Swann

*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure. Parfois, à peine ma bougie éteinte, mes yeux se fermaient si vite que je n’avais pas le temps de me dire: «Je m’endors.»*

I have never read this book. I’ve never read most books, even ones I bought or borrowed with the best of intentions. My attention span has always been short.

Now, however, I’m determined. Seven volumes, in the original language, word by word, translating with the aid of an online dictionary, grasping for meaning in the syntax of a language I have never learned to speak. I want to expand my horizons, master my craft, tame the beast.

The beast. Always there, lurking in the shadows. Do you have time? I’ll tell you about the beast. The beast demands of a man that he write a novel in seven volumes.

I am sitting, as I write and not as you read, in a café in my home town. The atmosphere is woody and comfortable, but the music is terrible, all synthetic beats and wandering melodies (or perhaps lack of melody). I find word-music hard to listen to, oddly; it disturbs the words in my head. Oddly, because I am, after all, a word-person.

I don’t mean to give the impression that I don’t read; I do, and frequently, but only short works or excerpts. I love poetry above all else, which is admittedly hard to do, as most of it is bad, or at least not good. However, I admire the spirit of anyone who is able to put him/her self out there in the line of sight of the world, fickle, dangerous and unimaginative as it is. A writer of poetry is giving you a piece of his/her life with each stanza, a piece whose gift may never be reciprocated, and if you don’t love it, the poet dies a little. I die a little. These deaths add up, until resignation sets in, and poetry is no longer a career, but a punishment. In what other medium is the height of glory an audience of at most a few dozen, their attentions wandering with every twitch of light or snap of sound?

I write what no one ever reads. I pour out words, lovely words, magical words, and they flow out into the street of our collective minds, roll drop-by-drop into the gutter of our ignorance and disappear down the storm sewer of apathy. Where is my great explorer of the mind, who will rescue a lonely cup of my words from the pavement, discover me like James Dean, and rocket me to the attention of a clamouring world?

For quite a while*, je me suis couché de bonne heure.* Sometimes, *à peine ma bougie éteinte, mes yeux se fermaient si vite que je n’avais pas* the time *de me dire: «Je m’endors.»*

I’m at home, sitting on my bed, computer on my lap. It’s late, past dinner time, too late to start working on anything important.

Time weighs heavily on me. Ok, not really, I’m just saying that because it’s one of those handy clichés that make a poet sound profound without the need of original thought. Time weighs so lightly on me that I ignore it. I’m not one of those desperate souls who feels that the half-second he saves by cutting someone off on the highway will possibly make any difference to the enjoyment of his or her life.

*For quite a while, I sometimes* did something*, when I had the time*. Physics tells us that time is an arrow that flies only in one direction. I believe that. Each moment, this one included, is a structure built on the structure of a previous moment. The theory is called “causal sets” and is one of the latest attempts to understand the fundamental reality of the universe. A moment is not just a slice of time; it’s a slice of a physical world, complete with matter and energy in perfect juxtaposition; an event, to use the terminology. An event is never repeated, nor re-accessible. Once done, it’s done. There is no way to reverse cause and effect.

Writers, of course, don’t see it that way. We can pile moments on moments, re-order them, reduce some, accentuate others, deal with effects and get around to causes when we feel a need. As a writer, I am a transcendent ego, the power of physics but a bouncy rubber ball in my hand. There was a time when I did this, but there was a time I did that, and not to mention the time I did the other thing. Or maybe I did the other thing, that and then this. In any event, the now in which I write this is not the now in which you read this, and there is no reason to doubt that this is perfect. I am a traveller on the way-ship of time, and I go where I will, and maybe if I was a better poet I’d have some travelling companions. See? I’m humble.

Control over time means control over the narrative. It means taming the beast. To get there, you have to read. Reading is a function of mental purity, a meditation. It’s not enough for a writer to simply allow his eyes to pass from word to word, listening vaguely to the echo in his head. He has to treat each word as a causal set, a frozen place and moment in time. And not just a moment in my time, but a moment in time of an author who is long dead, who was writing about a time out of time. I have to feel the event in every sign and symbol.

I’ve known plenty of writers, or at least met them, who don’t read. Can’t afford to read, they say. No time.

For a long time*,* I went to bed *de bonne heure.* Sometimes,when my candle was out, *mes yeux se fermaient si vite que je n’avais pas* the time *de me dire: «Je m’endors.»*

Midnight, god damn it. I extinguished my *bougie* and then relit it half an hour of tossing and turning later. I don’t get along with sleep at all these days. Me and the sleep thing just are not friends. I just lie awake until the beast crawls out of my ear and I get up and turn on the machine and begin typing.

Don’t feel bad for poor me, though. There’s something about coffee-shops and the hours after midnight that are my best times for writing. The bustle of the café stimulates me — it’s the energy of the place I like. I like to know that the good people are enjoying their daily drugs, getting the little subliminal lift that makes their quotidian existences bearable. I wear my headphones, and burrow into the silence that lies at the heart of the very loud. I have the freedom of my mind, and I work.

