

METRIC

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FRIDAY EVENING VISITS

THE WANDERER
ASHGROVE
WAITRESS

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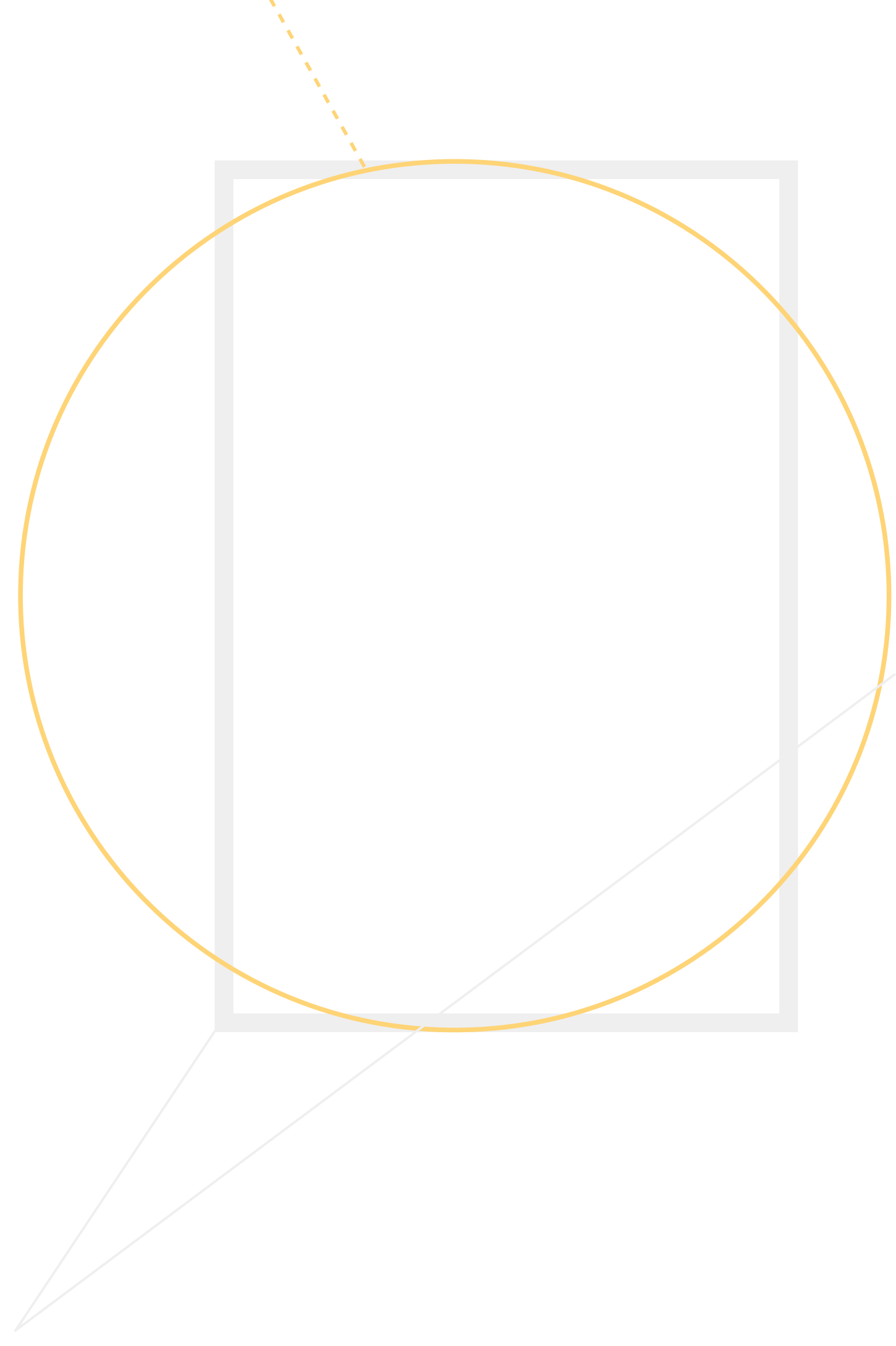
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PROSE

FIFTY SHEETS OF GREEN

Around me they converse and sip and laugh like hyenas. Coats draped over chairs like expensive tapestry. Jewellery glimmering as though I am subject to beautiful hallucinations. Glasses pressed eagerly to lips. Drunks make easier targets; already I have selected my prey.

I only take from the overly rich. In bars where the cost of a round would feed the poor for a week. If one can afford to pay over four sheets for a beer, one can afford to be robbed. No women though. They serve a different purpose.

I know how it began. The shoplifter in me born through hunger some time ago. The initiation of a new job in a bank. No food to fuel my performance. Eventually I stole a sandwich on a particularly grim day. Then another. Next thing I know it was occurring when I wasn't hungry. CDs and DVDs accumulating in vast piles in the new flat. Viddied once then forgotten. In some cases never freed from their casing.

Only corporations, no independent stores. My only rule. If they dodged tax they became subject to thievery. From then on it was what I could fit into my pocket or bag. But I found

it frustrating being restricted by mass rather than cost. It was also far too easy.

I admire the intimacy of change. The narrative behind it. Paper money broken and reduced to shrapnel. Coins gathering in corners like survivors of a tragedy. A harvest of copper and nickel.

A single coin standing alone after a particularly harsh payment. I find myself wondering what item or service claimed the banknote it was exchanged for. A note passed to a waiter in the final act of a romantic dinner. A child's pocket money gone in an explosion of sweets. A segment of a teenager's first wage. The death of a ten or twenty or – God forbid – fifty.

Sometimes the surfaces of bills offer a glimpse at their past. Figures scribbled across its surface. Water damage via rain or sweat. Traces of red dye suggesting an adventure.

I monitor my target for a while. Nestled amongst his herd. A lavish jacket hanging loose from his body. Pocket exposed like an abandoned fawn. Signature watch luring me forth like a homing beacon. I draw a finger lightly across the pocket as I make my first pass. The feeling is unmistak-

able. Wasting no time I step into him, almost connecting noses.

I recoil back apologising. Take in the trademark confusion/the inflicted state of disorientation. It is within these seconds one must act, and already I have. Knocking them with one arm, softly invading a pocket with the other. The man orientates himself. Tells me to fuck off and I oblige.

It was some time ago I felt shoplifting evolve into pickpocketing. The latter is more personal, requires a certain degree of skill, and made me feel more alive in a particularly apathetic time. Also, it feels as though I've actually earned my prize.

Retracting from society is easy when you completely oppose it. More so when you lack an objective. The excess of this side of the world depends on the poverty of the other – the words I keep telling myself. I am aware bitterness is a dangerous fuel to run on, yet I go on.

Nearby I hear the sound of someone fishing for change. The music produced as a result. A sweet tinkling akin to that of a piano or a brief arpeggio on guitar. Then the counting out of single coins. The unique notes as they crash together. For a mo-

ment I lose myself to it. My lids gently drawing over my eyes, allowing the realm of sound to take precedence. When it is over I again find myself standing in the bar.

Historically, coins were made from precious metals like gold and silver. Back then people would shave layers from them and use the clippings to make new coins. These days the edges of coins are milled – decorated with regular ribbed markings and engraved with words. Makes it easier to detect if the coin has had some of its weight shaved off.

The milling is where I imagine DNA accumulates. Vast amounts of consumers and workers contributing to the bacterial orgy with every transaction. Swelling until perhaps it reaches the right person. A collector decodes down the line. Disinfecting and placing it carefully between its brothers and sisters in a binder.

Or perhaps the coin is returned to a bank. The sterilization process that follows. Erasing what they can of its history and personality before returning it into circulation. Averted eyes as you silently accept your change.

Illegally acquired banknotes cannot be deposited into an account without great effort. Otherwise the process arouses suspicion. Storing money in a box under the bed conjures up the image of baseball cards. Like using red carpet as a door mat. Money should always be in circulation. Only through perpetual motion does it possess value.

There is a degree of chance involved in the game. Not just in getting caught, but also in the catch. A thick wallet adorned in plastic boasting no hard cash. Or containing a single gold card. Acrylic: the currency of the future. These things disinterest me. They end up on the floor where fate dictates what happens next.

Sometimes all to find is an ancient five pound note, a few sorry-looking coins, a photo of a potential loved one. Something along those lines. These wallets end up back where they were, owners kept oblivious. The aim to remain true to my thin moral code.

My target's wallet is a good catch. Ebony leather. Nice trim. Contents strapped down like an over-packed suitcase. Notes peering out like important pages in a binder. Someone of low socio-economic status could eat for months with this. A family in

Africa, years. Still in my pocket, I open the thing and thumb through. At least two hundred pounds. The corners of my mouth respond appropriately.

Then they have me. Expressionless door stewards displaying their catch. Their grip tight on my arms as though my form were made especially for their convenience. Dealing with my type does not seem to violate routine. Eyes turn to me and the music seems to quieten. My prize is fished from my jacket and returned to its owner. His face of utter shock. I smile and shrug as I am led to their chambers. It is not often I am caught, but when I do it only brings admiration. Normally I am invisible.

Behind closed doors I am interrogated and tortured with tools and electricity until I concede. Secrets and ideals and opinions and

passwords and pin numbers and sexual preferences and favourite movies spilling from my throat like water from a hose. They produce a contract stating simply that they got the better of me. Almost undetectable smiles as they watch my wrist move across the page.

