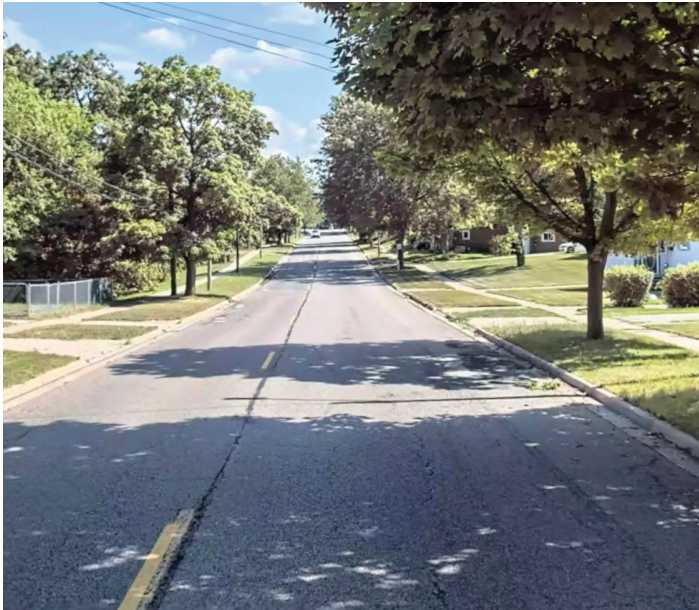


A Long Letter to Some Night Travelers

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1.
At one point, I learned how to breathe in the water, to stop coming up for air. This was a long time before I came to the argument factory. At that time, I fell back into a teeming mass of vegetal life whenever my knees gave out, only to re-emerge when the rhetorical situation called for a single being. Every now and again, there was a need for me to emerge from the swaying mass of breath and assure watchful eyes and ears that everything was going according to plan. Imagine my surprise when I encountered the same tactics on the first day of school. I guess I wrote this letter to tell the story of how I've been tip-toeing through the argument factory ever since the first day of school. As always, the betrayal was the most important lesson.

Now when I say tip-toeing through the argument factory, that is no exaggeration. I don't think you went to graduate school unless you have taken a previously unnecessary route. Maybe if somebody catches me sneaking they'll ask why and come to save me. Prolly not. It doesn't matter though, cause I was sent here, and I promised I wasn't comin' back without the missing puzzle pieces.

2.
You might ask who sent me. Well, I would remind you that those who my work loves, it cannot name. There will be some allusions here and there, maybe an argot or a jargon that the attuned ear can capture, but no names. Someone is always listening around the corner, someone with somebody else's ear, so no names. My arrival was the furthest thing from an occasion, because my friends know I'm always around in one way or another. In me and you time, I never left at all.

If you know how the sun hits the island you know what it means to plea down, you know what it means to hold your daughter up and whisper that grandma is the dragonfly crossing the sun. That doesn't square too well with mandatory 5 to 7, not at all. Who will hold the babies up to the sun when the fathers live locked inside the gray house? When I add "Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan" to a future syllabus, I add a note that I'm no expert on it, I'm just accountable to it. I'm accountable to my friends at The Madison, The Mermaid, The Twin Oaks, hell I'm accountable to friends all over the place. They sent me here.

3.
So, you know, my trip to The Madison left me with a decision to make. Some people make you feel like you either do what they want or you demonstrate that you only care about yourself after all. These are the people who, if you're not careful, will have you living inside their accusations. Other people, they would never think to ask you for a thing, they just buy

you Wendy's. Or rather, if they call on you, it must be for real. I came from a world where nobody counts favors, we just dance too much, roast too much, go on smoke breaks too much, clock each other in and out too much, you know we just love too much. That kinda thing. But, you know, eventually we sent me here. I'm not used to being all alone like this. Maybe at night, or at home, but not in my day to day.

I didn't know a damn thing about tip-toeing through the factory before I got here either. We used to be a procession through the hotel, one set of vocal chords singing "do-doo-doo-doo" the other bellowing "percocet, molly percocet, ain't no way, ain't no fuckin way", a third interlocutor throwing single dollar bills in our wake. We used to dwell, set up shop, you know sink into the dining hall and the top floor of the parking garage, wrap both hands around the sun cause we had already been on shift for an hour by the time she clocked in. You know, wrap both hands around the sun and let her know it's gonna be alright cause we will be out front soaking up her rays all day, she gonna have an audience all day. Since I got here, it's all professional freedom fighters and the freedom fighter professionals gotta take the elevator to the 8th floor and the stairs the rest of the way. Otherwise there's no telling what the next meeting will be about.

Since I quit drinking and smoking and whatnot I sleep better. I have dreams for the first time since I was a kid. My favorite dream is a dream with Jasper. I wake up and picture him going to sleep across the ocean where he lives now, I imagine he will clock in for the dream as I lumber to the coffee pot. It's my favorite dream.

4.

In my dream, Jasper and I are in an old Volkswagen Cabriolet convertible. I am smoking again, but it's ok because we are some night travelers. The rag top on the Cabriolet don't like to come back up when you take it down but you know, it's just exactly the right temperature tonight. That magic degree beyond the continuum of any thermometer,

where we can put the top back on the old Volkswagen Cabriolet and be comfortable with our shirt jackets on. You know, that temperature where you can still smell a lil bit of cold in the air but you can tell the world is turning back on. We are headed to the South Side.

The South Side isn't on a map the same way that our perfect shirt jacket top back temperature isn't Celsius. I don't live there when I'm tip-toeing through the argument factory but me and Jasper can still get there in my dream. To get to the South Side, you stop by Uncle Mo and get some ginger beers, maybe some American Spirits too, just for tonight. Then you take a left past the park, go down past Hiawatha Towers, the old heads are outside playing cards and they always wave back so you gotta wave at em. If not, they might think you're sick or somethin, that you're headed on a dastardly mission.