But it’s the wee small hours that really do it for me. No noise, no chatter, nothing to interfere. Thoughts waft through the air like stray lightning, striking me from oblique angles, and the screen of the machine lights the way for my fingers. I own the world at this hour, and there’s no one to dispute it.

So much for my resolution, though. Here I am typing away while I could be reading and translating. Life is a candle that only burns down. I will never again live what I lived up until now, and if I don’t write this now, I will never write it. It is a product of this moment...and this one...and this one, and will never come back.

Ok, that moment is past. You can breathe again.

For a long time*,* I went to bedat a reasonable hour*.* Sometimes*,* when my candle was extinguished,my eyeswere closed *se fermaient si vite que je n’avais pas* the time *de me dire: «Je m’endors.»*

I love the sun...its warmth, it’s authorship of life. What I’m not a big fan of is bright light. If I could have whatever I wanted, the sun would come with a dimmer switch.

I never write at this hour. What am I doing? I’ve been awake for so long now, the kitchen table is starting to look attractive as a bed. My eyes want to close, but the beast won’t leave me alone. Write it or lose it.

Most of the time, when the sun is up, I’m wearing two pairs of sunglasses: my prescription lenses, black and polarized, and a pair of dark clip-ons over them. I’m a night person; the dark is me.

I live in my hands and my eyes. The link between my see-brain and my typing-brain is delicate, and bright light just overwhelms it. I have nothing against the day, and me and morning are on good terms, even if we don’t hang out together. But really, I can only like the part of the day when the eye-computer linkage is smooth and well-oiled and productive. I have, I admit, wished otherwise.

Ever notice how so many authors, in resumé-ing their careers for the back flap of their books, list the following: cook, carpenter, logdriver, cabdriver, medic, crocodile wrestler, bat hunter, mouse wrangler and part-time neurosurgeon to the stars? It isn’t because they were good at all those things. The better you are at something, the shorter your CV. My list: cook, carpenter, programmer, web designer, library assistant, welfare recipient, student, student, student, poet. The only one that matters is that last one. The only thing that I’ve ever been even remotely good at is absorbing information, processing it and outputting it in a new form, hopefully with a sense of aesthetic purpose. In at the eyes, deconstructed, reconstructed, out at the hands. That is me, and there is no other.

Of course, I love many things, and I am as much a product of them as of anything else. I’m a product also of my failures and my (few) successes. But the measure of a man is not what he says he is, it is what he does. I’m a poet, true, but I actually do write poetry. Just not at this hour, when my eyes should still be closed.

For a long time*,* I went to bedat a reasonable time*.* Oftentimes*,* once my candle was extinguished,my eyeswere closed so soonI didn’t have the timeto say to myself: *«Je m’endors.»*

It’s midday, and I’m back at work, office desk, music, coffee coffee coffee, just not working on what I should be working on. Once again, I got nowhere with the reading. The beast intruded again. Let me acquaint you with the great import of my revelation:

it crawled from my ear and sat on my head

write me oh write me oh write me it said

i said i cannot, for you aren’t a verse

you’re a thought, an idea, a concept or worse

i am a poet, no philosophizer

politician or clergyman proselytizer

it said i don’t care you will write me because

i will sit on your head, and dig in my claws

and i won’t go away ’til you write me at last

i’ll whisper and whine and hold your brain fast

i knew at that moment i was losing this battle

so i opened a file, submissive as cattle

i proceeded to write, and the claws were retracted

each word that i wrote was one more claw subtracted

this is the result, this thing that you read

not brilliant or perfect, but serving a need

and now i can sleep with no thing on my head

i wrote you i wrote you i wrote you i said

It happens so fast sometimes: you’re sitting there wondering why you can’t think of anything and then you’re writing a poem about not being able to not write a poem. You say, “this time I’m going to concentrate,” and before you know it, the beast is back and you’re wandering around inside your head, kicking tires and wishing you were outputting, rather than inputting. The beast never sleeps.

Perhaps it seems as if I’m complaining again. This is because I am. I do, however, have a purpose in mind. I want you to understand why I am the way I am. It’s because I didn’t have the time to say to myself, I’m not going to do this. I was too busy. I was already doing it.

My head is full of literary theory. Marxist, feminist, structuralist, post-structuralist, etceterist. Theories created by people who write about writing. I’m writing about writing. How does this keep happening to me?

I have a theory about writing. You do it, or you don’t do it. It’s not really up to you, is it? Free will is an illusion, except for people who believe in their illusions. Some people believe everything they read. I believe everything I write. Bad habit. So tired now.

For a long time*,* I went to bedat a reasonable time*.* Oftentimes*,* once my candle was extinguished,my eyeswere closed so soonI didn’t have the timeto say to myself:“I’m going to sleep.”

Café again. Too tired to write.

Twenty-four hours ago, I started to translate this book. I’ve finished the first two sentences. At that rate, I should be finished by the year 3000. Not going to happen. At least, though, the beast is quiet. Maybe now I can go home and sleep. My attention span really is