the behavior of my schoolmates did not seem to matter very much in the big picture of my life. We moved from one part of Vancouver to the next that summer, and for the most part, I was content to take busses from my new home to various public libraries in the new neighborhood over the break and dive into my esoteric and other interests as I prepared myself for the upcoming school year in an as yet unknown landscape.

## Vancouver—Sexsmith Community School

My arrival on the first day at Sexsmith Community School was a staged event, orchestrated in my mind to single me out as a rebel without a cause, but not as a particularly *precocious* rebel. I purposely arrived late, walked to the back of the room, leaned back, stuck my feet up, and grinned at my new teacher. I had no idea that Mr. Upton would be the patient, formidable educator he was, however, and it turned out that Grade 7, thanks to his skillful negotiation of my *faux* rough exterior, became a positively pivotal year in my education. It turned out that I was not very adept at playing an incorrigible delinquent.

Sexsmith's Language Arts program was structured in such a way that I was given an exam and was placed into the highest level of Language Arts available at Sexsmith, taught by the very encouraging Mr. Nedo. It was in this class that I rediscovered that I very much enjoyed creating, illustrating, and binding books, as I had my hand-inked newspaper days on Gilford Island.



It was not long before Mr. Upton had asked me and a few other of the more rambunctious boys in his class if we would be interested in spending some extracurricular time with Franz, a social worker from Vancouver's *Youth Services*. Amongst Franz's mission goals was to take us young underachievers on outings that would allow us to learn how to explore a world of productive activities. It was not long before he and I would spend a lot of time talking about just about everything, and he started to comment that he knew of an academic program, called *City School*, that would probably suit me and my self-driven learning style well. The *City School* was part of King George Secondary School, in downtown Vancouver. The idea of attending a school where self-motivation was considered an asset, rather than a social problem, greatly appealed to me, and I allowed Franz to advocate for my admission to the school. After an interview at *City School*, I was accepted and enrolled into Grade 8. It really excited me that I would soon be in an academic environment where I could advance through the subject areas that I was strong in and possibly even attend university classes in those areas where I was strongest.

It was Mr. Spruceton, my Grade 7 mathematics teacher, who recognized my ability to work with mathematics from first principles. A few weeks into class, I made a point of asking him to explain square roots to me more fully, as I had, after Ms. D.'s humiliation on the square root of negative numbers, returned to the encyclopedia and now knew of the complex number system, but nothing much of how to calculate a non-simple square root without a calculator. He had me go to the board, but unlike Ms. D., slowly talked me through the long division algorithm for calculating the root of any positive number. As he watched me adopt the algorithm he was explaining, he saw something in me, and I was moved from lowest standing in the class to the highest standing, and I was given enriched mathematics education from that point forward. I no longer hated mathematics.

By the time I'd finished Grade 7, I was given the school's *Most Improved Work Habits* certificate for the year, which really meant not that I had so much excelled as a student, but that Mr. Upton, Mr. Spruceton, Mr. Nedo, Franz, had all done their jobs.

Over the year, they had demonstrated to me that there really were some educators who considered their role to be not one of filling empty minds with knowledge, but respecting the capable student enough to allow him or her to come to an understanding that school, at any level, was only as educational as the student and educator made it through dialogic problem-posing education. These educators and support workers empowered me with a core toolset for eventual self-curated socioeconomic emancipation.

That summer, Franz, knowing of my dreams of becoming a writer, loaned me a typewriter. This one act of support gave me a strong sense of belief that one day, I really *would* be a writer. Someone had believed in me enough to give me access to the first real tool that would allow me to sink or swim on my own. I was at last ready to begin to not only want to be an artist and writer, but to work at becoming one—to work at developing the skills and abilities that were within me already until I, too, could become one of the writers who had moved me in so many ways for so many years. After receiving that typewriter as an act of belief in my ability to know where I wanted to go and how I wanted to get there, I never again allowed myself to be externally what I had become for the previous three years. I would use the system to my best advantage rather than rage against it.

## **Burnaby—Alpha Secondary**

Events in home life and the shifts in housing pricing and availability that occurred over the summer prevented me from going to *City School*, however, and I ended up in the regular school system at Alpha Secondary, the school whose catchment area I fell into, as my mother had decided to move to Burnaby. I decided to make the best of it and see what I could get out of regular high school, clinging to the notion that the variety of teachers and larger student body would allow me to disappear into the system and find my own way. I did not want to change schools again before graduation and made my mother swear an oath to not move again until after I graduated high school. She kept her promise almost to the month of my graduation.

Upon entering Alpha, I was given another standard array of scholastic and general aptitude tests. After seeing the results of the tests, my English teacher made a point of talking with me about my scores. He presented what proved to be a life-path impacting response.

“I’ve seen your scores, and to be honest, I don’t know how I am going to teach you much about curriculum English,” my Grade 8 English teacher, Mr. James Heneghan, said. He was a well-known and well-published children’s author. “But you seem on about wanting to write. So why don’t you just write to your heart’s content at the back of the room, and I’ll mark your stories? How does that sound? I might make you take a test or two with the others in class if the curriculum demands it of me.”

I handed in enough fiction, short stories, plays, chapters of books, that Heneghan could hardly keep up, given all his other classes and teaching duties, but keep up he did, with so many notes for revision and other feedback that I essentially had a private writing mentor.

One incident in particular stands out with Heneghan. I had been writing a fantasy story that had a character who’d been bitten by a werewolf. One day, after I handed in my draft chapter for his editorial markup, Heneghan began to laugh at his desk. He approached me with the chapter in hand and pointed to a highlighted line that read: *it was not his fault that he had been afflicted with lycanthropy*. His smile, which he sported often, was particularly wide this day. “Can you imagine that, of all things?” he asked. During a visit from his colleague, Bruce McBay, he showed him the line and they both had a hearty laugh over my words. That he found such amusement in this one tin-line still astounds me, as my early prose was likely rife with such cacophony.

When I went on to English 9 with Mr. Shanks, I made him aware of the agreement I had with Heneghan in his class, and he and I continued this arrangement. His input offered me a different perspective on my writing. He was particularly fond of my hard-boiled detective pieces.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Heneghan had an interesting past and was a former police fingerprint specialist before becoming an English teacher and he also enjoyed my detective pieces.

While he required me to follow standard curriculum, another of my English teachers, Mr. Jon Terpening, later had a huge impact on my work through his engagement with me and my growth as an author and through his promotion of writing for publication in the local student community.

I used to joke that *Abadoun* wasn't my first novel, but my tenth,<sup>10</sup> but I was not actually joking, as I threw more away at eighteen years of age than I have had published since then. Except for a few published poems and one play, nothing written before the age of nineteen survived my fury and hunger-and-pneumonia-induced despair. Nor should it have survived, as it was not intended to be carried forward, and was likely akin to the line on lycanthropy that had amused Heneghan so mightily.

Grade 9 at Alpha Secondary was the year I was asked by a friend to submit an article for the school newspaper. I had already cursed the world in felt pen on the side of my childhood house. I had the audacity to use cursive when I ought to have printed in Grade 1. I had flummoxed a school psychologist with two words in total. All of these past events to say simply that I poignantly understood by the time I wrote that piece that words could enrage. And I knew that the rage would not be against the words as printed, but against the author called out in the byline: and that was to be me. It was a precarious bargain to strike.

Until that school newspaper opinion piece, however, I had not yet directly and fully experienced just *how much* words could enrage. In my inaugural opinion piece, I decided to call out the playing of loud heavy metal music on the school P.A. system during lunch hour and justifying it by calling it "School Radio" at the expense of the studious student body's peace of mind. The thrashing for writing a curse word on the side of the house when I was in kindergarten was nothing compared to the response my first opinion piece in the school newspaper drew.

Fortunately for my physical safety, I had grown up having lost all fear of standing my ground with clenched fists, as the first thing I saw the day the first edition of the newspaper came out was a copy of my article taped up on a locker with the bold words: "Whoever wrote this is *dead!*"

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<sup>10</sup> For some value of *tenth*, as I never actually counted.

I was challenged to a fight in the parking lot after school, and I showed up ready to fight bare-fisted, as did a small crowd of those who knew of the duel, but my challenger did not arrive. After that, I took a hand to the back of the head more than once while walking down the hallway, but nobody faced me eye-to-eye when it came to violence: it was always anonymous and randomly applied.

Rage. Words can stir unrestrained *rage*.

Summer came, and with summer, relief from the weekly torment flowing as a consequence of my article and the social dynamics this set into motion, and my mother bought me a used typewriter, since the one Franz had loaned me eventually had to be returned. I borrowed a *Teach Yourself Touch Typing* record and book from the library, and spent my nights learning to touch type properly, getting my speed up to about 75 words per minute. It was a skill I knew would come in useful for a long time to come. I made a conscious effort to adopt American spellings, since I imagined this would increase my marketability when the time came to submit for publication, if it ever did. Everything I had written up to that point had been written in long hand or haphazardly on the Franz typewriter, and I now felt it was time to start writing work for submission to magazines.

I also had my mind set on entering the CBC short story writing contest, which had an October deadline, and that required a typed submission. Despite the reputation I had built up, I set out immediately at the beginning of the year to try my hand again at getting a girlfriend, or even at least go on a few dates, to be even a small bit like other students my age.

I also made a point of joining the rugby team. Although I was not sports minded, by anyone's estimation, I did have an uncanny ability to take pain on the playing field, and the pain that was a rugby rumble did not bother me, so it seemed as good a sport as any in which to become involved. It turned out, after more than a few beatings on the rugby field, that I was a year too old to be on the junior team, a consequence of having been kept back in Grade 2. How some things later catch you! It was disappointing to have to quit the junior team, as I quite enjoyed playing rugby, even though I only did so for a short time.



Upon being given the news of this, I tried out for the senior team, but was an unwelcome interloper there. After one practice with the seniors, I received a clear message, from their elbows in the ribs, shin kicks, and intentional trips, that my career as a senior rugby player at Alpha was not to be, so I quit the team altogether. The team coach seemed disappointed that I had not stayed on, but I did not let on that the message from my new, older teammates had been painfully obvious.

At night, I put together the short story that I felt would be my ticket to my first few years of university tuition if it won the CBC contest. It was a piece about a young woman who was spared death on the Stanley Park Seawall by a shadowy character who was, in fact, a manifestation of the Spirit of Siwash Rock. I had already written novellas and numerous short stories longhand in the two previous years in my English classes, under my teachers' supervision, but we all considered those to be practice pieces. "At the Seawall" was my first serious attempt at literary fiction and was also the first piece I had written entirely without feedback from Heneghan or Shanks. They never so much as caught wind of its existence.

It was a piece that I was prepared to allow stand on its own as a literary work, one that I almost believed in despite my usual feeling that everything I was writing did not amount to more than finger exercises. "At the Seawall," however, never made it into an envelope, but instead found its way into the trash can beside the writing desk in my room, the victim of an emotional outburst after having shown it to Ron for review before typing the final draft. The insecure outburst was not entirely without other stressors, though, and so, it would be an unfair assessment of Ron to say that his harsh critique of my writing was the sole cause of my destructive episode.

While his delivery was unnecessarily harsh, the details of his concerns about the piece were well-founded. Moreover, the work was too dark in its outlook for the venue, I now suspect. As mentioned, that story was eventually rewritten as "Elspeth Stood at the Edge," published, and is part of the current work. This revised version, too, would likely not suit that venue all these decades on.

Despite my efforts to find someone willing to be my girlfriend, or even just go out on a date to a movie we might both like, it would be a while before that would happen. The rest of the school year after the school newspaper publication and the aftermath that came with it left my social circles uncomfortably tight and my general life unbearably antagonistic. Despite these setbacks, I went into Grade 10 with high hopes, and I began asking girls for dates and in no way was shy. Not a single one of them would *dare* be seen to be dating me, and they so much as admitted it.

One or two confessed to thinking I was well worth getting to know, and I made some good friends in the process, but that I simply had no chance of them being seen as dating me, given my infamy, which I had already well established the year before with only a few written words on the wrong topic. But even in the wash of all this adolescent rage and reputation came *some* love. One young lady *did* agree to start dating me, but alas, she understood the stigma this meant she'd have to endure, and it was on the understanding that she and I were not to be seen as dating by the student body. I was so conditioned to assume that to be seen walking alongside me was certain reputational regret that I didn't protest this demand for secrecy.

We started seeing one another at her home, and she was the first person outside of my family who ever sat and listened to me singing Elvis as I played guitar. We were seated in her open-doored bedroom as her parents sat outside that room and listened to me croon "Can't Help Falling in Love." I learned how to make my voice part of my meaning that autumn of 1986, having first learned how many feelings a voice could evoke in that camp truck in 1977, the summer of Elvis' passing.

This relationship broke off quickly and without notice in the winter of my Grade 10 year and I fell into a dark place. I sought counselling from the school's student counselling office, and became acquainted with John Hall, my school counselor. He and I talked through many deeply emotional matters well above the failed almost-relationship I had had with this one young lady. It was during our talks that he suggested that I might want to jump directly from Grade 10 to Grade 11, thereby correcting the fact that I had taken Grade 2 twice.

I would graduate with those my own age, as if I had never been held back that year. And all of this had been achieved by his simply listening to my entire story up until that point and getting to understand what my barriers might be truly built upon.

## **Burnaby—Burnaby North Secondary**

He and I also negotiated with Burnaby North Secondary School so that I could graduate from there instead of from Alpha. I had had enough of the hostility and stigma that piece of writing in the school newspaper had bought me. There had been a school assembly where I was called forward to stand before the student body of the school to be recognized for having won an extracurricular award for my poetry. As I walked to the platform, I was booed heartily by much of the student body present that day. This convinced me without any reservations that it was time to leave and finish my diploma somewhere else. With Hall's help, that became possible. He also transferred from Alpha to Burnaby North, and thus remained my school counsellor in my graduating year.

In the second semester of my final year at Alpha, I continued to practice the craft of my fiction, now under the keen and pedagogically critical eye of Ellen Matte, who had also been my drama teacher the year prior. She also knew of my efforts and ability in theatre from my having successfully acted the role Jonathan Brewster in Alpha's stage production of *Arsenic and Old Lace*. I had been asked to be the understudy for the fellow who originally had that role, but he quickly quit thereafter, and I was handed all three nights of the final production, having only come into the cast roughly halfway through, and only ever getting one opportunity for a solid full rehearsal.

Matte and I had a respectful and productive relationship, and I was pleased that she taught English Composition 11, as it gave me a chance to continue the writing mentorship I had established with Heneghan and Shanks. Moreover, she was a good friend, and more than once actively defended me and my work before my classmates in Composition 11 when my fiction all became too experimental for their tastes.

“Speak so I can understand you!” a classmate jabbed to a round of assent from his camp.

My ears flushed at this and I tapped my finger on the page where I had been reading my story from so I would not lose my place as I tried to think of a response to this sudden request.

“When someone puts thought and effort into their words and it shows, it is done with intention,” Matte asserted on my behalf, “and it’s on *you* to engage thoroughly if you wish to understand. Do not expect the author to explain or to speak down to you. You are *quite* capable.” While not wishing this level of attention to be drawn to me, the sense of vindication this brought was visceral.<sup>11</sup>

But the year finally came to an end. I had been accepted as a volunteer aide that summer up at Simon Fraser University’s summer-and-sports camp, where I would be a full-time teaching assistant in the computer camp for elementary school children. I would be too busy that summer, I knew, to waste away in the cesspool of the hostility I had just walked away from.

I discovered that summer up at Simon Fraser University that, if I let my beard grow, I could fit in with adults again, just as I had in Maple Bay, so many years before during my feral childhood in the woods of the Pacific Northwest. The difference now was that my body was in the process of catching up with my mind. As a bearded camp counselor, whatever my young age, I was able, in my spare time at least, to blend in with the campus crowd, as if I belonged there. I had many discussions with students and faculty on my pet topics, which were French and linguistics, and only rarely conversed myself into a corner where I had to confess my age, always to shocked stares.

I knew that, when I returned to high school, I would have to shave, and fit in again, but being up there, and being so comfortable, I was able to look forward to the fact that I would only have another year before I was a part of the university life that I had wanted. This was a place where I could fit in and approach the heights to which I wanted to soar.

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<sup>11</sup> I later rewrote the story that triggered this response from my classmate, and it was pseudonymously published as “Vancouver 2050,” *Tickled by Thunder*, Vol. 2 No. 7, 1991, which felt a fitting nod to Matte and the publisher’s belief in me on what was a linguistically opaque piece of speculative fiction.

At summer's close, I took a razor to my face, temporarily shedding my ersatz maturity, knowing I would soon be free of the shackles of life among my school cohort. The time came to go to Burnaby North Secondary. Unlike Alpha, however, Burnaby North was not within walking distance of my home, making going to school every day a choice between walking just over two miles each way and buying lunch or using that money to take a bus and skip breakfast and lunch altogether. The money situation was as bad as it had ever been. I chose to take the bus, which put me into the familiar position of eating one meal a day most days, and while I was 6'2" tall at that age and that was as tall as I would ever be, I was significantly underweight, and it drew comments from my schoolmates who were unaware of my family's financial situation.

I continued to do well with my writing, and achieved my first international publication, a poem (actually two poems were accepted, but the second, published the month after the first, has been lost to time) in *American Atheist Magazine*, during that year:

“A Divine Understanding”

EVANGELIST:

I would rather stand under God  
Than understand God.

THEOLOGIST:

I would rather understand G/god(s)  
Than stand under G/god(s).

ATHEIST:

There's nothing there to understand!

ANARCHIST:

There's no one to stand under!

MARXIST:

Opiate anyone?

I wrote that poem in belated full answer to the annoyed school psychologist from Grade 6 at Nootka. He wanted more than “We are” scrawled hastily on looseleaf, so I eventually obliged.

I was not presented with aptitude tests at the door, but neither did I completely shed my outlier ways, so it was not long before it became clear that there was an indelible and ineffable line between me and most others amongst my cohort that would not be easily crossed. In English, French, Art, History, and other classes, it quickly became clear that my teachers were on to me.

There was something different about me when I went up in front of my English Literature 12 class and recited with a flamboyant Middle English accent the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, of which for some reason I can recite the first stanza to this day, or when I thoroughly analyzed Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* in English class to a pleased but astonished Mr. Nielson. A few of the students also took notice that I was writing stage plays in the hallway near my locker, rather than doing my homework. As much as I fettered my feet so that I would fit in, I did not fit in completely. I was able, though, to pass the year more productively at the new school than at I had at Alpha.

Pockets of hostility started to stir against me when I became more comfortable around my new school and loosened my self-tethers, however. I took my first term paper in History 12 so seriously, for instance, that I removed all the stops when writing it and wrote an analysis of Marxist theory that my teacher proclaimed to be “a paper worthy of a capable graduate student.” He gave me the highest mark in the class for that paper and distributed it to all of my History 12 class as an exemplary piece of research. This did *not* impress my classmates, nor did I feel it should have; I had simply put forth my due diligence for a mark, and now had *been* marked a peacock.

I had not expected Mr. Kozak’s response to this paper, nor had I in any way wished it, since I had learned from my time at Alpha that the best way to be socially invisible was to not be perceived as shining or showboating. The hostility towards me after Kozak’s treatment of my paper was tangible, like a storm cloud hanging over me in his class, for some time going forward.

Similar events in Mr. Nielson's English 12 class followed, and I began to purposely underperform on assignments by putting less ambition into them than I normally would have.

My second term paper for Kozak was purposely written around a thesis that I knew he, because of his particular political leanings, would not agree with. I knew that he would not give it an exceptional mark, since the thesis I decided upon was not entirely the one he and I had agreed upon before I began writing the paper. Originally, I was to have written a piece on the Korean War as a United Nations peace keeping action.

Instead, I dug up a few articles from the *Encyclopedia of Non-aligned Nations* that I felt (in my gadfly enthusiasm) supported the thesis that the United States had flown the US flag as they approached Korea, only switching their colors to the UN flag after the Security Council had made its declaration. I received a stern scolding from Kozak for having taken such a bold swing at the topic without warning him before handing in the assignment. He could not understand why I had gone so far left of center. Though my final mark was good, he wrote on the paper that he could not give me as high a mark on my second paper as he had on my first. He added the handwritten comment: "History, however, may vindicate you."

I didn't care. I simply wanted him to get the message that I resented being showcased before the class. He was aware that I knew his political stance, and that I knew the consequences of letting my passion for social protest soak into my academic papers. I was happy to have him shaking his head at me and to have the other students in his class breathe a sigh of relief. My singular goal in my graduating year was to get through to university. I had neither need nor desire to be Hallway Famous.

It was early into February of my final calendar year of high school, 1987, that my phone rang. It was *her*: the girl I had dated the year before, and she wanted to talk. A while before this, she and I had crossed paths at the Burnaby Art Gallery. A chalk portrait I had done of Hemingway had been selected for display at a showing of students' work in the city, and my mother and I had attended the show opening. She and her mother were also there, and our eyes met.

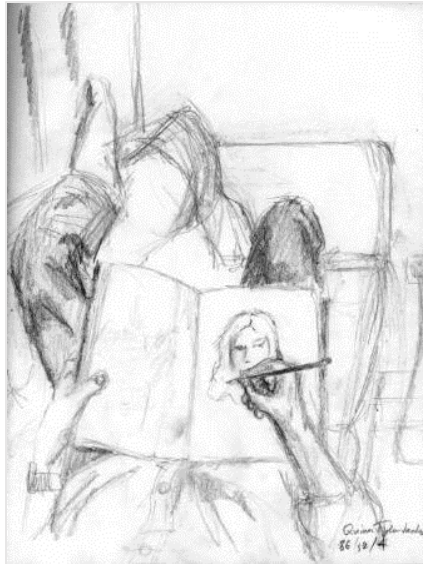
"Your eyes were so *cold*," she said on the phone.

“Leaving me without letting me know why and disappearing like you did *hurt* me, so I *was* cold,” I admitted.

She explained to me the circumstances that had led to her disappearance from my life, and I forgave her for having hurt me as she had. She and I agreed to go on a walking date along some trails “next Saturday.” As it turned out, and without my having realized it before hanging up the phone and looking at the calendar, the following Saturday was to be the 14<sup>th</sup> of February.

There was only one way a walk through those trails listening to mix tapes could go on Valentine’s Day, and that is exactly how it went: she and I agreed after that date to resume our relationship, except I insisted that this time it would be out in the open, for all to see who cared to see. She and I attended different schools, making this almost a moot point, but I was absolutely not going to hide this time through.

We continued to date openly with long term aspirations and half-made plans until just after I graduated in June, when we parted amicably, though in somewhat of an unresolved state. Relationships can be complicated.



“self-portrait” — 4 December 1986



I received letters of acceptance into both the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University, based upon my interim marks. Everything in my life was pointed towards my soon leaving high school, entering university immediately afterwards, with student loans to cover my tuition after the summer break, and moving into that wonderful world I had tasted the summer before as a bearded interloper. Three months before graduation, however, my stepfather took me aside, concerned about the family's financial situation.

Although my parents and I had an understanding that, as long as I continued with my education, I would be given, at the very least, a roof over my head while I studied, Ron expressed his concerns that there simply was not enough money around the house to follow through on these promises and plans. He asked me to quit school and find a job to help make ends meet.

I simply would not do any such thing. I was the first in my family to be so close to high school graduation. My father, mother, stepfather, brother, and sister had all left high school before graduation. As far as I knew, to that point, no Jackson had *ever* come so close as I was at that very moment, and there was no way under Heaven or on Earth that I would abandon my dreams of graduation and beyond.

I knew *why* there was no money in the house, and I asked myself that night if I would tell my stepfather why money was so tight. Rather than do that, I phoned up Jack, a good friend, and asked if I could move in with him while I completed my studies. When Jack's father agreed to have me, knowing how important Grade 12 graduation was to being able to continue on to university, I wrote my parents a letter and moved out, to their complete surprise. The reasons given were tamed somewhat by diplomacy and focused on my desire to set out on my own path.

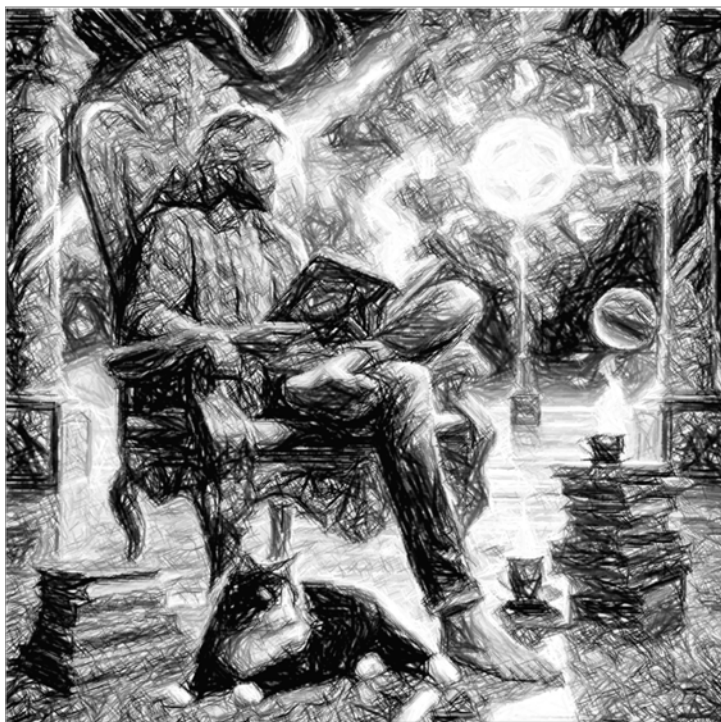
I had promised my mother to never admit to Ron that she was in debt. Ron knew *nothing* of her debt. He knew nothing of how much money was being poured into things other than food, rent, phone, and electricity. I also had not told him that a puppy had been in our house and had destroyed a manuscript I had prepared for him to show him that I absolutely had the *discipline* to write a novel.

I never moved back with my parents after leaving home.

Because I did not have my year's notes with which to study in the final weeks before provincials, due to their having been stolen from my locker, I did not feel able to take the scholarship exams. In the end, I did reasonably well on the provincial exams, and in only one case did my performance on my exam bring my final mark down to a B from what could have been an A, had I had my notes to work from. One of my teachers, Mr. Kozak, seemed disappointed that I hadn't scored as highly as he thought I would have and that I did not even try the scholarship exam in History, and I considered telling him that my notes had been stolen, but I felt that would have seemed like an excuse.

I resigned myself to getting out of my high school career alive and without apology. Once my exams were out of the way, I took my bursary and other award checks, cashed them, and went into hiding for a long while. Graduating and putting the notorious provincial examinations to rest hadn't been such a big deal after all, since all it now meant was that I had nowhere to go but sideways or down. Without the scholarship exams behind me to bolster any student loans to be able to meet my basic needs after tuition, university was not in my near future; rent, food, and survival would be first and foremost on my mind.

My search for a minimum-wage full-time blue-collar job had begun in earnest.



“Midnight at the Arcanum” — 2023

Quand nous conspirons en respirant notre  
boisson imbibée en sucre à nos dents supérieures,  
au-dessus des trucs à thé comme des  
khâns prêts pour la guerre, les mots,  
leurs épées à l’envers, en arrière, c’est à ce moment-ci  
que les enfants, leurs pieds aux métiers à tisser,  
en faisant les tapis qui réchauffent nos pieds  
à nous, et la boisson tombe mieux  
d’un graal d’argile que de verres rayés.  
Les jardins de paradis dans la soie de ces tapis  
et la contrainte, le thé renversé ne souillera pas  
les triomphes de la tulipe, mais le soleil  
se fane des mémoires des poésies écrites  
délicatement dedans, au moment et au-dessus d’une  
conscience.

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## The Novel

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Though inspired by aspects of the author's life, this is a work of meta-autobiographical fiction, and therefore all the characters, *including* the first-person protagonist of this work, dialogues, and settings are the products of creative artistic invention and interpretation. Any resemblance to real people, either living or dead, or actual events, or non-public places is either entirely coincidental or the result of the artistic narrative creative process.

*For the Reader, the only Oracle.*

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## New Westminster, Winter 2007

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“Memento Echo”

Is there tomorrow, yesterday, and now,  
If most yesterdays are superimposed  
Upon this thing we call immediate  
Present, if what is to come is merely  
A recombination of remembered  
Events? Time is not space that runs against  
The grain: the riverbank won't move, but will  
The river flow, and if you remember  
Where that river meandered just last week,  
You'll see the water not as going here  
Or there, but as a more constant creature.

When someone stares you in your constant eye,  
Not unlike a thousand instances yet,  
Then what this regard in moments will do  
Seems not to matter anymore at all,  
But instead what is of sure consequence  
Is that the person who adorns the look  
Exists in a continuum that was,  
And is, and will be, not that this moment  
Singularly came and went and may return.

The river of human interaction  
Flows—what moves, the bank, the river—what care?  
This person *was*, and *is*, and *will be still*,  
That we *perceive* this person is the point,  
Not that something was last year or not yet,  
But that in space and time we shared the flow.

If light will travel forward at some speed,  
Away from us the same as the towards,  
That we stand as the time moves on against,  
And thus receive the movie as a flick,  
Changes not the players in life's whole film.



“Midnight” — 2023

## “Midnight”

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אני חבצלת השרון שושנת העמקים

I am [the Essence of] the {Blossoms} of [the Plains and Valleys of] Sharon.  
—The Most Splendid of Canticles, of Solomon 2:1

All those years ago today I sat on this same bench, my then younger fingers pressing on this same saxophone, these then younger lips against the reed. The same breath, stronger but less certain, blowing a similar tune. Syncopation. Miss a beat. Miss a few.

Here we go again.

It was seven o' clock at night.

It's about that time again. I haven't looked at my watch. Time keeps on tessellating. That which was, comes back full circle. The Self in tune with the Infinite. Damn it's cold. Here we go again.

One, two, four, five. One, three, five, six. Miss a few. Miss a beat. Syncopated.

Circle T, circle T, circle T, square. My compass is broken. Northern star. Look at it. Lucifer in the morning, Venus de Mine.

Come on. Listen. Baby needs a new pair of shoes. Snake eyes, box cars, roll me a seven. Fours, Queens, and one-eyed Jacks. Wildcard. Play both hands against the middle.

It's cold, but my fingers are steadier now. They've got their wind; their second wind. Experience. Age. Wisdom. Call it what you will: it's Midnight at the Arcanum.



Allusion. That's you. Is that you? That was you, all those years ago to the minute. That was you who sauntered over like the night of cloudless climes. In beauty Byronic, shining like the midnight of your eyes. And the music stopped. Time took my cigarette, took my cigarette, and like Bowie, took my fingers and then another cigarette.

Midnight in the Sanctum Sanctorum turns lead into gold. Lead into the disaster of youth. You led me into the disaster. All those many years ago this very second.

—What song are you playing? she asks, as you once asked.

Fingers answer, head nods. No words, just a succession of notes. Let's imagine I'm playing *our* song.

“Round Midnight.” Out the side of my mouth.

—I know that song, she says.

My fingers keep at the brass, the saxophone thanks her, I nod my head again. So many years and ten seconds ago.

My fingers are faster now than they ever were. Rope tricks and half-missed beats; I give a glance to my right. Syncopated head swing.

Her eyes are almost like yours were. Her rise is almost like your eyes.

Isis' grief-stricken artifice snakes through my humming brain. Midnight in the Holy of Holies. Song of Songs, Solomon's judicious eyes. I take my lips from the saxophone as she puts her hand on my forearm. Her man in Fourteen Pieces and then came the Falcon. Twice seven and some years and a minute ago. I've stopped playing now. Like she has something to say, something to tell me. She *almost*, almost, syncopated missed beat, almost not quite....

—Can I make your eye shed a tear? Phoebe asks. Or does she ask?

Funny you should ask about the Wedjet Eye;<sup>12</sup> I see you there.

—No, I say. First words out of my mouth in a long, long time. But only because all my tears have been shed for now.

—Can *you* make *me* shed a tear? she then asks.

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<sup>12</sup> Wedjet Eye, the Eye of Horus, the Falcon, son of Isis and Osiris: 

Phoebe's inquiry cuts through the silence, a transcendent, sharpened kris through the air of uncertainty. The first notes of "Isis' Threnody for Osiris" (*Papyrus of Ani* edition) float from the brass, like a soul in transit to the sweet Field of Reeds. The syncopation disrupts the conventional flow of time, stretching and compressing. When alto brass swells meet crush notes in Cm7 Phrygian mode, they paint a high sonic portrait of my (*our* shared?) longing and sorrow.

She takes off her glove, and a single movement wipes away what might have been a tear. Or does the music cry *for* her?

The boundary between challenge and question blurs. In that moment, it doesn't really matter. The music has spoken with Thoth's bold-but-solemn authority, tears or not, and in its resounding notes, something between the two of us has been unmistakably transfused onto a page of Budge's *Egyptian Book*.

There's a cobra behind my brain, ready to strike, ready to hiss, ready to poison with a kiss. She starts to lean over, but hears the tell-tale hissing in my cerebellum, *cobra callosum*, and then backs away. Be cautious: she knows it. She can sense it. Maybe she likes a little danger, though, like you did, because she then quickly pecks a kiss on my cheek, pecks like an ibis into waters, standing in the Nile of denial, and leaves me alone on the bench.

Just like all those years and five minutes ago. Seven-thirty. Stars and cold. Crisp air. Midnight in the *sui generis*. One of a kind, unkind, wholly unwound, unbound Prometheus, gift of fire, dancing St. Elmo down the sails of the barge.

She's back. Couldn't stay away. Standing not but seven feet from me, watching my hands as they find the right sound in the right measured time. She *knows* the song. Not the *name*; it's my composition. She knows the *refrains*; those are universal.

—How long have you been playing? she asks.

One, two, four, five, seven years? Since a quarter to seven tonight? All the same, and all different, and that makes all the difference. I stop. I pry my lips away a second time.

—Many years, I reply. Do you wish to know more?

She smiles, almost, almost but not quite your smile.

—I've read "Barefoot Sonata," and the poem, more than once, but admit I still don't know who you *are*, she said. Tell me *more*. Who are you? Do I even *want* to know more?

Didn't she see me nod with the sax? I nod *no* again.

Daughter of Gaia, First of the Oracle at Delphi, looking for Socrates, but getting Thoth, she steps closer. Too close, too close to the asp in my brain, and it strikes on the alabaster of her throat, and at that exact moment, she *knows*. She has gotten the answer I suggested she did not want: like many, I am complicated, a complexity from whence all human chaos spills that *words* often only serve to enrage with winds and whitecaps.

—I can't *tell* you who I am, I finally say. We are in the endless flux of *différance*: the more we say, the more the trace will drift, *ad nauseam Sartreanum in perpetuum*.

—I want to know *you*, she asserts, not the Latinate flare and deconstructionist rhetoric. *Différance* is intrinsically diachronic and does not apply in the static *here-and-now*; thus the *trace* is not iridescent in *this* instant. The *now* is our single shared point: exactly *here*.

My ears sting, as if from the cold, but rather from the truth of what she has just said to me. —I hadn't thought of it in that way before, I confess. Midnight.

—*We* are the ones who adorn the look, she continues. *We* are the players on this *single frame* of film. I am no fawning gazelle: I am making myself vulnerable and transparent to you in order to connect *right here* and *right now*. As you said to me: "*Il n'y a pas de hors-maintenant. Now is your moment.*"

After wiping down the saxophone and emptying the water key, I place the instrument back in its case and then put on my gloves. I close the case carefully. The solitary song I have been playing is over; it is time to harmonize in the moment. The cobra is asleep after all these years and forty years in solitude minutes.

—*Touché!* Indeed, I *did* say that. Let's you and I go have another cup of coffee together, I say, standing up, offering my arm. Rise up, lover, fair one, and come away. *See!* The winter has passed, and the rainstorms have abated. She gladly takes my outstretched arm, and we go to our café. I want to know *you*, also, I add. Once there, across from one another at a small table, sipping our coffee, we stare into one another's eyes; into the midnights of our arcana. Our words like fragrant meadow saffron sway across several hours, unwinding our intricate tapestries to their most golden threads.

After no more words and after our joyfully slowly sipped coffees are done, we walk the asphalt repaired road to the door of my hotel. She comes up a flight of stairs to my floor and my seventh door. She knows when I open the only gate that a soul can truly hold right to keep that she is welcome, and she enters.

The place is clean. Bleach clean with the loneliness of so many years and an hour. You're nowhere to be seen, smelt, touched, or felt around here. Ablution.

I take off my overcoat and offer to take off hers. It was cold outside, but warm here. We sit for a while, doing nothing more than gaze at one another. I lean towards her and our lips touch. The serpent in my brain comes back to life, alive again, and strikes again. Toxic.

She kisses me fully. Having tasted me, there's a cobra in her brain, now, too. Her eyes are closed, but she now *sees* me and I see her. I'm flowing through her like the syncopated notes on the bench, but now she cannot shut her ears or her eyes and get rid of me. We are sharp lines of the same sheet music: *presto agitato*. Barefoot.

She *knows* who I am. If she did not before, she does *now*. Her skirt slides to the floor and is kicked aside with two or three lithe movements. She undoes the button of my slacks, and they, too, are soon off against the wall. Our lips are still one. Our kiss is unbroken. The tessellated ether slides between us, through our mouths, around our minds, back and forth. Venom. She is not you, but my heart is no longer wrecked. I can hardly remember you anymore.

Who am *I*? Who is *she*?

It doesn't matter *anymore*.

Her nails go up my *trapezius*, digging deeply into my constellation. I know I am bleeding, but I do not care; she has already tasted my blood, has it under her fingernails. Our breathing is *one*. Our movements, syncopated, but almost the same. Almost. Breathing can never be truly and completely *one*, as it pours from the syncopated cup.

Midnight is over. The stars have fallen. Venus will arrive again tomorrow morning. The morning star will return, adorned and haughty with the hubris of the first creation, but the envy of the second.

She opens her eyes. They are new to me. They see me for who I am; no more, no less, and nothing in between. I see her, also. Those are *her* eyes, not yours, and the heaving of her chest through her mouth is *her* rise *only*.

As she showers, I play a song on my saxophone, very low. I've only my slacks on now, full "Barefoot Sonata," on the chair, as my fingers glide and the notes drift around the room.

She comes out of the shower with a towel wrapped around her, her wet hair pulled back, and she smiles. The spices of her Dolce & Gabbana *Light Blue* fill the air like dancing scented cobras. She and I have *seen* one another as you and I were never free to do in our suite in Montreal, overlooking the Stygian flow of cars, so many years and three hours ago.

Midnight at the Arcanum.

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**Montreal, Late August, 1988**

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“Cipher” — 2023

## “Zero”

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Zero. I drag my hand across my bare chest, through the tufts of wet hair, over my ribs, digging my nails into myself, wanting to rip out my suffering, but unable to draw blood. My hand traces along the edge of the saxophone charm on my necklace; the charm that sticks to me, digging underneath my skin.

I smell you in my sheets, what remains of you, what you were willing to leave behind, even over the stench of my stale perspiration. I have not washed the pillow cover where you laid your head, nor have I lain upon that pillow. The distinct smell of your perfume fills my nostrils as they pull in the burning, sweaty night air of the Montreal summer. I am afraid even to move over to that side of the bed for fear of ruining your imprint there, out of terror of ruffling or unfolding some fold that still may hold within it some part of our time together.

Instead of your soft heartbeat, I hear the detestable tick of powered time as it wastes the seconds of my half-sleep on the wall. The midnight cars of Avenue du Parc under my bedroom window sound nothing like the cars I know they are, but instead like a river that I might have to cross at Stygian cost to find you.

I tried to imagine that the ticking of the timepiece was not the working of a fourth dimension, but the beating of your heart where I pressed my ear while you slept. It is not your heart. Can I have counted so high without falling asleep? I lose count at a century, brushing my other hand over the edge of the mattress, into oblivion. How many centuries of seconds have I counted off since you left this bed? They have all become one and I cannot remember their number. Yes, one. I'm alone. How long ago was it that you were with me? An onus of one. A cipher of none.



My leg falls over the side of the bed and my foot barely touches the hardwood floor. It is cold and brings my eyes open. Overhead are the slowly moving cast eye shadows of street lights, car headlight ricochets. Or is that really a river? The roof shimmers like the surface of a lake under a midnight moon. But your departure has brought me only the pitch of a new moon—those are headlights. Carefully, slowly, almost imperceptibly, so as to not disturb the bed that we once shared, I slide my other leg to the side and let it, too, fall down to the hardwood. Suddenly I begin to feel cool.

Cool like water. But it's only an imaginary-sideways-two breeze that I do not yet fully understand even though I have felt it. I roll onto my side towards my feet, in an awkward, damaged fetal position, bent into an abstraction. The lake shimmers, the river pours. I close my burned eyes again, staying in this twisted, tormenting place. My arm, almost under its own power, but not completely, since it must be doing it by some hidden will I still retain, pushes my torso, then my head follows, and I am sitting at the edge of the bed. My edge.

This time, I do not let myself stop at the century, and push on. One hundred and three. I hear the sound of the soles of my feet as they brush against the wood of the floor. I am bent over at the side of the bed, holding my knees. I am a four, ready to stand up and become a one again. One. Each of my vertebrae calls out the roll. Honor roll. Snapping into place, I am again a singularity, standing pajama-naked at the side of the bed, facing the window, ready to make my way to it and open it so the air will pour into the room and relieve me of summer's torturous caress. I am at the sill, hands on the handles, ready to pull hard, ready to converge.

I do not have the strength to lift the window from its seal. The paint must have become soft from the heat. I lean into the glass, my cheek pressed up against it. It smells dusty and bitter, and I can no longer remember what you smell like. I want to open the window and return to the infinite manifolds of the sheets, but by now, my fingers sting from trying to pull on the handles. My only relief is the coolness of the glass pane, and I do not want to pull my face away from the only measure of comfort I have had since your departure.

Two lovers down below murmur the incantations that only lovers understand as they march under the window, and through the glass, I can hear backwards in time and listen to us down there, ready to ascend to my apartment together. The paint finally releases its grip, and the window quickly slides up. A waft of real and present air rushes in, the voices grow louder through the open window, and the river's roar fills the room now. The wind is cool around my waist.

I lift my stinging fingers to the swinging hook and latch the window in place. I am at eighty again, but the clock's tick is quieter now that the window is open and the river can flow into my room and drown the centuries. Voices that are not ours come in, welcome guests. High heeled shoes on the pavement of Avenue du Parc sidewalks replace the passing of metered time with random, momentary recollections.

I throw the pages that have been sitting on the small table beside the window, unread since you went through them, marked with your words, wet with your opinion, and they are loose and into the still air. The pages flutter, left, right, slowly outward, into the street, like words from your lips, untamed, sheaves toward the codomain, reflecting the light of the streetlamps, shimmering, as if finally alive after being in a cage I never dared open.

Having seen enough, and returning to the bed, I stand at the foot of the thing and examine the messed-up sheets. Your side is away from the window. I have not disturbed the place where you were, and can see you there, almost. Your shadow remains. The bends, folds, depressions that were once you. Or were they me? Were you *ever* there?

A voice underneath the window calls out. The river becomes a street again as a car's brakes scream. I make my way to the window and look down. A young man is holding his lover as a woman gets out of her sedan to look about. She pulls a stray feral page from her car's windshield, looks up, and waves her fist at me, screaming profanities that speak of churches and chalices and tabernacles. They talk. The woman gets back into her car and drives on as the man holds his lover, brushing her long, black hair with his hand, saying things to her that do not carry over the noise of the traffic.

I return again to the foot of the bed, lean over, one hand on each corner of the blanket, and with new strength, pull quickly and mightily, like a magician at a table with his hands on two corners of the cloth.

*Snap.* The sheets are straight again. You are gone.

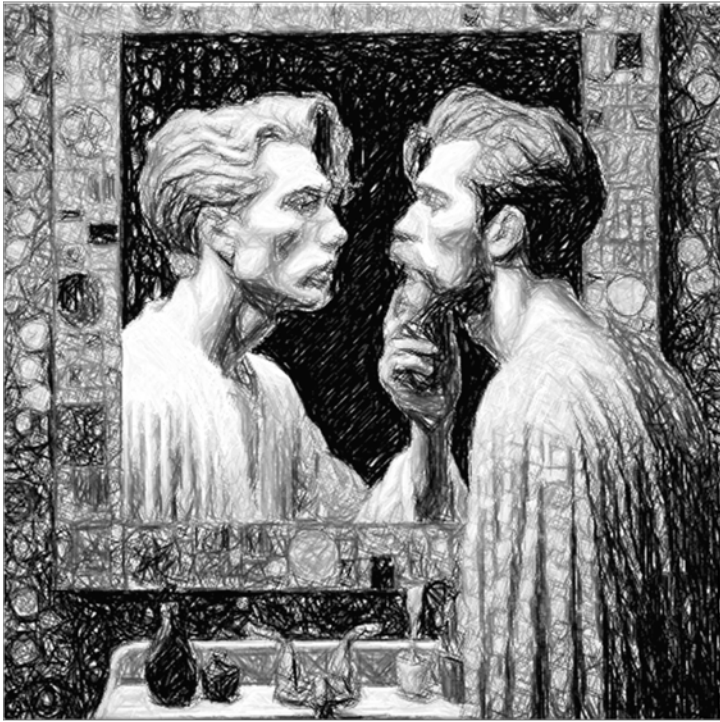
One. *Du lever igen.*

Midnight at the Arcanum.

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**Burnaby, Fall and Winter, 1987-1988**

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“His Own or Someone Else’s Face” — 2023

## 1

Outside much has changed. I do not know how. But inside and before You, my God, inside before You, Spectator: are we not bereft of action? We indeed discover that we do not know our role, we look for a mirror, we would like to remove our make-up and take off what is false and be real. But somewhere there is still a forgotten piece of our disguise clinging to us. A trace of exaggeration remains in our eyebrows, we do not notice that the corners of our mouths are twisted. And so we go around, a mockery, merely half-existing: neither beings, nor actors.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*<sup>13</sup>

When I entered the small bathroom, my intention had been to shave. I hated shaving, since it made my face feel as if it had been sand-papered smooth, but I knew my chances of finding work would be better without two-day's growth on my chin.

Even shaven, I knew that any work I might find would be rough labor, but my money was nearly gone, and I had three more days to find a job or not eat. The thought of an empty refrigerator had finally become more depressing than the thought of mucking spent toilets. Although my intention had been to shave, when I looked in the mirror and saw how the roughness of the hair on my face made me look older than eighteen, I changed my mind. I *craved* the mask it offered me.

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<sup>13</sup> A work we might consider a precursor of the meta-autobiographical novel.

Aussen ist vieles anders geworden. Ich weiß nicht wie. Aber innen und vor Dir, mein Gott, innen vor Dir, Zuschauer: sind wir nicht ohne Handlung? Wir entdecken wohl, daß wir die Rolle nicht wissen, wir suchen einen Spiegel, wir möchten abschminken und das Falsche abnehmen und wirklich sein. Aber irgendwo haftet uns noch ein Stück Verkleidung an, das wir vergessen. Eine Spur Übertreibung bleibt in unseren Augenbrauen, wir merken nicht, daß unsere Mundwinkel verbogen sind. Und so gehen wir herum, ein Gespött und eine Hälfte: weder Seiende, noch Schauspieler.

Perhaps looking a few years older would work in my favor. Nobody had wanted to hire an eighteen-year-old, after all, but twenty may be something I could sell. Instead of shaving, then, I rinsed my face, splashed on what was left of my aftershave, ran a wet hand through my hair, and returned to the kitchen of my shared house.

Walking the streets, looking for help-wanted signs, would be chilling. I would come back at the end of the day nearly frozen and all the more aching for a hot square meal. Nothing would keep a chill like that away from me; it wouldn't even leave me alone in my own house.

Soon, I was on the bus from the Kootenay Loop and headed to the center of downtown Vancouver, near Robson Street. I had been up and down the streets before, but could hardly remember where I had been, to whom I had talked. In my first days looking for work, it had been a systematic process, with addresses and names, but over the weeks it had turned into a desperate, random walk up and down streets in search of someone in need of a strong, young back built for mopping and lifting and a stomach that would not turn at the sight of a toilet given to general public use. I got off the bus where I always did. Ten feet away was the kiosk of Jacques, the old jewelry seller.

"Conrad!" Jacques cheered when he saw me. He waved for me to come over and I obliged. Jacques poured some coffee from his thermos into a Styrofoam cup and offered the steaming cup to me.

"How has it been?" I asked.

"Pretty frigid here in the shade of all the towers," Jacques replied, rubbing his hands together. He wore a pair of black knit gloves that had no fingertips. "But it's where the foot traffic is. Have you given what I said any thought?"

I sipped my coffee. I had gotten to like Jacques over the weeks. The idea of selling jewelry for him on commission had not at all appealed to me before, but even though Jacques was only a street vendor, he still managed to eat more and more often than me.

"I still don't know," I admitted. "I don't have your magic tongue. I can't sell. I'm not *slick* like you."

Jacques patted his belly. “Needing to eat can *make* you as slick as you need to be.”

“I want to try a few more places before I decide,” I said.

At this, Jacques brushed his graying hair from his eyes. “You have a good face,” Jacques said. “People trust a good, honest face. It’s an honest living, selling jewelry.”

I knew that what Jacques meant was that people were willing to trust from a handsome face that the knock-off watches he kept out of sight of the police would not stop working after a few months of use. Jacques sold his handmade earrings, necklaces, and trinkets openly, and they were beautiful and each slightly unique, but he made his greatest profit from the dubiously sourced designer watches he kept out of sight of the general public.

“Let me try those places first,” I finally replied. “Thanks for the coffee; it lit a fire under me.”

With the coffee’s warmth in me, I made my way a few blocks down to a store I had not yet entered. Posters. I knew art. I used to screen posters. I was, after all, some sort of an artist. I could sell posters. Most of the posters in the front window were not art, but I may be able to find work here. I pushed the door open and hoped for the best.

I approached the lady at the cash register after brushing my hair back with my hand.

“Yes? May I help you?” the cashier asked.

“I was wondering if you need any help around here,” I began.

The cashier looked me up and down quickly before replying, “Not hiring.”

“I know pop art and have a pretty good idea of...,” I tried to say.

“Sorry, not hiring,” the lady repeated.

I wanted to scream, but instead bid her farewell, turned around, and walked out of the store.

The mood of the air was so frosty I could almost see my words leave my angry lips. Jacques was far down the street, showing off his wares to passers-by. I returned to the kiosk, pretending to be interested in the jewelry for the benefit of the customers, and when they were gone, shrugged at Jacques.



“Not hiring!” I sputtered, pointing in the direction of the poster store.

At this, Jacques could not hold in his amusement. “You are not going to find work walking up and down the city streets looking like a lost dog, Conrad,” he finally said.

“Maybe I should take a bus to Montreal,” I returned.

“Montreal? Last act of a desperate man. You know why I am here? Why any of us are here? Because it may seem cold in Vancouver to you, but right now, over there, it’s *damned* cold. Worse than you’ve *ever* felt. That’s why I’m here. Be careful what you pray for.” He poured some more coffee from his thermos and offered it to me.

I accepted my second cup of steaming coffee. A young couple, probably tourists, approached the kiosk. Since I had the coffee in my hand, I could not pretend I was a prospective customer. Instead, I motioned to Jacques that I would take on the salesmanship for a bit.

“I think this necklace would suit your wife very nicely,” I said, putting a silver necklace up to the neck of the woman. “It makes her beautiful eyes sparkle.”

The woman smiled happily at the compliment she had been given and I went in for the sale.

“Look at that! She’s smiling! You don’t want to take that smile away from her, do you?” I said, tapping my back pocket as if there were a wallet in it.

The man, seeing that he could not back down gracefully, went for his wallet. “I suppose it’s quite beautiful,” he mumbled in defeat.

“Beautiful? This trinket?” I said, remembering what I’d heard Jacques say before. “This necklace is nothing. It’s all in the one who is wearing it. *She* is beautiful. The necklace sparkles on *her*.” I glanced at Jacques and then at the man who was fumbling with his wallet. “You see him? He goes home at nights, bent over a magnifying glass, twisting and turning this jewelry into something that is meant to be worn by beautiful people. You won’t find a necklace exactly like this one anywhere else because *he* made it by hand, you understand?” I showed him Jacques’ monogram stamp: **J†B**. “His philosophy is that no two are the same. Just like no lady is quite as beautiful as your wife here.”

“How much for this?” the man asked, flipping through his massive billfold.

“Well, this one is fifteen dollars, but I’ll let you in on something else,” I said. I reached under the kiosk and produced a suspect Rolex. “Yes, yes, *you* know it’s not real. *I* know it’s not real. The beautiful lady knows it’s not real. But let’s be honest: we’re all adults here. It looks real and it keeps good time. You’re visiting from England? I can tell from your accent that you’re from England.”

“Yes,” the man replied. The woman was now looking over the watch very carefully.

“She comes back from Canada wearing that necklace, you come back wearing this watch. Fifty dollars for both. The necklace is one of a kind—a steal at fifteen dollars.”

“Does it keep good time?” the man said, looking at his own simple watch.

“Keep good time? Of course it does, but with something like that on your wrist, who *cares*? Does French cuisine *really* taste better? No. There’s a little bit of food on a big plate. Probably cold by the time you actually get to eat it. But you *pay* for what? To eat French cuisine. To know when you place your fork and knife just so on the plate it’s going to magically go away. Right? With something like this, you pay for the name. You pay for what people think about you knowing you eat there, when they accidentally-on-purpose find out.”

I could see that the lady was amused by my presentation.

The man produced fifty dollars, put the necklace on his companion, put the phony Rolex on his wrist, and walked off with a smile on his face.



“Not on my Watch”—2023

“Who said you can’t sell?” Jacques blurted out once the couple was out of hearing range.

“Yes, but what did I sell?” I returned, sipping my coffee. “Something that will turn her neck green and his wrist purple—*if* he manages to get it past customs. To be honest, I don’t even know if French cuisine *does* actually taste better, since I’ve never been able to afford it, but I assume it tastes astoundingly better than *anything* I’ve ever eaten. Especially lately. Been eating salted boiled spuds.”

“Yes, but think of it this way,” Jacques replied. “They feel good about themselves. Every time he checks the time, he holds out his arm like a king, showing off his ‘Rolex.’ All for the reasonable price of fifty bucks.” I handed Jacques the money and Jacques handed me back five dollars. This was the first money I’d earned since as far back as I could remember. “They’re happy for a few days and you get five bucks. Not bad.”

“It’s not *me*, Jacques,” I contested.

“Not *you*? Conrad, come on. Look how you did that sale. Not you? If this isn’t you, what is? What *you* are you hiding?”

“Jacques,” I replied, “in a few months, you’ll be back in Montreal. The weather will be nicer. You’ll be selling your wares over there. All these watches will stop working by about then and you won’t be here when the ones who aren’t tourists come looking to flatten your nose. Me, I live here. This is my town. There’d be *hell* to pay.”

“Ah well, keep an open mind,” Jacques sighed. “They know what they’re getting for thirty-five dollars isn’t going to last forever. Nothing lasts half as long as forever, my friend.”

I looked at Jacques closely. His face was weathered. Years of selling on the streets had taken their fee from his face. Was that the face I wanted? Older than its years? Nothing lasts half as long as forever, especially in the brittle cold. Suddenly, I wished I'd shaved. I drew my numb fingers across my hoarfrost bitten chin and could hear the rasp of the stubble. Surely there must be some decent work in this city for a young man. Where was it then?

I sat in the small fold-away chair beside Jacques and waited for another couple to come by. I managed to sell them a pair of earrings. I sensed that they would not be interested in a watch. A few more came by without buying anything. By noon, I'd made fifteen dollars more in commission. With my twenty dollars, I bought a phony Gucci watch from Jacques at cost and put it on.

"What do you want that watch for?" Jacques asked as I started to leave. "I thought..."

"When this watch stops working," I said, "I will know you have returned to Montreal."

Jacques laughed as I walked away with the watch on my wrist and got back to the business of selling jewelry from his kiosk.

**3**

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Once down the main drag far enough to be out of sight, I sat down and checked the time. The watch, even though I knew it was a fake, felt nice on my wrist. It would look good and tell correct time for at least a week, before the shine started to dull.

“Nice watch!” the young lady who had been sitting a few feet away on the bench said.

I turned to smile at her. She was a gorgeous, well-dressed woman, probably a few years older than I was.

“Thank you,” I said. “It’s a Gucci.”

“Yes, I know,” she replied. “If you don’t mind my saying so, it doesn’t fit your clothes.”

She had a huge smile on her face when she said it, so I did not respond badly.

“Well,” I mumbled. “I’ve been out of work for a while. The watch was a gift from my Uncle Jack.”

“Uncle Jack has good taste,” she replied. “Out of work? What do you do?”

I didn’t want to lie anymore and replied, “I wanted to be an artist. Mostly I’m creatively inclined, but I know how to push a broom when the floor needs a sweep.”

“*Wanted* to be an artist? You’ve retired so young?” She inched herself closer to me.

“I’ve never held a job for very long in the artistic fields,” I admitted. “Bad luck and timing, I think.”

Again, she moved closer. “My name is Vanessa.”

“Conrad,” I returned.

“I don’t mind listening to your long story,” she finally said, after having stared in my eyes for some time.

I stood and pointed to the café ten feet in front of us. We went inside and I ordered two *café au laits* and I told her how I'd lost my one and only real job as a designer's silkscreening apprentice because of a severe allergic response to the screen cleaning chemicals. "The reaction ran roughshod on both my forearms and that was the end of that."

"What do you do?" I asked to take the focus off myself.

"I work across the street at *La Preziosità*," she replied. "We sell Gucci watches, amongst other things."

I wanted to stick my hand under the table when I heard this. If she looked closely enough, she would know that the watch was phony.

"Not phony ones like yours," she finally said, relieving the tension. "The real ones."

"You could tell?"

"Oh, those are good fakes until they start to wear down, which they *always* do. Can't tell just by looking from a few feet away, but I've seen you with Jacques," she explained.

"Ah," I returned, sipping my drink.

"Jacques is *infamous* with us. A few of his customers have come in expecting us to get his watches working again," she said. "Not likely, we tell them: you get what you pay for."

I looked at my watch. "I suppose so. To his credit, he *always* makes it clear that they're not the *bona fide* article."

"I'm sure he's a wonderful fellow all around and wants them to go into it eyes-wide-open, but those watches are what they are, at the end of the day. You know, we need someone on the floor," Vanessa suggested. "If you need a job, why not come in and apply?"

"You think?" I returned.

"Selling the real thing," Vanessa added.

I had to ask. "If you knew the watch was a fake, why did you start talking to me outside?"

Vanessa blushed. "Well, I thought you had a nice face," she finally admitted. "It takes a good face to sell even the *real* thing. Probably harder to sell the real thing than the phonies, and that's not because of the price point, but because of the persnickety clientele we do our best to endear." She showed me her watch. "*That's* the real thing."

I looked at her slender wrist more than the watch and wanted to touch her perfect skin but stopped myself.

“So I should come in with my best clothes and a résumé?” I asked.

“And please be sure to shave,” she said. “The boss *hates* the shadow.” Vanessa then looked into my eyes with her cool, green stare and smiled without saying a word. She reached out to touch my face with her soft fingers. She drew a circle on my rough cheek with her right index finger, making a raspy sound. Her touch made me feel as though I was going to pass out. Or was that the fact that I had only had three coffees in me all day to call a meal?

“You have a nice face,” she replied before standing up. She walked out of the café, crossed the street to the jewelry store, into the shop.

After a few minutes, the waiter came to the table and asked if there would be anything else. I removed my watch, handed it to the waiter and said, “Here’s your tip,” before leaving. Soon, I was again at Jacques’ kiosk.

“Where’s your watch?” Jacques called out to me.

At first, I didn’t know what to say. Finally, I blurted out, “I sold it to the highest bidder,” and walked on to the bus stop before heading home.





Our doubts are traitors,  
And make us lose the  
good we oft might win,  
By fearing to attempt.”

—Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* (1.4)

4

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With my freshly typed résumé in hand, I entered the *La Preziosità*, ready to put forth my best impression. The woman at the counter took my résumé, read it quickly, and put it to one side. From what had happened to me the day before, I expected the first words from her mouth to be anything but what she actually said.

“You’re hired,” she said.

I did not know how to reply. I had not even half-opened my mouth to speak, she hardly seemed to have read the résumé, and now I was suddenly employed. “I...”

“I’m Carola,” she said, offering me her hand.

