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Madness in Literature

Ms. Clark

*Little Essay*

Escape

When I awoke, my vision was engulfed with an experience that I can only describe as numbing whiteness. I find that waking up usually provokes feelings of confusion even in regular circumstances, as in after a night’s rest in the bed that I usually sleep in. However, these circumstances edged out of the circle of normalcy; I was specially and temporally disoriented in that I could neither place myself on a map nor on a calendar. I was surrounded by the snow, the slate-gray sky, and the impending soundlessness of my unknown setting. As I glanced across the horizon without any indication of the time, the thought occurred to me that - this here, right now - was what was happening. The time was simply now.

Now you see, one may think that the present moment feels special: unique and separate from all other moments, this is our perceived notion of now. It feels real to us. Although we may believe that we remember the past or that we anticipate the future, we have this rather limiting conception that we live in the present moment. Of course, the moment during which you read that sentence is no longer happening. As of now, the memory of that moment is perpetually and eternally contained within the fading written symbols used to describe it.

In our limited perspective, it feels as though time flows, in the sense that the present is constantly updating itself. We have a deep fixed conception that the future is open until it becomes present and that the past is fixed and inalerarble. As future flows to present, and present to past, this structure of fixed past, immediate present and open future gets carried forward in time. Really though, what’s to say that the future is just as fixed as the past, just as the present is. As you can see, dear reader, by becoming temporally agnostic (which is to say that time is far too complicated a concept to be considered an important factor in my experience), I was able to rid myself of worrying about what a clock might read if I were to come across one.

As my eyes lazily floated along the contours of the horizon, ground and sky almost seemed to become one. Rising slowly from the ground, I stood so that I might gain some perspective on the nature of this place. There appeared to be some kind of path that began ten meters from where I stood. My left food drew forward, and my right foot followed to begin a sort-of arbitrary stumble away from the imposing white blotches of sky that lurked above me. I descended to a place where the trail stopped, and two more started. Instinctively, I glided into the heavily wooded path with ease. The trees slid passed me as I advanced further through the snow.

Amidst the dark was light, and in the light was dark. Streaks of light shown through the darkened foliage and haphazardly projected slivers of brightness on the forest floor. The forest radiated quiet. It was the kind of quiet further muffled by the environment to create further quiet, which created a deafening silence: a din of solitude. I was seated in a kind-of clearing, where the foliage parted to reveal a less dense area – not exactly a clearing — but a kind of path. But it wasn’t exactly a path either; however, what are paths if not simply hypothetical possibilities of travel? Two paths appeared before me, split off-center. Roads that you’d find in a city are split near-perfectly, which is why the lack of precision of the split between these two paths took me aback. Unlike the city roads, the paths had not been designed, planned, and painstakingly calculated. The longer the thought resonated with me, the more perfect this path seemed; it wasn’t trying to be perfect, it had given up on that dream. The road was measured, plotted, paved, re-paved, perfected and attempted perfection but could never reach it. This path, however, was perfect in its imperfection. This path was stylistically and aesthetically more pleasing because of its obvious imbalance.

The right-hand path was the smaller of the two; it was evident the lack of use that this path received, which further drew me to it. Discovering the secret essence of the place, or as the French say - découvrir le pot aux roses - pulled me toward this path. It was the allure of the unknown that caused my legs to move involuntarily, as though electricity were shooting through them.

No one is afraid of the dark, just what might be lurking in it. Just as no one is afraid of tall heights, only of what might happen if they were to slip off the edge. People are inherently afraid of the unknown – we imagine murderers in our kitchens when we hear noises at night, and we run upstairs after quickly turning off the basement lights. This fear is what draws me: what we know is boring. I do not have the temerity to say I would investigate every scratch and scuff that I hear at night, but - and although I am not much of a thinker - it does certainly cause me to think. It is for this reason I found myself taking the less used path in the thick woods near midnight.

Near the side of the path was an old, wooden chessboard. What seems like a stark contrast of the natural affect of the environment pragmatically blended seamlessly because of the chessboard’s agrestal feeling. The small pieces were all accounted for, and surprisingly organized on the board, save the one white pawn. This pawn alone caused me to stop and examine the board further. The lack of the pawn made the board feel annoyingly incomplete, and it bothered me for a reason I couldn’t determine. I looked around the ratherish moonlight illuminated earth, but to no avail. The pawn would remain missing and while it evaded my physical embrace, it invaded my thoughts for a surprising duration and intensity. It was just a pawn.

I continued my promènade along the path not quite adjacent to the place in which I sat: the path less traveled, the dark and unknown path yet to be plotted or discovered. I walked, not because I had the intention to get somewhere, but because I wanted to see what was on the other side. If one were to walk down the streets of Boston as I walked, they would see a completely different city. When people walk around cities, they’re thinking about various things: they’re not paying attention; they’re lost in thought about this and that. They walk with purpose, these people, they walk in lines as a connection from the first point to the last, occasionally with various points inserted intermittently, but not changing the fixed, defined nature of the journey. Given the command, most would find it more difficult than it would initially seem to just walk. People need direction and a place to start; it’s a pleasing thought to have utter and complete freedom without responsibility or defined activity.

I looked up, and I was no longer in wilderness. Snow obscured much of the landscape, but I ascertained that I was in some kind of queue. The man in front of me took one step forward, and then he stopped. I did the same. I looked down to notice that a little boy had grabbed my hand. He did not seem to notice me because his stare appeared to be locked straight forward, staring at something in front of us.

“Hey, kid.” I bent down so that my eyes were at the same level as his, but he did not break his gaze. His cheeks were red-white from the whip of the wind, which made his face appear hardened and callous, as though it had aged thirty years more than he had. His eyes were fixed on something far in the distance, but I couldn’t be sure in what in particular he was interested.

We drew closer to the rumble of machinery, his small hand in mine. As we advanced, the low mechanical hum built to a crescendo and it seemed no longer to originate in the external workings of the structure that we stood under. The low buzzing now seemed to come from my eardrums and deep within my chest so that it reverberated thorough my body. The boy paid no mind to the evidence of my discomfort; in fact, he did not seem to notice that anything was out of the ordinary.

I stepped up to a red line etched in the ground; dragging the child next to me, I stood listening to the whirr and pop of the machinery hidden in shadows and behind smoothed surfaces. I glanced back at the boy to see if his behavior could offer me any clues, but he was standing with the same fixed albeit not uncomfortable expression. It was the kind of face with a certain forced contentedness that suggested he was comfortable in his environment. I stood at the line uncomfortably, wishing I could appear as comfortable as my unnamed partner.

A cold padded surface that appeared to be some kind of bench slid behind my knees, causing them to gently buckle and deposit me onto it. The boy was still to my left as he had been with his smug and comfortable expression still plastered across his lips. The chair appeared to be attached to a cable, to which other chairs were also fixed. The cable fed through a series of towers that lead up the mountain into the clouds.

As we ascended, I noticed that there was merely air for hundreds of meters, and then ground. The earth appeared so massive to me, I could feel it’s pull on me increasing as the bench brought me farther from it. The boy stared ahead. I struggled to remain upright, seated on this bench that seemed to ascend to – did it have an end? Of course it had an end; everything that has a beginning also has an end. But what if it didn’t?

The wire holding us from the earth stopped moving, and so did the bench and the boy. But I continued moving forward without him. I was free, silently floating into the vast whiteness below.