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

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 am sitting, as I write and not as you read, in a café in my hometown. 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. Odd, because I am, after all, a word-person.

I didn’t mean to give the impression that I don’t read; I do, and constantly, 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 life with each stanza, a piece whose gift will 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 snap of light or twitch of sound?

I write, almost compulsively. I have referred to myself as a graphomaniac. The problem is, of course, that no one ever reads me. 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,as soon as my *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. It’s late, too late for work. I got nothing done today, except the above, and I have a fully-booked day tomorrow. I haven’t even read a full page yet, and I’m already feeling like I’m out of my league.

I carry this computer with me wherever I go. It’s as much of a fixture with me as the baseball cap on my head. It’s a hideously overpowered machine, far more power than I’ll ever use, but I’m a computer guy from way back and I love the technology. That said, it isn’t the machine so much as what I can do with it. I do art on it, listen to and sometimes even compose music, read my mail. But the main point of this machine is that it contains, including this, the only record of my life and thoughts that exists in this world. Granted, I have a backup machine, and a lot of what I do is on there as well, and I have bits and pieces squirreled away in odd corners of the webiverse, but this machine is the one that is the repository of the flotsam and jetsam of my mind. It’s all me, sitting here, but I’m not thinking of me, or of my machine, or even of the synergy between us. It’s all about you. Which of course is all wrong. It wasn’t supposed to be about you at all. It was supposed to be about Swann. It was supposed to be about my education, my worldliness and my search for meaning as an artist.

At least, even if I’m not doing what I’m supposed to be doing, I’m doing something creative. The problem is that I’m so limited. I want to know everything there is to know about my craft. I want to do everything that my best possible fate demands of me, and that means writing beyond the best of my abilities. If sports guys can constantly be giving 110%, then I can write beyond my abilities.

For me to do that I must read. I must spend 10,000 hours reading. That’s 1,240 more hours than there are in a year. According to Malcolm Gladwell, that’s how many hours of work it takes to get really good at something. How do I know? Because in my daily search for anything of value on TV, I saw the last two minutes of an interview. I’ve told you everything I know.

I’ve known plenty of writers, or at least met them, who don’t read. Can’t afford to read, they say. No time. Can’t allow other people’s thoughts to pollute the pristine perfection of my mind. Don’t want to write like anybody else.

I say, at least know whom you`re stealing from.

For a long time*, je me suis couché* at a reasonable time*. Sometimes,* when my candle was out, *mes yeux* were closed as fast as *je n’avais pas* the time *de me dire: «Je m’endors.»*

Midnight, god damn it. I don’t get along with sleep at all these days. Me and the sleep thing are not friends. I keep trying to get to sleep earlier, so I can be awake in my morning classes, but it does no good. I just lie awake until the bug crawls into my ear and I get up and turn on the machine and begin typing. I even have an alias, “The Midnight Deconstructionist,” that I use to sign some of my self-exploratory poems.

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 — I don`t drink coffee, actually, just decaf — 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 no idea what you`re talking about, even when you sit two feet away from me.

But it`s the wee small hours that really do it for me. At that hour, there`s no noise through my window, save the occasional train or a truck on the highway. Thoughts waft through the air like stray pockets of 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.

Of course, if I didn`t live in this no-horse town, the streets would still be busy at this hour. Don`t get me wrong. I like this place. I like knowing that I could go outside with my computer, sit on the porch, and watch nothing happen all night long.

So much for my resolution, though. Here I am typing away while I could be reading and translating. Time, according to the latest, hippest physics, is an arrow that only flies in one direction, from cause to effect, and never from effect to cause. We live in a collection of moments, each one complete and the creator of the next. 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*, je me suis couché* at a reasonable hour*. Sometimes,* when my candle was extinguished,my eyeswere closed as fast as *je n’avais pas* the time *de me dire: «Je m’endors.»*

Sun’s up, um-hmm, looks ok. The world survives until another day. Bruce Cockburn, late seventies, look it up. I’m not embarrassed to say I still love that song. What I’m not a big fan of is the 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?

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, that’s all there is to it. I live in my hands and my eyes; my soul exists in a point where Hindu women wear a red dot. 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. Really, I only like the part of the day when the eye-computer linkage is smooth and well-oiled. There is nothing else for me.

Ever notice how every other author, in resuméing his career for the back flap of his book, lists the following: cook, carpenter, logdriver, cabdriver, army 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.

For a long time*, je me suis couché* at 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.»*

Thank god the sun is down. I’m back at work, the way it should be. Once again, I got nowhere with the reading. The writing brain intruded:

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

I managed to translate a few words before the beast appeared. 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.