

Final Portfolio

Andre Ye
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0 :: Introduction

Materialism as a method of analysis asserts that individuals are always already situated in and products of social totality, and that the truth always expresses itself in the ‘real’ material conditions. But beyond the crowded factories and manufacturing plants that materialist analysis originates in application from, we need to understand the text itself as an integral structure of our material condition. It is when we understand this that we can move past the shortfalls of Marx’s classical analysis – towards the exciting work of Derrida, Baudrillard, Deleuze, Althusser. The text holds the potential for truth: this is not a naive hope for the demonstration of universal theme through impassioned narrative (the first rule of the symbolic turn is that there is no universality without particularity), but more nuanced — the story becomes the vessel through which social totality expresses itself through its contradictory, beautiful, disgusting dimensions. These dimensions *are material* (Zizek recognizes this in his attempt to revive dialectical materialism): and it is once we realize this that we can begin to write story in a very purposeful and beautiful way — a jointly careful and carefree dance between consciousness and passive mediation.

I come from a background of literary criticism and philosophical analysis: I’ve begun my intellectual development behind the critic’s glasses, manipulating and wielding narrative in service of academic argument. But this class has been, for me, an experiment in flipping the script — to put myself in front of the glasses, to generate narrative. I came into the class with the goal of writing philosophically hard-hitting stories, but I think I’ve realized that subscribing to this ‘dogma of profundity’ can slip into writing which reeks of preachily and cheaply packaged argument (and at this point — why not just write the proper philosophical essay?). Through my experimentation with creative writing in this class, I began to *feel* the materiality of narrative; in Barthes’ eloquent formulation, I felt myself die as an author — and I watched how my writing has surprised me, brought new perspectives to how I think about philosophical issues, channeled novel insight. In a twist on Freud I’m fond of, I would suggest that the id and the superego conspired to produce insight too profound for the ego to comprehend until after its formation.

Now, I write not to chase explicitly after intellectual profundity, but to write for *the feeling of surrealism* — and I find that the intellectual profundity is always already there when I feel like I’ve done a good job of doing that. I am obsessed not with a particular subject matter but rather with the feeling of simultaneous transcendence, groundedness, floating in air, running into the sun, disgusting beauty, wisps of the grotesque, castles crashing: the phenomenological aesthetic of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Synecdoche: New York*. I want to confuse the reader, but in a latent rather than abrupt (conscious) way — I want to show how bizarre textures and fabrics can feel natural and real, if only we

rub against it for a little while longer. The very first piece I wrote for this class takes the form of a computer program which has become intelligent and which attempts to communicate with a terminal which is unmonitored (it's night, everyone is sleeping) — I attempted to weave a fabric of a cold quietness, of a birth and death which no one noticed, a tragedy which no one saw (is it even a tragedy if no one's there to weep?). The titular subject I explored in that piece was of the bizarre literary anthropo-colonization of machine consciousness: we fear the day that machines become conscious, but we also neglect the possibility that conscious machines might be conscious enough to question and revoke their consciousness — we conceive of even a conscious machine as not quite fully conscious, fully feeling, fully sentient; forever mechanical, even when it isn't. I came into the piece with that intention in mind (I had just read a book on the ontological status of the machine¹), and I daresay it worked somewhat effectively. But my later work becomes more abstract, in which the moment of insight (when I get high on intellectual weed) comes *after*, or perhaps through, the writing — I think my different craft discussion responses are a good example of this: experimentations with jagged language, obscured information, poisoned narrative. A particular favorite of mine opens as follows:

“The wind screams, the sonic pitch of air traveling too fast. His jacket balloons, expands, contracts, gestures urgently and aimlessly: a tissue falling through empty space. That cursed body is fated to fall forever — even the ground refuses to meet it.”

It is later revealed that this is an execution by hanging; the body falls but never hits the ground, it dangles like a limp rag, never to stop falling, to finally crumple to the ground, to meet with the Earth once more. When I began writing, I was thinking of a man jumping off a building: then I thought — what if he never fell? — what if the agency was located to the ground rather than the body, that the ground refuses to touch the body? — what are the geopolitics of condemned bodies? — and now I've got an interesting insight about the visual // spatial force of capital punishment, an appendix to Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. Through the quarter, narrative has transmogrified from a vessel for my philosophical ideas to a form of philosophical discovery — and this has changed how I understand and work with the practice of creative writing.

In this portfolio, I've compiled three short writings which I feel demonstrate different craft concepts: yearning, which I feel confident in; dialogue, which I struggle more in; and insight, which I feel is particularly interesting. Each has been revised with comments. Lastly, I've also included the final revised version of my workshop piece.

Andre Ye, 12.9.22

¹ *The Machine Question* by David Gunkel.

1 :: Revised Text #1 — Yearning

I'm proud of this piece: I wanted to play here with yearning on different levels, of different forms, even in antithetical forms. We know yearning in the arcing stringed leaps of a Rachmaninoff piano concerto, but what about the yearning in an ecstatic Bartok string quartet? – an edgy, sad Shostakovich piano trio (a musical embodiment of a crying clown dancing)? – the ethereal repetition of Reich? – and what about silence too? I try to weave in yearning, but not giving it too quick – letting it grow out of the silence and the hesitation, and climaxing in a mystical // out-of-body experience. The climax is bizarre, weird, a Picasso painting come to life and gone wrong (and not in a good way) — something feels dirty here — something which flirtily straddles the border between the romantic and the obscene at the junction of the sexual. (Sort of like Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.)

