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The Varied Lessons of Life Through 20<sup>th</sup> Century Authors, or L'Ecole de la Vie



This semester is my last at NYU, and with that, I've been reflecting on my time during college and my formative years as I enter some semblance of adulthood.

I consider myself someone who is always hungry for knowledge. Each topic I encounter, I'm driven to gain some understanding, perhaps it will help me one day, or the nuance can simply elevate my personal awareness. This has led me to intake a great deal of things; a voracious reader, movie lover, ravenous about politics, TV watcher, aware of pop culture, sports, music from many eras, graphic novels, fashion, the list goes on and on. I have an unquenchable thirst for information and hope that what I absorb and learn will be of use to me one day in my quest for success, or of the higher level in my journey. Fortunately for me I was raised in a major metropolis where all these things and more were available to me.

As a native of New York City who was born only ten minutes from NYU's 'Campus', it shocks quite a few that I choose to remain in my hometown for college. After jumping around to a number of schools for elementary and middle, I landed at the Churchill School where I spent most of middle and high school. That time also brought a flourishing of my academic abilities, where I went from disengaged and confused to the sharpest student in my classes, and seemed thoroughly set on following my favorite school subject, science, with college curriculum in the sciences or engineering, until a flurry of internships turned me off from science and astrophysics and pointed me more towards business.

Allow me to digress into the decision for a moment. I had a place in one of the City's, if not the Country's most prestigious science internships, researching at the American Museum of Natural History. During the years prior to admittance to the research level, it was required all prospective interns take courses after school, and along the way I encountered an instructor whose job as astrophysicist had led her to positions at some highly esteemed academic institutions. One day, she told a story almost as an anecdote or offhand remark, and revealed that a project she had spent almost seven years of her career on, measuring and collecting data from

star images, had recently been performed again with more accuracy than she had been able to do it by a machine. My heart sank, and prior to the summer institute which would prep us for breaking off into research teams, I interned at a hedge fund with a slick CIO. The position brought the concept of finance and business as a career path, previously perceived as an amorphous degree for the douchebags of America, was in fact a golden ticket to a lux lifestyle.

My application to Stern was declined, but was offered a spot in SPS with the major of my choice. A lifelong athlete and sports fan, I considered and researched sport management, unaware to that point that it was a thing people studied in college. Quickly I was captured by lectures given by young and knowledgeable industry professionals, also sport fans and athletes their whole lives, and after not long, the degree of complexity expanded, and I was fully immersed in business world of sports, understanding the depths of a field I had only thought was comprised what I saw on TV. I felt myself dive in, astonished each time I would uncover an industry, niche, or graft of useful knowledge.

My childhood love of baseball which had waned as I stopped participating in Little League and travel baseball, despite how good I was at America's favorite pastime. But it was had been replaced in kind by intense love for the game of basketball. Not only the NBA and its various avenues, but to play a casual game or a playoff game for my high school, I felt the freedom that had been described as the "beautiful game". I was engaged by the unique style everyone could imbue their game with, and Five-as-One was not just some concept of sharing the ball; I grew to the tendencies of my friends and teammates, and learned how to coalesce with shooters, slashers, floor generals, defenders, and countless other profiles of player.

During my Sophomore year, I was fortunate enough to be accepted to attend the spring semester in Paris with NYU. It came at a much-needed time; between class, school work, my

restaurant job trying to save tuition money, other professional obligations, commuting and living in my family home, and a rapidly-deteriorating long-distance relationship, it reached the point at which each day felt like a race with starting and finish line being my bed, and I didn't have a day off for nine weeks straight.

France proved to be the experience I had envisioned and everything more. My first time in Europe, one of my few times even outside the country, I used my acumen for New York City to acclimate to the idiosyncrasies of Paris and the larger metropole; the train system, the language, the food, the sprawling and various neighborhoods and people who lived there. Academically, I felt a return to many of the skills and class subjects which had fed my other personal interests besides 8a.m. financial accounting class. Language, film study, the history of France and Islam, and exploration of 'What is Technology?'; things which aimed not to teach me some skill or attune me to a buzzword, but instead to give me some understanding of a less "essential" facet, to perhaps even change how I think more broadly than in a boardroom. As a philosophy major explained on an early walking tour, "to study philosophy is to teach your brain a new way of intaking information. A new lens, or way of thinking".



Taken While Perched on a Parisian Roof

As well, I felt life breathed back into my social ability and persona. My busy schedule and the fact that I lived at home in New York had proven to be immense barriers to the NYU social scene I had already found to be frigid and inaccessible, especially when it comes to keeping your pool of friends within the scope of people who would go and study sports business or law; no writers, philosophers, theater freaks, art history snobs, filmmakers; with me meeting a succession groups comprised of some combination almost immediately upon arriving in France. Restaurant co-workers, either language barriers kept us from conversing, and most of the remainder of the staff was “real adults”, people in their late 20s and 30s hustling at acting or art or music, and while they appreciated I had things to say, didn’t invite me into the family, leaving that to be another place I could feel on the outs. But suddenly I had been presented with a new

pool of people to play with and to learn about. Many referred to study abroad as boarding school even though we didn't all live in the same place for the simple fact that it was a return to the feeling of being left along without adults.

Although aged and shabby, my dorm in the 15<sup>eme</sup> arrondissement proved cozy, and with my dorm being a part of the University of Paris' international students housing campus, was alive with students from all over the world, many different universities, many different reasons for coming to that city. Ingratiation with social groups from the Cité allowed me to know which houses to be and where, where parties were and free beer. To those there with NYU who had kept their circles of convenience within their classmates, they looked to me as the passport to this city and the various 'underground' elements, be that parties or other things, and I finally felt the useful nature in home-field advantage I had anticipated about going to college in my hometown.

My life slowed a bit in France. It was a joy to return from class in the afternoon and simply pass out while relaxing or reading Jack Kerouac; waiting to cook dinner in the communal kitchen, conversing with my dorm mates, or for friends to finish class. I would walk from class to different places, different museums, take different trains, see different neighborhoods. Sit at a café, drink a café, find a park, or a creative little boutique teeming with the intricacies of contemporary French taste, have lunch, maybe take a cigarette from a friend, sit by the Seine as the sun goes down, then walk home. I wanted to soak it all in. I had mastered New York. I knew every inch of the subway and the rhythm to the traffic and stoplights that had led me to absurdly fast commuting times via cycling, trying to best my previous trip and get to the next place in the concrete jungle with time to spare. Paris was new to me, and every inch of that city (and country) had a gorgeous design. It ached that I couldn't soak it all in, or simply disappear into the continent for longer than my visa would allow.



The Seine at Sundown

So I took each chance I could to venture deeper into France. Nice, Menton, Provence, Avignon, Son St. Michel, etc. NYU's cultural programming was ripe to be used, since I had accidentally missed all the sign-ups, I needed to just show up at the Gare (train station) at the uncomfortable hour of 6:45 in the morning and take the spot of someone who promised themselves they wouldn't oversleep, but had. With me swapped in for someone's "best friend", and this scholastic amalgam would board the train and quickly get antsy, with those who hadn't met yet quick to acquaint while the group plotted what ridiculous things to do while NYU was putting us in a hotel and serving us dinner with two glasses of wine each.

Unfortunately, a semester is only four and a half months, and I eventually needed to return home. Feeling some clarity, I only lasted a bit longer back in my restaurant job, which at that point had become more energy drain than income source. Walking off in the middle of a shift because I need to do school work urgently was one of the first times in my life that I had quit anything, but for every hour I spent stomping over the tile, killing myself for a restaurant

which couldn't even give me the shifts which accommodated my class schedule and preferences despite been there since open and tenure of nearly three years, I valued myself more as Gardner Frankel the student and eventual success than I did to be Gardner Frankel the hardest working food runner the managers knew. The following semester proved to be a shock; experiencing less of a scramble during the New York Spring was something I hadn't felt in many years.

That time as actually when I first read *Between the World and Me*, in senior year of high school. I remembered the lessons in a broad way, as well as some beautiful and painful memories of Howard University for Coates, but revisiting it four years later reminded me of the details of the story being told and why those bits are what comprises so many essential factors of the lessons passed from father to son. I was also reintroduced to the flow of Ta-Nahisi Coate's prose, and enjoyed having since seen him on television and also speak in person, and I felt some of my sense of duty to justice in the world renewed.

Since my time as a know it child, I've since reflected on the limits to my knowledge at age 18, despite growing up in a big city, being a good student, being purposefully aware, trying to soak in all the culture I could, and pertinently, in spite of feeling aware of the breadth of injustices our nation has been a part of. Since, I've had my views deepened by friends who study or are impassioned by issues like this, spent time in a country where racism and class differences have different meanings and implications, taken courses on the histories of various migrations of people, and through it stayed hypervigilant of the political climate. I also had my knowledge enhanced by worldly perspectives, and the perspectives of some of the country's most forgotten and most marginalized.

My first time reading the book existed within a bubble. I had not spent nearly enough time in "real America" to understand many different viewpoints and situations of our country.



Donald Trump had not yet won the election when I went to visit a close friend, Jay, at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania not even 70 miles away, and stepped foot in one of those gigantic grocery stores for a beer run and the people are somehow all as gigantic and riding Rascal scooters. My weekends at Lafayette over the years have been illuminating. No city dwellers, mostly people from the area, or generally suburban folks in duck boots and Vineyard Vines. I was no longer in a liberal stronghold like New York City. Life was slow there too, but differently than the idyll of France. Everything revolved around where and when the next beer pong or beer die or beer baseball tourney would occur, fraternity houses, a football team, and school spirit. Jay and I sat on the night before I departed my first weekend and compared notes on being New Yorkers finding themselves in this little school in the woods. After all, I had nearly followed him there before hearing from NYU. Making friends with conservatives or people who thought city slickers were as bizarre as I thought they were opened my eyes. My only peer republican was a George Bush defender and a white rapper in emo makeup and hair who somehow all the black kids at a New York City public school “Fucked with heavy”.