After a brief discussion among themselves it is decided my fingers will be broken as a precaution. When we are finished I am cast into the alleyway as though I were a spent commodity. I look down at my maimed digits not with sadness but with acceptance. An indicator that it is time to move on.

Money will be completely digital soon anyway. Sweden has begun the process and Canada is considering it. Bundles of notes will only occupy museums. Pickpocketing will be a robot's game.

THE VISITOR OF ROOM 213

He awoke, the room still unfamiliar. With his tired eyes he focused on the man dressed in an all black three-piece suit sat in the chair next to his bed. Marcus didn't hear the man come in, but then again, he had not heard nor seen much for a long while. If asked the date he could not imagine; the time he could only guess with the effulgent afternoon sun penetrating the window, now illuminating the foot of this bed and part of his visitor, hiding the rest in shadow. He didn't look at the man's face through the shadows. Instead, his eyes settled on the clothes and hands in the sunlight; the two could not be blacker or paler. The visitor never moved and for all

Marcus knew, it could have been a marble statue sat there, watching him in his supine position in the hospital bed. Then, the hands moved to the armrests, giving rise to the occupant. He shifted his eyes to the approaching visage, penetrating the sunlight, scattering it white and warm. He looked into the face and saw that it was the one he expected, Death.

Marcus remembered being rushed to the hospital, some time ago, after he called 911, knowing that he was going to die. He remembered the paramedics as they rushed into to his tiny dwelling on the edge of town ready to help, asking him too many questions.

What's your name, Sir? "Marcus," he replied; *How old are you* "96," he had whispered through his sun baked lips; they asked if he had any allergies or ailments, "None," that he knew of. If they found any now it would not matter so close to the precipice at the end of his world. He no longer had to be afraid with so little time left to him. They asked other questions; he ignored them with a smile, pretending not to hear. Over the past few days they tested him to see if it was his heart, his liver or his kidneys. All the tests returned negative, as he knew they would.

He was old and his time had come to wait for Death's train to arrive to take him on to the next world, and now it seemed that wait was over.

The conductor had arrived.

Always in his life he wondered how the end would look, but like the beginning we never know and so he was never scared, only happy that Death would visit him personally. The face Death wore for him was very handsome and ancient, with eyes black as thunderclouds and lips red like blood from a fatal wound. He may have other features that were shaded in grey, distorted or unseen through human eyes like radio waves moving

signals through the air we can neither see nor hear. Marcus looked directly into those eyes and felt the ease and the calm that old Death brings.

Finally Death spoke, *Good afternoon Marcus, I have wanted to meet you for a very long while.*

The words! Marcus was surprised to hear those lovely words spoken to him. He was not sure if his ears heard right or if he were dreaming as the sounds returned from a place in his memory, close to his imagination. Those words were not spoken to him, aside from his dreams, for more than a decade now. They came to him like he was returning to his homeland for the first time in a decade. It was like meeting an old friend who had been dead for many years.

How do you -?

But this is Death, he realized, and Death knows all languages. In every language there is a word for death, for the departed and the bridge that leads to the afterworld. Death is in all lands, maintaining the balance of life.

Thank you, Marcus replied, when he figured out what was happening.

So kind of you to visit me. I suppose my hour will soon be yours.

Soon, not yet.

Death sat back down in the hospital chair that moved closer, out of the shadows. He gave a little chortle at Death's demeanor.

You think it is funny that I sit in a hospital chair—to tell you the god's honest truth, any chair is comfortable. From these words, Marcus became aware that Death knew all of his thoughts. The air seemed to bend around him in both shadow and in light like dark matter. He both took up space and vacated none.

Can you guess as to why I am here?

You speak my language—my guess is that.

Death lowered his chin slightly.

I have always loved your language above all others for these past centuries. It pains me that I not only come for your death, but for your language as well.

I've feared this day as well. Not for my departure, no, I can handle that.

Death interlocked his fingers in front of his chin. Marcus looked at his human gesture and thought how odd

it is to see someone that truly does not draw breathe. His human form was probably for Marcus' comfort.

I remember when your words were born in the valleys of this land, shielded from other peoples of this region. Slowly they grew like a great tree. I was there, when the first member of your tribe died and was given resting rites in those lyrical words that planted seeds in the earth with the dead. Languages are beautiful that way in how they are born to a land and raised like crops.

But, crops need that land to survive.

Correct. So, I have come to talk to you and share a few moments of your life before I take it back to the earth from which it came.

It is an honor for you to come. I am happy to have a visitor even if it is you.

Even if it is I, he repeated. Please, tell me, in your own words what it was like to learn your language.

Marcus weighed these words in his mind as he looked in Death's eyes. He threw them into the river of his memory to see what ripples were made and how he could describe them.

The first words he spoke in his life were not English. His parents taught

these words to him and it was the only language spoken in their house until he reached the age of five and had to go to school.

So he began.

I suppose it would be better to tell you about what it was like to learn English.

He clasped his hands together on his laps, feeling them as an anchor to help him stay in this world as everything was blurring on the periphery.

One day, before I went to school for the first time, my parents said to me: Marcus, you understand the language of our people who lived in this valley since the days of the great birds. Regretfully, this is not enough for these times. For you to have a good life, you must learn another language that is spoken by those who stole this land, but in time have come to own it.

It was not all I understood, but it was all that frightened me. My life up to that point was pure bliss living on the farm on our side of the mountain. But as the years piled on each other, the world was turning stranger. And so, I was taught English so that I would be ready for school. It was hard as I'm sure you can see, or perhaps even saw.

Death gave no reaction, sitting motionless.

I hated school and my English-speaking teachers. I even hated my parents for sending me there. I could never find the right English words to match the pictures in my head and everyone knew that I was different as it was spiced in my voice. It was not until later that understood why it was important for me to learn another language; I was not aware until later that our language was 'our' language and was only spoken in 'our' home.

It was on a winter's day, when I was about eight, that I learned to ask my father the question: are we the only ones who speak our language?

He took a long time to form the three letters it took to answer, yes.

Why, I asked him. All children wonder why since they know so little, having lived through so few winters. The world to them is a book of blank pages, the story of which has even been written so it cannot be read. My father told me what story had been written for my mother and he.

Language, he said to me, is a living creature. Ours, regretfully, has lost its champions and in time has lost

the great fight against the mighty army of the English.

What can I do, I asked.

You can learn to make English your weapon. One day you can meet the one you are meant to share a life – teach them. They will learn if they truly love you. Together you can teach a child and through family our words shall survive as they have to this day.

Is that what you did, father?

No. I was the one your mother taught.

Children never have a clue as to what happened in their family before they were born. It must be told to them, like what day they were born.

The next day I asked my mother the same question.

My father, who sadly never got to meet my family, taught our language to my mother and they taught it to me, like our trio.

Marcus thought about the fact that he never got to use the words for siblings or aunts and uncles. Even grandparents could never be addressed, only remembered through memories transferred to him. There were many words he never got to use in his life.

I continued to learn English with my new sense of responsibility, and each word became paired with the words I learned from my parents. Always I preferred our language. There were times in school when I would let my mind and mouth slip and began talking in our tongue. My class looked at me like I was an alien. My teachers never knew what to do.

In many ways I was a foreigner, a stranger quite alone. It was hard being a child and slowly learning the truths about your world and having those truths corrupt the glory of your imagination. Friends were also hard to come by until I got to college.

His voice was becoming tired and strained. As his story continued, Marcus realized just how long it had been since he talked at great length to someone else. There were muscles in his mouth that were only used with this language; there was excitement in his mind as well.

Soon I began to hate everyone, even my parents who were the cause of my mis-spoken life. My mother sympathized with me and said that I was going through exactly what she went through at my age. She understood how mean children could be, but assured me that it would get better. She was a saint, and smart as a book.

He let his breath pause on that thought, as it became a question he was afraid to ask. Marcus thought about his parents a lot from that hospital bed, dreaming of seeing them again and being able to talk to someone through his own words instead of conversing to ghosts and memories. During the past few days he'd drifted in and out of sleep, waking in strange places long forgot, seeing people long dead, and hearing voices whose winds had long been snuffed out from this physical world.

He asked anyway.

Will I get talk to them soon?

Death smiled a deathly smile.

I know, I'll soon find out.

Yes, as long as you are able to draw breath for that question you shall not know. Now, please continue.

The only promise Death makes is that it will find you, always.

As I see it, you already know all that I am saying, I am sure of it.

I do know. Still, I want you to say it . . . There is a difference.

As I said before, I was very much alone until I got to college. There I

studied linguistics and philologist, but mostly, I wanted to research my parents' language. Looking back I wish I had revealed to my professors my unusual words. I should have, but I didn't. I didn't want them to know, and I didn't want to share or hear that the experts knew nothing of it. I searched through hundreds of books, countless articles only to find nothing. No records of our words, no scripture could I find that I was aware of. I didn't even know what my words looked like.

It was like an extinct species that left no fossils behind.

The sun was moving further west and was beginning to flood his vision. He paused to feel the light.

You know the name of my language, don't you?

Yes, continue.

With a deep exhale he did.

My father passed away a few months after I finished college. I cried when I got the phone call, partly because he was dead and partly because I wasn't even there for him or my mother. It was a massive heart attack and like that, he was gone.

