

Part 1: A Prelude

1.

He sat down to write:

The first point being: There is a spot in the parking lot where water drips from no apparent source. Mid-air it materializes, governed by gravity it splatters on the ground. Every day. Without fail.

The second being: This vantage point is remarkable. Yesterday, it afforded a view of five airplanes at once. All without having to move my head.

What a fantastic way to begin a novel. Let's begin again.

2.

"I am done for," he thought, and closed his book.

3.

He woke up knowing there was something important about Winesburg, Ohio. Or was it Gainsbourg? Or Ginsberg? What exactly the item of importance was, or its relation to the facts at hand, he couldn't remember. "No bother," he thought as he left the house to walk his usual afternoon route. Yes, there was the spot where the water dripped. There was the man with his placard. The famous aphorism came to mind: "There's something endearing about a panhandler who writes his sign in cursive." To be sure, few took the time any longer. Fewer still made the aesthetic nod to the color red.

4.

He was writing a book. A book he never finished. This is a story of failure.

5.

It was mid-February. The snow was melting, having long overstayed its welcome. Its waterlogged retreat revealed matted grass; sheaves of gray and brown interwoven like straw strewn through hail-battered cornfields. There are two weeks every year where it is impossible to determine whether it is the end of autumn or beginning of spring. He proposed the addition of a fifth season. An interloper, it would remain unfixed, open to personal assertion. This season would have no name.

6.

“Writing is easy.” He smiled and drew a large exclamation point at the end of his sentence.

7.

He had heard it said that mountainous regions were incapable of producing great literature. All of the celebrated works of the past several centuries came from the plains or the coast. Something about vast, flat expanses inspired the imagination.

Living in a subalpine valley, he knew he was doomed. He considered giving up, but then realized he could simply lie about his home’s location.

8.

With each step across the wet pavement, he could feel the clod of snow on the bottom of his shoe slowly dissolve. Until at last, his sole was back in contact with the earth.

A plow truck scraped across the nearly bare concrete sending up a shower of sparks. New stars extinguished as they hit the roadside snowbanks.

9.

He hadn't meant to begin writing. But then again, how many people sit down and say: "I'm going to write a novel"? The beginning had been effortless. From it had stemmed a variety of subjects, themes, plot avenues, and character formations.

(He had planned to come back to this paragraph at some later point to add more detail and description, but never did.)

10.

Here is where his ideas ran dry.

11.

He began writing two days before his twenty-sixth birthday, deciding that he would dedicate his book to true love. The love we all harbor somewhere down deep in the burial mounds of our memory. The paradox of celebration and mourning. Love unrealized.

If he wrote quickly, he could finish it tonight. That would leave time enough to read a few pages of *Doctor Zhivago* before he went to sleep. But he did not finish tonight.

12.

He hadn't intended on his novel becoming a failure either. But in keeping with the rhetorical outburst from #9, who sits down and says: "I'm going to write a failure"? He could trace the failure to nothing in particular. Perhaps it was his dedication line. He'd read so many that were far better. They usually contained words like "darling" or "my dearest friend and supporter." Some writers referenced multiple people. Some writers even thanked people. He was not one of those writers.

13.

Once, he'd read about a man named Al Herpin who'd rejected the notion of sleep entirely. Years went by and Mr. Herpin was as alert and thoughtful as ever. Finally, he died, just like everybody else.

He wished to be the new Al Herpin, but found it impossible since his mind was awash with sleepy phrases like:

“We are living in momentous times—it's not every day that you get to witness the unmaking of an empire.”

or

“This is my hope: to live out my days in peace among the receding glaciers.”

or

“Billionaires buying out the floodplain.”

All good phrases to be sure, perfect for letters to his nieces or his true love, but certainly not fit for the sleepless. When his letters yielded no reply, the phrases found homes in his “serious writing.”

14.

One night, he dreamt he was Al Herpin. Since he was sleeping, the dream proved fruitless.

15.

Maybe he would just write a book of short stories. He wasn't having much luck with anything beyond a paragraph. But the thought of ending a story in a matter of pages filled him full of hollowness. Surely, he had more to say than that.

16.

“What's your timeline?”

He pretended not to hear her. Sometimes people just go away if you pretend not to hear them.

“What’s your timeline?”

However, this tactic did not work on the persistent.

“My what?”

“Your timeline.”

“For what?”

“This book you’re writing.”

“I’m not writing a book.” (*Oh my God. I’ve told people about my book?*)

“Oh.”

