

Last Visit to Mauritius Island

by Kenton deAngeli

So I threw away all my stuff, because I was tired of it, and because I decided I wanted to revive the Oral Tradition. I figured if it was good enough for our ancestors, it couldn't be all that bad, not that I'm really into history or cultural stagnancy or anything; in fact, I've always believed the most important aspect of true performance literature is how it can change when it needs to, to fit the mood or the audience or time of day, or even the teller himself!

I took all the prose and shredded it, and sent the individual letters out to form whatever words they liked: absurdist manifestos in the random shuffling of landfills, or the dark, illegible bits in recycled paper. I soaked my plays in water until they were unrecognizable and submitted them to the New England Historical Society as the unpublished dramatic works of Sir Henry Walpole, blacked out all the unsent letters and mailed them to the three most attractive members of the U.S. Senate Ethics Committee, signing them only "I long for you desperately, A.T. Chapman, Chaplain, U.S. Army. The poems I cut up and dropped into the river next to the park, one line at a time, but the river didn't care much for them because it had been there forever, and knew more than I did, and probably found my imagery overwrought and my themes not sufficiently aquatic.

I finished most of this by early afternoon — it's amazing what a pair of scissors and a clear sense of purpose can do to one's productivity — and it felt good, like cigarettes are supposed to make you feel, like clear, fresh air, like I'd sloughed off all my dead skin and lost ten pounds.

It wasn't that I thought it was all bad — there were some parts I quite liked, actually — but the endings kept changing, and

they were always pretty depressing, and I was tired of going back and rewriting them.

Basically I was sick of feeling like a douchebag, for several reasons I'll probably list later. Also, someone pretty important told me once that what writers are — the underlying truth of their identity, what their actual nature finally boils down to — is pretty liars. And I wanted to lie to people's faces.

Love letters, of course, I burned — but I didn't tell her about those because I didn't think she had heard about the Revitalization of the Oral Tradition and the Death of the Written Word, and probably wouldn't have appreciated how it necessitated I destroy all her work, too.

I figured for the sake of the discipline, though, I should probably inform her of these exciting new developments in the world of literature, and I had to visit her anyway because she had a number of my possessions and I needed to get them back so I could destroy them, the only remaining writings of some person I used to be, who believed in several useless and unchanging things, who wrote turgidly and without context and who also believed firmly in ideas like love and beauty.

I walked there, because I believed a short constitutional never did anyone any harm, and I stopped at a bar on the way because I had been mistaken. The walk was one I hadn't taken in a while, and I had been thinking about memory, and how strange it can be — how emotions are made safe and dull with frequent thought, and worn down to such familiarity that they are no longer felt, only remembered — memories of themselves, harmless. But memory can be vicious, too, and I felt that, along those familiar sidewalks; how the truly dangerous things are those you don't think about, the ones you've buried, or tried to forget — they can lie quietly along old paths, lurking, predatory things, gleefully springing from their overgrown captivity and lunging straight for the jugular, as clear and forceful as when they were first formed, immediate and overwhelming, and suddenly making a drink a very good idea.

The bartender was one I knew — we had gone there often, before. He asked me how I was doing and I told him. I ordered a drink and he told me no one ever tells him stories with happy endings; they're always sad stories, with sad endings. I told him I didn't think that's what bars were there for, really: stories like that don't need alcohol, and dark, and strangers; but I figured I'd give it a shot, in the spirit of my new craft, and tell him something uplifting. At this point though I'd only been a follower of the Oral Tradition since that morning, so I wasn't very good at it, and the thing about truth in storytelling is that the characters have to be real enough that people will believe in them, and characters with that kind of veracity often choose their own endings, regardless of what the storyteller wants. I ended up telling the bartender a story with a fairly tragic ending, and he smiled and polished the bar and understood, and I sat there a moment to finish my drink and the goldbright afternoon sunlight it held. I told him I'd come back after I'd practiced more, and was a master of the Oral Tradition, and could end things however I wanted to. He wished me luck and I put on my jacket and left again to the dangerous streets, stepping deliberately, and pulling my eyes carefully along the ground.

She found me in front of her building. I hadn't noticed her approach — I had been intent furtively encouraging the birds roosting above the entrance to weave into their nest my collected memoirs, which were, granted, slight, and she startled me with a close "Hello." I turned to her, and her posture was slightly bent, and her fingers were unconsciously at the hem of her shirt, and her mouth was a small, crooked, gorgeous thing, and I thought about the whole Memory idea again, and wished I had stayed another drink or two.

I told her what I was doing and she thought a moment, and then told me shitting in the woods was also good enough for our ancestors, and I didn't know what to say so I told her maybe I'd do that, too, and she halfway believed me.

We stood there, parting the passers-by, and I asked her if I could come up. She told me "Sure," but she wasn't looking at me;

she was following the cars in their low, rumbling motion, she was studying the light of the crosswalk, and how it was red, and then not.

In the elevator we looked at corners, the numbers of the floors, the carpet's silver shoe-scuffed gradients, and I realized she'd be perfect for the Oral Tradition. Because I've always been a sucker for aesthetics, and the prettiest way I've ever heard a language spoken is from her mouth when sick, when you can almost hear the words vibrating against her sinuses. The way she relishes it, how the syllables scratch their way up her throat to gather slow in her mouth, and then roll out, liquid, always kind of broke my heart, to hear. But she's a terrible liar. And I didn't really want her to be sick any more, not at least if I could help it.

She opened the door and put down her things without checking if I was still behind her and disappeared into the back. I looked around the place, my hand held against the sunlight, which shone through the windows at a blinding yellow angle. I knew this place well, these furnishings, and I felt suddenly unwelcome among so many familiar things, like a friend who promised to visit and hasn't. They sat there reproachfully, and I put my hands in my pockets and turned my back to the window.