While diverse in its own way, my urban education left me unaware of the ills being faced in middle America, and generally what life was like outside the city. The Rust Belt was simply a concept, unattached to tangible examples. As well, I had not seen hatred go unchecked, and if anything watered so it may run rampant. New York is the place where hatred for others differences isn't accepted, and I always heard news stories about the hero bystander stopping a hate crime. As well, Spring 2016 had yet to unveil the horrors of Donald Trump and the Trumpism that's gripped the Right. The struggle of hateful white men overflowed, especially in moments like the Charlottesville Rally, which I watched, shocked and glued to my seat, unfolding on an old television in a small city in Ontario. More granularly, how Trump's answer

to illegal immigration was inhumane detention, and how these small steps towards a country ruled by the worst impulses in the American psyche have showed us the festering rot we've been standing on top of since the end of slavery. At the same time, our racial history is not the only painful one. Women are still outwardly disrespected at every step in our society, be that actively done or baked into the various systems. Being raised by a single mother, I saw how hard things were for my mom, and how much harder they were because of how she needed to navigate near every space. My mother is one of the most creative, talented, determined, and caring people anyone could deal with in a business capacity and still consistently is made to jump through hoops by clients or have to go to blows with a vendor or contractor because usually they make a mistake. She's an intelligent woman, she would remind me, and she doesn't want to ever have a business conversation with aggressive and rude scrappers from Staten Island.

As well, I felt myself absorbing some of the direct lessons being passed from concerned parent to child, hoping to prepare them for the tense lifechanging moments that are near impossible to predict. My mind then couldn't intake these fragilities; my mindset was omnipotence and excitement, but since I've grown to understand the more abstract lessons my mother tries to pass down to me. Especially since the shocking loss of national and sport icon, Kobe Bryant, has caused me to consider further consider the brevity of life and be more careful and conscious in steering my life. Kobe not only was a great competitor whose drive and focus can be admired by anyone, but was also a great mind having just transitioned to his life away from being a professional basketball player. I hoped he would flourish and allow us a further view into him, and the void he leaves behind is vast. Each day since, I've thought of the Black Mamba, and been moved almost to tears to consider that I as living in a world where he had died in a helicopter crash. An icon for so many, a sounding board for drive and determination, a

caring father to beautiful daughters. It feels wrong to assert that perhaps something is wrong with the world, as that might imply there's some kind of plan, but it was another reminder of the cruel and uncaring nature of life and how quickly things can move.

Reflecting on the above, I've thought of who to draft my letter to, and after some searching it dawned on me that I really wanted to write to a family member I had lost almost two years ago. "Aunt Rose" was my grandmother's cousin who passed away at 99, but because she lived just ten minutes from me my entire upbringing, stepped into the role of an afterschool caretaker and became one of my biggest supporters. I can still recall the smells of her Sunday gravy (What Italians call their pasta sauce), and the salt and pepper tone to her perfectly kept hair. Rose had really been the one to make me fall in love with sports, since she watched 162 Yankees' games a year plus the playoffs, and had seen all 27 Yankees championships. My childhood as a baseball star was all because I wanted to be Rose's favorite player, maybe even her favorite Yankee if it shook out right.

Just a few days ago would have been her 101<sup>st</sup> birthday, and reflecting on these things made me think back on hearing Rose retelling the world to me from her view:

Dear Rose,

I wish you could see me now. When I graduated from High School, having you at that ceremony meant the world to me, and you looked at me and told me how much you always believed in my ability, and seeing me in the cap and gown then made you so proud and confident in all I could do going forward. I wish you could see how good the Yankees are again, and that I could tell you all the amazing intricacies of the sports industry I've learned. I wish I could make you watch basketball, and share my love for sport with you. I wish so dearly I could have told you about my time in Europe, how you always told me to see the world outside of New York, just as you had told me of your trips to tropical vacations and your father's home in Italy.

Parts of me are glad you haven't had to see the terrible things in the world. The hate on the rise, the declension of our social norms and niceties, a President who's a national embarrassment and constantly does terrible things in the name of hate.

I would always exclaim 'I hate this', 'I hate that', but you always told me not to hate, not anyone not anything. You were a good Catholic when it came to that. Just to put my best forward, and if someone was terrible, forget them, I would hear. That sunk in and I can see it now with the clarity of time.

For years I've only ever thought of the good memories, but sitting here, on the verge of graduating college and I don't know how I'll be able to go to Yankee Stadium without their number one fan there to cheer me on. You would have gone crazy to see me down there on that emerald green baseball diamond that we watched so many times.

Thank you for all you did to get me here Rose. You helped me bloom. You guided me in ways I never knew.

Love,  
Gardner



Rose and I at Monument Park in 2009, the Inaugural Season of the New Yankee Stadium

All of this was written prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequently, the social distancing and cancellation of in person class, and postponement of the 2020 commencement. Before President Hamilton committed to giving us a ceremony at another time, it was nerve-racking. Finally, I had been able to have a moment to process the loss of Rose, thinking of Yankee Stadium, and it was on the verge of being taken away. A friend at University of Arizona told me their graduation was flatly cancelled just days before we heard from Andy Hamilton.

But more deeply, the quarantine and virus are something I couldn't have conceived in a nightmare. Now the nightmare was my daily waking existence. Everything has been canceled or postponed, the NBA season, the MLB season, the Olympics, and all of everyday life has been put on hold, and we're all stuck inside for at least another month. Especially painful considering the spring, a beautiful season, will all but be unappreciated this year. As someone who's used to spending a lot of time outside of the house working, it is terrible to spend my day pattering back and forth inside the ~900 sq./ft I grew up in. It's hard for me to concentrate when all my classes are Zoom. I was already a person who hated to read on a computer screen, and was that guy urging everyone to keep their phones away. Now they are our only lifeline.

Isolation is a fascinating literary topic, and many have explored it in their narratives, be that Tom Hanks and his favorite volleyball, or *The Yellow Wallpaper*. My first experience with James Baldwin, however, was his short story, *Equal in Paris*, where Baldwin writes about being arrested and spending eight days in French prison for accidentally stealing hotel sheets. Baldwin, having been in France for just over a year, moving there without command of the language or much more than \$40 in his pocket, was in a terrible predicament, but it was this short work which proceeded my reading of *Giovani's Room*, where his words filled me with excitement for more of his gorgeous prose.

Having encountered a work new to me in *The Fire Next Time*, it was good to also analyze his words as they pertain to the various questions and quandaries of life in 2020. I was particularly drawn to the section of the passage which discusses the baked in issues and obstacles of America, especially for people of color. In a letter to his nephew, he warns,

“You don't be afraid. I said it was intended that you should perish, in the ghetto, perish by never being allowed to go beyond and behind the white man's definition, by never being allowed to spell your proper name. You have, and many of us have, defeated this intention and by a terrible law, a terrible paradox, those innocents who believed that your imprisonment made them safe are

losing their grasp of reality. But these men are your brothers, your lost younger brothers, and if the word "integration" means anything, this is what it means, that we with love shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it, for this is your home, my friend. Do not be driven from it. Great men have done great things here and will again and we can make America what America must become.

It will be hard, James, but you come from sturdy peasant stock, men who picked cotton, dammed rivers, built railroads, and in the teeth of the most terrifying odds, achieved an unassailable and monumental dignity. You come from a long line of great poets, some of the greatest poets since Homer. One of them said, "The very time I thought I was lost, my dungeon shook and my chains fell off."

You know and I know that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too early. We cannot be free until they are free. God bless you, James, and Godspeed.

Your uncle,  
JAMES"

Baldwin has a signature of deep sincerity unlike many authors of modern American literature, and his words drip with care for his nephew, fear for what he has seen and his nephew may not yet know, yet the optimism of someone who also knows the peaks of what life can bring in happiness and achievement. Personal actualization is important, and a major theme of *Between the World and Me* is this deprivation of actualization, be that through soft influence (lack of opportunities based on income) or hard deprivation (baked in bias, or disproportionate rates of incarceration). 50 years apart, these themes remain parallel and many are concerned over the rate of our progress. Baldwin himself is no stranger to deprivation. A black man born in America during the early-middle 20<sup>th</sup> century, Baldwin's experiences with racism hardened him and shocked him. Later, he moved to France, and though he imagined a world freed from these racial pains, was instead greeted with shock, much like I was when discovering, it was a world with a different kind of racism, although it centered around treating people with dark skin like they somehow didn't belong there either.



1973 Photographs of Baldwin Unpublished for Accompanying Interview

Ms. Ward's analysis on the work's Title, *The Fire This Time*, speaks to a broad concept that James Baldwin often relied in his interviews and writing. Baldwin, although knowing the terrible misfortune of bigotry from living as an African American in his time also was a well-educated and worldly man, and knew that empires hardly ever lasted very long. Rome, the strongest in history, had fallen. The United States had been almost 200 years in existence during his life, and Baldwin could already see the cracks and scars on the skin of the nation which were



more like pavement cracking to unveil the tree growing from a tiny spore underneath. More recent history has shown us examples in China and Russia, states existing for hundreds of years as rigid monarchies or mandated dynasties, but eventually the modern changes gave more power to the masses; the apparatus of the Russian throne could not handle hundreds of millions of serfs being told to stay penniless and destitute while the world modernized and globalized around them and the state enriched itself with war and wine. The prosperity was yanked violently from the hands of the few and placed into some more public field.

Baldwin frequently interviewed, and was often asked a number of questions about being a leader in his community, speaking for African Americans. Often he was asked an existential question which pertained to how this painful racial history would continue to create strife going forward, and lean on the idea that white people, meaning racists, former slavers or sharecroppers or slave profiteers may have power now, but that they must first make peace with what they have done, and then work to address the ill effects felt in present times, or threaten the balance of the nation, and ultimately lead to the destruction or total reset. The logic stands that the oppressed will only be oppressed for so long before numbers advantage or moral righteousness become absolute and a sea change occurs.

The world has seen a number of revolutions, especially around the time of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when many of the oppressed masses, now with economic power, overthrew their rulers, and decided that the currency of the state belonged to the people, not the ruler. In America, the same era had major change, but it did not have the same kind of revolution. It was this time, when so much potential was out there, economic success, prosperity, happiness, that those who should have been able to pick these ripe opportunities, were again unable to. This time shows the

appearance of many of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries most poignant themes, one especially being the “death” of the American dream.

Many of our contemporary tastes and heroes also have their origins in this time, and few literary works have as much prevalence and adoration as *The Great Gatsby*. A story of its era, the Roaring 20s as they’ve come to be known, were an extreme time, filled with new opulence and social order in the wake of The Great War. Required reading for so many during their formative years, many are enamored by the beauty of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s language and description, but reexamination allows for discovery of the true beauty of the book story, what is *not* there, and what that allows us to fill in.