I shook her hand for about fifteen seconds, unable to speak.

“Vanessa gave you a strong recommendation yesterday,” she said. “I trust Vanessa’s judgment. When can you begin?”

“Right away,” I finally managed to reply. “By the way, where *is* Vanessa?”

Carola pointed to a door that must have led to the back room. “She’s doing some bookkeeping right now.”

My hands behind my back, I walked up and down the displays, examining the watches, bracelets, necklaces, and other items. There were far many more items to keep track of in the shop than there had been at Jacques’ kiosk. They were real.

Vanessa finally entered from the back. She was as beautiful as I remembered her from the day before in the café and when I saw her, I could feel her hand brushing my face as she got up to leave and return to work. Here I was, standing in a high-end jewelry store, where one item under the glass was worth more than I could hope to earn in a month.

“Hello, Conrad,” she greeted me, smiling.

“Hello,” I replied, staring straight into her green eyes.

“You like that necklace?” Carola asked.

“It’s amazing,” I replied. “May I look at it more closely?”

“Not until you’re bonded,” Carola said, sternly. Then, she went to the display and took out the necklace. “Just kidding, Conrad!” She handed the necklace to me, nodding for me to take it when I first delayed.

It felt perfect in my hand as I examined it. My mind began correlating individual stone sizes with the total weight on my palm.

“How much do you estimate that piece at?” Vanessa asked.

After she asked that, I closed my eyes, thought about what I was being asked, and then opened them again. “I’d say fifteen hundred, all day,” I said.

Carola started coughing.

“Did I say something wrong?”

Carola took a bracelet from the display and gave it to me after lifting the necklace from my hand. “And this one?”

I examined the bracelet closely, counted the stones, and then said, “Twenty-four hundred.”

This time, both Vanessa and Carola seemed alarmed. Carola looked at my résumé very closely for a minute and finally asked, “All told, you’re quite close on both of them. What I want to know is *how*.”

“A sixth sense, maybe?” I at last suggested.

“How about this ring?” Carola tested me again.

“Ninety-nine,” I said.

“You have a hidden talent,” Carola said as she took the ring back.

“I mentioned that I worked as a designer’s silkscreening apprentice,” I began to try to explain. “I got that job through my mother’s connections, and she is a seamstress for a number of Vancouver’s higher-end designers. Anyway, some of those designers include custom lines of jewelry with their collections. I grew up within earshot and arm’s length of fashion and design and its associated price tag.”

“A natural,” Vanessa said, seeming quite pleased with herself.

“Just a few years and a good loupe and you will be set in this business, young man,” Carola added. “Vanessa was right about you, Conrad!”

For the next hour, I went over the stock that was displayed, learning what the descriptions were for certain types of jewelry. As customers walked in, I stood back and noted how Carola and Vanessa talked with them, the tones of their voices, their movements. Behind all of their upper-class buff and polish, they were basically Jacques. What they had to sell was genuine, without any smooth talk to hide the fact that the shine would wear off, but still, I almost laughed at how similar the pitches ended up being. After my first hour, Carola had me write down descriptions of some pieces for inventory. I described the pieces in the technical terms that were used for other entries in the book, estimated the value of the pieces, and then verified my estimates against the catalogues.

Fifteen minutes before twelve, Carola dismissed me for lunch, but asked Vanessa to stay. I crossed over to the café and ordered a black forest ham sandwich. By the time my sandwich arrived, Vanessa came into the café and joined me.

“Wow. You have *really* impressed the boss,” she said, sitting down, making a motion with her hand over her mouth to the waiter that she wanted a coffee.

“I didn’t want to let you down,” I said, biting into my sandwich. “Oh, I forgot to ask how much I’m making.”

“Eight dollars an hour, plus a commission,” Vanessa said. “One of the reasons it *really* helps to know all the prices of everything is that you know where you can budge, what you should suggest to a customer, based on what you think they’re willing to buy, and so on. You can always negotiate, but you must factor that in pretty quickly.”

“I can’t thank you enough,” I said.

Vanessa stared straight into my eyes and reached across the table to touch my face as she had the day before. “Your face is very smooth today.” The moment her hand touched my face, my body shook, as if a cold wind had passed through me on a hot summer day, giving me some relief from the heat. I did not know what to say to Vanessa. My stomach muscles were shaking, my teeth chattered, and I could feel blood rushing to my ears.

“Are you *afraid* of me?” she asked, not pulling her hand away.

“Not at all,” I replied, not even blinking, so as not to miss a moment of her eyes.

“Then why are you *shaking*?” she asked.

Could I tell her why? That no woman had ever touched me on the face, and now, two days in a row, she had been through my shield? That I had always backed away, unwilling to be approached beyond a polite handshake? I was not accustomed to the caress of anyone, so to be touched, on the face, so gently, made me dizzy. The word *swoon* came to mind. I felt a complete idiot. Even if I could have come up with an answer that may have sounded half decent, I could not breathe, and without breath, could not speak.

“A face like yours? No one has *ever* touched it before?” she asked.

When she said it for me, my stomach collapsed. As my body took over from my heart, I finally could inhale, exhale, and say, “Just you,” through my uncontrollably chattering teeth and almost useless lips.

She then slid her fingers to my left ear, brushed aside my hair, and whispered, “Your ears are a pleasant hue of rose.”

I laughed, dropping my sandwich to the floor of the café, a waste of perfectly good food that would have been a life-or-death crisis before having found a job. “You have to pardon my awkwardness,” I pleaded. “I have been avoided all my life.”

“This will have to change,” she replied, taking away her hand from my face, sipping her coffee.

Vanessa Caccianda wanted into my personal space. The scent of her vanilla perfume was already well in my head, flowing through my fond blood, embathing my every *vayne* with Chaucer’s *swich licour*. Part of me wanted to let her past my fear. Not the scent of her alone, but what she was offering. The rest. I searched my mind for something to let her know this, without saying too much, without making myself vulnerable by offering her my neck and handing her a knife. How could I let her, the flower that gave off the scent, the flower itself, not its breath alone, past my wall?

What words?

I thought of quoting Byron's "She walks in Beauty," but Vanessa was not a brunette. Would that matter? I took a chance.

"And all that's good of..." I began.

"... dark and light..." she continued.

"... meet in her aspect..." I went on.

"... and her eyes," she finished the line. "Everyone knows *that* one," she then laughed. "Can you recite poetry for me that few others would know from the standard curriculum? Then, I would swoon." *Swoon*. Was she reading my mind? Nobody used words like swoon except dead poets.

I closed my eyes and saw before me the words of the poem that had once won me second place in the city contest.<sup>14</sup>

Soft zephyr in my flaxen strands  
Caressing with your ethereal hands  
Whose airy way my heart embands,  
You set my soul afire.

Cool wafting from the northern hills  
Sweet' singing 'til my longing chills  
With am'rous cold bouquet of trills,  
You blow my life astir.

Fresh perfume of the Frankish kind  
Intoxicating my fond mind  
With captivating, scented bind,  
You wet the air with myrrh.

Calm flutter of the musing breeze  
Swift' bringing your true spirit-ease  
Whose comfort-touches fiery please,  
T'your bedside I aspire.

Vanessa nearly tipped over her coffee cup. Her eyes had not released their stare from mine through the entire poem. "*Who wrote that?*" she asked. The poem wasn't any good in the grand scheme, I knew, but it was her turn to fight to breathe.

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<sup>14</sup> "My Love, You are the Scented Wind," *Words*, 1987.

“One day, I’ll tell you.”

“Sure,” she said, brushing her face and adjusting her hair as if she had been through a storm. She either liked the poem or hated it—I didn’t care much which it was: she had clearly *swooned* in either case.

After lunch, we returned to *La Preziosità* and continued to work in our respective roles, almost as if nothing had happened between us, but the scent of vanilla was strong in my head, so I knew something had definitely happened in that moment over coffees together.

As the week passed, Vanessa and I ate lunch every day at the café, but she did not touch me again. She looked at me almost constantly as I spoke, however, letting me do most of the talking, which I considered sporting of her. Her gaze, her cool green eyes, jumped from my mouth, to my own eyes, to my neck. Although I had never before enjoyed being stared at while I spoke, but often watched others as attentively as *they* spoke, I found that her unbreakable observation of my face eventually relaxed me enough to begin to feel completely comfortable around her.

When Friday came, she asked me, with a coy grin, if I would be interested in seeing her apartment, which was within twenty minutes’ walking distance of the shop.

“Certainly,” I replied, without my even having to consider the question at all.

We returned to *La Preziosità* from our lunch together. The remainder of the day passed quickly. Once outside, Vanessa and I walked at a quick pace away from the direction of Jacques. I followed her around a corner, with my sack over my shoulder. We were soon headed in the direction of the sea, passing by high-rise condominiums and other city center forms of housing that were mostly out of my suburban frame of mind.

5

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“You are such an arrogant bastard!”

Those were the words I awoke to on Sunday morning. Vanessa was sitting at the foot of the bed, naked, holding a page of my play, which had been in my sack with all of my poems. As my eyes focused, I noticed my notebooks sitting beside her, with all of my poetry written in them. She had read *everything* while I was asleep. My eyes watered. Her eyes were cold and, for the first time I had ever seen it from her, mean. The tattoo of the lotus just above her left breast did nothing to hide the meanness. My chest constricted.

“Why do you say that?” I asked, almost choking to speak.

She pointed at the short poem at the back of the page of the play. “What’s this all about?”

She had read the sonnet I’d written the day I found out about winning university bursaries for my sonnet essay. “I was just excited when I wrote that. Totally high on life.”

“I don’t know how comfortable I am with all this,” Vanessa said. She pointed at the notebooks. “You wrote poetry about me, too. I really don’t like being *interpreted*.” Her eyes glared with the same meanness.

I sat up in the bed. This same woman and I, the night before, had been entwined like two serpents in bed together. We had spent half the weekend in her apartment, and now, after having lost my walls to her, after having allowed her into my space like no other had been permitted, she was calling me arrogant because of a poem I’d written after being granted a reprieve from total doom by winning some high school graduation bursaries?

I had no words for her. *Nothing*.



“I didn’t say anything *bad* about you,” I managed to utter.

“That’s not the point. I’m not your open book. I didn’t even know you *wrote* poetry about *me*.” She pointed to the book in which my second-place poem, the one I had recited to her as if someone else had written it, had been published. “One day, am I going to read a ‘Vanessa poem’ published somewhere? Are you going to interpret me in some way and send it in to the local contest, up for auction? Am I going to become your ‘Vanessa Period,’ some character in some book you write? I hate the idea through and through. As surely as I breathe.”

“Oh, please!” I could not believe she and I had spent the weekend together. I wanted to get up, put all my books back in the sack, leave, and never come back.

And that is what I did. I got out of bed, slid on my clothes, gathered my stuff together, and started for the door. At the paper trash can beside the door, I slowly ripped out every poem I had written with her in mind.

“Vanessa,” I said, “Do you have any idea how much I have anted up in the last two days?” Tears surely unseen lightly streamed down my face as my relief fell into the bin. The rims of my eyes were aflame, but the tears themselves were icicles as the bucklers went up again around me. “And now you want to deal all the cards, or you won’t play with me? What I feel and express of how I feel are *my* property, as long as I don’t go spitting fire and smoke in your face or shaming you in public or something. Goodbye.”

“Don’t leave. I don’t want you to leave. I just....”

I was already gone but could hear her plea through the closed door.

**6**

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The bus ride home was hellishly slow. I reviewed my poems. I had no delusions that they were good poetry, but they were mine to write as I wished. Private pieces of me, expressed with structure and form, they were not meant to be for anyone else until and unless I made them so.

When I showed up for work the following Monday morning, I discovered that my punishment for having crossed Vanessa was going to be brutal. She had spoken to Carola about me and somehow as the result of this I was assigned to wash the outside windows of the shop. From that moment on, every morning after arriving at work, I filled a bucket with hot water and squeegeed the windows clean, no matter how cold it was outside. While never officially declared as much, it felt like a wet Sisyphian punishment for some imagined transgression.

After several weeks of the new routine, I started to cough up phlegm, but paid no notice to the raspy rattle in my ribs.

I broke out into sweat as I waited for potential customers to walk into the store but paid no notice. When lunchtime came, I stumbled over to the café across the street from the shop, leaned over a coffee, and wondered if breaking it off with Vanessa had been such a good idea. At least if I had continued to play her game I would not have been assigned to the grunt work, since Carola seemed to take a real shining to me. She would never have sent me out into the cold frontier lands like that without prodding from her senior salesperson. But it didn't matter. She was angry with me, and from the morning after I broke it off with her, she would only talk shop with me, when she absolutely had to.

It made sense that I never should have gotten involved with her in the first place, but when she'd been keen on me, she was kind and supportive. Always ready to listen to whatever came out of my mouth, as if it were interesting. She was no longer keen on me and now I was paying for it at a cold, wet squeegee handle.

I finished my coffee and went to pay.

"You look like hell," the waiter said.

"I reckon I've been sent an invitation to go there," I replied.

"Take care of yourself," he said as I pushed open the café door and readied myself for yet another morning of sliding a squeegee.

"If I don't, who will?" I replied. The door closed behind me. The shop window looked so damned wide I wanted to stay in the café and never start my task. I couldn't concentrate. I was barely able to push open the shop door.

"Carola," I said as I entered.

"Conrad," Carola replied.

"Can we...?"

"Yes?" she asked, looking over her glasses at me.

I wanted to take Carola aside and ask for a reprieve from this insane chore. What had I ever done to her, after all? I would even admit to her something that had never happened, begging for forgiveness, to be away and done with the window cleaning. Not wanting to bother her as she went over the month's books, however, I walked into the back room, filled the bucket, and carried it out.

The glass didn't look that it needed cleaning to me, but the chore I had been given was to clean the whole window, every morning, even if it didn't look dirty, so I put the squeegee into the bucket, swished it around, and lifted it above my head. As I lifted my arm, it happened.

My legs gave way. I could not bear to stand any longer at the window with my bucket of steaming water and the squeegee. As I slid to the ground, I could see through the glass that Vanessa and Carola saw I was falling.

I knew that my head hit the sidewalk but did not feel it. There was no desire in my body to try to get up. My left hand was twisted behind my lower back and the squeegee remained in my right hand. I wanted to close my eyes, but for some reason, the thought of closing them did not reach them; they did not obey. I heard the door to the shop open and Carola was calling out to me, panicked, but I did not understand a word of what she was saying to me.

Finally, my eyes closed.

“Are you with us?”

*I am at peace.*

“Hello? Are you in there?”

*Don't bother me.*

“Please move your fingers if you can.”

I moved my right middle finger. *Don't bother me.*

“You collapsed while at work,” the voice informed me. I wanted to open my eyes, to see who was talking to me, but could not. I felt clean sheets all around me. I was warm. The awful cold I had felt while cleaning the window of the shop was gone. It was when I moved my hand that I felt the sharp pain and grunted.

“That's an I.V.,” the voice said.

Finally, I was able to open my eyes and could see I was in a hospital. A nurse stood at my bed, writing on my chart.

“Sorry I flipped you off. Don’t know what I was thinking. What happened?” I asked.

“You collapsed. Probably from the pneumonia you’ve been fighting off,” the nurse said.

When she said that, I wanted to laugh, but in making the breathing motion required to laugh, felt a sharp pain in my side. This was my punishment for scorning Vanessa. I wondered if she had come to visit me, if she had sat beside my bed and felt sorry for the result of having had Carola give me the chore of cleaning the window every day in the middle of winter.

“Have I had any visitors?” I asked.

“Your mother brought you in,” the nurse answered.

“My mother?”

“Yes. When you collapsed, your employer called your emergency contact. She came immediately and drove you to the hospital.”

“How long have I been out?” I asked.

“Not very long. You were admitted yesterday.”

“When can I go?”

“As soon as the doctor says,” the nurse replied.

It was about an hour before the doctor made her rounds and informed me that I would do best to stay until my body recovered from the dehydration. I was to take an assortment of pills to fight off what was left of the beast in my body and to help with the pain. As long as I agreed not to return to work in my condition.

I spent the remainder of my hospital stay in my bed, calling my mother once to thank her for taking me to the hospital, somewhat confused as to why Carola hadn’t just called for an ambulance. She cried on the phone, upset that I had become so sick, and asked me to move back in with the family. I politely stood my ground, thanked her again, let her know that I loved her, and hung up the phone.

The patient in the bed beside mine, a man in his sixties who was in for a biopsy the next day, sat up in his bed, looked over at me, and said, “I’m Donald,” he said.

“Conrad,” I replied.

“Can I say something, Conrad?” he asked.

“Go ahead.”

He rolled on his side to face me. “What makes you so stoic at your age with your mom on the phone like that? You seem a tad hardened for someone so young.”

I smiled at Donald. “I suppose one might read it that way,” I agreed.

He crumpled his eyebrows, considering my reply, and then asked, “Care to talk about it? I’m a good listener.”

“I love my mother. The rest of the Greek tragedy of that part of my life is another story, for another day, I’m afraid.”

Donald nodded his head. “We each have our own row to hoe,” he said.

“Exactly,” I said. “That row for me is a bit of a ditch.”

My next phone call was to Carola at the store. I made her promise to mail me my severance pay. She agreed. The next day, I received a pot of flowers from “Everyone at *La Preziosità*,” which struck me as being insincere, given that that meant her and Vanessa, and Vanessa was no longer my biggest fan. She also sent an envelope with my severance pay and a small gift box. Inside the box was a *bona fide* Gucci watch. I offered the watch to the Donald in the next bed when he returned from his biopsy, and he accepted it.

I was released a week later, given a few pills and a prescription slip, and sent home. I called a cab, rather than take the bus or phone my mother. Once home, I collapsed on my bed and slept for what felt like the first time in my life.



"Hunger" — 2023

I passed from vision to vision, locked in my room, not letting anyone in to check on me when they asked at the door. I pored over my small library, trying to find roses, trying to understand bread. Even had I been able to hold down food, I had no interest in eating. Nothing interested me but reading, sleeping, and drinking water. I read until I could not read, slept until I could not sleep, and drank until I could not drink.

*Screaming Jesus.* I had become the protagonist of Hamsun's *Hunger*. Like him, I refused to sell the blanket, but in my case, it was a blanket not belonging to a friend, one Hans Pauli, but the blanket I had covering my soul.<sup>15</sup> Sometimes at night, I awoke, thinking I was screaming, but finding that I was simply frozen with my mouth open, silent, gasping for air, my ribcage unable to move enough to pull in a single breath of stale air, sweating so badly that my sheets would soak up no more.

Vanessa—*Ylajali!*—hovered above me once, when I awoke, staring me down with her meanest gaze. If I hadn't known that it was pneumonia, I might have thought I was going insane, and Vanessa's glare would have driven me over the fine line. I was losing my book, like Hamsun's starving hero.

*Screaming Jesus.* What an idiot I'd been to push her away. Now, I wanted her to be near me, to put a cold rag on my face, tell me I had a nice face, the way she used to. To watch my mouth as I breathed, to make sure I was still alive. I didn't want her to be a hallucination, a bit of Dickens' fragment of undone potato. I wanted it to be *her*.

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<sup>15</sup> *cf.* the essay "Dismantling Lionization in STEM" in the back-matter for a discussion on this.



The night the fever finally broke, I had fallen asleep on my pull-out couch with Rilke's French poems in my hand, opened to a poem I did not fully understand, bothered that I could not grasp what was once so clear to me. Perhaps it had not been clear to me at all and now I was beginning to realize this? After what could have been days of struggling with this one poem, as if everything that had happened with Vanessa depended on knowing what Rilke was saying, as if he had written that poem years before in order to offer me some advice, something in my ill thinking brought a superimposed meaning to the words I was reading, and I was struck as if by a great, cooling wind. It was then that I fell into a tossing, dreamless sleep.

After waking, I stumbled slowly to the bathroom, rinsed my face, and bared my teeth to the mirror. They were coated with the scum of not having been brushed for days. The area around my eyes was sunken into my head. How long had it been since I'd eaten? I gulped mouthfuls of cold water from the faucet, using my hands as makeshift ladles. As I leaned over the small sink, I could smell my armpits and I almost retched.

How long since I'd showered? Was this what could become of a human being, or had I stopped being human when the illness caught hold of me?

"What a pathetic piece of walking shit," I whispered to my image in the mirror. He thought the same: I could read his lips.

I then returned to my room and sat at my typewriter. Still on the rubber roller was my translation of a poem from German.

The procession of bars wears down his gaze,  
so no longer can it anything hold.  
It is as if there are one thousand bars,  
and just beyond those thousand bars, no world.  
The soft path of his supple, forceful gait  
turns in a tightening circuit, strong dance  
around a central point of the round set,  
his mighty will held in paralyzed trance.  
Only rarely do the silent curtains  
of his pupils rise—letting an inkling  
in past the intense stillness of his limbs—  
falling upon his heart and vanishing.

I carefully removed my fever-driven translation of Rilke's "*Der Panther*"<sup>16</sup> and then began pounding out a fictionalized autobiographical account of what had led up to the poem that had angered Vanessa so much. I would never show it to her, so she would never understand, but at least it would be written. At the very least, when it was before me, typed on the pages, I would be able to claim it as my own. Once I had managed to finish the second page, I was unable to get up and into the bed, so I fell asleep in the chair.

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<sup>16</sup> Sein Blick ist vom Vorübergehn der Stäbe  
so müd geworden, daß er nichts mehr hält.  
Ihm ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe  
und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt.  
Der weiche Gang geschmeidig starker Schritte,  
der sich im allerkleinsten Kreise dreht,  
ist wie ein Tanz von Kraft um eine Mitte,  
in der betäubt ein großer Wille steht.  
Nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille  
sich lautlos auf –. Dann geht ein Bild hinein,  
geht durch der Glieder angespannte Stille –  
und hört im Herzen auf zu sein.



“Neck and Neck” — 2023

## **“Neck and Neck”**

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It was Mr. Dirk who brought me the bad news that threw me to the ground. My entry in the city’s poetry contest had tied for second place. From a purely artistic point of view, I was not at all disappointed to have tied for second, even though, the year before, my poem had won first place in the same contest. My reasons for not taking the news well had nothing to do with the competitive implications of my place in the contest. Indeed, considering that the poem itself was not one I thought one of my best poems—in fact, it used such dated language and tricks that it was, at best, an exercise—it made sense that it came in second.

“That’s great news!” I lied to Mr. Dirk after he told me.

“Good show, Conrad,” he said before leaving the room.

I sat in the empty English class for twenty minutes, lost in the winds of panic, before Mr. Kelvin entered.

“Still at school?” he asked.

I had been writing a play in longhand before Mr. Dirk had given me the news. I lifted the binder and explained this to my English teacher. The room was a quiet place when everyone was finished for the day.

“Great!” he said. “And by the way, I heard the good news. Congratulations.”

“Yeah,” I managed, staring at the handwriting in my binder without being able to read it.

“You don’t sound very enthusiastic,” Mr. Kelvin noticed aloud as he sat in his desk and started through the marking of term papers.

I wanted to explain why I was not happy, but Mr. Kelvin was my English teacher, not my guidance counselor, and so did not. Instead, I shut my binder, stood, and started for the door.

What would he know about the situation anyway? Would an explanation win me first place, or at the very least, get me out of the tie for second place? No. I kept my mouth shut and closed the door behind me harder than I might have normally.

Dan Laurent was about twenty feet down the hallway, with his camera hanging on his neck, heading for the developing room, so I called for him to wait. He stopped, waited for me to catch up, and we were soon in the darkroom, developing his latest roll for the yearbook. He knew all about my situation, so I decided to open up about the contest results.

“Hey, second place, not too shabby,” he said, slapping my shoulder in a way that seemed too old for our age.

“There’s a problem, though,” I said.

“A problem? With winning something? When has winning something ever been a problem? What you get for it?”

“That’s the problem,” I admitted. “It’s about the money.”

He leaned over, turned a dial on a machine I did not understand, and then said, “How much you get?”

“Well, last year, when I came in first, I received a check for two hundred,” I said.

“For a poem? That’s not bad!”

“Second place last year was one hundred bucks,” I continued.

“Still, not bad.”

“I tied for second place, so I assume I’ll get fifty,” I said. “That’s why I am not happy. Fifty bucks. Can’t win for losing.”

Dan twisted a few more dials, adjusted a few more things on the machine that I did not understand, seeming quite pleased with whatever it was he was doing to produce a print, and finally said, “Why not? Fifty is still fifty more than you had before you found out about it. We call that *found money*.”

“Well, by the time I get that *found money*, I’ll have starved to death, but assuming I somehow manage live through the hunger strike, that’ll leave me fifty bucks to make it through the last two months of school.”

Dan now seemed to understand what the problem was. After all, he had brought two lunches to school more than once in order that I eat. "Yeah," he finally mumbled, "I get it now."

"Maybe I should quit," I said, fumbling with some lint in my pockets. "It makes no sense to screw around all day here when I could be looking for a job." Even though the words had come out of my mouth, I could not believe I had been the one who had said it. Then, some more things came out of my own mouth that made no sense for me to have said. "I mean, really. Even had I won first place, who cares? Two hundred dollars? Prize in a poetry contest? What am I going to do with my life? Become a poetry contest winner for the rest of my life, running from one contest to the next? It all sounds absurd."

Dan hung up the print, smiling at his work. It was good work. Maybe he would one day be the fashion photographer he wanted to be, while I wandered the country, looking for another contest to place in for the prize money. He had *real* talent. It would get him somewhere. Something he could *sell*. I had strings of words that sometimes rhymed.

"Well, you could always ask your parents for some money," he said, at last.

I wanted to leave the darkroom, but instead simply grunted my displeasure at the idea.

"The only thing worse than a sore loser, Conrad, is a sore winner," he added. "Think about that one."

"It's not about coming neck and neck for place, it's about the *purse*," I said, using racetrack terminology I wasn't sure he would understand.

"Say what?" Dan sputtered as he began working on his next print from amongst the ones he had chosen to enlarge.

"I don't care about the glory," I said. "It's the money. I can smile and be happy with second, even a tie. That is all very great stuff."

"Yeah, well, what I'm saying is don't forget your parents, if you need money to live, is all," he said.

For the next hour, he and I were in the darkroom, until it came time for him to go home. I wandered to the bus stop, caught my bus, and was soon at the place that I had been calling home for a month.

Garth was home and greeted me as I came up the stairs from the front door of the townhouse. He had a piece of chicken in one hand and a book in the other.

“Hey, Garth,” I replied. “What you reading?”

“Studying Bushman,” he said. This was just like him, studying yet another language he would probably have no opportunity to use in his life. “Want some chicken?” he asked.

I sat at the table, ate a few pieces of chicken, and bid myself leave. Soon, I was upstairs, under my covers, reading a poetry anthology from Garth’s bookshelf. As I read through the poems, I kept asking myself where it was I had gone wrong with my poem. What was it about the winning poem that had differed significantly enough from mine that I deserved to starve over it? Living with Garth and his father was a temporary arrangement—an arrangement that relied on my paying two hundred dollars a month until graduation, after which it was understood that I would get out and stay out. It was a great deal. It had been very kind on his father’s part to have me after the falling out with my stepfather at my own house, but I would not have the money for him.

Garth’s father was from a generation that believed one could put on clean clothes, go out into the world with thick-soled shoes, and pound the pavement until paid work came along. All that was required was a willingness to work and thick-soled shoes. He understood that the last three months of my graduating year were not the time to be worried about looking for work, so I had some time to study, but it would all come to an end. Sooner than expected now that I had not placed first in this contest. Since I was still a minor, social services would not give me a dime. That was my parents’ responsibility, they had told me.

Nowhere in the poetry anthology did I find any comfort. I took it for granted that my poem wasn’t even fit to be scribbled on a page made from pulp coming from the same tree as went to making this book. Byron, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth. They could write poetry that would have won them award after award in the modern world. Or maybe not, since no one cared for rhyme anymore. They would have found a way to transcend the latest trend.

Maybe that was it. My poem rhymed. No, the winner's poem was a sonnet, so that was not my work's flaw. Mr. Dirk had shown me the winning poem after telling me I'd tied for second. Given me a photocopy of it, which I had snapped shut into my binder. I took the binder out of my bag, opened it, and started reading the winner to see how *it* stood. Yes, it deserved to be the winner. I would not be able to find solace in tearing the better of the two poems to shreds. It was unassailable no matter my mood.

As I was reading the poem for the fifth time, Garth entered the room and asked what I was up to. I explained that I was reading the winner of the city's poetry contest and he took the sheet from me.

"Pretty damned good," he said. "Didn't you enter that, too? You won last year, didn't you?"

"Yes," I replied with one word to both his questions.

"Not so lucky this year?" he asked, sitting on his bed.

"No," I said. "I tied for second."

"That's still pretty good, don't you think?" he said.

I lifted the anthology, pointed to a Byron poem, and said, "I know I deserved to have come in second, if I should have even placed at all, Garth, but..."

"But?"

"The money," I said.

Garth smiled, turned on the light beside his bed, and started to undress. Soon, he was under his covers, studying his book on Bushman. "An amazing language," he said. "How's the play coming along?" he then asked, glancing at me over his glasses.

"Too late to enter the contest I had planned for it," I said, "but I'm going to finish the damned thing anyway."

"That's the spirit," he said.

Sleep didn't come easily that night. I could not get the words of Byron's "She Walks in Beauty" out of my head. The poem continued to repeat itself, even in my dreams.

The next day, it was announced over the P.A. system that I had placed second in the contest in the senior poetry category. I made my way up the hallway between classes to smiling faces, handshakes, and way-to-gos that did not help matters. This was quickly over and time passed.



The day of the award ceremonies came in due time, and I was allowed to miss school to attend the presentation, which were held at a convention center, with the money being presented by the city mayor. At my table were all the other award winners, in all the different categories and places of the contest. The whole award event had been woven into a meeting of the chamber of commerce for the city, with our part in it being an aside to the businesspeople. The mayor gave a very long speech about city development as we all ate our lunch, with businessmen clapping every so often.

Meanwhile, I sat at my placement at the table, trying to figure out which utensils to use to eat what. Left to right, small to big, right to left, big to small. It made no sense in my world. In my world, a fork was a fork, a spoon a spoon, and chicken was something you usually ate with your fingers while discussing the many fascinating linguistics features of Bushman with your best friend. One of the other winners seemed to have a pretty good idea about which fork went where and seemed proud about this occult knowledge. I wanted to ask if he would share this bit of *arcana* with me, so that I too, may be so privileged as to not appear an unsophisticated ass when at a table where everyone eating was either born into or otherwise swimming in enough money for such nonsense to matter.

When the first-place winner went up to collect her award, I felt proud for her, forgetting my own woes. I had gone up there the year before and she had placed second then. Now was my turn to get a taste of how that felt. I would have to learn how to eat with that fork throughout life.

My turn came. I went up with the co-winner and collected my check with a smile on my face, but the numbers were too small to fill my belly or keep a roof over my head. When I got back to the table, the fork-knife-spoon game really seemed to matter again. Those damned forks. Little or big? Was that knife for butter only? I looked around at these people, wondering if any of them had gone to school hungry, come home hungry, and woken up the next day hungry, as I had for much of my graduating year. My clothes were as clean as theirs, my teeth were as white as theirs, my vocabulary as large as theirs.

“What are you planning on doing with your money?” a boy who had won in a fiction category asked me. “I plan on buying a new Walkman.”

“I guess I eat this week,” I blurted out.

Everyone laughed as if I was joking around with them.

“No,” I said. “Maybe I’ll steal the silverware, sell it, and use that money to eat, and use my check to buy some David Bowie records instead.”

Everyone laughed again. They didn’t get it. I took all of the forks, spoons, and knives that I had not used, since I had only used one of each out of ignorance of the accepted rules in such things and put them in my jacket pocket.

“How much you figure they’ll fetch?”

Of course, I was not really a cutlery thief at heart, and so eventually put the silverware back on the table. The luncheon was finally over. All of the award winners were lined up outside in the lobby as the local reporter who covered such events took our group photograph.

“So how does it feel to be a three-time winner?” Mr. Dirk asked me as we were driving back to school in his car.

“Only two times,” I said.

“Oh, they didn’t tell you,” he said, covering his mouth with one hand as he steered with the other.

“Tell me what?”

“I shouldn’t say,” he then replied, staring straight ahead, smirking. “Do you remember applying for bursaries?”

Did I? Yes. It was a matter of form for those of the working class who wished to go on with their education to beg for money near the end of their graduating year. I had dutifully gone through the long list of scholarships and bursaries available, checking off those I felt I qualified for. At the end of the general application, I had come to the portion of the application that stated I should write a two-page essay explaining my financial burden and my academic ambitions.

Having received the application form my counselor gave me two days after receiving the disappointing news about the poetry contest, I was in a very bad mood, and so when I came to the essay portion, I decided to play it differently than was expected of me, knowing that this would ruin my chances completely.

“Yes,” I finally replied to Mr. Dirk. “I applied for them. But I intentionally blew it.”

“Oh?” he said. “How so?”

I was angry at Mr. Dirk for playing me at a time when all I wanted to know was how I was going to eat. “I’m planning on quitting school next week, anyway,” I said.

“Quitting? So close to graduation? That would be a considerable mistake you might never recover from, Conrad.”

I took the fifty dollar check out of my pocket and showed it to him. “You see this? This is all I have to live on for the next *two months*. I sat through lunch and watched as they navigated their cutlery as if it were a matter of life and death not to grab the wrong fork for their salad. Don’t play games with me. Forks and spoons aren’t life and death, but food money *is*.”

“Well, don’t tell I told?” he said.

“Get on with it,” I grumbled. He was a staff member, but we were in his car, not on school grounds, or in front of anyone else, so I felt at ease to speak as I truly felt with him.

“Your bursary essay was well taken,” he said.

“I didn’t write an essay,” I replied. “I wrote a sonnet.”

“Your sonnet was *very* well taken,” he then went on.

“You mean I didn’t torch the town hall?” I didn’t know what else to say.

“As you know,” he began, “some of the bursaries are in the hands of the staff at the school, some are in the hands of outsiders, and some, well, I don’t even know who makes the decisions.”

“Yes, yes,” I mumbled.

“I’ve been on the committee for umpteen years,” he said. “You want to know how many two-page essays I’ve read in that time? Nobody *ever* wrote a fourteen-line poem there.”

“I did.”

“And that’s what got it read. Passed around. Laughed over. Thought on. That one phrase you used: *‘Let loose your burse strings!’* Classic, that!”

“So was I selected for a bursary?”

“Two thousand five hundred dollars,” he finally said.

My heart went to the roof of my mouth, but I managed to say, “Which bursary?”

“More than one, actually. That’s the total award amount. You really dropped a few mouths on that one. You didn’t hear it from me, but Svend Robinson’s office will be presenting you with a check in person over this one.”

By the time we arrived at the school, my head was spinning. It seemed like the closing of a Jean-Paul Sartre story, to have won the bursaries, on the merit of a poem, when an essay was required, so close to losing it all. “The Wall” came to mind. I had been up against that wall, ready to have my clock stopped. And now this.

I was not able to follow my classes for the rest of the day. Once at Garth’s, I could not eat. I explained to his father that I would be pulling in a lot of money, and he agreed that I could pay him my next two months’ owing when the bursary funds came. After dinner, up in the bedroom, I sat on my bed, reading through the poetry anthology again and again. Byron, Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth had fed my soul for so many years, in bits and pieces, and now they had brought back hope into my life. I tried to find one poem that expressed how I felt at that exact moment in time but could find none, so I wrote one on the back of one of the pages of the play.

It was, of course, an Arrogant Bastard of a sonnet.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Shall I excel at everything I try?  
 Some things to awful failure must admit,  
 And though not perfect ranking shall I get,  
 I’ve at least striven to do ‘t perfectly.  
 If I incline my arrow to the sky,  
 And every arrow that I loose to fly  
 I aim not at mediocre target,  
 But at the Moon, then there is no regret  
 When the arrow gets only *half* that high.  
 But if I incline my sight to the ground,  
 Or at some target I know I will make,  
 The certain “victory” that will then come  
 It is an empty victory I’ve found.  
 Though, shooting high, I may not touch the mark,  
 At least the effort will enhance the sum.



*“Appel personne à quelqu’une, s’il vous plaît” — 2023*

**10**

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As I went into the kitchen and sat at the table with my finally finished account of the poetry contest, I knew that I needed to get out of the house. The story had taken me two weeks to write—nothing that short had ever taken as long, so I could measure the weight of how sick I'd been. The nightmares and sweats had passed and I did not want to be alone in the house where they had happened. Pneumonia had swung its sickle with repeated precision; I wanted to run somewhere and be free. I wanted to fly.

I wouldn't return downtown, though. I knew that. I had had enough of Vanessa. Wherever I would go next would be new, completely untried, promising. There would be no street vendors huddled over their wares. Whatever new world I would inhabit would not be a world where windows being cleaned in the dead of winter were more important than the people who cleaned them.

I picked up the phone directory and found the listing for a French language bookstore. Perhaps someone there could teach me how to speak French quickly enough that I could go to Montreal and find work outside the city that had eaten so much of my fleshly parts. The Great Babylon seemed the place to go; everyone would be there for a purpose, and I would not end up falling into a relationship with another Vanessa. I could polish my spoken French and escape forever.

I dialed the phone, and when a lady answered, I explained that I was interested in meeting a Francophone to practice my spoken French, so that I could one day arrive in Montreal without difficulties understanding their way of talking.

Aimée, the store's owner, very enthusiastically replied that I should come down to the store, hang around, and my chances of starting up some kind of exchange with someone would be pretty good.

By the time I hung the phone on the cradle, I was exhausted. Pneumonia had left my body in worse shape than my soul. I staggered to the kitchen sink and scooped water into my dry mouth until my stomach would hold no more. I managed to make it into the bathroom, returned to my sweat-soggy sheets, and fell asleep again, this time to dreams of anticipation of getting out of the house after what seemed like an eternity in the sweaty steam of anguish.

I awoke in the morning, feeling more able to walk about. Immediately, I brushed my teeth with a new toothbrush and water of their awful tasting film—the taste of having kissed death twice, once in Vanessa and in the pneumonia, and lived—and took a long, hot shower. The water poured over me, filling me up with its warmth, as if the heat of the water could put something back that having been sick for so long took away.

Once clean, I put on my best clothes, wrapped a scarf around my neck, and headed out into the cold. *Screaming Jesus*. This was my enemy, this cold. Cold hearts and crisper air. As I put one foot in front of the next, I soon forgot about the cold and started to think about Vanessa again, so the biting in my nostrils did not matter. Her taste on my mouth was ice enough.

On the bus, I tried to thumb through Verlaine, but could not concentrate, so I decided to save my energy for when I arrived at the bookstore. I rested my head on the cool glass of the bus window and half-dreamed that I was in bed with Vanessa, in her warmth, with her legs wrapped tightly around me, and our mouths locked together desperately. The bus jumped over a hole in the road, banging my head against my makeshift pillow, and I realized how incredibly pathetic it was of me to be warming myself with memories of Vanessa, so I tried again to read the Verlaine.

I wrapped the scarf more tightly around my throat. Winter seemed infinitely colder on an empty stomach. I turned the pages of Verlaine quickly, but the poetry did not warm me. That Rimbaud and Verlaine had looked one another in the eye and seen the cosmos, I could not believe; it must have been an accident of thinking, brought on by the absinthe delirium. They were both great, but in such entirely different ways. Who had the Vanessa been in their love?

“He was insane,” a voice from the left commented. Or had it been: *C’était un fou*—I wasn’t sure if I’d heard it in French or English.

I lifted my eyes from the page and glanced to the left, uncertain in which language I should reply. Finally, I settled on a compromise, “He was? *Et quoi donc?*” I was speaking to a petite brunette dressed in black. She was pretty, but not particularly so. I returned my glance to the book.

“*Je m’appelle Hélène,*” she introduced herself.

I then stood up, closed my book, and reached out my hand. “I’m Conrad.”

“You prefer I speak English?” she asked, accepting the handshake.

“No, no, it’s okay if you want to speak French,” I insisted. “*Je peux le comprendre, mais quand je le parle, je ne suis pas si vite que tout ça, vous imagineriez.*”

“You speak well enough fast,” Hélène commented. “My English is more poor.” When she said *English*, it came out as *Hinglish* and I had to hold back my smile.



Now that I was standing, holding her smooth hand in mine, staring at her, I realized that my first assessment had been wrong; she was more than pretty. She was beautiful. It struck me that my idea about coming to the store had been a good bet. I hadn't expected that it would only take one day of sitting and reading to get a conversation going.

"How old are you?" she asked outright.

"*Je n'ai que dix-huit ans,*" I replied.

"I was thinking you are young," she replied, finally releasing my hand. "I have *vingt-sept ans*. Twenty-seven."

*Good*, I thought. There was too much of an age difference for this to be anything other than a cultural exchange. *Good*.

We agreed to have tea a few doors down from the bookstore to discuss why it was that H el ene figured Verlaine was insane. After our third cup of tea, we agreed that everything seemed to go smoothly with the conversation and exchanged phone numbers so that we could meet again.

## 12

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Coming all the way across town to the store had been a gamble, but I'd needed to get out. I took a bus for the long ride home. I'd taken the risk, and now had the phone number of someone as eager to break the monotony of daily life on the edge as I was. There was the age difference, so there would be no chance of our getting any ideas beyond conversation. It made life safe and simple.

Halfway home on the bus, hunger started to get to me. Except for the tea, how long had it been since I'd eaten? Two days? Surely it couldn't have been that long. No, I'd fried two potatoes only the day before, so it hadn't been two days. She had noticed how thin I was. More than once while we spoke about Verlaine's insanity had she said, "*Mince*," as she looked at me. Or had I only imagined that? She had pinched my arm as we spoke, so it couldn't have been a dream. *Mince*.

I alighted at my stop and decided that it was time to eat something besides potatoes. The bus stop was right in front of Punch and Judy's on East Hastings. They sometimes had a good *soupe du jour*, and even if it wasn't as good as usual, it would be something.

"Hi, Sandra," I said as I walked in. "What's the soup today?" I sat down and leaned against the wall. I was tired and wanted to sleep, but the muffins and the soup smelled good.

*Navy bean, no potatoes.* A bowl of that would surely do something for me. I'd already spent most of my money on my monthly bus pass, so I was guaranteed a ride to go chat with H  l  ne whenever I wanted. It therefore didn't matter that my last scrap of cash would go to the soup.

I took a spoonful of soup, reciting the Lord's Prayer in my head in order to slow myself down long enough between mouthfuls that it didn't look to anyone that I was the starving wolf I really was. Spoon. Prayer. Spoon. Prayer. No harm would come from saying the prayer in my head. It might even do some good. This *was* my daily bread. But what about tomorrow? The money was gone; this bowl of navy bean holy water without potatoes had cost me my last two-dollar bill.

Before I made it to the door to leave, Sandra called out to me. "Hey," she said, "I've got something for you." She went to the freezer and pulled out a bag. It was full of soup bones. "I figured you could use these."

I wasn't proud and reached over for the bag and thanked Sandra. "Is it that obvious?"

"Yes," she said with a smile. "You've lost maybe twenty pounds over the last month. I can tell. But don't worry, things will pick up." She gently patted my hand as a mother would.

Not long afterwards, I was stuffing the bag of frozen soup bones into the freezer above the fridge. Those, with what was left of the potatoes, would make a nice soup—enough for two more days. I was calculating how many days I could stretch out of the bones when the phone beside the fridge rang.

"Yes?" I said.

"*Oui, allô.*" It was Héléne. She sounded very happy.

"*Salut,*" I replied.

"I just want to say it was nice meet you," she said.

"I feel the same," I replied. I really wanted to sleep, but it was nice that she called.

"If you ever want call me, talk in French, practice your French, you call me," she insisted.

"*Tu es bien aimable,*" I said. "*Je suis très fatigué là en ce moment, donc il me faut dormir. Excuse-moi...*"

"Oh, I am sorry! I must be annoying you! Please, you sleep!"

"Thank you for your call," I said. "It cheered me up! I will call you soon."

"*À bientôt, alors!*" she said before hanging up.

**13**

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“You find another job yet?” came a question through my open door, waking me up instantly.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes as Hans, the boarder living in the basement suite of our house, came in. “Nothing yet,” I replied. “It will come.”

Hans was in his mid-forties and always had something old and wise to say about these things. “There’s some left-over Chinese food in my part of the fridge if you’re hungry,” he said. It wasn’t old and wise, but it would certainly help. “Couldn’t help but notice your rack is bare.”

“Thanks!” I said. “I’m going to be making some soup today, if you want some later.”

“Sure, thanks” Hans replied. “Keep your chin up, Conrad. You’ll get back on your feet in no time. You are more than due for a break. The pneumonia completely gone yet?”

“Still feel off,” I replied, tapping my chest. “But I’ll live. I have my wind mostly back.”

“You’re tough as nails,” Hans replied before opening the basement door and descending. “Things will pick up.”

*Things will pick up.* The clock on the wall read ten. Since I’d slept the afternoon away, I could not sleep any more. I rummaged through my empty pockets, hoping to find a crumpled bill, or even a few coins, but I had nothing. Hans might have loaned me five or ten dollars, but I did not want to ask. I was afraid to ask. Sandra had handed me the soup bones without my having to ask, so I could accept the offer.

I rolled over to my room phone and dialed Jim.

“Hey, Conrad, what’s up?” Jim asked as soon as he knew who had called.

“I can’t sleep. Slept the afternoon away,” I said. “How about we meet and go for a walk?”

“Sure. How about we go for a drink at the Inn?”

“Sorry, no money for that,” I admitted.

“I can buy you a few,” Jim offered.

Jim offered. I could accept that. “Sure,” I said. “I’ll get you a few next time a check comes my way.”

We met in front of the strip joint twenty minutes later and walked in. A server with a nice smile asked us what we were having and I asked for vodka on the rocks. Jim wanted a beer. She was soon back with our drinks and Jim paid.

“Anything much doing these days?” Jim asked as he sipped some of the head off his beer.

“Met someone downtown Kits,” I replied. I turned my glass around in circles, wondering how the vodka would stay down on an empty stomach. The dancer was on her third set up on the stage, looking straight into my eyes, smiling at me. I lifted my eyebrow in acknowledgement of her smile, tipped my glass in her direction, and put it back in one gulp. It burned all the way down but it felt good anyway because it warmed me up.

“Yeah? Someone—a woman, you mean?” Jim asked, pointing at me and waving so that the server would bring me another.

“She’s way out of my league,” I finally admitted. “As in she’s nine years older.”

“Oh, Jesus, Conrad,” Jim returned with wide eyes.

“We exchanged numbers, and she phoned me almost as soon as I got home,” I said, almost to myself. “I went down to a bookstore on a lark,” I admitted. “Sat there, reading Verlaine, hoping someone would start talking to me so I could practice my French, and there she comes, right up to me, insisting that Verlaine was insane.” I put back my second drink as quickly as I had the first.

“What a life you live, man,” Jim said, again waving for another drink for me.

“Hey, Jim, you’re going to go broke buying me drinks,” I laughed. “You know I’ll put them back.”

“No problem,” Jim insisted. “I’ve got the bucks right now.”

“Ah,” I replied, without committing to saying anything either way.

“You been writing any?” Jim asked, gently patting me on the back.

“I wrote another play,” I returned, taking my third drink from the server. “But I am not happy with it.”

“Why not?” Jim asked, finally ordering his second beer.

“It lacks something,” I said, swinging my glass so that the vodka made waves around the ice. “Something important, but something I can’t put into words. A very big something.”

“Maybe it’s because you’re still not right in the head after being sick?” Jim suggested.

I thought about that and agreed that maybe what the play lacked was that I wasn’t right enough in the head to realize that it was fine as it stood. I put back the drink and noted that the dancer was finished her final set. My mind was racing from the alcohol. “Maybe that’s it,” I said. “Or maybe not. Maybe I wasn’t sick *enough* when I *wrote* it.”

“You want another?” Jim asked, pointing at the empty glass.

“Later,” I replied.

A few songs later, another dancer started her set. When she started, I asked for one last drink, which I sipped slowly as Jim went on about his courses at the university.

“Hey, I’ll be finishing at the bookstore pretty soon,” Jim said.

“Yeah?”

“Soon as the semester’s over. You want my job?”

“Can I do just a few days a week? We’ll see whether or not I can make it as a playwright first,” I joked. “I mention that the woman I met is a director?” I put an ice cube in my mouth. My stomach was on fire and I was finally warm.

“That should be interesting,” Jim said. “Maybe you can fly one of your plays by her?”

“Maybe,” I agreed, finishing my last tumbler.

“They like you here,” Jim said, pointing at the dancer. “Always smiling and winking at you.”

“They’re impressed that I can drink them under the table,” I joked. “Good thing that they don’t check my age here.”

“You’re with me,” Jim said. “With the amount I’ve put back here over my time at university, I pay half their lease, I’m sure.”

We stumbled out of the place, said our good-byes, and wandered to our respective homes. When I arrived home, I fumbled with my keys, let myself in, locked the door behind myself, and made it to my room. The clock now read two. I noticed that the light on my old answering machine was blinking with one message, but put my head on my pillow, still dressed, letting the vodka haze bring me to a dreamless sleep.

It was ten in the morning when I came to. I could smell something delicious cooking. My head was screaming for a painkiller, so I wandered into the bathroom, flung open the cabinet behind the mirror over the sink, and looked for a bottle. Hans wouldn’t notice one missing, so I swallowed one down with some water scooped from the tap. Once in the kitchen, I noticed a small note beside the slow cooker.

“Since you said you were going to make soup, I took the liberty to throw in a few of my things. It’s in the pot and should be ready by three. Dig in!”

*Damn!* I went to the icebox and noted that half the bones were gone. That was more than I would have used, so it threw my earlier calculations off by a day. I remembered that Hans had offered me the Chinese food leftovers, and so opened the bottom of the fridge to find them. *Damn it twice!* Hans had finished off the food in the morning, after all.

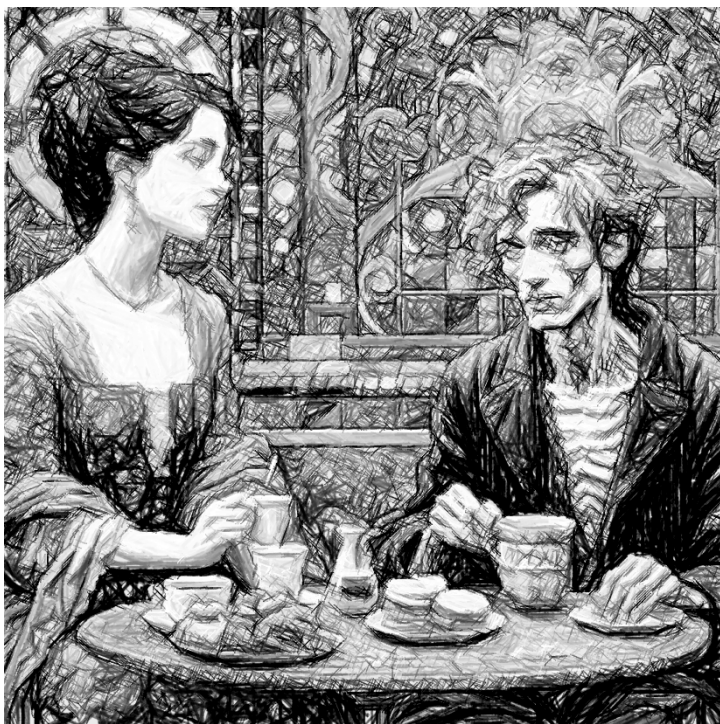
There was an apple on Hans’ rack, but I knew that Hans would notice it missing, so I didn’t eat it. Thinking that I could fry some potatoes, I went to my cupboard. Good, there were still three potatoes—Hans had used his own potatoes for the soup. I lifted the lid on the slow cooker and noticed that the soup had little pieces of meat, some noodles, and onions. That was where the Chinese food had gone—into the soup.

Bachelor chowder. Hans hadn’t reneged after all.

As I was frying my last three potatoes, I remembered that the light on the answering machine had been blinking before I fell asleep. Someone had called while I was out drinking with Jim. I let the potatoes sit on the stove and went into my room. It was a message for Hans from his fiancée, which I wrote down and put on the fridge with a magnet.

I ate the potatoes straight from the pan, cleaned the pan, and then sat at the kitchen table, examining the paper that had H el ene's number on it. I'd been abrupt with her because of my exhaustion the night before and wondered if she would ever phone me again. The phone rang as I was about to throw the number away.





*“T’es bien mince, toi !” — 2023*

“Did you sleep well?” she asked.

“Yes, thank you,” I said. “And I had a good breakfast,” I lied, “so I’m feeling better.” In fact, I was feeling awful. My head was splitting in two.

“*Veux-tu faire queleque chose aujourd’hui?*” she asked.

I put the paper with her number on it back into my pocket. *Yes, I would like to do something.* “I have to shower first,” I explained. “Then the bus ride will be about an hour.”

We arranged a time and place to meet. I hung up the phone and went straight for a shower and clean clothes. Not long after getting dressed, I was on the bus, my hair still wet, reading Rimbaud this time, wondering if she would claim I was also insane as soon as she saw the book. Maybe *I* was insane for reading French poetry on an empty stomach. Not completely empty—there were three hastily eaten potatoes in it, somewhere, unless I’d only imagined I’d eaten three potatoes. My head was spinning when I got off at the stop nearest where we would meet.

I stood in front of the produce market Hélène had specified, my Rimbaud in one hand, my other hand in my coat pocket, playing with a useless scrap of paper. Five minutes later, she approached from the left. She made to kiss me on the cheek as if I were an old friend and this cultural gesture caught me off guard.

“Would you like tea?” she asked.

“I have no money,” I admitted. “I forgot it at home.”

“Forget?” she said. “I can pay tea.” We were soon in a coffee shop, drinking tea. “What you do, that you forget your money for tea?”

“Do?” I asked.

Hélène made as if she were trying to find the words in English. “How do you earn your bread?” she finally ejected. She placed her hand on my, saying, “*T’es bien mince, toi!*”

“I’m a writer,” I said proudly, as if it were more than words floating with the cold draft of our crisp day.

“*Eh bien! A clearly* starving one! What do you write?”

“I’m a playwright,” I said. I wrote plays and short stories, so it wasn’t completely a lie. Plays and short stories are longer than sonnets.

“*Tu ne me l’as pas dit hier! Tu es drôle, toi!* I am a stage director, you know.” She shook her finger at me as if I’d been a bad boy for not having told her sooner.

I sipped my tea. It made the vodka hole in my stomach less painful. “It would have seemed too *eager*. *Everyone* is an artist.”

“Heager?” she asked. “*Que veux-tu dire*—heager?” She again held my hand in hers.

Her hand felt warm, smooth, full of life, and I wanted to lean over, lift it a notch, and kiss it, but I did not.

“I didn’t want to come across as if I were another writer,” I explained. “I am unproduced and unpublished,” I then admitted.

“Can I read your play? Is it in English or French?” she asked.

“English,” I said. “This one, my latest, isn’t completely ready anyway.” I used my left hand to lift my tea, since I did not want to pull my good hand from her touch. “I can show you the play one day,” I said. “Once you get to know me better. That way, I won’t appear too—”

“*Heager*,” she said.

“Eager,” I corrected her. “In *Hinglish* we don’t pronounce our *haytches* where they don’t belong.” I smiled at her with my eyes to show that I was teasing her affectionately. This was about getting our spoken language skills up to par, after all.

“You have such nice lips,” she said.

I blushed and managed to say, “Pardon?”

“You are so *mince*,” she then said. “I like your lips. I would want to kiss them.”

I laughed and finished my tea, not knowing how to reply. “*En tout cas*,” I said. My cup was empty, so I pulled my hand from hers, went to ask for some hot water, and reused the teabag from the first cup.

“Would you want to visit my room and take some lunch?” she asked. “Or do you find me boring? We must put some food in you!”

“Boring?”

“*Ennuyeuse*,” she tried to explain, realizing she perhaps hadn’t chosen the right word in English.

“No, you’re not *tedious* in the least—exactly the opposite,” I replied. “If you don’t mind having me as your guest, I’d be quite happy to see your place.” I quickly finished my tea and stood.

We walked a block before she reached over to hold my hand, and I took her hand in mine. “I am not asking except to hold your hand,” she explained. “Nothing else, okay?” She smiled when she said this.

“I understand,” I said, and I did understand.

“*Je peux sentir les os de tes doigts*. You are *mince!*” she said, gently tightening her grip on my hand. “We’ll fix that with some lunch.”

“

“

Kiss me, and you will  
see how important I  
am.”

—**Sylvia Plath**

We arrived at a large house, went around back, and through a basement to her suite. It was small, with a small fridge. She opened it, showing off some bread, cheese, and a few other items. Her fridge was not much fuller than my rack at home. We ate some cheese and bread and talked about theatre for what seemed only a short time, until I realized we had been speaking for hours. When I looked out of her window and saw that it was completely dark outside.

“You can sleep on my floor, Conrad, if you want to sleep on my floor. It is dark outside now.” She placed her hands together and rested her head on them as if they were a pillow.

I was tired and, since I did not want to go back to my house from this part of town by bus in the middle of the cold night, I accepted her offer. After she unrolled a blanket on the floor, I reclined, fully dressed, and closed my eyes. As much as I tried to sleep, I could not.

“If you want, you can sleep beside me,” she finally said. “We do both have on our clothes. It is okay.”

I did not know what to do. If I pretended I was asleep, would she know I’d heard her offer?

“I am not asking except to sleep,” she added. “Nothing else, okay?”

Exactly as when she had held her warm, soft hand out to me, I understood. I remained on the floor, however, and eventually fell into a deep sleep.

When I woke the next morning, my stomach was burning and I remembered the soup Hans had made but I hadn’t had a chance to eat. I opened my eyes and lifted my head.

Hélène was sitting on a small chair, beside the fridge, watching me with her big, brown eyes. “You are very handsome when you sleep,” she said to me. “I would want to kiss you.”

My mind was again pounding in my skull, as if trying to escape from a hole right above my eyes. I was dizzy and unsure I could stand up without falling.

“How do you know that I am not ‘insane’ like Verlaine and Rimbaud?” I asked without moving my body.

“You are too young to yet be crazy,” she replied.

“Rimbaud was younger than I am now when he was in his prime,” I corrected her.

“*Bien, tu sois peut-être fou aussi, puis que faire?* You did not sleep beside me when I am asking. *Ça me dit quelque chose.*” As she smiled at me, a low ray of sunshine came through the basement window and reflected off her face. “I have no fear of you.”

“I am too naïve to understand any of this,” I replied, finally sitting up.

“You understand what you need,” she replied, standing to open the fridge. “Would you want some milk?” she asked.

I looked at her legs, her back, her hair, and wondered why I had not accepted her offer to sleep beside her. Even though I’d only met her the day before, I wanted to stand, walk up behind her, and put my arms around her, but I did not have the strength to stand when it would have mattered.

“No, I’m okay,” I lied.

“Are you sure?” she asked, peering at me over her shoulder.

I forced myself to stand, brushed my clothes as if they were dusty and said, “It’s okay. Just some water, please.” I was not sure how well milk would stay down. She reached into the fridge for the pitcher of chilled water.

I walked up behind her and put my arms around her waist. She did not pull away. She was slender, so my arms went nicely around her. Her body felt good against me. “Just a hug, and nothing else, okay?” I said gently.

“I understand,” she said with her eyes closed. She seemed to move into the hug as if she had wanted it, as if it had been her idea in the first place.

My lips were near her ear and I wanted to taste her lobe, but I knew my breath must have smelled of last night's cheese, so I restrained myself. After a minute of standing there at the open fridge door, I sat on the chair she had been sitting on earlier.

"*Que je suis fou,*" I said.

"Maybe you are," Hélène replied, pouring my water.

"*Pour le plus bref instant,*" I said, not knowing from where it came, "*j'étais au ciel.*"

When she heard this, she put down the glass of chilled water, walked over to me, put her hands on my neck, and leaned over to kiss me on my lips. After a kiss that lingered far longer than a friendly peck ought've, she returned to the glass of water and handed it to me.

"Why did you do that?" I asked, taking the glass and sipping from it. The pounding in my head had moved into my bursting breast; the entire inner and outer lattice of me was tripping the inner light fantastic in the waves of craving that followed her kiss.

"Because I was not afraid to," she replied. "Because I would want to kiss you. And because you are *mince*," she said, as if that were sufficient explanation. What did the word *mince* even mean to her? She made a gesture with her fingers as if she were pinching the air. "Now, you must go because I must go to the theatre group for the day. You can come tomorrow? With your play. I would want to read your play. Please bring it with you."