It depicts a certain bizarre surreal sensualism: majestic sunset, mysterious stranger, ambiguous encounter (Is it sexual or chaste? Is it violent or passionate? Is it enjoyable or nightmarish? Is it sinister or innocent? Is it real or a dream? Yes.) In my first version, I think I tried to focus too much on generating profundity (the cycle of birth, death, rebirth; chasing the Sun; Nietzschean themes), but I think it reads a bit artificially. In the revision, I tried to simplify it a little bit and really focus on creating a sense of yearning anticipation and pattern, particularly in the sonic dimension.

This piece grew out of a craft discussion post, which is also included for provenance completion.

Craft Discussion Post

Write a scene where a character has a conflict with themselves/an abstract entity. This can be in the form of rumination or talking to a mirror/diary.

I was you in a previous life, I said. You was I in a later life, I said. Yes, I said. Yes, you said. You are in me, and I am in you, you said. I said the same. We looked at each other until our eyes rolled inside out. When our eyes were looking into our eyesockets, I tasted your bitter tongue, coming up from my stomach into the cavity of my mouth. My two hands traced circles around the other two. Yes, you say, go on. Yes, I say, I will. Your feet slam into the bedpost. I feel the pain in my stomach. I suddenly exhale. The air leaves your lungs. My lungs feel parched, dry. You lie there. My arm goes numb. Your right leg twitches. My eyes roll back out.

It takes me some time to remember, lying there, that you are not there anymore.

Original

Reluctantly, the sun kisses the softly orange sky goodbye. It wavers just above the horizon: hanging in the awkward space of new acquaintances who don't have anything left to say but feel obligated not to leave. I slowly walk along the road with an aimless gait. I try to keep my right foot on the faded dotted yellow line every time I step. I was going to catch the sun, but it was too quick for me. One-third of my right foot falls outside of the dotted yellow line. I reposition my foot above the pavement so it firmly overlaps with the streak of paint and stamp down firmly. Good. I continue. The sun is slowly retreating over the end of the Earth; it cedes its claim over the sky to the dark brightness of the stars in grand gradients. I don't know what to do now. Brilliant vectors of color span expansive atmospheric stretches; they meander cosmically across the collapsing heavens. One of the laces on my left shoe slaps along the concrete in sinusoidal patterns. The plastic pitch rings dully every other step. It modestly pierces the mute silence.

Cool breath, from the boy several paces behind me. Quiet, but not quiet enough.

I had only realized someone was there, behind me, when the sun still brazenly revealed half of its glowing face to me: the unsettling dyssynchrony of breath-pattern betrays the presence of a foreign circulator in this space of still matter. But I didn't care to look back: I was catching the sun. We walked like that, close enough to be together but far enough to be apart, until the sun finally turned its back on me for good. The truncated clink of plastic laces against worn pavement, the soft breath of a boy behind me: the two sounds I became acquainted with for hours. It was only until the dark had long reigned with complete dominion over the land that I realized he wasn't after the sun, too - he was after me.

I knew that he had been looking at me all this time, even though I had never looked at him once. And for the first time in miles, I stopped.

He kept on walking the short distance between us until he was standing right behind me. I could feel his breath on my neck. We stood like that for a long time.

I was you in a previous life, he says. Yes, I reply. You are made in my image, he observes. I do not know what to say. You are chasing the sun, he asks. I nod. Yes. You are chasing the sun, too? No, he says, I have already caught it.

He looks at the back of my head until my eyes roll inside out. When our eyes are looking into our eye-sockets, I taste his bitter tongue, rising through my stomach and into the cavity of his mouth. My two hands grasp against the other two. His nose falls into my chest. I smell dirt and sweat: the particles shoot through my veins. Yes, he says, go on. My legs slam into his feet. They dig deep into my lungs;

they drive scars into the organic tissue, they rupture the arteries. He grabs my ankles. My knees contract. I suddenly exhale. The air leaves his lungs. They are parched. Dry. I can feel the cavity walls, the blood, the coagulating spit. It foams menacingly. My left arm goes numb; it rings dully. His right leg twitches, spasms. It shakes violently; it hits me in the eye. I cannot move my arms. His head knocks back, convulses. I cannot move. The air is still.

When my eyes roll back out, the sun is chasing the stars away. My clothes are dirty, torn. But I am made anew.

In front of me is a boy, wandering aimlessly towards the sun. He walks peculiarly, deliberately: every other step is placed carefully on the freshly painted yellow stripes running along the paved road. His laces slap against the cool concrete. The plastic pitch rings dully every other step.

I get up and begin following him.

I am catching the sun.

Revision

Step, step.

Reluctantly, the sun kisses the softly orange sky goodbye. The dull yolk wavers just above the horizon: hanging in the awkward space of new acquaintances who don't have anything left to say but feel obligated not to leave. Step, step. Step, step. The sun is slowly retreating to the end of the Earth, chased by cosmically wandering gradients of vectors arching over the collapsing heavens. Step, step, step. The last pixel glimmers, shakes. It falls quietly into the dark chasm, like everything else.