A Screen From the 2013 Adaption, Which All but Screams, “Old Sport”

Perhaps it is the constant connectivity of contemporary life, where cell phones and social media have closed the distance between one and their compatriots the distance to their pocket, that has jaded us to the ways of this past era, which has made constant information, contact, and updates the norm. Simultaneously, “blue check” verification on Instagram or Twitter has become the new champagne of social status, where it is considered a line of demarcation between those how made it and the rest, teeming for attention and validation at the bottom. Jay Gatsby

was the original of this; high status, but in ways hidden away at his own functions, hiding amongst his guests. It's important to understand the context of (in ways) a primary source, and with the era of the robber barons ended, it allowed for those got lucky to ascend into money and the luxurious life that this story and so many others describe. Baz Lurhmann's 2013 film rendition cranks this up by adding a veneer of wealth and elite level taste into every frame, but even in the form of a few words on a page, there is a gravity to Gatsby. The narrator, Nick Caraway, although an Ivy leaguer and stock trader, is taken with Gatsby's status, persona, and lifestyle much like his cousin Daisy is. The yearning for status, with status now being more reachable in theory than the days of nobility and wealth only moving generationally, in ways begins with the Gatsby character, and his rapid ascension.

Revelations at the end of the novel about the true identity of James Gatz dispels some of the magic, just as moments when Tom insists that he's, "never heard of the man!" and that he (Gatsby) must "be a bootlegger" as to have appeared so well monied but so smoothly out of nowhere did. Outside the fact that Gatsby is having a liaison with Daisy, Tom is generally unimpressed by the probably not-as-rich man fooling around with his wife. But much of the magic of Gatsby comes from how he does everything in an effortless and glib fashion while also displaying his wealth, like raising a corner of his shirt to reveal his torso is in fact solid gold and that he's studded with jewels. Throw in a dash of "Old Sport" and, and the man sets to entertain and capture, even enrapture, all those he comes in contact with.

Fitzgerald was a part of the famed "Lost Generation" of writers who existed around this time, lost referring to their worldviews, being that they found themselves directionless and wandering, occasionally steeped in deep alcoholism, often being expatriates exploring and living for years on end in Europe. Others included Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein, both as well

known for their works detailing their modern societal quandaries. Fitzgerald specifically wrote about the frivolous lifestyles and decisions of the newly minted America elites who had amassed great wealth and the simultaneous death of the American dream for the common man, since so much oxygen gets sucked up by a few at the top. Gatsby, although not of rich blood, assumes the role quite well, and thusly steps quickly into this wealthy decision-making matrix.

The book's major motif is the flashing green light at the end of Daisy and Tom's dock that can be seen across the water in the night from Gatsby's. Many characters are noted as looking out across the sound at the emerald flicker, feeling inspiration or pull. To some it is a guiding light, a path in the darkness towards the next thing life has to offer, be that metaphorical or literal. For Gatsby specifically, it is his future, but it is also his past in the connection to Daisy before the war and before her marriage to Tom. While Gatsby's life is now transformed, with him being the ultra-slick talk of the town, he yearns so deeply to return to his days before and recapture his love, perhaps do things over. For all he does have, the pain remains because it cannot bring him what he truly wants, and that leaves him feeling empty.

Another theme throughout is the unfortunate unrounded edges that each character has, and by way of that being the visible pool, how it speaks about the world at large. Each character has something about them which shows some kind of personal or moral decay, and in ways the time spent in the "Valley of Ashes" relates to this declension. Tom, while dueling Jay Gatsby for who is the coolest and richest guy to sleep with his wife, maintains his mistress, who also has a husband with whom Tom interacts on a semi-regular basis. Gatsby at core is deceiving those around him, but also engages in hedonistic, sometimes even self-destructively so, behavior. The battlefield of rich men was the lives of others, and those around them serve as pawns in the greater chess game, likely another pivot to the enormous wealth disparity of 1925. Other stories

have shown the apathy of the rich towards the poor, but *Gatsby* has a way of making those outside the circle of characters seem even smaller and more miniscule.

Perhaps a beautiful touch to the story is that instead of it being from any other perspective, things are told from the point of view of someone who comes to admire and in ways love Gatsby. Nick likely looks back fondly upon his friend, although the memory is tinged with painful acknowledgement of what occurred on Long Island that summer. Gatsby learned the hard way that no matter how much time and effort spent or many resources sunk, he was not unable to recapture the past, and in ways, was kept from accomplishing his goals. This deprivation in ways shows bizarre parallels to Fitzgerald's life having died in the midst of writing what could have been another great novel speaking on the time in which he so thoroughly observed.



A Nervous Gatsby

This era in writing is perhaps a time-capsule of Americana. Prosperity in the post WWI era before the crash of WWII and the emergence into global society presents a bubble of “American Culture” made up more of insular events than international ones. As well, the prohibition era, temperance, a painful racial history, gangsters and bootleggers, the Harlem

Renaissance, battles for workers and union rights, and the long-term effects of industrialization and population boom converged in this era, making it one where each and every person needed to carve out their place in now changed world where so much of the was up for grabs. American writers in literary eras, including James Baldwin, although able to capture beautiful and painful cross-sections in love unfulfilled, perhaps were unable to capture the attitude this unmitigated wealth expansion, but were still able to convey feelings of deep loss and longing for the past. Gatsby the man finds a way to be the crux of a long line of characters, and if he is not the prototypical character, he is certainly the tragic centerpiece which comes to the minds of so many when it comes to an idyllic thought of longing for a lost love and working to get it back, but also to many whom feel failed by society and find the steps along the way which knocked them down to be tragic levying of circumstances stacked against them. Many authors imbue their work with personal effects, but Fitzgerald seemed to be targeting more societal themes with *The Great Gatsby*. But the aforementioned Baldwin captured a different experience, a racial experience, which some might find missing from the Gatsby story, although this time was one of segregation and ill treatment for black Americans. Baldwin, although born a year before the publishing of *Gatsby*, truly finds his time of literary and personal experience 20 to 30 years later, once many of the fluid aspects of the nation had been settled and crystalized for white Americans, and the monetary battle that had been waged between the elites and everyone else had in ways been settled. The concerns of Lost Generation authors who could see a negative effect to these American oligarchs being too powerful carried over into struggles facing the poor masses in the time of Baldwin, especially compounded by his experience as an African American. Perhaps it is Daisy of all characters who encapsulates the experience of an unequal party to the world of ultra-powerful, connected, and unconcerned white men when speaking of

hoping her hypothetical daughter were to become “A beautiful little fool”, as to both avoid the wrath of the powerful and to avoid knowing the terrible tragedies that only continued as the few amongst us actualize their will no matter the expense of those around them. This perspective is not the ideal, of course that being equity, but it is the way in which Daisy, who couldn’t foresee a change as rapidly as may be needed for her or even her daughter to have a chance of becoming the force of nature her father or Gatsby were, chose the next best alternative.

In the United States, painful racial history centering around slavery is the preeminent issue for the society. It undergirds nearly all other conflicts and inequities the nation faces, for it seems impossible for the nation to be able to truly handle other issues or sensitivities if there are still people being treated as second class citizens or always presented behind the veil of the enslavement history. For many, now African Americans, whose ancestors were brought here by force, it can seem difficult to understand your place in a society which seems it doesn’t want you, and also feel that you do not have the same roots or connection to ancestry as white Americans who can succinctly say “I am Italian” or some jumble of white-European, and Africa can seem a far off concept after generations of degradation and theft of social customs. Even someone as educated as Henry Louis Gates needed to take personal trips to Africa, even film docu-series about his “origins” to get a grasp of the African Continent and the African experience. He saw that the overall Black experience was varied, and it was a journey of unpacking a lifetime of biases and insults flung.



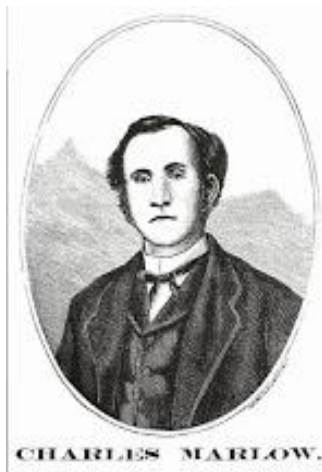
Africa, The Subject of So Much Western Abuse

W.E.B Du Bois said that the African American lives with a double consciousness, seeing the world through their own eyes, but also seeing themselves through the lens of the white man. To live like this, he explains, not only gives great stress, but deracinates social customs further. Both James Baldwin and Ta-Nahisi Coates write about this concept more than 50 years apart and from different angles, one experiencing pains of romance and existence, the other warning his son of the still horrid conditions despite the successes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but these struggles, and by extension the greater racism concepts of our time have deep roots.

Ever since European kingdoms have been able to leave their borders and colonize, they have settled on this concept of civilization. Civilization, and by extension the idea of a society, are well connected. An unjaded mind may think these are simply descriptors of a group of people, but viewing how the ancient civilizations of Africa have been discussed even in some of the highest scholarly settings shows a bias baked in. Nation-states comprised of strings of settlements, united in interest are called civilized and established when referring to Europeans, be it as byzantine as Ancient Rome, or as simple as the ancient Gaul they conquered; but are hardly considered to be anything more than just a few people living near each other when referring to darker skinned peoples living on a plain or along a river valley.



Published as a book in 1902, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* remains one of academia's most discussed works. Although disregarded in its time, the book came to acclaim as it describes a semi-fictionalized journey by a character named Charles Marlow up the River Congo in "Uncivilized" and "Wild" Central Africa with an Ivory Company. The book primarily has been lauded for its ambiguity, almost apathy, towards the many horrors around Marlow in the moment of their occurrence, but also for the picture it paints of who the true monsters in this "uncivilized" world are: the self-proclaimed sophisticated civilizers from Europe. The descriptions are inventive and evocative, the language course while flowing like a movement about a river, the racism rampant and deep. It is truly a shocking read.



A major issue in contemporary discussion, be that academic debate or friendly chatter between acquaintances, is that much of the leeway for thought, and for exploration of difficult ideas, has been removed from possibility. It is now assumed that to write something or to say something is to endorse that thing. In the 1970s, acclaimed Nigerian author and professor Chinua Achebe, famous for many works but specifically the 1958 *Things Fall Apart*, famously maligned *Heart of Darkness* as nothing more than racist pap, having thoroughly stoked the flames of harmful orientalist themes each time it has been added to a college syllabus.