I stood, again brushed the imaginary dust from myself, and smiled. She kissed my cheek—this time truly only a peck—said goodbye, and led me to the door of the basement. I was soon on the bus, heading home, trying to read Rimbaud again, but unable to focus on the words.



“ Has it ever struck you that life is all memory, except for the one present moment that goes by you so quick you hardly catch it going?”

—**Tennessee Williams**

Once home, I went to the fridge, where I found a large bowl of the soup from the day before sitting on my rack. I ate the soup cold at the table with voracious delight. My migraine abated.

“Where were you last night?” Hans asked as he came up from downstairs. “I was worried.”

“I stayed at a friend’s because it was late,” I said. “Thanks for your concern. I suppose I should have phoned.”

“How’s the soup?” Hans asked, sitting at the table.

“Very good, even when it’s cold!” I answered honestly.

“You got a phone call about ten minutes before you came in,” Hans said. “Jim Cooper says he thinks he can swing part-time work at the bookstore he works at,” Hans explained. “He’ll give up a few his days a week for you. Something to help you along.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Thanks,” I finally said.

After I’d finished eating, I washed the bowl, put it away, and went to my room. I found the play I’d been writing, looked at the pages, and realized how ghastly the thing was. I didn’t want to show it to H  l  ne. She was a stage director who would see how awful it was and would push me away. At first, I considered throwing it in the trash, but I pushed it into a desk drawer and decided to lie to her and say I’d lost it. Or maybe I would never hear from her again anyway and wouldn’t have to come up with an excuse about the play. The damned play. Why had I even mentioned it? Such an arrogant bastard.

The phone rang, and I picked it up. It was H  l  ne.

“Can you come tonight?” she asked. “This would be nice. You can sleep again on my floor if you want.”

“Yes, of course,” I said.

“*N’oublie pas ta pièce*,” she added before hanging up.

The damned play. I opened the drawer and looked at it. Maybe she wouldn’t notice how awful it was since it was written in English. No, that was stupid. She would know. She was a director, and bad art stinks across cultures and language. I put the play under my arm, put my jacket over this, and went out. I walked to the bookstore where Jim worked to see if he was in.

“Hey, Conrad,” Oliver, the bookstore owner, greeted me. I bought most of my used books from his store, and we had known one another for a few years. I had met Jim behind the cash register at the same place.

“Hey,” I replied. “Jim in today?”

Oliver nodded back and forth. “He wanted the day off to begin getting ready for graduation,” he said. “You ready to start here on Sundays and Friday nights?” he asked.

“That would be great,” I said, offering my hand.

“Jim says he figures you’ll do well,” he said.

“You’re great,” I said. “Say, Oliver, you majored in modern English Literature?”

Oliver looked me over. “Yes, why?”

I pulled out the play and showed it to him. “Any idea if this thing is any good?”

“Well, I’d have to read it first,” Oliver laughed. “Unless you want me to *assume* it is or isn’t.” He flipped through a few pages.

“I promised to show it to someone later today,” I said, “and I’m nervous about it, since she’s a stage director and can probably smell a stinker a mile away. Sorry so rushed.”

“Well, I’m guessing it’ll be pretty quiet in here all day,” Oliver said, “so if you come back in about two or three hours, I can sit back behind the register, read it, and give you an honest opinion. Why don’t you go in the back and organize the science fiction by author? I’ve been wanting to do that for ages and was planning to do it today. I’ll give you ten bucks for that, cash.”

I nodded and headed to the back of the store. Two hours later, I’d alphabetized the science fiction authors and was ready to check on Oliver’s progress with the play. A few customers had wandered in during that time, but it had been fairly quiet, so I figured Oliver would be done with it.

“Well, Conrad, that’s certainly something,” he said.

“You got through it?”

“Yes.”

“What did you think?”

“Well, it’s not Tennessee Williams, but I think you *should* show your friend the play,” he said. “Keep in mind that drama wasn’t my area. I think you have something here, in the rough. You’ve done the work, and that’s probably the most important thing with something of any length. But I’d like to know what happens to it at a reading. That would be the true test.” He handed me the binder and went to the cash register, took out a ten-dollar bill, and handed it to me.

“Thanks,” I said, putting the bill in my pocket.

“No problem. See you Friday at five? I’ll give you the keys then.”

“Great,” I said as I started walking to the door.

“Oh, and Conrad ... take it easy on yourself. Enjoy today. You’re allowed to enjoy the moment you’re in.”

“I’ll try, Oliver. Thanks for pointing it out,” I replied, pushing open the door and returning to the sidewalk outside the store. I walked a block to the bus stop, waited for my bus, and boarded.



[T]he only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to

be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars....”

—**Jack Kerouac**, *On the Road*

As the bus rolled, I read the play over again, thinking about Oliver's assessment, which hadn't been very specific. It was an awful play and I wanted to get off the bus, toss it into the nearest trash can, and return home. *C'était un fou*. Those were her first words to me. What was I thinking even to be on the bus headed for her in the first place? On a whim I'd gone to the French bookstore. Surely there would be something wrong with this at some point, even if there wasn't yet.

She was waiting for me at the produce store when I arrived. "You are late," she said, bundled up against the cold.

"Only fifteen minutes," I replied. "I apologize for that. I missed one bus."

"It is no problem," she insisted. "I am cold."

"I remembered my money this time!" I said, producing the ten-dollar bill from my pocket, as if it were something I could be proud of. "How about I buy tea?"

"No, it is okay," she said. She held my hand and we walked to her house.

"It's already getting dark," I said as we made down the stairs to the basement door.

Once inside, she made tea and offered me a cup. "This tea is cheap," she said. "You have the play?" she asked, rubbing her hands on her teacup to warm them.

I wanted to lie and say I'd forgotten it but handed the binder to her. She carefully opened the binder and began reading, mouthing some of the lines. I watched her face carefully as she did so.

"I—"

“Shhh...,” she hushed me, pointing at the play and then at her bed. “You would rest while I read it, if you want.”

I finished my tea, went over to the bed, and fell asleep without even trying. I did not know how much later it was before I felt her body against mine. I opened my eyes and noted that the room was entirely dark. I could feel her breath on the back of my neck. Her arm was around my waist.

She whispered into the back of my neck. “*Que tu es mince.*” Her breasts were pressed to my back and her chest heaved as she breathed.

I wanted to turn around, to hold her, to kiss her, but did not. Instead, I closed my eyes again and tried to sleep. But sleep would not come.

“*Tu l’as lue, donc?*” I finally said.

“*Oui,*” she replied. “Would you not want to turn around and see me?”

I slowly turned, putting my arm around her. My breath and hers formed a haze in front of one another’s faces. “What did you think of—”

“Shhh...,” she again shushed me. She then kissed my forehead.

I wanted to have her but did not dare. Instead, I kissed her forehead and asked, “What of the play?”

She moved so that her lips touched mine and she pulled back. “I can feel you down there,” she said. “*T’es fou, toi,*” she replied. “One day, I will say when you are not knowing it, *‘C’était un fou.’*”

I closed my eyes, held her more closely, and replied, “I know.” I did not know what else to say. My lips touched her eyelid and she sighed.

“I can feel your heat, too,” I said.

“It is just my heat, and nothing else, okay?” she said.

And I somehow imagined that I knew what she meant by that, and so we kissed and held one another, at the very boundaries of our heat, until sleep finally took us both. When I awoke, I retrieved my play, kissed her still sleeping forehead, and made for the exit. “*C’était un fou,*” I whispered as I blew her a kiss from near the fridge.

I thought I may have heard her say something in return as I opened the basement door. I was not sure, since maybe it was the wind, or the throes of an empty stomach. I caught my trip for home.

“Hey, Sandra,” I said as I entered the small muffin shop.

“Hey,” she said.

I reached my hand onto the counter with the first ten-dollar bill I’d earned since losing my last job to pneumonia. I sat on a chair for a long time, unable to order anything.

“Do you want anything to eat?” Sandra asked, filling a bowl of soup.

“No,” I said. “Keep the ten on tab for me, in case I ever need it.”

Sandra put the bowl of soup in front of me. “Here, this bowl’s on me, Conrad.”

Normally, I would not have accepted a free lunch, but Sandra had made the offer, so I pulled the bowl towards me and nodded a sincere thanks.



“ The role of a writer is not to say what we all can say, but what we are unable to say.”

—**Anaïs Nin**

I began working at Oliver's bookstore and found myself, due to the timing of my shift, to be reading more often than not once all my regular chores were out of the way. It always happened when I read that I knew how far—how *terribly* far—I would have to move myself through time and space to become the artist I wanted to be. I mentioned this to Oliver one day, as I walked in to start work, and we talked about it for a while.

"You have to get out of that way of thinking," he said as he counted out my float for me. "It's not about who *they* are and what *they* did. That's done with. *Fait accompli*."

"Sure, but I don't want to be the utter hack I am," I replied. I showed him my copy of the complete short stories of Hemingway. "I want to do what *he* did.<sup>18</sup> In *my* own peculiar way, sure, but not what *they* do." I pointed at the romance novel rack. "Not *that* kind of thing. *This* kind of thing." I tapped the book I was holding.

"First thing you have to do," he said, "is figure out how to articulate what it is exactly he *is* doing." The float was ready for my shift, and he started to head for the back of the store. "Then you are in a position to pace yourself realistically, rather than aiming at some ineffable target."

I took my place behind the old manual register, opened the stories, and read a few sentences at random.

Oliver was at the back of the store, readying his bike to ride home. "By knowing exactly *what* they did, and either following it slavishly, or running with it, you will be at the beginning."

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<sup>18</sup> For more on this, see "Dismantling Lionization in STEM," in the back-matter.

He walked the bike through the aisles to the front door and stood there with it. “Then, you will be able to look at your own work objectively and subjectively and measure it yourself. I won’t have to read it and give you an opinion, because, having stood back from *them*, not caught up in their literary prowess, but observing what they are doing, you will also be able to stand back from *Conrad’s* work. We cannot control what we do not understand.” He opened the door and wheeled out. “See you!” he called before heading off.

I read through the passages of the stories in a new way. Each time he did something that made me feel a certain way, I asked myself what exactly it was he had done. What techniques, what application of his personal insights had been turned to fiction? I could only know from my own perspective, but I allowed myself to speculate and become part of his processes, to better resonate with his possible intent and consider how that intent carried through, even though he was long since canon and all of this was only a mental exercise. This was a different way to read, but I started to realize exactly where my own work was lacking.

I hadn’t understood what he was doing with words to create specific effects in me as a *reader*. I had sought bread from Rilke without knowing Rilke’s yeast.

An hour into my reading, the bell sounded, and I folded the corner of a page and put it aside. I turned my head to the left, to see who it was, and dropped the book. It was Vanessa.

“Hi,” she said. She was smiling.

A wave of new energy swept through me. My heart twisted in my chest. I took a deep breath and replied, “Hello.”

“How are you?” she asked as she approached the front of the register.

“Well, contrary to rumor, I’m not dead,” I returned. I wanted her to know that she hadn’t killed me.

When I said that, she looked down. “Conrad, I’m...,” she began, but didn’t have words to complete it.

“It doesn’t matter,” I replied, picking up my book, opening it to where I had been. “How did you find me here?”

“I called using the number from your résumé. A pleasant fellow named Hans answered and told me you were working here,” she explained into the space two feet from my left ear.

“Notice that the windows here have dust on them?” I said, still reading the book. “I don’t have to scrub them clean from outside in the cold.”

“I have a gift for you,” she said as she handed me a book. “I wasn’t sure what to buy, but this came to mind.” She handed me a copy of Sartre’s play *Huis Clos*. “I knew you read French, since some of your poems are in French. And you write plays.”

I read the simple “With respect and love” on the inside and accepted the gift with a smile. “I appreciate this,” I said. I did appreciate it. She and I would never be together again, but I knew by accepting her gift, which she’d obviously put some thought into, that some kind of amends would be made between her bad memories of me and my bad memories of her.

“What are you up to these days other than working here?” she asked. “It’s so different from *La Preziosità*.”

“Not really,” I said, flipping through the pages of *Huis Clos*. “Here, I must know the value of a literary gem, instead of a bracelet, is all.” I put the book under the counter. “The surplus value is still what keeps the shop open.”

“Say, could we...?” she started. She did not have to finish her question for me to know what she wanted to say. Why did she have to go and ruin what could have been a nice conclusion to everything that had happened?

“Do you know what I’ve called you in my head? *Ylajali*. Now, from all these books, find me the one book that will tell you what that means, and I’d consider it, after you read it through.” I felt a deep satisfaction in saying this.

“Ylajali?”

“Yes,” I said. It was perfect. “Ee-la-ya-lee. It sounds so sweet on the tongue, doesn’t it?”

She looked at the books behind me on the shelves there, as if she assumed that it would be in one of those. But it wasn’t. The book was, indeed, in its proper place in the store. In fact, I had traded my one copy for the first printing of *Scribner Sons* edition of Ernest Hemingway’s complete short stories, having tired of reading it.

“You’re playing games with me,” she said, smiling. “That’s fine, I like games, but I just have no idea as to the rules to yours.”

I smiled back at her and replied, “No, it’s not a game. You wanted to tell me what I could and could not express about life in my writing, and I became unnecessarily angry. I am saying now that you must read that book, my *Ylajali*, read it through, so you know who you’re up against when you start asking questions like, ‘Could we?’” I was no longer angry with her, even though she had sent me into the cold for weeks to wash windows.

“You’re complicated,” she said.

“Not really,” I replied. “You just don’t understand me. We cannot control what we do not understand.” I didn’t know what had inspired Oliver to give me the lecture before leaving, but as I found myself repeating his words, in my context with Vanessa, I was thankful he had been touched by a muse. “When you know why I have called you *Ylajali*, then we will be in a better position to talk.”

I stood, leaned over the counter, and kissed her on the cheek. She smiled, kissed my cheek, and walked out of the store without another word. Surely my challenge to her would never be met, and I would at last be free of the tormented aspects of our spirit.

When she was gone, it was as if I could fully breathe again, completely rid of her ghost in my lungs.

I felt good as I marched home from the shop once closing time arrived. Once home, I sat at my typewriter with a clean sheet in front of me and began a story that put all the pieces that were me and Vanessa together in a way that wasn’t as literal as the one I’d written about winning the contest. I applied what Oliver had talked about, stood back from myself as I reviewed my own words, and produced something that, when I read it, read as if written by someone else, about something else. But I knew. I danced on a precipice and lived. I revised until the sun came up, and then slept.

## **“Elsbeth Stood at the Edge”**

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Elsbeth stood at the edge, her toes over the side of the seawall as the water sprayed up to her naked knees, unable to hear her own thoughts over the crash of the sea. The cold pinched her toes, now wet even through her shoes. Her nostrils stung, but since her hands were in her overcoat pockets, they did not hurt. Tears had once stung her eyes, too, but no more now. Only spray and rain soaked her face.

Elsbeth stood at the edge, waiting for the wind to change direction, so that it would be at her back, so that it would shove her off, so she would not have to gather the strength to jump. But the wind did not change direction. It continued to blow against her, almost pulling her hair in a straight line behind her head. One change in the wind would tell her that everything was for her decision, but the wind did not concur.

Her legs and feet had the strength and design to get her to the seawall, far enough along the walk that no midnight pedestrians along the wall would be within distance to interfere, to the very brim of the end of her life, but they did not have the determination to commit to the final step. She was certain, however, that the wind would turn against her back, and give her a final push.

“Stand there long enough,” said someone far behind her, “and your legs will give out.” It was a man’s voice. Or was it her thoughts? Her legs shook from the cold.

“Go away!” she hollered.

“Go away?” replied the man’s voice, more loudly than before. “Are you sure about that?”

“I want to be *alone*,” Elspeth answered, still facing the ocean.

“We all want to be alone, once in a while,” the man returned. His voice was now coming from much closer.

Elspeth stood at the edge, her knees knocking, drenched in ocean spray, unable to jump, unable to turn to see who it was who’d found her standing on the stone rim of the walkway.

“I know what you’re going to say,” she finally found the strength to whisper to the man she could not see.

A deep, loud laugh followed, echoing even in the rainy air. “You know what I’m going to say? And how so?”

Since she could only hear his voice, and not his footsteps, she did not know how close he was to her, or if he would be able to grab her if she threw herself over.

“Because I...”

“Because you assume I am the kind of person, like any normal person, coming upon this scene, who would try to convince you that your young life would be a shame to waste?” the man interrupted her.

For a brief instant, Elspeth feared for her life. Who was this man behind her? Was he going to try to rape her? Strangle her? Toss her into the sea? It was then that she remembered why she was at this place to begin with.

“I’m not here to violate you,” he said. “You have no worry about that.”

Elspeth turned her head, to try to see the man, but when she turned enough, almost lost her balance, and instinctively stepped down from the edge towards the walkway.

“You see?” the man said, still in the shadows. “Did you notice which way you stepped when you were about to fall?”

“Who are you?” Elspeth called, pulling her overcoat tightly over herself to keep out the cold. With her back to the sea, the wind was now at her back, and her hair blew over her eyes.

“It doesn’t matter who I am,” the man replied. Elspeth tried to determine where he was, from the direction of his voice, but she could see only shadows and darkness from where the man seemed to be coming. “Don’t try to figure out who I am, but, rather, who *you* are.”

“Go away!” she hollered into the night.

It was then that he stepped closer to her, and a tall, shadowy outline could be made out against the backdrop of the rock, but still Elspeth could not see his face.

“I know who I am,” Elspeth replied. “I know why I am here. Go away.”

“Go away? So the wind will change direction and push you to your conclusion?” He stepped closer, and Elspeth could now make out the faint features of his coat, his pants, his black shoes, and the brim of his hat, but she still could not see his face.

“Yes,” Elspeth replied, taking a step back, so that the heel of her shoe pressed against the six-inch-high stone that she had been standing on before.

“You know who you are? But you probably have no identification on you, and so, when your body is found, if ever, how will they know who you are? Surely, people are wondering where you are, but will they ever know what became of you?” Finally, he stood out of the shadow, and into the electric light of the lamp that illuminated a short stretch of the seawall.

“Do you make it a point to lurk around in the shadows, waiting for people to come here?” Elspeth asked, looking straight into his eyes, now that she could see them.

He squinted before replying. “Do you want me to answer that question?” His face looked entirely serious as he asked her this.

Elspeth stood with her back to the edge, unsure if she should run, hurl herself backwards into the water, or answer his query. “Yes,” she finally replied. “Are you some kind of nut who sits there, in the dark, waiting for people to come here and jump?”

“Let me tell you something,” he said as he took his hands from his pockets and wiped under one eye with what appeared to be a handkerchief. When he did this, Elspeth could see that he was wearing a ring on his left ring finger. “I have been standing here, waiting a *very* long time.”

The crash of the water behind her kept her from moving any further backwards, and she knew she was alone with this man, far away from anyone who might be able to hear her if she screamed. Her legs continued to shake from the cold.

“I probably shouldn’t even have said anything in the first place,” the man finally broke the silence. “It’s just....”



“Just what?” Elspeth spat. “You get your jollies?”

“Young woman don’t be rude,” the man returned almost immediately. “You see, well, it would be hard to explain.”

“What is so hard to explain? We’re friends, aren’t we?” she said, not at all attempting to hide her sarcasm.

“I shouldn’t have spoken out,” he repeated himself.

“Why not? So you could watch me drown?”

“And then....”

“And then *what? What?*” Elspeth shouted. “Man, you are completely insane.”

“This is about you, not me,” the man finally said, carefully placing his handkerchief back into his pocket. “What is your name?”

“Elspeth,” she answered, not entirely sure why.

“Now you have a name,” he said. He took off his hat, brushed his short, black hair back with his hand, and said, “I am Connor. Connor Swift. Remember that name, will you? As a favor to me?”

Elspeth stood at the edge, wanting to say, “What a time to be polite,” but saying nothing.

“I should not have spoken out,” he said yet again.

“I don’t get any of this at all,” Elspeth admitted.

“This is life and death,” Connor Swift made clear. “What is there to understand other than this truth?”

“This,” Elspeth mumbled, “is a bad dream.”

Connor circled around towards the wall, as if he knew not to walk directly at her, until he, too, was standing at the edge, about ten feet farther down the wall. “No, this is not a bad dream.” He stood on the ledge, squatted, putting his hands into what must have been the freezing water, and then flung the handful of water towards Elspeth. “That water is damned cold, and this is not a dream. This is life or death.”

Elspeth stood at the edge, one side now to the ocean, the other to the shadowy spot near the rock face where Connor had once stood. “What’s all this about?” she asked.

Connor stretched out his arm to the water, as if pointing to a spot only feet from where Elspeth was standing. She turned towards the sea, straining to see what he was pointing at.

“That’s *you*, Elspeth,” he said.

Elspeth stood at the edge, unable to see entirely clearly, but seeing something that looked like an overcoat in the water, bubbled up from air, in amongst the churning of the sea.

“Trust me,” he said. “That’s *you* out there.”

“But...,” Elspeth sputtered, grabbing her own soaking wet arm and feeling it. “That isn’t me. I’m right here.”

“You have enough life, enough strength,” he said, slowly wandering along the top of the ledge towards her, “that you could *wake up* from it, out of the despair, and swim back to the wall, grab on, pull yourself over, and save yourself.”

It was at this moment that Elspeth was most afraid. She could hear coughing, out from where Connor Swift had pointed. “How?” she managed to say, still gripping her own arm tightly and feeling its reality.

“*How* is not the question here and now, or even *why* really,” Connor replied. “I should not have spoken out.”

“What is this all about?” Elspeth demanded, still staring at the flapping overcoat out in the water.

“This is about life and death,” Connor again said. He was now almost beside her. “Haven’t you been listening?”

“Why do you keep insisting that you should not have spoken out?”

“If you don’t die out there, who will take my place *here*?” Connor asked, pointing towards the shadowy rock back wall.

Elspeth stared closely at Connor’s face now, and felt she knew what he meant.

“If I hadn’t spoken out,” he said, “you’d still be standing on the edge, waiting for the wind to turn. It would never turn, you know. This is *choice*, not *chance*.”

“Snap out of it! Fight, damn it!” Elspeth called to the figure out in the water. The figure slowly began to move about, to cough.

Connor Swift slowly returned to the spot where he had first been, his back to Elspeth. “Do you understand now? Do you realize? Why I shouldn’t have spoken out, I mean?”

“Fight!” Elspeth called out again, as the figure slowly splashed towards the wall.

“I have been standing here for a *very* long time. It was almost time to find another place to go and be,” he said, walking into the shadows completely.

“But I can wait until the next one comes. This is really a lonely, desperate place. Someone else will surely come along, eventually, don’t you think? To take my place. Please don’t forget my name.”

Elsbeth clung to the edge, coughing up sea water, her body completely numb under the water as the waves pounded her against the slimy surface of the rocks, her arm hooked over the six-inch rock ledge. Connor Swift stood in the shadows, only feet away, cold and waiting for the wind to change direction.



“Luminous Liminal” — 2023

“That’s more like it!” Oliver said after reading “Elspeth Stood at the Edge.” He handed the manuscript back to me. “It’s nothing like that piece you wrote about the poetry contest.” He sipped his coffee, smiling.

“How so?” I asked.

“Well, for one thing, the way you portrayed Dan Laurent in the contest piece was a bit fierce,” Oliver said. “Your narration showed a certain lack of respect.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant and asked for more.

“In one part, you were on about how he wouldn’t understand gambling terms like ‘neck and neck’—like he was an idiot.”

“Oh,” I sighed.

“You weren’t being honest as an artist. Sure, you were being honest about how you *felt*,” Oliver conceded, “but you weren’t showing any real deep human connection with anyone other than yourself. ‘Elspeth,’ because it doesn’t directly address you or your particulars, seems to have let you get out of the confused self-pity of your other piece.”

Oliver should have changed his name to Frank, but I managed to pull myself together after his mix of critique and personal criticism. “I looked at things and, rather than write about my life in a way that made sense to *me*, I tried to make it ... well ... what’s the word I’m looking for?” I, too, sipped at my coffee. I did not have a shift at the bookstore but came to show Oliver the story to see what he thought of it.

“I don’t know what word you’re looking for,” Oliver laughed. “You’re the wordsmith. So *you* smith up the word you are looking for.”

“I wanted to turn some insight, some personal thing, into something more abstract, more general. Less *just* me.”

“More *universal*?” he suggested.

“Yes.”

“In this story, you took what and did what with it?” he asked, taking another sip.

“Well, first of all, ‘Elspeth’ represents me in a symbolic way at most. Connor, too, is a bit of me, just as, in the story, it is not clear whether he is a part of Elspeth or an apparition.”

Oliver sat in thought for about a minute. “I read it like this: part of Elspeth woke up after diving into the drink. After passing over the wall between life and death, she decided to fight to come back to the other side of the wall. Connor represented that part of her that still had a will to live.”

I nodded. He understood. “Exactly!” I exclaimed. “And what’s more, he insists that she remember his name for a reason.”

“What reason?” Oliver asked.

“Being the part of her that wants her to live, to come back over the wall, he wants her to remember that name, so that she won’t forget where she’d been. So she won’t come back to that wall again.”

Oliver nodded. “So, you’ve taken a step. A big step, Conrad. You have transformed your specific anxiety and turmoil into something outside of yourself and accessible to others. You’ve made artistic progress.”

“What you said to me last night really sunk in,” I explained. “I realized, as I read through the stories, that what was missing in my vision was not the technical aspects. I could see how others used adjectives, verbs, and so on, as I can see when I read poetry how poets use form and structure. I’ve written poems that play with these, like a word game, but what I haven’t done is sought to take things apart and use those techniques to apply them in some less personal way so that the reader can interpret and complete the work.”

“Keep at it,” Oliver said. “It’s the way to be heading.”

As I was considering Oliver’s words, Jim came in. He joined us for a coffee. The three of us discussed literature between interruptions by the random customers who entered the store. Jim read my new story and nodded his head.

“I agree with Oliver,” he said. “You really are coming along. I notice that there is still something you have to grab hold of that you haven’t quite managed in this piece.”

“What is it?” I asked. “I can take it. Let me know.”

“Hard to put a label on it,” Jim said. “You are holding back something. You aren’t letting me *in* far enough. You take me *so far*, and then ... you hold back.”

I nodded.

“Sure, yes, you take something personal, and you apply it to the outside world. It even reads like it’s supposed to be the inside world. *Supposed* to be. You know? But where the hell is the *pain*? Your fictional narrative voice tends toward being glib.”

*Glib*. That stung. I could feel my face flush at the sound of it leaving Jim’s mouth. I took a deep breath and accepted the feedback in the spirit it had been offered, but it tasted a bitter pill.

Oliver took the story again and circled a sentence. He handed it to me. “So now you’ve started to see what it is you weren’t doing when you were reading other people,” he said. “Jim is right. What we need now is for you to stand back and try to force yourself into yourself as if you were one of us outsiders who hasn’t had a look in there yet—because frankly, we haven’t. Maybe the reason you treated Dan Laurent in the contest piece with such lack of empathy was *not* that you are afraid to get into Dan, but that you are afraid to know who *you* really—and I mean *really*—are.”

“I’ll be the first to admit that I’m not entirely sure who I am, exactly,” I confessed.

“It’s not enough to simply hint at the internal life. Be explicit, so we know the pain. Don’t be shy to love or hate what you see when you get there but *do* let us know what it is you do end up seeing once you get through the fog. Dust it off and present it in the right light, sure, but certainly explore.”

After some more discussion, Jim and I decided to head to the Inn for a drink. This time, I offered to pay.

“Whatever happened to that director you were telling me about?” he asked before tipping back his beer. We had picked a table well out of the way so the dancers would not distract us.

I didn't know what to say about H el ene. She called after the day I left with my play, but I had never returned her calls. Something inside me kept me from her.

"I stopped visiting her," I said.

"Any particular reason?" Jim asked.

"Can't put my finger on it. Maybe I wanted to wait until I was completely healthy, ready for it." The words came from my mouth, but when they did, I wasn't sure I believed them myself.

"Nothing like being on the rebound, sick, and thrown into something earlier than you want," Jim said. All of that made sense but didn't seem to be the case. Something else kept me from wanting to let her and me get closer.

"Vanessa came to the store last night," I admitted, sipping my vodka.

"Shit," he blurted out. "How did *that* pan out?"

"She gave me *this*," I replied, taking the signed copy of *Huis Clos* out of my sack.

"She wants to get back together and as part of this grand scheme of hers she lobs this absurd masterpiece of French existentialism at you?" he asked as he flipped through the pages. A photograph fell out of the book. I hadn't noticed it before. He picked up the picture, looked at it, and said, "Holy shit! Is *that* her?"

I took the photo. "Yes."

"I'd find a reason to make up!" he laughed. When he saw my sour response, he said, "Just kidding, man."

I put the photograph between several business cards in my wallet. Why had she put *that* in the book? To try to haunt me?

"It ain't never gonna happen," I said.

"I know," he said, swinging a wide pat on my shoulder. "At least not if you're even half the stubborn cuss I've come to know and love, Conrad."

"I did part with her on more or less decent terms last night, though," I added. "It was some kind of closure."

"If I've learned anything in the four years toward my baccalaureate, other than how to cook noodles, it's that closure is some bullshit someone said once to make someone else feel better, and the lie 'took' well enough that people still talk about finding it like it was some kind of gold bar."

“Closure can be a relief,” I only half-heartedly protested, given that Jim was clearly just a bit drunk at the mouth.

“Well, it ain’t; just ask Derrida about the non-finality of trace. That’s what I think of *closure*.” Jim looked at me, straight in the eyes, and said, “But since you’re over that and it’s all ‘closed’ now, you have your health back, you’re writing the way you want to be writing, why not phone H  l  ne? You have your footing again now, and a bit of scratch in your wallet to pay your way around a cup of coffee or two. What’s the worst that can happen?”

I laughed, and the vodka sprayed up into my nasal cavity, burning as it went. “I had the chance for that,” I said. “She and I were in bed. I could have had her then but decided against it. I’m not even sure I *want* that.”

Jim nodded as if he understood but he had told me many tales of his many relationships, so I knew he didn’t understand. But then something he said then made me think that perhaps he did understand after all. “I lost my virginity when I was sixteen,” he began. “I was pissed out of my mind, at a party, and woke up, half naked, in the bushes, with a girl I didn’t remember even *knowing*. That was my great experience. You, on the other hand, went with your eyes open. It meant more to you when it happened to you, no matter how it ended up. I don’t know if I envy you or me.”

“What it is,” I then was able to open up, “is that I do not believe that I am capable of *loving* H  l  ne.”

“Oh?”

“She’s entirely unlike Vanessa. I fell out with Vanessa, but at least ‘fell in’ in the first place,” I tried to explain.

Before replying, Jim lit up a cigarette, leaned back, and exhaled a cloud of smoke as if in deep thought. “What’s not to love about her?” he asked finally.

I didn’t have an answer for him. There was something but I could not express it in words to him, or even thoughts to myself.

“The age gap?”

“No, that’s not it.”

“The language barrier?”

“No real barrier there,” I responded to that idea.

“The chemistry?” he then went through his list.



“That’s there,” I said.

“Ah,” he then said. “Then what we have here is a strong case of the immeasurable ‘it.’”

“Yes. The immeasurable ‘it.’” I did not know what he meant by this but said the words as if I fully *understood* his offer of solace and wisdom.

“Hate when that happens,” he said, still dragging at his cigarette.

I laughed with him, we finished our drinks, and we decided to head back to the bookstore. Once there, we restarted the discussion of literature the three of us had been having before we left. I finally headed home alone.

## 21a

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What was that immeasurable “it?” Jim had me wanting to know. A week after that day, after revising the play with the new understanding of my work that Oliver had given me, I picked up the phone and dialed H el ene’s number.

“I thought I had annoyed you or something,” H el ene said in French.

“Not at all,” I replied. In front of me on the kitchen table were the copy of *Huis Clos*, the story I had shown Oliver, and my play. “I had some things that I had to sort through in my mind, that’s all,” I admitted.

“I understand that artists can be like that,” she replied.

“Maybe we can get together again? I have typed my play,” I said. “I have also revised it considerably.”

“Tonight I am going to a wine and cheese party with some others,” she said. “Would you like to come?”

I would be safe with her in a crowd. I agreed to meet her at four thirty, packed my book, play, and story into my sack, and headed for the bus. On the way, I visited Sandra.

“It’s been a while!” she said.

“The last time I came here, I put some money on my tab,” I said.

“Yes,” she replied, smiling.

I sat at a table, and said, “Soup of the day, please, Sandra!” as if I were a king on his throne.

She chuckled as she brought me the bowl. “You look so much healthier than the last time I saw you.”

The minestrone tasted delicious. “I was completely starving and sick,” I admitted. “I’m on the mend now.”

“Great!” she said as she returned to her stool behind the counter. “Don’t overdo it, though.”

I finished my soup, thanked Sandra for her advice, and caught the bus to H  l  ne’s. The trip went quickly. Once at her door, I brushed my hair back, knocked, and waited. About a minute later, she was at the door. She hugged me in greeting, and I returned the hug.

“You are a little bit less thin!” she remarked.

“Only a little less,” I replied.

“Come in!” she said.

Something was different from what it had been before. Now, as I watched her get ready to go out, I was not seeing her through such pathetic, ill eyes. I was not a starving, suffering artist, but had some energy to think, watch, and interpret what I saw. As I had with Vanessa the night she came to talk with me at the bookstore, I stood back from myself and regarded the process of interaction between us, as if I were watching a video at Jim’s place and commenting as the movie progressed.

We walked to bus stop, got on, and headed for the location of the party. It was being held at a friend’s apartment. Once there, she introduced me as a playwright, which I thought amusing. I shook hands, smiled, and tried to be as inconspicuous in the crowd as I possibly could. I watched H  l  ne as she greeted her friends, one at a time, started a snippet of small talk with each, and each session of chatter came to an end. Only when approached by someone directly did I speak.

“Are you in theatre?” asked a young French-Canadian man. He was probably a few years older than I was.

“Only in the sense that I have written unproduced plays,” I replied.

“Do you write anything else?” he asked. He was stocky, muscular, shorter than I was, and I thought him more of a Brutus than an Anthony.

“Short stories, poems, that kind of thing,” I replied, moving my gaze back and forth across the room trying to see where H  l  ne was.

“I’m R  jean,” he said.

I took his offered hand, shook it, and said, “Conrad.”

“*Conrad?*” he blurted out. “Yes, H  l  ne told me your name a while ago. So, *you* are Conrad. You *are* a playwright, then!”

He and I walked over to the table that had the wine, cheese, grapes, and other food on it. I picked up a cracker, put some cheese on it, and started to chew it before speaking again. “Is everyone here in theatre?” I asked.

“More or less,” R  jean replied. “Maybe we can do one of your plays?” He winked at me and elbowed me in the ribs lightly.

“I’ve only written plays in English,” I replied.

“H  l  ne could translate for us,” he said.

I wanted to laugh out loud but held it in. “You don’t even know that my plays are any good,” I insisted.

R  jean then did something odd. He took me by the hand into a quiet corner of the room, leaned over to my ear, and said in wine-soaked breath, “Conrad, let me tell you. H  l  ne talked a lot with me about your play and a lot about you, as I’ve said. She was *impressed*.”

I didn’t know how to reply and so remained silent as he leaned to my ear.

When I did not reply, he continued to speak in a whisper. “Also let me tell you something else. She is a very serious person. If she introduces you as a ‘playwright’ to a bunch of us people in theatre whom she directs, you understand, then she considers that you are one—not only in name, but because she has read what you have written. Understand? That is her *life* and why we trust her to direct us with our *careers* in theatre.”

He departed from my ear and again elbowed me in the ribs. “So you now know what language we are speaking, you know, Conrad?” He then wandered into his own crowd, leaving me alone in the corner to consider his words.

Was Jim’s immeasurable “it” somewhere in this room? Having heard R  jean’s opinion, I no longer knew where to look, even if I hadn’t had much of an idea of where to look before. Perhaps knowing that H  l  ne was part of a crowd like this, a functioning part of a whole, kept me from allowing myself into that world? I watched everyone as they slapped one another’s backs, elbowed one another’s ribs, shook hands, and made small talk, and I knew that this world was foreign to me.

My world was a locked door during a fever. I could write a play, but to have the players in my space, leaning over to my ear with their breath stinking of wine and ancient cheese, felt like a world that was not mine. Did I know that this would be H  l  ne’s world, and that becoming part of her world would mean accepting *this* space also?

As I leaned with my back into the corner, observing the room, H  l  ne finally approached me and said, “So what do you think?”

To answer, I leaned to her ear, so no one would hear me, and said in English, “I feel like a cat on a hot tin roof.”

She laughed when she heard it.

“I am not an actor, or director, or stagehand,” I said. “I see, I interpret, I write.” I knew it was a pretentious thing to say, or at least I felt pretentious for having said it, but H  l  ne nodded at me, as if she knew exactly what anguish I was trying to express.

She put her soft hand on my shoulder, nodded at me again, and returned to her people. Within ten minutes, she returned to me, and said, “We can go now, if you want, Conrad. I have said goodbye to everyone. I told them I have a bad headache from the wine. Let’s go.” She smiled, offered me her hand, and we left the party.

Outside, on the street, in the cold, dark air of night, I felt comfortable again. The noise of the cars was far more tolerable than the constant formulas of the group we'd left.

"Thank you for saving me from more of that," I said over my shoulder to H el ene.

"I understand that there are different kinds of artists," she said, rubbing my hand in hers. "Theatre is not a quiet art at my level. It is at yours."

"About my play," I said, reaching around to my sack. "I revised it."

She took the typed manuscript from me. "How about we have tea, over there?" she suggested, pointing to a caf e.

We entered the caf e together, ordered tea, and she sat at the table, reading through the pages very quickly. Her mouth moved on some parts as she read, and I watched her mouth very carefully. Sometimes it smiled, sometimes it bunched up, as if she'd tasted something sour, and other times, it did not move for minutes.

When she had at last completed the play, which I had entitled *Three Rooms in Hell*, she set it on the table and drank her now cold tea in one gulp. She looked straight at me, with eyes I could not estimate.

"It is difficult to...," I began.

"Shhh...," she shushed me. "Let me read this. *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte.*"

I remembered R ejean's words about H el ene and blushed.

"You did revise it," she finally broke her silence.

“For the better, or for the worse?” I asked, my anxious heart pounding.

“Definitely for the better,” she replied. “It was already a good play. Now, it is more so.” She pushed it at me. “My English is not as good as yours, but I noticed one thing right away.”

“Yes?”

As she explained my play in her own words, through her own perceptions of what I had put down, I immediately realized what Jim’s immeasurable “it” had been with her. I wanted to know that she *understood* me as I was and not as a projection of her own making and imagination. Vanessa had not. I could tell by her quick response to the play as it now stood that H  l  ne *did*. Whereas she had been pretty before, she now sat before me in beauty. It didn’t matter that the play was horseshit to my own nose; it mattered that she read beyond the stink of my mechanics and technique and into my *intent*.

“Exactly!” I blurted out at one of her comments. “The interaction between Chris and Georges emphasizes that the point of an argument is neither to win, nor to let the other win, but to move forward or at least become more aware.”

“Please explain?” she asked.

I searched my French vocabulary in my mind for the words, trying to express what I meant in a clear way. “Synthesis,” I said. “Not victory. Progress. *Dialogue toward progress*.”

I smiled. She had understood the point of the work to such a degree that I felt no need to speak and ruin the moment with useless words. She reached across the table, held my hand, and said, “I see that I was correct about you.”

We returned not to her room but to my house. Once home, she and I went to my room. I closed and locked the door to keep Hans out. She scanned the books on my shelf, pulling one out, reading through it a bit. We did not speak at all for a long time.

“Would you like to stay the night?” I asked.

She sat on the couch and replied, “I am not sure.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“If I stay,” she said, brushing her hair out of her face, “we will make love. I know this. I feel this.”

“But when I stayed at your place, even when in your bed, we did not. We simply kissed. Why would it be different here?”

“Yes,” she agreed, “but remember, then, I said, it is only my heat, and nothing else. Now, it would be different.”

Not sure if she was playing with me, I still managed to ask, “And how would it be different?”

“Now I really know a piece of you. Knowing a piece of you, I could give my body to you, and when I do that, then I give it completely, and then we could fall in love,” she said.

There had to be some missing term or coefficient from this equation I was handed to solve on the invisible blackboard of my soul, some line of this sketch that I couldn’t see with simple eyes. I watched her expression closely as she sat there, staring back at me, and tried to grasp what I had overlooked.

“We are not in love,” I finally admitted.

“But we could be,” she said. “After, we could be.”

“Do you already have someone in your life?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “I don’t. Not in this way.”

Not knowing what else it could be, in jest I asked, “Do you think my breath will smell in the morning?”

Hélène smiled at me, her eyes obviously betraying her conflict, and said, “It is not about something *external*.”

I sat down beside her and held her to me, closely. Her hair smelled like shampoo. Her body was shaking. *What is it then?*

“I do not want to be like a bird in someone’s heart,” she at last confessed. “I want to be free to fly in my life. I do not want to be loved, or to love, and because of that, become something tamed.”

I stood, went to my shelf, and found my copy of *Le Petit Prince*. “You mean like in this book?” I asked.

“Exactly. I do not want to be *tamed*. I want to be free to fly from planet to planet. If we give to one another in this way, we will be tamed.”

It finally made perfect sense to me. “Saint-Exupéry meant many things when he talked of being tamed,” I at last tried to explain. “Do you think I am a snake, looking to eat you?” I smiled when I said this so that she would know I was being whimsical. “I simply am asking if you would like to sleep the night. I can sleep on the floor.”



“But I don’t want you to just sleep,” she said. I could see that she was near tears. “I want make love but not...,” she began, but could not seem to find the words.

“You want to make love, but not fall in love and be tamed?” I said.

“*Exactly* that,” she admitted.

Hearing this, I put *Le Petit Prince* back on the shelf. “We can simply sleep beside one another.”

When I said that, she stood, approached me, and put her arms me in a tight hug. Her breasts pressed against me, and I could feel her breathing on my neck. I *did* want her. She had given me the unnamed “it” while she and I had discussed my play in the café earlier. Now that she was pressed so tightly to me, my body, mind, heart, and heat all responded in a way that told me that I would have either to be careful, or careless, but the decision would have to come eventually.

“You can go,” I said. It stung inside, deep inside, to say it, but I knew that she had to hear it from me. “I do not want to tame anyone, any more than you want to be tamed. In the end, if you do not think we could sleep the night together, without ending up a tamed creature in some cage, I understand.”

She continued to hold me. From my heartbeat, the rush of blood to my ears, and my hardness, I knew that she would not have much longer before the choice was already made by both of us. She would not let go of me, and I leaned to kiss her ear, and she moaned. That was my answer.

“Have you been tamed?” were the first words I spoke the next morning into H  l  ne’s ear as she reclined beside me on the pull-out bed. There was no movement, no breath, no whispered passion that had not been of some meaning or consequence between us the night before. When we’d finished making love once, we’d rested, and then found some new excuse to begin again. Now, it was morning, the light came through my bedroom window, and we were both exhausted, calm, and awake.

“No,” she said after some time in thought.

“Good,” I said. “It wasn’t my intention.”

“Good,” she replied, turning over on her side, away from me, with her back pressed against me.

I motioned for her to turn over to face me and held her against me. She kissed my lips, and my hands slid along her side, over the small of her back, down the back of her thigh.

For breakfast, I made the two of us scrambled eggs and hash browns. She walked around the house wearing only one of my tee-shirts. She showed through the shirt wonderfully.

I was not in love with her and she knew that. If I was any judge of character, she was not in love with me either. She seemed to admire me, for some reason that was personal and private, but from the conversation she and I had had the night before, love was something she did not give anyone, in order to avoid being tamed. It made perfect sense, as I chewed my ketchup-soaked eggs, that she had only wanted to be held, be close, be brought over and over again to a place where she preferred not go alone, but then be allowed to be free, to fly fast.

After breakfast, when she left my house, I knew that I would not ask if she and I would ever cross paths again. To have asked, or expected such a thing from her, would have been a slap in the face. We could never see one another again; that would risk a chance of falling in love, and this was not a risk lightly taken.

We had shared a moment, been “alone but together”—*tout seul à deux*—for our allotted while. It was time to move on—she as a director, and I as whatever the hell it was I happened to be. To be alone-but-together-as-two was both the saddest and most deliciously honest of intimate moments the untamable essence of us could have shared, and we had already done so completely.

I spent the morning going over my favorite books but found that reading any more than a paragraph or two from each of them was impossible. The words on the pages flew about, sentences read differently. I was high and low at the same time.

“Who was over last night?” Hans asked me when he finally came up from his room in the basement.

“A friend,” I said.

He brushed his beard with his hand, turned up one eye at me as his head cocked, winked. “From what I heard last night....”

I smiled. “A friend,” I repeated, flipping through the pages of *Martin Eden*.

Hans walked into my room, sat on one end of my couch, and folded his hands on his lap. He had never, in all the time we’d been sharing the house, *sat* with me in my room. “Conrad,” he said.

“Yes?”

“When I was younger, in Sweden, I used to be a racecar driver,” he said.

“I didn’t know that,” I replied.

He smiled, looking up into an old, happy memory. “That was before I took to drinking.”

“Well, you got over drinking,” I observed.

“Anyway, I was a racecar driver. A good one. It was a great life. Women wanted to sleep with me all the time when I won a race.” He looked at me and winked. “I needed to ‘feel like a man.’ That did it. The speed, the women. The ‘drunk’ of all that was huge.”

“I can imagine,” I said, still flipping through the book.

“One day, a tire blew at the wrong part of a hard turn,” he then said.

“Oh, Jesus.”

Hans stood up and rolled up his sleeve. His arm, right at the elbow, appeared almost as if it had melted and hardened again. I winced when I saw the scar.

“Didn’t ever see anything like that?” he asked.

“No.”

“I remember very little about the crash,” he said, rolling his sleeve back down, “but there is something I remember well.”

I wasn’t sure if I should ask what that was, but I did.

“As I was being carried away on a stretcher, after they pried me out of the car, I remember a woman leaning over me. I had never seen her before, and she wasn’t a paramedic.” He held his arms crossed in front of himself, shuddering.

“Who was she?” I asked.

“All I know is that she leaned over me, as if no one were looking, and put her hand on my forehead. Then, she whispered something to me. In Swedish. ‘*Du lever igen,*’ she said. ‘You live again,’” he said, softly, as if he were trying to mimic the tone of the voice he’d heard.

“That’s bizarre.”

“Yes. Even more bizarre is that, after I recovered, I asked one of the people who had pulled me out of the car; a friend of mine, another driver, who the woman was who had leaned over me. He said I must have seen a ghost because there was no woman there that day.”

He held out both of his arms straight in front of him. One arm shook visibly, the other was steady. “That’s where my love of speed and women got me,” he said.

“Thanks for the warning,” I said as he walked out of my room.

“Oh, just a story.” He turned, smiled, and winked again. “Enjoy the speed and the women while you have them; just take time to reflect whether your tires can handle the next few hard turns. The bout of pneumonia you got through recently, that was *your* blown tire at high speed. It’s time for you to be alive again. Here’s as good a warning as any I can give—*carpe diem sed respice finem*: seize the day but consider the end.”

After Hans left, I was able to keep my mind on track, and managed to reread through the first half of *Martin Eden* without losing focus. I was just past the third paragraph of chapter twenty when the phone rang. It was Vanessa.

"I found the book," she announced proudly. "*Hunger!* Knut Hamsun's *Hunger!* That's where Ylajali is!"

"So quickly?" I said.

"I cheated," she admitted. "I phoned up a literature librarian the next morning. Took her about ten minutes to figure it out."

"Did you read the book, though?" I asked. I reread the third paragraph of chapter twenty again.

"Only very quickly," she said. "The English translation, anyway."

"And?"

"You're too damned complicated," she said, laughing. "But I do think I get how I made you feel, and I am sorry. Just try to be kind to me in your memoirs, will you?"

"The moon had not yet risen," I cited a line from what I was reading.<sup>19</sup>

"Pardon?"

"Oh, nothing," I said. "Contemplating being Ruth-less."

"You're too damned complicated," she repeated. She and I chatted a short while longer, and finally both hung up at the same time. I proceeded to the next chapter.

I would live again.

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<sup>19</sup> *Martin Eden*, Chapter 20, from which Conrad had been reading before the call: "The moon had not yet risen, and Ruth, gazing into the starry vault of the sky and exchanging no speech with Martin, experienced a sudden feeling of loneliness. She glanced at him. A puff of wind was heeling the boat over till the deck was awash, and he, one hand on tiller and the other on main-sheet, was luffing slightly, at the same time peering ahead to make out the near-lying north shore. He was unaware of her gaze, and she watched him intently, speculating fancifully about the strange warp of soul that led him, a young man with signal powers, to fritter away his time on the writing of stories and poems foredoomed to mediocrity and failure."

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## **Montreal, Early Summer, 1988**

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“This ain’t Canterbury, Toto” — 2023

## 21b

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Came a horrible summer day, warm and humid, putrid with the divided east and west of the deranging season, a Montreal summer day, with crazy sun and thundering whips of breeze that did not stir the strangle of the air.<sup>20</sup>

*What the hell have I gone and done now?* There I was, standing in a McGill University parking lot, looking back upon the scattered salt of my past life, carrying a backpack heavy with everything that mattered at all to me, every book, every scrap of scribbled-on paper, and no place to rest, my deck awash with the dust of a Canada I had only just crossed. I stank of days of riding the buses across the summer-dried surface of a nation, with this goal in mind, this very place I stood, but I was utterly lost now that I was actually there.

This was a genuine *city*. Babylon of Canada, double tongued Midgard Serpent, heating my fleshy parts with blast furnace air. The place I had left, that town, Vancouver, the one-car Gomorrah I'd known most of my adolescent life, did not spread across the horizon like Montreal. Jacques' assessment had been absolutely correct. I started to slowly return to the bus terminal, thinking maybe I would use all my traveler's checks to return. To give up. To buy myself back to something I maybe knew.

The streets were dusty, with old, torn scraps of newspaper blowing about, the air stank with the pollution of real city air, the noise was in my blood, in my sweat.

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<sup>20</sup> This is a pastiche of the first sentence of Chapter 21 of *Martin Eden*: "Came a beautiful fall day, warm and languid, palpitant with the hush of the changing season, a California Indian summer day, with hazy sun and wandering wisps of breeze that did not stir the slumber of the air."



Was I ever sweating; for the first time in my entire life, I was sweating as if in the throes of fever, but I was perfectly fit. The air was almost liquid, brackish, impotable, improbable by all my reckoning. This wasn't a destination. This was the road to Hell paved with good intentions. *What had I been thinking?* From the heat, from the beads of sweat on my sunburned forehead, I guessed Montreal wasn't hankering to see me. Finally back at the bus terminal, I took a coin from my pocket and called the number Réjean had given me the last time he and I had drinks while discussing the possibility of having my play translated to French.

"Why not translate it yourself?" he'd said.

"Living here in Vancouver, I'll never get the flow of spoken French well enough," I'd replied.

"Then why not move to Montreal, listen to the people there, and get the *flow*?" That was the challenge.

I wanted out, out, out. The job at the bookstore was relaxing and gave me enough money to eat while I looked about for a full-time position and kept the government off my back about being an indigent artist-wannabe sucking up welfare. So, as drunk as Réjean and I were when the challenge was made, I decided to take him up on it. Now, I was dialing the number he had given me, rolling the dice of his goodwill.

"Yeah, hello?" came a thick reply. I put my hand over my ear to cut out the noise at the terminal.

"Hello," I returned. "I was given this number by Réjean Lepage. He said—"

"Réjean! Jesus Christ! You know Réjean? How's he doing, then?" came the reply.

"He's well, and if you're Jeanne-Marie, he sends his best regards."

"Anyway, he gave you my number why?"

"He told me you may know of someone who runs a boarding house," I replied. "I need a place to stay. A room would be enough. I just arrived...."

"Well, any friend of Réjean," she said. "Let me see." There was a long silence, and then she returned to the phone. "Yes, there is an old lady in Outremont. Madame Galois."

"Great!" I ejected.

“I stayed there once as a boarder when I first arrived from Québec City when I was going to UQAM. Here, call her and say Jeanne-Marie Brun—Brun, okay?—recommended her place. Small rooms, but very clean, at a good price.”

I thanked Jeanne-Marie for the lead, and then called the number she'd given me, rolling the goodwill dice again, risking snake-eyes yet again. *Baby needs a new pair of shoes.* Within minutes, with her recommendation behind me, the old French lady who ran the place agreed to let me a room, sight unseen, for fifty dollars a week. I did not have enough money to pay for more than two weeks, but she said there were plenty of help-wanted signs in the neighborhood, and I would find a job if I had a strong back and wanted to work hard. She gave me directions on how to get to the place from the bus terminal.

Not long afterward, I was walking in a much quieter neighborhood. The street was clean, not dusty, there were trees, and the tall condominium brownstones that lined it were well kept. I found the number, rang in, and walked up three flights of stairs. Once at the top, I knocked.

“Hello, come in,” the old lady greeted me. She led me to my room. I realized, when I saw the three empty rooms in her place, that she had been so willing to take me because it must have been the slow season for her with the university students who typically stayed with her. I dropped my backpack at the foot of the bed, removed my jacket, handed her fifty dollars, and collapsed on the bed.

“You need a bath first!” she said. “You smell something awful, frankly!”

Five days on a bus. Five centuries, may as well have been—listening to the affronted dreams of the down and out as they shuffled across Canada, looking for a comfortable place to shit, sitting on frozen broken glass. The man who sat beside me the whole way was an ex-convict, which was all well and good enough, but he was breaking the rules by carrying a switch, fobbing the thing off on me to hold for him not ten seconds before an RCMP officer boarded the bus to chat up the driver. Yes, I needed a bath to wash it *all* off. I needed to be clean of the entire trip; I could have it clinging to me no longer.

She led me to the bathroom, explaining as we went what the house rules were, and how the price of the room included dinner with her on Tuesdays. I accepted all of the terms, closed the bathroom door, and peeled off my wretched clothes.

The bath water felt smooth on my skin, unlike what I was used to in the West. Somehow, I had managed to find a place in a city I knew nothing about—even the feel of the bath water on my skin was smooth, foreign, and strange. Next would come a full-time job that would pay for my room and board.

The next morning, after the first restful sleep I'd had in a week, I took my best clothes from my backpack and started towards Avenue Bernard. I'd already seen the street I came in on to get to the apartment and hadn't seen any shops of note there. To my left, as I reached Bernard, was a small restaurant. I went in with my traveler's checks and struggled to order two sunny-side up eggs. It struck me as amusing that I'd never before thought to ask what the words for *sunny-side up eggs* were in French. This stay in Montreal would certainly help with translating my play for Réjean and the others. Hélène might like the French version, too. It would flow right down the River Styx, over easy, sunny-side up. *Oeufs au plat*, no mention of sunshine.

After my breakfast, I walked a block up the street, and noticed a help-wanted sign. Madame Galois was right. There were places to work. It was a drycleaners. I walked in, smiled, and said, "I notice you're looking for help."

The man behind the counter had a measuring tape around his neck. He looked at me, smiled, exposing his golden fillings. "Yes, we are looking for full-time help," he replied in continental French. On the word *we* he swept his hand to indicate his wife.

"I need work," I said. *Damn do I need work.*

"Do you live around here?" he asked.

"I just arrived from the West Coast," I said. "I have a room here in Outremont halfway to the other side of *there*," I pointed in the direction, not knowing the street names well enough to try to pronounce them. "*Champagne* something."

"*Champagneur*? Have you any experience with clothing?" he said.

"Well, I understand all the terms in English, but in French, it will take a while," I said.

He looked from my feet to my head. “You speak French well enough,” he said.

“It’s not perfect,” I replied, “mostly book French, with a little practice with some French-Canadian contacts in the West. I learn quickly.”

“You sound Alsace-Lorraine fully born and raised,” his wife interjected, smiling widely. “That must have been one interesting ‘book’ you learned your French from, young man.”

“You understand it would be minimum wage?” her husband then informed me.

“I don’t have big dreams,” I said.

“You seem like the age that you might want to walk through this job and head to university,” he said. “You sound like an ambitious, intelligent young man who is going to walk away from a hot, physical job like this.”

“Am I too ambitious to eat?” I asked him. “I know how important hard work is. I don’t want to study. I want to eat. Whatever others before me have done: I am here to work.”

He offered his hand. “You can start tomorrow,” he said. “My name is Monsieur Guillaume, and this is my wife. This is our business.”

“I am Conrad,” I said. “But it sounds a bit odd in French, so please feel free to just call me *Jean*.”

“Jean it is, then!” Madame Guillaume agreed.

As I walked out of the store, with a job and sporting a new name to match my *faux* Alsace-Lorraine origins, I could not believe my incredible change in luck. It was beginning to appear that I had done something right, for the first time in a long time. I returned to Madame Galois’ rooming apartment, told her that I had found a job, and she invited me to tea to celebrate my good fortune. After tea, I went into my room, locked the door, got down on my knees and prayed again and again.

The words of my prayer became confused after a while. Was I thankful? Was this a prayer of thanks? Was I asking for mercy? Wisdom? The heat inside the room had me unable to remember what I was on my knees praying about. To be pure. I needed air. To pray, I needed air, so I left the room after an hour on my screaming knees.

“Where is Old Montreal?” I asked Madame Galois as I headed for the front door of the apartment.

She gave me directions and I took the buses needed to get me there. For some reason, I wanted to go to Old Montreal, as if my life depended on my being there.

After arriving at Place Jacques-Cartier in Old Montreal, I started to wander about. I stood on its cobbled streets, dressed only in a light shirt, shorts, and sandals, surrounded by sightseers and passers-by. The heat in the air filled my nostrils. I could feel my temples throb. Everywhere I went, someone tried to sell me something or entertain me in an attempt to charm a quarter out my pocket. Street performers danced in circus circles, did their magic tricks, blowing fire, while tourists and happy lovers wandered about, hand in hand. This was a crowd looking to buy an impressive enough memento to recall a perfect vignette as it accrued each successive year of nostalgia's patina.

I sat down on a wooden bench, watching a street artist draw someone for twenty dollars, wondering what he would see, were I to pay him twenty dollars to draw me. Could he draw a lonely line, without doubling back to erase or emphasize my face? Would it be a face that Vanessa would call pretty, as it poured sweat along lines in my forehead that only showed when I was crying?

The heat. It would have killed Vanessa to be in this arrogant fever. H  l  ne must have known this *exact* heat. Nothing and no one was *tame* or even *tamable* in Old Montreal, as far as I could see. It was horrifying and mesmerizing at once, and I could feel myself slowly melting into its cobbled maelstrom mosaic milieu.

I shuffled up to a street vendor and, as I looked over his pieces, I saw a small, brass saxophone on a necklace. The workmanship seemed familiar. I turned the charm around and saw the unmistakable **J+B** monogram of Jacques the Basque. This was his signed work. No two were alike.

Was he here, too? I knew that summer was his season for Montreal. The cold of winter had passed, and he could migrate east again, where the action was.

If Jacques were anywhere, he would be in Old Montreal. I guessed that he would be hiding in the respite of the shade of an alley or side street. He had worn black every time I saw him and, in such a bright place as this, he would be off to the side to keep out of the sunshine.

“Do you know a Basque vendor named Jacques?” I asked the street vendor.

“Jacques? A Basque?” he said, reaching over to the necklace that had a saxophone charm on it. He put the necklace against my chest. “Nice on you,” he said, honestly admiring the exquisite handiwork of the piece. “Do I know a Jacques? No.”

I paid him the fifteen dollars asked for the necklace and started across to the street to the next nearest vendor, a man called Yves. “Do you know of a Basque vendor named Jacques?” I asked. I showed him the mark on the back of the charm.

He screwed up his eyes. “Ah, yes, Jacques! I know him! We *all* know him. A *real* traveler! Great work! Does it all himself. No cheap import crap from him. Every last one unique!”

“Yes!” I said. “Do you know if he is in Montreal right now?”

“Yes, I think you can find him down that street, to the right, about two blocks from there,” he said. “That’s his spot.”

I shook his hand in gratitude and offered him a ten-dollar bill for the information, but he did not take it. As I walked down the street he had pointed out, I went over in my head what Jacques and I would talk about when I finally approached him. I turned right and continued. As I strained to see in the distance, I saw Jacques, leaning over his folding kiosk. I ran the rest of the distance to get to him.