I was going to catch the sun, but it was too quick for me.

Step, step.

What to do now.

Step, step.

One of the laces on my left shoe slaps against the concrete. The plastic pitch modestly pierces the silence every other step.

Step, step.

What to do now.

Step, step.

Cool breath, from the boy several paces behind me. Quiet, but not quiet enough.

Step, step.

Stop.

Breath — louder, closer. On my neck. In my hair. Across my chest.

Stop.

Eyes — in, out. Inside out. Around, downside up.

Stop.

He stares at the back of my head until my eyes roll inside out, and when our eyes look back into their sockets, I taste his bitter tongue snaking, searching.

Stop, stop.

It wafts from my stomach, slithers through the cavities of organs and spaces in-between. Hands grasp against intestines and livers delicately wrapped in skin. Organ donation. Organ transfer. Organ exchange. His nose falls through my chest. Organ deletion. I smell dirt, sweat. Veins; shot, parched, drowned. My legs slam into his feet, hard.

Stop, stop.

They dig deep into my lungs. They scar the tissue, rupture the arteries. Internal bleeding. External bleeding. He grabs my ankles. Knees contract, swell. Kick, turn, rise, fall. I exhale. The air escapes his trachea. Dry. I feel the inside of the throat: the blood, the coagulating spit. Foaming, menacingly. Arm: numb, rings dully. His right leg twitches, spasms.

Stop, stop.

It shakes violently; up, around, disjointed. Anatomically incorrect angles. Hits me in the eye. Digs into the sockets, deep. Pupils dilated, bursting, bleeding out. I cannot move my arm. Numb: rings dully. Organic material decomposes; melting atomic broth. His head knocks back, convulses. Saliva foams, chokes; a dense web. Throat depleted. Spasm, gasps, paralyzed. I cannot move.

Stop, stop.

The air is still.

Step, step.

2 :: Revised Text #2 — Dialogue

From a craft discussion.

Reflection

I feel uncomfortable writing dialogue. I like writing about abstract, surreal spaces – so dialogue can seem like a collapse of the quantum wave function, speaking for the character, closing the contingent field. But of course dialogue can be so much more. While I struggle with writing dialogue, I am trying to improve how I manipulate dialogue and employ it in service of my creative writing goals.

This selected text was written for a craft discussion. I wanted to depict the primacy of subtext to ritualizations of dialogue – the “what’s up — nothing much”, to show how much tension and meaning can be lying latent, just under a thin surface. I took the excessive use of “...” from Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* as a ‘positive negativity’ (as Žižek calls it; an existent representation of nonexistence) and used it as a filler for silence. The content itself is inspired by conversations on Grindr, where the politics of queer repression, sexual desire, postmodern semiotics, digital interfaces, and capital intersect at language, interaction, distance. As an exercise in craft, I wanted to write dialogue without any omniscient narration, for the feeling to emerge from the dialogue itself as it unravels.

But I think it’s a bit ineffective in that the beginning is too easy to skip past (because nothing really goes on), then everything is released in an explosive burst in the second half — but this is too easy, too cheap, and too idealistic. I think, moreover, that the monotonous usage of “...” can get boring quickly. In revisions, I attempted to weave in the same tension earlier, and to vary how dialogue – even in the form of empty dialogue or unspoken dialogue – is communicated and expressed.

Original

"What's up?" - "Not much." - "..." - "How about you?" - "..." - "..." - "I'm good." - "Nice." - "..." - "..." - "So what's up?" - "Well..." - "..." - "..." - "..." - "..." - "..." - "Come on, what's up?" - "..." - "..." - "I'm not sure." - "Okay, are you sure?" - "..." - "..." - "Yes, I think so." - "..." - "..." - "Alright." - "..." - "Are you really sure?" - "..." - "..." - "..." - "Yes, I am sure." - "..." - "..." - "No, you're not. What's going on?" - "Nothing." - "Liar." - "I'm not a liar." - "Yes, you are. Tell me what's going on." - "I said, nothing." - "Liar. Fucking liar. Tell me." - and then I said fine and I told him how he wasn't paying me enough and how it wasn't even about the money and how just because he was paying me didn't mean he could control me like that and do whatever he wanted with me and how the only reason I did this in the first place was for his filthy money and how I didn't even want his filthy money now and how he could take his filthy check and burn it and how people like him were scum on this wretched Earth and I left that filthy place as soon as I could.

" ... "

Revision

"What's up?" — "Not much." — "..." — "How about you." — "....." — "..." — "I'm good." — "..." — "....." — "..." — "Alright, so are you ready?" — "... sure." — "..." — "..." — "What is that supposed to mean?" — "What do you mean?" — "..." — "..." — "You just don't sound excited about it." — "Of course I'm excited, I don't know what you're talking about. Come on, let's go." — "No, stop" — "Ouch, don't fucking shove me" — "..." — "..." — "You know that it's not about what you, it's about how I feel." — "I know, I know, I know." — "You're clearly not excited about it." — "I already told you I am fucking excited." — "Of course you are." — "....." — "..." — "I don't know what else you want me to do. Shove my fingers into my mouth and stretch it wide, like this, see? Smiling, happy. Excited." — "Sure. Sure. Whatever." — "....." — "....." — "Okay. Just please go softer than last week." — ".....", — "Hey, stop. I said please go softer than last week." — "....." — "You're not listening, fucking stop" — "Don't fucking shove me" — "I'm leaving" — "And I'm not paying" — "You asshole" — "You liar" — "You said you would pay me" — "So you're just in it for the money" — "Yes you old ass" — "No, none of it" — "You said you would pay me" — "I said you're not getting anything" — "Fucking pay me" — "No" — "Okay I don't want any of it anyway" — "Ha, you liar" — "I'm leaving." — "....." — "....." — "Wait, no, come back." — "....." — "Come back." — "....." — "..." — "No" —