I first read *Things Fall Apart* the summer before 9<sup>th</sup> grade, when a former friend whose school assigned it to him lent it to me at sleepaway camp. It was a quick read, but I was spellbound by the story. I had joked about the title and cover but didn't realize how quickly things could fall apart for one man and his family, and then I grasped the story as mystical instead of realistic. That said, Okonkwo's story however was a first for me, a story about Africa from the African perspective. I had recently read *Melania Sun* and learned deeper truths about racism, slavery, and Columbus, but all of it was the American perspective, and it prepared me well to continue to learn and understand the long history of injustices and prejudices. Returning for this assignment allowed me to add all I had learned since then, and hopefully experience it in a more global perspective than an American one.



Okonkwo the Strongman

Okonkwo's fall from grace is a tragic story, especially when recounting all the steps from village champion to suicide. Seeing the imperialist history from the reverse perspective to *Heart of Darkness* juxtaposes the stories and adds effect to understanding. Achebe takes aim at the language, using that to target intentions for Conrad: the language of the natives described as "A violent babble of uncouth sounds", the Africans and all their humanity "Like yours, but

blackened and ugly". Parallels appear between both narratives. Both protagonists, Marlow and Okonkwo, have a vital role in their respective stories, because they are central to conflict and see the tribulations of those around them as well on a great societal level. Marlow has a front row seat to the declension of what have been considered the world's great societies. Nietzsche advised that one who fights with monsters long enough is destined to become one, and it is some kind of tainting of the soul of the West, of the Civilized, of the Englishman, that has occurred with the treatment of Africa. Marlow, although carrying out his mission, encounters men made into monsters and those who have lost their minds, stricken with disease, or worse, changed by what they've done there. The killing, the burning, the pillaging, the battling, and above all else, continuing to believe that for all they do, the Africans are the savages. On the other side, the factors which drive Okonkwo's stubborn masculinity, ultimately are what lead to his downfall. As well, his personal downfall came at a critical time, and once he returned to his village, he found his entire world changed, since white colonists and religious pilgrims have started to approach the village. Okonkwo was not there to be the alpha and masculine figure he fashioned his entire life around, and failed his tribe in their biggest time of need.

James Baldwin, a man who wrote about deep and passionate love, was almost never seen in a photograph smiling. He thought that he was ugly and dark with beady eyes. Baldwin would add the caveat that this was of course by white standards. Orientalism, the Western patronization of Asia, the Levant, and North Africa as mystical places filled with both sultans with mass harems and subhuman Africans, is a basis for much of the modern racial hatred. Those who have decided they are and were the authority on societies and what civilization meant did an objective unscientific job, as they painted all those who did not speak their language as apes who could not speak a sophisticated modern, as if English, Spanish, German, French, and Latin weren't older

than the states which use them today. The white man's burden is another theme which appears often here. Some holy charge by God to civilize the world. It seemed that no conquerors had stopped to see that they were using God and these various qualifications to make others ineligible to simply be left to live and grow normally. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, still developing nations of Africa face struggles that Europe and the West have settled long ago. Access to medicine, national infrastructure, clean water, broadband connectivity, so how could it be that all these men flocked to the continent to do go and ended up raping it for natural resources and stealing people from their families? Perhaps this is the crux of the issue Achebe has with *Heart of Darkness* being a literary mainstay. For all the discussion we had in his time and now about the terrible acts committed against those who have always been the most abused and forgotten, it seems that racism is not changing, and the world which has declared itself civilized is happy to insulate and accelerate forward with no regard for the fact their progress is directly proportional to the pain inflicted upon Africa. It takes a sophisticated reader to spot the commentary of *Heart of Darkness*, one who is able to take the behavior of the men and take it as almost a satire of the worst among us, especially weighing the disgust Marlow has for European society upon return, and Achebe no doubt was able to see that. Issue seems to come with the readers who perhaps are unable to decipher this, and simply read the work as a racist surrounded by racists in an uncivilized Africa, one which was uncivilized then and remains a dead zone on the map today. Our perceptions can sometimes be the most powerful force, and the continued perception of Africa and those of African descent through the lens of it being an uncivilized place where dangerous savages come from continues to cause ill effects all across society.

hell is gonna be so fucking lit



FACT: Everyone Cool in History is in Hell

To continue with these ideas of collective memories and thoughts, many of life's ills are borne from blind faith and atrocities committed in the name of the lord, an unfortunate circumstance given the intended goal and lessons of faith. My lukewarm childhood attachment to religion, which was born from spending time in both synagogue and church just for holidays, was easily shattered by my access to the internet, a place where I could curate and learn based on my curiosity. I was about 10 years old when I declared myself an Atheist. I knew of religiosity, and I knew that people all over the world had different degrees of belief, much like I saw most people engaging in their normal lives without being fundamentalists, much like my parents who both later in life had admitted to me their own agnosticism or, "I don't believe in having to memorize a book and go to a special house every week and recite". I knew what Hassidic Jews were, and that they lived their lives strictly, following the word of God, wearing only certain garb, keeping strict eating rules. But religion always felt like a strange thing. Different people believed in different things, and meaning of course that some were wrong, if any were right at all. But I also remember learning about civilizations which had many Gods. Ones which

controlled nature, or carried souls across some mystical river to the afterlife. Not long after the breaking of that mental bond, I felt awkward standing beside my cousins at my grandmother's funeral and reading out of the Bible, a thing I'd never done before.

In my earlier childhood, even I recall a Muslim babysitter who would ask me if she could use my bedroom for about 10-15 minutes to pray do one of her five daily prayers. I respected it as something she wanted to do alone, and as the adult asked me if I could accommodate her private time, but it wasn't until later in life I realized this was religious even. I simply went to the living room and flipped on the TV. I couldn't conceptualize God beyond the cartoonish images of the bearded man who slings lightning and causes things to be here on Earth. If anything, it felt comedic to me, although it did feel bizarrely real. So, finding a label for the feeling I'd had, being a kid who would stare out car windows and school windows and wish, even ask, God for things nearly every moment I wasn't engaged in something else, and many when I was, was gorgeous.

But never was I much inducted into anything religious. I was learning through commentary done by a peculiar graduate level philosophy student at Brown over Call of Duty gameplays about Kant and Nietzsche and Descartes, and many other thinkers who spoke broadly on humanity. Soon I was googling theories and reading college level papers on philosophers of the like. But truly, I was hooked by the self-determination in thinking there was no higher authority running my life. At that young age, I put Dostoyevsky's quote in my Facebook "Quotes I Like" section. Atop many others I wrote, "If there is no God, then I am God!" I loved the Übermensch, the one who would rise about the beleaguered thought processes of man, many of which were directly religious, and achieve great things. Perhaps even, I imagined I had some of the same attributes. I imagined greater things for society one day, even if I never saw it. Growing

up in a world post 9/11, especially being a New Yorker who was on the way to school when it happened, it didn't seem right that something like that could be planned by a being of higher knowledge and ability, but instead by hateful men, who even despite how close they may have felt to God, were simply wearing that as a cloak over their twisted personal beliefs.

I felt my mind freed from what I now perceived as merely bronze aged fairy tales written by power hungry or hallucinating men from the days before we knew what germs or viruses were, or where the Sun went at night, or how the seasons or the tide worked. What I also saw were the lavish lifestyles of my classmates and camp friends, Manhattan's ultra-wealthy, and myself one day having achieved that status. To that point, I had felt that I was a finished product. A relatively poor student in previous schools, I was yet to view myself as the person who would or even could become valedictorian, then go on to NYU. I was no longer waiting around for the miracle of achievement, no. I was active, and proactive in my success. Later, in college, I would take courses in school covering the biblical era, and the origins of Islam, and found greater evidence to my belief that perhaps these leftover morality structures were not real, and that I would go in the ground when I died, not to some mystical place. As well, grasped onto things in a very scientific way, loving my science classes, and thinking the knowledge of the hypothesized, experimented, recorded, and peer reviewed, as the way to answer the worlds questions, not through focusing on the voice inside my head when I wished to be another person in another car going another place.



Nawal el Saadawi is truly brave. Born in Egypt in 1931, she graduated Cairo University in 1955 as a medical doctor. Early on in her career, she saw patterns in the physical and psychological harm of the women she saw, and connected them directly to oppressive societal fixtures, along the lines of patriarchy and class struggle. But it was not until 1972 when el Saadawi made waves, releasing “Women and Sex”, discussing various plights on the female body which for religious purposes had become mainstay. el Saadawi herself was subject to female genital mutilation, a common practice across the Arab world and Africa. For this, she was removed from her post as the Director General of the Egyptian Health Ministry. In the early 1980s, el Saadawi was imprisoned by Anwar Sadat’s government for criticizing the policies of the government, spending three months there and writing a memoir on a roll of toilet paper with an eyebrow pencil. By the end of the decade, for her own safety, was living and teaching in America. The multi-hyphenate el Saadawi (Author/Doctor/Philosopher/Thinker/Feminist) was



under siege because she constantly challenges the status quo. Upon reading about her and watching her NYU bookstore appearance, I was taken by this woman's thoughts and convictions. She continues to be a major fixture in feminist circles, an outspoken proponent of freedom who would even in 2020 be named as one of TIME's 100 most influential women. Watching the interview, I was especially gripped by her discussion of truthfulness to self, paired with her writing on how as she gets older, she in fact becomes more radical (a sentiment I've heard many times over from other prominent women, including some like Gloria Steinem). As well, I appreciated her sentiment on how being a successful writer means having no secrets, and being unashamed, and how important remembering all the fixtures of your life is. el Saadawi states proudly that she has had three marriages, and has happily had just as many divorces, because she learned that this institution in fact oppresses women. She speaks on FGM as a way to oppress women. She speaks on the mandatory wearing of the veil as a way to oppress women. But not just women, so many people who are outside of the elite upper rooms of decision making. When she first shared that she had been circumcised, she spoke about feeling ashamed for this thing she of course had no control over, which occurred during her childhood. It took her some time to feel that instead she should speak about it, and share her experience with others.

Having been raised by a single mother, I saw her face discrimination. Not only did she always need to do her absolute best to be taken seriously, even if by loudmouths far her junior in skill and age, but simply not being with my father raises eyebrows from all range of people, from school admissions officers to the parents of my friends. Never mind the reason why it was the case, never mind that it might be because my father is childish deadbeat, or for so many other women that their former partner was abusive. As el Saadawi points out, there are countless inequities in our society, and the constant perception of women as inferior is just one of them.