I came home to pay my respects and see her. If my mother was angry with me, she didn't show. She knew that I was angry with myself. I stayed home for a few weeks and sometime or other I asked her if there was anything else about our language that she had not told me. The story she passed on nearly broke my heart with its weight. It was a burden she carried all her life, which I have carried since.

The story goes: my grandfather was the last of our people left to this world after his young wife, his baby sister, and older brother died from a small pox epidemic that swept through our village. Brought on by strangers sometime in 1930's. An entire generation was wiped out like flames on birthday candles, one by one. My grandfather was, like his fathers before him, the medicine man, a shaman. As well balanced as he was, his powers of healing could not fight against the foreign illness.

As you probably saw, he gave the final resting rights to his people in their tradition, and moved out of the village, saying that it now belonged to ghosts. Years later he met my grandmother and together they raised my mother. He died when my mother was still very young, before he could pass on the words of the prayers, the technics and the traditions of the final peace to her. He died with

the secrets, taking them with him to where ever you will take me.

Through my tears I asked her what the name of our language was—through her tears she said that she did not know. It died with her father. All she knew were the words and stories passed down to her, and had since only ever called it 'our language.'

Her story became my beautiful burden, igniting a fire in my heart that could not be snuffed out. I set out immediately on an expedition to some of the most secluded and uncorrupted places on the planet, where there were many languages like my own. I recorded dozens of languages documenting their words to ensure their survival before the people who loved them departed from this earth. I searched, hoping to find any bit of evidence of my language from my people. Never in all my travels in each hemisphere, on every continent did I find a single word I recognized. More than that, I did not know what my language looked like on paper. I did not know its characters and could only assume from my education what it was not. I searched for years into a decade into more, finding nothing and feeling my burden crush me.

Then, like all the leaves on the family tree, my mother's fell. She died while I was abroad, and because I stayed away, she died alone with no one else to talk to.

Marcus broke down in his story, wanting to cry, but having no more tears after these many years.

You were there; I know it. Tell me Death: Did she die in pain?

Death remained silent for Death gives no answers to the living, only death.

I understand.

I returned home for just long enough to tell her good-bye at her grave—then I was off again, alone. Away for another decade still searching for a cousin of my language, the brother, the sister, the distant relative from which I might share any words. Searching for the origins of the language I counted in; knew the days of the week; recorded the months of the years; identified the natural world, I found not a whisper.

I dream in this language, where English cannot penetrate. There are words in my language that could never translate. There are many words for the mountains and the way the sunlight hits them at certain times of the year and those words relate to crops and the

migration of birds. My favorite word holds the magic in the light fading in the afternoon of western sky of October.

Finally I gave up. Defeated. Exhausted.

I never returned home. It became a ghost town, but I would still talk to their ghosts so that I could talk.

It was a sad living until the day I met my wife.

She taught at the same University as I, stealing my breath away, reminding me just how lonely I was. We grew close swiftly and over the next few years I taught her my language and she spoke it beautifully. In our conversations, I knew she felt the magic. So we married.

We were too late in life to have a family. She was in her late forties and I was fifty. We tried adopting; it never worked out they way that these things sometimes do not work out. I was willing to admit defeat, to be the last champion. A strong part of me was not willing to pass the growing burden onto my son or daughter. My ancestors' fight was done.

Then one day, she came to me, with her smile that was brighter than sunshine, and told me about an idea.

Marcus, she said, write a book about your history. I looked at her, curious as to what she truly meant. Write it in your language.

But I do not know the words.

Then give it words. They may not be the original characters, but perhaps there are no original characters. You know as well as I that some languages are only spoken. Perhaps it was only an oral language written in your DNA. As the only survivor of your people it is your soul right to give it a physical form. No one may argue with you and I shall help anyway I can.

She was right, my word, she was right and I had not seen it. Being too sad with my story, I never thought to tell it; too obsessed with finding its story, I never thought to tell my own; too defeated by my mother's story and her death, I never thought that I could give my words a new physical form, a new champion. If I could not give birth to a child I could give birth to a language.

Using the Roman alphabet, thanks to my tools in English that my father told me I would need, I gave my words life. A few characters I had to create as the German, Danish, and Slavic languages have phonemes that cannot be made with the basic 26 characters. It took me

a decade to make my dictionary, and when it was done I wept. A little boy desire to show it to my mother and father overwhelmed me as joy and sadness surged through my heart.

Thank god I had my wife, my anchor and sail.

With the dictionary done I began writing my memoir. In it, I recorded the tales my parents told me when I was young. The folk tales, myths, ghost stories, they all went into it, with, of course, a translation. My book would be the Grimm Fairy Tales and the Rosetta Stone all with in the same cover. I told the stories my parents gave me on nights when I could not sleep, when thunderstorms took out our power or the bogeyman taunted me. I told all the stories, the ones my mother remembered, and the ones about my grandfather with the lessons he lived.

It took me twelve years to write and rewrite the book and its translation. When I finished there was no question that this is what I was meant to do. My wife, my muse, shared my elation, but only for a while.

Like everyone else in my life, Sarah died. Pneumonia took her from me and I was left, once again, to talk only to ghosts. During my time with her I knew

the day would return. I wished that it would be her to die first so that I could carry the sadness, not her. It was I who brought her in and did not want to leave her alone.

With all of my life savings I gave my books to a lawyer with the instruction that upon my death they are to be published through the University. My life savings, life insurance and all are to go into the publication.

I gave birth to the language and raised it in my stories and soon it shall have my inheritance so that it could grow into new life. I asked for it to be published after I died so that my death could give it power, but I also do not want to risk seeing its failure. I want to die, instead, with hope for the future.

Marcus stopped, tired from his long account and ready to not be tired anymore. The sunshine moved onto his face with the fading afternoon light. It shined through the window on his tanned skin that illuminated his white hairs as they rose like sunflowers to meet the sun's rays. He whispered a single word that went out like a spell of good hope, of good-bye. He felt old and lucky that he had lived the life that was given to him. Now he was ready to return that life to the earth so that someone else could have it.

Do you know if my words will live on?

Death gave no indication. He only sat there with his hands clasped together in front of his face, looking long into his storyteller's eyes.

Well, then please tell me Death; he said looking back out the window for the last time, you who know all languages—who meet all people at their final moment, what my language is called.

Death rose with long patience and approached the bed. He put one arm on Marcus' shoulder and another on his hands, laying him down to rest.

With a very soft voice he spoke, your time is now. Your people once called your language...

In the hall the nurses and doctors had gathered outside of room 213 to hear the lyrical words they had never heard before. They whispered to each other asking if they knew what he was saying. They did not want to interrupt the old man, who had not had any visitors. Then the words stopped and the alarms sounded on the monitors. They rushed in to find the old man dead and wondered from where the smile on his face came.

OF TIKOLOSHI AND THE TRANSLATOR

Monday

It is a dream come true for Siphon Mbongolo. His prayers have been answered.

“Siphon, as a matter of interest with whom are you staying in Old Magwegwe?” Madam Mumba is relaxing on a gold-coated garden chair; her back is fidgeting as if itchy, or as if resting on something prickly. So short are her lacey shorts that Siphon’s eyes are magnetically riveted to where her huge legs are joined together in a union of fat and flesh. The sight simply drives Siphon’s poor heart into a series of emotional jerks.

However, playfully, mischievously and slowly, she launches light but lively kicks on the lap of Siphon, whose chest in turn vibrates breathlessly as the hormones run riot.

“Ah... ahh... Madam Mumba, I sit with my small father, my small mother and their children: Makhi, Mzwakhe and Sethekeli.”

“Siphon, please call me Mona or Monalisa. Are your cousins friendly to you, do you get along well?”

Siphon’s bloodshot eyes roll in their sockets as if at that point in time all they seek in this tempting world is to flee.

“They have the stubbornness of a black millipede, largely Sethekeli who has no shame to say she cannot be under a man. She has a mouth and I always protect her when her brothers want to beat her. But she thanks me by counting for me, hey I eat too much, hey I finish everything she gives, hey this, hey that. She has a tongue too, that’s why I don’t tell her my secrets, because her chest was kicked by a zebra. She sees me quiet and thinks I have no liver to tell her not talk bad about me.”

Madam Mumba cannot help laughing hysterically. “She has a mouth! A big mouth! A tongue? Well, she abases or criticises you baselessly. But what does a person who has a liver do? We all have a liver, don’t we?”

“No, some people don’t have a liver. Those who don’t have the encouragement to tell you you have a mistake. I have a liver even if I see a lion, I don’t urinate with fear. I face it like uShaka!”

“You mean courage! I see, but what do you mean your cousin counts for you? You cannot count money?”

“No. I can. She counts for me. Uyangibalela ukudla. She says to people I eat too much of her father’s food. She forgets tomorrow is yesterday.”

Madam Mumba’s ribs are itching from a bursting of laughter. She steadies herself, before tapping Sipho in a hooking manner between his legs. The rustically inclined man draws away, batting his eye. He gasps, looks askance – much to the amusement of the teaser.

She picks up a glass of wine and ungracefully some wine splashes out, dropping on her fatty neck.

“Sipho, you talk of your uncle, aunt and cousins; where is your biological father? Ehmhm. But before you respond to that question please towel the spilt wine on my neck with your tongue”.

Sipho’s yellow-tainted teeth are bared. In fact, if he were swimming one would be forgiven for thinking that he is on the verge of drowning. He is practically gasping for breath.