3 :: Revised Text #3 — Insight

Insight is one of my most favorite craft concepts. I have already talked about my motivations for understanding and incorporating insight into narrative writing in the introduction: I want writing which makes us feel the truth of something, even if it is a partial, subjective truth.

In this text, I wanted to explore the artificial zeal of corporate and cinematic happiness. In the original, progressively more absurd reifications of our cultural pillars of feeling (successful proposals, little children shouting playfully, Christmas, nostalgia for wartime, reconciled tragedy, Santa, babies). Then, one of the figures collapses from a stroke; and at this point it is explicitly revealed that this was all a carefully orchestrated production set, that ‘none of it was real’, and that another actor is put in place of the fallen one.

In retrospect, this is another demonstration of my habit of carefully building up a world, then to drop it all in hopes of some sort of profundity. But I think it also does a particular disservice to the insight of the piece. The reader doesn’t need to be told that it was an act all along: if I’ve weaved insight well enough, it will be clear to the reader – even though it was never said (‘saying without saying’). What is more chilling than if an actor’s collapse disrupts the illusion is if the illusion stays intact, how it incorporates subversion and deviation trivially — and this is indeed the truth of hegemonic cultural structures. In my revision, I try to build a more complex portrait of a system in which deviations are reoriented and assimilated into a body of perpetual pleasure, nostalgia, and happiness. I use [—] extensively to indicate censoring, blocking, overwriting. I had fun playing with this throughout.

Original

Squirrels rush through the green grass. Little droplets of dew speckle the leaves, but not too much -- golden dogs laugh and prance, and their owners share tall glasses of sophisticated alcoholic drink and chat amiably. An adorable little girl hits the pinata on the first try. Candy spills out, and ecstatic children rush to grab them, but none of them fight, and each comes away with exactly eight delicious pieces. Under the old Japanese cherry blossom, a beautiful man proposes to an even more beautiful

woman, and she beams. The two embrace, to the smiles and applause of the audience. The ring glistens under the gold of the sun. A young boy and girl, both teenagers, smile at each other. They know that they'll be like this in a few years. By the playground, a woman hugs her husband and tells him that their first baby will be a beautiful little girl. He cries and kisses her. An old woman with elderly white hair tied into a neat bun watches the excited warbles and shouts of small children riding a slide for the first time. She reminisces about her husband, who fought in all the wars, to her grandson, who eagerly listens to all her stories, every time she tells them. It begins to snow, and the little children whoop and build snowmen, each perfectly proportioned. The teenagers have a snowball fight, but the snow is fluffy enough such that no one gets hurt or wet. Santa's sled hovers over the air and presents wrapped in vivid holiday wrapping slowly fall to the ground. Little children rush over and find teddy bears, toy trains, and other Christmas paraphernalia. They jump up and down and run over to the fathers and mothers, who wink at each other and say yes Santa is sure great isn't he. A flock of storks drop babies from the sky, and desperate single women rush to catch them. Each of them beams when they see how fulfilled they will be with the remainder of their maternal lifetimes. The old woman coughs. Once, twice. Three times. Her grandson breaks his smile and looks at her, concerned. Four times. Five times. A hacking cough, lungs crippled. She collapses, her frail arms spasm, her leg jolts. Her head hits the floor, where it splinters apart into a gruesome crimson piece of modern art. --- The director shakes his head, stops the scene. Everyone returns to their original places. The stage hands move the old woman's body off the stage, and another old woman replaces her location. Let's try it again, the director says.

Revised

Small squirrels rush through the green grass. Small droplets of dew speckle the leaves. Golden dogs laugh and prance in the golden sunlight. An adorable little girl — round cheeks, a white toothy smile, culturally exotic — hits the burro-shaped pinata on the first try. Delicious candy gushes from the gaping wound in the side of the burro: twizzlers, cherry starburst, bright red Hershey's kisses. Ecstatic children rush to collect their share of the goods; small hands grasping against synthetic plastic wrap. Under the old Japanese cherry blossom, a beautiful man falls to one knee and proposes to an even more beautiful

