

My story, I'm embarrassed to admit, is infinitely revisable.

-Jonathan Baumbach

Your story is mine, monsieur, and the story of ten or twelve hundred young fellows besides who come from the country to Paris every year.

-Balzac

Academe

They're afraid of him, you know.

Yeah? Why?

You know why.

No I don't.

C'mon.

Really, I don't.

He paused, exhaling rather loudly, as if auditioning for the role of Exasperated Man on the Left. Well, you know. Here's the— He tugged at the neck of his pale green t-shirt, which was really quite talented, an expensive boutique item that did a splendid Thrift Store imitation. I guess I really don't know either, he said.

She raised her eyebrows, ambiguously.

But it's true all the same. They're scared of him.

You can just feel it.

Yeah. I know what you mean.

They were talking about Jomma. Doctoral candidates in Interdisciplinary Studies, they were always talking about someone. This place is loaded with freaks, you'd hear them say. Just loaded.

The assignment, in Dr. Kuhn's *The Rise of Individualism and the Bourgeoisie*, which wasn't meant to be an ironic title, was to speak to the class for five or ten minutes about your research. By "research" the professor meant either the paper you were working on for his course or, in a larger sense, your dissertation, though in practice they tended to be the same thing (a Venn diagram would reveal significant overlap). Graduate students can shoehorn just about any assignment into their ongoing thesis research. One of the persons speaking, for instance, was writing her dissertation on Nicholas Biddle and his able management of the Bank of the United States; in the previous semester, she'd used Chapter 7, an excursus concerning Biddle's great uncle, who pioneered the medical use of tobacco smoke enemas, in Dr. Knipp's African Fiction seminar.

I can't believe he kept talking, you know?

He just kept talking and talking, he said.
An hour?
70 minutes, actually.
My god. And that poem... The ellipses rolled off
her tongue like intransigent Skittles.
I thought Dr. Kuhn was gonna *shit* himself.
I know.
What was that one line—
—I know, she said, putting her messenger bag down.
It was...hold on...almost got it. She closed her eyes. After a
few moments, a thin smirk climbed out of her mouth and
pulled back her teeth, like a dental hygienist inspecting for
plaque. Yeah, here it is. *I'm a titty-sucker, / I'm a mean
mutha-fucka*. That's all I can remember.
Well, he said, admiring his own incipient apercu,
that's more than enough, isn't it?
True. What was he thinking?
Who knows... He laughed, mirthlessly, readjusting
the awkward heft of the seven books he'd been carrying.¹
I mean, maybe in Fr. Ong's Orality seminar.
Yeah, *maybe*. Upon further reflection, he added: But
still, no. No way. An entire *hour*. That's whack.
No, you're right. He spoke for an *hour*? And no one
shut him up...
Kuhn's scared of him, like I said.
Yeah, you're right. Sr. Kolmer wouldn't have stood
for it, though. That's for damn sure.
No kidding. Or Dr. Barmann. He was in the
seminary once, long time ago, did you know that?
No, yeah. Yeah, I think I did know that...
This was a Jesuit university. Still is. The nature of
their studies was entirely secular (except insofar as the quest

¹ Four of them (thin hardcovers with almost impressively bland titles and cover designs) were for various courses, texts written by his teachers and his teachers' friends and his teachers' teachers. The fifth and sixth, works of modern German philosophy, were chosen on the basis of being (or rather, appearing to be) the most abstruse and obfuscatory he could find and which, therefore, presented the best possible version of himself to onlookers, a semiotics of pretension; these texts roosted on top of the pile, naturally. The seventh book, sandwiched dead center, was a recent novel about a poor woman in Carolina who, having lost a family member, finds something much more poignant: the courage to love again. It had a sticker in the upper right hand corner, white with a ring of orange, and three portentous words emblazoned in the center, which he made sure onlookers could not see (hence the readjustment).

for “pure knowledge” is, one might argue, a religion), but the university still had a divinity school and, though their numbers were dwindling as quickly as our national ability to perform mathematics, a few non-lay professors.

Did you get a load of Jomma’s family crest?