Around age 12, I read Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, and prior to that, we learned all about the author's exile and fatwah. I was shocked that the *Satanic Verses* had angered a religious leader to charge all pious followers to, if they saw Mr. Rushdie, kill him. Interviews revealed Rushdie to be a well-spoken intellectual, not a zealot, who despite his own religious attachments, could see major issues from society's attachment to religion. The story of Haroun also speaks on the dangers of holding stories in higher regard than the truth. Comedically, el Saadawi writes of a hilarious conference between believers of all stripes, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish. The three bicker over who is right and follows the true interpretation, and the respective prophets as well join. Even Satan comes to tender his resignation. It comes across a bit like *The Holy Mountain*, but of course with less magic realism. But as God announces they are stepping down, neither Moses, Jesus, or Muhammad are willing to replace them.

El Saadawi always felt her mind and thoughts to be constrained, and creating work like this, which is intended to make even the deeply religious think, but often inspires anger, is the just her style. Many think that boundary pushing is often unnecessary, and edgy, and especially in our modern times even liberals are too worried about offending others to point out the absurdity of female genital mutilation, forcing women to cover themselves complete, to only have sex to procreate, or in less religious terms, open air markets with live animals and snakes, or perhaps more disgusting, the factory farms which feed countless Americans, where bovine and poultry perhaps carrying disease are packed as tightly as possible into conditions that would curl the stomach of all but those who are too poor but to do that job. But being too afraid to offend someone in all circumstances is ignorant, and if anything is more offensive. The soft bigotry of low expectations is everywhere, where now we simply believe the world to be the way

it is. We used to have slavery as an institution all across the world, but we changed that, and made it unacceptable. And if one is to truly be a liberal thinker, they must never shrink from the challenge of questioning the norm.

Despite my personal feelings, of course I respect other's religious beliefs, no matter how deep or casual it is. Allowing others that space to My qualms come with those who shroud themselves in their holy book and use that to do terrible things, be that super-church televangelists or terrorists, domestic or otherwise. If anything, these people who are seen holding their God so close are the ones who have strayed the farthest, breaking so many core tenants. At every step, el Saadawi has prodded at society's midsection, inspecting and exposing some of its ugliest warts, and I truly appreciate for that. Her wit is razor sharp, and she maintains the dedication to what is right above all else, while also leaving room to be a skilled comedic mind (every interview with her is very funny). Beautifully enough, she is still a religious woman. She is someone who is happy with what her faith brings her, and it can be inferred perhaps she feels offended by all of these perversions of this thing she believes and loves. But one thing is certain, she is certainly a powerful and much appreciated figure, and the world is a better and more thought through place with her in it.

Unfortunately, countless others with ideology and inner fire like el Saadawi had their lives extinguished when they spoke up against religion or regime. One of the universal platitudes is that "History is written by the victor". It's a statement which at this point can feel trite, but in reality, it is one that applies to so many more circumstances than just war. History is written by the most well connected, by the dominator, by the one who has the wherewithal to create an account of what happened there. In modern times, these things are a little less applicable, with most people having access to the internet and social media in some way that

allows them to record their history, and what's happening around them. This enables a view from inside uprisings and movements, and technology even exists which aggregates social media images to track the movements of items or people. This, for example, is how investigators figured out the exact Russian military unit which shot down the Malaysian airliner in 2014.

That said, this convenience is relatively new, and the days until just 20 years ago was one where moments were still scarce, and not everything was recorded. The early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are a grey period, photography is prominent, but not video, or audio recording. Most accounts are comprised of primary sources, newspaper clippings, diaries, and the like. Africa is the most ignored places in the history books, especially for European and American education, a travesty considering the proportional good fortune which was siphoned from the birthplace of man. A bright history teacher might have a realistically sized Africa on the maps in their classrooms, showing that the continent is the largest, and dwarfs early every other region. It seems that Africa is spoken of first as a wild Serengeti, then the place where slaves came from, now left in ruins, but there was a pivotal period, during that same time, when many things occurred. The full imperialist history of Western nations is often not a subject for most school children. In America, we learn about Gunboat Diplomacy as a positive, opening the far east up to new trade opportunities, but it is not explained as the way in which foreign run opium production reached the region.

Dutch and English companies, riding high off of centuries of plundering the continent for resources, living and natural, maintained their presence in Africa. In *The Dream of the Celt*, we get a unique view of colonialism in Africa and South America, an interesting mix of firsthand accounts of one British consul Sir Roger Casement and reflections on the reality he lived in. Originally cutting his teeth working in the Congo, Casement worked for the company which was

effectively a front for King Leopold II's takeover of the state, especially looking to extract the wealth from the rubber plants which had recently had a massive increase in need because of the popularity in car and bicycle tires.



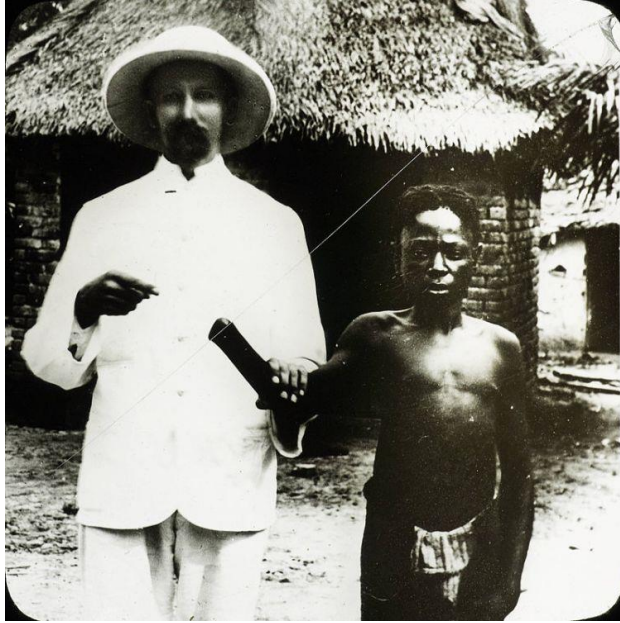
Photo Portrait of Casement

Soon Casement was irritated by the profiteering nature, and was dismayed especially by the mistreatment and exploitation of natives as workers in the European pursuit of diamonds, gold, oil, ivory, and anything else of value. Transitioning to the public sector, the Irishman joined the British Colonial Service and used his expertise for the region, but still saw problematic fixtures of the business. These companies needed to build infrastructure to transport the goods, and traverse the terrain with speed. Covering the distances from the interior to the shore via river presented a whole swath of issues. These stretches of hundreds of miles are broken up into cataracts as they descend, making it so a ship can only go a set distance. But anyone would tell you laying track is dangerous and full of hazards, and very quickly the paths of the trains would be lined with graveyards.

In later years, Casement was in Peru on behalf of the British Government, and was again shocked by human rights abuses. By this time, he'd become fully disillusioned by imperialist practices, and wrote a formal report on the operational failures and atrocities he saw, stating in ways that these actions were corrupting the men who committed them, and the societies which

they served, as well as leaving irreparable damage to the lands themselves, and soon quit his post. Originally a Dubliner, Casement had left Ireland at 16 and never returned, but as he aged, become nostalgic for his home and began to relate to the Irish independence movement. His ideology had shifted, and his time working for the great powers and oppressors of history had made him sympathetic for the underdogs. While he may not have seen himself as oppressed or downtrodden as the natives in other lands which he had overseen, but still found that the world was filled with profound injustices, and thought of ways to assist his countrymen in loosening the grasp that Great Britain had on the nation.

Casement organized a shipment of weapons to come from Germany and land in Ireland, having traveled there via Norway wearing a disguise and himself pretending to be an Irish diplomat, which ultimately would have been a component to the Easter Uprising. That said, the submarine was intercepted by the British navy, and Casement was subsequently captured and charged with high treason, being stripped of his royally bestowed title of Sir. Spending some time in prison, he was seeking clemency and looked to be able to use connections and pull strings until his personal journals were discovered, and to quite a shock to most, he recorded all range of things, from his thoughts on work from previous years, as well as his sexual interactions with men. Most knew of his negative opinions about imperialist actions, as his Congo Report was a prominent document in the industry, but the sex was something else. Many of the partners were natives whom he paid, and Casement wrote about the size and color of his partners sex. Because of this, and homosexuality being a crime in England, Casement's contacts with the government were unable to free him before he was hanged in 1916.



Casement Points to the Stump Hand of a Native, Likely Cut Off by a Worker as Punishment

Joseph Conrad, author of the famed *Heart of Darkness* wrote about the Casement he had met in Africa in years prior in a letter which circulated around the time of the execution where he stated, “He was a good companion; but already in Africa I judged that he was a man, properly speaking, of no mind at all. I don’t mean stupid. I mean that he was all emotion ... A creature of sheer temperament – a truly tragic personality: all but the greatness of which he had not a trace. Only vanity. But in the Congo, it was not visible yet”. How bizarre it was that Conrad could sense there was something more below the surface. Homosexuality is one of the great secrets of all history, and of course quite oddly, Roman and Greeks of many stripes, from thinkers to commanders, were noted to have both male and female partners, and it being not an issue or something which invalidated them. Many fantastic writers spend their lives secretly loving, or like James Baldwin, writing painful parallels inspired by their experiences like *Giovanni’s Room*. Yet the religious rhetoric of monotheistic belief systems which have become popular made it taboo. The journals of Casement reveal a man who changed over time, but kept many of his

personal thoughts and desires on the inside, for fear, for personal discovery, for purposes uncertain.

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is from the perspective of another apathetic man in Africa doing what he was instructed to do. Like Marlow, Casement becomes disillusioned by the injustices he witnessed upon returning to Europe, but Marlow himself is upset by the form which European life has taken, propping itself up and claiming to be the pinnacle of civility while being supported by such atrocities in a far-off land. It is unfortunate that Africa is often portrayed in this scenario, being the ground on which horrors occur, not mythical or scientific, but simply by the cruelty of man. So many books are written of this time, all showing characters venturing down the river only to return completely changed, deracinated even. But what does it mean that Roger Casement presents such a duality, being on hand for some of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most atrocious moments, while at the same time growing sensitive about the events there, and engaging himself in clandestine relations. Perhaps these things are related, as it is difficult to lie to oneself for very long. While Casement was not said to have been ever open with his relations, it without a doubt played a role in his perceptions, and perhaps a role in how he carried himself secretly. Not only was he seeing mistreatment for no good reason but the glory of the Crown, but he himself was a secretive man who ultimately saw his ruination by his own actions, and through things about himself he likely felt he could never change. No matter that it didn't affect anyone, being his relations were beyond the public view.