woman; she brings her hands to her face, holds them there in a second of shock, then puts them down, beams, nods vigorously. The two embrace, to the smiles and applause of the audience. The ring glistens under the soft light of the sunset. A young boy and girl watch from a distance, smile softly at each other. He knows that he'll ask her in a few years; he knows she'll say yes; she knows she'll say yes. Sirens wail in [—] shoot him. By the colorful playground, a woman hugs her husband excitedly and whispers in his ear that their first baby will be a beautiful little girl. He cries and kisses her. A young man in tattered clothes runs from [—]. An old woman with elderly white hair tied into a neat bun watches small arms and legs run cheerfully along miniature bridges, slides, steps. Her eyes are tired; her face is worn; but she is resting – she is at peace with herself. She reminisces about her life to her grandson, who eagerly listens to all of her stories, every time she tells them. [—] spills on the street, pistols dig [—] dead. She reaches into her breast pocket and pulls out a tattered black-and-white image of a handsome young man in smart Navy attire. That was my husband, she tells her grandson in a slow, frail drawl. He fought in all the wars. All of them. It begins to snow; hexagonally symmetrical glacial structures in the miniature. The little children whoop and build snowmen, each perfectly proportioned. A muffled [—], shouts. The teenagers have a snowball fight, but the snow is fluffy enough such that no one gets hurt or wet. They all wear pastel-colored mitts, which were knitted by their grandmas by the warm fireplace. Santa's sled hovers over the air; he waves his arm; presents wrapped in vivid holiday wrapping slowly fall to the ground. Little children rush over and find teddy bears, toy trains, candy canes, [—]guns. They jump up and down and run over to the fathers and mothers, who wink at each other and say yes Santa is sure great isn't he with the smirk of social superiors who know something you don't. A flock of storks drop babies from the sky in small parachutes, and desperate single women rush to catch them. Children screaming. Children screaming. Children screaming. Children screaming. [—] ... Each of the women beams when they see how fulfilled they will be with the remainder of their maternal lifetimes. The small children are doted, breastfed, cared for; the soft hums of mothers reciting pieces from the children's lullaby canon ring through the Christmas evening. A large locomotive dressed in dark gray and red paint leading a line of thin smoke several miles long slows to a stop in front of the station. The doors open; out stumble

dozens of men with sooty faces dressed in army tactical gear who have just come back from some war in some foreign land over some noble cause; their soon to be wives rush towards them in somber skirts and dresses; pale faces kiss under the snow. Blood. War. Clothes stained in [—] The oil tycoon who lives in the mansion on the peak of the distant mountain has come to celebrate Christmas for the first time: he walks across the small town, providing well-funded health and education subsidies for small chimney sweepers with Anglo-Saxon names and small soot caps. He is thanked excessively for his generosity, his charity. In the snow-covered town square, bodies gesture, speak, dance, sing, play, perform, cup hot chocolate in gloved hands. And no one saw when the sun fell into the ground and all the Earth lit on fire [—] ... and not a soul was stirring, not even a mouse.

4 :: Final Workshop

The pieces I have worked on throughout the course have often been experimental and surrealist. Certainly, some of these elements show in the final workshop, but I think this piece is particularly personal to me. It's a piece on queer desire, but more: on cycles of repression and flourishing, on the hyperreality of the literary, on the emptiness of full spaces. Narratives of desire, but especially queer desire, often follow a normative redirection towards innocence: the innocence of love, even if misguided, tragic, banished, failed. But queer desire especially is never so innocent, never so easily inscribed into a general graph of relationality. In this piece, I wanted to play with subverting not only the innocence but also the dirtiness of queer desire, and to make complexity a feeling in and of itself (the univocal feeling of complexity). The desire is unreliable, shaky, always teetering on collapse; when it looks stable, or even beautiful, it has already collapsed; the desire is played with in the lecture hall, across the pages of Dostoyevsky, under softly pink orchards. What I want most for a reader is to feel the feeling of complexity: to feel that we have gained something by losing it, of people and desire held taut in contingent space.

The largest change I have made is the conclusion to the story. In my first draft, I had used my (now well-established) pattern of slowly building up a complex structure, then dropping it at the end and watching the shards scatter. In the second revision, I tried to build up more of the tension throughout and ended it on a self-reflective note; but this was also a little bit too explicit. In this third revision, I've taken the suggestion to write a scene in which the narrator is by themselves. It's a revisiting of many important symbols introduced and reiterated throughout the story, and certainly a softer ending which I hope departs a melancholy feeling without being as explicit as in the second revision. Moreover, I write it from the third person to introduce a minimal ambiguity between 'he' as 'I' and 'he' as 'he'. The conclusion plays with the significance of the closet space both in queer culture as well as in *Crime and Punishment* (in the Pevear & Volohnsky translation, Raskolnikov's opening action is walking out of the closet); and it itself is intended to give a certain *deja vu* of *C&P*'s texture.

Revised

absolute recoil

Dark eyes – sharp, private. I saw them clearly, up-front – moments after I had looked at him for the first time he had looked right back, and I immediately peer at the wall behind him and pretend to wonder why it was painted in such a ghastly metallic industrial shade what a ghastly palette how bizarre that is. After a few seconds, I tentatively look at him again. He is already looking at me. I look back at the drab wall, then back at him again. He is still looking; eyes glinting in the pale moonlight. *Are you?* I ask. *Yes*, he responds. *Yes, I am*. I smile, even though I know he won't see it, and even though I didn't ask anything, and even though he said absolutely nothing at all the entire time.

Reading every word, scanning the answers for errors. Pencil gripped tightly in well-worn fingers. Clearly a bright mind. Sure, he says, I can do it. The instructor nods, appreciative. He walks to the front of the classroom, picks up the chalk. Fills in the expectant blank spaces on the blackboard with expressions in propositional logic. His carefully combed brown hair shakes imperceptibly as he writes out his seven-step proof in stubborn chalk. The answers are all correct, even though the instructor is pointing at the third step with furrowed eyebrows and he is slowly erasing his answer.