The conversation came to its inevitable end. Once again, he proved that persistence never pays.

17.

He distrusted books that drew conclusions for their readers. His conclusions were his own, not to be dictated by the whims of an author.

He felt like a peanut butter sandwich, having concluded they were good.

18.

Given the book’s title, he was finding it surprising how little manifesting was being done. He kept having good ideas but kept forgetting them by the time he got home. It was time for a new hobby. Or at least a new title.

“What about *The Book of Aphorisms*? I can just write pithy phrases and attribute them to invented people.”

He went back and added one at the beginning of his novel, and while it fooled you, the reader, he found it difficult to come up with realistic names.

19.

Here was where the globe stole his gaze. Lost in dreams of remote islands, his sentence trailed... off.

Saints Helena and Kilda rocked him to sleep.

20.

Once, when asked his profession, Satie claimed the title of gymnopedist.

A long sigh rose slowly, escaping like a tidal bore—churning against the incoming breath. He could make no such claim.

“I am only an aphorist,” he thought.

21.

He went to the spot where the water dripped. There he stood, gazing into the sky, trying to muster his best “inquisitive look.” There was nothing for it. Stare as he might, the heavens would not divulge their secret. The perfect blue was tight-lipped; the horizon’s fade to white was its laughter.

22.

“I will write to frustrate.” At first, he forgot to define the intended target of that frustration but found one in throwing his manuscript across the room.

23.

Six months after her death, he received a letter from his grandmother. He imagined it in the cargo hold of a plane, shuttled back and forth across the Atlantic in search of him. “I hope all is well in Scotland. Try wearing a kilt and playing the bagpipes! Miss you sweetie.”

Grandmothers are magical creatures. His once predicted the future: “One day, they’ll play your songs on the

radio.” And she was right. Once, in the middle of Wyoming, the songs he loved came gushing through the radio in rapid succession, an oasis interrupting the unending, barren expanse of highway.

24.

For once, life was not accentuated with a dull throbbing. He was thirsty and drank deeply.

Yet, headache gone, he found he was now haunted by an unslakable thirst.

25.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t be writing this way,” he thought. “My words flow more freely with a pen in hand and a gentle breeze filling my lungs. The sun does me a world of good. I don’t want a gaudy expanse of cloudless sky, only an errant ray escaping its vaporous bonds now and again.”

?

Part 2: An Assemblage

1.

DAMASCUS, Pennsylvania – A small township on the Pennsylvania/New York border. Its primary industries in the 20th century were timber, agriculture, and bluestone mining. It is notable for the fact that in the early 21st century, it became a center for natural gas production. It is also notable as the birthplace of James Gordon Brecht...

I promise every word of this is true. I open with that admonishment simply because I know the nature of the Brecht clan. We are liable to be skeptics and hyperbolists, always taking to the extremes when it comes to storytelling. With Brechts as the intended readers, I want to be clear that this is all fact. Hopefully, you will add my “memoir” to the great book of family history without feeling the need for “accuracy” edits. What follows may at times seem fanciful, impossible, or even tarnished by faulty memory, but you must believe what I say.

In 1971, when I was at the tender age of eight, my father informed me that Brechts were Eagles fans. Seeing as how I was a Brecht, my allegiance was required for Philadelphia. But I harbored impure thoughts—I dreamt of rooting for the Steelers.

In our house, there were only two laws: the laws of God the Father and the laws of my father, the god. Philly was just over 150 miles away. Pittsburgh was more than twice that. Distance dictated our loyalties. To my old man, it didn’t matter that New York was closer than both. Besides, both the Giants and Jets played in New Jersey, which didn’t say much

for their understanding of geography, let alone football. We lived in the great state of Pennsylvania, so we had to root for the nearest Pennsylvanian team.

But as I lay in bed at night, waiting for sleep to wash over me like the Delaware, I dreamed of honorable steel men, massive crucibles, and red-hot, glowing ingots. Then I would pray my Hail Marys, ask for forgiveness and close my eyes.

Every morning, I imagined I'd woken up in a new, unfamiliar house. After I'd rummaged through the drawers that happened to be filled with clothes my size, I'd wander downstairs and introduce myself to the kindly woman who seemed to be one of my caretakers.

“Good morning ma’am. My name is James Gordon Brecht. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Lovely place you’ve got here.”

The woman would greet me with a smile, fix me a seat at the kitchen table, then offer me a plate piled high with blueberry pancakes.