“Jacques!” I called out when there were no potential customers in front of him to interrupt.

“Conrad!” he said. He walked up to me, hugged me, and kissed both my cheeks as if I were family. “What are you doing here in Montreal? No, wait, this makes perfect sense. Welcome to Old Montreal! You finally made it! How have things been over in Vancouver, then?”

Jacques and I sat together, talking about everything I had been through since the last time I had been downtown to his other kiosk, in the middle of winter, looking for work. I took a piece of paper and a pencil from him and drew his face, and as I told him of how I met H el ene and how we two parted, he pointed at the sax on the chain around my neck.

“You got that from Jean-Pierre,” he said. “I recognize it.”

“He didn’t seem to know you,” I said.

“Ah, he knows me. He owes me money!” he said. “Son of a bitch liar, that guy! A very good friend of mine.”

I couldn’t hold in my amusement. “What a life!” I handed him the sketch I had done of him. He smiled and pinned it up on his kiosk.

“It’s a good, honest life, being a street vendor,” Jacques said. He stretched his arms and cracked his knuckles. “Except when someone is dishonest. I should break that idiot’s nose for not giving me my commission on my pieces.”

“It will all be worked out,” I tried to remind him. “The code of the street vendor will prevail.”

“I know,” he replied. “I’m just old and cranky from the heat. I think this is my last year at this, and I will go back to the Pyrenees to be with family and old friends again. So you picked the right year to come and see me here. I’m glad you finally decided to try something other than Vancouver.”

“How do you manage this heat?” I asked. “It’s unbearable.”

“Which is better?” he asked. “The heat here, or the cold there?” He wiped away sweat from his eyebrows with a green handkerchief.

“I’ll take the heat, I suppose,” I said.

He looked at me and brushed his salt-and-pepper hair out of his eyes. “The music of the heat can drive a man insane,” he said. “I’ve told you before, Conrad: be very careful what you pray for. And just you wait for the cold here; it’s nothing like West Coast cold. It’s *much* worse than in Vancouver. You’ll learn that soon enough, though. Enjoy the heat while it’s here.”

When he said that, I remembered being on my knees in the sweltering air of my room. My shirt was wet from perspiration.

“Do you believe that people get what they pray for?” I asked, fumbling with the saxophone with my index finger.



“No,” he said. “But they get what they pay for.” He poured a cup of lemonade from his thermos and added, “And most people get what they deserve, too.”

“Pray for me, Jacques?” I said.

“I can only pray for you to get what you deserve,” he said. “That’s the Erromintxela<sup>21</sup> way as I’ve come to understand it over a long and eventful life, my friend. My best offer.”

After he and I talked a bit more, I stood, started for a bus stop to return to my room in Outremont. I was about eight feet away when he called out to me. “Oh, Conrad! One second!”

“Yes?” I asked.

“You’ll be happy to know I gave up selling those watches. You gave me a lot to think about back in Vancouver, and when all was said and done, it seemed the right path to follow.”

I returned to Jacques and gave him a solid embrace without saying another word, and then continued my route to a bus stop, holding the saxophone on my necklace the whole way to shield me from the barrage that was Old Montreal on a summer day, knowing it would get me out of there alive.



“Jacques the Basque”

— 2023

<sup>21</sup> Erromintxela refers to a unique mixed language spoken by a group of Romani people in parts of the Basque Country in Spain and France. It combines elements of Kalderash Romani with Basque. The connection between the Erromintxela and broader Romani culture serves as a testament to the resilience and cultural diversity of the Romani diaspora. Like many Romani communities, the Erromintxela people are known for their craftsmanship and artistry.

I thought I saw you walk by the storefront as I stood at the back, snapping shirt sleeves straight in the steam of the maiden. Part of me, the reasonable part that still managed to stick to my sweat, knew it could not possibly be you, since you were half a world away, but I wanted to release my grip, run to the front door, look out, and be certain. The sticky, reasonable part of me won.

I stayed firmly to my task, forgetting to lift my foot in time, scalding my right hand in the blast. At first, I did not feel the wound, but as I pulled off the shirt to put another one on the mannequin, I began to notice the searing in my wrist. I walked over to the sink, turned on the cold water, and put my hand under the stream.

“You burn yourself, Jean?” Jean-Paul asked. “Gotta be careful around that woman.”

“Yes,” I replied, rotating my wrist so the water would cool the right spot. I had once been burned by cleaning chemicals in that same spot and remembered the rash that had spread up my arms and kept me from working at my first real job.

“Gotta be more careful, Jean,” Jean-Paul repeated himself as he lifted the press and turned the pant leg in front of him.

When the pulsing in my wrist had calmed down, I returned to the maiden and continued with the shirts. Soon, it came time for lunch and I quickly made my way out the front door with my brown bag and looked about to see if I could find you. Of course, it hadn't been you in the first place who'd walked in front of the shop, so I knew I would not find you. Eventually, I gave up, walked across the street to the park, and sat at a table to eat.

An old man sat a few feet from me, with his back to the table, breaking a small piece of bread into tiny pieces for the pigeons. As he tossed the crumbs to the grass, he muttered what sounded like a stream of profane revelations to no one in particular, and the pigeons came to accept his offering. I couldn't taste the apple and the puffed rice wafer had no taste at all anyway, so I handed a half-eaten wafer to the old man, and he started breaking that into pieces, too, without even thanking me for it. Two old men bent on a park bench, feeding the pigeons with their Klein-bottle livers.

It was as I watched the birds take up the broken rice wafer that I noticed your doppelganger again. She was standing in front of the stationery store beside the drycleaner's where I worked, looking inside the window. I knew she was not you, but she looked like you, and that got me to wondering. Two lovers at a riverbank—not the Styx—pretending they remember younger summers.

I missed you. I hadn't seen you in months. This woman looked your identical twin, so if there was any part of her personality that was even the tiniest amount like yours, would it matter, in the end, that she wasn't you? Could she take away the pain simply by being enough like you to suffice? An old Elvis Presley song came to mind. She had your mark, but perhaps, just like Jacques' trinkets, there were no two alike. I fantasized about walking over there, to the store, and introducing myself to her. Would it break my heart that she wasn't you, no matter how much she looked like you? One breathes through a saxophone, closer than a scale ascending on the precedent.

I stood, negotiated through the traffic without bothering to wait for the pedestrian light, and approached her.

—Pardon me.

She turned to face me, and it was then that how much you and she looked alike really overtook me. I expected to hear your voice come out of her mouth, but of course, it didn't. I listened when words left her mouth, watching them fly to my ears.

—Yes, how may I help you? she replied, in a strongly regional French.

—I don't mean to be a bother, I replied, in a French that she would know came from lesson after self-lesson and not from Quebec or Europe, although I had been told by Madame Guillaume my French sounded as if I'd been born and raised in the Alsace-Lorraine region. *You resemble someone I know.*

Her expression was to be expected. It sounded like a line, and so, I reached into my wallet and found your photograph, and showed it to her. She took the photo, obviously startled by the resemblance, and then returned it to me.

—I thought you were trying to play me, she finally said. Yes, she and I do look *very much* like twin sisters.

When the moon appends for months and we retrospect yesterdays, what do we offer bent to appease Persephone? Like a dog chasing after a car that he finally was able to catch, I did not know what to do now that she and I were talking. It struck me how incredibly idiotic I had been to approach her in the first place, without any real plan or purpose. After a few seconds of struggling for something to say, I finally acted.

I took a pen from my shirt pocket, wrote my phone number on the back of your photograph, and handed it to her, without saying a word. Since I was practically in front of where I worked, I walked into the shop and continued with my day's tasks.

The walk to my rooming house seemed to take an hour, even though it was only a few minutes away. I greeted Madame Galois in the usual way and retreated to my room. That night, I did not eat my usual dinner of another apple and two boiled eggs. It took forever to fall asleep.

A week passed with my walking up and down the streets at lunch, trying to find her again. She did not call and I did not expect her to. Friday night of that week, as I wallowed on my bed in my small room, the phone rang. Madame Galois was not home, so I went to the phone to get the call, since one of the house rules was to never let the ringing phone go unanswered.

It was her. She had nothing to do, on a Friday night, and wanted to meet me for a drink. I suggested the small restaurant that sat almost kitty-corner from where I worked, and we set a time. After hanging up, I shaved, splashed some water in my hair so it would stay back, and descended the stairs of the fire escape that I sometimes used to get down from the third floor.

Rather than take the main street, I made my way up the alley, in two minutes, and was soon at the top of the short flight of stairs that led down into the restaurant. The place was busy, but I spotted her immediately upon entering and went over to her table.

—I didn't think you would phone, I said.

—I half expected you had given me *her* phone number, she replied, almost laughing. I took a chance.

And then she said something quite odd: *What song are you playing?*

—Pardon?

She pointed at the saxophone on my neck.

—Let's imagine I'm playing *our* song.

—That would be “Round Midnight,” she replied.

She and I had a few drinks, she ordered *poutine* and a beer, offered me a few bites, and we talked on and on about life and its sorrows as if we knew one another. Of course, she and I did not know one another at all, but I tried to forget that she wasn't you. French poured from her mouth, even though her lips were formed so much like yours. The French was what kept me from thinking she was you. Finally, we decided to take a walk through the park where I usually ate my lunch.

I took a chance and put my arm around her waist. She felt like you, no matter what my ears were telling me. She did not, as I had expected, pull away from me, but instead put her arm around my waist, too, as if she were completely comfortable in the darkness of the park in this first embrace. She was the first to break the silence in the park.

—I wondered why you approached me, she said softly. I know it was because I look like this other woman.

I did not know what to say, knowing that anything I could say might insult her. At last, I replied,

—Ineffable isolation.

—Yes, I suppose, she returned, gazing intently past my eyelids and into me. But am I not a replacement? A stand-in? You cannot deny that you came up to me because of what you knew *her* to be. I am *not* her. Until you and I spoke a bit about matters, you did not know anything uniquely my own to claim.

Why was she doing this to me? Here she was, close enough to kiss—I wanted to kiss her so badly—asking me all these questions. Of course I knew she had the right to want to know these things, given the circumstances of her and my meeting in front of the stationery store, but I did not want to admit these things out loud. I wanted to kiss her, or you, it didn't matter whom, why, or where, only that I *kiss* her. I wanted the ineffable horrors of solipsism to end.

—I had a very enjoyable time with you tonight, I finally conventionally replied, pulling back a little. We should meet again, don't you think?

I looked at my watch: it was seven o' clock.

—I had an enjoyable time, too, she replied. She kissed me on my cheek and pulled away from me. *But I cannot meet you again.*

I wanted to scream so that the police would come and throw me into a steel room. Nothing of my freedom or safety mattered anymore. I wanted to howl. Instead, I quietly asked,

—Why not?

—I am not *her*, she finally said.

—But you are *you*, I tried to hold it together.

—And the *me* who I am is *married*, she finally said, turning her back to me. *You forgot to ask.*

Now I really wanted to scream. As she walked away, I followed her for a while, but decided it was futile. The obvious questions went through my head. Why hadn't I noticed? Why had she agreed to see me on a Friday night under the pretense that she had nothing to do? Had I somehow answered one of her questions so poorly that she decided to lie about being married?

Instead of asking any of these questions out loud, I walked back to my room at the boarding house. I raged against the silence at my tongue, hot words inside trying to burn the dumb away.<sup>22</sup> My head was spinning from the beer and the excitement of the night, but I managed to sleep it off.

The following Monday, I was back at work, standing in front of the unforgiving scalding mannequin, hard at it on steaming sleeves one set after another in endless, hissing succession. Distracted for a moment in thought, I burned my right wrist again, on the old wound, and went to the sink to cool it off.

—*Jean!* Gotta be more careful around that woman, Jean-Paul said as he pressed pant cuffs, one after the other, my faithful bock-mate, his cigarette hanging from his mouth with little regard for inflammable fumes or incendiary by-laws.



“Silent<sup>meta</sup>-Requiem”

— 2023

<sup>22</sup> I rage against the silence at my tongue,  
 Hot words inside try to burn dumb away  
 Open the locked door at my teeth and say,  
 But ever silent is my mouth, tight strung.  
 Never has the gnashing of my teeth stung  
 So much as now, but all my words do stay  
 Inside my heart and mind, unsaid, away  
 From ears to hear their cold curse: *Zerstörung*.  
 The gale force phrase would topple useless dreams,

Lost souls would be torn from their false found joys,  
 And so, I hold in the sour, silent screams,  
 And since the sound hits *me* with all its worth,  
 My inner ear goes deaf from all the noise.





*“Ça ne me fait rien” — 2023*

When she passed again, three days later, I quickly walked to the front of the shop. Monsieur Guillaume and the others were out. I opened the door and called out to her. She turned, saw me, and walked up to me. Without thinking, without reasoning whether it was the right thing to say or not, I looked directly at her and said,

—I don't care.

She seemed startled at the exact words I'd chosen to use: "*Ça ne me fait rien.*" It was true. It meant nothing to me that she was married. I wanted to continue to see her, married or not, whether she looked like anyone I used to know or not. I wanted her absolutely.

—Something in you says the same or you never would have called me the first time, I added.

As she walked away, I felt certain that she would not call. I had been an idiot.

She called me that night, however, and we again went to the underground place to talk. She arrived twenty minutes after she said would, but I did not mind—at least she arrived. I began by explaining to her, as if she'd asked (but she hadn't), that I was a writer, an artist, not just a laborer.

The first time she and I talked, we'd talked about life in general. This time, however, she and I went on in detail about ourselves. She told me of her unhappy marriage to a man who traveled the continent and was hardly ever in Montreal. I told her briefly of Vanessa and Hélène, how I didn't seem capable of staying in a relationship without breaking it with a hammer.

—Who do you want? she asked, sipping her wine.

—Let's go for another walk when our drinks are done.

Once we were outside, I opened up about what I felt had been my problems with Vanessa and H  l  ne.

—With Vanessa, the one who looks like you, but is nothing like you, I got angry at her for meddling in my writing life and telling me what not to write about. My private writing is my sanctuary, and her presence there was uninvited.

—Space 'to be' is important, she said. I respect a man with the courage of his convictions, though yours are quite extreme.

—With H  l  ne, on the other hand, I was not willing to take her space from her, even if taking a little more of it would have been enough to have been with her longer, I suggested. *We might* have tamed one another despite ourselves, and maybe even would have grown to not remember how free we once wished to be. But she explicitly let me know I was not invited into a bond of deep love with her; I was fine with this contract at the time. But I would have rather....

—So, it is all about too much on either side, she summed it up. Too tightly strung, too loosely strung: no *balance*.

We held hands and circled the park.

—I expected too much of Vanessa, I admitted. I wanted her to *know* me (not *bend* me) or just get lost. Or at least, even if she didn't know me, at least accept me without telling me who and what I could write about in my private poetry. After a long pause, I added a truth I now realized: We hardly even knew *one another*. It's preposterous to act as if there was anything *real* there. One weekend in her apartment, at one another like....

—No need to explain, I can see where you're headed with this, she stopped me, placing her finger on my mouth.

She leaned toward me, kissed the back of her finger, and our lips touched. She was not afraid to be seen with me, in the park, kissing.

—Doesn't Michel have any friends? I asked, looking about, trying to determine if anyone cared to notice us.

—Ah, well, we're safe: all of our friends are in Quebec City, she explained. I live here because of my job, he lives mostly there, travels all the time, no friends of his here. Or mine, really.

We continued walking around the park, holding hands, as if it were the one activity that we had been made for in life. We did not speak much, but things seemed to be said despite this.

—I'm thinking of getting an apartment above one of the stores on Avenue du Parc and Rue Bernard Ouest, I said. I make enough money to get a small one.

—It makes sense, she agreed. You mean right near the *Rialto Theatre*?

—Yes, right in that area. Would you come to visit me there? I asked, grasping her hand firmly. When I get it?

—I would, she said. It would be nice.



“The Gatekeeper” — 2023

Looking for an apartment took on a heavy weight that I may otherwise not have noticed, had it not been for her promise to visit me. She and I would have a place, out of the view of passers-by, where we could talk. As I made my way up Avenue du Parc, I entered every place that had a sign on it and asked to see what they had. Most of the apartments were too expensive. Some did not have stoves or refrigerators. Finally, I found a bachelor's apartment above a portrait photographer's studio, only a few doors southeast of the *Rialto*.

The rent was reasonable. The suite was unfurnished, but the landlord, the old Greek gentleman who owned the adjoining photography studio underneath, informed me that another tenant had just jumped his lease, leaving his furniture behind, and he offered to let me look through that apartment for anything I wanted. I wanted the bedframe, the small desk, a chair, and a table, and he agreed to let me have them.

- What is it you do? he asked before I signed the lease.
- I work at a drycleaning place, I said. I'm also a writer.
- The cleaner down on Avenue Bernard by any chance?
- Yes.
- That's where I get my stuff cleaned, he said.

He checked that the details of the lease were all in form, handed me my copy of it, and I walked back to my old room at Madame Galois'.

She was *not* happy that I was leaving. It wasn't just that she was losing her only boarder in the off season, but that she would no longer have anyone to pass time with at dinner on Tuesdays.

I suggested that I could come over on Tuesday nights for dinner as I was within walking distance.

—At least until you find another boarder, I added, and have some regular company around here.

—That would be very nice, she said. I would appreciate that, frankly.

I then carried my full backpack out, double kissed Madame Galois, and headed for my new apartment. After putting my things in the apartment, I headed in the direction of Mont-Royal Park, walking along Avenue du Parc.

In time, I came to a storefront that was obviously a used bookstore. It made me think of Jim and Oliver. Wondering if these two had doppelgangers of their own, I entered the dark and musty store.

There were books everywhere, not just on the shelves. A man in his fifties sat behind a stack of *National Geographic* magazines. He appeared to be in the process of pricing a small stack of books to his right. He looked up at me, greeted me, and continued what he'd been doing when I entered.

I spent at least an hour looking through their stock. Most of the books were written in French. I found the store's small English selection, and started looking for *The Sun Also Rises* on a self-bet that they would not have it in their collection. As I scanned through the titles, a man about Jim's age approached me.

—First time here? he asked in English.

—Yes.

—We have a lot of selection, said he.

—I used to work in a used bookstore, I said. It had a French section only a quarter the size of your English section.

—Some of our English books are mixed in with the French, he said. We slowly pull them out and put them here.

Abel and I chatted for a while, and I soon discovered that he, too, was a writer.

—Can I read something you're working on? I asked.

—I don't show *anyone* a work in progress, said he. Just what's been published. I don't want to be influenced or caught with my pants down.

He went to the backroom of the store and returned with a journal. It had a glossy cover with a picture of a gargoyle on it. As I read his story, he talked on and on, throwing in a periodic “Just wait until,” and “You’ll like the part where....” There was nothing technically wrong with what I was reading—it was *technically* superior to my own work—but the story made no sense to me whatsoever in terms of its *raison d’être*. I lied and said I liked it. I could not put my finger on what it was about his work that bothered me, so I did not offer any critique. I was his technical inferior, and thus quite willing to admit to myself that perhaps there was nothing *wrong* with it other than the fact that I personally did not at all enjoy reading it.

—Where have you been published? asked Abel.

Nobody had ever asked me that question before. The closest anyone had come to asking was Héléne and a few of the theatre crowd I’d met at her evening social. Oliver and Jim had never suggested I even try for publication yet. I didn’t know what to say to Abel. Did he consider things like that important? Of course he did, or he wouldn’t have asked.

—I haven’t, I said. Haven’t even tried, actually. Haven’t even considered trying. Everything I do is finger exercises for this part of my writing journey.

Abel blinked, as if I had sworn at him. His voice changed cadence. He became important. It was then that I knew what it was about his piece I didn’t like.

I did not like the author of the piece explaining to me as I read his work, trying desperately to like it as much as he did, but not succeeding, what it was that I was to do to get published: which works I was to read, how I was to learn from them the intangible magic that would get me safely behind the hind end of a gatekeeping lackey gargoyle. The names he mentioned, the readings I could attend—You are going to submit to So-and-Such, aren’t you? That’s the key to City Literati—as he went on and on about this and that journal or venue or magic bullet, I did not hear any of Jim or Oliver in him. I heard instead a person whose name in print at the top of a page in a journal found in a dusty used bookstore was more important than the *work* under the name. He spoke endlessly about publication, but not about *writing* or even the story itself, and his ink attested to this truth.



I wanted out of the place. It was not the bookstore I knew. The heat was suffocating, but it was not that alone. It was Abel. Had I been Cain, I would have picked up a heavy book and clubbed him with it. There was nothing wrong with his *writing*. I supposed it deserved to be in the journal. I loathed him not because the gods had found his sacrifice more righteous than mine—after all, I had never put my lamb before those same gods, and could admit to myself that his lamb was fatter—but because he was the gatekeeping gargoyle on the glossy cover. I could take no more and returned to my search.

—Do you happen to have *The Sun Also Rises*? I interrupted his impromptu lecture on whatever it was exactly he was saying.

—Hemingway? That would be in the A.D.W. Section, he said. *Another Dead Writer*, he explained.

I could feel my blood rising into my face. My heart was pounding. I searched my brain for one quotation, anything, that I could use to club him. Nothing came to me. I did not reply, but simply went about looking for the book. I could not find it, and walked briskly out of the place, without another word into my ears or out of my mouth.

Out in the languid liquidity of the Montreal air, I walked to the winged Cartier Monument obelisk at Parc du Mont-Royal. There was a small crowd of people gathered around. Some were playing small drums, and a few were dancing. I found a place in the shade of the monument, closed my eyes, and let the music and the social chatter flow into me, through me, to remove the mustiness that I had taken in at the bookstore. Slowly, my mind became clearer.

My thoughts moved from Abel to her. I didn't have her phone number. I didn't even know her name: I had bet it all on an anonymous encounter and an evening walk through a small local park. How would I get in touch with her? These questions were more important than Abel. I listened to the drums for answers.

When I arrived back at my apartment, I purged Abel from my system completely by writing "In the Shadow of Clay Pigeons," a short story based upon something that had happened when I was a boy.

I wanted to find the center again. Spirits tiptoed where fairy fire scorched memories and autumn lovers leapt (and slept, finally) to their conclusions. Pencil sketched timelines, along the outer edges of eggshell white, tore rough sketchpad pages while the bark bit my back. Some neighbor's radio retold songs that meant something when they were written, and through the midnight air the carry met the brook, and I found the center and returned to thermos coffee inspiration. These were stones, never leading to a gazebo, in the backyard memories.



We write to taste life  
twice, in the moment  
and in retrospect.”

—**Anais Nin**

Tuesday, directly from work, I walked in anxiety to Madame Galois'. She handed me a tiny slip of paper. On it was the name *Anne-Jolie*, and a phone number. *Anne-Jolie*. Ylajali? No. *Anne-Jolie*. Her name. Her number. My anxiety was gone; she existed. *Eleven!* A natural! Madame Galois asked me to say grace before we ate. I prayed, we ate, we chatted, and I left for my apartment.

It was hot inside the apartment. I tried to open the window, to let in some air, but the thing had been painted shut along the seam. I sat on my bed, scribbling some comments to myself about the story I had written with Abel in mind, unable to decide if I should phone Anne-Jolie. After an hour, I called her.

—Would you like to see my apartment? I asked. It's not much, but it's now my home.

She wanted to walk outside first. Where would we meet?

—Do you know that used bookstore across from the Park? I asked.

She did. After hanging up, I rushed to meet her. She and I entered the store. Abel was sitting, pricing books. He nodded at me.

—Which authors do you like? she asked me.

—Camus is good, I said.

—Oh, yes, I love Camus, too, she replied.

—*He* said I shouldn't read Hemingway, because he is a *dead* author, I whispered to Anne-Jolie as she scanned through a shelf, looking for Molière.

She then went to a section of the store, as if she knew the place well, and pulled Camus' *L'Étranger* from between two French translations of Fitzgerald's works. She went to pay for it.

—Camus is a dead author, Abel pronounced to her.

Anne-Jolie was prepared with a reply.

—I want to buy his immortal book, she said, not his mortal corpse.

I couldn't help laughing.

At a small café, I showed her the story I had written to purge Abel from my blood and perspiration. She nodded as she read it but did not comment. I did not mind that she did not comment; I was content with her presence and had no need to hear either how awful or artistic the piece was.

## **“In the Shadow of Clay Pigeons”**

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Summer days in the logging camp passed slowly through the horsefly-ridden heat. On Saturday nights, there were the radio plays that managed to bounce from the States, all the way up to Maple Bay on Gilford Island. *The Shadow* and *The Whistler* came across time and space to Conrad's radio, as he hid under his blanket with his ear pressed against the speaker so his stepfather wouldn't hear him. To Conrad, the only child in the camp since his arrival a year earlier, these may as well have been live productions, since they were the only entertainment he had. When two of the married men of the camp moved in their families from the Vancouver mainland, then, Conrad was more than happy to have some company.

Sean and Bill came first. It did not take long for the boys to get together. Within a few days, it was as if there had never been a time when Conrad's only company during the day was the horseflies and his only game was trying to avoid getting bitten. Because Bill was the older of the two brothers, Conrad naturally spent more time with him, leaving Sean to run behind as they dusted the trails of the camp.

When, a week later, Ritchie arrived with his mother, he fell into the group smoothly. Now that there were four, it became easier to get Sean into the games; they could form fair teams.

“I'm starting to get bored of football and Pig-in-the-Middle,” Ritchie complained one day.

“Beats picking our noses,” Conrad said as he tossed the ball to Bill over Sean's head.

“What else can we do?” Bill asked.

A loud boom echoed through the camp just as the ball reached Bill's hand.

"What was *that*?" Sean asked.

"My mom brought my dad's shotgun with us," Ritchie said. He started to run in the direction from which the shot had come. Soon, the other three were running behind him on the trail, past the family trailers, towards the large clearing on the other side of the camp. As they came to the end of the trail, they slowed down and approached with more care.

"Pull!" Richard hollered to his friend Duke. A few seconds later, the shot cracked through the air.

Marked watched with his mouth open in wonder as the clay pigeon vanished from sight.

"Cool!" Bill said.

"Hey, Dad!" Ritchie called out to his father.

"Hey, Ritchie!" Richard called back. He pointed his shotgun down at the ground.

The other boys came into the clearing. Conrad noticed that a clay pigeon launcher had been fastened to the top of a used wire cable spool. It was set up so it would launch the pigeons out into the ocean, so that the shots would all go in a safe direction.

Duke walked away from the launcher, towards the kids. "Any of you know how to launch?"

Ritchie stood forward and said, "I do."

"Stand about ten feet behind us, kids," Duke said as he took the gun from Richard.

Richard stepped back a few paces from his friend. Ritchie pulled back the arm of the launcher, placed a clay pigeon on it, and waited.

Duke closed his eyes, as if thinking, and then yelled out, "Pull!" and the pigeon went flying. A second later, Duke opened his eyes, and the pigeon was gone.

"That looks fun!" Sean called out.

"Pretty neat, hey?" Richard called out.

"Open your eyes one second after you hear me yell *pull*," Duke said. A few moments later, Duke yelled the command, and Conrad counted one, and opened his eyes. The disk in the sky disappeared into dust. Ritchie launched three more skeet, and then returned to his friends.

When the men were gone, Conrad ran up to the wooden wire spool and examined the launcher. He pulled the arm back.

“Man, that’s hard to pull,” he mumbled.

Bill joined him and tried. “Sure is,” he said. “You try it, Sean.”

Sean could only get it halfway.

Ritchie picked up a small stone, put it on the arm of the launcher, pulled it back about halfway, and launched the stone out into the ocean.

“Wow,” Sean said.

“Neat, huh?” Ritchie said.

It was then that Conrad started to think. About ten feet away, there was a stump, right along the line of where the launcher shot the rock Ritchie had just lobbed into the sea. He did not say anything to the other boys, but he knew summer wasn’t going to be so boring after all.



Conrad ran along the trail, past the family trailers, towards the clearing. Sean, Bill, and Ritchie were at the clay pigeon launcher, holding tin cans, waiting for him.

“Did you bring them?” Sean asked, holding out an empty tomato soup can.

Conrad reached into his pocket and produced a handful of spent bullet casings. When they saw the casings, Bill and Ritchie ran over to the stump and lined up their cans on it. As soon as they had lined up the cans, they ran back to the launcher and the boys counted out the casings.

For the last week, they had been using small rocks and pieces of wood to knock the cans over. For some reason, when Bill had suggested they think of something else to launch at the cans, Sean figured spent bullet casings would work. Perhaps it was the casings’ connection to bullets that made the idea seem exciting, or perhaps it was because the casings were shiny, metallic, and might make a neat sound when they hit the cans, but Conrad agreed to gather up as many as he could find around the camp.

“Six each,” Ritchie finally declared.



Ritchie went first. After two misses, his third try hit the can. The sound of the metal hitting the metal excited everyone.

“Cool!” Ritchie shouted.

Sean was next. Since he didn’t need to pull the launcher back very far, he was able to join in on this game Conrad had invented. He didn’t hit a can until his last shell.

“I bet I can get it on the first shot,” Conrad boasted. He did not tell them that he had come out the night before with the casings and had been practicing with them.

“Bet you can’t,” Bill said.

“No way you can,” Ritchie agreed. It had taken him three tries to get the feel for it.

“Bet I can,” Conrad said.

“Can’t do it,” Sean said.

Conrad put the shell into the launcher. “Stand back,” he said.

The shell flew along its path and knocked over a can.

“Amazing!” Ritchie called out.

Conrad knew he had cheated but didn’t say anything. He put the next shell in the launcher, pulled back, and let it go, forgetting to yell “Stand back!” before launching it. He stood, waiting for the second can to fall, but it did not fall.

Instead of the sound of metal hitting metal, Conrad could hear, over his left shoulder, the sound of someone yelling Bill’s name. He slowly turned his head to see what the commotion was about.

Sean was shaking his brother. Bill was on the ground, on his side. Ritchie was standing back from Bill about five feet.

“Bill!” Sean sobbed.

Time became slow for Conrad as he ran over to see what was wrong with his friend. The side of Bill’s head was covered with blood. Bill’s eyes were rolled up, his mouth was wide open.

“Bill!” Conrad hollered. He pushed Sean out of the way and held Bill’s hand, feeling for a pulse, thinking not with his mind, but with his first aid training. He could not look at his eyes. The pulse was there.

“Damn, damn, damn,” Ritchie kept saying.

Conrad started undoing the top buttons of Bill’s shirt with shaking fingers.

“We’re in deep,” Ritchie said.

“Is Bill going to be okay?” Sean asked through sobbing.

“Run to get Sharon,” Conrad said.

“Who?”

“The first aid lady in camp,” Conrad said, realizing that the other boys didn’t know everyone in the camp very well.

“I don’t know her,” Ritchie said.

“Me neither,” Sean added.

“I have to stay here,” Conrad said. “Do either of you know any first aid?” He started to take off his shirt. When it was off, he put it over Bill.

“No,” they both said at the same time.

Sean’s sobbing was getting louder.

Conrad lifted one of Bill’s eyelids. It horrified him to do so. He could see that Bill needed help, fast.

“I’ll go get help,” Conrad finally said.

“Is Bill going to be all right?” Sean asked again.

“They’ll take care of him,” Conrad said as he stood up. “But they’re going to *kill* me for this.”

Ritchie said, “Nobody says who did it, understand?”

“What?” Sean asked.

“We make a pact,” he said. “Nobody says who launched it,” he explained. “*Nobody*. Got it?”

Sean was quiet for a while. “It was an accident. Conrad didn’t *mean* to do it. It was an accident. I *won’t* tell. Go get help, Conrad. Please! He’s bleeding!”

Conrad started to run, shirtless, along the path, towards the camp. Halfway to the camp, he started yelling for help at the top of his lungs. He made his way past the trailers, and to the commissary trailer, where Sharon was. When he arrived at the door, he flung it open, ran over to her, grabbed her arm, and screamed, “There’s been an accident! Get your kit and follow me. Now!”

Sharon looked at Conrad’s hands and saw that they were covered with blood. She then noticed that he wasn’t wearing his shirt. She quickly stood, grabbed her first aid kit, and followed him as he ran towards the clearing.

When Conrad arrived at the end of the trail, he stopped and pointed at Bill. He could not approach. His feet would not carry him any further.

Sharon finally arrived to the clearing, saw that Bill was on the ground, and ran over to him. “What happened?” she yelled when she saw the boy’s head.

Sean was sobbing and could not speak.

“Accident,” Ritchie said. “He got hit in the head.”

“By what?” Sharon asked as she opened her first aid kit.

Ritchie held out a bullet casing. “By one of these,” he said.

Sharon looked up, saw the casing, and yelled something Conrad couldn’t understand from where he was.

“Where’s the one that hit him?”

“Is he going to be all right?” Sean finally managed to ask.

“I don’t know,” Sharon said. She checked the boy’s pulse, as Conrad had done earlier. “All of you, go get more help.”

“Remember the pact!” Ritchie called out before they arrived at the trailers.

Conrad saw that Jim the mechanic was leaning over a truck engine and ran for him.

“In the clearing,” he panted. “Sharon needs you. Bill had an accident. Go help her.”

The boys found as many people as they could, sending them all to the clearing. Finally, Sean ran to his trailer and found his mother. Her screaming could be heard throughout the camp as she followed behind Sean to the clearing.

It was then that Conrad started to cry.



“Which one of you little bastards did it?” Richard yelled as he wrapped the chain around the launcher.

None of the boys spoke.

“It took *four hours* for the pontoon plane to arrive,” Richard said. He put the lock on the chain, and then put the key in his pocket.

“So who the hell did it?” he said. “The boy is in really bad shape, you know. He may *never* wake up. The thing went into his brain. Right into it.” He tapped his temple. His face was contorted. “Who did it?”

None of the boys spoke. All three were sobbing. Duke was standing behind them, with his arms crossed.

“Stupid little bastards,” Duke said. “Lucky you didn’t kill the kid. Damned lucky. Pretty much did a worse job on him than that, truth be told. Stupid bastards.”

Conrad could not get the memory of Bill’s rolled up eyes from his mind.

Richard grabbed his son by the ear and started for the trail. Duke put his hands on Conrad and Sean’s shoulders and led them away from the locked-up launcher. The walk back to the trailers seemed to take a week. Richard, still pulling his son by the ear, walked up the stairs into his trailer. When the door closed behind him, the yelling really began.

Duke turned the two boys around, looked them both in the eyes, one after the other, and pulled a shell casing from his pocket. He then put the open end up to Conrad’s temple and pressed it.

“Feel that?” he said. “That went right into his head, you little bastards.”

Sean was sobbing uncontrollably as Duke walked off.

It was Friday night. Conrad could not eat at the cookhouse. He did not want people to look at him. At about seven o’clock, Ritchie knocked at his trailer door.

“Is Conrad here?” he asked Conrad’s mother.

Conrad’s mother went to the door of his room and said, “Ritchie is here to see you.”

Conrad got up, went to the door, and stood on the stairs. He could tell, in the porch light, that Ritchie had taken a beating from his father. He had a bad shiner. This kind of old-school licking came few and far between.

“He tried to beat it out of me,” Ritchie finally said.

Conrad’s heart was beating hard.

“Jesus,” Conrad finally managed to say.

“I didn’t say *nothing*,” Ritchie then said. “Got it? Nothing.”

Conrad and Ritchie started walking along the sea.

“Is he going to be all right?” Conrad asked. The sea was spraying at his shoes.

“My dad says probably not,” Ritchie said. “Maybe if the plane got here sooner, but it took a long time to get him to the hospital.”

They did not speak after that. Conrad plunged his hands into the icy seawater and shook them about. “You know...,” he began. He wanted to tell Ritchie, who had taken such a beating and kept quiet about who launched the casing that had hit Bill, that he had practiced all night the night before the accident, to be able to take out the can on the first shot. All that practice hadn’t helped Bill one bit, though. He did not speak anymore after that. After a few minutes, they both headed back to their trailers. That night, Conrad did not sleep well.

The next day, he did not come out of the trailer at all. The hours passed, and he just stayed in his bed, unable to move. At about two in the afternoon, his mother arrived at his bedroom door. “Bill’s mom radioed in to Sharon,” she said. Her voice was heavy.

Conrad sat up and looked at his mother.

“The doctors got it out of his head, but Billy nearly died,” she said.

Conrad closed his eyes and fell back onto his pillow. He could not think much.

“She says they say he probably will never be the same. He was such a bright boy before all this,” she added as she closed the door.

Like a clay pigeon, Bill had disappeared in an instant.

Ten minutes of tears streamed down Conrad’s cheeks before his door opened and his mother walked into the room again. She sat on the side of his bed and took his hand into hers, slowing caressing it. She brushed his hair from over his closed eyes. He could feel her fingers smooth away the tears, as she leaned over and kissed his forehead.

“I’m just glad it wasn’t you,” she whispered.

Conrad wanted to say to his mother, “But it *was* me,” but he could not open his mouth.

“I’m very sad for Billy’s mom, but if that had been you with that in your head, I don’t know what I would do now.” She then stood, closed the door, and left Conrad alone.

Conrad did not get out of his bed. The time came that he normally would have turned on his radio and listened to the radio plays, but he did not do that this night, for the first time in months. He wanted only the consolation afforded by silence.

This Saturday night passed slowly through the guilt-ridden heat. Only the shadows and horseflies knew what lurked in his heart. The cold and salt of the sea were unforgiving and had not taken away the stains from the hands of a ten-year-old boy. Unlike clay pigeons, those stains would not disappear when he opened his eyes.



“Young Pontius” — 2023



*“Mea maxima culpa!”* — 2023

Over the weeks that followed, Anne-Jolie started visiting me at my apartment and I began to understand more fully how incredibly beautiful her mind was. She and I would sometimes simply sit and read for an hour or two, and then get into debates over what we had read. She read my work, marked it up with a pen, flew into rages sometimes about how important it was to get it *perfect*. Whatever this meant.

As she had that first time she and I went for drinks together, she challenged me to ask questions about myself and my art and others that I did not think immediately to ask. To do this, I had to ask questions about my life that were immensely painful to ask myself. Maybe if I carefully blew away the steam from my mental cup, touching my lip to the pool of its congress, I would drink.

—Why did you leave home when you could have stayed? she asked.

—One day, my stepfather came to me. It was just months before high school graduation. He complained that there never seemed to be any money. Not two nickels to rub together, despite his decent union wage. Since I was the only one under our roof who must be eating like a teenager even though I “looked” rail thin, and I didn’t have a job, all that money must have been going down me and it was time for me to carry my share. So he asked—told, actually—me to quit school, get a job, and . . .

I did not want to continue to explain but forced myself to say it despite my reluctance.

—I left home the next day without explanation to him where the money really was squandered or by whom.



—I’m not exactly sure how to respond to that, Anne-Jolie admitted. It’s unfortunate and has many layers that might take you some time to fully appreciate.

—It set me on a certain twisted path in life, to be sure. We’ve yet to see how it evolves and concludes.

I took what Oliver in his replete bookshop had told me about reading not to merely how a work made me feel, but the exact reasons why it made me feel that way, the exact techniques used to pull me around, and I took what Anne-Jolie was helping me understand about myself, and I wrote. I cast the runes and traced them with my thumb, for nothing put my soul escrow, and some sharp soul-glyph, not unlike fickle *tau*, jumped back and forth in conundrum.

The triad of Anne-Jolie, my conscience, and my esthetic did not delude me into thinking that what I was writing was *great* work, or even half-assed *decent* work, but it was at last and at least *real* work—the mutilated personal came only when I had the courage to let Anne-Jolie inside and pull out my rusted chains. Not having the patience to pursue two or three roads at once, but rather willing to travel a fourth, I prepared my chariot and switched the horse, not looking back, as the wheels met the standard mark and brought me along life’s Appian Way.

It wasn’t always easy having her around at nights. She sometimes pried too much, pulling out more than I wanted to admit to for a night, pushing me harder than I cared to be pushed, and we fought (gently) about this more than once. Always, though, we threw up our hands at the end, held one another, and let it slip us by as if it had never happened. She tattooed my sins upon my back, when she saw them in me, exposing the crack, and learning my transgressions. *If you find opium horrors at my hookah, will you still inhale me and try to dream, or will you run from what you learn?*

Oddly enough, even the fights that “never happened” helped me see myself and my surroundings more clearly. She was a sharp teacher and was willing to come out of a fight looking the villain in my eyes, if she sensed that it would help me grow. I never came out of these fights looking the villain because I never won an argument with her. Ever.

Or does the villain always lose? I was the village idiot. Anne-Jolie also was so widely read that any self-esteem I may have had was quickly dismissed by the knowledge she borrowed so readily during our debates, as if the pages were open in front of her, asking to be cited, alluded to, referenced, and put as footnotes to her antitheses to my shaky theses.

—Revise until you no longer recognize it as your own, she said one day upon reading a particularly appalling piece I'd written. Until you can say, This is dung, but at least it's not *my* dung!

Her mother had been a university professor, and I found out, a well-known French-Canadian author, and she grew up in a family where word play, knowing the classics, and critical thinking about literature were everyday social events. She could remove my Halloween mask with a well-timed allusion. She even knew how to cite Gosciny and Uderzo when she needed to sap my strength and conquer me.

It wasn't easy always being wrong in a debate on some picky point of literature, but when she and I got into these, she invariably showed up my shaky formal foundations. No matter how often, and how deeply I rolled my inner eyes at her and tried to dowse her with my arms angled like some rune, standing like a branch on tree, there was always some instant that I did not understand her and ended up gored on Yggdrasil in my search for enlightened vision, seeking runes and finding only ruin.

When we weren't going over one another's brains, we were going over one another's bodies. She was neither Vanessa nor H  l  ne in bed but was instead uniquely Anne-Jolie. Being an avid reader, she would start talking about some passage she'd read earlier, while we were making love, and I eventually understood that this was just her way of mixing two things she enjoyed together.

—This reminds me of..., she once said as she was about to climax, and then lost her train of thought as the moment came and went.

No matter what, though, the time came, as I suspected it eventually would, that Anne-Jolie and I would not be together. She was married, and my not caring about that did nothing to change the fact.

It was not guilt on either of our parts that broke us apart, but circumstance. Her husband had finally been offered a huge promotion, one that wouldn't have him moving about all the time, but it was in Paris. For all the things Anne-Jolie was, she was not particularly cold-hearted when it came to her husband. Their marriage had been unhappy because he was constantly moving around, and she rightfully wanted to make it work, so she wanted to follow him to Paris. I was the unholy intruder.

I wanted her to stay, but I realized, as I watched her tell me the news, as the pain left her lips, that she still loved Michel. She and I had spent a wonderful summer together. She had given me some excellent criticism and things to consider. Our minds worked well when we were in the same room together. But it was *borrowed* bliss. She had seen something in me worth dragging out, kicking and screaming, and I let her do it, though I had put up one hell of a fight. I had wondered why she had so selflessly invested so much effort into me and *my* artistic growth during our time, asking nothing but effort of me. I came to understand that she'd always known of Michel's coming promotion, and she had decided to focus on me, rather than involve me in *her* inner self and needs, as those would soon radically change for her.

It was *borrowed* time. We had been gambling with lifted chips, making fools' bets, entering the game knowing that the house would always win, but somehow wondering if the wheel would call us winners. Time became tessellated on the Hilbert curve of Venus de Mine. Not only a simple face, but Madonna's embrace, disgrace, and tesseract ray trace. Tessellated doubts, losing irresolute edges, becoming sphere-cones, intersecting on space-time lines and personal chronologies, as beat poets chanted Circle T Square and got it out while echoes of Oscar Peterson painted the sound stream. Time became unbecoming in the recursive summing matrix, iterated halving along the evens. What were the odds on that?



- We shouldn't write one another, I suggested.
- It would be too painful, she agreed. And dangerous.
- We should kiss, part, and bear it, I sighed.
- Yes, she agreed again.
- And if forever fare *thee* well.

We kissed, and as my lips touched hers, the meaning of what it would mean to be without her overcame me, and I began to cry right in front of her. I had only ever wept in front of close family to that point in my life. It started in my stomach, and worked its way up, and I could not stop it before it reached the kiss. This started Anne-Jolie crying, too, and we held one another in my apartment, on my bed, rolling in the scented sheets, our last night together, sobbing at what we had done to one another because I simply had not cared that she was a married woman.

With a Klein-bottle kiss, I kissed myself, tasting the only lover I'd known, with the Möbius hug in sinews sewn, I pulled a book from off my cluttered shelf. I traced to a glyph—it was not simple book I had taken, so I read it all again and quite alone, returning it later, gently.

—We should make love, part, and bear it, she said.

I positioned myself above her, slid into her, held her hands above her head the way she liked when we made love, and as I moved over her, continued to sob.

—This is the way it was certain to end up, I whispered.

—It makes me think of a..., she replied as she began to climax.

*Just once, turn me into a butterfly, so that I may fly  
and with my wings trace the contour of the heavens.  
Don't reserve that pleasure for yourself, Zeus. And  
when I circle around the center, when I draw in the  
sky some great equation in the swirl of clouds above  
your place of rest, look up and forget I was not always  
that and let me stay that way.*

I didn't see her to the door. I let her go, as she had to go, and remained in bed, with the window closed, with my manuscripts piled on the small table beside the window, and I bawled as I never had in my life. As each convulsion hit me, the complaint became worse, and I could not breathe in the same way I could not when pneumonia had me wishing for Vanessa.

Like Archilochus, I turned and ran when the fight became too hot, and in doing, dropped my shield, so that some proud shepherd took it up and claimed it as his own. How many proud shepherds have picked up our shields and married our Neobulés? And though ages pass, we still find the breath to curse *Lykambes*, rather than *ourselves*. Ἦ τὰν ἦ ἐπὶ τᾶς!<sup>23</sup>

Had there ever even *been* an Anne-Jolie? Had she, just as Hans' ghost woman after his crash, leaned over me, touching my sweaty forehead, whispering: *Du lever igen—du lever igen?*

No, I could smell her in the room. Her marks and script were on the pages on the table by the window. She was not Hans' apparition, but my arms shook, both of them, not only one as with Hans. My arms, my legs, and my neck were like melted flesh that refused to harden. But through and because of her, I had *lived* again.

*God damn it all.*

I had done this to myself, the *hamartia* I accepted in full inglorious onus. I had pushed, and fallen, and gotten back up, ready to push, and push again like some Zeus-damned too crafty Sisyphus, and now, at the top of the mountain with Anne-Jolie, I had been told that I dreamed too damn big, climbed too damn high, too damned fast and all the while I had been admonished: *carpe diem sed finem respice. Mea maxima culpa!*

Hours ticked away, but I did not get up out of bed. Instead, with each tock of the clock on the wall, I thought of an unsaid word I could have said that would have done something to keep that wall from being built in the first place.

I could not stand outside myself this time; I was the agent of my own damn regrets. I had found the immeasurable "it" and I measured it now in the passing of vacated villages along the wall.

I had gotten what I deserved.

*God damn the wall.*

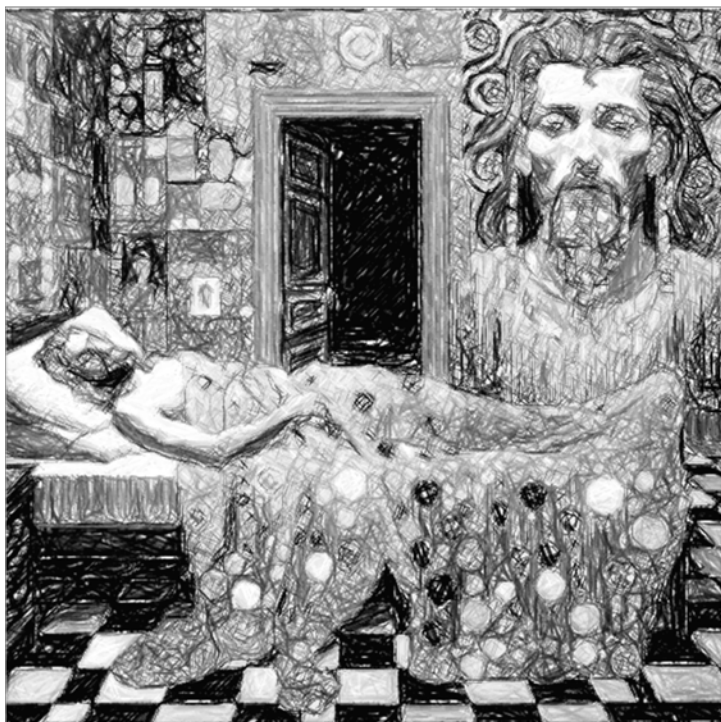
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<sup>23</sup> Ἦ τὰν ἦ ἐπὶ τᾶς!—Spartan mother's exhortation to sons headed for battle: "[Return] either with [your shield] or [dead] on it!"

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**New Westminster, Winter 2006-2007**

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“Are you awake?” — 2023

## “Wake Up!”—December 2006

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—Conrad, wake up. I’ve made coffee. Can’t you smell it?  
Roll over and play dead. I want to roll over and play dead.

—Get up, will you?

My eyelids are shaking. I do not want her to see my eyelids shake, or she will know I’m not asleep. Can she see my eyelashes fluttering?

—Oh, never mind!

Door slamming. She didn’t see my eyes move. Conrad didn’t have to wake up. Conrad didn’t want to wake up. Conrad is asleep. No, not asleep. Just tired enough to refer to myself in the third person, he said.

My brain feels like the first passages of Ecclesiastes. Vanity, vanity, roll over and play vanity. Conrad is sick. Conrad is tired. Conrad is awake with his eyes shut, quivering, shaking in bed as the last thundering echoes of the slamming door finally make it to the corners of the room and out of his oscillating head.

Conrad has been asleep too long. Kiss my lips, taste my tongue, breathe my air, the same air I just breathed, air that kept me alive another minute with you, but notice that I’m asleep behind uninterested open eyes. Blue, green, purple, gray—it does not matter one bit. It all fades to gray sooner or later. The sleep always comes.

I am Conrad. Awake or asleep, dreaming, dancing, singing, eating, breathing air you just exhaled; none of that matters to my being awake or asleep. Conrad just *is*. Am I?

—For Christ’s sake, Conrad, wake the hello up!

*Buzz off!*



“Okay! I’m *awake* already! No need to get your knickers in a twist!” I yell back, eyes now open but back to blissful sleep. “What’s the big deal? It’s Saturday!”

Exclamation points are the voice’s way of telling the listener that logic, reason, and vocabulary are insufficient to carry on a real conversation. When all else fails, a big stick does the job.

I shuffle off the bed, stagger about a bit, and let the nightmare come into focus. Vertigo, somnambulism—it is all the very merry well same to Conrad in the morning. Especially the Saturday vertigo. Conrad doesn’t want to be in the Saturday or in any day ending with an exclamation point.

“You’re not making any sense,” Roxana says. “Are you okay?”

“Not making any sense?” I ask, truly caught off my guard. “What do you mean?”

“What does horseback riding have to do with anything?”

What the hell is she talking about? “Horseback *what*?”

Roxana walks over to me as I put my hand on the side of the bed to steady myself. I can’t quite see the reflection of my face in her eyes, but she looks genuinely concerned. “Apple pies? What’s going on, Conrad?”

“I didn’t say apple pies,” I insist.

“Shetland ponies?” Her eyes now betray her absolute confusion.

“Have I woken up making absolutely no sense at all to you, then?” I eject, still trying to steady myself with the one hand, and reaching for the closest bedpost with the other.

“Oh my God. You’re totally gibbering,” she informs me. “Have you had a stroke? Are you okay, Conrad?”

—How many fingers am I holding up? I ask with my hands just before I fall to the floor and wake up to Satori.



—I don’t quite know how to say this, but you’re in a deep, deep sleep. That horrified screaming you hear is the sound of a book you once read as a child that always haunted you. You know, you never should have read your older sister’s books.

No, I never should have read that book. Evil creatures, hangings, and descriptions of things that couldn't be shaken for some time. That screaming I hear now is *that*?

—You were too young and horrified to scream then. And that's why you hear it only now.

But if I am asleep, how can I hear you?

—Who am I to be heard at all?

I fell to the floor.

—When?

Just a minute ago, at most.

—Conrad, can you tell me if you smell anything?

Apples?

—Anything else?

The faint ... what is that? The faint smell of horseshit. No. Apple pies on windowsills.

—Conrad, wake up.



Plastic tubes. Cigarette tubes. My nose is dry. When was the last time I remember spitting? Conrad, when did you last take a piss?

“Three blind mice,” Roxana said.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Contrariness is perspiration under milk lodgings,” she answered. Well, she seemed to be answering that. She reminds me of a badly dubbed Japanese monster movie. Her lips aren't moving right to the sounds I think I'm hearing.

—No, it's not a stroke, Roxana. I'm just asleep.

“Perfunctory,” she then insists. Again, it's those eyes doing the insisting, the way they're wont to do.

I get up off the floor, face the dresser mirror, and notice that I'm not even dressed. I can feel the linen pajamas on my skin, but I can't see pajamas in the mirror. That is *me* standing there, though. That is *Conrad*, after all. Conrad is standing in front of his wide bedroom mirror on get-the-hell-up-Saturday, in linen pajamas, and he's awake, and he's happy, and he's ever so damned happy about his life, about his marriage, about his career, and *that* Conrad is the Conrad standing at the mirror.

So who the hell is *that* then? Is. Let me stress the *is* so it all stands out. Who the hell *is* that then? Exclamation point! Door slamming. Horseback riding. Apple pie upon hot apple pie upon apple pie. It's turtles, all the way down. Turtles and apple pies.

My forehead is cut but though I see it, I don't *feel* a cut. All I feel is my forehead. But the naked man in the mirror has a cut on his forehead. The naked man who isn't awake or asleep or even happy that it's Saturday is bleeding all over the place. Blood is so hard to get out of anything if it goes dry. It's worse than red wine. Unless you get it with cold water while it's still wet.

Conrad is wide awake.

—You say that like you mean it.

Roxana, how many fingers am I holding up?

—Wake up, Conrad!

I told you I *am* awake already.

Playing dead in front of the mirror. Playing. One note at a time. The play is the thing. Places! *Lights up!*

“Conrad you're really starting to scare me.”

—Am I? What is it about *me* that is scaring *you*? Can I make it clear, or can you hear a word I am saying at all? When I say, “I don't want to do that,” do you hear “Apple pie?” When I say “that really pisses me off” do you hear “horseback riding?”

**If that is what you *hear*—that is why we're *here*.**

I make much, much more sense than the guy standing in the mirror with a cut on his head. How long has it been since *he* spit?

If my eyes are not actually open, how then can I *see* that cut on my forehead?

—Conrad, do you know where you are?

I'm trapped in a book I read as a child that I was too young to understand, and now I am lost in the screams I was too young to scream.

—No, you're horseback riding.

I don't want to do that.

—It's not up to you.



—Conrad, are you awake?



“Are you awake, Conrad?”

“What day is it?”

“It’s Sunday.”

“Sunday? Then what made me think it was Saturday?” I ask Roxana as she purrs beside me under the sheets.

She laughs, glances over at me with those beautiful eyes of hers, and says, “I’ve no clue, silly love. Saturday has come and gone already.”

I lean over to her smooth forehead, kiss her, and say, “That is has. That it has. Why did you want to know if I’m awake? Now that you’ve got my attention. What’s up?”

“Just a bit lonely here beside you. Wanted some company.”

I put my arm around Roxana, breathe in, and then exhale, and then whisper, “Well, here I am. Half-asleep, mind you.”

“Half-awake is good enough,” she assures me.

*Enough for you*, I think, and then put that thought right away until the coming New Year. In the meantime, a new short story has wandered into my mind and I feel the pull to commit it to the written page before it becomes a phantasm. I will get to that when I’ve found a calm moment alone.

Midnight at the Arcanum.



“When a Stranger Wandered In” — 2023

## **“When a Stranger Wandered In”**

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There was no work at all for outsiders in Grace Springs, New Hampshire. Whatever such work there might have been had long since moved away. No one had bought or sold a house there in at least half a generation. When a stranger wandered into town, it got him noticed. If he wasn't just passing through, he always ended up at The Old Door, the only place to rent a room. Keith Coppersmith, the owner of the inn, would then pass the information on to the regulars at his bar, and within a day, the speculation began at the drug store and the barbershop. Most often, by the time the speculation started to get exaggerated, the stranger was gone, and it didn't matter anymore, but every now and again he or she would stay on longer than most, and the real sport of gossip would get going. The tall, slender guest at the inn had already been there for three weeks, always paid each week in advance in cash, and had not said a word to anyone about what his business in the town was or when he planned to move on. In the Grace Springs system, that had elevated him to the kind of celebrity status very few managed to achieve.

Every morning at nine o'clock, he came out of his single bedroom, ate a small breakfast of ham and eggs with a black coffee, put back one glass of milk, and returned to his room until one o'clock. At one, he came down for a corned beef on rye, and then wandered out onto the many trails in the groves around the town, some which led to the river, and others which led to the old mining shacks. Around six every night, he returned, had a small supper, and retired to his room.

After three weeks, he paid a visit to Arnold's for a hot towel straight razor shave and a trim. "Keep the mustache," he said as he sat down. "Stop it at my lip. No hanging down the sides, please."

"Certainly," Arnold replied as he lathered up the only new customer he'd had in over a year. As Arnold skillfully scraped away about four weeks' growth from the stranger's face, he set to talking, as barbers will do in small towns like Grace Springs. "If you don't mind my asking, you here for some rest and recuperation? To get away from the bustle for a while?"

When the blade had made its way past his Adam's apple, the stranger replied, "Yes, that's a fair assessment."

Arnold smiled triumphantly. His bit of news about the stranger would be the first real, confirmed bit of gossip anyone had managed to get out of the man. "It's a good place for that," he said. "Good folks here in Grace Springs. Good, quiet folks. You had any of Anna's apple pie yet?"

"Can't say that I have," the stranger replied. "But now that you've gone and gotten my mind on a slice...."

Arnold wiped the scum from the blade and started folding the hot towel. "Just past the post office, to the right, then the left. When I was a boy, we used to smell them at her window and try to steal them, but she was always wise to us and would be waiting for us. Gave us a piece, in the end. I'm sure if you ask her nicely, on a day you smell one, she'll give you a piece. Her apple pie *is* Grace Springs. Recommend you go and get a piece when you can before you leave. You won't regret it."

"I just may take your advice," the stranger said.

"Right, left, just past the post office," Arnold repeated as he counted out the stranger's change.

"Oh, just keep the change," he said as he walked. "And thank you for the direction to Anna's apple pie."

"Think nothing of it," Arnold replied. "Arnold Brown, by the way," he then added.

"Adrian," the stranger admitted his first name.

"Think nothing of it, Adrian," Arnold repeated. He now had *two* new pieces of news on the stranger to share with the regulars out on the barbershop porch later that afternoon.



Adrian could smell apple pie. He wandered past the post office, turned right, and when he had reached the first left hand turn, faced the small house. On the ledge of the open front window was an apple pie. Soon, he was at the door, knocking.

At first, the old woman who answered the door stood back, but when she saw Adrian's smile, she smiled herself.

"Arnold Brown the barber tells me your apple pie is some of the best eating in Grace Springs," he said.

"Oh my," Anna replied. "I just made two pies. You must come in and have a piece," she then added.

Adrian stepped forward and entered Anna's house. "My pleasure, Ma'am. I am Adrian Pelletier," he introduced himself.

"So the mystery visitor has a name," Anna said as she directed him to the dining room. "You have created quite a stir in Grace Springs," she then admitted. "Would you like some coffee or tea?"

"Coffee would be nice, thank you," he said. "Black. I can't imagine how I could have created a *stir*, Ma'am. I don't even stir my coffee, for Heaven's sake."

"Anna Macdonald," she greeted as she put the coffee pot on the stove. "Oh, Mr. Pelletier, you haven't created a stir by *doing* anything unseemly. You have to understand how a town like Grace Springs works. We're just a little piece of America. We have our mysteries and our secrets, and we like to amuse ourselves by pretending that anyone who comes through longer than a few days is some great unexplained threat or as yet unimagined salvation. I suppose," she added as she put the coffee cup on its saucer, "it's how we keep ourselves from losing our heads hereabouts. It changes so little year to year."

Adrian sat at her table, his back straight. "Oh, I understand Mrs. Macdonald," he said. "Before my time in Europe, I lived in a small town not unlike Grace Springs."