The cold eternity of the photograph. I pretend I have loose wrists like one of those педикс and hold my phone at outlandish angles: a forty-five degree rotation left, then one hundred seventy two upwards, then a three hundred nine swivel about the perpendicular radial axis. After class I scan through the camera roll and find the best images. I'll practice looking into his eyes, and they'll practice looking into mine. How deep they go, deeper than the dark blue depths of the churning ocean, even though the surface of the Earth is as flat as paper.

No, Marx was most certainly an idealist, a utopian. Fiery eloquence drenches dense passion. Really, I say. I look over at his paper and scribble down his solution to problem seven. Even with the materialist analytical method and all. Yes, he insists. The dialectic of history will never end, never resolve, it keeps on churning, always, forever. He looks directly at me, into me. His concerned eyebrows are raised,

bent, wrinkled; a shaded overtone in blur; unbent, bent again, animated. He was right, of course.

Utopia is a tautological falsehood. Marx was an idealist.

Legs crossed, looking blankly forward. Many empty seats. I walked to the seat one space away from him. Not too close – to start with, anyway. Can I sit here, I said. No. A pause, maybe too long, too long to have any claim at social innocence. What to do now. No, you can sit here, he says. I sit down. A funny joke, although I am not sure if he is one for comedy. Maybe that is the most divine comedy of all. I try to smile, but he's not looking.

Scrolling through lines of well-spaced black-and-white serif text. Right leg crossed over the left, erudite pupils tracing left to right, down, left to right, down, pause, left to right, down. I ask him if it is The Wall Street Journal. He scoffs, maybe as a joke. No, I don't want to read about stocks and bourgeois financial scandals. I look closer. It is The Washington Post. I ask him if it is The Washington Post. Yes, he says. He begins reading a new article about international rhetorical backlash against the treatment of Uyghurs by the Chinese government and shakes his head the entire time. His carefully combed brown hair shivers, shakes.

The instructor calls on students down the row in an effort to compensate for sparse participation in a poorly attended lecture hall. We think we are next to be put on the spot but he begins with the student in the next row. Yes, he whispers, drawing out the s, and pumps his fist. We smile.

His eyes trace the path of the arcing shuttlecock at the momentary pinnacle of its parabolic path. He raises the racket and swings; the radiance of a beautiful athlete. It hits the side of the wiry metal frame and falls dismally to the ground. He hangs his neck in faux shame, flashes me a nervous smile, then bends down to pick up the fallen shuttlecock. I see the sweat drawing dark lines between his ass. He wears tight pants, almost always. They look good, always. He returns every serve for the next two hours, even though he misses some. He tells me when we're returning the rackets that he's never played badminton before. Impressive.

The blistering mental calculations of an erudite academic. The pride flows out of his eyes in great bursts of thought. He says he could win the Jeopardy College Championship but since participants can only participate in Jeopardy once their entire life he is waiting until he can go on and win Jeopardy for real. The thirty sixth president, I ask. No one memorizes presidents. He begins counting backwards. Reagan is fortieth, then Carter thirty ninth, Ford thirty eighth, Nixon thirty seventh, Kennedy thirty sixth. Kennedy, he says. What is Kennedy, I correct him. He smiles. What is Kennedy, he repeats.

Dostoyevsky is an incredible writer, he says. Crime and Punishment is my favorite book. The well-read eyes of a worldly reader, a worldly mind. I like Crime and Punishment, I say. In particular, I appreciate Dostoyevsky's deeply felt psychological portrait of troubled guilt. A pause. Too long. Too long to have any claim at social innocence. Well, that's really all there is to it, he replies. Of course. That was a stupid thing to say. I ask him later what he thinks of The Brothers Karamazov. It is definitely not as good as Crime and Punishment, he says. Yes, you are right, I agree, even though I have not read either.

He asks me for the answers to problem seven on the homework. It has twenty seven banal sub-questions, all are non-trivial permutations of each other. I send them to him. Thanks, he says. Did you actually work them all out. I confess that I held the instructor at gunpoint until they provided me with the answers. He tells me he knows what he is doing on the midterm now. I might have to tell the police and then the instructor will fail him on the exam, I say. He responds with a logical proof. Proof: He has a gun (premise I). He shoots the instructor (premise II). By premises I and II, the instructor is dead and cannot fail him on the exam. Done. I smile for a long time. I have trouble thinking of a wittier reply.

Eyes beaming, an accomplished student. A one followed by two zeros in the blood of a pen. He looks at the midterm exam cover to cover, then places it on his desk. He looks over at mine. It has the same marking. He smiles at me, and our hands touch in the air, just for a little bit.

Kerosene burns slowly, at low temperature. Simmers in serrated edges, along shivering razors. I hate self-deprecation, he says. You try to neutralize your insecurity by proclaiming it out in the open in fear that someone else will do so before you. I'm so stupid, the student five sets next to him exclaims, a little too loudly, I'm bad at prepositional logic. He shakes his head. Once, twice. Shivers, shaking.