“Good morning James,” she would say. “I trust you slept well.”

“Oh, very well, ma’am. This is one of the most peaceful places I’ve stayed in quite some time.”

At that point, a loud, older gentleman would come blustering into the kitchen complaining about a sports score from the night before. He would swallow his curses as soon as he saw me, weaving a distinctively garbled tale of foul play, witless refs, and the nefarious people who rigged the system.

I was always too shy to formally introduce myself to the man, so full of poise and self-confidence did he seem. I always suspected that he owned the establishment. Nonetheless, he'd give a brief smile and nod while walking by and would touse

my hair as if I were a loyal Labrador retriever. As such, I'd often finish my breakfast on the floor since it was a place more suited to a dog.

When my meal was complete, I would be shoed away to get dressed for school. Since I went to St. Vincent's in Honesdale, I always knew what I would be wearing. Even if I hadn't gone to Catholic school, I probably would have adopted a daily uniform anyway. I never gave much thought to what to wear. My mind was elsewhere.

I would sit by the front window, waiting for the bus, huddled up between the radiator and the coat closet, soaking in the warmth that would power me through the day. Eventually, the bus would come and my mother would hand me my backpack as I bounded out the front door. "Have a good day James. Love you!"

I'd find my seat on the bus with well-wishes in my ears and the smell of hot metal lodged in my sinuses. The other kids sat in early morning delirium, absently staring out the windows. This was always my favorite time on the bus. My face pressed against the window in silence, its rattle connecting me to the world outside. As we wound our way through the hills, my compatriots would gradually be shaken to life. By the time we pulled into the St. Vincent's parking lot, the din of voices was more in keeping with that of youth.

School would proceed in a cascade of English, mathematics, Latin, social studies, science, and religion. We began with our morning prayers and the nuns kept us on a break-neck pace through lunchtime. Knuckles were rapped and the disobedient were punished. The best strategy was simply to keep your head down. When lunch came, we marched down to the small cafeteria, forming a long line that waited patiently

by the doorway to be admitted on a class-by-class basis. Seniority ruled as the older grades would be the first to snake their way along the outside wall to the stack of fiberglass lunch trays, all faded shades of sea green, yellowed cream, and weathered red brick. The trays would then be slid along the counter, in front of a scooping squad of Polish grandmothers who ladled out our daily allotment of meat, potatoes, and vegetables presented in one of five ways, according to the day of the week.

By the time my turn came, I was always already day-dreaming. I would count the tiles on the floor—first the white ones, then the black, making note of each new stain or spill that hadn't been there the previous day. At the end of each week, this slate would be wiped clean by vigorous mopping and I would begin my observations anew. If my eyes weren't on the floor, they would usually be surveying the assembled hordes, scanning slowly back and forth, looking for the most subdued table. Eventually, the hungry impatience of those in line behind me would boil over into insistent prodding.

Once we finished eating, we waited yet again, squirming under the watchful eye of the mother superior, until the recess bell rang. For a brief twenty minutes, the concerns of the school day dissolved and we were left to our own, more rambunctious, inclinations. Footballs, baseballs, and tetherballs traced arcs through the air. All found their targets, intentional or otherwise. Recess was essentially one big game of chicken—a constant cycle of tempting and then avoiding physical harm that consumed our time until the bell rang again and we lined up, breathless, to return to class.

Afternoons mirrored the mornings: more lessons in obedience. The hands of the clock would crawl as if hindered

by relativistic effects. The day ended with our “evening” vespers. Once finished, I would often stay to help the teacher wipe the chalkboard clean. Thus, the bus ride home was suffused with the comforting smells of incense and chalk dust.

This was the template for my days. During the summer or on the weekends, a different cadence emerged. Daily chores, welcomingly aimless free time, family dinners, and Sunday drives. I lived in tune with my Circadian rhythms and left the clocks confined to the school day. My concerns were week-long campaigns and exploratory expeditions that crisscrossed the back yard. I knew every branch of every tree. Every lump of uneven earth. Picked countless bushels of berries from the creekside. It was my first and only stint as ruler of a fiefdom. While my people loved me, the demands of time eventually dictated that I rule in absentia. Someday, I may return to reclaim my crown.

This pattern persisted throughout my years in primary and secondary school. My daily interests and passions evolved as I aged, but not so substantially that one would be unable to recognize the second grader next to the eleventh grader. I was a model of consistency.