So we follow that route, ride past the vape store and the combination plasma donation center, and go under the viaduct, praying not to hit a pothole. We are listening to Kate Bush. After a while we look down to the left and see the South Side sprawling at the bottom of the hill all the way to the rusty green horizon. Now it's time for the final phase, a left turn followed by taking the old Volkswagen Cabriolet out of gear and making a deal with God the whole day down the hill. I take a drag on the way to the South Side and hope it doesn't rain tonight cause I don't too much feel like messin' with the rag top. We slide right into the perfect parking spot and hop out, all shirt jackets and heavy boots. You know we had to!

They are playing Ras G in the party. Me and Jasper do a round of handshakes, we find The Iambic Pentameter Man holding court by the fire in the back. He is explaining, ten syllables at a time, how the problem of evil presumes such a degree of subjectivity that it undoes itself. Silas is here, he reminds us that nobody owns this block or the block over or the rusty green horizon, so we might as well keep shouting the names of everyone we love. I shout names, and before I run out breath I wake up. Not on the South Side, not at all. I

wake up in the North End, which is pretty far from the South Side but pretty close to the argument factory. Close enough that I can get there on the toy train.

5.

So you know I'm on the toy train all shirt jacket and heavy boots. Jasper is across the ocean and I imagine he is headed to bed, that he will clock in for the dream and somewhere out there in me and you time we will be back on the South Side with Silas and The Iambic Pentameter Man. The news is all kid cages and other such horrors, I change my headphones to Ras G again. Sinking into the bass I almost miss my toy train stop. I would go straight to the basement but I gotta tip-toe to the computer room and grab a piece of paper to take attendance. Generally speaking this is not my practice, but I keep it cool with the academic advisor over at the cohort program so it's not too much of a problem. I get to the basement with a couple minutes to spare and set up the projector. Soon it will be time for 15 minutes of in-class writing about American Artist's "Black Goopy Universe".

I don't grade the in class writing, but I do read it. I tell the students every week that reading their in-class writing makes my whole week fall into place. They act like they don't believe me, which is ok. I intend the in class writing as a calm tunnel from the noise outside into whatever we might wanna do in the class today, something interesting. I'm not convinced that anything resembling what we might wanna do in the basement today could be truthfully represented in a scholarly journal. If anything, that journal article just gonna be a 15 page long promise that everything is going according to plan. If I make enough of a case that all is going according to plan, maybe we can do something interesting. Some writing maybe.

We do a lot of twists and turns in the student writing, we think about sources, credibility, community, transformative and restorative justice, art, the art galleries on the Southwest Side they walk past every day but don't go in, the murals the

gallerists walk past, you know, all that. When it starts to get cold my friend with the gallery takes the students through the library on a tour of the art. They stand far back away from the art until I approach it and they follow me. Somewhere in there they come up with some analysis essays. Some final papers that are really collages, but I'll be back next year and we'll all still be in coalition searching for missing puzzle pieces that walk elders across the street.

It's almost time to go to the Gray House, just enough time to go get some late lunch early dinner kinda thing. While I'm tip-toeing through the factory I think about my morning in the basement, what I'm really here to do. I think in some ways it's similar to when I was at The Mermaid and I was mostly around to assure a wandering eye that everything is going according to plan. No nonsense here. Then we might get back to doing something interesting. I wonder about those who run through the halls of the argument factory screaming that they are against the argument factory, waiting for someone to stop them from running in the hall. It isn't the breaking of rules that I find confusing, rather the asking for permission. When they run past thru the halls screaming, I close the door and we get back to doing something interesting.

6.

I'm half asleep on the way to the Gray House. I never drive because my car is old, my friend always drives. On arrival I take my phone, wallet, keys, and change out. Entering the building, I only carry a pen, my driver's license, and a notebook. I don't need to get a coffee on the way, cause I know the friends are brewing it already. They are in the back getting ready to do something interesting. Shoes off, pockets open, mouth open, socks off, wand, pat down, another wand, and we are past the fence. Now we are in the Gray House. My knees don't feel so strong when I'm in the Gray House. I get dizzy sometimes and get sudden flashes of heat through my chest. In the Gray House, there are invisible borders and gun towers. We walk the same exact path every time to the inch, I look ahead and never to the side and I do what I'm told.

Once we get to the back, it feels a little better, because for one there's coffee, and also we can close the door and get to doing something interesting. We pass poems back and forth all across the room and let the South Side's rusty green horizon grow all over the gray walls of the little room with long table in the back of the Gray House. In the back of the Gray House, we hang out and do something interesting. We do so in the basement too, and in my dreams. It's really hard to do something interesting in the argument factory though, I don't know that it's possible. I am beginning to get the sense that my main objective in the argument factory is to make my list of accomplishments as long as I can so that I can shut the door when we wanna do something interesting.

7.

This has been a long letter. I told you about Jasper and friends I can't name and the South Side and ginger beers from Uncle Mo and the Gray House and the basement, and I told you how on the first day of school I got in trouble for asking how my research can love those it can't name. Really I told you how the safest place is a Volkswagen Cabriolet out of gear barreling down the hill into the rusty green horizon. Sometimes, my central objective is just to do assure the secret police everything is going according to plan so we can do something interesting. At other times I'm trying to find a way to walk Miss Gwen across the street to her car and plant the seeds of a South Side that grows all over and through and between the Gray House. I wanna build a colorful house out of all the missing puzzle pieces and we can listen to Ras G. I wanna hold everyone up to the sun and say that grandma is the dragonfly across the sun, and the sun will have an audience all day. I won't go back without the puzzle pieces.

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