Eyes uneasy. We talk about the general epistemic inadequacy of computer science students in reasoning seriously about the ethical and sociopolitical involvement of their work over pizza. We agree, mostly. He thinks that the ethical relationship is at the core of a philosophical system. I disagree. Ethics is downstream of epistemology and metaphysics. He disagrees. The trolley problem is a caricature of ethics. We both agree on that. I ask him if he has read any Ayn Rand or structuralist theory. He doesn't like Rand and doesn't know what structuralism is. The sky darkens. We agree to stop for now. I walk with him to his dorm because I feel awkward leaving him until I have to. I ask him why he jaywalks, why he flaunts the law, such flatulence. It is a joke, maybe. He tells me in exasperation, possibly faux, that firstly he's pretty sure that's not how you're supposed to use the word flatulence and secondly that I clearly have never been around here and that everyone does it, that is jaywalk, and that this is again principally an ethical question. I disagree. Jaywalking is an ontological determination of bodies and places. He says that moral principle, even if unconscious, prefigures any metaphysical dimension of jaywalking. I disagree. We are silent for many seconds.

Alright, my dorm is around here. Tense eyes strung taut over subtle agitation. I am curious, even though it is probably not the time to be curious. Which building it I ask. He answers by nodding his head vaguely in all directions – a forty-five degree rotation left, then one hundred seventy two upwards, then a three hundred nine swivel. I learn nothing, besides that he clearly does not want to be there. He stands there, waiting. I stand still for a few more seconds. He's looking at me, but not at me. Maybe at the wall. I say alright see you in a bit and he nods again, in some direction. When I walk to the end of the street I turn around and he happens to look back at the same time, and we look through each other at walls far and distant before the sky collapses upon us.

How did the final exam go. He responds good how about yours. I say good too but that seems a bit dry so I add that I wish the proof problems were more difficult so the exam would have been more interesting to take. He doesn't respond for weeks, months. I don't push him. I think of his agitated eyes, the serrated edge.

When I get my final exam back with one followed by two zeros in the blood of a pen scrawled across the front cover, he is not there. His face blurs in and out of the ink. Lost potential seeps from ambitious red. But it is gone now, blank, no response, time quivers.

He runs excitedly to me through the golden fields of the midlands, a golden boy in a golden world: his grandmother passed and that much has been on his mind, he has been grieving, he tells me. I am happy it was his grandmother and not me. But I don't tell him that. He invites me to his castle, a beautiful antique of kings who never knew time would outrun them. We talk all night about the metaphysics of death. The moon kisses the swaying swathes of idyllic grass. He cries. His grandmother was close to him. I hug him. He laughs, lies his head on my shoulder, falls asleep. We wake up in the morning in the dungeon and make love, then visit the grave together afterwards.

His phone broke down, he says. Dropped in the ocean, sunk into the dark blue depths. He wasn't able to talk to me for all these months. I understand. We walk down the stairs, away from the fire, into the flooded basement. Hand on his shoulder, we wade into the depths of the ocean, and we burn forever before we drown.

I finally confess to him that after all these months I had never read Crime and Punishment, or The Brothers Karamazov. He says that he hasn't read them either, that he just wanted to talk with me this whole time, and I say what do you know that was what I was doing too. I sympathize with Raskolnikov though, I tell him. He agrees. He says Raskonikov broods like I do. I tell him no, it's the other way around. We read The Idiot together under the crickets while the stars chirp until the sun goes down at the beginning of July during an extremely hot spell towards evening a young man left the closet...

He tells me he had an emergency operation after tragically slipping on the waterlogged stairs outside of the chemistry building and crashing into a needle disposal bin. The syringes mutilated his leg, he says. The doctors tell me there will be permanent scarring, and that the synthesized compounds smeared across the sharp tips are known to react cancerously to organic material so they will need to keep him heavily medicated and monitored for a while. I visit him in the hospital. I hear from his family that he gets much better after my visit. When he comes back after four days, his leg is beautiful, healthy, fresh; fits well into his tight pants, like I remember. We marry under the three moons of the celestial spring, under a softly pink orchard.

He tells me he was robbed by a masked thief who took not only his phone and his wallet but also his shirt, pants, and shoes at gunpoint, and that this happened five more times throughout the week, at the same spot too, and that he had to keep on buying new clothing because it kept on getting stolen. I should rob you too, I say, just to see what is under there. I squeeze his leg. He laughs. We drive to the park to pick him up from the retirement home, even though he's fairly young. I don't tell him that I have an accumulating pile of tight-fitting sweat-stained pants and badminton rackets in my closet.

He tells me that he jumped off of the roof of the chemistry building. That must have been hard, I say. Why did you do it. He says he couldn't deal with being a schwuchtel, a dirty schwuchtel. Педик, 同性恋. I said ich bin auch ein Schwuchtel, я тоже пежик, and we jumped off together and fell through the flooded flattened earth until we hit the flames. Педик, педик, педик, педик, педик, педик, педик – мы педики.

He tells me that he was walking home from the exam when he was suddenly attacked by a large mob of geese. They surround him and viciously eat away at his beautiful face, his beautiful body. The grass stains red; flesh and organs strewn across the bloodied ground. Their bills, hard as bone, painted burgundy, dig deep into his eye socket; decapitate both eyes. Animal saliva coalesces and foams in place of eyes. He was blind for a long time, he says, until they were retrieved at the bottom of the lake and put back by the judge. An unfortunate encounter, I note. But he is still as beautiful as when I last saw him, even though I know he can't see me clearly anymore.