Yeah. What, did he make it with cardboard and magic markers?

He did, actually. He said that he made it himself, just as he gave himself his own name, because he rejects all external authority.

Oh. Well anyway, when he held it up and showed us the iconography? Then read his family motto? I almost barfed laughter.

(He noticed that she sometimes uttered statements as if they were questions, which many women do. He considered, but did not, mentioning to her that this was because women were not traditionally encouraged to share their ideas and, when they did, men tended to disregard them, which made them lack interpersonal self-confidence. He wrestled with the possibility that alluding to phallocentrism would get him somewhere with her.) Why? I mean it *was* ridiculously funny, and bathetic, but why did you specifically almost laugh/throw up?

The words? They’re lyrics from Steel Pulse. Or hold on, Black Uhuru? Some fairly popular 80s reggae band.

80s reggae is fun.

Yeah, 80s rap too. Ton Loc.

Young MC.

DJ Jazzy Jeff, Biz Markie.

Sir Mixalot.

*Mix-a-lot*², she corrected.

He shrugged, with a waving right hand motion that served, she was fairly certain, as the gesticular equivalent of “whatever.” And...De La Soul.

Good one. Yeah, pre-gangsta.

Those were fun times. *Prelapsarian*.

He winked at her and smiled, quietly acknowledging her ironic appropriation of highbrow classroom jargon within a popular culture context. She opened her mouth too, swallowing his discrete reification of her wit like a sumo

² The ostensible written/oral confusion here is actually a *functional* error.

wrestler attacking a plate of deep-fried squid entrails, but more delicately of course.

It was quite a shock to them both, the sudden awkwardness. It struck without warning, and at the height of their collective discursive strength, which is perhaps the way these things tend to work. A civilization crumbles at the height of its glory, or a great man is laid low through a single wrongfoot, because power leads to a feeling of invulnerability, which in turn creates an opportunity for oversight and failure.

The more they tried to think of new conversational lands to conquer, the more impossible it became. Self-consciousness was the cudgel that beat them silly, and because they were effete bookish types, the beating was not difficult to administer.

So he's a plagiarist then, he said, gazing nostalgically over the dialogic past.

Looks that way. Hey, I wonder what JJ would've done?

Good question.

JJ was a "cool" teacher. 80 years old. No syllabus, no homework, no assigned texts. Essays were negotiable. A haiku might do, or a video, or a concordance to a translation of a dramatic monologue rendering of a novelization-in-progress. JJ did not publish or attend conferences, did not read scholarly journals or suffer fools lightly; he was, by some margin, the most respected and intelligent member of the faculty.

He stared into the middle distance, he thought, though in point of fact he did not know what constituted the "middle," as distinct from any other subset of, distance. He tried to appear, as he often did, like a poster he'd once seen of a controversial, savvy and rather louche French critic, which meant continually raising his chin and turning his face so that people saw him from the side.

I dunno.

Me too, she said. I mean, me neither.

Hey, speaking of JJ, remember that guy... The Poet. Jomma's performance today reminded me of him.

She squiggled her eyebrows in an imitation of concern and concentration that was, in reality, merely a demonstration of her willingness to imitate. Civilians, non-academics, who might not really *get* it, who might oversimplify the matter, who might be reductive, would say that she liked him, would suggest that she touch his arm,

stroke her hair, lean back and expose her neck. But no, she didn't do that. As an added gambit, however, she scrunched her nose and index-fingered her black glasses more securely to her face.

He...okay, let's see...he always wore a big white t-shirt and a black vest. And a beret. I think? Maybe not. But he's the kind of guy that you remember wearing a beret, even if he never did. You know what I mean? He was nodding, smiling, vigorously.

Totally. She nodded and smiled back, with equal gusto, though she had no idea what he was talking about.

Anyway, vest, beret...black goatee. He was bald, balding anyway, pretty flabby. *Fat?* Heavyish anyway. Thing is, he always wore this pin on his vest. It said, and I shit you not: LIVING POET.

No.

Scout's honor.

Oh. My. God.