“My bio-o-ological father, he died five years old while the maize was kicking and the pumpkins were vomiting in the fields.” His face is a little gloomy. He adds: “It was the disappearance of luck as elders say. He, my father, didn’t like a person who doesn’t hear. His stomach was running him, running him”

“Sipho, my goodness, you’re such a fascinating literal translator. Your parlance is what is sometimes referred to as Ndenglish. I guess that even if you cannot give me a blow-by-blow account of how your father died five years ago, you’re basically saying he died while the maize plants and pumpkins were blooming or tasselling”.

“Is that so?”

The reply is phrased like a question.

“Yes, Madam. No, Mona. Yes is that so, shuwa. Maa... Mona, I mean he was going outside fast-fast. He was carrying heavy.”

“Ooh, gosh! My Lord! I think I’m getting more confused now.” Madam Mumba whimpers.

“No, Madam... Mona... what confused do you have? It’s simple: Wayesiya ngaphandle. Out into the bush. Ethwele nzima, just carrying heavy.”

“Okay, he had a running tummy! My goodness! What do those who don’t hear do, generally?”

“General, they do bad. They don’t work what they are told to work. They have hard heads. You don’t need to see a moon or isangoma to tell you that

they do bad. Same like Sethekeli; she thinks she has black because no young man will point her. We cry not for the self-doer but for the done-to.”

“Oh, I see, Sethekeli must be stubborn and disobedient but whatever your opinion –men are funny creatures. They will make passes at anything, ghosts and corpses included. You’re just being hard on Sethekeli, I think. What does a moon or sangoma do?”

“Madam, sorry, Mona, a moon I am referring to is not the banana-shaped light that appears at night, but an in-yanga. I mean a herbal man—one who cures. A sangoma can foresee, can tell you your tomorrow.”

Time tears on.

Wednesday Night

The urinary bladder threatens to open apart with sudden violence if he does not respond to the call of nature right away. Sipho slips out of the bed, rushes towards the door, hits against the door frame and curses, “Demedi!” Common sense orders him to put on the lights. The lights uncover one thing: he is wearing a tattered undergarment. He does not care a dot because he is alone. He slips into a pair of purple trousers – and races into the

toilet. Inside the beautifully painted small room, he feels for the zip.

“Demedi! Where is the damn zip!” The zip-it is the other way round, at the back! He struggles with the waistline, hitches the trousers down but, no, the urine is irrepressible. Tremulously, he navigates his human hosepipe to face the toilet pan—but it is already too little too fast. There is a desperate whirlwind inside him. It is spurting out, making the floor messy and cloudy. The short bursts of the coloured watery waste have made an emergency landing on an exclusive imported tapestry of the quilting products. Like an efficient scrub-man, he fetches the scrubbing cloth, sorts out his mess, sighs a sigh of a fireman who has stumbled and fumbled before putting out a raging fire. He walks along the passage.

At Madam Mumba’s door, he hears some noise. Mumba dreaming aloud! Dreaming? Soliquising? He places an ear on the lockset.

“I care for you.”

(An inaudible sound).

“Yes, I confess I was going out with that Minister but...”

(An inaudible sound).

“Please... Let’s not dwell on that issue.”

You killed him out of jealousy, now you suspect I am going out with that ”

(An inaudible sound)

“I won’t shut up! I don’t have a crush on him. He is just my... eh...”

(An inaudible sound).

Sipho says to himself: I am convinced that Madam Mumba is arguing with a boyfriend. Hmmn... so she has a boyfriend after all. Anyway, she is only human. Once on his bed, he recalls everything. How last Saturday he met Madam Mumba in a salt queue, his speechless admiration for her high-class car. How a naked man burst into the queue and started fondling the backside of a plump woman who, on discovering the presence of the mentally challenged man, took to her heels like her body was a mere feather. How they talked about the incident and the endless queues, ending up discussing the sad state of the economy, and how Madam Mumba was prepared to dig him out of his financial mess by offering him a job as her bodyguard. How they later weaved their way through the bustling crowd into her gleaming car.

Then on Monday, at what appeared like a billionaire's evening party – at the Mumba residence, men and women who drove the latest and most expensive cars, spoke on the trendiest of cell phones and wore immaculate designer suits converged, wined and dined. They spoke English, danced in an English way and even sneezed in English – or so it seems to Siphon. He remembers one silly man with an elephantine neck who gave him a glass of wine, and when he told him that he was a teetotaler and a member of the Zionist Bakhonzi Beqiniso Church, he called him a stupid, rustic pumpkin who did not know that Heaven is on earth.

He also has a vivid picture of a lady who told him squarely: "I love you boy. I've gold and silver. Gold is my first name. Fun my second. Bodyilicious my surname. What more can a soul want? Those who have had the privilege and pleasure of rubbing shoulders with me have confessed that I uniquely nurture a soul's heart and body like the earth's axis is on my palm. Run away from this portly pig, Mumba. I would pay you more; give you my everything, boy. My body oozes love and more love for you. Your body, oh boy, I feel like licking you up like a chocolate bar."

He remembers his response:

"I appeared for my wife sometimes ago. The go-between asked for a fire. I paid the open-the-mouth money. I will pay the suitor be-known money. Sorry, besides in my culture, a woman does not smoke or point a man."

The smoking, swaying and over-embellished woman unleashed f-prefixed obscenities at him. She called him the most unintelligent, rural, backward cat she had ever seen before reeling away and kissing a man who could easily be her oldest grandson.

He is now half-asleep. He hears some patting sounds from a distance, but finally he drifts into sleep. He has a grandparent of a nightmare.

Thursday Morning

"Madam, me thinks there is a witch here?"

"What?"

"Me thinks there's a witch who's doing rounds and sounds here."

"Siphon, get this clear, I hired a bodyguard, not a witch-hunter, okay?"

"Sorry, madam, but I'm made to see in my dreams as a Zionist..."

“Antiquated nonsense! Whether you’re a Zionist or Satanist I don’t bloody care a whit. Stick to your job description or else...”

That is it. Madam Mumba is bad-tempered today. She is a flooded river. Maybe her boyfriend rubbed her the wrong way. He too probably drives a stunning car. He must be one of the billionaires who were at the party. Madam Mumba is now dazzling in her dress. She drives away.

Thursday Afternoon

Sipho is trimming the hedge. He wonders: when will I start body-guarding her? He tries to hack off a green leaf but the floppy folio dodges the cutter! He is shell-shocked. A shrieking laugh is heard. The source cannot be seen! Then he is pelted with small stones! He runs for cover in his room. Shiver holds his legs captive. He puts on the lights. His heart is full of pounding boulders now. A sub-human creature enters...

”Nkosi! My God!” He is screaming with a fear without ignominy and confines.

“Mfowethu, don’t panic. I won’t hurt you. I’m Mkhulumanothisa. I live here.”

The child-like voice is peppered with a swishing streak. Mumba’s bladder betrays and belittles him. He wets his tattered pant. The hobgoblin sneezes, sending out a yellowish, smallish and circular fluid across the room. It patters on the ceiling. Sipho’s world is now a tremulous den of the unknown. Small wonder he releases some squishing sound that gets the back of his trousers vibrating.

“Don’t worry. I won’t harm you. In fact, I’m disappointed with lady Mumba. She won’t get away with it. I brought her all the fortune she flaunts. Now she wants to get rid of me. Shat day she served me with salty relish, yet she knows in our clan, salt is an allergy. I read the mind. She forgets shat. Now she has left for Chiredzi, to seek a muthi man who will wipe me off the face of the earth. Yeppee! No! Nowayzshee. How narrow-minded!! Kill me? Never! I killed her meddling minister boyfriend. I will kill her too if she continues running madly like a nervous fool trying to castrate a burly bull with their bare teeth!”

Sipho almost melts into fear itself. Finally he summons enough courage to ask: “So you has a wife like us people?”

The awe-inspiring 40 cm-long creature with a lengthy beard, rolling eyes and a hairy, whitish rugged skin replies in a low but child-like voice:

“I had a girlfriend who also worked for Mumba. Coz I’m a blast furnace in bed, the maid left in a huff. But me thinks she was already pregnant! Coz I’m a sharp-shooter! Shen... hhh... How can I put it? Shen, Mumba had no choice but to hook up with me. Needless to say Mumba and I are an item. And I’m a jealous man. So velly jealous shat you don’t mess with our relationship by hook or crook, day or night and live to see another day. Forget.”

Sipho finds himself posing another question.

“How did you make Mumba reach?”

“Rich, you mean? I loot. Yes banks, factories, stores, mining concerns, you name shehem – I raid.

I can sheeleep with a man’s wife in his presence, on the shame bed. Shat me.”

Though a watery coldness slithers down his legs he manages to ask another question.

“So Madam Mumba will point the house where there is beer?”

“Yes, shat woman will taste my wrath. They don’t call me Ntokoloshi for noncing. Now take shis and disappear. You did not talk with me. You did not see me, is shat right? You disclose, you’re dead. Shat me!”

Sipho cannot believe it. A suitcase filled to the brim with crisp notes! He walks past the computerised colourful gate. With a trembling joy, he hurries on, his horizon characterised by the diminishing grandeur of the house and the snowballing mysteries therein.

If this is not a dream... if these are real notes... If... he wanders.