"You lived in Europe?" Anna asked. She reached for the pie on the window, cut out a piece, and put it on her best plate.

"I served in France," Adrian replied.

Anna smiled. "Oh, I see. Which branch, Mr. Pelletier?"

"United States Marine Corps, Ma'am."



Anna Macdonald put the plate in front of Adrian with a cup of black coffee beside it. "There you go, young man. It isn't much, I know, but the boys used to love it."

Adrian carefully filled a fork with the pie and put it to his mouth. When he had swallowed, he took a sip of his coffee and nodded. "That's awfully good pie, Ma'am."

Anna blushed. "I'm happy you like it. Are you a man of God, Mr. Pelletier?"

He nodded. "Northern Baptist Convention, Ma'am."

Anna nodded her approval. "I haven't seen you at the services since you arrived in town," she said. "Why not come by this Sunday? We're Congregationalist around here, and I'm sure God and Pastor won't mind if you sit in on one of the sermons. We'll be having a church picnic after sermon this Sunday. You'd be more than welcome. You can be my guest."

Adrian smiled. "It would be my pleasure, Mrs. Macdonald." He finished the slice of pie, drank the rest of the coffee, and stood. "You've been kind to have me in for pie. I'll see you on Sunday, then, Ma'am."

The old woman showed him to the door, kissed his forehead, and wished him a good afternoon. He wandered back to the inn, went to his room, and did not reappear until his usual time the next morning.

"I hear you're in town for some rest and recuperation," Keith Coppersmith said as he brought him his usual breakfast.

"I am, indeed," Adrian replied.

"This would be the place for it," Mr. Coppersmith said. "Quiet kind of town, we are. Nothing much exciting or disturbing happens here. Good place to rest your head a while."

"Peaceful place," Adrian agreed.

Keith Coppersmith sat across from his table. "Now, I'm not one for putting his nose where it doesn't belong, but do you mind if I ask what you're wanting to rest *from*? I could lend you my fishing tackle if you're the kind of man might find that relaxing. Some good trout down in the river if you've got the patience for it."

Adrian smiled. "Nothing as calming as pulling in a few decent trout. That would be nice, Mr. Coppersmith."

“Call me Keith,” the innkeeper said. “I’ll see what I can put together. Some good bait worms around here and there.”

“That sounds great. And if I catch anything eating size, maybe you can fry it up for dinner tonight?”

“Would be my pleasure to,” Mr. Coppersmith replied.

When Adrian opened his door again to come down for lunch, a fishing rod, some tackle, and a bagged lunch were sitting beside his room door. He took them and headed for the river instead of going to the dining room for his usual midday meal. Along the way, he gathered together a few worms, and soon he was at the river, casting his line. The sun reflected off the river as the line drew an arc where it jerked about waiting for a bite. When he returned to the inn, he had four large trout with him.

“One for me, two for your family, and one for whoever you think might be hungry,” Adrian said as he put the fish in front of the innkeeper.

Keith Coppersmith smiled, took the fish to the kitchen, and brought back a glass of beer for his guest. “I know you’ve never ordered a beer,” he said, “but figured after a day in the sun, you wouldn’t turn one down.”

Adrian drank the beer, thanked his host for his hospitality, and returned to his room to rest before dinner. When he did finally come down, he was presented with a plate of trout and potatoes, and quickly ate his meal.

When Sunday came, Adrian arrived dressed in his uniform. The two medals on his chest told of his bravery in battle: Bronze Star and Purple Heart. His buttons were polished, his cuffs and collar pressed, and every stitch was in perfect order. He took off his hat before entering the church, brushed back his short hair with his hand, and shook the usher’s hand before being offered a space in the pews. Several heads turned when he came inside in his Dress Blues.

Although he had been in Grace Springs for almost four weeks, he did not recognize half the faces in the church. One face he did not recognize in particular was the face of the pastor. He did, however, notice that Anna Macdonald was seated near the front and that she noticed him, smiled, and he nodded his recognition her way when she did.

After the sermon, the pastor approached Adrian and offered his hand. "It has been quite some time since I've seen a new face here," he said.

"An excellent sermon, Pastor," Adrian returned.

"Anna Macdonald tells me you come from progressive Baptist roots," the minister noted. "Where would you be from?"

Adrian was quiet at first, but at last replied, "From a town not unlike Grace Springs, Pastor. Pinedale, Maine. Northern Convention."

Pastor Douglas nodded his approval, put his left hand on Adrian's shoulder, and said, "I hope to see you at the picnic later."

"Mrs. Macdonald has invited me, Pastor," Adrian said. "I will most certainly be there. Again, an excellent sermon."



"You are so dashing in your uniform," Anna Macdonald greeted Adrian as he approached her at the table.

"Ma'am," he replied, taking his hat off to greet her.

"Have you been saying hello to everyone today?" she asked.

"A few, Ma'am. A few." He sat beside her and folded his hands on the table.

"Susan Brown, for instance. The barber's eldest daughter."

Adrian smiled. "I've met Mr. Brown. A nice fellow. I wasn't introduced to his daughter, though."

Anna pointed Susan Brown out to Adrian. "Very pretty, and as sweet as they get. But you're right to think that she's a proper lady, and probably wouldn't so much as say *boo* your way without a regular introduction."

"That's fine, Mrs. Macdonald. Plenty of time for regular introductions later."

"Do you plan on staying in Grace Springs for any length of time, Mr. Pelletier?" a woman about Anna's age who had been sitting quietly beside her asked.

Adrian waited until his mouthful of potato salad was down and replied, "It's the kind of town I could imagine myself staying in for a while, Ma'am."

“I can’t remember the last time anyone from the outside world stayed longer than a month,” the woman replied.

“Mr. Pelletier, this is Mrs. Helen Trent.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Trent.”

Helen smiled. “Mr. Trent is sick at home today, I’m afraid. He would have liked to meet you. He served in the Great War, in France. I hear you served in France, too.”

“Yes, Ma’am. I touched down at Omaha Beach and pushed into Germany with my unit from there. Got a field promotion to Staff Sergeant after the Bulge. I’m sorry Mr. Trent and I couldn’t meet today. Perhaps when he’s well, Ma’am.”



When Adrian returned to the inn, he changed back into his civilian clothes and went to the front porch and sat at the top of the stairs. The air was still and warm. After about twenty minutes, he heard the door open behind him.

“It was good to see you over at the church today,” Keith Coppersmith greeted him.

“A nice bunch of people you have around here,” Adrian replied.

Mr. Coppersmith handed him a full beer and sat beside him on the stairs with one of his own. “Now, again, I don’t mean to pry, Mr. Pelletier, but you can imagine that we all don’t see too many people come longer than a few days on a just-passing-through. I would know, with this place, because they would certainly blow through this place on their passage through. Do you have any particular purpose here other than rest and recuperation? Maybe something I can *help* you with?”

Adrian sipped his beer, still staring out at the dusty main road of the town. “A piece of apple pie now and again,” he finally replied.

“Pardon?”

Adrian put his right hand on the innkeeper’s left shoulder. “Who owns that piece of land up near the first two old mining shacks?” he asked.

“That would be Mr. Trent,” Mr. Coppersmith replied. “I believe you were introduced to his wife today. Why?”

“This town needs a carpenter,” Adrian noted after reaching the halfway mark on his beer. “Some of the houses are falling to disrepair. Loose floorboards here and there. Un-mended fences. A bit of rot that needs fixing.”

“You want to buy that land and open up shop? Likely isn’t much profit in it around a town like Grace Springs, you know.”

“Oh, I know.”

“Then why go to the bother?”

“Ever been to war, Mr. Coppersmith? The Great War?”

“No. Due to my eyes. I tried in my day to join up, though.”

Adrian turned to the innkeeper and said, “My eyes now see too well, sir. They see Staff-Sergeant-well, unfortunately.”

“I don’t understand,” Mr. Coppersmith replied.

Adrian took a long sip from his beer and finally said, “You might think I’m a stranger to your little town, but I grew up in a town very much like this. Names were different, is all. Same air. Same dust on the road. Same barbershop. Same post office. Same kind of picnics after church. You understand?”

“It’s a good, quiet life. Good to know we’re not alone in the world for all our blessings.”

Adrian put his hand again on the innkeeper’s shoulder. “But you see, sir, when you go away ... and see so much ... so much death and destruction and pain, it *reconfigures* you. Inside. It changes your eyes. You can look in my eyes, and it won’t matter. It won’t matter to you because you’re a stranger. You never knew me *before* I went to war. You’re not my two folks, old and set and remembering a freckle-faced boy chasing garter snakes and the like in the long grass with a stick, and not understanding what they see in my stare now that I’m back. Someone like Susan Brown can look into my eyes, and maybe take a fancy to me. Maybe want me to ask her to dance.”

“Supposing you’re properly introduced,” Mr. Coppersmith said, poking Adrian in the ribs lightly and grinning.

“Yes. Supposing we’re properly introduced,” he agreed, grinning back. “Mrs. Trent and Mrs. Macdonald can look into these eyes and see a young man who served his country when called and came back alive in mostly working order. A stranger with an honorable past and a decent idea for how to make a future. Nobody over in Pinedale, my hometown, can do that now.

“They remember the old eyes. The other set. The eyes that never looked into a dying man’s face and shoved the bayonet a little harder to give him some mercy. The eyes that never saw someone all of sixteen-years-old die just a yard in front of them. They can’t look into these eyes, and I can’t look into theirs. Not anymore. It’s cold and it’s ... chilling. You understand? Like you’ve never felt, or would care to feel, I assure you.

“A stranger wandered into my body when I went over there. A stranger wandered in that none of them recognizes anymore. But I can look into *strangers*’ eyes, and they mine, because they never knew me before. They don’t know what color these stained-glass windows were before they went different from all that havoc and inhuman savagery. I still remember what I loved about the small-town life. I want that back. That little piece of apple pie they couldn’t steal from me. I’ll even take cherry pie. I can build from there. I’m a patient man. Give me a hammer and some nails, and maybe an ear now and again, and I—or maybe even *we*—can put it back together.”

Keith Coppersmith went quiet. He regarded Adrian Pelletier from the top of his head to the bottom of his beer glass, and he sighed. He slapped him on the back with his wide left hand, and then stood.

“Let’s go fishing, Adrian,” he said. “I found another old rod. I’ll bring a few sodas.”

Adrian took his last sip of beer, stood beside the older man and said, “Sounds wonderful, Keith.”

“I hear Mr. Trent is sick. I’m sure if we bring him a few trout, he’ll be more likely to take kindly to you and sell you that land on fair terms. And when the dust settles, I’ve got a few rooms at this place with loose floorboards.”



“Misery and Glass Frost” — 2023

## **“Clean”—1 January 2007**

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The surface of the bed was uneven on his back. The ceiling above him was stained, with a few of the panels slightly out of place. The sprinkler system had a slightly brighter coat of paint than the rest of the room. After a few minutes on his back, he reached into his pant pocket and found his lighter, and then into the other pocket for the nearly empty pack of cigarettes. Within seconds, he had a smoke between his lips, but it was several minutes before he found the strength to flick the lighter and bring it to the tip of the cigarette. Once it was lit, he inhaled deeply, held in the smoke, and then let it rise slowly from his nostrils.

Several drags in, he realized that the ashtray was out of reach, but he did not want to get up. His desire to finish his cigarette was greater than his lack of desire to move, and so he quickly stood, fetched the ashtray, and was soon again on his back. The cigarette finally done, he butted it out into the ashtray and closed his eyes.

Alone on his back on the uneven bed of a rundown hotel room over a pub, his bones ached, his eyes burned, even the strands of his hair were heavy on his scalp. While he was not trying to force other thoughts from his mind, other thoughts simply did not make it into his imagination. When he lit his second cigarette, he started to envision a cloud of almost blue smoke. The smoke did not obscure his vision too much; he could still see the vodka through the smoke and glass. He wanted it to encase him, hide him as much from himself as from the world.

He reached into his pocket, looked at the display, and pushed the phone under the pillow above his head. When the phone stopped shaking, he tried to recall to his mind the smoke again.



It would not return to him, and so he gently floated through the jet blackness there instead.

It flowed between his atoms like a soothing bath of India ink, washing through him and taking with it his pain. Any glimmer of hope and light in him found a peaceful rest in the ocean of nothing that surrounded those remaining sparks of life. Only when he let the darkness take over was his life not at risk, and he knew well enough that even the stars of the winter night sky above the hotel needed the void around them in order to not burn into cold lumps of coal. The darkness was a refuge, safer than a shot of vodka or a hot drag from his cigarette. The darkness was not smoke; it did not obscure his vision but allowed the light a medium through which to travel, so that he could see himself more clearly. Only on the darkest of nights could one really *see* the moon and stars; he longed to stare into Diana's eyes.

The constant thud of the music from below his room resonated through the floor, the bed under him, through his shirt, through his ribcage, into the chamber of his lungs, and past his exhausted heart. He could not make out the song, but that did not matter; the beat shook the dust inside him and as he exhaled that dust out, into the stale air of the room, he felt himself begin to feel cleaner. Only a little bit, but still, *cleaner*.

It was then that he needed to try to be clean again. He lifted his hands to his shirt buttons and slowly started to unbutton them without opening his eyes. After his shirt was completely open, he reached down to his belt buckle, undid it, and undid the zipper of his pants. He kicked off his shoes with two quick jerks of his legs, throwing them so far that they bounced off the wall. He needed a bath. He stood and his pants fell down past his knees and he kicked them off the rest of the way. He was in his boxers and socks only now, standing before the mirror hanging five feet away directly at the foot of the bed. The filth that covered him, that poured out of his skin, was not the darkness; it was the grime from outside trying to get in, trying to slither between his atoms like acid rain and time would try to corrode the stone hubris of Ozymandias. He wanted it off.

As he walked to the bathroom, he slid off his boxers and pulled one sock off and then the other. The bath was old and the paint on it was flaking. He turned the tap, trying for hot water.

The water that poured from the hot faucet was cold. He did not care; the grime had to be removed.

As he placed his left foot into the freezing cold water of the tub, his chest began to shiver from instinct, but he did not relent. Soon, he had both feet in the icy water, and eventually, he was sitting in the tub. His teeth were chattering, but he eased backwards into the water until only his nose and mouth were above the surface. With his right hand, he rubbed along the left side of his ribs, and then with his left hand he did the same along his right ribs. He clenched his teeth tightly together so they would not shake. The knives of the cold water began to relent as his body became used to the temperature. With the small bar of generic hotel soap, he scrubbed the layer of skin covering his pubic bone, and then along his inner thighs, and finally down the crack of his ass. He wanted it all gone; no grime from his past would stick to him. His ablutions would be complete. He wanted the freeze of the water to touch him to the bone. Grace Springs.

He had no shampoo and so instead used the bar of cheap soap on his head. It did not lather well, but all that mattered was that he be clean. He shook his fingers through his hair until the soap was completely rinsed out, and then sat up. Coming out of the water caused his body to tremble against his control once more. He stood, bent over, removed the plug from the tub, and then stepped onto the linoleum of the bathroom floor. With the towel, he rubbed himself down until he was completely dry. He did not want to put his old clothes on, and it occurred to him that even the clothes in his suitcase would be filthy and he was afraid to put them on.

He walked back to the bed but did not get under the covers. Instead, he lay naked on top of the covers, on his back, his eyes closed, and slowed down his breathing until he was breathing half as quickly as he might normally. His pulse raced as the goose bumps formed everywhere on his exposed skin and his body shuddered.

Clean, he returned to the blackness in his mind, and the cold no longer bothered him, even though he sensed that his body was still shivering from it. Inside, however, he was swimming in the warm bath of nothingness. He couldn't help but wonder if he was bleeding out onto the covers of the bed under him.

He was simply naked, shivering from cold, and probably suffering from not having had a good meal for over a day. When he fell asleep that night on the covers of the lumpy hotel bed, he was completely alone, with only the darkness between the solid parts of him to keep him company, but he was not at all lonely or sad. He was too tired and broken to be either of those things. He was numb and he was clean. As clean as *Midnight at the Arcanum*.



As the apertures of his freshly opened eyes adjusted to the lighting of the room upon awakening the next morning, he saw his new reflection for the first time since the night before. His chest hair was standing on end, and he could feel that the hair on the back of his neck was also doing the same. Though his skin was smooth, his eyes looked old. They betrayed his true age. He was an old man, trapped in a body that lied everywhere about his age except around the eyes. Though he saw no gray hair, he knew that some must be hiding at his temples and simply could not be seen because he was so fair.

This is what it was to be fully clean. His head swum with dizziness from the seven ounces of vodka now fully in his system on an empty stomach. He held his arms out and when he stood like this, he could see his hip bones protrude slightly through his skin. A young abdomen. But those old eyes knew better. Could his *eyes* ever be made clean? Could the grime he had seen over the years be washed away? Maybe another swing of *Stolichnaya* would clean his eyes of *their* grime. He was still thirsty. He returned to his bottle and put back some more.

As he let the most recent volley of vodka flow into his system, he noticed the soft buzz of a vibrating phone and remembered that he had shoved his cell phone under his pillow the night before. He reached up, found it, and noted that he'd ignored ten calls, all from the same number. Each call had a message in his voice mail, but he did not call in to fetch his messages. He knew that number well and knew that he did not want to speak with her.

If he could have erased the messages from the system without hearing a single syllable, he would have, but he knew that he would eventually have to listen to a few sounds from each message in order to get rid of them.

He closed his eyes and let himself fall back into a deep sleep. When he awoke, it was at least noon. His first act upon awakening this second time was to drink what was left of the vodka, after which he got dressed in a fresh pair of clothes, put on his watch, his shoes, his overcoat, and headed out into the world outside his safe hotel room.

He needed cigarettes most of all, and so headed for the closest convenience store to buy a pack. The store was run by a middle-aged Filipina. He asked for his usual brand and also whether or not the store had any combs. She produced a single black comb, a pack of the usual, and his response was to dig through his wallet for the cash. Once outside, he pulled the comb through his harshly washed hair, opened the pack, put one between his lips, and lit it.

The air outside was cold with early New Year briskness, but Conrad did not feel cold inside. Everything appeared clear and bright to him, as if spring had already come. He could not be sure if it was truly mild out, or if his mind was playing tricks with him by making him feel warmer than he actually was. After a few deep breaths through his nostrils, he decided that it was his mind; the air itself was actually quite cold. Something inside him, something deep in the inky recesses of who he was, kept the cold of the outside world from touching him too deeply.

He needed to eat something, but his body was not hungry. It was only his vague recollection of the fact that he hadn't eaten for some time that alerted him to his need for food. Were it not for his logical, rational mind, he would not have considered eating at all. The closest place to get a meal was at the pub under his room and so he headed back to the hotel to see what their menu offered.

Once he was seated, a slender waitress in her mid-forties approached to see what he wanted. He ordered a double gin and tonic and a corned beef sandwich on rye. Through too much lipstick she repeated his order to confirm that's what he really wanted, and he nodded in agreement.

His drink came first, and he paid for it with a small tip. His gin was half done before the sandwich arrived. He poured some ketchup on his fries and ate the sandwich quickly. Three quarters of the way through his food, he could feel his phone shaking in his pocket and put it to his ear.

“Conrad speaking,” he said, without thinking to look to see who the call was from. He was on his feet now, with some food and drink in him, and it didn’t particularly matter who it was on the other end at this point.

As the syllables traveled from the earpiece of the phone, into his right ear and into the inner parts of his mind and heart, he flexed the fingers of his left hand, paying special attention to the deep, pale indentation that now took the place of a ring on his ring finger.

“I’m not ready to talk about *any* of it,” he replied slowly.

After a long silence on the other end came the question.

Conrad put a fry to his lips, started chewing on the end of it, and replied almost in a whisper, “No.” He pushed the button that disconnected the call and returned to examining his now naked ring finger.

That ring had been on that finger for years without ever having come off. The skin where it had been was now bald and looked almost like the skin of the nineteen-year-old he had been when he’d first put it on. It had shielded that small circle of flesh from the elements without fail for nineteen years after putting it on the first time, so it was no wonder that the skin was so young and smooth there. That small piece of Conrad’s entire body had not seen the light or pain of day for half a lifetime as he lived as half a person. His small band of innocence would eventually take on the texture and color of the rest of his left hand, but it would surely be some time before the pale reminder of his time with her had weathered enough to disappear.

He slowly finished his lunch, ordered one more drink at the table, and let his mind and body rest to the sound of the pub music. It had taken all those years to break, it was surely not going to unbreak overnight. Even that pale reminder would eventually fade one day, and he would only remember it on days of reflection. This did not yet have to be one of those days.



Conrad sat at the bar, running his half-empty tumbler in counterclockwise circles on its cork coaster. With the fingers of his right hand he tapped the surface of the counter with his fingers, from pinky to index. Again. Again. Each sweep of his fingers was a quarter turn of the tumbler.

“Why so sad?” the man seated to his left asked as he pulled his bottle of beer up to take a sip.

Conrad stopped his fingers quickly, turned left, and replied, “Not sad. Thinking.”

“About what?” the beer drinking man asked.

That a complete stranger wanted to know what he was thinking about bothered him. His thoughts were nobody’s property, and nobody’s business. Idle bar conversation irritated him. He wanted to tell the man to be quiet, to stick to his beer. He wanted to ignore the question. He wanted to finish the rest of his gin and move to another seat. Instead of doing what he wanted, he rotated the stool as far to the left as he could, stared into the stranger’s eyes, put his glass to his lip, and just before he put back what was left in the tumbler, said, “Thinking about *misery*.”

The stranger pointed at Conrad’s glass and signaled to the bartender to put more of the same in it. When the fresh gin came, he pushed a five-dollar bill onto the counter and said to Conrad, “Then that explains the sad look.”

“You’ll find it on every other face, in every other bar, in every other city in Canada,” Conrad returned as he tipped his glass in way of thanks for the drink.

“Sadness, yes,” the stranger replied. “Misery, though, is a special thing. So what’s the source of yours?”

Conrad turned his seat back to its normal position and faced forward. “One day, I woke up, and realized I wasn’t me.” He put back half the contents of his glass.

“Who did you find out you *were*?” the stranger asked.

“A mere projected caricature of myself,” Conrad replied. “An exaggeration. A fragment. I am the hazy steam on the edge of a chilled beer glass, lasting only for a moment, until the room’s warmth hides it from view, as if it never was.”

The stranger was silent as he finished his bottle of beer. He ordered a draught beer next and asked that it be in a chilled glass. When his beer arrived, he touched the frosty rim with the tip of his right index finger. “Chilled beer glass, now that doesn’t strike me as something miserable,” he finally said, rubbing his index finger against his thumb. He then put back a sip. “I don’t get that one, as metaphors go. I can be thick.”

“A chilled beer glass is a liar,” Conrad tried to explain. “It promises a cold beer in the frost. You look at the thing, and think, ‘This beer is going to be cold.’ But the moment you breathe on the glass, the promise goes away with the frost.”

The stranger held his glass to his mouth and breathed on it. “I’m still not following this one but keep going. Humor me.”

“Breath is life. Truth. The truth always takes away the promised relief. Misery. Utter misery.” He finished his drink and shook his glass for another.

“So I take it that what you’re saying is that you haven’t lived up to all your own expectations for yourself?” the stranger asked. “You had some idea, who knows how many years ago, about who you *thought* you were, and it turned out that real life has a way of getting in the way of all that youthful ambition and imagination, and here we are all these years on and you feel all that came up a bit short in the long run. Sound about right?”

Conrad almost choked on his next sip. “Exactly.”

“And this makes you miserable?”

“It pretty much exemplifies the miserable human condition: that *we are not who we are*.”

“Which you are you not?” the stranger asked. “Which you did you envision but who failed to meet you at the train on time?”

“The me nobody sees. The me *I am*.”

The stranger put his hand on Conrad’s shoulder, stood up, and said, “You just keep on talking, champ. Then maybe one day someone will see and hear the you who you truly are, and your misery will end. We all deserve to *be* who we *are*. No need to settle.”

Conrad then started turning his tumbler again on its coaster, returning to his ritualistic finger tapping. He closed his eyes and imagined the glass, full of ice. As he turned it with his hand, in his mind he visualized the glass slowly rotating along with it.

When the glass had made three full turns, he felt a soft hand on his back.

“I heard what you were talking about,” a soft voice said almost into his ear. He felt a hand midway on his back. “I hope you don’t mind that I was listening in.”

Conrad did not open his eyes, but instead continued to turn the glass in his inner vision. “This is a pub and I’ve learned never to say anything out loud in a pub I don’t want others to hear. So you’re *more* than welcome to listen in. Welcome to my self-pity party.”

He heard that she was sitting to his right at the bar. “Your eyes are closed.”

“Maybe I should keep them closed,” he suggested.

“Then you could have a conversation in a bar without any influence other than the words,” she replied.

“Yes. So feel free to keep talking with me and just ignore my eyelids.”

“You have me at a disadvantage,” she said.

“How so?”

After a few moments of silence, she explained. “I’ve seen you. You may open your eyes and be disappointed.”

“I’ll risk where this takes us,” Conrad replied. He lifted his glass, put it to his lip, and took a sip, still with his eyes closed, still rotating the tumbler in his mind. “The toll to keep this conversation going is to tell me what you think you heard me saying a while back.”

“You were crying out to be seen, so that you would be you as you expected to be back when you felt you knew well enough who that was exactly,” she replied. “You are the beer in the glass, and not the frost on the outside that can be blown away with warm breath. But to others, you are the frost on the glass, and change and shift when they speak of who they assume and think you are but are wrong about. You are the essential self, not the presentational self.”

Conrad wanted to open his eyes, to see who she was, but kept them closed. Instead, he held out his right hand and said, “Conrad. Pleasure to meet you.”

A soft, warm hand touched his. “Cindy. Likewise.”

“Hello, Cindy. Do you know that kind of misery, too?”



Her hand squeezed his. “Of course,” she said. “My own personal flavor of it, surely, but yes. What is it they see, then, if not *us*?” Cindy asked. “What do they see when they look? We know they don’t see *us*. So what and who *do* they see?”

Conrad was quiet for a long time. He took a long sip from his now almost empty glass and then finally replied, “How others see us? You’ll have to ask the wee louse of good Bobbie Burns. I don’t know the answer to that. It’s sometimes best not to read their unabashed diary entries written about us; such frightening enlightenment. It’s often best not to endure the ‘I’m just being honest’ family of conversations as well. Best to ascertain how they see us from how they *engage* with us.”

“Who do you imagine I am?” Cindy asked.

“I won’t pretend to imagine who you are,” Conrad replied. “I know how I feel when others *imagine* me out loud. To me, you are the warm, soft palm of a hand and the welcome smoothness of a stranger’s voice. You are a brief, shared moment of mutually understood misery, in a pub somewhere in New Westminster. You have no past, you have no eyes, ears, mouth, hair, or any other distracting feature. I honestly do not know what my mind would imagine of you were I to open my eyes.”

He heard her breathe, even though the pub was fairly noisy by this time of night. He heard tears in the pauses between her breaths. Her tears smelled of blood and smoke. The rusting blades of iron daggers. In his mind, he filled the tumbler with the tears he heard, and started rotating the glass in the opposite direction.

“Close *your* eyes,” he suggested. “Let me know when they are closed.”

“They are now,” she replied.

He gently traced with his index finger along her palm in the direction he was turning his tumbler in his mind. “Imagine a tumbler full of ice and drink turning in the same direction I am moving my finger,” he said. “Let me know when you have that in your mind.”

“Okay. I see it now.”

“Keep doing that, and then imagine rose petals falling *around the surface* the tumbler is on, but never falling *into* the glass. When you see this, let me know.”

“Okay. I see it now.”

“That is the *you* I see.”

Her hand grasped his suddenly and desperately. It squeezed and crushed his fingers together. He felt her lean close to him, until her cheek touched his, until the heat of her mouth was at his right ear. Her breath was hurried as she said, “Oh my God.”

It was then that Conrad knew he could open his eyes and not be deceived by misery and chilled glass frost. When he saw her, he gestured for Cindy to sit beside him, and then motioned for the bartender to get them both more of the same.



“Staring Directly at an Exploding Sun” —2023

When she took a seat right beside me at the dance club, I was already three house gins into what I planned to be a seven-drink night, there to hear the music and watch the movement on the dance floor. She was with her girlfriend, drinking a tall rum and Coke. She appeared to be searching for a lighter to start up her cigarette, so I held out mine, already lit. After putting the tip of her smoke to it, she nodded her thanks.

When she told me her name was Phoebe, I replied by letting her know mine. The direction of conversations at a dance club hinged on the next few words out of either party's mouth: whether grand wit or triviality, what either of us said next would determine not only how long the conversation would continue, but its general tenor. Our conversation jumped about enough to keep us both engaged.

"I often think about how the sun is one day going to burn out," she eventually said, brushing her just-past-shoulder-length raven-black hair over her ear as if preening. She had the soulful eyes of a moon goddess. "It scares me."

"This troubles you?" I asked. I leaned back into my seat and lit another cigarette. "It's a long way off yet. Do tell."

"I think *a lot* about things like that," she replied. Her smile showed her near porcelain perfect teeth. "I know that most people don't, but I do. Pondering existential crises came as a rider with the Philosophy minor on my Fine Arts degree."

"Fine Arts?" I replied.

"It got me into a decent ground-floor position in marketing," she replied with pride. "The ends justify the means."

I sipped my drink and then explained, “These people likely haven’t even figured out how the rest of their *night* is going to go, let alone the next *billion years*. But as it happens, final entropy and all the existential questions it entails are topics close to my heart. So feel free to wax eloquent on what distresses you.”

Phoebe’s laugh shook me inside. I knew that I should not let my guard down, but maybe it was the drink, maybe it was the nice feeling that came with the fact she was putting so much enthusiasm into the conversation; I let my guard down despite my better judgment and returned her laughter. Eventually the conversation went to where I lived, and I admitted that I was in a hotel room.

“For how long, that?” she asked as she put back some of her drink.

“About a month,” I replied. “Give or take a week.”

“Is it a *nice* room, at least?” she asked.

I paused to think. The room was mostly empty. Other than the banged-up furniture it came with, it had my saxophone, notepads, laptop, and a half-dozen changes of clothes. “Kind of barren, but I like it that way,” I finally said. “There’s a certain freedom and clarity that comes with living a minimalist life.” I sipped my drink and then added, “And what’s more—when the sun explodes in a billion years, I won’t lose much.”

She half-grinned when I said this. “What happened about a month ago?” she asked.

“I became an awakened—and *de facto* homeless—being,” I said.

Phoebe looked closely at me. “Care to explain? I’m curious. *Do tell.*”

“Simply put, I walked away from it ‘all’ and now am trying to live as simple a life as I can manage given the demands of the modern world. Six changes of clothes are about the fewest one can have. I now strive for balance and clarity.”

After a few moments to consider, she finished her drink and smiled at me again with those perfect teeth of hers. “I’d like to be in a place like that.”

My lungs ached. It had, indeed, been a seven-drink night. As I opened my eyes, my first sight as they struggled to focus was the half-full ashtray on the end table beside the head of my bed. I smoked a brand with a white filter; half the smokes in the tray had fake cork ends, and a few of those had lipstick smudges on them. I reached over with my right arm, expecting Phoebe to be in the bed, but she wasn't.

Now that my eyes were completely focused, I could see the red numbers on the clock: seven in the morning. The bathroom sink was running. I closed my eyes and imagined my head under a cold stream of water.

"This place has no fridge or stove," she called out from the bathroom. "You weren't kidding about *barren*."

"Welcome to cheap hotel-room-by-the-week life. I'll treat you to breakfast down the street," I replied through my cigarette-smoke-glossed teeth. "After I freshen up."

She walked out of the bathroom, her jet-black hair wet from having showered. "That would be nice," she said, smiling. In the morning light, her eyes sparkled. She leaned and kissed my brow, and I could smell her Dolce & Gabbana *Light Blue*.

I got out of bed, pulling the sheet over myself out of false modesty. After reaching over for my boxers and pulling them on, I went into the bathroom. A quick shower and thorough scouring of my teeth later, I came back into the bedroom, feeling ten years younger than I had when I'd awoken. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, smoking her brand. I returned her kiss. "Let's go, then," I said as I pulled on a clean turtleneck. She butted out her smoke and followed me out to the hallway.



“Hungover and Hung Out to Dry”—2023

“What made you abandon everything?” Phoebe asked me as she cut her bacon into three pieces.

I sipped my coffee while I formulated an answer to her question. In the light of day, with no alcohol in my system, and half a cup of coffee in me, she looked good even against the backdrop of the cheap café where we were eating. “For many years, I awoke every morning feeling as if I were only half a being,” I finally replied. “Try as I could to make the feeling go away, it got worse, rather than better. I wrote fiction that was bathed in this but hid my emptiness in the wake-a-day world.”

Phoebe nodded that she was listening as she chewed her food. She placed her fork to her lips with an almost perfect delicateness.

“I eventually came to understand,” I continued, “that my feeling of half-being was tied to my endless pursuit of *otherness* or *alterity*. Trying to be other than myself. Looking in the mirror and wanting to be older, or younger, or ....” I turned my plate halfway around and started on my hill of hash browns. “Then I remembered how life was *before* I felt this way. I didn’t *need* so much back then. I didn’t *need* all of the otherness I found myself *surrounded* with all those years later.”

Eyes wide open, Phoebe nodded as I spoke, motioning for me to continue when I took a pause.

“I didn’t need *most* of the circumstances or people around me.”

“Are you sure you didn’t need them?” she asked. “Are you backfitting how you’ve come to feel to how you felt then? You know about hindsight bias. Not doubting, just probing.”



“I have the benefit of having written much of it down as fiction or drama,” I replied to her justifiable question. “I wrote a whole play about this very theme when I was *eighteen*. It was in my fabric at the time. All of Act III was a minimalist’s manifesto of sorts. So, since I know I didn’t need them then, how had I started to need them later on?” I shrugged. “But I surrounded myself in them anyway and came to *believe* that I *needed* them. An adult lifetime of that accumulation. All of this, however, exacted a price.”

“What price?” she asked between forks.

“In order to have all this around me, I had to give away those parts of myself that are truly *me*. To know such-and-such person, I had to stop talking so much about such-and-such topic while in their company, and then altogether never mention it again around *anyone*, until I no longer even thought about it much, let alone talked about it. Eventually I forgot the topic’s name and called it ‘such-and-such.’ Almost an Orwellian self-obliteration under an endlessly crushing boot. And so on, unto self-erasure. That, I determined, is where the ‘other half’ of me had gone. Into the ineffable void.”

“But we *do* need people,” Phoebe rightly rebutted my stance. “Human beings are social animals. People aren’t *things* or *topics*. *L’enfer c’est les autres*, perhaps, but how we flow and conduct ourselves with others plays a critical role in our own *être-pour-soi* and *être-pour-autrui*. As you learned last night, my best tattoos are where nobody else can see them.” She blinked playfully and added, “Unless I decide they should.”

“Of course people aren’t things. It’s pretty much a matter of *indiscriminate* attachment that obfuscates us from ourselves and pressures undue disintegration of our core and authentic self,” I explained my thinking. “I guess one might think of this as *Harmony* over *Quantity*, as *Quality* seems an unnecessarily dismissive term. Mindful association versus oversaturation.”

She changed her regard, staring more directly at me and with a soft, compassionate tone said: “I’d caution against becoming enmeshed too fully in your *être-en-soi*. You *are* an agent in your own life, but firstly, you are not the *only* agent, and secondly, yours is not the only life involved in the interaction.”

Her admonition stung somewhat, but it was not the sting that would have caused me to pull back, as I understood that place she was warning me to avoid; I had gone there painfully with Hamsun, Hemingway, and London in my younger years and had no desire to return. I pushed my empty plate to the middle of the table. “I do not want to be alone, caught in a solipsistic loop, drinking myself drunk on a Klein-bottle of whine; I want to live *authentically*. I simply no longer consent to being *tamed*.” When I said *tamed*, I could almost smell H  l  ne near me, almost feel Saint-Exup  ry’s *Le Petit Prince* in my hands.

“I no longer needed to settle for mere half-being because I no longer needed to be surrounded by others without sufficient prior mindfulness. In this way I have begun to learn to avoid the traps of *mauvaise foi* and of becoming an entirely self-referential loop in a hellscape of my *own* creation.”

Phoebe’s face suddenly appeared very sober. “I don’t know if I could walk away from all of the people and comforts around me as you have,” she finally said. “I have two jobs and am proud of being able to have all those things. To know all my friends.”

“Though I’ve many years of preparation and rumination on the foundations of what I’ll need to pull off this transformative period of my life, I’ve only just begun my *real* journey on this side of the street,” I admitted.

“But to answer your original question, Phoebe: Why did I abandon it all? At the end of the day, on the first day of this year, I left nineteen years of a *mauvaise foi* marriage and all that this encompassed and carried out only my laptop—so that I may earn a living—and some clothing and my sax,” I finally summed the tally of my decision. “And as cataclysmic as that might sound on paper, that single act of self-liberation finds me here, finishing up a lovely greasy-spoon breakfast with you, which puts me *well* ahead of where I had been for the last *two decades*.” I started to chuckle. “And besides, nobody’s asking you to leave anything,” I assured her. “That was *my* cost to count and price to pay.”

When the waitress came, we ultimately paid Dutch despite my earlier offer to pay, and parted company with a polite European double kiss. When I returned to my hotel room, I wrote a short story at my laptop in one continuous sitting, something I had not managed to do in some time.



“Barefoot Sonata” — 2023

## “Barefoot Sonata”

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James Colt straightened his tie and then pulled his shirt collar over the silk noose. Once satisfied that the tie was perfectly placed, he walked toward the patio door, out onto the marble. His leather shoes snapped on the stone as he walked.

“You look wonderful, James,” Siobhan said. “Not so much as a hair out of place.”

He regarded her from the top of her head to her high heels. Nothing was out of place with her, either. Her shoulder length blond hair, almost a bob, was perfectly coiffed. Her lips were the right color for her dress. Her eye shadow and mascara were meticulously coordinated. “You’re smashing,” James replied. “I say we take my car, rather than yours. The weather is mild enough for it.”

Siobhan looked up at the stars and inhaled deeply. “Yes, I think we should take the Jaguar. It would be a shame to miss the full beauty of an evening like this.”

James returned inside. Once at the front door, he found his coat, put it on, and searched through the inside pocket for the car keys. “Let’s go, then!” he finally called out. He stood with his hands in his coat pockets until she arrived. “Did you lock the patio door?” he asked.

She put her hand on his shoulder, “Nobody could get in through that.”

“Lock it anyway, won’t you?” he said.

She quickly did so and returned. “Let’s go, then.”



“Of all the times I have heard your Chopin,” Mitchell said, “that was perhaps the most haunting.”

James sipped his wine and considered Mitchell’s words. “How so?” he finally asked.

Mitchell Connor scratched his earlobe, put his hand to his chin as if in deep thought, and then shrugged. “I suppose I should be able to quantify what I mean,” he said, “but it’s just a *feeling*. Some things about a musical performance simply go beyond words. Tonight’s recital captured a certain *sadness* that I hadn’t heard in your interpretation of Chopin before.”

James turned his head to scan the scope of the room. Siobhan was off in a corner, talking with two others. “It’s interesting that you would hear such a thing,” he said. “I suppose, if you really think about it, the slightest delay between notes speaks volumes. Happiness, sadness ... these things can change even the motion of our fingers.”

Mitchell smiled. “Are you feeling hauntingly sad, then, James?”

James returned the smile. “I suppose the timing of a man’s fingers never lies, but I will and say, ‘No, Mitchell, I am perfectly happy.’” He took another sip of his wine.

“And I’ll know you’re a fraud,” Mitchell added, sipping his own wine, “and will say in reply, ‘Very good to hear, James.’”

“Exactly.”

“It’s so wonderful being superficial and shallow,” Mitchell said. He slapped James on the left arm.

“Isn’t it, though?” He turned in the direction of Helen, Mitchell’s wife. “How are things with you and Helen, then?”

Mitchell shrugged. “I suppose, much like the slight delays in your hands, the frown lines on my face never lie,” Mitchell replied, “but I shall lie and say, ‘Everything’s brilliant with us. Absolutely wonderful.’”

“And I’ll know you’re a fraud,” James added, “and will say, ‘Very good to hear, Mitchell.’”

“It’s so very nice to be *understood*,” Mitchell returned.

James nodded his head slightly and lifted up his wine glass. “Here’s to the mutual understanding between friends.”

“Cheers!” Mitchell responded as he tapped his glass to James’.



“The recital went very well,” Siobhan said as they were driving home. “Nigel Saint-John was thoroughly taken by your Chopin.”

“Saint-John? That gadfly? Why didn’t I notice him there?”

Siobhan looked over at James with a sideways glance. “Perhaps because you were too busy chatting up Mitchell most of the evening.”

“He and I hadn’t spoken in months,” James returned.

“How are he and Helen doing?”

“Not well, by the sounds of things.”

“Oh, really?”

James pressed the accelerator pedal and shifted gears. After thirty seconds at the new speed, he said, “Nothing specific, but there’s trouble in paradise, it seems.”

“That’s a shame. They’re so nice together.”

“Apparently not,” James replied before pressing the clutch and shifting again.



“Are you happy with me, James?” Siobhan asked.

James opened his eyes and looked at the alarm clock on the dresser. Two thirty. Had she been able to tell from his breathing that he was awake at that hour? Could he pretend to be asleep so that he would not have to answer her question? He turned onto his stomach and slid his arm over her midriff. His reply was, “What kind of question is that to be asking at this hour of the morning?”

“Is that your answer?” she asked.

James held her close to himself. “I’m unhappy in *general*,” he finally replied, “but I am in no way unhappy with *you*.” He could feel her body move under his arm as she breathed.

“What are you unhappy about, then?” she asked.

“Nothing I can put my finger on at this hour,” he replied.

“Then how do you know you aren’t unhappy with me?” Siobhan replied.

“How do *you* know you’re happy with me?” he replied, sliding his hand to her hip.

“I just *know*,” she replied.

James caressed her hip and kissed her ear. “Is a man terribly different from a woman? I know that I’m not unhappy with you, or with us. I just *know*. I’ve lived the difference.”

“You promise you would tell me if you were? Unhappy with me, I mean.” She turned on her side and kissed his cheek.

“I promise,” he replied. “Be assured that it’s a conversation I never expect we’ll have, as you and I are right as April rain.”



“Why did you ask if I’m happy with you?” James asked over his coffee cup.

Siobhan sipped her tea before answering. “What you said about Mitchell and Helen made me wonder,” she finally replied. She brushed her long bangs from her forehead.

“Well, that’s *them*.”

“What are *you* unhappy about?” Siobhan asked.

James smiled. “The superficial nature of who I am.”

Siobhan’s eyes opened wide. “That sounds serious. What’s superficial about you?”

“Ties and dress shirts,” he finally replied. “I could give a recital in my shorts and a turtleneck, and it wouldn’t change a single note. I have become the Maestro of using my mouth in all its conversational glory but saying nigh *absolutely nothing* over a wine glass at a gathering of interchangeable characters.”

“Seems petty to be sad about all that at *this* point in your career,” Siobhan returned. “All the world’s a stage, love. You’ve known that since your first recital as a boy, I’m sure.”

“Perhaps it *is* petty,” James conceded the point. “And yes, I understand that all the world’s a stage. It gets to be saddening. Petty or not. It’s *unnecessarily* superficial.”

Siobhan stood, walked over to him, and put her hands on his shoulders. “I want you to be happy.”

“Well, I’m definitely not unhappy with or about you,” James affirmed.

Siobhan leaned over and kissed James' right ear. "Then let yourself be sad. Feel it. It's the only way."

"Exactly my plan," James replied. He turned and kissed Siobhan's neck. "Thanks for understanding."

"I don't *understand* it," Siobhan replied, "but I *accept* it."



James sat at the piano, unable to move or breathe. He knew that the room was filled with the most important names and personalities. Nigel Saint-John sat stoically in row three. After three minutes of complete silence, he still could not force his hands to move over the keys. How many times had he performed Beethoven's *Sonata No. 14 in C# minor*? Many dozens of times. His fingers should have started moving but did not. He could hear the members of the audience stirring in their seats. He remembered having read that Beethoven, upon reaching the third movement of the *Sonata*, sometimes broke hammers. What could make him play the "*Presto Agitato*" with such fury and freedom as that?

His shoes hurt his feet. His collar choked him.

It started with the button. He undid the collar button of his shirt. He could breathe again. He loosened his tie, slid it over his head, messing his hair as he did. Once the tie was on the bench, he put his left foot to his right heel and removed a shoe, and then the other. After rolling up his sleeves to his elbows, he was ready.

The first movement came more easily to him than it ever had before. He could feel the freedom of the notes. The second movement came as easily. At the finish of the second movement, he stopped. The shirt had to go. With care and precision, he unbuttoned the rest of the buttons, removed his shirt completely, and then bent to remove his socks, and started on the "*Presto Agitato*" with full passion.

For the first time in his career, James Colt knew the beauty of the third movement of the *Moonlight Sonata*. He played with his eyes closed and his mind and soul completely open. The hammers of the piano were completely under his dominion. Every echo belonged to him.



At the finish of the third movement, he stood with his back to the audience. The room was utterly silent. After about thirty seconds, he heard a single member of the audience applauding. He turned to face the audience, to see who had the courage to applaud the truth.

Siobhan was standing, smiling, slapping her hands together, as every other face in the room sat solid and statuesque in disbelief. After a minute of applause, she bent over, took off her high heels, and threw them up onto the stage.

James gathered together his shirt, socks, both pairs of shoes, tie, and left the stage a happy man. As he reached the stairs and took Siobhan's outstretched hand there, to a member, the audience stood in near unison and greeted James Colt into his Satori with resounding ovation.

It was two weeks before I met her again, at the same club. This time, she was sitting by herself when I walked into the smoking area. She acknowledged my presence when I entered the room, so I sat near her and pulled the ashtray closer to myself and lit up.

“Hello,” she greeted me, smiling widely.

I suddenly felt as if no time at all had passed since she and I had eaten breakfast after our night together. “Hello, Phoebe,” I replied. “Are you still worried about the sun going out in a billion years?”

“I’m impressed that you remember my name,” she said. “Are you still living the minimalist life, Conrad?”

I nodded yes. “And you remembered mine....”

She started to laugh heartily, so much that her teeth shone slightly like my gin and tonic in the black lights of the club, and her full beauty came out to play with mere mortals. “We’re a few weeks closer to doom since last we talked,” she said.

“Indeed, we are. The entropy clock is ticking.” I looked at my wristwatch. “But we’re well safe enough for now by my watch’s reckoning.”

She put her right hand on my forearm. Her fingers felt gentle through the material of my cotton shirt, and I remembered our night from two weeks earlier. “I’ve been thinking about what you said a few weeks back,” she admitted.

I took my cigarette from my mouth, tipped the ash from the end of it into the ashtray, and returned it to my lips. After she had been silent in thought for some time, I finally asked, “And? Come to any conclusions?”

“I wish I could do what you did to be free,” she said. “It calls to me.”

“You’re too ambitious and socially integrated to be that empty and still,” I returned, placing my hand over hers. “And that is perfectly fine.” As my skin touched hers, I asked myself why I had put my hand there, and settled on the idea that I did it to comfort her from an unspoken angst.

As she looked into my eyes, I noticed something inside her own eyes that spoke of a deep aching that could only be noticed in a certain light, at a certain distance, under the exact conditions she and I were now in. The beauty of her features hid her sorrow well; when she smiled, almost everyone else’s heart would soar the sky like a free bird to see such perfection on a human face. Somewhere inside Phoebe’s soul, however, was a deeply inky darkness that was struggling to get out, to be free of its chains. At the center of those amazingly bright eyes of hers was a somber beast. I knew that beast because that beast stood behind me every day as my own shadow.

I leaned to her right ear and whispered, “Did you miss me?”

She leaned to my ear in response and whispered as quietly as I had to her, “Yes, I did.” Her cigarette had gone out, so she took mine from my mouth, put it between her lips. I lit another one for myself.

I picked up my gin and tonic and took a long sip from it. “Doing what *I* did to find freedom may not be what *you* need to be free. Everyone’s different. You may *already* be free.” I took a thumb drive from my pocket, which had only two documents on it, “Barefoot Sonata” and the poem “Memento Echo,” and I handed it to Phoebe. “Something you might enjoy reading as you consider running amok amongst the newly liberated.”

She continued to stare into my eyes, that darkness at the center of her clearly fighting just behind the thin mask that was her face. “It’s an intoxicating thought,” she admitted. She placed the thumb drive into her bespeckled clutch. “I’ll read it for sure,” she insisted. “From what I’ve gleaned from our earlier talks, you tend toward existentialism and self-aware postmodernism, which is some of my favorite reading. Is that what I ought to expect from your writing, as well?”

“It’s a short story and poem I wrote very recently, from an authentic place,” I replied. “So it gives off a certain waft of self-awareness amidst existentialist undertones, to be sure.”

“Will I find answers to your enigmatic stylings in there?” she asked. Her question had me almost inhaling my gin. “You’re a bit of a *sui generis*—which is fine by me, no matter—and I’m deeply curious to get to know your interior better. I’ve never met anyone who’s seemingly embodied their personal metaphysics so fully. You seem authentically transparent, and yet you remain enigmatic to my most concentrated gaze.”

I broke our stare and scanned the smoking room for another couple, eventually finding a young man and woman seated a few yards away in a dark corner. “I’ve given thought to what you said last time we talked about how we need people, and I wanted to find a way to express this all to you that goes beyond simply walking away from people.”

I then continued: “You see those two? The man’s wearing a red shirt and the woman has her hair up.”

She looked about and then said, “Yes.”

“Tell me what you think they’re discussing.”

Phoebe shrugged and said, “Maybe he’s saying something like, ‘Let’s hook up.’ Would fit right in at a place like this.”

I chuckled. “Probably. What we can say with some certainty is that they’re not talking or thinking about when the sun is going to burn out and destroy us all. They are in the present moment. Aware of the potential future, but alive in the now.”

“In the now,” I added after a long pause, “we start to live life with a certain amount of *clarity* and *freedom*.”

I could tell from her expression that she was listening to what I was saying. I didn’t want her to; I wanted her to get up and run away from me as if I were some kind of crazy man she’d met in a nightclub just a few weeks back. But she stayed in her seat, watching and listening as if I had something to say.

The darkness behind her pupils was fixed on everything dark and melancholy in me. She had seen past my friendly face and was appealing now to that part of me that held me in balance such that the end result evened out and kept me from being destroyed. She beseeched my shadow with her regard.



*“capituli quadraginta duo arcanus” — 2023*

Phoebe was silent for a very long time, so I continued. “Our shadow—all that inky darkness—just *is*. When at balance and rest, it is still and calm and gently flows with everything else that is us. In that state, it stops fighting us and we stop fighting it, and we begin each moment in that moment, and quite simply:

“We are.”

I drew an esoteric symbol on a napkin and showed it to her through the dim light of the smoking room.



*audere, scire, tacere*  
ὅπως ἐπάνω, ἔτσι καὶ κάτω

“I’m Greek,” Phoebe said, smiling. “I can read the Greek: *as above, so below*. The Hermetic Axiom, as I recall.”

“The Hermetic Axiom: the Self reflects the Infinite and *vice versa*. And the Latin means: *to dare, to know, to be silent*.”

“Some say the Latin as *to know, to will, to dare, to be silent*, sometimes in slightly varying order, but others, such as myself, find that when we release ourselves from attachments of *will*, we may, perhaps, then enter the House of the Self encircled fully within the closed System of the Universe. Lit and unlit.

“Free and awake.”

Although I was not putting on a face, I imagined that my face must have appeared very serious and that this was the sobriety about life that she had craved to see on another human being. “Seen as a clock, the top of the House-in-Circle symbol points out midnight. *Midnight* at the Arcanum. At the gateway to transformative opportunity. *Wendung*: Rilke’s Turning Point.

“Day follows night, light dispels darkness, each day anew. The sun also rises, and the sun also sets.... This takes us well beyond final entropy, although that permanence comes through posterity and legacy only. *Now* is what is certain; tomorrow we may be only how we are remembered.”

“I want to see things the way you do,” she finally replied. “It sounds so liberating.”

“You and I are free and equal agents on the tessellated path of the blue-collar bodhisattva.”

“All the *nausée* of my generation has tainted me, I guess,” she said after a moment in contemplation. “I’m not seeking transcendent enlightenment *per se*; I’m looking for alternatives to the only options strewn before me. I just hadn’t realized how much so until I met you. I want reconcilable options.”

“*La nausée* certainly had its way with me over the years,” I agreed. “I can endure the hit of a minimalist reboot because over the years I’ve built enough reputation to sell my hours at a high premium, from wherever I can sit at my laptop. My esoteric views may give me some measure of personal clarity, but ultimately even this coarse, simple life has its expenses, and I haven’t disavowed my privilege or my income.”

“That’s where I start to get uneasy,” Phoebe admitted, taking a sip from her drink, not releasing her intense gaze. “I don’t serve sackcloth on the runway all that well. Buying my own drinks doesn’t feel like a betrayal of living an authentic life; it feels like independence and autonomy, which I wish to keep. And besides, burlap makes for itchy dresses.”

I tried to set her mind at ease: “There need be nothing overly austere about minimalism in practice. I spent years giving myself enough background to one day step across onto this pseudo-minimalist stage. It’s nothing spectacular on its face at this point, my current venue is but the haze-filled, crowded smoking room of a seamy New Westminster nightclub.”

I swept my hands over all we two here surveyed, and then continued, “But I gave the alternatives ‘strewn before me’ a solid go before standing aside from the din, and for the time being, where I am will do *me* fine. You will find this harsh truth rarely stated, though there’s a hint in Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage*, and it stings eager ears to say aloud: the Bohemian life needs underwriters to sustain it; one eventually runs out of plays to burn for warmth. You are quite right to hold so white-knuckle tightly onto what you have earned.”

“Maugham’s *Bondage* trainwrecked me when I first read it for that very reason. I’ve mentioned that I’m proud to have two jobs, and I can tell you in no uncertain terms that I have *no* desire to become *his* Fanny Price, trapped in a wrong-career filled attic of self-deception and deprivation amongst my own anosognosial crap art seeking to buttress my self-image through Philip’s panic-stricken vacuous praise.”

“Never apologize for success,” I gently resonated.

She continued to stare into my eyes and added with her obsidian glint: “The *inner* noise has become more deafening than this club, so the raucous club life itself no longer can silence it. I just want the *peace* you seem to have found. *To dare, to know*—and most of all—*to be silent*. I want that *silence*. And the *bling*,” she added, pointing to her disco-sparkling clutch. “All of it.”

“The sound you hear, the one that makes you *worry* about the future, is *your* shadow, caterwauling to be free so it can rest still. I can see it in your eyes, kicking and screaming.”

She blinked a few flickers, as if embarrassed to have been staring so intently, but then she regained her composure. In the pounding of the nightclub music around us, we did not speak another word, but instead sat, smoking and drinking, calmly pondering the depth of one another’s regard, for what seemed like hours but was probably only a handful of minutes.

“You are at the midnight of your *own* arcanum, Phoebe,” I finally said to her after first leaning in close. “The next moment begins *your* new day. That is *your* moment.” I looked at my watch and saw the time. “Actually, midnight comes in just under a minute. *Il n’y a pas de hors-maintenant*. *Now* is your moment.”

[Per Möbius and Heraclitus, the story continues at “Midnight.”]



“ You do look, my son,  
in a moved sort,  
As if you were dismay’d:  
be cheerful, sir.

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air:

And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.”

—Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (4.1)

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## Back-matter

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“Cast After-Party” — 2023



## Author's Afterword

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After leaving home and going on to graduate high school, I went into the autumn of 1987 working a graveyard shift pumping gas in Vancouver. My sister and I found a roommate through the recommendation of a family friend, and we all shared the same house my mother and stepfather had rented in Burnaby during my time in high school. It was almost like being back home, but only almost. As a full-service gas pumpist, I worked outside at the darkest part of night, during perhaps the wettest season of the region overall, working at a station that had been robbed one night at gunpoint during the shift before mine, and it was my duty to clean the windows most nights with a squeegee. Eventually, I collapsed outside on the cement at the job site and later that night was diagnosed at hospital with severe pneumonia.

In retelling the lead-in to my actual battle with pneumonia in the afterword in this way, I bring to the forefront the meta-autobiographical nature of this work, as these details echo, but do not completely agree with, how the love affair with Vanessa results in the cleaning assignment at work that leads to Conrad's collapse. The events leading to the pneumonia differ, for reasons sitting at the core of curated romantic truth.

I acknowledge the intrusiveness of relaying *any* details of past love affairs at all in Vanessa's statement that she did not wish to be known as his *Vanessa Period*. Honoring that intimacy is achieved through *invention*: Vanessa represents a conflated exemplar and narrative has been adjusted to accommodate this. Whereas the fourth wall is torn down herein, a fifth wall *built up* through the bricks of obfuscation, invention, and reconfiguration in order to honor the sanctity of pillow talk. *Audere, scire, tacere.*

“Conflation”

as you slowly erase me  
and (b)rush me away  
be careful not to  
scrub too hard

for all the veneer  
that held me entranced  
got stained when we kissed  
and won't shine as much

and if you sand me away  
you'll scar parts of your charm  
and the mirror of your eyes  
won't shine so well

as I slowly erase you  
so that I may write you  
I take every care  
to brush out your own flaws  
and leave mine behind

for as I slowly regret you  
I likewise adored you  
and if I undo you  
I'll undo parts of me

and if I ever replace you  
it's *not* to undo you  
or to fill what you emptied  
or even to redo me

if I ever replace you  
it's not to erase you  
or somehow disgrace you  
or to un-disgrace me

it's just that I'm human  
and somehow still breathing  
and whatever's left over  
deserves to be free



“conflation” — 2023

During my period of convalescence from pneumonia, I simultaneously descended into and reified utterly the work of Rimbaud, Knut Hamsun’s *Hunger*, and Rilke’s French poems, almost feeling their hunger as my own actual slow starvation ate at my body and my rarefied psyche. I ate perhaps one meal every other day at the best of times. Such existential hunger does not best temper one’s judgement.

A brief but emotionally and artistically engaged failed winter love affair later, I started 1988 ready to figure out how I might get my life back onto the track by going to university so that I might have a proper supportive career as I explored my writing. The scars of the hunger were deep for years.

“Rilke-weed Hunger” (2001)

Although I now eat on a  
daily basis,<sup>24</sup> Rainer, I still  
know that it is by  
sheer dint of prayer  
that one comes to know bread.

The archangels in the  
orchards of your borrowed  
tongue still dine on  
rose petals.

It was in the early days of 1988, having pulled myself from the edge of what hunger, pneumonia, and an impossible love had done to my physique and psyche, that I discovered that within walking distance of my house was a newly opened used and antiquarian bookstore, Arcanum Books. No longer would I be confined in my room to Rimbaud, Camus, Hamsun, and Rilke, trapped in my head and heart, but now would be within walking distance of a book shop that I found upon entering was to be an experience no other book shop before or since has afforded me.

The owner, Everett Foley, told me almost immediately that the Arcanum was, in fact, not simply a new store, but a second life to a store of the same name he had started up in 1969 around that neighborhood, before eventually setting out on a long exploration into the stock markets as a quant to support his growing family. He had intersected the world of the hippies, with their combined love of world peace and all things esoteric, with a genuine expertise on his part when it came to arcane, occult, and otherwise intriguing tomes of esoteric mystery. My own fascination with the arcane, the very same fascination that had gotten me expelled from Nootka Elementary, was far too strong for me not to immediately gravitate to the Arcanum. Everett had indeed created a “House of Mystery” and a great place to warm up over coffee and conversation at the shop.

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<sup>24</sup> Alas, the lean times were not yet but memories when this poem was written, and future challenges of food scarcity indeed loomed ahead.

As he came to get to know me and trust my judgment, Everett sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, but always very enthusiastically gave me access to a phantasmagoric worldview that was entirely orthogonal to the worldview I later came to espouse as a scientist. He gave me *carte-blanche* access to the rarest, most esoteric collection of works he had.

Of all the books that I read during that era, the one that has impacted my life most in its advice and teachings was the anachronistic but practical *Give Yourself Background*,<sup>25</sup> a book that I have to this day. My present copy, however, had to be rediscovered after I misplaced the original in my many travels, and it does not have the distinctive “House-in-Circle” symbol<sup>26</sup> on the front inner cover that many a book sold at Arcanum Books had placed there.