I know, he said, wondering how, how in god's name, this whole conversation could somehow lead toward their going out on a date. The signifiers had floated so far afield that he couldn't even see them anymore. How did people *do* it? He'd read all of Lacan, well most of it anyway, well okay, he'd skimmed some abstracts, and he'd read part of that article on Foucault, or was it Derrida?, and lots of other stuff besides, but still. *Still*, he didn't have the answers he needed. *Still*, there was an absence. So...oh yeah, and he always wore some other pin that said something about Vietnam. Excuse me, "Nam." What a tool.

A-hole, she said.

Exactly. So one day he hands out a manuscript. An *entire* manuscript, 150 pages maybe, of his own poetry.

Prisoners of laughter were making a break through her mouth, but the guards of her hand shot them down as they ran through the yard of her face and scrambled over the fortified wall of her imposture.³

It was all about "Nam" and the atrocities we...I don't know the verb here...*foisted?*

Visited?

Yes, good. Thanks. He thumbs-upped her. *Visited* upon the Vietnamese people. GIs raping young girls,

³ The imposture being that she was pretending to find the story riotous when in reality it was only mildly amusing.

Andrew Madigan

napalming quiet villages, rifle-butt-smacking the elderly, whathaveyou. Man...

Was it any good?

The poetry? Are you kidding? The writing was more grisly than the events he tried, with such utter futility, to narrate.

She smiled as thinly as a butterfly wing, and her eyes were illuminated by two extraordinarily small Japanese lanterns. He knew, therefore, that it had been worthwhile to spend the better part of a week drafting the epigram about the man's writing. Always write your material in advance, he thought. At least make an outline. Can't go in there without a battle plan and plenty of ammo.

I think I remember that guy, she said. He looked like that actor.

Which one?

Oh, you know. He's in everything. Fifty-ish, losing his hair. You know who I mean.

I think so. Yeah, he was in that movie...

Yeah, him. But I wasn't in that course you're talking about.

You weren't?

No.

Huh. Well, someone who *looked* a lot like you sat right across from me. He squinted just slightly, as if suffering through a minor gastrointestinal event. He stared through the space she was occupying as if she weren't there, though we can be fairly certain she was. Oh yeah, sorry. That *was* someone else. My bad.

No biggie.

They both started walking, though no exchange of words or even nonverbal signs had precipitated the movement. They rounded the corner, walked down the dim yellow staircase, passed through the front doors of the neo-Gothic building, descended the pristine white faux-marble external stairs, stepped over a scrim of cigarette butts sleeping like homeless people at the foot of the stairs, then headed south, on the new red brick walkway, toward the black iron fence that separated campus from the sour-milk pong of increasingly anxious city streets.

Anyway, the guy was just like Jomma. He read his "work" for, I dunno, maybe 15 minutes.

Christ. So what did JJ do? she asked.

Well, you could tell the guy was just gonna keep on reading and we were all getting pretty restless. You know that moment, in a real boring lecture or play, when everyone starts coughing, clearing their throats, moving their butts around in their chairs? Well, it started the minute he started reading and lasted the whole time. After, like, 15 or 20 minutes, JJ said: Really nice work. Let's move on.

Now that's good classroom management, she said.

You said it. Kuhn could learn a thing or three.

So no one's scared of the poet guy, though, whatever his name is.

No.

Why not, do you think?

I dunno, but they're sure afraid of Jomma. Personal politics, I guess. He angled his torso in such a way that she couldn't help but notice the profile of the German thinker festooning his topmost book.

They walked side by side, he on the right.

That's redundant, isn't it? The personal is *always* political. This was her famous blue-ribbon sound-bite, reserved for contests at the regional and state level.

Yeah, but it could be situated within a social context rather than a personal one, so I was just trying to establish a...trying to differentiate.

Oh, right.

No, but maybe you are right, sort of. It was more social politics, or political correctness. Something. Jomma gets away with everything.

Even plagiarism, she said, wittily.

Yeah. She snorted, which was supposed to suggest something ironic about Academe.

He allowed his left arm to brush against her right, for just a moment. Soon, it would begin.