GLOSSARY

Small father: uncle

Small mother: aunt

To have a mouth: to provoke people to fight you

To have a liver: to be courageous

To count for: to accuse one of eating too much (especially of the given food)

To have a tongue: to talk about someone else (usually) in a damaging way in that person's absence

A chest kicked by a zebra: this refers to a person who cannot keep secrets or whose chest 'leaks' confidential information easily

To point: a direct literal translation which refers to propose love

Tomorrow is yesterday: Bear in mind that whatever bad thing you do or say today will haunt you in the future (e.g You can laugh at someone else's abject poverty today but when you are in need in future you may turn to the same person for help).

The maize is kicking and the pumpkins vomiting: this a literal translation used to refer to the stage at

which the maize plant is tasselling and the pumpkins are blooming

Shuwa: sure

Carrying heavy: Toiling or suffering

Inyanga: (In SiNdebele, this term refers to a moon or a herbalist/traditional healer

Has a black: a literal translation for bad luck

Ask for fire: When a suitor's delegation goes to the girl's parents/relatives in order to tell them that a man is interested in marrying their daughter

(It used to be a fiery affair, with the mediators being sometimes (initially) beaten/tossed about or chased away

Open the mouth money: the money that kick-starts the above negotiations

Point the house where there is beer: to be in hot soup

SHE FOLLOWS ME

I knew she was there, right in the room with us, watching us horse around in our underwear or not in our underwear, would probably be right there under the covers with us too if she could be. When I was drinking I saw my mother everywhere, behind a potted palm at the bar, in the backseat of the guy I'd just met, standing on the porch as he fumbled with his key, sitting upright in the wingback chair across from the couch we were rolling around on. She was there, in every bedroom, between me and every guy I ever slept with, or thought about sleeping with. When I was drinking it was like she had her arm around my shoulders every place I went. And not in a good way.

I know she was there the night I went dancing at that little hole in the wall in San Mateo with the construction worker I'd met the weekend before. I didn't really like him much but he kept calling me so I agreed to go out one more time. I knew before I got there that I'd leave with somebody else. It was just a matter of time and meeting the right pair of eyes across the room and of course drinking just enough beer to make it all seem logical and inevitable. Randy or Bruce or Henry or whatever his name was, went to buy us a couple more drinks, and I'd already made my move. I moved over to a table with a pretty boy with slicked back hair and tight jeans who'd

been entertaining a number of other women earlier but had still been able to send me a few signals across the room. His name was David. I knew I had to make this happen pretty fast, Randy or Bruce or Henry was due back shortly and if he showed up, David would be history.

It didn't take much. I suggested to David we go somewhere else. He put out his cigarette, downed the last of his drink and we were out the door before Randy or Bruce or Henry even got his drink order filled. I explained to David that I had to take my car and I followed him back up the peninsula to a little cluster of mid-range type apartments. I tried to shut out my mother's voice from the backseat. As a matter of fact, I was even more determined, the more she spouted off, the faster I drove, the surer I was that I was doing the right thing.

David stopped off at a grocery store for more beer. I followed him in. I lost him down one of those long aisles with bread and cereal and granola bars. The florescent lights were too much for me. I needed sunglasses. Mother said if this wasn't enough to show me I was doing the wrong thing, she didn't know what would be. I walked away from her, and ran into David in the liquor aisle, on the phone. When he

saw me, he hung up and put it back in his pocket. He picked up a big box of Bud and we headed to the check out. My dance shoes slipped on the waxed linoleum. The fewer-than-10-items aisle had housewives in it and old men just getting off work. I looked away from them.

She was waiting, as usual, on David's porch. Trying to give me one last chance before all was lost. I told her to get back into the car and shut the hell up.

David's apartment was full of sleek, modern furniture all in black and chrome. I hated it. He tried to set us up in the living room on the sofa, popped a couple beers, put his arm along the back edge of the sofa, patted the seat next to him. Then his phone rang. He told me to ignore it. I sat down and tried to ignore the phone and my mother sitting in the plush coffee brown leather chair across from us. She had that look on her face. I knew what she was thinking. I looked into David's eyes. He handed me another beer. I'd probably already had plenty and didn't need any more.

Then his answering machine went off. A woman's voice was screaming into the phone, "Where are you, you son of a bitch? Do you have somebody

over there? Do you know how many times I've called there tonight? You told me you were staying in tonight."

David jumped off the couch, leaning on my knee to get past me and ran into his bedroom where the answering machine was and picked up the phone. The screaming stopped. I sat back on the couch and put my feet up on the glass coffee table. I drank some beer. Mother had that same look on her face. I avoided meeting her eyes. I looked around the room. There was some kind of ugly modern art on the wall, the kind you can buy up on the second floor at JC Penny's. There were a couple of animal statues on side tables. The kitchen was one long counter with barstools along it. The rug was dark and shaggy.

Mother tried to say something but I stopped her by finishing the beer and opening another. It had been a while, how long I couldn't tell and David had not come back. Mother started to get up from her chair. I was afraid she was going to drag me bodily out of the place. Then David showed up again.

"Sorry about that. Old girlfriend. Having a rough time."

"Oh," I said.

"Want to go in the bedroom?"

"Sure."

He grabbed what was left of the six-pack of beer and we went into his bedroom. The bed was low on the ground and huge. The side tables had lamps in the form of rocket ships or bullets, all chrome. The far wall was one huge mirror.

The phone rang again. This time he left the bedroom to pick it up in the living room. Mother was sitting on the edge of the bed. I could tell she wasn't going to leave. I felt like throwing a beer in her face. I wasn't leaving. I didn't care how many times the phone rang. Mother just stared at me. I could tell she was upset. I'd never done anything quite this stupid before, at least not that I remembered.

David was yelling into the phone now, things like,

"Leave me alone."

"Get a life."

"No, you have to get a life, Simone. And stop calling me here."

He'd slam down the phone but before he could even reach the bedroom the phone would ring again.

"Yes, I have someone over here."

“I’m getting on with my life. What about you?”

“Stop calling me.”

He hung up again and the phone rang again.

Mother had taken a nail file out of her purse and was doing her nails. She knew she didn’t have to say anything about this one. She knew the situation spoke for itself. Even through all those beers she figured I could see the writing on the wall.

I heard David say,

“No, you’re not coming over here Simone.”

“I don’t care, kill yourself, that would be a big relief.”

“Yes I’m a heartless, cold bastard. Now stop calling here.”

But this time he didn’t hang up. I heard the leather couch sigh in the other room, and his voice lowered, and I couldn’t hear what he was saying any more.

Mother looked at me. She was right. I was tired. It was late. I pulled the black leather bedspread off the pillows and laid my head down. Mother put her nail file away, got out a blanket

and covered up my bare legs. I must have fallen asleep.

Next thing I knew, it was morning. The apartment was silent. Too much sunshine spilled through the windows and hit every surface lighting up the dust motes that never stopped falling.

She already had the front door open and one eyebrow arched in expectation. I picked up my clothes and walked out, picking up the stale, powdery scent of her perfume. I bent my head at the sound of her tongue clucking at me. That way I didn’t have to look her in the eye, didn’t have to admit she’d been right again.

FRIDAY EVENING VISITS

Michael steps out of the shower, shivering in the cold. In the mirror by his bathroom sink, he inspects his goose bumps one-by-one. Like a turkey, he thinks. He clips a stray hair from his nose and slicks back his hair, still half-wet, with gel. His fingers trace a row of dark blue bottles lined on a shelf before he selects a bottle in the middle, unscrews its top and splashes his neck. His skin reddens as the lotion stings, but he leaves the bathroom before he can notice its effects in the mirror.

Moving to his bedroom, Michael slides open his wardrobe with a nudge and extra push of the door as it halts half-way across its runners. Pulling

out a black jacket, he feels the velvet of its collar glide in his hand before his fingertips stop at a droplet of wax. He sits down on his bed and picks at the wax with his fingernails. Feeling the collar again to be sure, he picks a shirt from the wardrobe. Its collar is greying at the edges and he ties his bow tie a little more closely to his neck to compensate. A creak of floorboards, he leaves his bedroom and climbs down a spiral staircase, pausing at each banister in turn.

At the bottom of the staircase, Michael enters a darkened room. On a table in the gloom, he can see the outline of a frame on a table, next

to a candle and a sealed envelope. Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket he cleans the edges frame by touch and licks his fingertip to check for dust. Then he searches for a box of matches, his hand outstretched on the table like an octopus. As he lights a candle, he watches the wick splutter a pale yellow against the darkness. Then he slips the envelope into his inside jacket and tugs at the gap between his bow tie and his neck.

A single knock on the house door is followed by a pause and a quicker, double tap. Opening the door, Michael steps aside back into the living room without looking. A girl walks in with shoulder-length blonde hair and wearing a coat the colour of crimson under the candle light. Reaching into a handbag, she pulls out a mobile phone, clicks on a button and smiles at Michael with a flash of sparkling lipstick.

“Honey bunny. If you had a car, you could have picked me up straight from the Tube. You know how I don’t like walking the streets at night. Friday evenings are so rowdy,” she says, turning her cheek to the candlelight.

“The nights are frightful, dear,” Michael replies, kissing her cheek against a flicker of the candle.

“You also have car parking at work. With a little detour, you could pick me up and I could avoid the Tube completely. That would make you the ideal honey bunny to love forever,” she continues, handing him her coat.

“Absolutely without end, dear.”

“Sometimes I think you don’t listen to me. What was I saying?”