Everett saw in me what he called an ability to *recall the future*, a liminal ability, at the cusp of interpolative cognition and holographic memory, allowing one to assemble what one knows of the past, to center on the question asked in the present, and to consider multiple latent outcomes absent any significant changes in the actors’ paths. The resulting purely mental tesseract, rather than being a mystical construct, might be likened to the localized set of perceived greatest likelihoods. *Recolere futurum*.

Through my daily visits and conversations at the store, both with Everett and with the many fascinating booklovers (druids to day traders) who found the place after having been patrons in the early days before Everett’s days in trading, and with patrons of about my age who had never known the early store, I began to heal and reconstruct myself with new purpose: I focused on pulling myself from the darkness and into the light and was not afraid to ask for advice from my mentors along the way.

Through study, discussion, practice, and feedback from a number of the successful entrepreneurs and lively characters-at-large in that entourage, I had learned the essentials of how to transition a Midnight Point in my life. Working the register at the Arcanum was some of the most honest, joyful pay I had to that date earned.

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<sup>25</sup> F. Fraser Bond, *Give Yourself Background*, Whittlesey House, 1942, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

<sup>26</sup> The “House-in-Circle” symbol signifies “The Self in Tune with the Infinite.”



Through a friend I'd met while browsing another bookstore on Hastings, I found a part-time job as a cashier at Burnaby Books that allowed me to attend a summer semester at Simon Fraser University. I studied French, Spanish, and Linguistics in that semester. Academically, I did well, and I enjoyed my professors' conversation very much. I did not, however, fit in with my peers, just as I didn't in earlier years of schooling. Eventually I felt so out of place amongst them that I began speaking with a campus counsellor to get to the underlying cause of my displeasure with the university life.

I sit here now, from a rented apartment view overlooking North Burnaby, including the full Simon Fraser University campus, and I have the benefit not only of my current vista, but also hindsight. I know now that I am autistic, and this comes with barriers. The framework under which I can now, two decades into the New Millennium, begin to deconstruct and unpack any number of motivations, understandings, and events in my life is comprehensive. The narrative of an Autistic Life is informed by neurodivergence and its outcomes and consequences in ways that one based on an Allistic Life is not. In 1988, however, it was known only that I was just a confused inward-looking nineteen-year-old who had finally achieved what he had set out to do in life: get into university after generations of predecessors not graduating high school, and then found the whole enterprise *incredibly* dissatisfying.

An analysis of how my being autistic might have informed that core dissatisfaction would now be a work of speculation, as is all meta-autobiography, but I have not worked this new insight into past perspectives in order that the primary lens not be repolished anachronistically and be made entirely unsuitable to authentically inform the narrative herein. Moreover, as my university-life misfire is conspicuously absent from the present narrative, Conrad's early life journey does not read as needing such retroactive continuity. It is mentioned here for full context.

With campus support staff knowing only that I was intensely unhappy and an individualist, they did not discourage me from leaving the university and taking a bus across Canada to explore my future in Montreal without so much as a plan or more money than could be raised by selling my typewriter.

My time in Montreal left me extremely vulnerable, without any network of those who might be able to help me in a difficult moment, and I learned what full and true vulnerability and disconnection meant.

My *entire* universe during such a formative period of my life, from end to end, can be seen from eight stories up, roughly five miles away, as an island of splendid suburban isolation. And there I was, thrown from this tiny virtual island in Burnaby, British Columbia, into the full force of the summer heat of Montreal, Quebec.

On arriving in Montreal, I left the bus station and headed down Boulevard de Maisonneuve Est, and I became dizzily overwhelmed. I had my youth hostel membership card, but I did not want to sleep in a shared room. I had two hundred dollars in traveler's checks and a twenty-dollar bill, but no money in my bank account. I needed a safe place to stay while I searched for work, and I needed it quickly, as my funds would not do much in terms of survival. After composing my muddled thoughts and remembering my resources, I returned to the *Voyageur* bus terminal and made a single phone call that would determine my path in the next few hours and possibly for years to come.

"Hello," I began in my clearest French. "I have just arrived from Vancouver and am looking for a clean place to stay while I look for work here in Montreal." I was told to call back in half-an-hour, which I did.

"Your references check out. There is a lady who rents rooms to students who is in the slow season and can take you in for a weekly rate." I was given directions on the public transit system, which I followed to the latter, and I soon arrived in Outremont, ready to begin my new life. After checking in, paying my first rent, and taking a bath, I fell asleep until the next morning.

I awoke and started wandering down the street toward Bernard and had sunny-side up eggs and bacon for breakfast. After putting breakfast in me, I started down Bernard, and passed the drycleaning store. I found the job simply by walking in, mentioning the help-wanted sign on the window, and insisting to the store owner that I had no larger ambition in life that would later pull me away from the steam and chemical breeze one day. At the time it was true.

I would work four and a half days a week, paid in cash weekly in a small envelope as was the way in Montreal in those days, and after doing the calculations, I concluded that I had come out of the ordeal so far more than ahead: I had a quiet, clean place to stay, and a job that paid me well enough to eat something every day, on a weekly basis. I felt like the protagonist in “The Pit and the Pendulum,” having survived the inevitable final cut.

Before I left, Jack’s father, with whom I had lived up until graduating for those few months, gave me a copy of London’s *Martin Eden*, as he felt it might suit me. There is a reason that *Eden* permeates the current work, as I, too, struggled working over the heat of the equipment at a laundry as I first read it. Just as Hamsun, Rilke, and Rimbaud had informed my thinking as I started on that island in Burnaby, London’s *Eden* informed me as I forced myself against the gymkhana of my new life. I stood shoulder to shoulder with Martin Eden as he snapped those sleeves into order, again and again.

There was absolutely no romance in it: Standing over the heat, snapping sleeves on shirts, and scrubbing grime from hundreds of stiff collars was uncomfortable work, but I needed food to eat. Every week I passed the grocery and bought exactly the same things: a single package of rice wafers, a small bag of apples, a carton of one dozen eggs, and enough *Ichiban* noodle packages for the week.

This was my entire diet, except on Tuesdays, when my landlady would make a simple shared dinner, and on Saturdays I would pass a certain drinking place and Jean-Paul, my coworker at the laundry, would call me in and buy me a few *bocks* on his tab while he and I passed pleasant small talk in his thick rural Québécois rhythm.

During this time, inspired by the undaunted pluck of good Martin Eden, who pushed into his writing despite the damnable toil, I began writing what I considered at that time to be my first real attempt at a work that I would finally consider submitting to a publisher once it was done. I wrote the first manuscript of what eventually became *The Succubus Sea*<sup>27</sup> entirely in French.

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<sup>27</sup> Back again in Montreal just over a year later, I unsuccessfully submitted the English version of that novel to *Goose Lane Editions*, who were encouraging.

I did this while sealed alone and dejected in my sweatbox of a rented room, in Outremont, Quebec, while living off the rice wafers, apples, and eggs I could afford, and the beers offered by a coworker.<sup>28</sup>

Through my landlady I met her church family, and through this, I met and got to know a computing consultant, Charles, about fifteen years my senior and also originally from a town in British Columbia. Once in a while, I would visit him at his condominium closer to the central city, and he let me spelunk on his personal computer, which was my first serious exposure to QBASIC and any kind of programming since my younger days of high school. It was during these sessions with an interpreted programming language in real time that I began to feel the call of technology that eventually informed my career, but that would not fully flourish for some years yet. More importantly, I saw that a computing specialist could have his or her own business and work from a home office, two lessons that significantly impacted my aspirations going forward.

Summer became autumn, and with autumn also came my decision to return to Vancouver. My mind became set with a sharp and constant ache for returning there, even if just to be somewhere familiar again. I knew Vancouver, I had friends and family and past loves there, some who wanted me back on the West Coast, and Vancouver's winter was famously far more manageable than the looming Montreal freeze that was about to arrive my way. During this very vulnerable and desperately lonely time, I received a letter from a past love that suggested she needed (or at least wanted) me by her side as she navigated through a particularly difficult stretch. That was my external catalyst and the truthful reason I put forth to everyone for my departure: I was returning to Vancouver to comfort a friend.

Without having more than my final pay, which was only just enough to cover my last rent and the bus fare back across Canada, in late autumn of 1988 I again spent five days on a long-distance bus. I had nowhere, save Westward, that I was heading and no money to spend when I got there. I did, however, have a backpack full of fresh writing, pluck, and a plan to find work.

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<sup>28</sup> Yielding approximately 725 calories/day for an extended period.

Everett Foley of the Arcanum knew many other bookstore owners, and once told me he could probably find me a job working at Bond's Books downtown on Hastings Street if I ever wanted to come back to Vancouver. I also had hopes of talking to that former lover who had sent me the letter, asking her if she and I could reconcile and begin anew. Perhaps we could rise from the grief.

One of my two ambitions came to be: Everett was able to get me into Bond's Books, and I began working full-time at five dollars an hour stacking and organizing books in the basement sections. Restoring my past love, however, was not to be, as she had already found another, and so I let myself safely settle into a relationship with someone whom I had dated during my university days prior to going to Montreal. She had greeted me at the bus station and drove me to her house the day I arrived back in Vancouver. I showered immediately and was presented to her parents as their daughter's *fait accompli* fiancé.

Within short order, she and I were back in Montreal, by then already having been married a year, living in a small flat overlooking Avenue du Parc, near Bernard. I could walk to where I had once been living as I worked at the laundry.

I had found a job as a gas station pumpist and was working in the painfully cold winter at a Shell gas station and adjacent auto repair shop. The loss of this livelihood to a cruel and unexpected turn ignited a passion in me that year to create my own value and do custom with it on my own terms whenever possible. I finally began writing for submission for publication in earnest, producing a body of short stories, poetry, and the first final English version of *The Succubus Sea*, which had Wales and Aberystwyth where the current incarnation has Iranian towns and the Caspian. I took particular care to keep careful track of submissions, hone my bespoke query letters, and correspond with publishers about their many preferences and requirements.

And I also began editing the work of others, rather than simply my own. This exposure to unpublished works in progress expanded my skills and insights on literary craft into areas that I had not fully explored until then.

All these things I did on an ancient electric typewriter with just high ambition and clear eyes, my two best tools of the trade. Turns of fate would have it that by late 1990, I was again in Burnaby. This time, however, there was stronger family support unwriting my ambitions and some of the more difficult elements were smoothed somewhat. Once in Vancouver, I continued to work as a freelance editor, and I joined the Freelance Editors' Association of Canada (FEAC) and was accepted as a voting member. Meanwhile, I had decided to take on authors as their literary agent. At the time, I appeared to be the only agent on the West Coast, though that singularity may have been perception.

I did not ask permission to do any of this (and indeed, whom would one ask?) and felt particularly proud when one of the authors I had the privilege to represent got a publication or note in a public forum. It was during this time that I came to meet Fred Candelaria, who from then forward and until his passing in 2006, became a dear friend and mentor.

During this period, I produced and announced sixteen weekly episodes of *Airwords: Literary Radio Magazine* on Thursdays on Simon Fraser University's CJIV 93.9 Cable FM station. Fred named the show *Airwords* and judged a poetry and drama reading contest I organized on it. There were many entries, and in the end, the West Coast author Yvette Edmonds won the contest.

During all this time in the very early nineties upon my return to Vancouver from Montreal, I borrowed from my then father-in-law and bought my first personal computer and began using it primarily as a word processor to help with my editing work. I began to automate my processes and it was during this time that my interest in computer programming, which I'd had since I was thirteen, reignited with full vigor.<sup>29</sup> I began to get publication of my short stories in a little called *Tickled by Thunder*, and this early support and publication<sup>30</sup> encouraged me to continue with my short fiction efforts.

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<sup>29</sup> Membership in FEAC included a discount on the Microsoft QuickBASIC compiler, which I ordered and began using to write and compile programs.

<sup>30</sup> In 2003, *Tickled by Thunder Press* asked me to write a booklet on writing short stories, which later evolved into *On Writing Fiction*.

In early 1993, I completed a two-year correspondence school diploma in computer programming with highest honors and I had built my confidence in my ability to code in the in-demand C++ programming language. I moved from editing, research, and agenting into applied computer science with full force in 1996 and this has been my source of income since. It was Everett Foley of Arcanum Books that put my name forward to my first employer in this field, as he had done years before with Bond's Books.

Alongside this period of early computer interconnectedness, in the early nineties, I was also part of the FidoNet WRITING community, where writers across many customs and genres all supported one another over the years. I wrote the manuscript for what became *Abadoun* during this time and had put it on record by 1996 for posterity before entering software development.

At the turn of the Millennium, I joined the Poetic Genius Society and the Ultranet (a project of the Mega Foundation), two online communities. I began interacting with other community members and submitting my fiction for publication and poetry for publication in their journals, as well as to *Perfection*, the journal of the Pi Society. As I gained momentum there, I also found publication in journals outside these communities.

It was during this that I had a renaissance with my own fiction, after having previously mostly walked away from it to work in computer science. These communities and their leaders gave me a sense, for the first time, that I belonged in the world as part of it; I had never once felt that sense of belonging before finding them. I remain associated with these organizations to the present day.

With Fred Candelaria's vigorous and often challenging artistic and editorial feedback, I reworked *The Succubus Sea*, and even included early into the first chapter a cameo of Fred reading from his poetry at a poetry evening at The Syncopated Cup.<sup>31</sup> The novel *Janus Incubus* also came together at this time. The poem he read in the novel was the poem I had first recorded him reciting aloud at a Ronsdale Press publication event.

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<sup>31</sup> "The Syncopated Cup" is a nod to my love of jazz saxophone that carries through a number of my works.

PlaneTree published *Abadoun*,<sup>32</sup> and then followed up by also publishing *The Succubus Sea*<sup>33</sup> and *Janus Incubus*.<sup>34</sup> Over the next half-decade, although I wrote some short fiction, I focused on formal science and technology writing, and with March of 2006 came *Adapting to Babel*, a computer science monograph. I actively struggled with continuing to write fiction, and made Candelaria the promise, as I sent off a short story, that if it was accepted for publication, I would continue with fiction. That story<sup>35</sup> was both published and won the *Year's Best* award.

I wrote Fred an excited email letting him know that it had been published and that I was keeping my promise to him. On not hearing back, I became concerned. One day, I received an email from his son, sent from Fred's account, telling me that his father had passed away.

I did continue writing short stories, holding to that promise, a number of which became part of this monograph, such as the beginning chapter "Midnight." That promise to him underlies the existence of this monograph. After Fred's death, I also began considering my own mortality and realized more viscerally that if I was going to have anything resembling an authentic life as a human being, let alone as an author, I would have to act. But acting on such monumental life choices always comes at a price for everyone involved, and I took time to be certain that I was not simply being fickle about my circumstances.

On 1 January 2007,<sup>36</sup> after many years of soul searching and building toward the decision, I packed a few changes of clothes, my guitar, and my computer, and left my first marriage, living for a time in a noisy room in what was then called the College Place Hotel, situated directly above the invitingly boisterous Chicago Tonite nightclub in New Westminster.

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<sup>32</sup> *Abadoun*, PlaneTree Publishing, UK, May 2000.

<sup>33</sup> *The Succubus Sea*, PlaneTree Publishing, UK, April 2001.

<sup>34</sup> *Janus Incubus*, PlaneTree Publishing, UK, May 2002.

<sup>35</sup> "The Torchbearer," *Tickled by Thunder*, March 2006.

<sup>36</sup> As mentioned, the story "Midnight at the Arcanum," herein reworked into the first chapter "Midnight" was originally published during this transformative time, in *Apotheosis*, Vol. 7 No. 6, December 2006, the month before I left my marriage. The timing was not a coincidence. "Barefoot Sonata," and "When a Stranger Wandered In," also herein, are from that same general timeframe.



The rent there was extremely affordable, and the security and general peace of mind was second to none. The four and a half months of hunger, confusion, and pure survival energy that followed reminded me that even with my highly marketable skill set in the booming software development industry, I was *always* vulnerable to hunger.<sup>37</sup> Either eighteen or twenty years on at thirty-eight—it did not matter what age I was—I was three meals from either anarchy or absolution, and one meal from collapse.

Where I now write this at age fifty-four overlooks North Burnaby such that I can see the entirety of my life from the age of fifteen through to my mid-twenties, with a few brief moments of adventure in Montreal interspersed between those years. From my first steps into high school and the authorial voice inside me that teachers like Heneghan, Shanks, Terpening, and Matte first helped me so deeply explore, to my first taste of the SFU campus and community as a bearded volunteer, to the disappointing reality of undergraduate studies, this singular expanse was that stage. That so much of our identity is tied to space as well as time is to a large extent an accident at the whimsey of probability and possibility.

And we try, through our fiction, to put some order to the disorder of life, even though we sometimes declare that such overarching themes are antiquated, haughty constructs that are no longer needed in postmodern narratives. So our explorations continue as we seek order in a post-ordered creative landscape.

I feel that the current work is far more faithful to my authentic initial intent for the novel that once was *Janus Incubus*, and with the removal of about one third of the original novel that my current thinking no longer supports, and with the addition of entirely new narrative that was not in the 2002 release. Both subsequently published and unpublished work has informed these revisions and additions, and I feel strongly that the current work has a much more thematic symmetry than it did originally now that it has been given a more resonant ending.

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<sup>37</sup> I crossed paths with a former colleague from my time in the corporate software development world while traveling on a city bus during this time and his reaction to my severe weight loss was one of both clear horror and human empathy. My own sense was that of having been othered.

Each sentence, each dialogue, each aside and past conceit has also been tested against my present esthetic and honed to answer thereto as needed: some will have stayed the Test of Time, others will have elided or shifted slightly (or drastically), informed by my present rhythm.

—November 2023, Burnaby, British Columbia



“Discipline” — 2023

## **“It Ain’t Never Gonna Happen”**

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“It ain’t never gonna happen,” he said over his newspaper. “You lack discipline. You won’t ever be a novelist.”

Conrad Kirk looked down at the story he was writing when his stepfather Ken said that, wanting to say *What about this?* but staying quiet. Instead, he continued with his short story, carefully forming the next words from the mouth of the protagonist with his fountain pen. Ken had always said that Conrad’s writing with a fountain pen made no sense; authors sat at typewriters and pounded away. Fountain pens were a thing of the past, but they better connected Conrad to his words as he wrote. He liked how the anachronism felt in his hand as it scratched along the lines of what he wanted to say on the paper.

“If you want to be a novelist, you’d have to get some discipline, and you just don’t have it,” Ken added, still reading his paper. A trail of smoke from his cigarette poured up, over the edge of the racing section. “Take Hemingway. I read somewhere that he sat at his typewriter every day until he had five thousand words behind him. Every day. No exceptions.”

Upon hearing this again, for the third time in a week, Conrad wanted to repeat out loud another mantra Ken had used on him almost weekly: *Believe none of what you hear, very little of what you read, and only half of what you see.* Instead, he finally said what was on his mind. “I’ve written plenty of stories.” He held up the science fiction short story he was working on at that very moment as tangible evidence.

“Short stories aren’t novels. What you’re working on now is a *pamphlet*,” Ken commented over the top of the paper. “Five thousand words a day,” he repeated. “*Every day. Discipline.*”

After gathering his things together, Conrad went to his room. He was too angry with Ken to complete the story he'd been working on. Instead, he put on his headphones, carefully placed a Bowie record on the turntable, and drowned out his anger to the instrumental side of *Low*. What would it mean to Ken if he could write a novel? Probably nothing, but it would prove him wrong. *Discipline*. Ten minutes into the record, he had fallen asleep with the headphones on his ears. He awoke to the *tick-tick* of the needle when the side had finished playing.

He pulled off the headphones, walked to the back porch of the house, sat down on the top stair tread, and watched the grass grow. *When are you going to mow that lawn?* he heard Ken ask in his mind. *Discipline*. He stood, walked around to the shed, pulled out the gas mower, and started yanking on the cord. He was soon cutting trails in the back lawn. Ken walked onto the porch, a beer bottle in his left hand and the paper in the other, nodding his head in approval.

"Discipline, discipline, discipline," Conrad said when his back was turned to Ken. He wouldn't hear him over the howl of the machine. "I wasn't *ever* going to mow the lawn either, I bet. Didn't have the *what?* The *discipline*."

An hour later, the lawn showed no sign of his lacking discipline. Conrad pushed the mower back into the shed, locked it, and started for the library. "I could mow all of Canada and he'd say I lacked *discipline*," he said to an old lady who was sitting waiting for a bus on the street that led him to the building.

Once inside, he headed straight for the section that had the books on novel writing and picked up *The Art of Fiction*. Twenty minutes into it, someone slapped him on the back.

"Conrad!" Tim said.

"What's up, Tim?" Conrad responded. What was Tim doing in the library? Everyone in the family knew that Tim was not a reader.

His brother-in-law sat across from him at the table after turning around a chair so he could straddle it in his way with chairs and said, "Looking for work. Thought the library might need a janitor."

"Do they?" Conrad asked.

“Haven’t asked. What you reading?” Tim reached across the table, flipped the book up so he could read the title, and said, “*Ah*. Art book. Don’t you *already* know how to draw?”

“It’s a book on *writing*,” Conrad replied, pushing it down again so he could continue to read.

“Say, speaking of writing ... do you know when Ken is going to camp for his next season?”

It struck Conrad immediately to ask what any of the family goings on had to do with the topic of writing, but he held his tongue in check, since Tim hated being corrected. “Why?” he asked instead.

“Our landlord found out we have a puppy,” Tim explained. “Need a place to keep it on the lay-low for a little while.”

“Ken wouldn’t...,” Conrad began.

“I know. You know. That’s why I need to know when he’s off to camp.” He shuffled about on his chair.

“This Monday, for two months,” Conrad said. He closed the book, stood, and headed for the book checkout. He did not say another word to Tim before walking back home.

Reading and walking down the main street of the city was a habit for Conrad, so he made it home without getting hit by a car while crossing at lights. Once home, he went to his room and finished reading Gardner’s *The Art of Fiction*. He *would* write a novel.

After dinner that night, he approached Ken and confidently informed him of his goal to write a novel that would be ready and waiting before Ken got back. Ken made a point of insisting it would never happen—Conrad lacked the *discipline* to do such a thing—but Conrad just ignored this and went to his room and read through Gardner’s book again.

Monday came and Ken was off to camp. Conrad stared at a blank page of looseleaf, his fountain pen ready, but nothing came to him. It didn’t have to be *only* a novel; it had to be a decently skilled antithesis to his stepfather’s constant proclamation: a rebuttal worthy of a gadfly critic with a diesel-stained skull and cynicism-soaked soul. Monday passed without a word finding its ink to Conrad’s page, but he was not worried; it would come when it felt like coming, and given the stakes with Ken, he was patient to let the Muse consider the cost.

With Tuesday came the puppy. Conrad kept his door closed when his sister and brother-in-law arrived with the German shepherd, but he could hear his mother and sister arguing over the dog no matter how much he tried to filter it out. He wanted to swing open his door and yell *I'm trying to write a novel in here!* but did not. Instead, he put on his headphones, turned up the volume, and drowned out the hollering with Elvis Presley.

Just as Conrad expected would be the case, the dog stayed. Something about the idea of having it put down if his mother didn't sit on it for a few months won her over, no matter what *Ken* would have said on the matter. Conrad made it clear to his mother that he would have nothing to do with its care. He also made sure that Tim and Jane were absolutely aware that the puppy was not to come in his room.

"Don't worry about it," Tim insisted before heading out the back door. "It's a nice dog! Just a puppy for crying out loud!"

By the end of Tuesday, the novel still had not started to write itself. As hard as Conrad tried to push the word *discipline* out of his mind, he could not, and it was keeping him from hearing his own voice. When Ken's voice wasn't echoing in his mind, the dog's scratching on his door to be let in distracted him. That night, Conrad fell asleep with his fountain pen still in his hand and the looseleaf binder he wrote in across his stomach.

He dreamt of the things he had seen while living in the camps with his family when he was nine. When he awoke, he knew what he would write. It was perfectly clear in his mind, and he started with such fury that he forgot to go to the washroom when the need struck him. By noon, he had written fifteen pages: his first chapter of a novel about living with the crew when he was younger. A novel about life in the camps.

The smells. The crummies, the crew, and all the food anyone could ever hope to stuff down without worrying about the check at the end of the meal. After lunch, it started to write itself where Conrad had left off. And so the days flew past. Page after page became covered in the ink of his *discipline*; Ken had been *wrong*. It didn't matter that Hemingway once drank a forty-pounder and then pounded out five billion words before eating rye crisps and ground glass for breakfast every day. This novel was on its way, and it would be in Ken's hands by the end of the summer.

Tim and Jane made a point of coming over to the house every other day to pick up a few groceries and see their puppy. Sometimes, they would sit at the kitchen table, playing crib, with Tim smoking away, laughing about whatever it was that amused him, calling for the puppy. Conrad managed to shut it out and keep writing in his room.

“Hey, Conrad, come and play crib!” Tim called out one day when he was visiting. He was there alone and in need of crib partner because Jane was busy at their apartment dealing with exterminators. *Fifteen two, fifteen four, ...*

Cribbage. A game that made no sense and took time away from the novel that Ken said he would never write. Although he didn’t want to play crib with Tim, he did anyway, to keep the peace; Tim hated it when anyone turned down a game, and when Tim hated something, he walked around like his nose had been knocked three inches out of joint to the left. Though he played crib with Tim, his mind was writing the next pages of his novel.

“Your mom says you’re writing a book,” Tim said as he moved his peg a few spots forward.

Conrad did not want to say even one word to Tim about the novel. Everything that Tim knew others were doing, he claimed he could do, too, and do a better job of it than anyone else. He didn’t know what to say. “I’m trying,” he finally admitted.

“How far along?” Tim asked as he looked at his cards.

“It’s coming,” Conrad replied, shrugging.

“You know,” he said, “if you really want something to write about, I could tell you a few stories about....” And on and on Tim went about so-and-such. “Now print *that* up and *that* would be a *bestseller*.”

Tim won the crib game without much effort that day, and Conrad, having appeased the Tim-God, returned to his room and put to paper all of the pages he had written in his head while losing so miserably to Tim. His intrepid protagonist was on to something in the camp—the central conflict of the work had been sketched out in principle. The first draft was nearly complete.

The next time Tim and Jane came over to visit, Jane opened Conrad’s door as she looked for something in the house, and the dog ran into the room. Within seconds of seeing the dog, Conrad was gently but firmly directing it into the hallway.



“Please keep the puppy out of my room!” he shouted.

“Hey! Hey!” Tim shouted back. “Keep your hands off my dog!” He stood in a fighting position, as if Conrad had just manhandled his kid niece. Conrad had seen Tim angry before, and knew what it meant to make Tim mad, but he didn’t care.

Jane intervened, gently pushing Tim back from her brother. “Leave him alone, Tim,” she said. “It’s no big deal.”

Conrad shut his door and began work on the second draft. This writing came more easily, since the core of the novel was already written. As he copied out the first draft, revising and adding and shifting as he rewrote, he threw the first draft into the garbage, page by page, as he always did with first drafts. Two weeks later, he had his second draft, piled neatly on his floor beside his bed. Ken would know. The novel had been written. He had *discipline*.

“I tossed the stack of paper that was in your trash bin,” his mother said over dinner. “Was there something wrong with it?”

Conrad leaned over his mashed potatoes. “That was my first draft of my novel,” he finally explained to her. “I didn’t need it anymore since I’ve already written the final draft from it. I’m done.” His ears flushed to say it, even if only to her for now.

She smiled at her son.

Conrad wanted to celebrate. The novel was a task of the past, sitting beside his bed, nicely stacked, and waiting. *Discipline* he had called the novel. “Can I go downtown to see a movie?” he asked his mother. “I want to relax and celebrate a bit.”

Conrad’s mother gave him a twenty-dollar bill and kissed him on the forehead. He was soon on the bus downtown. Which movie he saw didn’t matter to him. It passed quickly and didn’t make any sense. All that mattered to Conrad was the look on Ken would have on his face when he came back from the camp and had that novel staring down at him. *Discipline*.

While walking, almost dancing, towards his house, Conrad heard hollering coming up the street. Tim, Jane, and Conrad’s mom were shouting at one another. Conrad could not determine what the fight was about. The porch light was on and the back door was open.

As much as he did not want to enter the house, he walked up the back stairs into the kitchen, into the middle of the fight. As soon as he entered the room, everyone shut up and looked at him.

Conrad had never seen his mother's face so flushed and angry, an anger clearly directed at Tim and Jane. Jane was seated at the kitchen table, a half-played game of crib in front of her. Tim turned so that he was looking at the refrigerator, instead of directly into Conrad's eyes.

"Conrad," his mother said. "I ..."

"We ... I..." Jane mumbled as she tried to look at her brother. She shuffled the deck of cards she was holding.

The puppy came into the kitchen from the hallway, and the three adults stared at it as soon as it entered. Conrad then ran into his bedroom. The door was wide open. He could smell urine as he switched on his light.

Beside his bed sat a disordered pile of yellow stained papers, strewn about. His heart pounded as he slowly approached his novel. Pools of urine and ink smears lay where once was his novel, his discipline.

"*Who* opened my door?!" he screamed so loudly he could feel his tonsils push into his ears. When he turned around, the first face he saw was Tim's.

"I guess you have your first major critic, Mr. Author," Tim barely had time to say before Conrad had both his hands on Tim's shoulders in an attempt to pull him to the floor for a brawl.

When he awoke the next day, under an icepack, Conrad could not remember what had happened during the scrap from the moment he'd grabbed Tim. His mother was leaning over him, shifting the pack over his eye, sighing.

"Did I *at least* take one of his teeth out?" he managed.

"You didn't get much of a chance," his mother replied. "He knocked you straight in the head right quick."

"Damned lot of good all that judo training did me," Conrad sighed. "My novel?" Conrad then mumbled.

"There was nothing left of it," his mother admitted. "The paper practically fell apart when I picked it up. Ink poured right off the pages. Had to wear dish gloves because it was so soaked. I'm so sorry, Conrad."

Fifty-thousand words of his handwritten discipline pressed down on Conrad's body at that moment. He had nothing: neither to show Ken, nor with which to stand up to Tim.

"I'm going to tell Ken...," he began.

His mother quickly put her finger over Conrad's lips. "No, please don't," she said. "For me. You know Ken would scream bloody murder if he knew I let them keep the puppy here."

"But..."

"*Please*," she insisted.

He looked up at his mother with his one good eye. She was visibly anxious of what Ken's reaction would be if he gave up the fact that Tim and Jane had kept their dog at the house.

The final week of the two months of Ken's stretch at camp passed slowly with Conrad staying in his room, in bed, recovering from being hit so squarely in the eye. The swelling was almost completely down by the time Ken came back.

After a big dinner, Ken walked up to Conrad's bedroom door, knocked, and looked in. "So, Sport, how's the *novelist* been doing?" he asked, clearly amused with himself. "It's time to show your hand: Hemingway or pamphlet writer? Where's the novel you promised, then?"

From the darkness, with a sheet pulled over his face like a newspaper, Conrad replied, "It ain't *never* gonna happen."

## **“Call your Play; Call your English”**

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“Out of an infinity of designs a mathematician chooses one pattern for beauty’s sake and pulls it down to earth.”—Marston Morse

When I first entered New Westminster’s Thirsty Duck back in July of 2010, I didn’t know the slightest thing about playing a game of pool beyond the few very hasty details I’d gleaned from my neighbor’s son at their table when I was a young teen. My stepfather, Ronald, was a seasoned former professional gambler who had a hands-on knowledge of games which included horse racing, poker, craps, and any number of other card concerns from gin to bridge to crazy eights, but he didn’t talk to me much about pool during the many patient gambling lessons he gave me over the years of my adolescence.

I was freshly in a bachelor’s suite, scoping out my new local neighborhood one evening after working at my system all day on a medical terminology parser and ontological novel entity classifier, when I noticed a biker out in front of The Duck having a smoke, standing beside his immaculately kept machine. I stood a few feet away from him and lit up one of my own and struck up a conversation with him about the bar, to see what kind of atmosphere it had.

“A great place if you like pool,” he replied. “Chill feel.” He and I talked about local nighttime entertainment beyond this and somehow the conversation turned to Chicago Tonite, a nightclub also in New Westminster, but some ways away from The Duck. He knew the regulars there, as well, of which I had been one back in 2007, and as it turned out, as we chattered, we discovered that his ex-girlfriend and I had crossed paths briefly at the Chicago just after I’d left my first marriage. Fortunately, he and she had already broken up amicably by the time I’d known her back three years before, so he and I were not put at loggerheads.

Overall, I took the friendly, welcoming conversation Jacob offered me in front of the bar as the kind of banter I enjoyed, and I went in and took my chances that The Duck was going to be the right place for me after a long day's work. I walked in none the wiser about pool, but as I sipped my drink and watched others play, however, my many evening visits to The Duck began to interest me in the game for the pure controlled physics of it.

Eventually, I'd come to have a good conversation with bartenders, and one, Kevin, was an avid player who walked me through many a play between just us two, and it came about that I often stayed long enough for him to close the bar with me there, and we played a few games before I headed home and collapsed and awoke the next day to my usual day-to-day working on oncological ontologies and adaptive grammars.

One day I pointed out to Kevin a fellow named Bill, who was widely recognized as probably the best bar pool player there. "I want to beat Bill at just one game," I said. So Kevin began to teach me a bit about various forms of "English" and jump shots I could employ to get around tight corners if I needed, as he informed me Bill would be sure to snooker me in every chance he could get.

I conscientiously practiced all the techniques Kevin showed me and, over the next stretch of evenings, tried my skills on a few other players and made a lot of rookie mistakes. Eventually, one night in late September, I felt ready, and I asked Bill for a friendly game, and he agreed.

"But since you and I have never played one another before," he said, "we'll call our plays and call our English."

I'd been asked to call plays before but had never been expected to call the intended spin. Bill was interested to see what my intentions were at each of my shots; he wanted to know if my shots were random luck or thought through. I had my reasons, and he had his, so I accepted his terms for the friendly game. Calling the English adds complexity because it is one thing to say which ball one is about to put where, but to wax on about spin reduces unknowns when one wants as open a backdoor of plausible deniability as one can get to run through when the roof comes down on a series of plays in a room full of pub distractions. There would be no "I *meant* to do that" with Bill.

I followed his lead after he broke, and we proceeded. At first, I figured having all the spin called would be annoying, but I soon learned what he was doing, and found I started to adjust my own gameplay to best fit, knowing full well that he would be doing the same. It made the game play at a meta-level I had not to that point experienced. At each play, “out of an infinity of designs,” the player must, as Marston Morse put it, “[choose] one pattern for beauty’s sake and [pull] it down to earth.”

The game came to the next-to-final shot, which in this instance was mine to call and make. I’d been snookered, Bill’s specialty; the eight ball was in front of my eleven ball, my last on the table, and the only way to get eleven into its best corner was a massé jump, arcing to the rail in a spin, with a trip down the rail to put eleven in the pocket, thus missing the eight. “Massé jump with outer English toward the rail down to eleven in the corner pocket.” *Bang!* The shot was made, and it *sunk eleven as called*, leaving only the eight.

Bill’s eyes did not blink as he stared at the eight. “Quinn, my friend, where did you learn to call your English like that?” Bill asked.

“From you,” I admitted. “The massé jump itself, well, Kevin taught me that one.” I then called and played my final shot on eight. *Snap.* I had won.

We shook hands, I bought him what he was drinking, and got back to my evening with Kevin at the bar. All these years later, pondering over the night’s events and the unexpected lesson from Bill, I cannot help but draw parallels between my learning journey with pub billiards and my understanding of poststructuralist fiction. In billiards, as in this form of literature, there are layers of complexity that are not immediately apparent. To some, they may not ever become apparent, and many will be none the worse off for it, still enjoying and experiencing both without much hinderance.

Even so, just like calling out the English in a game of billiards, the writer of a self-aware text must be mindful of the multifaceted nature of language, meaning, and identity and how that may be interpreted by and responded to by the engaged reader. This is an elaborate and intentional dance between reality, fabrication, motive, and interpretation.

I confess that one of my most eloquently vociferous inner critics is the non-Euclidean multivariate dot product of my imagined sets of readers, along with their possible perspectives, potential reactions, and interactions with my text; all the while having the awareness that this projection is merely a blatant fabrication formed from how *I* have *understood* the world. What single-author literary work is not constructed thusly? And yet, even though it is a confabulated *singular* mental construct, I have proposed to call it a *dialogue*, attributing imaginary exogeneity to complex shifting endogenous psychological simulacra.

Poststructuralist approaches challenge the idea of a single, definable meaning by positing what is a proxy of a definition and allowing the state of non-singular social play on the table to embellish the actual outcome toward an analysis of trace. Bill and I interacted with the game in a way that was not confined to mere physical ball-and-cue contact, in that there were subtleties, spins, feints, and maneuvers, all adding layers of complexity and both reducing *and* expanding the so-called rules-determined “dimensionality” of the game. By our successfully calling an extremely difficult shot with extreme English, we can play on a manifold that introduces subtle layers of polite intimidation that other, quieter games would have just let fall to interpretations of mere Luck.

We were playing not just with essentialist objects but with ideas, possibilities, and, at times, even with one another’s most *likely* thoughts. In *true* dialogue; we co-created the game before us in real time. It’s a loop of mutual creation, reflection, and understanding, not unlike the way I had come full circle from a naïve observer to a player somehow capable of challenging the local master.

My victory against Bill was not merely about winning a game. It was symbolic, almost like writing a complex narrative where the writer is both the creator and the subject, both the student and the teacher. The recognition of oneself in others and of others in oneself, the awareness of the blurred lines between truth and construction, mirrors the poststructuralist idea that meaning is never fixed but constantly shifting and undergoing contingency, depending on perspective and interpretation.

An essentialist interpretation would likely admit to none of this. Reductionists would perhaps have us instead take the events at The Duck at more or less face value, breaking them all into discrete units. Calling out one's plays and one's intended spin in a pool game alerts a skilled opponent of possible longer term game strategies and presents opportunities to divert play from a more informed position than without the verbal annotations. To such thinking it is a simple enough Markov Chain, with the only unknowns being the various transitional probabilities, which are, at their core, a matter of modeling and analysis to determine with any degree of confidence that one might so wish. Such is the reductionist perspective, structuralist at its roots, but missing half the spin and torque.

Metafiction and poststructuralism, however, are neither essentialist nor reductionist in their underpinnings. As manifest in meta-autobiographical narrative, which includes *these* very words, they are what makes reading something as long and as complex as a novel as interactive, iterative, and self-adjusting as the long, involved game of Call-your-Play-Call-your-English. Each at the table must consider new understandings of where the table is moving, based not only upon one's own conception of how the gameplay *ought* to progress, but how it progresses in practice, and all of this in a milieu of explicitly stated praxis-driven desired final outcomes that might, due to turns of chance or overestimation of one's own skill, not *sink-as-called*.

In meta-narrative, just as with standard pool, there are two at the table: the author and reader. As with pool, there are rules: and just as with bar pool, specific variants of the rules can be declared just before a game commences, as long as both players agree to break after that, the agreed upon rules will be heeded and the modified game considered square. Some rules of pool one can almost intuit the moment one enters the bar sporting the table, even if they're not posted, just by the condition of the tables themselves in some cases, even when there are no players surrounding them. This bar room atmosphere we might liken to literary genre or mathematical convention.

I learned while learning to play pool first how to stand and distribute my weight when taking a shot. I learned to be aware of my surroundings. I learned to be aware of things I said out loud.



One does not always want one's opponent to know one's English in advance, and most games don't require calling this. And I learned to try to learn from each game in the moment it was being played, rather than to simply immerse myself in the wash and flow of the play cycle.

Moreover, this synchronicity of systems found accord with my understanding of constructs of mathematical sheaf theory and adaptive, self-modifying formal grammars and their associated hyperdimensional output directed graphs. Sheaves project onto the codomain through functors, forgetful or free, projecting across categories onto each representation those semantics most suited to analysis at each currently interesting response surface facet, without for a moment perturbing the essentialist truth at the sheaf-of-sheaves meta-level. In calling one's English in mathematics, one dances precarious manifolds and thus is as benefited by collaboration as anyone can be. Like the intricate play on the green baize, the complex interplay of morphisms and objects in category theory displays an elegant dance of logic and abstraction, a composition of function and form that reveals the deeper connections between seemingly disparate mathematical structures, in a space where higher structure often has more importance than local specifics such as inner vs. outer English.

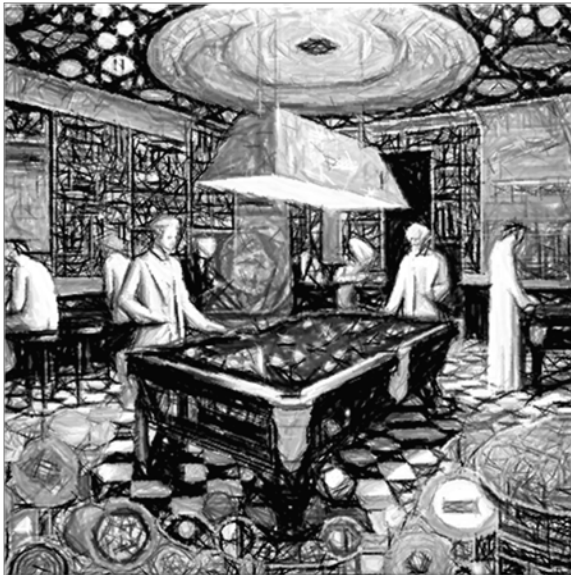
Just as I sought temporary local command over the cue ball's English to defeat Bill in a game of pool, a mathematician navigates the landscape of category theory, applying functors and natural transformations to expose the hidden relations within mathematical entities. These three games, one played on a pool table, the other in constructed narrative, and the last as equations and graphs and arrows, require an understanding of not just the rules and tactics, but the subtleties and nuances of what are, at heart, socially negotiated Representations of Truth.

These analogous experiences shed light on the delicate balance between essentialist perspectives, which cling tightly to reductionist denotations, and the more fluid, connotative, multi-dimensional poststructuralist viewpoints. The latter allows for a richer, more flexible understanding of the greater world, where complexities are not boiled away to some desired Simplicity but are instead enthusiastically embraced and explored.

In the world of pool, metafiction, and mathematics alike, the torque of one's English and the application of functors both require a willingness to dive into the intricate and the subtle, to recognize that, even within the strictures of rules and definitions, there lies a vast landscape of possibility and interpretation, a world where calling your play and your English is not merely a boisterous demonstration of skill but a celebration of complexity, creativity, and collaboration.

Like the written word or the spun ball, these constructs become the nexus where logic and expression intertwine, where theory and practice meld, and where the game transcends its bounds to become a metaphor for understanding and engaging with the multifaceted world around us in fuller praxis.

My journey at The Thirsty Duck over a decade ago was not just about wings and beer and pool; it was a reflection on life, learning, complexity, and the beautiful ambiguity that ties all these elements together. It was a metaphorical game, where the real lessons were hidden beneath the surface, waiting to be uncovered and understood in the same way one unravels the dense narrative of a meta-autobiographical text.



“Call your English” — 2023



“De-lionization” — 2023

## **“Dismantling Lionization in STEM”**

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“Mathematics is as much an aspect of culture as it is a collection of algorithms.” — Carl Benjamin Boyer

### **Abstract**

We examine name and personality lionization in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics through the broadly culturally-informed and trauma-informed lenses of modern practice, especially as practitioners collectively strive for common ground in presumptively increasingly socially just modern work and personal spaces and environments. Following the lead of [Freire 1970], we seek to establish a dialogue that identifies some potentially difficult culturally unjust and yet canonized practices and (unfortunately) lionized personalities in STEM, while at the same time recognizing the complex and intersectional nature of the present system. Science is not simply an antiseptically methodological algorithm or framework or practice outside the lives of its human practitioners, absent consideration of their varied cultures and histories, but rather is built by the scientific *community*; it is because scientists are in, by the nature of their shared endeavor, consistent and continuous dialogue, that what has to date only been *presumptively* actualized may indeed continue to benefit from reflection and self-examination, thereby more fully reaching a shared benefit across its many avenues.

As an author with poststructuralist leanings, I have long openly struggled with the notion of respectful irreverence, my first international publication (*i.e.* [Jackson 1987]) being an invitation-by-example to an open ideological dialogue in poetry:

“A Divine Understanding”

EVANGELIST:

I would rather stand under God  
Than understand God.

THEOLOGIST:

I would rather understand G/god(s)  
Than stand under G/god(s).

ATHEIST:

There’s nothing there to understand!

ANARCHIST:

There’s no one to stand under!

MARXIST:

Opiate anyone?

The role of the artist in art and the purpose and intent of narrative are defined not only by a single artist but by the cultural context from whence that artist arises. “Art” does not fall from the Abstract Heavens, but rather emerges *societally*: it both produces and is produced by the many aspects of the past sociolinguistic and meta-symbolic ecosystems—not *all* healthy ones!—that come forth with it.

## Discussion

Let us suppose for a moment that we were to stop referring to **Pearson’s *r*** by that surname, and instead suggest that a depersonalized substitute such as *correlation coefficient* be used in the former’s stead.

If there was from this *gedankenexperiment* any feeling that some *threatening social line* had been crossed, we might best ask: *what felt at threat in that moment?* Surely there are many other questions one might ask as well, but dialogues sometimes begin with such questions that are, as put forth earlier herein, respectfully irreverent.

While it is true that we can already just call the coefficient by the more general form and we would likely in doing so not put anyone else to any bother, it is also true that Pearson's name and some part of his intellectual legacy is attached to the specters of eugenics, and from that foundation there are also associations and inequalities. As already mentioned in [Jackson 2021], I am, as an autistic, personally impacted by flawed notions associated with their ultimately fatally eugenicist thinking (*cf.* [Baron-Cohen 2018] for more on Hans Asperger's activities and the impacts and consequences therefrom); and as a scientist who deals with the mathematical models in genetically-informed spaces, I feel a *deep* revulsion towards eugenics, Pearson's other legacy, carried forward from Galton. In eugenics, we hear less of the inclusive *vox populi* in [Galton 1907] than we do the "*regression towards mediocrity*" found in his ruder precursors (*cf.* [Galton 1885]). I (and many others) have seen and measured the contributions of Galton, Pearson, Fisher, and others, and I have stared into gene expression levels, informed foundationally by mathematics and scientific thinking first put forth in Western scholarly literature and onto modern scientific methodology.

The goal of such dialogues is not to eradicate these names from all mathematical and other scientific nomenclature, even though the increased promotion of universally perceived positive values may actually eventually lead to this outcome organically through disuse and eventual retirement of these old "classics." In these areas we may find ourselves feeling more than one thing about the same thing, with shifting understandings based upon our own lived intersectional identities.

As said [Freire 1970, p. 48], "[they] may discover through existential experience that their present way of life is irreconcilable with their vocation to become fully human. They may perceive through their relations with reality that reality is really a *process*, undergoing constant transformation."

If I cast my mind back only to the age of six and just push past the ending of the Vietnam War in 1975, I have personally *seen and felt* across a number of generational norms and cultures. While much of it was simply my young life as it passed by me where I then stood, other of it came from the international nature of the modern connected world and my own place in that world as a youth and young adult and how that impacted my access to other cultures across international and social boundaries.

And I heard how “the other half” lived because I was to some degree always a blue-collar gas jockey in a world where learning how to change a tire correctly, safely, and quickly made a few cents an hour difference in wages in a world where that was converted into food to eat that night. The number of times I have faced existential crises centered on access to food in my early life is unsettling. This struggle to find enough to eat did not end until my late thirties, when I was well past pumping gas.

I know what I felt through those periods, as much as one can, not only because I remember, but because I also produced poetry, short stories, novellas, plays, and novels during those years, and much of that work (although thankfully not all) survives and I can review the words and recall my intent and note shifts in my own perspectives and understandings.

Self-actualization in Western culture has continued to be valued highly, and we might even say that we can presumptively declare we have reached a post-actualization balance. And yet when we propose to consider just how the continued name-lionization of these eugenicist thought leaders in the honorific trappings of our day-to-day language of mathematical labeling might best incline us to step away from the distress-laden surnames of that movement, we may still feel that something is at threat if we let go of these traditions.

It is for this reason that I have called this a *presumptively* post-actualized milieu: those of us who have been freed of yesterday’s burdens may still sit in privilege not yet fully understood, and at worst may yet have our vision obscured by generational trauma and systemic barriers to truly liberated actualization. The pedagogy of this dialogue is ever expanding as the caucus grows, shifts, and finds its own place amongst the various practitioners and communities they purpose to serve.

And now to return to hunger. I can hear echoes of my own doubts and discomfort amongst my own past medicine. That dialogue came from others who have given me the necessary tools to even begin to continue the conversation. As my life and art eventually collided in the pages of the novel *Janus Incubus*, for instance, my personal existential struggle to find enough food to eat in my early adult years was directly impacted as I struggled to find meaning and insight in the words of Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*. Other works around that time, too, had great impact on my perception of my battle against slow starvation, such as those of Jack London as seen in *Martin Eden*, and the French poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke.

But Hamsun in particular spoke to me when I, too, was in that empty, lonely, painful place that no longer even offered up hurt. And then I read a bit *too much* about Hamsun's later career and his explicit and vocal support and admiration of Hitler, and Hamsun suddenly became my uncomfortable version of who Pearson becomes when one uncovers the connections to his eugenicist thinking. His name and work had seemed forever a part of my own *id*, and yet, Hamsun then went on to ride his very own chariot to infamy, even being charged with treason in his native Norway. As much as I had been forged in common human existential desperation into fraternity with Hamsun, I had to push that all away upon learning of his betrayal of humanity. While it is true that we can feel more than one thing about something, there are notions to which there is only one response, and Hamsun's later actions had invoked that deeply in me.

In turn, Hemingway was my Galton, and London my Fisher, each for different reasons that I nonetheless consider warranted. These exemplars had built significant pieces of me, over many years, but I no longer welcomed their more disturbing aspects. This journey of the interconnectedness of personalities with legacies and unintended or under-considered consequences also included unexpected and delightful alternatives, leading me to many other sources of inspiration across many cultures and intersectional identities and I came to understand that one need not mourn the loss of some now wholly inappropriate, obviated pantheon.



As is also said by [Freire 1970, p. 57]: “Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality. [...] In this incompleteness and this awareness lie the very roots of education as an exclusively human manifestation.”

It is even through our disappointments, disownments, and redemptive reconstructions upon less shaky foundations than prior that we arrive at our present actualization. Our practice becomes informed not only with new wet and dry lab techniques and reagents, but also with trauma-informed reflective practice in whatever discipline of science, technology, engineering, or mathematics the practitioner may be actively engaged.

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## Notes for the Acquisitions Editor

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“Over the Transom” — 2023



# *Midnight at the Arcanum*

*a monograph*

Quinn Tyler Jackson CSci FIScT FRSA



**Knight Terra Press**

*littera manet sed lector oraculum*

*audere, scire, tacere*

ὄπως ἐπάνω, ἔτσι και κάτω

## **About the Book**

Quinn Jackson's *Midnight at the Arcanum* is a 106K-word illustrated meta-autobiographical monograph, composed of three sections: front-matter, the novel narrative itself, and back-matter. Despite its composite literary format (essays, autobiographical vignettes, short stories, poems, a novel, a play), it is presented as a unified monograph focusing on an examination of meta-autobiography as a transformative poststructuralist literary form, with each section of the work building toward the next or supporting what preceded. Finally, the work aspires to be of pedagogic utility, a template in meta-autobiographical praxis.

At its core, the monograph takes the reader on a journey through the emotional and intellectual landscapes of Conrad, an aspiring author. The work is divided into three distinct sections: front-matter, the main narrative, and back-matter, which weave together a tapestry of essay, memoir, poetry, drama, and fiction. The narrative serves both as storytelling and as an exploration of the intricate nature of metafiction, moving through time from the author's childhood in 1980s Canada to the adult he becomes.

The front-matter sets the tone for the novel, with an essay on meta-autobiographical fiction as a form of social justice, a foreword exploring the author's early life, and a poem that sets the tone of the central narrative that follows.

The narrative segment, presented primarily in the first-person point of view of the protagonist, Conrad, encompasses decades, shifting between the Canadian locales of Burnaby, Vancouver, Montreal, and finally, New Westminster, following Conrad's journey from his early days as an aspiring writer as he navigates his complex love affairs, all marked by growth, loss, and transformation, to the physically austere yet restorative months immediately following his departure from his marriage.

The back-matter offers a denouement rather than an abrupt end, continuing the author's personal growth journey through an afterword, an additional short story, and two concluding essays. Much like Jackson's previous work, lauded by reviewers for its precision, attention to detail, and innovative narrative style, *Midnight at the Arcanum* invites readers into an immersive and at times gregariously intimate exploration of time, emotion, and the limits of fictional narrative.

## **Front-matter (12K words):**

- Essay: "Reclaiming the Narrative Pedagogy"
- Preface: "*Apologetica de Polyphonia Veritatis*"
- Author's Foreword: vignettes from age 5 to 18

The front-matter establishes that the book is a meta-autobiographical account of the author's early life in late-80's Canada. First, a brief treatment of meta-autobiographical fiction is presented to immediately alert the reader to the expectations one should have from this point onward. The foreword then discusses the author's life through vignettes in terms of key developmental impact factors across his intellectual, social, and emotional growth from kindergarten to high school graduation. These vignettes are put forth in a matter-of-fact format without nonlinear time shifting or narrative flourishes. Finally, it closes with a poem that sets the tone for the enclosed novel that follows.

## The Novel (60K words):

- New Westminster, Winter 2007 (1 chapter)
  - Short story: “Midnight”
- Montreal, Late August 1988 (1 chapter)
  - Short story: “Zero”
- Burnaby, Fall and Winter 1987-1988 (24 chapters)
  - Short story: “Neck and Neck”
  - Short story: “Elspeth Stood at the Edge”
- Montreal, Early Summer, 1988 (10 chapters)
  - Short story: “In the Shadow of Clay Pigeons”
- New Westminster, Winter 2006-2007 (9 chapters)
  - Short story: “Wake Up!”
  - Short story: “When a Stranger Wandered In”
  - Short story: “Clean”
  - Short story: “Barefoot Sonata”

The novel begins *in medias res* with the entitled short story “Midnight” with Conrad, the protagonist, sitting on a bench outside in the cold, playing a saxophone, reminiscing about a past lover. This chapter is dated seven years into the New Millennium. The next chapter, numbered “Zero” flashes back to 1988 in Montreal, showing a much younger Conrad, clinging to a necklace with a saxophone amulet on it, straining through the last emotional disruptions of an apparently failed relationship that we as yet have not seen into. The use of the second-person addressing of a past lover and then the shift into the past and the subsequent use of this same second-person ties together the love interests of the protagonist, or at least suggests an ideal love in his emotional focus. He then regains his composure and (it is implied) centers himself to press forward with his life.

The novel hereafter progresses linearly from roughly a year prior to the scene in sweltering hot Montreal. We are with Conrad at his bathroom mirror, ready to head out into the world to find a job before he starves. Through chance and charm, he lands a decent job at a jewelry store, and he and Vanessa, one of his coworkers, fall into a weekend of lusty activity together that ends quickly in the fracturing of his life as a consequence of a hot-headed outburst on Conrad’s part.

After this weekend, he eventually falls sick while at work due to severe pneumonia, loses his job and income, and endures the consequences of his destroyed relationship and health. He slowly pulls out of the effects of his illness and begins a plan to improve his French by socializing at a French bookstore in Vancouver, where he meets H el ene, a theatre director who becomes charmed by him in a way that pulls him into an almost ethereal relationship almost centering on his play-in-progress (included as an appendix herein). This relationship eventually ends on mutually agreed terms, and Conrad makes the decision to move to Montreal and try his hand at survival there.

The novel then shifts to Montreal and Conrad's immediate tone is one of regret. Even so, he pulls himself together, finds a job, and begins pushing through the days. During this time he sees and is compelled to approach Anne-Jolie, a dead-ringer for Vanessa, and they begin to talk. He learns she is married but declares that this does not matter to him. Their relationship builds into something more intensely connected than he is used to. This stolen love affair comes to an end, however, when her husband gets a job location change to Paris and expects Anne-Jolie to come with him, which she decides to do.

We then jump forward, to a time just before the first chapter of the novel ("Midnight"). Conrad, much older now, finds himself being prodded awake by his wife, Roxana, in the chapter "Wake Up!", and in a following chapter is in a dark hotel room in New Westminster, in the chapter entitled "Clean," presented in the third person. As suggested by the transitional-period short story "When a Stranger Wandered In," that serves as the next, allegorical examination of his interior life, he here seems to be coming out of many years of trauma that he insists must be washed from him.

The jump to 2007 after so many missing years brings us to Conrad's post-marriage voyages. He meets Phoebe in a nightclub and begins talking with her about her anxieties and concerns, and he shares how he has found some peace. We progress through their relationship, and then are brought to the close of the novel, where we see that the lover in the first chapter ("Midnight") is, in fact, this same Phoebe, bringing us full circle.

## Back-matter (34K words):

- Author's Afterword: vignettes from age 19 onward
- Short story: "It Ain't Never Gonna Happen"
- Essay: "Call your Play; Call your English"
- Essay: "Dismantling Lionization in STEM"
- Annotated Bibliography: Thematic Annotated Bibliography
- Memorandum: "Notes for the Acquisitions Editor"
- Postscript: "A Poststructuralist Postscript"
- Playbill: Playbill to the Appendix
- Appendix: The Play: *Empty Rooms: a play in 3 acts*

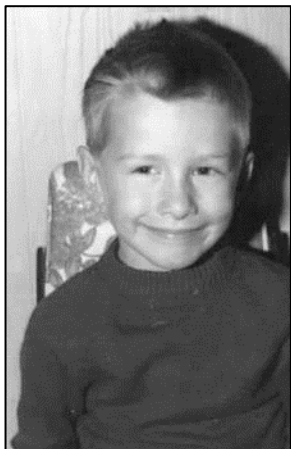
Whereas the front-matter establishes the context of the work, the back-matter provides a denouement rather than abruptly end the work on the last word of the novel portion. As this is meta-autobiography, there are matters of conflation to consider when it comes to the portrayal of past loves, for instance, and the afterword addresses some of these items. It also continues with the linear, straightforward approach of presenting the author's growth as an artist and citizen of the world.

The author presents a short story, "It Ain't Never Gonna Happen," that recounts the tale of how he, in an attempt to prove to his stepfather once and for all that he had the "discipline" to become a novelist, ended up caught silenced in the promise of non-disclosure he had made to his mother. This bond of his promise prevented him from proving to his stepfather that he did, indeed, have that discipline, and the very existence of this story in the back-matter of a novel become monograph is intended as an ironic metafictional conceit, as well as further background information on the character interpretation of Conrad from the earlier novel.

This is followed by two self-reflective essay treatments that tie to other matters presented. The monograph is then completed with the present memorandum summarizing its structure, a thematic annotated bibliography of key works, and a final word from Jackson on the entirety of the present opus. An appendix, *Empty Rooms*, a three-act play, the inspiration for a play central to the Hélène relationship in the early novel, is included for reader enjoyment and to make this oeuvre self-contained.



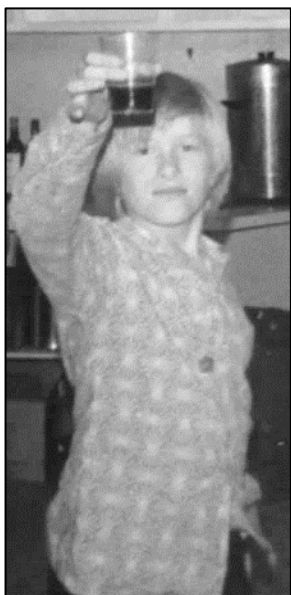
***Vive la différence !***



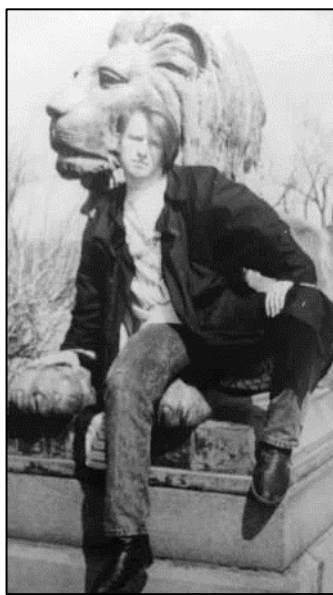
Gibson's Landing – '74  
(Sweater on backwards)



Montreal Bus Station – '88  
(In dire need of sleep and a bath)



Gilford Island – '79/'80  
(31 December 1979)



Parc Mont-Royal – '90  
(Soft Goth Alternative)

## **Thematic Annotated Bibliography**

This bibliography strives to concisely but faithfully capture the entire referenced work discussed while maintaining a strong emphasis on resonance with themes found herein. The works discussed are either directly referenced or alluded to in this monograph and have had considerable impact upon its evolution.