She came back with my things carelessly in her hand, and they looked so forlorn, wrinkled and long-unread, that I couldn't quite stand to leave yet. I watched her hold them and didn't move; I warmed my hands through my pocket linings and squinted at the sunlight.

I had a lot of things to say to her, I guess, so I didn't say anything, really, and we stood there until she asked if I wanted coffee. I shrugged, and she turned to the kitchen and put down the sheaf of papers. I looked at them from where I was standing, the last copies of everything, and then I looked at her reaching for the cabinet. Her shirt had pulled up from the curve of her back, and the hair shaken from her eyes was gleaming red with the sun, and it was suddenly there again, so easily I wondered I hadn't noticed it before: the person who had written the things on the countertop, and why.

It found me the same way gravity does, when you are balancing on something narrow and high, and it realizes all at once it is not doing its job, and reaches up to snatch you back to itself, just as you'd almost believed you've escaped its embrace, jealous and long and powerful. Her hand was searching in the high darkness of the cupboard and she had stretched to the tips of her feet, and it was so familiar I knew exactly the things she needed to hear, and how to say them, just as I had known exactly where to find in the warm dark her scars with my fingers, and how to pull at them to bring her closer.

And I was going to say the things that would fix everything — the words were there, perfect, waiting a breath — but, squinting and blinded, I instead tripped spectacularly on the coffee table, bringing her grandmother's vase to a scattered fractal death on the floor, and the moment died, having been constructed too delicately for such crashing noise and violence.

It's not that I was drunk, why I tripped over the table — I had been too busy at the bar wrestling with the Oral Tradition to drink — but I've never really understood grace on anything but a vague conceptual level, and she knew that, and was unsurprised. I apologized, crouching there in the shards of the shattered thing, and she sighed and told me she wasn't interested in that, that she just wanted to forget, really.

And I said no no no that's not the point at all — you have to keep telling the stories, that's how it works. She didn't say anything, she just looked at me, and I remembered that horrible feeling I'd had, before, when she looked at me, like I was on the island with the dodos, back when they were still alive, and I had found one of the last of them, and it looked at me, perhaps finally understanding the import of the ugly, heavy thing I held in my hands, and I pulled the trigger, helplessly, not wanting to, but because we were both there, and there wasn't anything else we could do.

I looked at the papers again. Were I a better liar, I would have had some really critical revelation here about remembering the

people we used to be and how important they were, because they were so simple and delicate and hopeful and et cetera but really it's just that I'm afraid of all indicators of change.

I've always been terrified about emotions; not about feeling them, but because I can never escape that I will not feel them forever, the fact that at some point in the future they will inevitably be less intense, that I will wear them down like memories, or move on, or forget why, and time will progress until they are only a thought, or an image, or a scent, and the memory that they were once everything.

And I rubbed the warm throb of my shin and realized I had lost the purpose that had brought me here, that I didn't know what to do anymore, really, and that I wouldn't ever know, probably, so I left the papers and the table and the vase and her and all the people we used to be, and I didn't know how to say goodbye, so I told her how in the future all these things will still be there, but maybe they'll somehow be okay. And she hadn't been listening to the progression of my thoughts, obviously, but I got the feeling she somehow understood, or at least wanted me to leave, so I did, being sure to say a polite and solemn goodbye to her things.

I should probably admit I wasn't quite honest, earlier, about the bar. I didn't mean to be, but truth is often something different than you think, and rarely so simply as happy or sad. The ending was sad, I wasn't lying about that, but it was happy, too — because it was true, and happiness is never simply there; it is something we have to find, and we have to laugh, because there is nothing else to do.

The bartender had asked me to tell him a happy story, that afternoon, and I had thought of all the prettiest lies I could.

"This is a story," I had told him, as he absentmindedly rubbed his towel across the deep brown of the bar, as businessmen ate their small lunches, as the sidewalks outside menaced, "of two people who are perfectly well-adjusted. They come from similar

socio-economic backgrounds, and neither have ever seriously disbelieved in the existence of love."

The bartender was skeptical: too many stories he'd heard started in this fashion and ended as the worst tragedies imaginable. He gestured with his towel, by way of illustration, to a thin man in the corner staring miserably into a drink. But I assured him I had no intention of telling him a sad story, and he grunted and let me continue.

"And so they meet, and find each other amiable and attractive, and they both know without a doubt that the other would be a good companion for as long as they live, and would probably love the other so sincerely that when one died, the second would not be far behind, and that if they ever decided to have children they would be intelligent and well-behaved and grow up to be incredibly successful. In fact, there is no doubt whatsoever that the both would live happily and feel completely fulfilled, just in the fact of being with each other."

The bartender was all right with this, and he wanted to know what happened next. I started to tell him, but I realized I didn't know myself, so I sat there a bit and listened to the low rumble of the traffic outside, and the low murmur of businessmen eating their lunch, and I wondered if I should consider going into business, if the Oral Tradition thing didn't work out, and what I would do as a businessman, but then I remembered I had scrawled ridiculous genitalia over all the copies of my professional resumé and thrown them from the windows of a city bus, and watched them twist and fly and fall to land like slow, obscene birds.

"So?" he asked, holding the towel still, in suspense.

And I realized where I was, and what I was doing, and what the ending had to be.

"You're not going to like it."

He told me to tell him, that he didn't care, that it was unfair to leave it unfinished.

"Well, they don't fall in love."

He looked at me.

“Why not?” he felt betrayed, and his hands gripped the towel tightly, because he had trusted me, and because stories should not end this way.

I told him that they couldn't have, that it would never have happened, because there wouldn't have been any fun in it.

And I almost laughed, because there wasn't anything else to do, and because it was true.