Unlike Mr. Casement, it seems society has failed to have a broader learning experience on freedoms and what is right in our world. While the world is much better a hundred years after his hanging, he doesn't appear to be a great martyr of any cause, or even any ideology, having fallen to the wayside despite the level of public notoriety. While the victor writes history, it



seems quite often they work to erase what their adversary stood for. Baldwin wrote often about the pains of secret love, and while the release of being who one truly is so sweet, it hurts all the more for having to cover it up out in the world. Compound this with himself being a black man from America, hoping for equality in France but of course encountering another society ruled by its bigotry, xenophobia, and Laïcité, where those who exist within the metropole must conform to the mold of the typical Frenchman. Roger Casement is a complex man, and having his life ended in mid-age robbed the world of the experiences he was yet to share besides some monetary markings in a book. His convictions led him to the most actualized version of himself, I'm sure he felt it was closest to the true version, but at the same time he couldn't calculate for the apparatus which did him in, an apparatus of status quo which looks out for these same self-determinant fixtures and look to stamp them out.

A man lost to time, but immortalized on the page. Roger Casement is one of the most complex and conflicted men I've ever read about, although it seems his self-control to live behind the necessary façade, be that for his work or personal endeavors, it is a lesson to us all that our stories are not set.

To remain on this concept of self-conflict, self-reflection, and in ways, self-hatred, we can look at the greatest challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century so far, as well as some essential and historic literature. Staying inside for prolonged periods of time has always been looked down upon. The outside world is full of wonder, experiences, vitamin D, and other people, but now with COVID-19, it seems that staying in is actually the best course of action to help other people. I spent exactly seven weeks (49 days) inside my apartment building during the onset of this pandemic, only leaving to get the mail and do minimal laundry in the basement laundry room. Although being someone who enjoys time without social stimulation and the recharging of the batteries

that comes with it, humans inherently are social creatures who crave and thrive based on interaction with others, be that as complex as spending an afternoon with a friend, or as basic as a chat with a stranger. Certainly, this new normal comes as quite a shock to many, and ignoring those who are demanding stay at home orders lifted so they may go to bars and infect each other, most people grasp the gravity and stakes of a situation.

Being trapped inside with my mother and our two pets (Chico the Chihuahua and Narnia the Tabby Cat) certainly made for a bizarre circumstance. During angsty adolescent years, spending this much time away from school and with my mother was a surefire recipe for a serious argument over honestly nothing. As well, having been robbed of senior spring, which when in High School was an absolute highlight, featuring the best parties, the good times, and my personal joy of being extremely busy (class and two internships), was soul crushing. The thought that my summer is practically canceled, hit hard, and the fact that I can't get together with old friends who I refer to as brothers, made me feel extremely isolated. Fortunately, what kept me and my mother both sane, was that we were able to keep apart during the majority of the day, as there was class to attend and phone calls to be made, and friends to contact via video call, and that at the end of the day, we could come together, cook dinner, perhaps enjoy a glass of wine, and watch a show. It's a way that many families are keeping sane during this time. But of course, we are not without bickering, over who should do what, or being conscious of not yelling when everyone on our floor is home, but for the most part we have survived and at the end of most days turn to each other and say we are glad to be stuck indoors with each other.

Last year I was introduced to NBC comedy *The Good Place*, which to me as a layman seemed to be the adventures of people in some afterlife which appears as an idealized neighborhood, called The Good Place (likely, heaven). However, at the end of the first season, it

is revealed by the neighborhood architect (played by Ted Danson) that in fact the four main characters were in The Bad Place (Hell), and that those four had been arranged there to specifically torture each other in specifically prickly ways for all eternity, as opposed to being chained up to a fiery wall and prodded with a pitchfork. Danson's character wanted to create a 21<sup>st</sup> century solution to a 21<sup>st</sup> century problem, especially since social media and cell phones have become ubiquitous, and we have grasped that humans, despite our social nature, are truly only wired to interact with and know a certain amount of people, not 1000+ followers. Quite literally, it implies that Hell is other people.

This is also the point of Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*, or in the native French, *Huis Clos*, the story of three people recently dead now trapped in a room together for what is suggested to be eternity. Joseph Garcin, a Frenchman and soldier, who was executed by firing squad for desertion during WWII, who is always guilty of killing his young wife who was stricken with the grief of his death, and took her own life. As well, he is a womanizer, having brought another woman into his home. Next is Inez Serrano, a lesbian postal clerk who turned a woman against her husband (Inez's cousin) and subsequently caused the murder of the cousin, which plunges the wife into despair. Lastly, there is Estelle Rigault, a well-to-do woman married to an older man who fools around with other men. Estelle bore a child by one of her lovers, and drowned it by throwing the baby into the sea. The subsequent grief caused her young lover to kill himself. These three have quite a wake of destruction behind them, although the crimes of intent which landed the quartet from the *Good Place* there were certainly not as severe.

At first, Garcin, Estelle, and Inez are all quite confused, and seem to be determined to not interact with each other, but quickly their worst habits come out. All three are avoidant about what landed them in this hellish afterlife, an oddity to be embarrassed even in death, but very

quickly the three put their cards on their backs. Estelle's vanity is exposed when she searches for a mirror to check her appearance, and Inez tries to help, but her attraction shines through and makes Estelle uncomfortable. After all, she is more interested with manly man Garcin, who doesn't seem to have much interest in either woman. Inez specifically was killed by the woman she seduced while still alive, who killed them both by asphyxiating them with gas while they slept. Estelle explains part way through that she died only yesterday of pneumonia, and that her funeral is in progress during the play. At one point, the door to the room opens, but none of the three can bring themselves to leave.



No Exit Performed on the Stage

Sartre himself is a famous mind in philosophical writing, and is grouped in, much to his dismay, with other existentialist authors and thinkers like Camus and Nietzsche who wrote of the bleakness of the human existence. All three discuss at length the freedoms of man, and that most everything is a societal construct, and ultimately each human in each situation is bound merely by their thoughts to do something and reactions to the circumstances they are in at that moment. This is the effect of Camus' *The Stranger*, or *L'Etranger*, where Mersault, an apathetic

Frenchman living in Algeria who kills a knife-wielding Arab one day at the beach, almost abruptly. The oddity is that Mersault himself does not have reason for killing, he did not feel threatened by the man, only that the sunlight reflecting off the blade made him uncomfortable, and that he stood over the man and shot him extra times while he was down. While the world had transitioned to a place where many people were no longer peasants living at the will of their kingdom, it presented crises of meaning and faith for many who think of their existence of meaningless and monotonous.

In *Huis Clos*, the trio's actions are all based on desire from a single moment. For one man to run away from his duty, and for that to be a high crime, for a woman to seduce and break a family which before may have been happy, and for a third to sneak around on one partner just to injure another partner so severely. Humanity perhaps is bound by preconceived notions of meaning and responsibility, and in many ways the abstract concept of an all-powerful god who is simultaneously guiding the narrative of the Earth while allowing his children to behave as they would, and stray from the path if that was their ultimate choice, which is contradictory in many ways. While Sartre may not have believed in God, he knew that others did, and he was quoted as saying, "We can take refuge in the idea of God, to escape the brute fact that we may never be truly seen by another and that justice may never come. Faith in God is one of the many ways that human beings avoid freedom and responsibility". Sartre said quite openly that "Humans are condemned to be free", and that their actions, mistakes or triumphs, are no one else's but their own. At the end of the play, the three seem to accept that they are terrible people, and have committed atrocious acts which most unfortunately affected people they cared for or were close to them, a lesson for conducting oneself without thought of how it may change the world around them, even if that world is their sphere of convenience.

Scrolling comment sections in news stories about the COVID-19 pandemic, it appears that many people still believe this to be much less severe than it is. But as was mentioned in the discussion of Nawal el Sadaawi, often time people hide behind their God, and pervert the positive aspects of faith and dedication to something which never appears in a tangible form. Some ask, “How could God allow this to happen to his children?”, which shows that so many people are yet to grasp that this is a unpredictable and dangerous situation, affected more by the actions of man than even the potential path or inevitabilities of a creator, and that practically no one is safe without acting accordingly. Old Testament God is vicious, letting plagues, floods, deaths, smiting, and bringing curses down upon those who anger him, so it seems bizarre that people could think the almighty creator is anything but cruel when he chooses to be. That said, it is with some clarity I’m happy to be quarantined with my mother, and perhaps when this is over, everyone will feel more relief in the presence of other people, and hopefully that the meaningless quarrels sometimes between friends will pale in comparison to the happiness of having each other in that moment.

The meaning of life is an eternal question. Be it ghosts reflecting on their sins, or people still alive, we often look back at life as a story, or some kind of narrative on a screen or in a book. The phrase, “I saw my life flash before my eyes” may come to mind here. The quest, or the journey, is the most classic form of storytelling, be it for a fiction or one’s life. Even something like *Don Quixote*, regarded by many to be the original novel, features a journey, as the journey is often an allegory or microcosm of life, in which every person’s life and experience can seem to them as pages in a book written each day. For many people, and in many stories, a journey is commenced at some major conflux, where things have changed drastically and suddenly, and a search for meaning, or some other answer is the goal. If you’ve ever gone on a

trip, or long hike, or some other adventure through nature or cities, or across countries or continents, you know that this time can hold deep meaning, and the memories will stay with you.

During my first real time away from New York, away from my family, and away from the life I practically had always known, I can recall the steps as a moved towards a period of freedom, and of self-discovery. The overnight jump across the Atlantic felt long, but I couldn't sleep. Transferring flights, I recall the sun rising over the French Riviera, feeling like I had been transported to not only a new land, but a new planet, with new opportunities. I pictured Alice falling down the hole into Wonderland, unsure of what lay ahead, but excited by what I had always known as impossibilities. I embraced the potential for deracination, to allow the New York that was deep in my blood to mix with a new land, new experiences, a new language, and new companions, and ultimately create new parts of me.

Some journeys are begun not with joy or excitement, but from need or tragedy. In 1983, Chinese experimental author Gao Xingjian was diagnosed with lung cancer, almost assuredly a death sentence. Xingjian was in ways an outsider, and had reputationally had taken a beating because his recent works were thrown to the wayside and considered illegitimate and detrimental to the new Chinese society after the Cultural Revolution of the late 60s and 70s had drastically altered the China he grew up in. Still reeling from his father's death just two years prior from the same cause, Xingjian in ways resigned himself to death as a way of finding inner peace. Although not long after it was discovered through further tests being a misdiagnosis, Xingjian had heard that he would be disappeared by the Red Guard and reeducated in a camp in the countryside, a surefire death sentence, and decided to flee Beijing, and embark on a spiritual journey in the process. As well dismayed by the uniformity required by the communist party, Xingjian begins a spirit quest which eventually became the outline of his book *Soul Mountain*, in

which characters search for Lingshan, or Soul Mountain, a hypothetical place in which personal enlightenment occurs. Xingjian searched for his personal Lingshan as he trekked for over five months from Sichuan to the east along the Yangtze River.