“Anything you want to, dear. And you do look lovely this evening.”

The girl hesitates to reply, before Michael pulls out a chair from under the table. With a scrape of its sliding feet, he gestures for her to sit down.

“We have something even more important to talk about, my honey bunny,” she continues, leaning forwards in her chair.

“I’m always at your devotion, dear.”

“My RSVPs have come back. We are going to have a problem.”

“Problems shared are problems solved, dear.”

“We shall need more space in the church. On my side. We can’t have people queuing outside. It might rain and spoil their hair.”

“Perish the thought, dear.”

“You could donate me some of your side of the church. My honey bunny will understand.”

“Two rows at the back would be just lovely for your relatives, dear.”

“I was thinking of six of the rows at the front. If you feel your side can squash together.”

“Absolutely ready to oblige with sitting on knees for the cousins, dear.”

“My honey bunny learns so quickly that I wonder how he could cope without me.”

The girl pulls a small plastic tube from her handbag and tucks its tip into her mouth. With a puff, she disgorges a cloud of vapour into the air.

“There is also the crisis of the dinner menu,” she continues, watching the smoke curl in the candlelight. “We can’t be causing a scandal.”

“An upset would be unthinkable, dear.”

“Oysters are an absolute must. They taste of nothing and a perfect antidote to champagne. Three oysters for each guest will only mean six hun-

dred in all. Perhaps four oysters for my side and two for yours. You always did say your family needed to diet. The caterers will just have get an extra large plate of ice to keep them fresh.”

“A very large ice bucket, dear.”

“Don’t be facetious, honey bunny. You know how church bells give me migraines.”

“Absolutely atrocious, dear.”

The girl leans forward and toys with Michael’s hand. “There is another problem which is more pressing, if you are still listening.”

“I’m always your confidante, dear,” he replies, holding onto the hand.

The girl withdraws her fingers and takes another puff from the tube. “You know how much my doctor is worried about my circulation.”

“Absolutely best to be cautious, dear.”

“For our honeymoon in Sydney, there’s strictly no alternative. On doctor’s orders. With our weekend in Dublin we flew economy and the flight was only an hour. You saw how much my ankles itches.” The girl demonstrates by tapping the plastic tube against his hand.

“The risk would be unbearable, dear.”

“I’m glad my honey bunny is coming to the same conclusion. On health grounds, we shall have to fly Business Class as a minimum. First Class if you dare to ask your boss for a raise. You are going to be learn to be assertive, aren’t you honey bunny?”

“I’m always going to put you first, dear.”

The girl’s handbag vibrates and she pulls out her mobile phone. “How time flies,” she announces with another twinkle of her painted lips. “I do so hate to be vulgar, but would you mind attending to business? I’m always so embarrassed to ask.”

“Always my forgetfulness, dear.” Michael withdraws the envelope from his jacket pocket and hands it to the girl, unopened.

“Same time next Friday evening? Our little visits are so much exciting than drama school,” the girl says, tucking the envelope into her handbag. “But don’t you ever go on holiday anymore? Even go out to the cinema? I can offer a good rate on all-nighters, even if you just want to hold hands.”

Michael shakes his head, the bow tie rustling on his collar, and hands the girl her coat. As he opens the door, the girl bids him farewell with a wave of her arm tugging on a sleeve. Alone in the living room, he picks up the frame on the table and draws it closer to the candle. A photograph of a girl with long blonde hair peers back at him in the flickering light, her smile lost in the shadows. With his hands resting on his knees, he looks at the photograph until the candle crackles on its last droplet of wax and plunges the room back into darkness.



The image features a central golden circle containing intricate Arabic calligraphy. This circle is surrounded by several concentric white rings. Radiating from the center are numerous golden lines of varying thickness, resembling sunbeams or rays, set against a white background. The overall composition is symmetrical and evokes a sense of light and artistry.

POETRY

THE WANDERER



The lonely find friendship in faith, though
Sorrow-filled they have long been forced
To weather the ice-cold water-ways
And tread trails never taken.

Fate unravels herself.

Thus proclaimed the experienced Wanderer,
Knowing the hardship, the carnage
And the fall of his dear friends:

Mornings I would muse to myself
To keep my outcast thoughts inside,
Knowing truly well the noble customs of
Chastening one's spirit-chest and fostering
One's thoughts while thinking as one wishes,
But weary spirits fight not fate's hand, and
The dreary manage naught but dross.

Thus glory-seekers often keep the sorrow
Safely secured in their chests:

I, too, exiled, full of sorrow and far from kinsmen,
Have had to manacle my mind ever since
I dug my lord down in the cold, dark ground,
And cast myself in winter-spirits over frozen waves
Seeking a new lord, wanting another home;
Hunting far and near for any man in a mead-hall
Who'd know my men or simply wish
To befriend me in my forsaken search. But
Only the forlorn can fathom the friendship of sorrow;

He is wreathed with thorns, not twisted gold,
His spirits are of winter, and the ground he walks on cold,
For he recalls the hall-warriors and gift-givings of old—
 How hard it is to forget those familiar feasts!
 How alive they are now; all lost.

Forsaken by his lord for so long, he will see,
When bound together by sorrow and sleep,
Them kissing in his lord's own keep,
Laying his hands and head on his lord's knees,
Enjoying once more his master's gift-seat.
But sea-birds bathe before him as he wakes up,
Preening their feathers in the hail-mingled snowfall
As the fallow waves drift on as before,

And again the ailed heart is hollowed out,
Longing for the friend it has been left without.
He sees his kinsmen once more on the beach,
He stretches out his arm to hold their hands
But again they fade away and out of reach,
As the ships form their familiar bands.
The spirits of seafarers bring little in speech,
 But would they have rid me of my cries!

How I hate my gullible heart
For not sinking down and growing dark
When I think of the men—shells for youth—
Leaving the halls in their search for sooth.
So I will behold middle-earth droop and decay;
 One by one, day by day.

Therefore, may no man call himself a wise man
Before he calls himself an old man!
May the winters teach him patience,
And rid him of his daring recklessness,
His awfulness and his weaknesses.
May his greed for goods be riven from him
And his boasts turned into wimpy cheerlessness.
Only then will he behold his heart beat.

He must see how all the wealth of middle-earth
Can be laid to waste like the walls of ruins
We find in some places; wind-swept and frost-covered.
For the wine-hall's walls wither with their lords
Still inside, sorrow-filled for the brave troops that've died.
Some are born away by war, some by birds,
Others by wolves, while the rest hide in the earth.
So the Maker lays waste to this place;
Empties the works of giants until all is silence.

Thus cried the experienced Wanderer,
Knowing the hardship, the carnage
And the fall of his dear friends:

Where has the horse gone? Where the warrior?
Where the gift-givers and the glory-seat at the feast?
Where are the revels of the hall?
Hail dear earls! Fill your bright cups!
Drink for the mailed warriors and the prince's glory!
For those days are soon taken away by an eternal night.
Behold how these decorated walls are bemired;

The warriors are carried away by thoughts of renown,
Yet night strikes them with frost-whirls and hailstorms,
 And the men want to turn around,
But the whole world is wretched and doomed.
Here wealth is fleeting,
 Here friend is fleeting,
 Here man is fleeting,
Here woman is fleeting;
Soon this earth will be as hollow as my heart.

Thus advised the experienced Wanderer
Knowing the hardship, the carnage
 And the fall of his dear friends:

 The virtuous keep their faith inside;
A good warrior makes his grief an inside cry, and
The forlorn tread on the ground, but soar in the sky.

UNTITLED



That which is prevented
each day
from entering our human realm
descends gently
into the memory of our being
residing there-patient
until the moment it becomes the soil
moving terror to another side
where it changes into the flowers
opening on an apple tree

Poem from Dance Upon the Territory
Interpreted in English by Elizabeth Brunazzi

THEORY OF ESSENTIAL STORAGE



Public space makes privacy possible. The average kitchen is a Pittsburgh in miniature. Find places for little things: papers, books, pipes, guns. Bathrooms are out of date. A manufactured climate is not a flaw of the home. Refrigerators will cool our items, offloading their warmth to us, before we dial in our own reciprocal heat. City dwellers are unlikely to leave windows open for long. It's obvious, an afterthought; feel the walls. Soot is why. We dress for it. Someone's crying in the hall, in the peephole, on the phone. A meltdown already in the works is our introduction. We urge her to alert authorities once I vouch for the ferocity of her thoughtlessly opened takeout's flames. It's the landlord she fears most. No surprise. I linger, eager, at every knocked-on door just to glimpse the furnishings.

*Contains language from Wright, Henry, and Nelson George.
Tomorrow's House: a Complete Guide for the Home-builder.
New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945. Print.*

ASHGROVE



*Thus fought the heroes, tranquil their admirable
hearts, violent their swords, resigned to kill and to die.
– Jorge Louis Borges, The Garden of Forking Paths*

stoic labyrinthine sparrow-bone;
there is a slalom down your gullet,
bayonet curled around your neck,
you have a beak, you are lusty-smooth,
have rubble for skin, an emaciated infinity:
everything is fractal so eat your words
they are you are your rusty toenails
every footstep is a holocaust there's
genocide under your neurons,
watch them flex and shiver.

you have soft plastic lips,
there is a vacuum in your gullet,
a box cutter carving
through your adam's apple:
epileptics are just indecisive,
when they seize hold their tongues
they are their words you are a god
are oppenheimer and shiva,
pick favorites it doesn't matter
it doesn't matter it doesn't matter
flex and shimmer we are just neurons
flatlines are not ghoulish nooses,
paraplegics are just cowards,
move with conviction each step
is a genocide, you have wooden
teeth and woolen wings,
thrashes are a velveteen sunset
an edible fog, your stomach
is a stomach do not eat the fog
just know that someday it will kill you
softly and swiftly.

it doesn't matter it doesn't matter:
infinity is not recursive
alive is not our default state
once is the only route
blood makes the blade holy
if you cut me i will bleed,
i won't blame you just know
you were only ever
that very moment.

