

Today the Smell of Worms and Wet Pennies

by Josh Maday

Martin Heidegger wore hearing protection out on the tarmac at JFK. The runways were broad and he danced and leapt with the freedom of a *Cats* performer while he guided planes to the terminal. Martin Heidegger pulled double shifts: he covered for co-workers whenever possible: anything to continue his dancing. He felt electric grace gather in his hands as he handled the batons under the midday sun. Martin Heidegger disliked sunsets, though, because they signified the end of the day, the end of his dancing on the tarmac. Martin Heidegger sought a seeing for which the sun did not set. Martin Heidegger's supervisor saw how he enjoyed his work and loved to dance. A week later, Martin Heidegger was reassigned to other job duties. It is said that he developed the concept of thrownness during a stint as a third shift baggage handler. He desperately missed his dancing and for the first time saw clearly the specter of death in his periphery.

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Rousseau drove a corvette. He pronounced it kor-VAY, butchering it purposely in front of his friends. He knew his friends did not like him for it. He knew he did not like his friends anyway. Friday nights, he drove past their places and called their cell phones. They always let it go to voicemail. He knew they were inside with their wives and kids and pets, watching movies three years out of style. All they had to do was answer and ask what he was up to and say that he should stop over. He would wait three minutes and then turn into the driveway. But no one ever answered. He killed each call, threw the phone on the passenger seat, turned up the radio, and drove around alone and cried. He traced the grid of city streets and then opened it up on the country roads, sometimes turning off his lights and half-hoping to crash into a drainage ditch. He thought about speeding

into a light pole or a building, but he never had enough anger for that. He imagined that his friends would feel vindicated somehow. They would not remember how much they liked him. They would not feel a close connection of human love with him again. Besides, he didn't want to hurt himself. He loved himself too much. He only wanted his pain to cause them pain so they would realize that life is short and lonely and friends are few. But he knew it would not—they would not. So he drove around some more. He got gas and a Super Big Gulp. He poured half of the soda out and topped it off again with spiced rum. After his face had gone numb and his heart had retained an ocean of water, he drove past his friends' places again. He called one more time even though the lights had gone out inside. Still, no answer. Just voicemail and tears.

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I found Descartes in the front row of a movie theater. He was eating popcorn and watching *The Wizard of Oz*. I approached and asked his name.

Names are irrelevant, he said.

But I knew it was him. I told him that we had finished digging our way out of the mind. We have exposed every myth, every illusion. But we're tired and disoriented. We don't really care anymore if nothing is real. Illusions are real enough. We are building a new reality in our own mental image. I said, That there is no myth is the greatest myth of all.

Popcorn? he asked, holding out a bucketful.

No, thanks, I said. Don't you see? We made war on the episteme, and we won. We've dismantled the world. Everything means something different now.

Hey, I'm trying to watch a movie here, he said. Besides, I'm sick of philosophy. He leaned forward and pointed to the screen. You see there in the background? That's one of the munchkins swinging from a rope. He was depressed or angry or both and hanged himself out of revenge before they shot the scene. Crazy, huh? He grabbed a handful of popcorn and jammed it into his mouth. Little pieces clung to his mustache. The quiltwork foursome skipped on down the

yellow brick road. I love this place, he said. Everyone dies but they are still alive—they have different names, but I know it's them: I recognize their faces. He pulled a sip of soda and swished it between his teeth. Sit down, he said.

Feeling defeated, I sat, leaving an empty seat between us. The seats were soft and they reclined. The popcorn was light and well-buttered. Have you seen *The Matrix*? I asked. I think you'd like it.

He stuffed another mouthful and mumbled, Thanks, but I'm not really into Keanu Reeves.

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Harps:

seaweed hair:

floating underwater:

the sound of heaven and old TV.

Debussy sits in a coffee shop. Not drinking anything. Staring at his hands. Faux brick walls. Laminate visual acoustics over particle board. The b is p upside down, d flipped around. The italicized *b* is flat [bémol]. Close enough. Staff is a straight jacket, horizontal prison bars. Debussy is not drinking anything as he sits in the coffee shop, the café, the salon, the center for feeling busy and important while being neither. The notes swim and fly and scurry: ants erupting from a hole in the earth or the hand or the head. Emerging from the pupil of an invisible eye. Take a razor to the glossy sphere and release the clear gel filling through which pass all things seen. I approached Debussy, this my patently inappropriate way of engagement, and stood staring at him until he noticed (or at least acknowledged) my presence. Debussy pressed his lips together and looked as though he needed to yell, scream, speak. His face shivered in conflict around his mouth. I spoke first, saying, I feel like I want to know you. He looked excited and began scribbling on a piece of parchment paper, dipping his pen again and again, working

furiously. He finished and handed me the sheet. He'd drawn an ant colony. He'd littered the lineless paper with music notes that wandered according to some other logic, radiating outward from a blank, indeterminate center. He looked at me in anticipation, his face saturated with hope and desperation. But I can't read music, I said.

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Wittgenstein sat tied to a chair inside a room. The floor, ceiling, and walls were painted with emptiness, which appeared white to the seeing eye and to those experiencing the onset of death. He wore a gray shirt and faded black pants. He thought he heard someone speak. Something about escape. He could not be certain. He did not answer. He examined the rope holding him to the chair. The chair was rickety and hard enough to tear flesh. The voice again from somewhere behind him in the form of a whisper. Or someone speaking while their breath left them as they cried. Or else very hoarse so that speaking was the most painful act possible. The rope appeared well-used and faded. The sound of the voice was escape. The whisper held a question in the lift at the end. But where would they go? He did not answer. His fingers touched the rough texture of the rope pulled tightly around his body. Sometimes he felt struggle in the rope, even though he was not moving. Though he could not be certain. He sat tied to a chair inside a room painted with emptiness. He wore a faded black shirt and gray pants. He did not speak.

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Beckett struggles now and again. And again. Again. Feeling of scream in his throat. He struggles to loosen the rope tugging his arms with his shoulders. And goes still. He asks the man tied to his backside to try goddamnit try. Try. He asks where they are how they got there why he doesn't remember. The other is silent. At least say your name. The other is silent. Beckett presses his arms to his body and howls. Jerks forward repeatedly, constricting the rope against the other's chest. Forcing air from the other's mouth, he can hear it. But the voice won't engage. He goes still. Head hanging. Mock weeping wheezing trying to make it happen for real. Gives up. The

other does not answer. Rope burns raw against his skin. Raw. He looks at the walls and the floor. No shadows his eyes go out of focus they are the same color and soon the chair is on the wall and he is looking at the floor in front of him. Speak. Scream. Move. Mouth move. Howl. Move. Still. Silent.

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Bataille found a burnt orange bottle full of ecstasy in a farm field in Somewhere, Nebraska. His name affixed to the label. The directions said: TAKE THESE PILLS, AND EAT: GET THEM INSIDE YOU: ALL OF THEM AT ONCE. THEN LIE DOWN BETWEEN TWO FURROWS. FEEL THE SKY ROLL OVER YOU AND WIPE YOUR BREATH AWAY. QTY: 30. He installed an IV drip and followed the instructions. *ALL OF THEM AT ONCE*. He made love to the sky six thousand one hundred and twenty-four times. He plumbed the depths of the heavens. His veins plumped. He seized once more. And he died. It was the middle of summer.