The book is comprised of vignettes, and isn't chronologically arranged. Xingjian writes forward and backward in time, talking of dreams, daydreams, wishes, hallucinations, allegories, and of multiple characters searching for enlightenment on their own Lingshan. A city dweller now in the country, the narrator soaks in the lifestyles of honest farmers and fishermen, conversing with elderly sages, and considering his life in a new light. Rarely entering larger cities along the way, the narrator, who is in ways Xingjian, finds some comfort in being recognized by admirers, and the hospitality that comes with it. At one point even encountering his birthplace, where he grew up and where his mother and grandmother are laid to rest, deep reflection occurs on the life that was in contrast to the life that is. Along the way, the narrator



makes many notes about the beauty of nature, and the plants and animals which live in China, often forgotten as the country becomes more and more industrialized.

Towards the end, the Narrator encounters a devoted Taoist, who although is full of the wisdoms of a life spent in reflection, does not pass much along to the Narrator. He does explain however, that the greatest tragedy is that eventually the narrator will need to return to his normal life. After more reflection, the narrator discovers an issue with the optics he has viewed his journey through: that at the end of the day, all the meaning is simply personal, and does not apply to the world writ large, and therefore is as insignificant as a single man's rebellion. In China, from the period of Mao's rise to power until the mid 1980s, the deaths of millions occurred in the name of social progress, and the communist concept itself values the collective over one singular human. Soviet leader Joseph Stalin was quoted once as saying, "A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic". While morbid, it holds weight and meaning beyond this example, and while each person may be as insignificant as a grain of sand, personal satisfaction and understanding no less affects the person experiencing this thought transformation. The narrator ends the book atop a snowy mountain, now an ascended figure who others seek out to questions the wisdom of, as he did with the Monk from his journey. Atop this Lingshan, which may or may not be real or an imaginary figment, he converses with God, who ultimately does not answer his final question about a world without miracles.

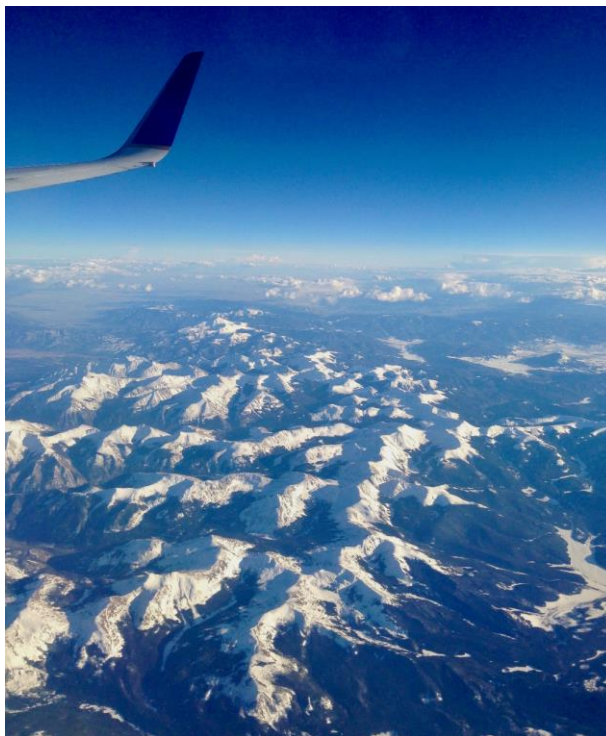
Xingjian himself moved to just east Paris in the late 1980s, where he remains to this day, as his stories of protest about the Tiananmen Square incident resulted in all his work being banned in China. The journey of his life was long, and across continents, country sides, streams, and mountains, but through it all, the man has maintained his dedication to the thought processes which brought his work and personal satisfaction to acclaim. Unlike many artists who play in a

form of spiritual or even magical realism, such as Paulo Coelho, Xingjian's work is much more internal, and speaks on the personal change as the result of experiences and the outside world. Xingjian likely views the body and the mind as a permeable membrane, which ideas and new things, whether or not it is desired, pass in, and change the makeup of what is inside.



If they can afford it, many people use time off from schooling or between jobs to travel, to change perspective, to experience anew. Changes in scenery can be eye opening, be it nature or civilization, as it allows the brain to absorb new images, new experiences, new smells, thoughts, feelings, and in some ways, new lives lived, if even for just a moment, but alive mentally for years after. Some say you can live in a vacation for years after, recounting certain sticking moments overlooking a place you couldn't have imagined to be real. Gao Xingjian has a unique ability to reflect upon his experiences and translate them into magical pieces of literature which apply and can feel they were written specifically for masses of people. Back to Alice entering Wonderland, this is an image perhaps we all should cling to more tightly, as her story showed that despite the psychotic moments and lifechanging events, she could return to her life on the surface with a new perspective, joy, and wonder about all she would continue to see,

despite there never being invisible Cheshire cats and Mad Hatter tea times. To be opened up to the world is an ultimate goal, as it allows the mind to be more accepting and well-rounded in processing information, and thusly allowing the mind to be more flexible, and creative when intaking even the drabest of images. The search for Lingshan is especially meaningful as Xingjian, his narrator, and many along the way acknowledge it to be likely a false place, and if it is a physical location, perhaps unique to each person, much like the meaning of the experiences along the way, but that does not subtract from the fact that the new perspective, inner peace, or some other gift is what will truly be of aid you along your journey once you've spent time sat atop your mountain.



Stepping off the plane in California, even a weak nose like mine could immediately smell the difference in the air. It was familiar to previous trips to SoCal, where the faint wafts of ocean breeze and trees of pine and citrus flooded my nostrils, replacing the pressurized cabin of polluted air from back in New York. One In-n-Out stop later, my class and I were on our way through the countryside by bus towards Yosemite, a trip I'd heard from classes before mine this

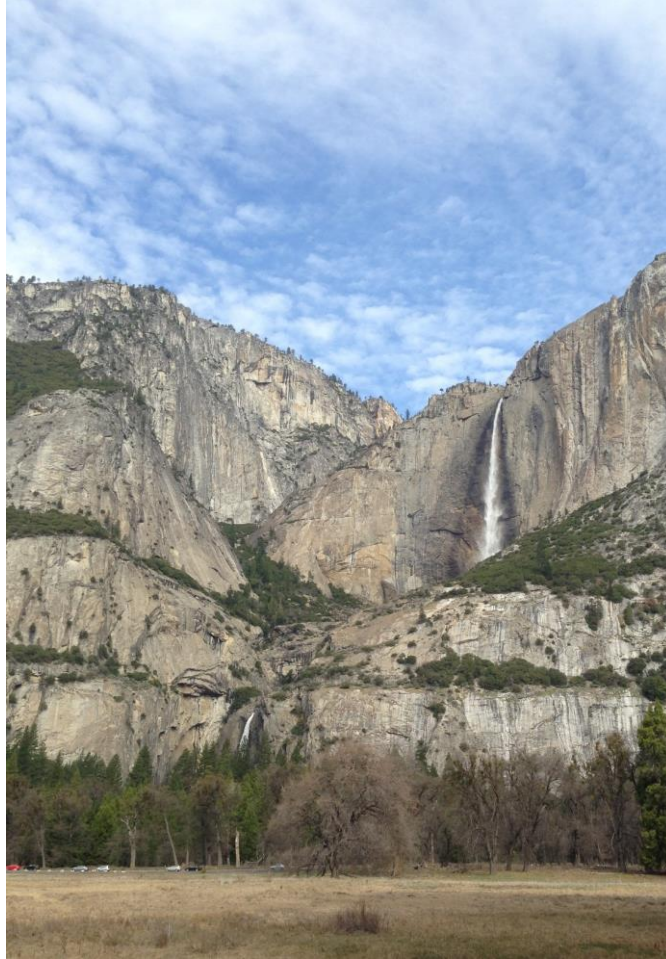
expedition was the best of the class trips, especially since I'd forgone the sophomore year trip to snowshoe and cross-country ski.

My childhood had been filled with much more hiking and wilderness than my teenage years, but I fondly recalled expeditions where my father would drag me along on to trudge through nature, see unique trees and birds near his house in eastern Long Island. Since those days, my city slicker nature took over as I choose to stop seeing him for various reasons, and my most recent hike, if you could call it that, had come over a year prior when I stood at the highest and most western point of Catalina Island off the coast of Dana Point and gazed towards the West. The voices of childhood friends and their friends faded into a muffled song in the background as somewhere thousands of miles away, out of my view, my line of sight was running ashore in Asia, a place I'd never been except for images online and in books, and I contemplated the feeling of being at the end of the world as I knew it.

A week on a nature expedition sounded fun, but quickly it was discovered that snooty New Yorkers were either complete out of their elements, or pigs in shit. Our first couple days, we walked along the floor of the valley through varied landscapes and shades of greenery accompanied by our guide, and I convinced one of the chaperones, the school's technology integrator, the hipster Mr. Bergstein, to let me wear the chest-mounted Go-Pro camera he had brought, of which the footage I collected would eventually be showed to our whole school. In ways, it was another time where I felt like I had been transported to another planet, especially when looking up at thousand-foot-tall walls of pale-grey and white rock like this:



On the first day, we were instructed to look towards Yosemite Falls, which presented itself in the distance, and along with being told that it was the largest waterfall (by height, not volume) in North America, that we would be climbing it in a few days. Internally, I was thrilled, because by this point had been fully engaged by the wilderness and experiences around me, as well as the team building exercises such as climbing fully blind into the pitch-black Spider Cave, guided only by the classmate in front of you, and instructed to guide the one behind you as we journeyed towards an alternate exit. I would relish in the soreness from a long day rock pounding under my feet, I would rub my hands in the earth to feel its warmth and grains.