Bond, F. F., *Give Yourself Background* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Wittlesey House, 1942 (*orig.* 1937)

From the Preface to the First Edition: “People who lament their lack of education should expect no sympathy. [...] Too often they base their lament on the fact that they did not have a chance to attend college. College attendance itself does not imply education. I have taught in a university for years and I would like to think that many of the young men and women who sat in rows before me in a polite coma were being educated. In some cases they were; in others the process would not begin until years later when they individually awoke to the fact that they needed information and understanding and set themselves to the work of making the wanted knowledge their own.

“Life consists of taking in and giving out. William James says that ... the process consists in taking in, turning over, and giving out—the turning over being the period of mental appreciation. To give out, one must take in; one must have a filled-up reservoir on which to draw; one must have a background.

“This book deals with the acquisition of a background. It shows how you can use your public library, your newspaper, [and] your radio as college instructors. [...] It uses shortcuts where shortcuts are available and have been found of value. It suggests methods of study, based on current psychology, which you can apply to the whole wide realm of knowledge and make yours as much of it as you need.”

Budge, E. A. W., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: (The Papyrus of Ani), Egyptian Text Transliteration and Translation*, Dover, 1967 (orig. 1895).

*The Egyptian Book of the Dead* is a collection of ancient Egyptian scriptures, primarily incantations and prayers designed to aid the deceased in their journey through the afterlife. To ensure a seamless passage and a favorable verdict by the deities, especially the pivotal god Osiris, these texts were typically placed within tombs. Budge's 1895 edition offers a thorough exposition of the *Papyrus of Ani*, a notably detailed and illustratively rich version of these scriptures. Through his intricately detailed and meticulously presented compilation, encompassing hieroglyphic inscriptions, transliterations, and English translations, Budge sought to present the religious ancient traditions of Egypt to a broader readership.

Central to the tome thematically are Isis and Osiris, given their indispensable roles in the ancient Egyptian perceptions of the afterlife. Osiris stands out as the god of the afterlife, resurrection, and renewal. His own journey through death and rebirth positions him as an emblem of the eternal cycle of life and death, and the deceased aspire to receive his favorable judgment and thus accompany him in the afterlife. Concurrently, Isis emerges as Osiris' loyal consort and Horus' mother. She is instrumental in the mythos where she resurrects Osiris after his assassination by Set, who cut him into fourteen pieces and scattered him to the winds. Within the *Book of the Dead*, her magic and sagacity are many times invoked, as she is the protective deity, providing invaluable assistance to departed souls in their funerary voyage, shielding them against the potential perils with her potent magic.

The enduring allure of *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* stems not only from its elucidation of ancient Egyptian post-mortem beliefs but also its linguistic, literary, and artistic merit. The writings therein offer insights into the ethical and spiritual ethos of ancient Egypt, underscoring their understanding of existence, mortality, and divinity.

Camus, A., *L'Étranger*, Folio, 1971 (*orig.* 1942).

In Camus' *L'Étranger* (*The Stranger* or *The Outsider*), the protagonist, Meursault, stands as a portrayal of the quintessential existentialist figure, journeying through life with a dispassionate and detached demeanor. From the outset, Meursault's indifferent reaction to his mother's death sets the tone for the narrative, drawing the reader into a deep exploration of human alienation. This indifference and inability to adhere to societal norms and expectations not only isolates him from those around him, but also underscores the existentialist belief in the meaninglessness of life.

Throughout the narrative, the theme of existentialism becomes increasingly prominent. Meursault's actions, or often lack thereof, reveal someone who is living without an adherence to any moral or societal code, but rather moving through life as an observer, detached from his own experiences. His eventual violent act, the killing of an Arab man on a beach, seems to come from no deeply held belief or passion, further emphasizing the existentialist idea that life lacks inherent purpose and meaning.

The culmination of the narrative, Meursault's trial and eventual death sentence, amplifies the theme of absurdity. Rather than being judged for the crime he has committed, it is his atheism, emotional detachment, and failure to grieve for his mother that society condemns most. This trial serves as Camus' poignant commentary on the absurdity of societal norms and the human desire to impose meaning on an integrally meaningless existence. The novel challenges readers to confront the uncomfortable truths of existence, the isolation of individual experience, and the inevitability of death.

Meursault's journey, characterized by stark emotional detachment and societal indifference, emerges as a seminal reflection on existentialism's core tenets. The work stands as a solid cornerstone in existentialist literature, prompting readers to grapple with alienation and the human quest for purpose in an inherently indifferent universe.

Derrida, J., *De la grammatologie*, Les Éditions Minuit, 1967.

In Derrida's seminal work, *De la grammatologie* (*Of Grammatology*), published in 1967, the philosopher delves into the realms of language, challenging conventional notions of structuralism and highlighting the core concepts of *différance*, deconstruction, and trace. His exploration begins by deconstructing the presumed hierarchy of speech over writing, asserting that writing is not merely a derivative of speech but, rather, a distinct modality of expression. This deconstruction of the binary opposition between speech and writing is a theme that permeates the text.

*Différance*, a term coined by Derrida, plays a pivotal role in his analysis. It signifies the interplay between difference and deferral, emphasizing how meaning is deferred in language, thus making exact meaning elusively diachronically delayed. He argues that language operates through a system of differences, where words only gain significance in relation to other words, creating an endless chain of suspended meaning. This concept challenges the notion of stable and fixed meanings, inviting readers to question and examine the instability and multiplicity inherent in language and even perception itself.

Deconstruction, as practiced by Derrida, involves the careful examination of a text's underlying assumptions and hierarchical structures. By revealing the ambiguities and tensions within language and philosophy, he encourages readers to engage critically with established or entrenched discourses and thus consider alternative perspectives. The notion of "trace" reinforces this approach, as it highlights the residual, elusive nature of meaning in language, leaving behind traces that are never fully comprehensible.

In *De la grammatologie*, Derrida challenges the traditional foundations of linguistic and philosophical thought, inviting readers to question the presumed stability of language, revealing in its place the intricate lattice of deferred meanings and urging a critical reevaluation of entrenched ideas.

de Saint-Exupéry, A., *Le Petit Prince*, Harcourt, 2001 (*orig.* 1943).

*Le Petit Prince (The Little Prince)* is an illustrated novella that playfully but meaningfully delves into themes of love, friendship, innocence, and the nature of human relationships. The story revolves around a pilot stranded in the Sahara, who encounters an adventurous young prince from another planet. Throughout their time together, the Little Prince recounts his experiences and the various inhabitants he met on different planets during his journeys.

One of the central themes of the book is the idea of *taming* others or forming bonds with them through our relationships. The Little Prince encounters a fox who teaches him that meaningful relationships require effort and understanding to cultivate. The fox tells him:

« Tu n'es encore pour moi qu'un petit garçon tout semblable à cent mille petits garçons. Et je n'ai pas besoin de toi. Et tu n'as pas besoin de moi non plus. Je ne suis pour toi qu'un renard semblable à cent mille renards. Mais, si tu m'apprivoises, nous aurons besoin l'un de l'autre. Tu seras pour moi unique au monde. Je serai pour toi unique au monde. »

[“To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world...”]

By the end of the tale, the Little Prince realizes the depth of his connection to the rose he left behind on his planet, understanding the weighty truth in the fox's words: “You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed.” The story underscores the importance of nurturing our relationships, valuing those we have “tamed,” and recognizing the irreplaceable nature of the bonds we form.

Freire, P., *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin Modern Classics, 1993 (*orig.* 1970).

Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a foundational text in critical pedagogy, revolves around the central idea that education can be a tool for oppression or liberation. Freire criticizes what he calls the "banking" model of education, where knowledge is "deposited" into students, positioning them as mere passive recipients. Instead, he advocates for a problem-posing approach, where students and teachers actively engage in a true dialogue, co-creating knowledge. This interactive learning method emphasizes and encourages mutual respect and treats the learner as a co-creator of knowledge, fostering critical thinking and awareness of social realities.

Central to Freire's philosophy is the concept of "conscientization" or critical consciousness. This involves recognizing the socio-political systems that perpetuate oppression and working actively to transform them. Dialogic education is pivotal for conscientization, as it enables individuals to perceive their reality not as a static given but as a problem to be solved. It encourages learners to actively and meaningfully question, challenge, and eventually change the structures of power and domination.

Lastly, Freire underscores the importance of self-enacted liberation. He believes that the oppressed must be instrumental in their own liberation, emphasizing that it cannot (or at least will not) be bestowed by the oppressor. This means that the journey towards freedom must be rooted in the lived experiences of the oppressed and must involve their active participation. Only through this self-enacted liberation, facilitated by dialogic education, can genuine transformation and emancipation occur. This humanistic approach to education not only empowers individuals but also serves as a catalyst for broader social change, making Freire's work a timeless beacon of self-actuated, socially supported personal realization of human potential.

Gardner, J., *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*, Vintage, 1991 (*orig.* 1984).

In *The Art of Fiction*, Gardner delves into the intricate craft of writing fiction, illuminating the nuances that transform simple narratives into powerful works of art. Drawing from his vast experience as a writer and educator, Gardner provides aspiring authors with valuable insights into the nature of fiction and the tools needed to master it. He emphasizes the importance of continual artistic growth, urging young writers to cultivate their unique voices and remain true to their vision, even when faced with the myriad challenges of the literary world.

Gardner delves deeply into the often-overlooked areas of fiction writing, such as the ethical considerations a writer must grapple with and the moral obligations that come with authorhood. He suggests that every writer has a duty to the reader, a responsibility to portray characters, conflicts, and resolutions with authenticity and care. He also emphasizes the fluid relationship between a writer's own experiences and the narratives they craft. He posits that the most compelling tales are those born from the depths of genuine human experience, for these stories that touch upon universal truths and shared emotions.

For Gardner, storytelling is not just an act of creation but a means of communication, a bridge between the author's seminal vision and the reader's perception. It is this reverence for storytelling that sets his work apart, encouraging writers to view their craft not just as a skill to be honed, but as a powerful means to connect, influence, and inspire.

Central to Gardner's thesis that fiction should be a vivid, continuous dream, with every element—from plot to character to setting—working in harmony. For Gardner, literary greatness is achieved when the author effectively immerses the reader in this dream, thereby capturing the mind and leaving a lasting, meaningful, personal impact. Rather than a barrier, Gardner's ideal might be considered an ambitious challenge for the author of metafiction.



Hamsun, K., *Hunger*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008 (*orig.* 1890), *trans.* Robert Bly, *intro.* Paul Auster.

Hamsun's *Hunger* (*Sult*) is a groundbreaking work that delves into the psychological torment of its unnamed protagonist, a starving writer wandering the streets of Christiania (Oslo) in the late nineteenth century. The protagonist's struggle for sustenance and dignity is marked by hallucinations, erratic behaviors and disorganized thinking, and unsettling reflections on existence. Central to the narrative is Ylajali, an elusive female figure with whom the protagonist becomes infatuated. Ylajali represents the unattainable, a brief respite from his suffering, and a symbol of the society from which he feels estranged. Their interactions range from light intimate encounters to estranged misunderstandings, mirroring the protagonist's broader relationship with society: a constant dark tension between the need to belong and a deep feeling of otherness.

The society depicted in *Hunger* is indifferent to the protagonist's plight, casting him as an outsider. His experiences and interactions are marked by both the callousness and occasional kindness of strangers, but more often than not, he finds himself at distressing odds with societal norms and expectations. The public's indifference to his suffering highlights the alienation many individuals feel within urban settings, particularly those who do not fit predefined societal roles or serve some perceived function.

The protagonist's relationship with God is another central theme. Throughout his journey, he grapples with existential questions, often addressing God directly in moments of despair and introspection. These dialogues reflect a complicated relationship: at times, he challenges God, blaming Him for his misery, and at other times, he seeks solace and purpose through spiritual introspection. The ebb and flow of this relationship adds depth to his characterization, positioning his physical hunger alongside a gnawing spiritual yearning as he finds relief for neither.

Hemingway, E., *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, Scribner Sons, 1938.

*The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, published by Scribner Sons in 1938, at the height of his literary career, stands as a reflection of the multilayered psyche of one of America's most celebrated literary figures. While the stories display Hemingway's hallmark minimalist style, encapsulating a wide and varied array of human emotions and experiences, they also provide insights into the writer's personal complexities.

Two stories, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" and "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," are particularly illustrative of Hemingway's mastery. In the former, the undercurrents of existential loneliness and the keen human yearning for significance are explored within the simple setting of a café, as characters grapple with the inevitability of aging and the relentless passage of time. The latter delves deep into themes of regret, mortality, and self-reflection, all set in the backdrop of the African wilderness, symbolizing both the vastness of life's possibilities and the constraints imposed by our choices. While these stories resonate with universal experiences, they also hint at Hemingway's personal struggles and the societal norms of his time. Specifically, in stories like "Hills Like White Elephants," his portrayal of the woman, and the interpersonal dynamics between the couple, reflect elements of toxic masculinity and an adherence to rigid gender roles. The subtle power imbalances and the man's insistence on a decision that primarily affects the woman are indicative of these issues.

This collection invites readers to not just immerse themselves in the narratives but to also engage in a deeper reflection about the intricate interplay between a writer's personal life, societal norms, and the stories they choose to tell. By doing so, one appreciates both the art and the artist, while also examining the more problematic aspects of their legacy and actively electing to use authorial privilege after mindful consideration, without the need to conflate literary minimalism with outdated notions of masculinity.

Hemingway, E., *The Sun Also Rises*, Scribner's Sons, 1926.

Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* might not be an existentialist work *per se*, but one can argue that its themes and stylistic choices had a significant impact on the ethos that later evolved into existentialism. The novel captures an existentially deep sense of aimlessness and an incurable disillusionment, mirroring the sentiments of the Lost Generation who were grappling with the societal upheavals and moral ambiguities following World War I. These deep feelings of existential emptiness and the questioning of traditional values laid fertile ground for the existentialist ideas of thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, who took up similar themes of absurdity, freedom, and existential despair.

The characters in *The Sun Also Rises* embody the existentialist dilemma in their search for meaning in a world that seems to offer absolutely none. Jake Barnes, the protagonist, represents the struggle with existential angst, grappling with impotence both literal and metaphorical. He, like many existentialist heroes to come, must navigate a world devoid of clear moral or philosophical guideposts. The characters are unable to find any solace in traditional values or societal norms, a theme that existentialists would later delve into deeply. They are essentially free, but this freedom comes as a double-edged sword: while it allows for the possibility of creating one's own meaning, it also engenders a deep sense of dislocation and loneliness.

The existentialists re-found the Lost Generation by providing intellectual and philosophical tools to navigate a world that had seemingly fallen apart. They offered a way to confront meaninglessness and turn it into an opportunity for personal freedom and authentic living. This resonates with the characters who, while not explicitly existentialist, certainly grapple with similar themes of aimlessness and the search for individual meaning in an unforgivingly hostile world. The book not only embodies the *Zeitgeist* of its era but also anticipates the existentialist ethos that would soon permeate literature and philosophy alike.

London, J., *Martin Eden*, Penguin Classics, 1994 (*orig.* 1909).

London's semi-autobiographical novel *Martin Eden* is a grippingly frank narrative that delves into the struggles and aspirations of a working-class individual aspiring to intellectual and societal elevation. Born into the working class, Martin Eden's life is punctuated by a series of labor-intensive occupations. He has worked as a sailor, which not only exposed him to the toils of physical labor but also brought him into contact with a diverse range of people and cultures. Later, he takes on back-breaking jobs like laundry work, all the while fueling his passion for reading and writing, fueled by his pursuit of self-improvement and societal recognition.

Eden's journey to becoming a published author is far from smooth. He faces myriad rejections, with manuscripts frequently returned with cold, impersonal slips. However, his determination is unwavering, fueled in part by his belief in the power of the written word and his own potential. His countless hours spent in public libraries, educating himself, and penning down his thoughts, often in the face of abject poverty and desperation, underscore his dedication.

Central to the story is Eden's relationship with his love interest, Ruth Morse. Ruth, an educated woman from a bourgeois background, becomes the embodiment of everything Martin aspires to be—cultured, refined, and accepted by the elite. She introduces him to art, literature, and music, further expanding his horizons. However, their relationship is fraught with challenges, stemming from the vast chasm between their socioeconomic backgrounds. Ruth, while initially enamored by Martin's raw passion and intellect, often finds herself at odds with his lack of conformity to societal norms. Their relationship not only highlights the divisions between social classes but also underscores Eden's internal struggles, as he grapples with his identity, ambitions, and the sacrifices he must make for his dreams. Ultimately, at the height of his success as a published, well-respected author, Martin Eden stares into an abyss of existential disillusionment and disappointment.

Maugham, W. S., *Of Human Bondage*, Modern Library, 1999  
(orig. 1915)

Maugham's novel *Of Human Bondage* is a semi-autobiographical work that delves into the basic fabric of human existence, depicting the ebb and flow of aspirations, frailties, and self-reflective moments. Maugham's prose masterfully mirrors the many shades of human emotion, unraveling the dance-delicate balance between passion and prudence, dreams and reality.

Philip Carey, the young protagonist, is emblematic of the human spirit's dual resilience and vulnerability. His clubfoot, a physical imperfection Maugham is sometimes believed to have modeled after his own stammer, serves as a potent metaphor for the internal struggles and external judgments that he encounters throughout his oftentimes-difficult life. His relationships, especially with women, are rife with emotional intensity, symbolizing the dual nature of love as both a source of joy and pain.

His association with young Fanny Price is particularly evocative. Fanny, though not a romantic interest for Philip, represents the perils of unchecked ambition. She embodies the tragedy of overreaching without sufficient honest prior introspection. Her aspirations in the art world, despite her clear lack of any aptitude whatsoever, showcase not only the dangers of self-delusion, but also Philip's failing as a friend in having sugarcoated his opinion of her work due to panic. Her path warns of the necessity of self-awareness.

In contrast, Philip's interaction with M. Foinet, his art teacher, offers a counterpoint. Foinet's candid assessment of Philip's artistic abilities challenges him to realistically address practicalities. This emphasizes the overarching theme: the necessity of recognizing and accepting one's true strengths and weaknesses rather than being in bondage to them. By juxtaposing Fanny's tragic end with Philip's journey of self-discovery, Maugham underscores the idea that self-knowledge is a pivotal element in navigating the complex terrain of human growth and maturity.

Plato, *Apology*, circa 399 BCE.

In Plato's *Apology*, the philosopher Socrates of Athens, the central figure, is brought to trial on charges of corrupting the youth and introducing new gods. He defends himself by arguing that he is a philosopher on a divine mission to encourage people to seek wisdom and virtue. Central to this mission is the idea of self-examination, as, for Socrates, "the unexamined life is not worth living." He insists that true wisdom lies in acknowledging one's ignorance and continuously questioning both oneself and others. This continuous process of intellectual inquiry and introspection, Socrates argues, brings individuals closer to an authentic life—a life led by rationality and moral virtue.

During the trial, Socrates remains unapologetic about his actions and his philosophy. He steadfastly refuses to abandon his mission of fostering critical thinking, even when faced with the prospect of death. To betray his principles, Socrates contends, would be far worse than dying; as compromising the integrity of his philosophy for the sake of public approval would be inauthentic and make him a hypocrite. He chooses to be true to himself and his beliefs rather than offering a defense aimed merely at escaping punishment. In the end, the jury finds Socrates guilty, sentencing him to death by drinking poison hemlock, which he does without flinching despite pleas for compromise, all the while making it clear he has no wish to die yet and has done absolutely nothing to warrant the sentence he is obliged by the laws of Athens to accept.

Plato's account of Socrates' trial and his unyielding commitment to self-examination and authenticity have had a lasting impact on Western thought. It sets foundational ideas about the role of the individual in society, ethics, and the pursuit of truth. The principle of self-examination became an essential component of Western philosophical inquiry, influencing countless thinkers. The *Apology* is not just a record of a historical trial but is also a timeless call to intellectual and moral courage and rigor.

Rilke, R. M. *The Complete French Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, Greywolf, 1986, trans. A. Poulin, Jr.

Primarily renowned for his German-language poetic masterpieces, Austrian-born Rainer Maria Rilke took an intriguing linguistic turn later in his life by penning poems in French. *The Complete French Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, translated by A. Poulin, Jr., offers an intimate glance into this significant yet lesser-known facet of Rilke's body of creative work. Written during his stays in Paris and Switzerland, these poems underscore a delicate interplay of linguistic and cultural influences, reflecting both the beauty of the French language and the unique sensibilities Rilke brings to it through his mastery of the lyrical.

In the larger context of Rilke's poetic evolution, these French compositions provide the reader with a robust dimension to his deep meditations. Just as his German writings, such as *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, grapple with weighty themes of death, transformation, and the nature of artistic creation, his French poems often engage with immediate sensory experiences that have a universal, deeply spiritual tenor, therein revealing a Rilke who is simultaneously a foreigner to the French language and a native of its emotional landscapes. This juxtaposition adds depth to our understanding of him, emphasizing the versatility and adaptability of his genius.

Poulin's translation serves as a bridge over a peaceful brook, inviting English-speaking readers into the poetic world Rilke crafted in a language other than his mother tongue. The translator's sensitive approach ensures that the essence of Rilke's lyrical voice isn't lost in the process. Through this work, readers not only gain access to a relatively uncharted aspect of Rilke's creative expression but also share in witnessing the universality of poetic themes and emotions that transcend linguistic boundaries. As such, this compilation is a testament both to Rilke's enduring legacy and to the timeless allure of poetry that can resonate across cultures and languages.

Rilke, R. M., *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Penguin Classics, 2009 (*orig.* 1910), *trans.* Michael Hulse.

Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* is a semi-autobiographical novel that delves into the existential and introspective journey of the protagonist, Malte Laurids Brigge. Set in early twentieth-century Paris, the narrative follows Malte, a young poet from Denmark, as he grapples with the transient nature of life, the weight of memory, and the search for meaning in a rapidly modernizing world. Throughout the novel, the city of Paris serves not just as a backdrop, but as a vibrant entity that mirrors Malte's inner turmoil, with its bustling streets, decaying buildings, and disparate inhabitants.

A central theme of the novel is the confrontation with mortality. Rilke delves very deeply into the human psyche, exploring the tension between the fleeting nature of life and the desire for permanence. Through Malte's memories and encounters, including haunting reminiscences of his childhood and family, the novel paints a vivid picture of the inevitability of death and the challenges of coming to terms with one's own mortality. This theme is underscored by the various specters and apparitions that appear throughout the narrative, serving as constant reminders of the thin boundary between life and death.

Another recurring theme is the search for identity and purpose in an ever-changing world. Malte's experiences in Paris highlight the feelings of alienation and displacement that come with living in a metropolis, where old structures and traditions give way to the new. His struggle to find his resonant voice as a poet, amidst the cacophony of the city, symbolizes the broader quest for meaning and authenticity in a world of flux. Rilke's lyrical prose and introspective musings underscore the novel's exploration of these themes, making *The Notebooks* a poignant reflection on the human condition.



Sartre, J.-P., *Huis Clos*, Folio, 2019 (*orig.* 1944)

*Huis Clos*, written by Sartre in 1944, is a one-act play that encapsulates the central tenets of his existentialist philosophy. Set in a mysterious, windowless, and doorless room, three deceased characters—Garcin, Inès, and Estelle—find themselves condemned to spend eternity together. As the plot unfolds, they begin understanding that their shared space is a form of hell, and their torment comes not from external torture but from each other's presence and the inescapable gaze they impose. Life's significance arises solely from individual choices and actions and is not preordained.

The interpersonal dynamics between the characters in *Huis Clos* further highlight and amplify Sartre's stance on freedom, responsibility, and the nature of human relations. As the characters grapple with their past sins and confront the frank judgments of their co-inhabitants, they face the realization that they are each trapped within the subjective perspectives of others. This is encapsulated in the play's most famous line, "*L'enfer, c'est les autres*" or "Hell is other people." Sartre uses this line to emphasize the view that individuals are often ensnared by the opinions and perceptions of others, which can severely restrict them in achieving authentic selfhood and true freedom.

The inability of the characters to leave the room serves as an omnipresent metaphor for isolation and the inherent solitude underscoring the human condition. While they long for escape, the characters in *Huis Clos* are ultimately bound to confront themselves, their choices, and the full weight of their existence. This reinforces Sartre's belief that individuals must bear the full responsibility for their actions and their consequences, without the possibility of divine or external salvation or redemption. In essence, *Huis Clos* stands as a potent exploration of existentialist themes, prompting audiences to reflect on the nature of freedom, challenges of human interconnectedness, and authenticity.

Sartre, J.-P., *L'être et le néant*, Gallimard, 1976 (*orig.* 1943).

Sartre's *L'être et le néant* (*Being and Nothingness*) is widely recognized as a seminal work in twentieth-century existentialist philosophy. First published in 1943, amidst the turmoil of World War II, this *magnum opus* offers a deep analysis of the intricacies of human existence. Central to the text is his exploration of two key concepts: being-in-itself (*être-en-soi*) and being-for-itself (*être-pour-soi*). The former refers to the inert, passive state of existence characteristic of inanimate objects, while the latter denotes the conscious, self-aware state of human beings, marked by free intentionality. One of his most prominent propositions is the idea of bad-faith (*mauvaise foi*), a form of self-deception where individuals, overwhelmed by the freedom of their existence, adopt false values or roles to evade their responsibility. In doing so, they betray their authentic selves, opting for a life defined by societal conventions and external determinants. Sartre's emphasis on personal freedom, even in the face of absurdity and despair, serves as a call to arms, urging readers to live authentically, free from self-imposed limitations.

While structuralism emphasized the importance of overarching structures in determining meaning, Sartre's existentialist approach highlighted the fluidity and contingency of existence. His notion of the "subject" as an ever-evolving entity that constantly defines and redefines itself stood in stark contrast to the fixed essentialist entities postulated by structuralists. This laid the groundwork for poststructuralists to further challenge dogmatized ideas about authorship, meaning, and the stability of signifiers.

Poststructuralists, later building upon Sartre's ideas amongst others, further deconstructed the very foundations of meaning and truth. Figures like Derrida, while diverging from Sartre in many aspects, nonetheless drew inspiration from his challenge to the *status quo*. *L'être et le néant* thus not only spearheaded existentialist thought but also paved the way for a radical rethinking of the nature of meaning, signification, and the human subject in poststructuralism.

Sartre, J.-P., *La nausée*, Folio, 1972 (*orig.* 1938).

Sartre's *La nausée* (*Nausea*) is a pioneering work in existentialist literature, originally published in 1938. The novel centers on Antoine Roquentin, a historian living in the fictional French town of Bouville. Throughout the narrative, Roquentin grapples with a disquieting feeling, which he comes to describe as "nausea." This feeling, which permeates his everyday experiences, arises from his acute consciousness of existence itself. He confronts the raw, indifferent, and superfluous nature of the world around him, leading to intense feelings of estrangement and isolation.

The term "nausea" in the greater context of Sartre's existentialism encapsulates the visceral emotional reaction to recognizing the inherent meaninglessness and absurdity of existence. It is a permeating discomfort caused by the sudden realization of the contingency of the world: objects, events, and even one's own existence do not possess inherent meaning or purpose. This is a cornerstone of Sartrean existentialism, which posits that life does not come with predetermined essence or value; instead, individuals must construct their own meaning through free choices and actions.

Within *La nausée*, Sartre masterfully delves into the psychological and philosophical ramifications of this realization. Roquentin's journey through discomfort and introspection culminates in an embrace of freedom, artistic creation, and the responsibility to define one's own essence. The novel not only reflects on the individual's confrontation with the void of existence but also emphasizes the liberating potential that arises when one acknowledges and accepts this inherent freedom. It is this very recognition of meaninglessness that provides the canvas upon which individuals can paint their own, self-defined purpose.

Solomon, *The Most Splendid of Canticles, of Solomon, circa 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE.*

In an entirely humanist reading of *The Most Splendid of Canticles*, the text becomes a timeless exploration of the human condition. It delves into the universal experiences of human desire, longing, and connection that transcend boundaries. It showcases the beauty of human emotions and relationships as intrinsic to our shared humanity. This perspective invites readers to reflect on their own experiences of love and passion, recognizing that these feelings are part of the rich tapestry of human existence.

Read through this humanist lens, *The Most Splendid of Canticles* highlights the full autonomy and personal agency of individuals in matters of love. It portrays characters who pursue their love-driven desires, express their affections, and assert their identities without external constraints. This portrayal underscores the idea that love and intimacy are fundamental aspects of human life that can be celebrated and cherished independently of any particular ideological doctrine. It encourages a view that values human choices and connections based on mutual consent and emotional and personal fulfillment.

In this universally humanist reading, *The Most Splendid of Canticles* becomes a testament to the depth of human creativity and expression. It showcases the power of language and metaphor to convey the intensity of human emotions and relationships. The text's poetic and lyrical qualities invite readers to explore the beauty of human communication and the ability to capture the essence of love through art and expression. Ultimately, a secular humanist reading of this holy scripture explores the richness and complexity of the shared human experience, emphasizing the primacy of love, desire, and connection in our lives.

Strunk, W., Jr & White, E.B., *The Elements of Style* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.), Pearson, 1999.

Reading *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White is akin to attending a masterclass in writing, distilled into its most elemental and vital components. The book, renowned in literary circles and beyond, offers a compass for writers navigating the too often turbulent waters of storytelling, grounding them with principles that have withstood the test of time. It celebrates the beauty of simplicity, a trait often associated with Hemingway's iconic prose, urging writers to trim the fat and get to the heart of their narrative.

The journey through its pages offers not just rules but a philosophy, a call to treat *all* writing not merely as a craft but as an art. For those aspiring to echo the clarity and impact of Hemingway's words—minus the toxic overtones of his personal complexities—*The Elements of Style* serves as a beacon: all the simplicity with none of the toxicity.

One can argue that the true essence of writing lies in authenticity and the ability to evoke emotion. However, even the most genuine sentiments can get lost in a sea of verbosity or muddled expression. Strunk and White's masterpiece reminds authors of the importance of precision and the power of restraint. In an era of information super-overload, their teachings resonate even more, emphasizing that, sometimes, less truly is more.

Wittgenstein, L., *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Benediction Classics, 2017 (*orig.* 1921).

In the spirit of Strunk and White who came before on this page, paving the way for the succinct, and brevity being at the very essence of the propositions put forth in this seminal work, this annotation shall be and remain forevermore:

6.421 It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed.  
Ethics are transcendental.  
(Ethics and aesthetics are one.)

## **A Poststructuralist Postscript**

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“There is no branch of mathematics, however abstract, which may not someday be applied to phenomena of the real world.”

—Nikolai Ivanovich Lobachevsky

Through an investigation towards the harmonization of the forgetful and free functors and morphisms of category theory with discontinuous local mappings and hierarchical semantic ontological frameworks as parameters to theta-role and X-bar theoretic semantic graphs, I came to further understand that I am, at core, aligned intrinsically with poststructuralist thought in my written artistic endeavors. The parameters of theta-roles and X-bar template constructs, after all, are conceptual cousins to poststructuralist notions of contexts external to the formalism, something much more fully and explicitly (that is, notationally) seen in adaptive grammar theory and practice.

For it is, in essence, that the compatibility between all these higher-order mathematical elements and poststructuralism lies in their shared focus on deconstruction, morphisms acting upon what would otherwise be fixed meanings, contextualized local instantiation on a mentally tractable manifold subspace, and embracing the nuanced complexity, contingency, ambiguity, and boundaries of language.

That statically printed language is not truly fixed or even *finite* can be demonstrated quite simply in an utterance as concise as two monosyllabic words:

*Drain well.*

Agnostic of context, we cannot with certainty know how this utterance parses either syntactically (verb-adverb *vs.* verb-noun) or semantically. We ask if it is telling us to *drain thoroughly* or if it is asking us to *empty the well of (presumably all) its water*.

Such is the inherent syntactic and semantic ambiguity of even those propositions we dare designate as *simple*. The local resolution of their deconstructionist trace need only be their venue: appearance in a pasta recipe in the former case or in a book on backyard landscaping in the latter would be sufficient disambiguation by format alone, just as a complex topological space may appear Euclidean locally after projection despite the complexity of the global topology from which it is drawn.

Poststructuralist narrative actively disrupts this longstanding understanding between the text and the reader, however, and rather than undermining an utterance's presumed essentialist semantic mapping, underscores its already inherently unstable *différance* by emphasizing language's intrinsically malleable foundations and the perpetual elusiveness of trace. If we consider Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, while by no means a poststructuralist discourse, this suggests to us not only that language's limitations extend beyond its ability to capture the all of human experience but also that the very structure of language itself constrains our understanding.

In a sense, these perspectives converge on the idea that our attempts to articulate complex ideas and experiences through language are inherently bound by the limitations of the systems we use to communicate. Moreover, Wittgenstein's later work, *Philosophical Investigations*, highlights the concept of *showing* rather than *saying*, implying that there are aspects of reality that deftly evade explicit verbal representation, or, at the very least, concise textual containment. This idea aligns with the notion of language's malleability and the need to navigate the nuances of encoded intention, context, and interpretation, a central theme in poststructuralist thought, and a focus of my investigations with adaptive grammar and parsing theory and practice that followed my work as seen in *Adapting to Babel*.<sup>38</sup>

The atomicity of our propositions is called into question not only by the ambiguity of underlying syntax and semantics but also by the cultural, societal, and historical factors that all readers in the reader-response iteration bring to their interpretation of the supposedly static words put on the printed page.

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<sup>38</sup> *Adapting to Babel*, Ibis Publishing, Plymouth, Massachusetts, March 2006.

In fiction, as an example, a set of words may only obtain anything approaching coherent and contextual meaning when considered against factors that cannot easily be encoded entirely within the work itself and which may thus be lost to time when the ephemeral *Zeitgeist* that once almost deliciously underscored an oeuvre's milieu no longer prevails amongst a readership, scuffing its once harmonic tenor to anachronistic moribundity.

It is in this spirit that I revisited *Janus Incubus*, written just after the turn of the New Millennium, and put in its stead *Midnight at the Arcanum: a monograph*. While it is true that the meta-autobiographical elements of the shared portions are inspired by the self-same life—that life being my own up to the age of nineteen—returning to the work more than two decades after its original publication highlighted for me the impact of the passage of time I had undergone as related to not only my interpretation of that life to that point, but also to how I wished those events to be represented in narrative.

The events as they *actually* had unfolded in my early life had not changed; they *could* not, as time moves *only* forward. For the most part, despite all of its fluctuations, my subset of North American society and culture also had not fluctuated *drastically* across those years. My sets of forgetful and free functors had, however, undergone deep transformation, and thus the projection of the domain of my past life through those functors onto the codomain that became the novel *Midnight* resulted in an entirely different work than it once had.

Far from merely being a relativist or revisionist approach to narrative, this adjustment over time implies that life and perspectives on it can renew themselves each day. There were cultural issues with which I had not yet engaged and by which I had not had my esthetic properly and richly informed, that I now at least better acknowledge. The image on the shared codomain that is to become uniquely my contribution, if any, must reflect the present, rather than some past removed from the reader not only by time, but by my formerly less polished lenses. As an avowed poststructuralist, I must invite the reader to participate, not simply present a *fait accompli* that belongs only to its author, but as the author, it is primarily on me to provide the reader with the proposed framework and set it in *initial* motion.



It is my goal that the Author's Foreword and Afterword provide enough non-blurred biographical details that the novel itself thereafter serves as its own topological glossary and allows for concretized self-referential and self-contained interpretation that need not be overly speculative on the part of the reader except where that might be enjoyable or enlightening.

The differential of any events from the autobiography and the meta-autobiography presented in the novel-form narrative is an intentional spandrel emphasizing the projective nature of the endeavor. I play guitar. Conrad plays saxophone. I wore for years a mandolin necklace. Conrad wears a saxophone necklace. These juxtaposed touchstones, much like the anachronistic penny found in the pocket by the protagonist of *Somewhere in Time*, bring us back to reality: Conrad is a *literary* projection onto the codomain, the author is the domain, the spandrels are the artifacts of a crafted narrative projection through insufficiently negotiated functors, residuals, and contingencies of pullback between the morphisms of the author and those of the reader, commuting toward the limit, with society and its cultures as the ultimate adjunctions. In all this, the *reader is the only Oracle*.

When I first wrote the initial version of *The Succubus Sea*, then entitled *Le pont*, in French, I was nineteen-years-old and living through a hot summer in a sweltering rented room in Outremont. Upon my return to Vancouver later that autumn, I put this work aside and did not return to it until I was yet again in Montreal a year later. This second version, written in English, contained many of the same elements of the original. The protagonist, but an authorially unintentionally glib simulacrum, Drake, a celebrated middle-aged Vancouver-scene painter, had come up against a block in his artistic creativity. Drake's father passed in Montreal, and he relocated there after being offered a job teaching at a small art college.

Drake then met his love interest, and with her, returned to Wales, the country of his birth, where he rediscovered the cause of his current blockage: his guilt-laden false belief that he had been the cause of his mother's death when he was a child in Wales. I submitted the first English version of *The Succubus Sea* to *Goose Lane Editions*, but after putting it through a few reads, they chose not to publish, and rightly so, given its paucity of soul.

A few years later, back in Vancouver, and now active as an editor and literary agent, I subjected the novel to a rewrite and repositioned the protagonist to San Francisco and New York (rather than Vancouver and Montreal) and placed him and his love interest in Mazandaran, Iran, rather than Aberystwyth, Wales. I worked on the manuscript with Fred Candelaria, and even included Fred in a cameo reading one of his poems at *The Syncopated Cup*, a trendy fictional club Drake visits in the first chapter. This reference of the “Syncopated Cup” is my metaphor for jazz saxophone, and thus we come full circle as to why Conrad wears that necklace and plays saxophone and not guitar.

This is a direct example of recasting a work through new functors, as the mapping of Vancouver to San Francisco could not be a simple one. Certainly having a Canadian father and Welsh mother would bear significantly differently on Drake’s entire life than having an American father and Iranian mother.

Flying to Aberystwyth from Montreal would not, after all, be in any way like flying from New York to Teheran and then on to Mazandaran province. To navigate this shift I had to have lived a number of years in amongst a subset of Vancouver’s Persian community; I had to have augmented my functors.

More and most importantly, however, was the overall theme of the novel: at core it was intended to be about overcoming the throes of a creativity-stifling midlife crisis. The novel’s opening paragraph reads:

Time was when Cyrus Drake could have looked out at San Francisco Bay and seen colors. His painter’s mind would have begun applying azure, jade, and ivory to canvas. But today, Drake saw no images or translations—just water and seagulls and wind as he heard the distant, almost guttural *oh-ah* signaling the arrival of another day of fog.

As it is currently framed, *Midnight at the Arcanum* is also, ultimately, an examination of the adolescence-to-adulthood arc of a male midlife crisis, at more or less the age Morgan Drake was in *The Succubus Sea* when I first conceived and wrote it three decades ago in schoolish French in that sweaty bedroom in Outremont.

While it is tempting to declare that I've now accrued the lived experience to tackle such deep constructions, as though it were time alone that shone forth the requisite new light, it is not only my life perspective that has progressed since that novel's initial conception.

That I lacked the lived experience, however, while certainly contributing something to the earlier work's reported glibness when compared to later work, was not entirely the issue: it also—much more importantly—lacked an inherently poststructuralist scaffolding. In short, in attempting to write a significant work about something as impactful as midlife crisis, in *Succubus* I had failed through my reluctance to invite the reader to participate viscerally in what I then saw as such a cataclysmic epoch of an artist's creative and emotional life, and in doing so, had made the work a scuffed pseudo-essentialist fiat rather than an immersive collaborative dialogic narrative experience: I did not ask the reader questions nor hear those the reader might rightly pose.

My time with Fred Candelaria as a friend and mentor transformed me for work that followed. He was the first reader of my work to ever call out my authorial voice as being *glib*,<sup>39</sup> stated after having worked with me very closely on *The Succubus Sea*, and I took his views on this matter to serious self-reflection.

On reflection, I came to see that my fiction did, indeed, offer only surface examinations of their subjects, with human interiors mostly being avoided. I took this new perspective that Fred's sharp, honest insight highlighted most seriously while writing *Abadoun*.<sup>40</sup> In this work, I systematically deconstructed a single day in the last day of the life of a fictional Kurdish village during the Iran-Iraq War, where only the reader, and the main protagonist of the novel know that the village is to be gassed later that day. For even numbered chapters, I set up a grid with First-Person, Second-Person, Third-Person, and No-Person down the vertical and the Present, Future, Past, and Heroic-Past on the horizontal, and constructed each chapter using those parameters as strict guidelines.

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<sup>39</sup> In Chapter 20, Conrad's friend Jim calls out his glib voice when Conrad is just starting out in his writing, rather than so much later as happened to me.

<sup>40</sup> Which later became *Hiroshima in Stained Glass*.

Only the single central protagonist's view was written in a standard flow from start to end of the novel, at each odd numbered chapter. While this may at first glance seem like an extended literary finger exercise, by thus forcing each alternate chapter into a mandated form, I effectively freed myself to let the matrix decide the mechanics as I instead focused on what that day in the life of each villager meant as they crossed paths with the protagonist on his final walk through the town. I was thus able to present how the protagonist perceived those characters, and then I went into each in turn and presented *their* deepest inner truth, effectively placing the protagonist in the role of the reader. The matrix was simply a means to an end: I had broken through my reluctance to expose human interiors and, having the mechanics determined for me, could no longer hide behind decisions of pure logistics and was forced instead to focus on the human acoustics of the work.

Fred said he considered *Abadoun* to be my best work before he passed, and for the most part, I agreed with him, as it had been the work into which I had invested the most toward the examination of interior spaces. He said, in what became his endorsement of my literary work: "What impresses me about Jackson's work is that he recognizes the role of work in art and seriously works at it with thought and sensitivity. It is also scholarly: like a mathematician, addressing all the possibilities critically."

I continued on with the novel *Janus Incubus* and attempted to explore my own psychic geography in a relatable, authentic, and novel-wide, sustained way. I reached a point while writing it, however, that I did not wish to continue with this exhausting interior exploration and just surrendered, hammering out a conclusion that, while satisfying mechanically, did not sit well with an as yet unarticulated esthetic dissatisfaction with such a tangent shift. I had not yet polished the lenses through which I was reviewing my life, and though there was much there that could be brought into the final work, there were resounding artistic misfires in the hurried last third of the book. After *Janus Incubus*, shorter works came as the novellas *Anders' Contrition* and *Lament of an Architect of Babel*, but nothing followed those for over a decade.

Against which watermarks do we juxtapose ourselves to know our own depth? Wittgenstein famously declared that the limits of his language mean the limits of his world.<sup>41</sup> This is not the end of the dialogue, however, for we may continue to collaboratively build our lexicons, ontologies, and systems of transformation and projections and find ourselves tomorrow saying fluently what now rests intractably ineffable.

To leap that chasm this present work strives to provide what mathematics already provides far more succinctly and clearly elsewhere: functors to better project the unfathomable algebraic and topological properties and structures one wishes to explore onto an illuminable range of the human codomain. We mature as artists and readers, resulting in a more fully articulated legacy, so that our inner worlds transcend the limit, or so one might privately wish while soaring the never-ending Interim Fantastic that is *Midnight at the Arcanum*.

## 道可道非常道 ; 名可名非常名

“The Tao *told* is finite; the name *bestowed* is finite.”—Lao Tzu

*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte.*<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Proposition 5.6: “*Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt.*”—“The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.”

<sup>42</sup> Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, Les Éditions de Minuit, France, 1967.

## **Playbill to the Appendix**

In *Ubiquity*, Vol. 2 No. 2, Spring-Summer, 2001, my short story entitled “The Play” was published, and from that story eventually evolved the novel *Janus Incubus*, which in turn resulted in *Midnight at the Arcanum: a monograph*, which begins incorporating this short story’s inspiration at Chapter 11. In this story, the protagonist has written a play, and having met a woman active in theatre who sincerely wishes to read and critique his work, he sits at the liminal threshold between being a serious, peer-reviewed playwright, or just a young hobbyist. “The Play” was perhaps my first piece ever written explicitly as meta-autobiographical fiction, though it was written in the third-person originally. It was accepted well by the readership of *Ubiquity*, and I took this reception to heart and carried my writing down this avenue for some time.

The actual play referenced in the story had, for many years, been assumed lost to time. Unlike the play in *Midnight*, the actual play was written originally in French, whereas in the novel, the play was written in English and Conrad only hoped to translate it to French, providing his impetus for moving to Montreal. I did translate the play, then entitled *Trois pièces en enfer*, to English, within a year of its initial writing, and sent the original manuscript to a friend for review and critique. He reviewed it, but I was out-and-about for a number of years and did not cross his path at the same time he remembered he had it. Eventually, he returned my manuscript to me, and it went into storage, presumed lost until about 2006, when I rediscovered it.

I cleaned up the translation (the original French version was truly lost) and retitled the play to *Empty Rooms*. It has been revised in the same spirit as the rest of this monograph, although does remain *very* close to the theme, form, and voice of the original. As such, it is nonetheless still the most authentic representation of any of my serious work surviving the era first covered in this shared meta-autobiographical journey. As it is with midnight, we begin now after the ending....

Places! *Lights up!*

“ A theatre is the most important sort of house in the world because that’s where people are shown what they could be if they wanted and what they’d like to be if they dared to and what they really are.”

—**Tove Jansson**

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## Appendix: The Play

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*“bric-a-broke”* — 2023

# Empty Rooms

## a play in 3 acts

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**NOT LICENSED FOR PERFORMANCE**



## Characters

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- CHRIS FIELDS**            A young man aspiring to become the next Arthur Rimbaud. Aged 18 years.
- JACKIE LEBRUN**        A teacher. Woman harboring a secret. Aged 35 years.
- SYLVIE**                    JACKIE's lover.
- GEORGES BEAUFORT** Formerly a celebrated poet. Assumed dead. Now drunk and middle-aged and living in JOANNE's boarding house.
- JOANNE FEHR**            Formerly an actress, she now runs a run-down boarding house in East Montreal. Middle-aged.
- CHANTAL LEPAGE**      Journalist.
- MONSIEUR PICARD**     Custodian of an apartment building.
- YVETTE DUCLERC**      Dancer. Aged 20 years.

## **Setting**

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Three apartments in Montreal in 1973.

### **Act I**

The first is a nicely decorated one bedroom apartment.

### **Act II**

The second is a slovenly two room portion of a “boarding house”—a quaint term here used for shared hovel.

### **Act III**

The third is *completely* empty, with but a wooden floor.

## Time

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Act I	Scene 1	Early in the year. Evening.
	Scene 2	Later that evening.
	Scene 3	Six months later.
Act II	Scene 1	Early summer.
	Scene 2	About three months later.
	Scene 3	Next morning.
Act III	Scene 1	Next day.
	Scene 2	Later that day.
	Scene 3	Still later that day.

# Act I

## Scene 1

At RISE: (The scene begins with JACKIE at her desk. She is marking her students' homework assignments. After a while, someone knocks at her door with urgency.)

**JACKIE**

*(Nervously.)*

Is that you, Sylvie?

**CHRIS**

No, it's Chris.

**JACKIE**

*(Walking to door.)*

Chris?

**CHRIS**

*(Pause.)*

Chris *Fields*....

**JACKIE**

*(JACKIE opens door.)*

Yes, yes, I know you're *that* Chris. Don't be silly. I wasn't expecting you *yet* is all.

## Act I—Scene 1

(JACKIE sees that CHRIS is very dirty and is visibly taken aback.)

**JACKIE (continuing)**

And certainly not in *this* condition.

**CHRIS**

When I called, I was just around the corner. Sorry about the smell. Been a while since I showered.

**JACKIE**

I can tell.

*(Beat.)*

Manners! Manners! Come in! Missed you at the café all last week. Expected to hear some poetry, got an empty stage. Coffee wasn't the same.

**CHRIS**

Like I said, it would take a bit of explaining. *Not* phone stuff.

**JACKIE**

Sure! Go ahead.

**CHRIS**

My parents kicked me out.

**JACKIE**

Good Lord!

(CHRIS closes the door and walks over to her sofa and sits on it. JACKIE looks a bit disgusted that someone as dirty as CHRIS is sitting on her clean furniture. She hurries to the washroom and fetches a large towel. She then signals to CHRIS to get up, throws the towel over the sofa, and motions for him to sit again.)

**JACKIE (continuing)**

You *really* smell, Chris. *Bad*. Now ... when were you kicked out? Tell me the whole story.

**CHRIS**

Last week. The whole story is a *bit* much.

**JACKIE**

Try.

**CHRIS**

It's kind of Rimbaud.

**JACKIE**

You've taken an older, male lover? And they found out?

**CHRIS**

No.

(JACKIE lights up a joint, and gestures to CHRIS, who accepts and takes a toke.)

Not even close. Grass related. Hang ups aren't for me. Too bad my stepfather wasn't so hip.

## Act I—Scene 1

**JACKIE**

The world is not as hip as they pretend to be. Especially about grass, man.

**CHRIS**

You sure you want to hear this?

**JACKIE**

Sure, sure. But first, have a shower. I can't stand the smell. Reminds me of the summer of '69.

**CHRIS**

*(Smells under armpits.)*

But it won't clean my clothes.

**JACKIE**

*(Pointing.)*

You'll find some clean clothes that might fit in that chest. They're my brother's for when he visits, but he's about your height.

**CHRIS**

I only wanted your ear.

**JACKIE**

Yeah, well, you *stink*.

**CHRIS**

Sorry.

**JACKIE**

Well, I'll be starting to feel stoned by the time I reconsider.

(JACKIE starts sorting through some clothes from the chest.)

Blue or green?

**CHRIS**

Huh?

**JACKIE**

Blue or green turtleneck?

**CHRIS**

Turtleneck? Who's your brother? Anything less ...?

**JACKIE**

He only left two turtlenecks. That, or one of my blouses. Ha!

**CHRIS**

Blue, then.

(CHRIS goes to the washroom door, closes it behind him.)

**JACKIE**

I'm glad you came over. Why'd you wait a week?



## Act I—Scene 1

**CHRIS**

Didn't want to impose until I couldn't take anymore. After a week on shit row, you start to think about things like how imposing isn't so bad.

(JACKIE puts a chair beside the bathroom door and sits with a coffee in hand.)

**JACKIE**

OK, I'm listening.

**CHRIS**

I had a fight with my step and got booted. Pretty simple.

**JACKIE**

Why would they do a thing like that?

**CHRIS**

He found my stash of weed. There was about a half a brick.

(JACKIE spits out the coffee she's been drinking.)

**JACKIE**

For fuck's sake.

**CHRIS**

*(Pause.)*

Exactly.

*(Longer pause.)*

My mom only married the guy last year. And *he* sent me packing.

(CHRIS starts to laugh uncontrollably from behind the door.)

**CHRIS (continuing)**

Told him I was “holding it for a friend.” That’s supposed to work, I’ve heard.

*(Beat.)*

It didn’t seem *too* bad at first.

**JACKIE**

Freedom, I suppose.

**CHRIS**

That’s it. Freedom. Beautiful.

**JACKIE**

To be free of society’s chains. Moment I first heard you reading, I knew you were pushing to run free. That’s why I kept coming back for coffee.

(CHRIS has finished his shower. He opens the door and sticks out his hands, motioning for some clothes.)

**CHRIS**

Out on the actual street, the reality of it all hit me.

## Act I—Scene 1

(*JACKIE goes to the chest and fetches the clothes she had set aside for CHRIS. She returns to the bathroom door and hands them to his waving hand.*)

**JACKIE**

Reality is beautiful. Truth, however, not always so much.

**CHRIS**

Then this turtleneck must be “truth.”

**JACKIE**

Picky, picky.

**CHRIS**

Reality—truth—whatever—hit me pretty hard when a wino walked up to me and spat on a sandwich I’d begged all day for money to buy.

**JACKIE**

That’s horrible.

**CHRIS**

That’s *reality*. The guy was pissed out of his skull. I don’t blame *him*. It made me puke what I’d already eaten. Of course, by that point—

(CHRIS walks out of the bathroom, now fully dressed in clothes that are a bit loose on him.)

—all that I had in me was a belly-full of righteous indignation.

**JACKIE**

What about your mother? What did she have to say about all this?

**CHRIS**

It was either me, or him. So, it was me. I pity Monique.

**JACKIE**

Monique?

**CHRIS**

His daughter. She smoked half my stash with me, but I didn't narc on her, of course.

*(Beat.)*

Thanks for the clothes, by the way. I lacked *dignity* with those rags. Please feel free to burn them.

**JACKIE**

Turtleneck suits you.

**CHRIS**

I'm a bit thin. Loose is cool, even in a turtleneck.

**JACKIE**

Are you hungry?

**CHRIS**

This might seem odd, but no, I'm not. Not at all.

## Act I—Scene 1

**JACKIE**

You can stay here for a bit if you want. But I have homework to look over, so you'll have to be patient with me.

(JACKIE goes to her desk and returns to her marking.)

**CHRIS**

You're cool. Thanks.

**JACKIE**

*(Almost to herself.)*

I hate marking. It's useless. There are those who learn, and there are those who bugger around. I often wonder why on Earth I became a teacher. When I was sixteen, you had to threaten me with death to get me to read the ingredients on a cereal box.

**CHRIS**

People change, I guess, man.

**JACKIE**

*(Continuing as if she hasn't heard CHRIS.)*

Literature was a foreign concept to me. Now, I mark the papers of students who are mirror images of myself at their age. Cosmic justice or what?

*(Turning to CHRIS.)*

**CHRIS**

You became what you hated most.

(JACKIE puts aside her marking and looks CHRIS straight in the eyes.)

**JACKIE**

What do you plan to do with your life, young man?

**CHRIS**

Say what?

**JACKIE**

You're just past being a kid, Chris. You can't stay here forever. Maybe a night or two, on the sofa, if you behave yourself. But that's it.

**CHRIS**

*(Long pause.)*

With all the crap as it stands now, I don't give a damn about my so-called life.

*(Longer pause.)*

Perhaps I could become a poet.

(JACKIE starts laughing uncontrollably.)

**JACKIE**

Oh, Jesus!

**CHRIS**

What's so funny about *that*?

## Act I—Scene 1

**JACKIE**

For Christ's sake, you're eighteen, no place to hang your hat. Who are you, Rimbaud? It takes more than being a stoned libertine and reading your poetry on stage for free while passers-by listen over their coffees!

**CHRIS**

So you're saying it won't be easy. So what's *easy* when you're eighteen and homeless?

(End of Scene 1. BLACKOUT.)

## Scene 2

At LIGHTS UP: (JACKIE is at her desk. CHRIS is asleep on the sofa. There is a knock at the door, and JACKIE rushes to answer it.)

**JACKIE**

Finally you, Sylvie?

**SYLVIE**

You've got it. I want my stuff.

**JACKIE**

*(Opening the door.)*

Don't be noisy, he's asleep.

**SYLVIE**

*He?*

*(SYLVIE goes over to the sofa and gives CHRIS an eying over.)*

You've changed in so little time? Who's the little host? You seeing young men these days?

**JACKIE**

Shut up.



## Act I—Scene 2

(JACKIE walks over to SYLVIE and pulls her away from the sofa area, towards the door.)

**JACKIE (continuing)**

Your things are where you left them. Get them and get out.

**SYLVIE**

What?

(SYLVIE stands behind JACKIE, hugs her tightly, and kisses her neck. JACKIE squirms to beat all hell.)

Nothing left?

**JACKIE**

You *act* sincere, when it pays for you to, Sylvie.

(*Pause.*)

That doesn't change the fact that it was *you* who left *me*.

(*Longer pause.*)

Remember?

**SYLVIE**

Sure. Can't stay with a coward like you.

**JACKIE**

I still love you—

**SYLVIE**

Oh, don't be so dramatic! You made your decisions.

(SYLVIE gathers her things briskly, not following JACKIE's earlier instructions to be quiet because of CHRIS.)

**SYLVIE (continuing)**

Who is *this*, then?

**JACKIE**

You can toss your trashy thoughts out. Besides, when you left—

(JACKIE walks to the door with dramatic flair, opens it, and points out.)

—you also left your right to my business.

**SYLVIE**

Just curious, that's all. Doesn't he have family?

**JACKIE**

(*Beat.*)

Actually, it's a bit of a sob story. His father found his grass stash and showed him the door...

**SYLVIE**

Sounds like a sob story, for sure. I understand, Florence Nightingale. I'll take my stuff and go now.

**JACKIE**

(*Desperately.*)

Please, don't leave me like *that*.

## Act I—Scene 2

**SYLVIE**

I *already* left. I already explained myself. If you loved me, you wouldn't hide me like the plague.

**JACKIE**

I'm a *teacher*, for Christ's sake. You want me to lose—

**SYLVIE**

I understand, but I can't stay with you.

**JACKIE**

Go, then.

**SYLVIE**

I've already gone. I just came for my things.

(SYLVIE goes to the door with her bags.)

**SYLVIE (continuing)**

Goodbye.

**JACKIE**

*Adieu*, my love.

**SYLVIE**

(*EXITING.*)

Always so damned dramatic with the *adieux*.

(SYLVIE has been gone for some time before CHRIS stirs visibly.)

**CHRIS**

Now I understand why *my* story didn't startle you. You've got swagger, you do....

**JACKIE**

(*Covering her face.*)

You were *listening*?

**CHRIS**

Kind of hard to miss. Don't be embarrassed. Love is love.

**JACKIE**

Of course, you understand, what you heard is private.

**CHRIS**

Ha! You told *her* what got *me* kicked out of the house! Half a brick!

**JACKIE**

Yes, but she's not the principal of the school and she can't get you removed from the important lists in a career as a teacher.

**CHRIS**

Anyhow, it doesn't matter to me. Nobody will hear it from me.

**JACKIE**

Good.

## Act I—Scene 2

(JACKIE returns to her desk and pretends to start marking the papers again.)

**JACKIE (continuing)**

I *hate* marking.

**CHRIS**

What are you marking?

**JACKIE**

Essays on Sartre's *Huis Clos*.

**CHRIS**

As far as I'm concerned, I'm a fine example of raw existentialism: victim of a world I couldn't change even if I thought I knew how. *Huis Clos* it is, then.

(The LIGHTS DIM to indicate a passage in time. When the LIGHTS GO UP, it is morning. JACKIE is still asleep and CHRIS is at the desk.)

**CHRIS**

Good morning.

**JACKIE**

(*Half-asleep.*)

What time is it? I've got to—

**CHRIS**

You've still got two hours before you have to do *anything*. Besides, you can't leave now anyway. I've still got one essay to read. Most of them were pretty damned mediocre, but there are a few stars in the class.

**JACKIE**

The only consolation of this job.

**CHRIS**

Oh, come on. I'm sure you get more out of it than you admit. Otherwise, why protect your job even at the cost of *love*, man?

(JACKIE gets up, dressed in her nightgown. She goes to the shower, undresses at the bathroom door without shame, and enters the bathroom without closing the door.)

**JACKIE**

Like I said last night ... when I was about your age, I hated literature. Put quotes around that—I hated “literature.” I thought there existed no torture so cruel as a book. Finally, I was lined up with a teacher who showed me the beauty of the written word.

*(Very long pause.)*

In fact, I wanted to become a poet like—

**CHRIS**

What made you change your mind?

**JACKIE**

What?

## Act I—Scene 2

**CHRIS**

I said—what made you change your mind? Why did you become a teacher instead of a poet?

(JACKIE laughs so loud that the neighbors surely can hear her.)

**JACKIE**

Oh, Jesus, you are *so* damned naïve it's beyond comprehension!

(*Much more laughter.*)

I'm not a *Bohemian*, by any stretch!

(JACKIE finishes her shower and comes out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel only.)

Poverty, though romantic to some, isn't funny. Have you ever read *Of Human Bondage*? There's a lovely scene in that novel where the artist—

**CHRIS**

—gets a good lecture from the art master about having means to support oneself. Yes. I read it. We met in a coffeehouse, remember? I read a *lot*.

(JACKIE takes off the towel and starts dressing as if CHRIS is not even in the room.)