WAITRESS



After she railroaded
the plate hot from the lamp
down the counter under

the sad, mystical pies
that shyly avoided
the law of gravity

by hanging sideways high
on the wall, though only
in reflection, she whisked

the dish around as if
in hope of giving it
flight, then set it before

the man who even now
seemed to be engulfing
the booth. And then she rushed

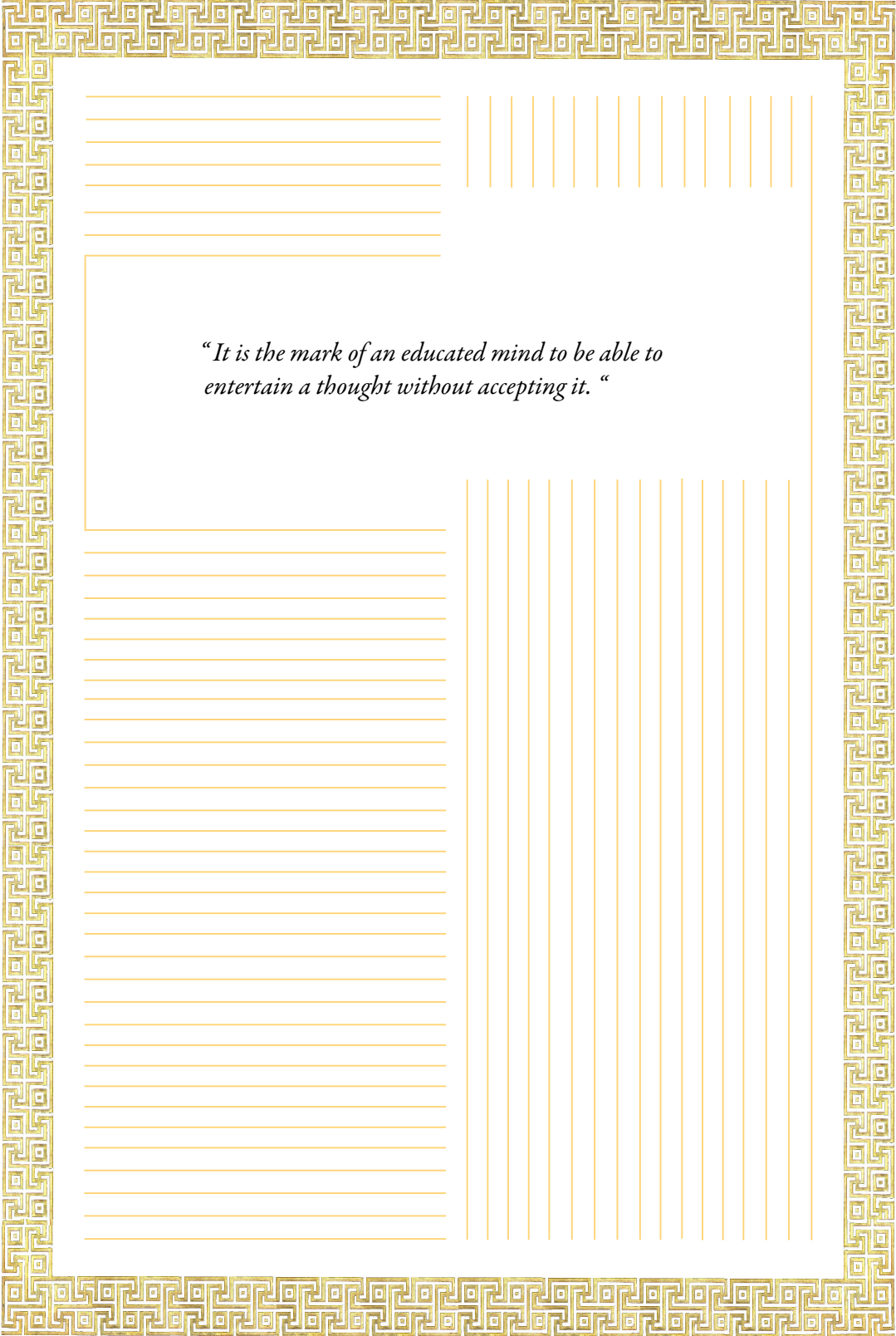
back to clear up the spot
where a half-finished cup
of coffee stewed a swamp-

brown and composting
butt of a cigarette
next to an old napkin

with small globs of donut
jelly on it it. And then
it was breaktime. And she

stood outside by the sign,
lighter and pack of smokes
in hand, and silently

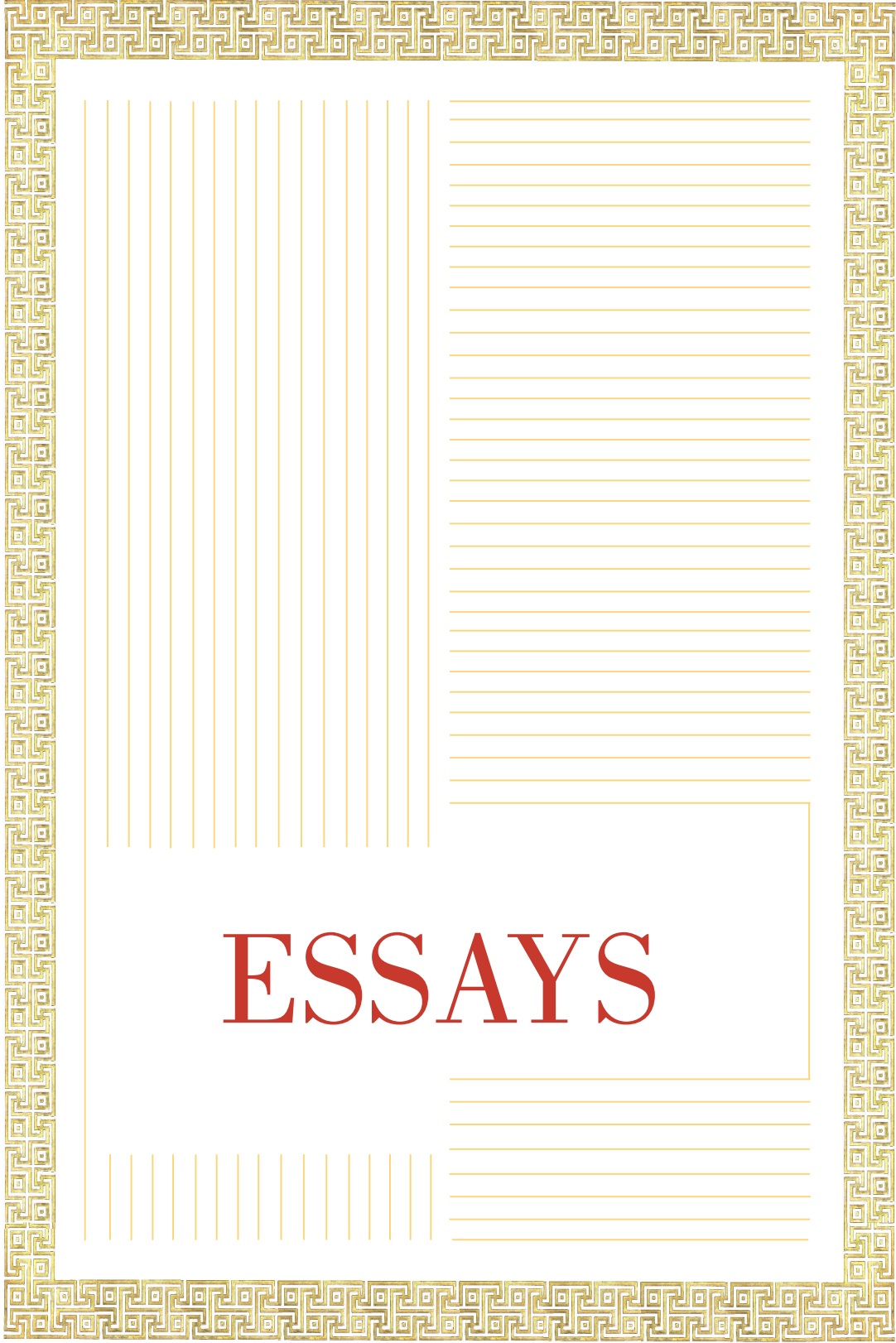
sucked and blew the blue curls
of smoke toward the neon
that blots out the star light.



Horizontal ruled lines on the left side of the top section and vertical ruled lines on the right side of the top section.

“It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.”

A large rectangular area with horizontal ruled lines on the left side and vertical ruled lines on the right side, providing space for writing or notes.



Vertical lines on the left side of the page, and horizontal lines on the right side, forming a grid-like structure for writing.

ESSAYS

Horizontal lines on the right side of the page, and vertical lines on the left side, forming a grid-like structure for writing.

