

The Optimism Of Despair

by John Olson

He felt sick at heart, as if he'd just been told he'd been fired from a job to which he'd devoted 60 years of his professional life. And for no good reason; the profession no longer existed. It had slipped into obsolescence, like blacksmithing at the beginning of the 20th century. Nor was it just the loss of a profession, it was existential: the loss of a culture. As if he'd just been told that the country he emigrated from decades ago had suffered a long war and no longer existed. Its laws and constitution, libraries and universities, theatres and architecture were rubble now, fragments of concrete with welded wire mesh sticking out, broken toys, dead animals, burned forests. Just a few sad signs of life here and there, inadequate, inessential, and inopportune.

He'd taken three boxes of books to a used bookstore in the neighborhood of a city in the Pacific Northwest enriched by a large university. It had once been a vibrant, eclectic, stimulating neighborhood of exciting trends and people, intellectual eccentrics, alert and cheerful students, elegant women in black lace dresses and wizened old men with beards and long gray hair who played chess in the coffeehouses and read their poetry at night in funky bars loud with lager and talk, foosball and pool. There had been numerous coffeehouses and bars, movie theaters, record stores, newspaper and magazine stores, small, inexpensive restaurants and bookstores. Now there were just two bookstores: the big one that was aligned with the university and a used bookstore down the block with one of the best collections of books he'd ever seen. The big bookstore was no more. The building was still there, and it called itself a bookstore, and had at one time been so full of books that the titles devoted exclusively to philosophy alone required three long double-sided bookshelves. Now it was essentially a gift shop, cheesy tchotchkes and stuffed animals vastly outnumbered the few books on the few bookshelves still left at the far rear of the store.

The neighborhood was filthy. And impossible to drive in: hundreds of new restricted lanes had been added for buses and bicycles. If you spent too much time in a bus lane because you were preparing to make a right turn on a busy street you could receive a ticket in the mail because everything was surveilled. His wife had come along, for which he was grateful, as she helped with directions and could remain in the car with the hazard lights on if it became necessary to double-park. He parked the car on the main street, around the corner from the used bookstore, but when they got out and looked for the kiosk to pay for their space, they encountered a sign that offered information for paying by smartphone. But what if you don't have a smartphone, he asked. I know, his wife answered. A lot of old people have been excluded from society. Some stores had established a no-cash policy. Except for tipping the staff. They spotted a kiosk some distance up the street, and walked up to it, but the device was filthy, and appeared inoperable. So they walked back to the car, and drove around the block to park in the big bookstore's parking lot. You could park there for two hours free, which was a small blessing in what had become a raging dystopia, like the rest of the city. It also gave the impression that the bookstore had resigned itself to obsolescence, the victim of illiteracy and highly addictive electronic devices, and no longer cared, no longer pretended to be anything but a befuddled, moribund store of decorative coffee mugs and greeting cards with a few curious items in the back called books. It lacked the dignity to charge people for parking.

This is what made him feel sick. He'd devoted 60 years of his life to writing, to reading, to reviewing books, to writing articles for weeklies, to promoting the joys and endless journeys of print media, books with spines, books with catacombs and catalogues, spools of glistening enlivening prose, adventures and ladders and narrative exploits. Diagnosis, osmosis, apotheosis. Glorious ejaculations. Moony speculations. The long sweet flow of words. Whatever remained of this dying technology was finding something of a hospice service in used bookstores.

The used bookstore was surprisingly busy, and it wasn't just people there to sell their books to help augment their social security or the premium for their Medicare supplement plan, there were some younger people browsing. This was reassuring. He tried deriving some comfort from it, but couldn't, all in all, help succumbing to grief, and the inevitability of change, and the juggernaut of digitalization enveloping the world in a network of surveillance, podcasts, recipes and porn.

The bookstore offered him \$200 in cash, or \$300 in trade. He chose cash. And reduced the amount to \$197, after finding a collection of poetry by Blaise Cendrars.

At home, he set the box of books refused by the bookstore on the floor. To his right, was what he termed their mini-Kauai. The Christmas cactus exploding out of its pot and blooming soft red flowers, the two fuchsias growing robustly under the grow light and a smaller one that emerged from a cutting and was growing quite fast. He and his wife had been to Kauai a few months earlier and this zone of fertility in a dark apartment nourished by a series of grow lights was an ongoing reminder of warm tropical breezes and a primordial luxuriance of vibrant fertility. These plants were his wife's devotions. She cared for them every day, examining the soil for moisture, checking the lumens on an app. He pulled the Cendrars out of his pocket and it made him glad. This was medicine for the day's dispiriting discoveries. When the soul is in pain, the best balm is a book. And what better than the poetry of a man who — except for the loss of an arm - survived the trenches of WWI and lived large and energetically until dying in 1961 following a stroke, and who once declaimed that only a soul full of despair can ever attain serenity and, to be in despair, you must have loved a good deal and still love the world. Amen to that.