**JACKIE**

Anybody can be infected by *perfection*. Read Rimbaud, want to be him. Read Shakespeare, think maybe you're the next one. It's a sure sign of true perfection when every Mr. and Mrs. Whatshisname thinks it's his or her life's goal to be the most recent poet he or she's read.

*(Pause in reflection.)*

**JACKIE (continuing)**

Good art is sure inspiration, and *anyone* with half a brain and one third of a heart can be inspired by it. Only an artist, however, can serve that inspiration in *good faith*.

**CHRIS**

I believe you could.

**JACKIE**

Optimism is a side-effect of youth. You hardly know me.

**CHRIS**

Aha! But I've seen you naked!

**JACKIE**

Smart ass. Anyway, belief in the impossible is a sign of your age.

**CHRIS**

That's pretty cliché, Jackie. I'm not so much of an optimist. I was born in grand Sartrean absurd style. If I sound optimistic or doe-eyed, I'm sorry. It's accidental.

**JACKIE**

In any case, I'm too old for all that now.

**CHRIS**

Old? Get serious with me here! How old *are* you?



**Act I—Scene 2**

**JACKIE**

Promise not to tell?

**CHRIS**

And vain!

**JACKIE**

Thirty-five.

**CHRIS**

If *that* is old, then I'm already middle-aged. You could still change your job.

**JACKIE**

Um, Chris—being a poet is *not* a job.

(CHRIS waves the last paper he has been reading in JACKIE's face.)

**CHRIS**

You want *this*?

**JACKIE**

Well....

**CHRIS**

Do you write *any* poetry these days?

**JACKIE**

I've some old poems, but nothing more recent than from my university days.

**CHRIS**

You still have a chance.

(A very long silence ensues.)

**JACKIE**

*(Beat.)*

You're making me mad.

**CHRIS**

How's that?

**JACKIE**

*(After another long silence.)*

If I wanted to throw away my job as a teacher, do you think I would have made my lover so mad that she would leave me? One must keep up appearances to be a teacher. I could have kept it quiet, but Sylvie wanted us to advertise our love to the world, and I refused. As a "poet" I could have—as a teacher, forget it, man, no can do.

*(Another long silence.)*

Do you think I would abandon it *now* that I've lost *her*?

**CHRIS**

Got it. I become the poet you never could. How's that?

## Act I—Scene 2

**JACKIE**

What about money, buddy? You can't mooch off me for more than a few days before you *really* start to piss me off. I don't keep half a brick sitting around for guests.

(CHRIS sticks his hands in his pockets and starts to pace around the room like Chaplin's tramp.)

**CHRIS**

I guess I'm really screwed.

**JACKIE**

I suppose you are.

**CHRIS**

In a *serious* way.

**JACKIE**

Should have thought about that before you started stashing your grass where you eat and sleep, man. That much could have put you in the slammer if your stepfather had turned you in.

**CHRIS**

(*Beat.*)

He threatened it, but Mom begged him not to, so it was exile for me instead.

(*Beat.*)

I can find a shitty job and pay sofa-and-board.

(JACKIE makes the “I’m thinking” gesture with her hand on her chin, and after a lot of very loud faked humming and hawing, picks up the papers CHRIS marked.)

**JACKIE**

It’s not like I’d fall in love with you or anything. You have the wrong credentials, after all.

**CHRIS**

I’ll find a shitty job, and you’ll teach me how to be a *real* poet. Not just one who hangs out in cafés. I can find a shitty job. There’re plenty of them out there.

**JACKIE**

Easy to say.

**CHRIS**

Tons of people find tons of shitty jobs. It’s the norm.

**JACKIE**

Worth giving it a shot.

**CHRIS**

I’m not a loafer and am easy to be around.

**JACKIE**

You have *one week* to find that shitty job.

**CHRIS**

OK.

## Act I—Scene 2

**JACKIE**

As in *seven days*. Not a magic five-month week or something. Seven days. That kind of *one week*. No magic maths.

*(Pause.)*

I'll be damned—but, OK.

(End of Scene 2. BLACKOUT and CURTAIN.)

### Scene 3

At RISE: (SIX MONTHS later. CHRIS is typing at the desk, smoking a cigarette, and JACKIE is seated on her sofa with a sheet of paper in front of her. JACKIE sighs very audibly.)

**CHRIS**

What's the matter?

**JACKIE**

This is a sad poem. I'm glad there's only a week left of this school year because I don't know if I could handle much more of your work *and* the school load. I can't keep up with you.

**CHRIS**

I'll take that as a compliment. So why the sigh?

(CHRIS imitates JACKIE's earlier groan.)

**JACKIE**

This one couplet about how we dash our hopes like cracking our skulls under Sisyphus' rock. For some reason it reminded me of Sylvie.

**CHRIS**

Forget her, already, Jackie.

## Act I—Scene 3

**JACKIE**

Easy to say, impossible to *do*.

**CHRIS**

Real love, then, eh? Yeah, I guess it isn't as easy as all that.

**JACKIE**

She was my whole life if you'll excuse the tired cliché.

**CHRIS**

But you're *still* alive.

**JACKIE**

On the outside.

(JACKIE closes her eyes and rests her head on the arm of the sofa. CHRIS gets up and approaches her.)

**CHRIS**

Inside, as well.

(CHRIS begins to massage her shoulders.)

Life isn't necessarily *Huis Clos*. Or rather I should say, we aren't necessarily the *Inèses* of a Sartrean nightmare done in Second Empire.

**JACKIE**

You're as gentle as a masseuse with your metaphors. Now, what the hell do you actually mean?

**CHRIS**

Even if life *is* absurd, *we* needn't be. That is, why go and kill yourself moaning over this *Inès*? Sylvie was the coward, not you. You were brave enough to protect your *life's work*, and she was merely terrified that your conviction outweighed your attraction.

**JACKIE**

*(Beat.)*

Her hair in mine....

(SYLVIE enters through the door, catching everyone off guard.)

**SYLVIE**

What's going on here?

(CHRIS beats a hasty retreat to the other side of the room and JACKIE stands.)

**JACKIE**

You have everything, why are you here? And give me your key!

**SYLVIE**

I wanted to talk, but now I'm not sure. This *man* still hanging around your pad?

**JACKIE**

Talk? What about?



### Act I—Scene 3

**SYLVIE**

About *us*.

**CHRIS**

Six months ago you said you didn't *want* her.

**SYLVIE**

(*Beat.*)

What business is this of *his*?

**JACKIE**

He knows about us, but that doesn't matter. What are you doing here?

**SYLVIE**

I won't talk with *him* listening.

**JACKIE**

He *lives* here, Sylvie. He pays board. He's not going anywhere. So speak.

**SYLVIE**

If you insist. I was thinking about us, and I decided you were right. I want—

(JACKIE is visibly angry, barely able to hold it in, until finally, she just lets it rip.)

**JACKIE**

Flat on your belly like the coward you are? Six months ago it was “Jump in front of the career train,” and today it’s the old humble “You were right and I was wrong, so please forgive me”?

**SYLVIE**

Was I right, then? You like *him*? You’ve *changed*?

**JACKIE**

What a steaming bucketload of shit. He *lives* here, but who I *am* and what I *am* is exactly the same.

**CHRIS**

And besides, it’s none of your damned business.

**JACKIE**

I can defend myself, Chris.

**CHRIS**

I’m defending *myself*. Piss off, Sylvie.

**JACKIE**

Chris....

**CHRIS**

Fine, fine. Whatever.

## Act I—Scene 3

**SYLVIE**

So what do you *do*, Mr. I-Live-Here?

**CHRIS**

*(Beat.)*

I'm a *poet*.

*(SYLVIE starts to laugh until she's nearly in tears.)*

**SYLVIE**

Oh, that's grand. You're screwing boy poets these days, Jackie?

**JACKIE**

Shut up.

**SYLVIE**

But a *poet*!

*(More intense laughter.)*

That demands my *respect*, that!

*(SYLVIE does a grandiose bow as if before royalty.)*

**JACKIE**

If you're going to attack, attack me. He's a damned good poet. In fact, I can't even keep up with his stuff anymore. Only Georges Beaufort himself could keep up with him, and since I know the man personally, he may just have to do that.

*(Beat.)*

But this *is* "none of your damned business," as my roommate put it. What are you here to say?

**SYLVIE**

I see I'm no longer welcome.

**JACKIE**

Brilliant judge of a situation. Right. Leave.

**SYLVIE**

For *good*?

**JACKIE**

You make *good* sound so *evil*. Right. For *good*.

**SYLVIE**

*No* chance for ...?

**JACKIE**

Jesus, Sylvie. You're just pathetic. Leave.

(SYLVIE returns her key to JACKIE and exits. A long period of silence and tension.)

**CHRIS**

You lied to defend me. Thanks.

(JACKIE begins to cry.)

**JACKIE**

She's gone *forever* now.

## Act I—Scene 3

**JACKIE (continuing)**

*(Beat.)*

I didn't lie. I really *can't* keep up with your poetry. It's beyond me, and I admit it.

**CHRIS**

But that line about Georges Beaufort—that was beautiful. You may as well have told her you know Dylan Thomas. Beaufort's been dead for *years*. All *my* life, at the very least.

**JACKIE**

*(Beat.)*

He's not dead.

*(Pause.)*

Just drunk.

*(Longer pause.)*

I do know him. He's my uncle on my mother's side.

**CHRIS**

No shit?

**JACKIE**

Shit-free.

**CHRIS**

Shit.

*(Pause.)*

Shit.

(CHRIS bows before JACKIE the same way SYLVIE had bowed before him.)

**JACKIE**

Cut that out!

**CHRIS**

*The Georges Beaufort. Your uncle?*

**JACKIE**

Exactly. And since we're on about it: I've shown him your work. He wants to meet you.

**CHRIS**

I repeat—no shit?

**JACKIE**

Let's get over that, can we?

**CHRIS**

*(Looking at his fingernails as if not at all interested.)*  
Yes, Sylvie's gone forever, but at least you're free of her.

**JACKIE**

I'm not sure if I want to be free.

**CHRIS**

You will be. After all, didn't you choose to be free?

## Act I—Scene 3

**JACKIE**

Just like I *chose* to be a teacher instead of a poet.

**CHRIS**

One chooses one's freedoms.

**JACKIE**

I don't feel as though I've chosen mine.

**CHRIS**

No?

*(Silence. Beat.)*

So what about your uncle Georges? Sounds *serious*.

**JACKIE**

He lives on the East Side in a boarding house. He hasn't written anything for a *long* time. In fact, he was the rage when I was *your* age.

**CHRIS**

I'm quite familiar with him. He's the poet laureate of Quebec. His work is taught in school. His poems are lyrics to songs. But I thought he *died* in the late 50's, early 60's or some such thing. Oh well, learn something new every day.

*(Beat.)*

He's a *genius*. But why rise from the grave to meet *me*?

**JACKIE**

Wants to work with you. He needs some human company. Being dead—well, being out of the limelight—has taken its toll on him. He doesn't admit it, but maybe he wants you to kick him out of his slump.

**CHRIS**

When do I meet him?

**JACKIE**

Whenever you want.

(End of Act I. BLACKOUT and CURTAIN.)



Act I—Scene 3



“A Fehr Place to Stay for a While” — 2023

## Act II

### Scene 1

At RISE: (The scene begins with GEORGES asleep in bed. JOANNE is busy cleaning his room with a duster, trying not to stir him. CHRIS knocks at the door and JOANNE goes to open it.)

**JOANNE**

Hello. Who's there, please?

**CHRIS**

Chris Fields. I'm a friend of Miss—

(JOANNE opens the door.)

**JOANNE**

Ah, you're known to me, Mr. Fields. Come in, please. Don't make any noise. Georges is asleep. He needs his rest.

**CHRIS**

(*With reverence.*)

That's *him*, then?

**JOANNE**

Yes. What do you wish, then?

## Act II—Scene 1

**CHRIS**

You invited me. Don't you remember?

**JOANNE**

I only read a few of your poems over his shoulder. I didn't invite you to visit. I was just told you would be visiting. I'm only the landlady. Georges is in charge of his own invitations. Just have a seat until he sobers—wakes up.

**CHRIS**

If I must wait for *the* Georges Beaufort, I'll wait.

(CHRIS sits at the desk. JOANNE closes the door, the sound of the door awakening GEORGES.)

**GEORGES**

Who was that, then? I heard someone. I'm certain.

**CHRIS**

'T is but the win', ol' chap.<sup>43</sup> Go back to sleep.

(GEORGES gets up and out of bed.)

**GEORGES**

Ah! I *knew* I heard someone.

---

<sup>43</sup> The original French line, here, was "*Ce n'est que le v'n', mon vieux.*" The ambiguity between *vin/vent* has been retained in wine/wind.

(GEORGES walks over to get a better look at CHRIS.)

**GEORGES (continuing)**

Chris, then, eh? I was as young as you when I was your age.  
(*Silence.*)

**CHRIS**

(*To himself.*)  
Drunken poet. Cliché. Bit of a disappointment, that, man.

**GEORGES**

Ah, go to hell, brat.

**CHRIS**

A real cliché, aren't you, though? Unkempt beard, wine on your breath. General smell of a bock about you.

**GEORGES**

Clichés, clichés. *You're* a cliché. My niece's told me all about you and your naïveté. Disrespectful little prick. Cliché. Got disrespect in your blood, you little bastard?

**CHRIS**

I only disrespect the ones I respect most.

**GEORGES**

You've got piss and vinaigrette in your blood.

**CHRIS**

Beer and wine in yours.

## Act II—Scene 1

**GEORGES**

Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Just an old, forgotten drunk to you younger types.

**CHRIS**

Forgotten? You were a *god*. Nobody forgets *gods*. You're an old, *remembered* drunk.

*(Beat.)*

But nonetheless dead, by all appearances.

**GEORGES**

Well, I still get my royalty checks, so shut up about the *dead* stuff. Even if you can't respect me as a human being, respect me as a poet. They translate me and teach me and even sing me, you know. Makes for money. Not many of us around who can say that. *Capiche?*

**CHRIS**

*(Beat.)*

Got it. That's cool, man. I have much respect for your *work*.

*(During all of this time, JOANNE has been quietly cleaning the room in the background without imposing.)*

**JOANNE**

I'm finished. Goodbye for now, Georges.

**GEORGES**

Thank you, Joanne.

(JOANNE exits.)

**CHRIS**

Joanne?

*(Long silence.)*

I thought I recognized her. Is that Joanne *Fehr*?

**GEORGES**

How does a boy your age know about Fehr? Yes. That is she.

**CHRIS**

Shit.

**GEORGES**

Maybe you're not as naïve as Jackie claims.

**CHRIS**

In *this* dump? Joanne Fehr, *here*?

**GEORGES**

Eh?

(GEORGES looks around, as if trying to come up with reasons why his two attached rooms aren't a dump.)

*(Beat.)*

Yes. In *this* dump. When she got out of the movie business, she went into managing this place. This *dump*.

**CHRIS**

Why this hole?

## Act II—Scene 1

**GEORGES**

Guess it's seen better days. But it's home.

(GEORGES swings his arms about as if showing off the place.)

The only thing I *don't* like is that the windows are sealed shut. It's summer, so by noon, this place is a sauna.

(CHRIS wanders about the room, examining its sorry state.)

**CHRIS**

Satan's bathroom.

**GEORGES**

Basically. At high noon, you begin to look around for the brimstone.

**CHRIS**

Lovely.

**GEORGES**

(*Beat.*)

But I want you to move in. Into the other room there.

**CHRIS**

(*Nearly choking.*)

What?

**GEORGES**

So we can *write* together.

**CHRIS**

*(Very long pause.)*

Really?

**GEORGES**

Look kid, I'm dead. You got that right. Look at me. Cirrhosis, probably. Any number of other things, too much to count.

**CHRIS**

But why *me*?

**GEORGES**

I've read it all. Every last page of it.

**CHRIS**

Jackie said you'd only read some of it.

**GEORGES**

Nice kid, my niece, but she lied. She didn't tell you the whole story. I want you to move in here.

**CHRIS**

Insane.

**GEORGES**

Yeah? It's not anything *sick*, mind you. Got that?  
I've got maybe a year or two left. No doctor said that, but—  
*(GEORGES coughs up a lung.)*  
—that ain't sounding so good if you know what I mean.



## Act II—Scene 1

**CHRIS**

You want to write again?

(GEORGES laughs until his coughing and his laughing can't be told apart.)

**GEORGES**

No! I want *you* to write, asshole.

**CHRIS**

I'm already writing at Jackie's.

**GEORGES**

She's not a poet. Not even a dead one. She couldn't step into the light back when she had the chance because I was hogging the mic enough for everyone in the whole family. But she thinks you might be able to progress with me, and I've come to agree with her.

**CHRIS**

But—

**GEORGES**

Listen. You're a son-of-a-bitch, from what I can tell of you so far, but I like your stuff. So, I want to work with you. Take it or leave it. But you can't get much out of my niece for much longer. She's lost on your work, pal. Totally lost.

**CHRIS**

(*Beat.*)

I'll ... hell, I've considered. OK.

**GEORGES**

If you don't hate me now, don't worry, you will.

**CHRIS**

*(Beat.)*

Oh, I already hate you. That ship has *long* since sailed.

**GEORGES**

Great. We'll get along, then.

(End of Scene 1. BLACKOUT and CURTAIN.)

Act II—Scene 1



“When Dead Poets Dream”—2023

## Scene 2

At RISE: (Some considerable time has passed, perhaps THREE MONTHS, and the three know one another fairly well by now. The scene begins when JOANNE enters. GEORGES is in bed and CHRIS is at the desk, typing like a madman with smoke pouring out his nostrils.)

**CHRIS**

Thanks for the typewriter. I missed Jackie's. You know, he doesn't even have a *pen* in this room?

**JOANNE**

How long has he been asleep?

**CHRIS**

A long time. For you and me, perhaps twenty minutes. For the rest of the world, one hell of a long time.

**JOANNE**

You're his only friend.

**CHRIS**

*(Beat.)*

I hate the bastard.

## Act II—Scene 2

**JOANNE**

That's exactly what I mean. Everyone *else* loves him. The him they remember. You hate him like a father. That's true love.

**CHRIS**

I guess. Yes, I hate him like a father.

**JOANNE**

He's a lucky man, then.

**CHRIS**

*(Looking at JOANNE.)*

What's the matter?

*(A long period of silence follows. JOANNE appears to be trying to avoid answering.)*

**JOANNE**

What do you mean?

**CHRIS**

When someone is going to cry, I can tell.

**JOANNE**

It's nothing serious.

(CHRIS gets up and goes over to hug JOANNE.)

**CHRIS**

A woman like you doesn't cry over "nothing." What's the matter?

**JOANNE**

You're surprising.

**CHRIS**

How?

**JOANNE**

Yesterday, you and he were shouting at one another. Now, you're gentle. Are you trying to make fun of me?

**CHRIS**

I'm not following.

**JOANNE**

You two fight like drunken sailors.

**CHRIS**

He tore up my *best* poem.

**JOANNE**

(*Beat.*)

If *he* tore up a poem, it *was* trash.

## Act II—Scene 2

**CHRIS**

Exactly. I got mad at him for seeing past me.

**JOANNE**

He's in enough pain without your giving him more.

**CHRIS**

I'm not going to give him less pain, because it pains him that I'm not at the level he was before he quit.

**JOANNE**

Only your body is nineteen. So, even though I like you, I won't have any more arguing. Hate him like a father, but respect him like one, too.

**CHRIS**

You're the landlady and I'm the guest.

**JOANNE**

Don't make fun of me! You know there's more involved. I'm thinking about his welfare.

**CHRIS**

He doesn't need our pity. He *needs* our hatred.

**JOANNE**

Chris! You just said that—

**CHRIS**

Calm down. Of course I love him. I adore him. Nonetheless, I don't like how he is now.

**JOANNE**

That's just the drink.

**CHRIS**

If I accept that, must I also accept what he's become because of it? If you want to help a drunk, don't tell him that it's the wine and beer, tell him that he's a drunk. Plain and simple.

**JOANNE**

*(Beat.)*

You're a child. Not just in body. I knew him when he was the most famous living poet in Canada. When he was big, you weren't even a wish in your mother's head.

*(Very long pause.)*

If he drinks now, it's not him.

*(Pause.)*

It's the bottle.

**CHRIS**

The result's the same.

*(Beat.)*

Leave us alone for a while. Bring some tea around six. He's going to be thirsty when he wakes up, and I don't want to give him booze.

**JOANNE**

Well, despite all your arguing, it's you who knows him best now. If you say six, I'll be up around six.



## Act II—Scene 2

**CHRIS**

Thanks. See you then.

(JOANNE exits. Some while after she has gone,  
GEORGES awakens, completely sober.)

**GEORGES**

What the hell time is it?

**CHRIS**

Quarter to six. Did you sleep well?

**GEORGES**

(*GEORGES thinks for a long time.*)

I guess. Had a horrible nightmare, though.

**CHRIS**

Oh?

**GEORGES**

Dreamt my mother was dying. After the funeral, I received a hotel in the will. It had been hers. It was mine, but there was a *proviso* in the will.

**CHRIS**

Oh?

**GEORGES**

Fairly complicated. Long and the short of it is that I had to give up a gold pen my uncle gave me as a boy if I wanted the hotel. So, I did.

**CHRIS**

That doesn't sound like a nightmare.

**GEORGES**

Well, the hotel had these windows...

(GEORGES looks around with a look of horror and disgust at where he has been living.)

... that wouldn't open.

*(Beat.)*

So, you see, asshole ... when you find out on waking up that your life *is* your nightmare.

**CHRIS**

Sounds like a great dream to me.

**GEORGES**

You're mocking me.

**CHRIS**

When I was really young, I used to dream I was a bird. Whenever I awoke, and learned I couldn't really fly, I was so sad.

**GEORGES**

Which nightmare is worse?

## Act II—Scene 2

**CHRIS**

Doesn't matter, Georges.

**GEORGES**

Listen, asshole—

*(Beat.)*

Chris—I'm sorry about ripping your poem up.

**CHRIS**

Poems aren't things. You can't destroy them if they're not meant to be destroyed.

*(Tapping his own head.)*

**GEORGES**

Still, I was rude.

**CHRIS**

Nothing new. I have already forgotten why you hated it, man.

**GEORGES**

I hated it because it was a piece of trite shit, Chris, and you are far more capable than *that* at this point. All that tripe wrenching slush. Get over it, already.

*(Beat.)*

What are you writing now?

**CHRIS**

“If I was wrong, what then?”

*(Pause.)*

Hmm. Well, something like that.

**GEORGES**

Get a clue, boy. Nobody gives a shit about *you*.

*(Beat.)*

Speak in the universal personal.

**CHRIS**

Yeah, but what exactly is *that*?

**GEORGES**

It's something that can speak to other people. Something that isn't so personal that only *you* can hear meaning in your confession.

*(Beat.)*

Tell me who *I* am, but through *you*.

**CHRIS**

Who you are?

**GEORGES**

But through *you*.

**CHRIS**

You're a drunk. You make me sick.

**GEORGES**

But through *you*.

**CHRIS**

You *really* make me sick.

## Act II—Scene 2

### GEORGES

Be serious, just for a minute, will you?.

(GEORGES goes over to the desk and sifts through the papers there. He finds something that catches his eye.)

*This!* This is universally personal. See? You aren't such a stupid, naïve prick after all. This is *good*. Well, *better*.

(*Reading voice.*)

I'm Byron my time, bidding on Ozymandias' dust,  
working willows and conch Shelleys,  
Prometheus unbound and bound to live  
I am alive, it's alive....

### CHRIS

I have no clue what it means, though.

### GEORGES

Who gives a shit what it *means*? Think I had a clue about that most of the time back when I wrote? Not half the time, at best. The good stuff wrote *me*. This voice here speaks to *me*. The first-person voice you've used *here* is just a temporary bit of syntactic scaffolding until I see *myself* covered in the dust of Ozymandias' hubris.

(JOANNE enters with tea.)

### JOANNE

Tea for everyone!

**GEORGES**

Joanne. Listen to this:

*(Reading voice again, but bolder.)*

I'm Byron my time, bidding on Ozymandias' dust,  
working willows and conch Shelleys,  
Prometheus unbound and bound to live  
I am alive, it's alive, and though  
the stark night, the stark of life  
that jumps from God's loud clouds  
and Greek fevers in swamps for freedom  
fighting ... like phallic Jehovah howling  
from the burning push, rote learning  
memories of remembrances and  
stolen stoking embraces, at  
the portcullis, praying and  
staying, to light blast.

(JOANNE claps.)

**JOANNE**

Did you write that, Georges? This *certainly* calls for some tea!

**GEORGES**

*(Embarrassed.)*

No, no. It's his.

(JOANNE puts the tea on the desk.)

**JOANNE**

I have a letter for you, Chris.

## Act II—Scene 2

**GEORGES**

From whom?

(CHRIS briskly TAKES the letter from JOANNE.)

**CHRIS**

*(Beat.)*

It's from my mother.

**JOANNE**

But....

(CHRIS pretends to read the letter.)

**CHRIS**

Family gossip, as usual. Life is too hard on me, she says.

*(Beat.)*

Thank you, Joanne. See you later.

**JOANNE**

What do you want for breakfast tomorrow?

**CHRIS**

You decide, Georges.

(CHRIS puts the letter into his pocket.)

I've got some things to do.

(CHRIS goes to the closet and puts on his wind-breaker.)

**CHRIS (continuing)**

Bye-bye.

**JOANNE and GEORGES**

*(In unison.)*

Bye!

**CHRIS**

Aren't you coming, Joanne?

**JOANNE**

What? Oh! Sure, Chris.

(CHRIS and JOANNE EXIT together.)

**GEORGES**

Odd.

(GEORGES paces until he hears CHRIS has left. Then, he calls for JOANNE, who RETURNS to his room.)

**JOANNE**

Yes?

**GEORGES**

I'm worried. Where did he say he was going?



## Act II—Scene 2

**JOANNE**

Georges! Are you the father who worries about his son, or the son who worries about his father?

**GEORGES**

In any case—

**JOANNE**

If you must know, he didn't say a word about where he was going to me. But...

(JOANNE stops herself and puts her hand over her mouth.)

**GEORGES**

Go on.

**JOANNE**

I'm not sure he'd want me to say it, but that letter was *certainly* not from his mother.

**GEORGES**

From whom, then?

**JOANNE**

*I don't know.*

**GEORGES**

Then how do you know that it wasn't from her?

**JOANNE**

His mother lives in Pointe Claire, and that letter had a Montreal return address. You know?

**GEORGES**

They're both on the same damned island.

**JOANNE**

I've seen letters from his mother before. That wasn't her return address. Or her handwriting.

**GEORGES**

I don't understand this kid. The body of a boy, but all the *deception* of a man.

**JOANNE**

I'm sure he's not up to anything bad.

**GEORGES**

Of course not. But—

**JOANNE**

He has the right to his—

(JOANNE stops herself.)

**GEORGES**

Go on.

## Act II—Scene 2

**JOANNE**

How were *you* at his age?

**GEORGES**

Much worse. And you?

**JOANNE**

It doesn't mean much. I wasn't like you two.

**GEORGES**

You had your gifts! You were a goddess without equal. Unlike so many paper goddesses of today. You played each scene to its natural conclusion. I often think that if you had continued—

**JOANNE**

Oh, be quiet!

**GEORGES**

I just—

**JOANNE**

The gift of *words* is never lost. One can hide it with wine and beer, but it's with you until you die. Beauty, on the other hand, disappears without a qualm or remorse. You don't have to be a genius to smile for a camera, or cry for a director.

**GEORGES**

Let it be, then.

(JOANNE exits. GEORGES goes to sleep as the lights dim. A while later, CHRIS enters with a smile and the lights go up. It is now midnight.)

**CHRIS**

Aren't you asleep yet?

**GEORGES**

Of course! I've already slept a bit and re-awoken. It's midnight.

**CHRIS**

That doesn't surprise me.

(CHRIS goes to his bed.)

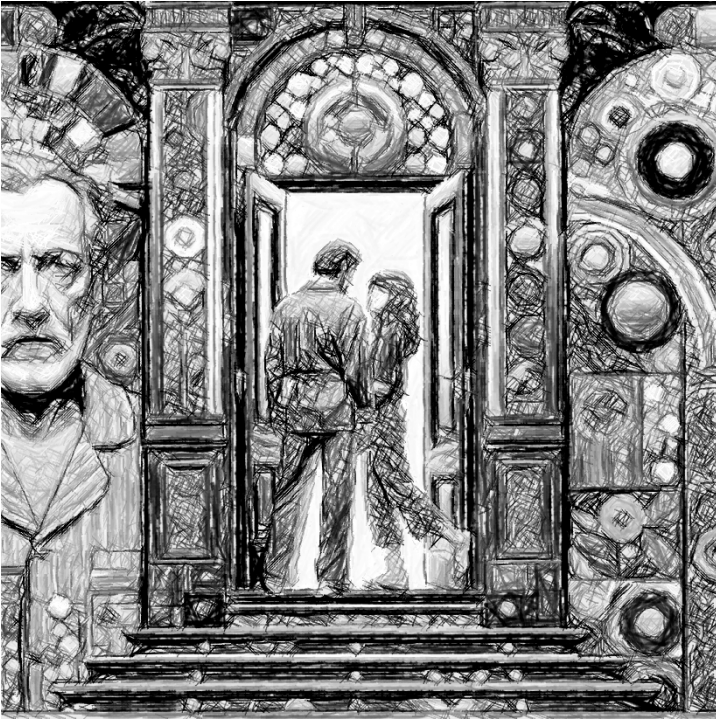
Goodnight, you old bastard.

**GEORGES**

Goodnight.

(End of Scene 2. BLACKOUT.)

Act II—Scene 2



“At the Gates of St. Georges’ Cathedral” — 2023

## Scene 3

At LIGHTS UP: (The scene begins with loud knocking at the door. GEORGES gets up, opens the door, and sees CHANTAL.)

**GEORGES**

Huh? Excuse me, Miss. Usually, we have breakfast service about now. I thought you were Joanne. I'm a bit embarrassed....

**CHANTAL**

It's nothing. Do you always greet breakfast in your pajamas, man?

**GEORGES**

It happens.

**CHANTAL**

Surely, you're kidding.

**GEORGES**

Yes. I'm a real laugh in the mornings. Chris is asleep right now. You have the choice of waking him up and facing his wrath or waiting here. Come in.

(CHANTAL enters.)

**CHANTAL**

Actually, I'm here to see *you*.

## Act II—Scene 3

**GEORGES**

Then don't be alarmed if I ask your name and business.

**CHANTAL**

I'm Chantal Lepage. I'm from—

**CHRIS**

*(Loudly as CHRIS enters.)*

She's from *Century*. She'd like to interview you, Georges.

**GEORGES**

What? So, you're finally awake.

*(To CHANTAL:)*

I don't write anymore. Obviously, you've made a—

**CHRIS**

She doesn't want your name on the dotted line in blood, Georges.  
She only wants to talk.

**CHANTAL**

I'm writing your biography for *Century*.

**GEORGES**

Then you already know more about me than I do.

*(Pause.)*

I don't want any fresh publicity. It's better that they think I'm dead, don't you think? You want to make things worse for me? I don't want university students asking me for interviews.

**CHANTAL**

You're coming back.

**GEORGES**

Am I?

(GEORGES taps his chest, runs his hand up and down his beard, as if trying to feel whether or not he really exists.)

Let's see.... I feel like *shit* today. I felt like *shit* yesterday. I'll feel like *shit* tomorrow. If that's a comeback, I want to flush. *Piss off.*

**CHRIS**

Georges! Give her a chance. Maybe if she writes the truth about you, public opinion will be in your favor.

**CHANTAL**

I think it would do you a lot of good for people to know you're still alive.

**GEORGES**

What the hell would you know what would do *me* good, eh?

**CHANTAL**

What you wrote touches people even today. They want to know you.

(GEORGES calms down but is still angry.)

**GEORGES**

Right—past simple. What I *wrote*. In the past. A completed action that is no longer with us. If there's some kind of poetry renaissance, I'm happy because maybe I'll get more sales and thus royalties.



## Act II—Scene 3

**CHANTAL**

If they knew you were alive, you'd be in for the Order of—

**GEORGES**

*Blah!* Can't spend *that*. I don't want fame beyond the three syllables  
"Here's your check."

*(Pause.)*

If you think this renaissance puts me in ecstasy, think again. I don't  
have time for such things.

*(Silence.)*

**CHRIS**

You're such an idiot, Georges.

**CHANTAL**

I can see I'm not welcome.

**GEORGES**

Your eyes are in working order, then.

**CHRIS**

I invited you.

**GEORGES**

You invited her into *my* business, and you frankly had *no* right to do  
that.

*(To CHANTAL:)*

Bugger off, Lepage. If you want material, write this...

*(Pause.)*

"Georges Yves Beaufort, son of Jean-Paul and Jeanne-Marie  
Beaufort. Born 1919 and died in 1959. Drank too much."

**CHRIS**

Georges....

**GEORGES**

“Drank to deaden it all. Today, he just *exists*.”

**CHRIS**

That’s the first time he’s ever admitted why he drinks. You’d better write it just as he said it. That’s very likely the last poem he’ll ever write.

**GEORGES**

Just bugger off.

(CHANTAL exits. CHRIS is visibly angered. There is a long silence as GEORGES looks for his wine.)

**CHRIS**

Georges....

(JOANNE enters.)

**JOANNE**

What’s happening?

(Silence.)

**CHRIS**

Oh, be quiet.

## Act II—Scene 3

**GEORGES**

You're *evil*, Chris.

(GEORGES finds the bottle and takes a long swig from it.)

**CHRIS**

You're the evil one.

**GEORGES**

Go fuck yourself.

**JOANNE**

What's happening?

**CHRIS**

Shut up, Joanne!

**GEORGES**

Don't talk to her like that!

**CHRIS**

(*Calmer.*)

You know what just happened? This idiot just ruined his chance at ever redeeming his soul.

**GEORGES**

You know, my parents had thirteen boys. I'm the son they never had.

**JOANNE**

Chris, you know it's just the wine.

**CHRIS**

Yes, yes. The Great Lie. He's a failure. Just like you, Joanne.

**GEORGES**

That's quite *enough*. What do you want, Satan?

**CHRIS**

You're *both* failures. Two has-beens.

**GEORGES**

That's *enough* out of you.

**CHRIS**

You don't want to understand yourselves, yet you want the world to understand you.

**GEORGES**

I could give a rat's ass if the world understands me. That's a young angst thing.

(CHRIS puts his arms around JOANNE.)

**CHRIS**

Former actress. The lines on your face didn't kill you, Joanne. You were just too afraid to believe that you had talent deeper than your looks.

## Act II—Scene 3

**GEORGES**

She's still a beautiful woman.

**JOANNE**

Thanks, Georges.

**CHRIS**

*(Beat.)*

Yes, still beautiful.

*(CHRIS kisses her on the cheek.)*

You could have been one hell of a Gertrude, but insisted on being Ophelia and jumped into the river the moment you started showing your age.

*(CHRIS runs his fingers down his own laugh lines to indicate aging.)*

Age isn't death, but you chose to die.

**JOANNE**

You're horrid.

**CHRIS**

*(CHRIS walks over to GEORGES and puts his arms around him.)*

Poet? Couldn't handle leaning over paper any longer. Well, the gold plate on his pen wore off and the lead shone through. Drinking is easier on the mind. Wanted to die and did.

**GEORGES**

My life is already over.

**CHRIS**

Your life *never was*. When you bedded Wine instead of the Word, you proved that. What a cliché!

(*Pause.*)

Anybody can be so dead.

**JOANNE**

We're just human beings, Chris. Sure, we have our weaknesses. What do you want us to do about them?

**CHRIS**

You were the best! Gods! The others were *cinders* beside you.

(*Pause.*)

You were the *stars*.

**GEORGES**

Flames go *out*, Chris.

**CHRIS**

Yes. Flames disappear, but *stars* always blaze. Are you going to accept that you were just sparks from the Grindstone of Art?

**JOANNE**

You demand too much of us. Too much.

**CHRIS**

I don't demand a goddamned thing from you.

**JOANNE**

If we were stars, so much the better. But if we aren't anymore, it's all just the same.

## Act II—Scene 3

(CHRIS returns to holding JOANNE around the waist.)

**CHRIS**

What a loss.

**JOANNE**

You weren't even an itch in your mother's crotch when we were the best, Chris. We remember what we were, and that's enough for us to get by on.

**CHRIS**

And what about the world? If you don't give your best to the world, you are both failures.

**GEORGES**

*(Beat.)*

Just what is a *failure*, Chris?

**CHRIS**

A failure is a worm-infested cadaver who has been dead for years but is too stubborn and self-concerned to fall to the ground where it belongs.<sup>44</sup>

*(Beat.)*

The maggots are having fun with you two.

**JOANNE**

*(Just short of screaming.)*

Horrid child!

---

<sup>44</sup> The original French read: “*Un raté est un cadavre vermoulu qui ne sait même pas qu’il est mort, mais est trop préoccupé de lui-même pour tomber dans sa propre sépulture.*”

(JOANNE begins to cry. The three are silent for some time, with GEORGES pacing around the room without words.)

**GEORGES**

*(After a time.)*

Then aren't you a failure for simply being around us?

**CHRIS**

I suppose.

**GEORGES**

You want me to help with your poetry? How can a failure help one so brilliant and alive as you? And I don't say that with anything but a sense of respect for you, Chris.

**CHRIS**

Respect?

**GEORGES**

You'll amount to something. If you can get past the moaning about love lost. I respect that, Chris. Your harsh words against me I can forgive. Be kinder to Joanne, though, would you?

(CHRIS lets go of JOANNE.)

**CHRIS**

I really don't know why Jackie set this whole thing up. I suppose she thought I might inspire you to get off your ass and write again. You probably just agreed with it all to have someone else around the place.



## Act II—Scene 3

**CHRIS (continuing)**

*(Beat.)*

Every so often, I've gained something from the part of you that hasn't quit, but most of my progress has been my own. It feels sometimes—most of the time!—that I don't need you as much as you need me.

*(CHRIS goes to the desk and takes the letter from inside the drawer.)*

I've rented a small place. This is a letter from my *real* father, not the jerk that sent me packing. He's offered to pay half the rent until I can get on my feet in my new job.

**GEORGES**

No kidding? Why didn't he send you any money before now?

**CHRIS**

He sent the poetry I sent him to a few of his friends to see if I was worth the time of day. He's a practical man.

**GEORGES**

Which friends, those?

**CHRIS**

Some editors. He's nothing if not thorough. A few were published.

*(Pause.)*

They liked it, and said I had a real chance. So, he offered to pay half the rent of a decent place, if I found a better job. Guilt, I guess, for not having supported me earlier in life. Whatever.

(CHRIS hands the letter to GEORGES, who reads it.)

**GEORGES**

OK. So you're out of here.

**CHRIS**

Tomorrow. I'm not so naïve to think I don't have to work while I write poetry. The help my dad is giving me is to help me get on my feet in the *real* world.

**JOANNE**

Tomorrow?

**CHRIS**

Yes.

**JOANNE**

But....

**CHRIS**

I've had it here.

**JOANNE**

But Chris, he *needs* you. He's dying.

**GEORGES**

No, Chris is right. It's his choice. It's his life.

## Act II—Scene 3

(CHRIS puts on his jacket. The room is completely silent for some time. CHRIS walks to the door.)

### JOANNE and GEORGES

*(Together.)*

You're leaving?

### CHRIS

I'll call for my boxes.

(CHRIS exits. A very long silence follows. GEORGES rubs his throat as is the way for thirsty men to do. He appears to be in deep thought.)

### GEORGES

Do you think he was right?

*(Beat.)*

Oh, it's all the same, isn't it?

*(Pause.)*

It's like a bloody furnace in here. I need a drink.

(GEORGES starts to look for his bottle.)

### JOANNE

It's the window.

*(Very long pause.)*

It doesn't open.

(End of Act II. BLACKOUT and CURTAIN.)

# Act III

## Scene 1

At RISE: (Keys can be heard at the door of a completely empty apartment. Then, the voice of PICARD....)

**PICARD**

Where is that key? Ah! Here we are. I'm sorry, but I don't know where I put the master.

(PICARD opens the door and enters.)

The boss is *very* tight with keys. One per apartment. No copies. That, and my master. What a paranoid.

**CHRIS**

I doesn't matter. I'm alone. This is it, then?

(CHRIS enters.)

**PICARD**

Good old Number Seven.

**CHRIS**

I like it.

## Act III—Scene 1

**PICARD**

Don't usually let out sight unseen, but your father knows the boss. Shower and toilet at the end of the hall. Very clean, and we expect you to keep them that way.

**CHRIS**

The key?

(PICARD hands CHRIS the key.)

**PICARD**

Don't lose it, or you'll have to pay to have the lock changed. You can move your stuff in.

**CHRIS**

I already have.

**PICARD**

Nothing?

**CHRIS**

Just me. Six months ago, I had nothing, and now, I have nothing. Well, a few boxes of papers to follow soon. But that's it.

**PICARD**

Sure.

**CHRIS**

Do you read poetry, Monsieur Picard?

**PICARD**

*(Beat.)*

Don't be deceived by my looks, Mr. Fields. I know a lot of people, and a lot of artists. This is a low rent building, isn't it?

*(Pause.)*

Every struggling artist in Montreal has been through here one time or another. I understand your position. But at least you have a job other than that.

**CHRIS**

Well, it's a job.

**PICARD**

Never underestimate the power of a few bucks in your pocket. Especially come rent day.

**CHRIS**

Goodbye.

**PICARD**

Goodbye.

*(PICARD EXITS, but quickly RETURNS.)*

It's quite possible that a young lady will be dropping by today.

**CHRIS**

Oh?

**PICARD**

She wanted this place but couldn't come up with a deposit. If she passes by, tell her that you've taken the room, please.

## Act III—Scene 1

**CHRIS**

Of course.

(PICARD exits again.)

What a place!

(CHRIS begins to pace the room, taking wide steps. After a short while, there is a KNOCK at the door, and he goes to open it. It is YVETTE.)

**YVETTE**

Hello. Are you a janitor?

**CHRIS**

Eh? Hardly. Do I look *that* old? Are you the one who wanted the apartment?

**YVETTE**

Yes.

**CHRIS**

Mine, now. It seems my money went further than yours. Come in, anyhow, please.

(YVETTE ENTERS.)

I'm Chris. How are you?

**YVETTE**

(*Detached.*)

I'm Yvette.

**YVETTE (continuing)**

*(Beat.)*

I wanted this place. The floor is perfect.

**CHRIS**

Yes, for my back.

*(Beat.)*

Do you dance?

**YVETTE**

You can tell?

**CHRIS**

You walk like a dancer. Sort of like your feet are too careful to touch the ground, while, at the same time, comfortable when they do.

**YVETTE**

Yes, anyway. I am. What do you do?

**CHRIS**

*I exist.*

**YVETTE**

*(Beat.)*

Ah, Jesus, probably a writer, man.

**CHRIS**

A poet.



## Act III—Scene 1

**YVETTE**

Right. Your words are too careful to touch the mere mortal listener, and stumble when they do.

**CHRIS**

Good! You sound like a poet, too!

**YVETTE**

I probably read that somewhere.

**CHRIS**

Hey, I might be crazy for offering you this, but you can drop by and dance here if you want. Only, I can't make a key for you. The "rules."

**YVETTE**

You'd do that for a stranger?

**CHRIS**

You're not any stranger than the rest.

**YVETTE**

What do you want from me?

(YVETTE backs away from CHRIS.)

**CHRIS**

Nothing. Just one condition. No friends. I hate people, for the most part. So no hangers on.

**YVETTE**

Hate people? Who'd have known? Anything else?

**CHRIS**

No. That's it.

**YVETTE**

Agreed.

**CHRIS**

OK, now, since you're a dancer who couldn't afford this cheap place, I assume you're shit out of luck.

*(Pause.)*

Do you have a place for the night?

**YVETTE**

Well....

**CHRIS**

What's mine is yours, man.

*(YVETTE almost cries. She walks over to CHRIS and hugs him.)*

**YVETTE**

I was scared about where to stay tonight. Thank you.

**CHRIS**

No problem. I'm famished. You hungry at all?

## Act III—Scene 1

**YVETTE**

Even if I weren't, I'd say yes *just* to have something to eat with you.

**CHRIS**

Then I hope you like cheap. I'm pretty strapped for cash. Let's go see what we can manage.

**YVETTE**

Sure.

**CHRIS**

Let's go, then.

(CHRIS and YVETTE both EXIT.)

End of Scene 1. BLACKOUT.)

## Scene 2

At LIGHTS UP: (CHRIS opens the door and lets YVETTE into the apartment. He follows after a short wait.)

**YVETTE**

What a life you've led so far.

**CHRIS**

Pretty bizarre.

**YVETTE**

Fucked up.

**CHRIS**

Yeah.

**YVETTE**

You lost all that weed....

**CHRIS**

Such a waste! Anyway, not any stranger than the rest of life, man.

**YVETTE**

Are you published?

## Act III—Scene 2

**CHRIS**

Recently—in a few littles. Nothing big yet. But I’ve got boxes of stuff to start sending out. Working into short fiction.

**YVETTE**

That’s cool, man. Truth and freedom are the most important things.

**CHRIS**

*(Beat.)*

I’m going to get some sleep now.

*(CHRIS turns out the light.)*

**YVETTE**

Before you nod off, can you tell me just one more thing?

**CHRIS**

The more trivial, the better.

**YVETTE**

Why did you invite me to stay here if you don’t want my ... body?  
Every other guy I know just wants some grass or ass or both.

*(CHRIS is silent for some time.)*

**CHRIS**

I didn’t say I didn’t *want* you. Just that I *wouldn’t*. I just need some company of someone my age. Another artist.

*(Pause.)*

Why risk it?

**YVETTE**

Yeah. Why risk it?

**CHRIS**

*(After much pondering.)*

Someone else at the bottom, trying to climb up. The innocent, naïve ones. That's what we are.

**YVETTE**

Innocent until *proven* guilty.

**CHRIS**

Not done over by despair. Not yet anyway.

**YVETTE**

Sounds mysterious.

**CHRIS**

*(Beat.)*

Mystery is solitude. Nothing mysterious about that.

**YVETTE**

I don't know.

**CHRIS**

Those who *want* to be mysterious are just playing games. It's all too lonely. Clichés abound.

*(Pause.)*

By being a mystery one detaches oneself from the real, and by doing that, one cannot address reality.

## Act III—Scene 2

**YVETTE**

But aren't you the "starving artist" type? Isn't that also cliché?

**CHRIS**

I'm just broke. Being strapped for cash is not the same thing as being mysterious. Nothing *mysterious* about an empty stomach on a park bench.

**YVETTE**

I guess. I wish I had a full-time job. It's hard to dance when I'm not eating well. We can't survive if we don't eat. Life's first lesson.

**CHRIS**

You'll figure something out. At least for a while you have a roof.

**YVETTE**

Yes. That helps. Thanks again.

**CHRIS**

Think nothing of it.

(YVETTE hugs CHRIS again.)

**YVETTE**

Are you sure about ...?

**CHRIS**

About no sex? Yeah, I'm sure.

**YVETTE**

Because, if....

**CHRIS**

I'm sure.

**YVETTE**

If you change your mind....

**CHRIS**

*(Pause.)*

Don't worry about that.

**YVETTE**

*(Beat.)*

Do you feel alone?

**CHRIS**

Not now.

**YVETTE**

Then you *are* a mystery. The *real* kind. Not the put-on kind.

*(Silence. LIGHTS DIM to indicate the passage of time. As morning comes, LIGHTS UP again. PICARD knocks at the door and awakens them both.)*

**CHRIS**

Who's there?



## Act III—Scene 2

**PICARD**

Picard. I'll have your mailbox key later.

**CHRIS**

Good.

(CHRIS opens the door.)

Come in. Forgive the dancer on the floor.

**PICARD**

Ah, Mademoiselle Duclerc. I see she *did* come by.

**CHRIS**

Yes. I let her stay. She's really down and out, man. Hope you don't mind terribly, Monsieur.

**PICARD**

*Your life, your details.*

(*Beat.*)

Remember what I said about knowing a lot of your kind? Nothing shocks me.

(*Beat.*)

Just don't make a copy of the key. The *rules*.

**CHRIS**

Yes.

**PICARD**

As I said, I'll have your mail key to you later, then. Goodbye, Mr. Poet.

(PICARD EXITS.)

**YVETTE**

He doesn't care if I stay?

**CHRIS**

Why should he? He's not our father.

**YVETTE**

Chris....

(CHRIS waits a long time for YVETTE to finish her sentence, but she doesn't.)

**CHRIS**

Yes?

**YVETTE**

I *really* want you to make love to me.

**CHRIS**

Well, I....

**YVETTE**

It's been a *long* time for me. And I *really* dig you, man.

**CHRIS**

(*Beat.*)

People are like rooms.

## Act III—Scene 2

YVETTE

(*Pause.*)

What? What does that have to do....?

CHRIS

Empty or full.

YVETTE

Empty.

CHRIS

That wasn't a question. It was a statement.

YVETTE

Empty, anyway.

CHRIS

Full rooms, the empty people.

YVETTE

Contrast?

CHRIS

I've seen it. Lots of *bric-a-brac* means lots of secrets, but nothing inside but lost dreams. *Bric-a-brac* is lost dreams. *Bric-a-brac* is didn't quite make it.

YVETTE

No lost dreams *here*.

(YVETTE gets up and runs the entirety of the room.)

**YVETTE (continuing)**

Just a big empty room.

**CHRIS**

Lots of junk means lots of lies. Bottles and dirt. Lies.

**YVETTE**

You sound like a poet.

**CHRIS**

Who'd have imagined? Are you hungry?

**YVETTE**

Starving.

**CHRIS**

I don't mean for food. I mean for *art*.

**YVETTE**

For *dance*, yes. I'm *hungry*....

(YVETTE walks to CHRIS and puts her arms around him. She playfully grabs his crotch and tries to kiss him, but he resists.)

**CHRIS**

Close your eyes.

## Act III—Scene 2

(YVETTE does, expecting CHRIS to kiss her. When he doesn't she opens them again.)

**CHRIS (continuing)**

Close them. Are you happy with what you see? If you only had what you see, would you be happy?

**YVETTE**

So what?

**CHRIS**

*(Pause.)*

Then now you understand why you're welcome here.

*(Beat.)*

Not for sex.

**YVETTE**

You don't *know* me. Not *really*. I have *problems*.

**CHRIS**

Name one.

**YVETTE**

Problems in *quotation marks*, mind you.

*(Beat.)*

I had to run away from my ex. I got out in time, but it was pretty ugly.

**CHRIS**

*(Beat.)*

Shit. That's no fun. But, you don't know me, really, either. But we know this about one another: we're *not* empty rooms. Only our *room* is empty.

**YVETTE**

You make no sense at all.

**CHRIS**

I'm not supposed to.

*(Beat.)*

I have to go buy a pen and paper. Can't afford a typewriter yet, but that one is very high on my list.

(CHRIS exits.)

YVETTE is alone. She begins to DANCE, using the full span of the room for her movements. After about two minutes, she stops and sits on the floor as if exhausted, likely from lack of a decent meal.

End of Scene 2. BLACKOUT.)

Act III—Scene 2



“Three Meals from Anarchy: One from Collapse”—2023

### Scene 3

At LIGHTS UP: (YVETTE is unconscious in CHRIS' arms. She slowly awakes.)

**YVETTE**

Did I?

**CHRIS**

Seems you passed out. You're exhausted. Hungry?

**YVETTE**

That *hunger* thing, again?

**CHRIS**

No, I mean *food* this time.

**YVETTE**

Not really. I mean, I *must* be, but.... I have to go to the washroom.

**CHRIS**

Down the hall.

(YVETTE EXITS just before PICARD ENTERS.)

**PICARD**

It will be hard if you only have *one* key, so I asked for permission in your case. You can have a copy. I took the liberty of adding your friend to the lease. I already had her information.



### Act III—Scene 3

**PICARD (continuing)**

Feel free to let me know if you ever want me to remove her name. I understand how these things can go.

*(PICARD hands key to CHRIS.)*

**CHRIS**

Thanks for the key. She'll need one. And for all the rest.

**PICARD**

That one will do. No more copies though, OK? Is she OK? She looks *really* pale. Saw her in the hall.

**CHRIS**

She'll be OK.

**PICARD**

*(Beat.)*

Would you like a chair?

**CHRIS**

Come again?

**PICARD**

A chair.

**CHRIS**

Go on.

**PICARD**

It really wouldn't be a problem. Another tenant left a chair. Nice one, too. Not ratty. A big leather, padded thing.

**CHRIS**

You're very kind, but I'd rather keep the room empty.

**PICARD**

Really?

**CHRIS**

I have this theory about empty rooms and full people and full people and empty rooms.

**PICARD**

Too poetic for me. If you want the chair, just ask.

(PICARD exits as YVETTE returns.)

**YVETTE**

What did he want?

**CHRIS**

He gave us copy of the key for you. You officially live here now, too, I guess. You're on the paperwork.

**YVETTE**

(*YVETTE hugs CHRIS.*)

He seems nice.

### Act III—Scene 3

**CHRIS**

And he offered us a chair.

**YVETTE**

Great!

**CHRIS**

I turned it down. I don't want any unnecessary *bric-a-brac*.

**YVETTE**

Unnecessary? This place is *empty*, Chris.

**CHRIS**

The more junk we get, the emptier *we* get.

**YVETTE**

Well, we need a *bed* at least.

**CHRIS**

Floor is fine.

**YVETTE**

*(Pause.)*

What have I gotten myself into? I'm a *dancer*. I can't do too well getting all my rest on the floor.

**CHRIS**

We can get a mat that can be rolled up, I guess.

**YVETTE**

Better than wood.

**CHRIS**

Sure.

**YVETTE**

*(Beat.)*

Will you at least *kiss* me, Chris?

**CHRIS**

*(Pause.)*

No.

**YVETTE**

You make me feel *ugly*.

**CHRIS**

No, you're quite beautiful.

**YVETTE**

Then kiss me, stupid.

**CHRIS**

Then I would start to be empty.

*(Pause.)*

I want to focus on my poetry.

### Act III—Scene 3

(CHRIS EXITS. FADE LIGHTS to indicate the passage of time. When CHRIS RETURNS, YVETTE is on the floor, trying to sleep. LIGHTS GO UP again.)

**YVETTE**

Where were you for so long?

**CHRIS**

Just wandering down the street.

**YVETTE**

See anything?

**CHRIS**

Nothing much.

**YVETTE**

Oh, come on. I can tell.

**CHRIS**

Hundreds of empty rooms. Hundreds upon hundreds. Thousands upon thousands. Millions upon millions.

**YVETTE**

*(Pause.)*

Let me see if I'm getting this—you mean *people*, right?

**CHRIS**

Yes. You're getting it.

(YVETTE approaches CHRIS and hugs him. CHRIS doesn't resist.)

**YVETTE**

Is something wrong?

**CHRIS**

Maybe, yes. You remind me of my first lover.

*(Pause.)*

She's a dancer, too. That *could* be it.

*(Pause.)*

Yes. You reminded me of her. That's why I didn't want to have sex. I didn't want her in my system if you and I.... It didn't feel fair to you.

**YVETTE**

I hate it when I "remind" people of someone. I'm me, Chris. Yvette. Nobody else.

**CHRIS**

That's cool. But you're both dancers.

**YVETTE**

World is full of dancers, Chris.

**CHRIS**

Well, maybe something else. The way you talk. Something. Don't know.

**YVETTE**

But I'm *not* her.

### Act III—Scene 3

(CHRIS leans over and kisses YVETTE. The kiss doesn't stop, and things start getting heavier.)

**CHRIS**

*(Breathlessly.)*

No, you're definitely *not* her.

**YVETTE**

Can't we accept that chair from Monsieur Picard? This floor is *hard*.  
Way too hard.

**CHRIS**

*(Pause.)*

OK. I'll tell him tomorrow. I could also use a desk, I suppose. And maybe we *could* really use a bed.

(BLACKOUT. When the LIGHTS COME UP again, CHRIS is standing, facing downstage. YVETTE is motionless, in the same position she was before the blackout, as if CHRIS were still with her.)

**JACKIE**

*(From OFFSTAGE.)*

I can hear you.

(JACKIE walks ONSTAGE, not through a door. CHRIS does not look at her.)

*Bric-a-brac?*

**GEORGES and JOANNE**

*(From OFFSTAGE. TOGETHER.)*

We can *hear* you.

(GEORGES and JOANNE walk ONSTAGE, again not through a door. CHRIS does not look at them either.)

Dirt and lies?

**CHRIS**

Don't you know yet  
that I cannot say *no*  
when supplication  
flies from your lips?

**JACKIE, GEORGES, and JOANNE (together)**

We hear weeping before  
it begins and bend  
to undo pain that  
has not *yet* torn you.

**CHRIS**

*(Looking at the motionless YVETTE.)*

I scan the path for  
stones and thorns  
before your footfall  
has touched the earth.



### Act III—Scene 3

**JACKIE, GEORGES, and JOANNE (together)**

Listen for a moment  
to that bird in the tree  
over there and if you  
listen with our ears for  
just a minute you  
will hear your cries,  
the ones that have not  
yet left your mouth.

**CHRIS**

What has not yet left my mouth?

(CHRIS covers his mouth.)

**JACKIE**

You are naïve.

**GEORGES**

An asshole.

**JOANNE**

Horrid.

**CHRIS**

Caius Caligula, *without* boots.

**JACKIE**

I can't find the moon for you.

**CHRIS**

Caius' moon is an empty room.

**GEORGES**

*(Pointing at CHRIS.)*

He's the shy  
underneath of  
spandrel insight  
and gossamer cobwebs  
until revisions escapade  
beyond swirls.

**CHRIS**

*(Pointing at GEORGES.)*

He's the unkempt  
beside himself of  
unworried mythologies  
and precipitant hoarfrost  
until reveries escalate  
between worlds.

**JOANNE**

*(Pointing at CHRIS.)*

He's the right bank  
Bohème crawler slipping  
from shadow vanities,  
like narcissist copper  
mirror into echoes  
and mirages of  
shoulder glances back.

### Act III—Scene 3

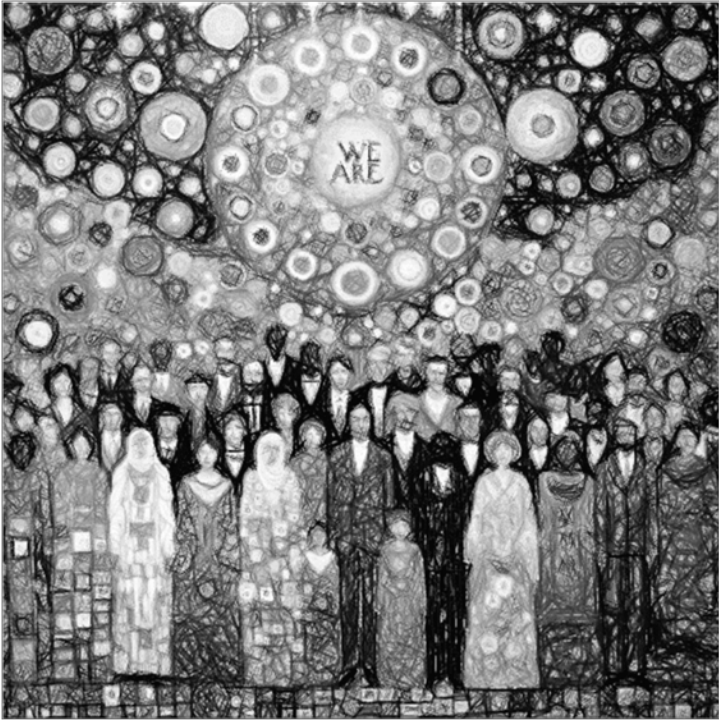
(YVETTE now gets up and stands with the others.  
Everyone points at CHRIS.)

#### EVERYONE

*(Together. Still pointing. Perfect unison.)*

And when the spider touches  
on the strand, escaping  
estimation, another  
angled swan spreads its  
Caesar form into  
the ether of  
*empty rooms.*

*(They all lift their heads, looking at the sky.  
Final CURTAIN.)*



“We Are” — 2023

## **The Final Word**

“The difference between the *almost right* word and the *right* word is really a large matter. 'tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.”—Mark Twain

*Il n’y a que du hors-texte: the Reader is the only Oracle.*

Whereas you, the Reader, have the final word, space has been provided here to complete the text with *le mot juste*:

---