THE SOUND OF THUNDER

AN ESSAY ON THE ART OF NOISE MUSIC

Pick a genre, any genre. Maybe Hip-Hop, Dance, Metal or Jungle -- whichever genre you can name it can be described in a short sentence. Sounds fairly simple; *“Metal is a ‘heavier’ branch of rock music, characterised by complicated rhythms, fast or heavily technical playing and often loud/screamed vocals, typically accompanied by guitars and drums.”* You can probably do this for just about any genre. However try describing Noise music and you’ll be at a loss for words. I suppose you could say its *“Uh, got lots of free-improvisation and stuff.”* But that doesn’t give you an idea about how it sounds.

Noise music is one of the hardest to define branches of music out there for one very big reason: in Noise anything goes. Unlike other genres there are no rules or common themes, generally accepted techniques or styles. To Noise, any sound is allowed, any technique fair game and no subject, act or idea taboo. It is often used as a wide blanket term for many types of similar, yet radically different styles and subgenres of music. For example it is often used to label music from the *Musique Concrete*, *Fluxus*, and *Sound Art* genres.

Noise is also used to describe a specific style of music, a relatively popular yet also relatively underground genre,

one that many listeners (and artists) find a technically and creatively daunting area of music to travel in because of what Noise allows for; a Noise artist can do anything they want. What this translates to in music can be some of the most technically complicated but musically simple genres. Common staples of some of well-known Noise groups/artists (such as *Incapacitants*, *Hijokaidan* or *Merzbow*) can include heavy use of distortion, feedback and sine waves or even white noise. Already you may have an idea of what Noise Music is. You're possibly thinking of the static on a television or perhaps the ringing in your ears after a loud bang. Try combining those noises and then amplifying them by a billion.

For the first time listener, they'll most likely not actually hear anything other than "*just noise*." It's often an abrasive and powerful sound. It can be harsh, hard-cutting, even painful at times, but can also find territory in calming down-tempo ambient spaces.

Unlike with other genres for many people, if not all, Noise is something you can't just '*get*' right away. For most it simply doesn't resonate instantly. This is understandable and is one of the genre's biggest problems; it's something you have to commit to. It might take a few minutes, or even a few days

a few days but for those that do listen to the unrelenting wall of sound attacking their ears, there will soon begin to develop an understand of what the appeal is. It's a pseudo-religious experience when you first *click*. Inside of the waves of powerful chaos, there lies hidden sounds -- hidden meaning, and new experiences.

Listening to Noise is not *just* listening to it, it is walking around in it. One could listen to a song five times and keep hearing something that went unnoticed on the first, second or even third listen, some aspect or technique that changes a perspective on the entire piece. This almost meditative state of active listening that Noise can require is the core of the force it holds over its followers. Were it a movie you could say Noise has a strong cult-following. Noise fans are some of the most die-hard and rabid in the world. Once it grabs you, it changes you forever and then never lets go.

It sounds like some empty praises from nothing but a fan boy, but many people, at least in the number I've spoken to, report that after they became fans of Noise Music, their perspectives on what constitutes as "music" (how to define it) and sounds in general had changed dramatically. For example, you hear a train pulling into a station.

In the ear of average listener it's just a sound, just a bi-product that goes mostly ignored. To a Noise listener, however, it's music to their ears - literally. Every iota of the sound is dissected and devoured. The individual nuances become pronounced themes and the sound of a train is felt in an entirely different manner; it stops being background sound and starts being a piece, as if composed and played by the industrial being that produced it.

This perspective on sound creates a gap between other genres (and listeners.) The environment where literally anything is allowed can be an alien and anxious one for many people. However, I do believe that given enough time to understand it many people can appreciate Noise Music in one form or another. The freedom in Noise is its biggest appeal. This freedom causes Noise to blend and overlap with other genres and is the reason it is often compared to (or flat-out called) Sound Art.

When it comes to art, popular tastes can change slowly or violently over time. The music popular today may sound too "noisy" for people just twenty or thirty years ago and *their* music would sound just as uncomfortable to listeners who came before them. For example, Beethoven's

Grosse Fuge "sounded like noise" to those who first heard it in 1825. I think that as time goes on, as electronics (that is to say, electronic and untraditional instruments) become the standard in the creation of music and more emphasis is put on improvisational ability, both in live and recorded performances, we could see trends turning towards a more widely accepted appreciation for Noise Music. In a way, music has been evolving to that state. Luigi Russolo, who is considered the great-great-great grandfather of Noise Music, definitely thought that Noise was the music of the future. He reasoned in a manifesto, *The Art of Noises*, that the industrialisation of the world he lived in had allowed for an appreciation, in modern society and its people, of a larger array of sounds. In a sense, he was arguing that being accustomed to a new industrial landscape altered the musical palettes of those living there.

"The variety of noises is infinite. If today, when we have perhaps a thousand different machines, we can distinguish a thousand different noises. Tomorrow, as new machines multiply, we will be able to distinguish ten, twenty, or thirty thousand different noises, not merely in a simply imitative way, but to combine them according to our imagination."

- Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises*

So, while I understand the reasoning that Noise is the music of the future, instead I would argue that Noise is more the music of the present. Its not ahead of any curves, nor is it behind them. Noise is more of a reflection of the current times, and is representative of the people and societies at the time. This comparison of Noise Music to some kind of societal-mirror has been made before. It's been argued, specifically by Jacques Attali (in his book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*), that Noise, as a genre, acted as a litmus test for what was and what was not either politically valid or socially correct, it measured the society it was in and acted as a force of change.

Naturally, the free-form and lawless jungle that Noise is allows people to be truly honest, creatively speaking. They don't need to filter their ideas via genre-restrictions and that is why it pours so undiluted from them. Examine Noise music from Russolo's time, compare it with Noise some decades later and the differences are so vast you could easily allocate the two into their own genres. At the same time, while this clear distinction is created over time, there is also a sense of that whatever it is you're hearing it's Noise. To put it in clearer terms; it sounds completely different, but it feels just the same. Similar to the evolution of a

species, the various generations resemble the past, they're clear where they come from and what they are. But I digress.

Noise is the reflection of the times it's made in. It's the clearest expression for its creators. It's not always necessarily exploring anything new but exploring the same ground with new people. This is why I consider it as music of the present, of the now. Even today Noise can be found hidden amongst modern musical styles. For example, Rihanna did a song not too long ago which had been produced with what you could either call clear *Acid House* influences or the sound of subtle Noise music in distorted lead synth lines that, left on their own, could constitute as Noise. It shows that put into the right context and jived up a little, you can sell Noise to many more listeners than you would think. It can be heard a little further back in time too, Jimi Hendrix's heavy use of feedback and distortion on guitars could be seen as a relatively recent example of Noise influence in popular music.

Noise remains, despite it's large global following, a relatively unheard of genre. It's been in all over the globe and developed a fan base everywhere it goes and yet it's still likely the most underground music in use today. As

such, it has yet to be totally commercialised and sold unlike, well, every other genre out there. Henry Rollins, in his column for LA Weekly, described Noise as “... *more punk rock than punk rock ever was...*” [1] because it doesn't have the mainstream appeal to even play on the radio.

You could argue that Noise can't become mainstream because it is unlike other genres in the sense that it has no clear visual identity. It just isn't able to have one. What I mean is this: imagine metal, you can picture how a typical metal-head might dress, and this is applicable to many other genres as well. These distinctions and identities give it a commercially viable way to sell itself, an image. Due to how wide a genre it is, Noise doesn't have this kind of identity: there is no way to 'look' like a Noise fan. Of course one may also argue that it isn't commercially viable because “*it sounds like crap!*” Although the music was never enough alone to sell *anything*, Noise included.

Despite this the genre has shown an increasing commercialisation in recent years, from around the mid-80s and onward. It saw a particular boon with the popularisation of the internet and file-sharing, perhaps reflective of the sharing scene that exists within

Noise involving bootlegs and the trading of valuable rare copies.

It used to be a quiet, underground scene hidden away in some unknown clubs, but suddenly, through the internet, it could grasp a global audience in a way it never had previously and spread further than ever before. In a way, making it one of the biggest things you've probably never heard of... As unfortunately hipster as that sounds. Pretension aside, Noise has steadily grown in size and potential as what Luigi Russolo described as the music of the future, a music for the post-modern ear.

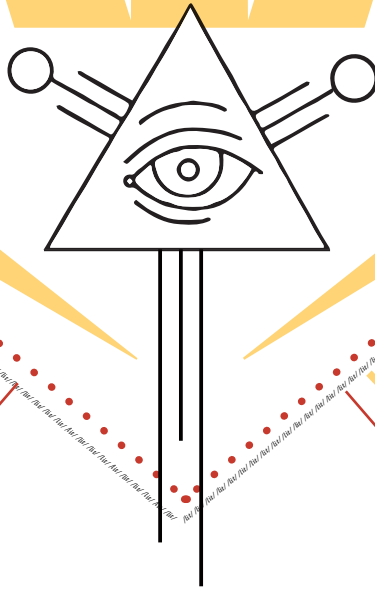
Sources:

[1] http://blogs.laweekly.com/westcoastsound/2012/10/henry_rollins_the_column_noise.php

Further Reading:

'The Art of Noises' ('L'Arte dei Rumori'), Luigi Russolo (1913)

'Noise: The Political Economy of Music', Jacques Attali (1977)



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