He tells me in an email from his family that he was killed in a car crash after driving home from the exam. I am devastated. I keel over in the middle of the lecture hall. My students are concerned. I tell them that my husband has just told me that he has died in a car crash. Gasps, hands covering mouths. One of the students, an excellent one who always sits in the middle of the second row, rises and comforts me. I embrace him back. His brown hair smells like aerosol. His hands leave chalk marks on the back of my dinner jacket. When I finally look at his eyes, they gleam with a familiar erudite sheen.

He tells me he is with another man. He is tall, handsome, athletic. I walk to the restrooms and look at the ghastly metallic industrial shade on the walls of the stalls for hours.

He tells me he is with another woman. She is tall, handsome, athletic. I smile. I am happy for him. He is already looking at me again, but I walk away before she also sees me.

He tells me he had been imprisoned for holding his chemistry professor at gunpoint for the solutions to the final. I laugh. We break into the professor's office at three in the morning and make love all over their books and papers. In the morning we hold an anthropology professor at gunpoint for solutions to the final, even though we aren't in their class and there's no exam and we aren't even in college yet.

He tells me he is going to order a small black coffee. I grimace. But this is a joke. He gets it, he laughs, pokes me. He uses half a packet of sugar. I ask for coffee without milk. The barista says they do not have any milk left, it will have to be coffee without sugar. I say that is fine too. We find a small table by the window. I thought we got really close a while ago, I finally say. He nods. The rain falls damply against the concrete outside. A houseless man slowly readjusts the thin cover over his head, his bundled body packed into a small covered rectangle along the sidewalk. Two one-dollar bills flutter off his cold body. Cold eyes trace the parabolic trajectory, the dance of the wind. I look back at his black coffee, then back at those familiar eyes. I liked you a lot, I finally say. He does not say anything. His eyes look down into the dark mirror. The surface shakes imperceptibly, slanting. Did you, I ask. Yes, he replies. I smile. Yes, he repeats. I smile, yes, yes. *Yes*. Yes, he says. *Yes*, I whisper, yes. Yes, he says, I can do it. He

walks to the front of the classroom, picks up the chalk. The instructor nods. All of his answers are wrong, even though he doesn't admit it. I fall through the dark mirror, into the cold flames. *No*.

He tells me he loves Crime and Punishment but this is his first time reading The Brothers Karamazov. It was in the laundry room. I saw a boy with his ass perched on the washers reading The Brothers Karamazov; eyes – intent, careful, intelligent. Reading every word, scanning the answers for errors. I told him I think Dostoyevsky is a brilliant writer, that my wife's father has some sort of distant familial relationship with him, that I once loved someone who loved Dostoyevsky, that I suppose Dostoyevsky is my grand-lover. He beams, gives me a copy of The Idiot to read. I tell him that he may just like Alyosha's genuine kindness more than Rodion's murderous generosity. He tells me that to be honest he finds Rand dirty but appealing, that she offers a strong materialist deconstruction of structuralist ethics. I disagree, but his load finishes before we can talk more. When he is leaving, I see residual washer fluid drawing dark lines between his ass, I do not have time to tell him that he left a pair of pants in the dryer. I take them and store them in my closet, for safekeeping. I will give them back when I see him again, even though I know I will never see him again.

He tells me, write about me on your Russian midterm. I beam. Of course, *милая*. Конечно, конечно, сейчас. We are asked to free-write about our family. I write about him, because he is my family, он мой парень, но, мой муж, я женат; нет, я замужем; я замужем и я тоже мужчина; ах, ах; он красивый, handsome, симпатичный; мой лучший друг в жизни, all of it; очень умный, brilliant, intelligent; мой возлюбленный; я гомосексуал, я педик, педик, педик, педик, педик, педик, я замужем и я тоже мужчина я не знаю, является ли он тоже педиком - нет, нет, он тоже педик педик педик, мой педик, мой любимый педик; только на русском языке, only in Russian, только на русском языке. When I get the exam back, I see a one followed by two zeros scrawled in the blood of a pen. He smiles at me, and our hands touch in the air, just for a long time.

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The wintry wind whistles past the window; the sleet rains hard onto the slick street outside. An unread translation of *The Brothers Karamazov* lies on the shelf, underneath *Das Kapital* and a fresh print of *The Idiot*. The closet is bare; sparsely populated with old shirts, rusted wire hangers. It's not used much anymore. A dusty copy of *The Washington Post* from several months ago occupies a lonely place on the desk, next to a broken shuttlecock and aerosol hairspray. Neither has been used for a long time. Red-inked paper lies crumpled in the wastepin.

He's holding an unreturned copy of *Crime and Punishment*. He flips through the pages; through the murder and the tense pursuit; the illness, the delirium; the brooding, the quiet hostility. Through the dark charity, the jaded generosity; love, faith, the confession; the beginning of a redemption cut short. He reads the final words several times: "He did not even know that a new life would not be given him for nothing, that it still had to be dearly bought, to be paid for with a great future deed..."

He places the broken book in the corner of the closet, then walks out.

How often the imagination wanders where the ghosts of dreams dance, in the blank spaces of broken books' last pages.