Finally, the day came, and my friends and I awoke achy from an especially cold night which had prompted us to all climb with our sleeping bags into the same bed and huddle for warmth. The hike would take the entire day, and at the top, we would stop and have lunch, and spend time reflecting before hiking down. The way up proved to be grueling, and once the sun was high in the sky, the heat presented an additional challenge. My hiking boots began to blister my feet through my socks, I had killed my water at the 70% mark, and the fact that I had opted to carry part of the lunch provisions wasn't helping, but I soldiered on without much of a peep of my discomfort.

Climbing to the top, we were directed to not gaze out over the valley immediately, but to bank by the edge of the stream that fed the falls, and talk about the trip up. The accomplishment

felt from getting there was prevalent in the entire class, but after lunch, in our free moments, looking upon the valley took my breath away. In ways, this was like being atop my Soul Mountain, a place where time moved slower and where the outside world didn't matter; simply this moment and what could be taken.



As far as the eye could see, rolling wilderness, untouched by civilization. Snow-capped peaks, and trees clinging to arid surfaces of solid rock, surviving off sunshine and hard rain. Looking down to the floor inspired some vertigo, so I stayed conscious of the fact that slipping and falling to my death on a joyous, sunny day like this wouldn't be a good look. But more than anyone else, I stood there and stared at nature, and felt inner calm, a rarity for someone with a cell phone, depressive tendencies, and severe ADHD.

Perhaps one of the lessons, intended or not by Gao Xingjian, is that in the process of finding one's personal Lingshan, is that these places and moments are various, and while fleeting, can be carried with you for a long time afterwards. Xingjian's journey along the Yangtze took five months, and along the way, and in *Soul Mountain*, a book which is over 600 pages long, features countless moments in which the narrators experience something, or see something, and stop to intake what's going on there, as if the panacea for their ills would appear written across the sky. In the end, the Taoist monk explains that all meaning is internal and personal. Existentially, it may feel defeating that by and large we are insignificant lifeforms who live on a giant rock in the broad expanse of space which is so vast it is frankly inconceivable to our minds, but on the flip side, it can be liberating to know that our actions in fact do matter as they affect our personal world and circles of convenience.

Despite our many science fiction fantasies of the future involving alien planets and alien worlds, life at this juncture is comprised entirely of things which happen on or in the immediate vicinity of the Earth. But this doesn't mean we should be disappointed, instead it means we must try our hardest to make our lives the best they can be here, and to treat the planet and nature with respect. There are no do-overs, and there's nowhere to run if mistakes are grave. Xingjian learns through his travels that for him, being one with nature is a form of Lingshan, and provides much peace. The cross section of the false diagnosis, the need to escape persecution, and his pursuit of knowledge and enlightenment lead Xingjian to a journey unlike anything he could have envisioned at the onset, which is part of the beauty he encounters and knowledge he gains.

The trip down the slope was much quicker and easier, and we seemed to sail to the bottom without much need to stop besides to take photos. At the base of the falls, the crashing water vaporized and refracted the light, creating a rainbow.





The following day, our guide offered that we try to go as long as possible without speaking. I enjoyed this segment, as it allowed me to block out distractions from the nature around me, stay in my head, and simply soak in Yosemite on the last couple days of the jaunt across the country. At one point in the mid-afternoon, the guide broke her silence, and instructed us to sit for a half an hour or a bit more and observe an open field. The mountainous stone walls lining the perimeter of all I could see didn't feel claustrophobic, but instead that we were a cradle forming Yosemite Valley, a place untouched, away from the world. I sat off to the side, far from my class, looking out across the expanse and felt the sun beaming down on me, warming me up as I tried to avoid the next instruction from our guide, which was to make some art of our surroundings. Perhaps it was my perception of my skills, but I was mostly turned off by the concept of making fine art, as I could barely draw anything but stick figures. Then Ms. B, who ironically for the first thing she asked us to read in her class, for the sake of the reference, and the fact that I couldn't stand her since our many spats in English class the year prior, might as well be named Diana Moon Glampers, came and sat next to me. I was actively dismayed she had joined the trip, but the young chaperone offered me a watercolor set and a sheet of paper, and I

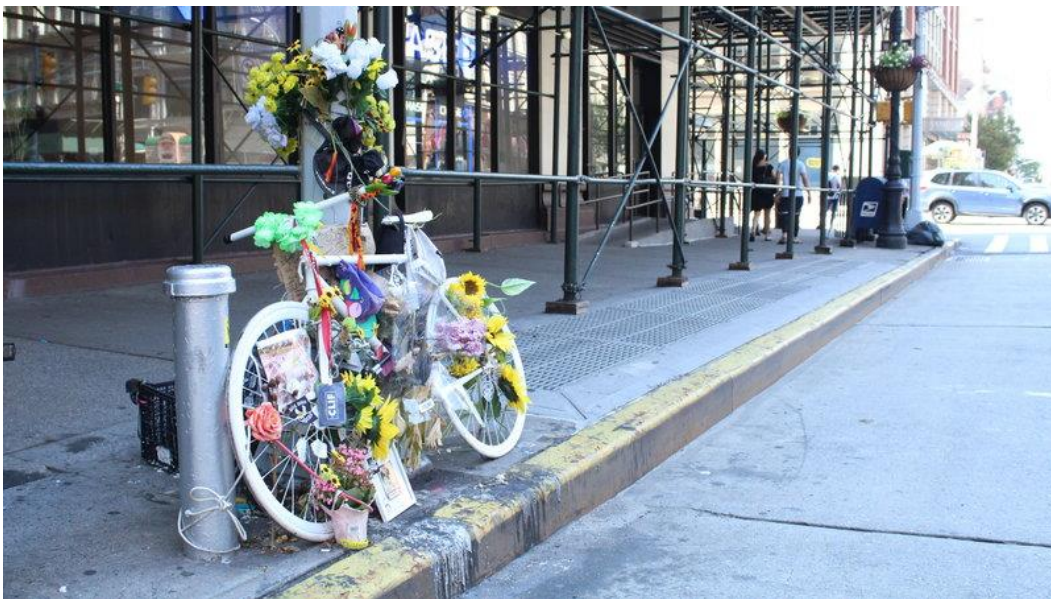
was fine with spending the break in painting quietly. But soon after I selected my subject, she broke the silence by pointing out that the biggest asshole in our grade was having a hissy fit over his art inability, and another kid not far from him was splayed out on the floor face down after making something more akin to a Jackson Pollack than a nature scene. But I couldn't believe it, I was *laughing* at what she ended up saying about the people around us, and quietly, and for just that moment, we were able to go back and forth. Later, I thought of that moment, and although her torment from the previous year couldn't be forgiven, it was an interesting moment to have a truce. Best of enemies perhaps? I wondered what had brought her guard down to trash students, but nonetheless it was in ways enlightening to how I could interact with people, even if I found them revolting. Back at school, the interactions were none besides the errant half-smile and the raising of a brow from a distance, and she left after the conclusion of that school year.

Much like anyone who's been on a recent trip, normal life seems drab and unengaging, especially when the contrast is fresh in your mind. Xingjian's journey, and his narrators' journey, we're life altering, as they allowed the world to be seen from new perspectives. Along the way, the various set pieces, be them real or comprised of visions borne from pure desire to see them, presented the information that make up the journey and the lessons learned therein. As corny as this is, often the true gift of the journey, or the Lingshan to the quest, is all that is accumulated along the way, and the various places, things, people, and moments we pick up and stow in our pockets, be them mental or physical. The world is cluttered with meaning, and Xingjian implores us to stop a moment and piece things together instead of searching for the ultimate prize, since in reality, these things lessons rarely appear fully formed.



For younger people, it is often difficult to conceptualize many of life's greatest challenges and harsh realities, simply for lack of experience. Many philosophers maintain that humans exist primarily in their minds, and thusly if two people are playing video games with each other thousands of miles apart or are feet from each other lifting weights, the sheer fact of that interaction is the connection, no matter the activity or medium. Many cannot conceptualize being without their body, or without use of their body, which is why often when people have injuries to their extremities which limit their ability to walk, or use their fine motor skills, it can be debilitating. Yesterday, as I walked my dog, a man on a bike caused me to recall the day of my potential worst cycling accident when I was nearly flattened by a van, so vividly to the point I became unfocused and unsettled. That spring day, I was hustling home after going from one internship to the graduation for another internship, and it was the day of my senior prom, so certainly it would have been a bad day to end up in the hospital. Luckily, the driver behind me was quick to hit the break, and I was far enough ahead that he had time to react. But moments

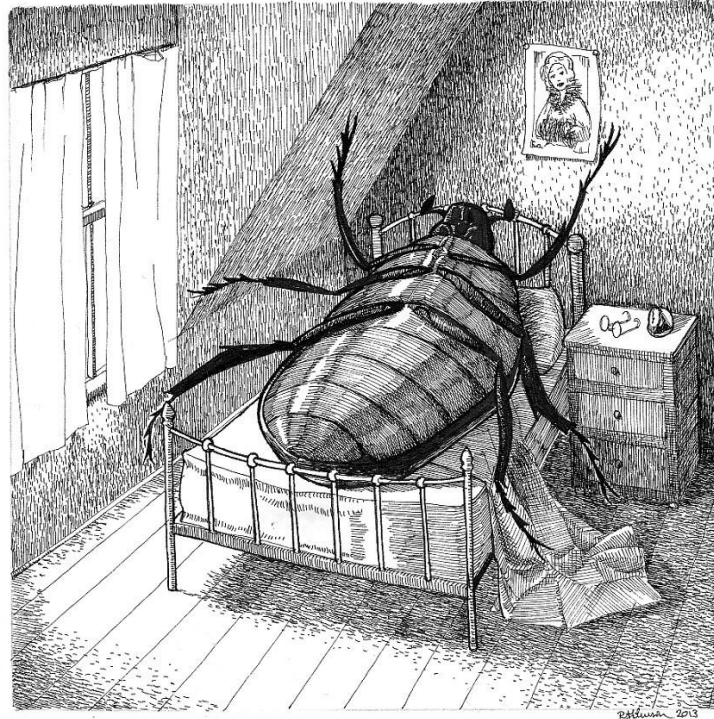
like that have stuck with me for years, a safety mechanism which allows me to make better and more intelligent decisions when zooming through the city. For a long time, but especially since that moment, I've had a fear of losing my able body as I knew it, losing my ability to be physically active, and go where I wanted when I wanted unassisted. I understood that in old age, these things would decline, and watching my grandmother shake from Parkinson's was something I wasn't able to grasp in my childhood. I understood however, that she was unable to stop, and now I worry about if that will be my affliction, or worse my demise, in old age. Still to this day, I've never broken a bone, and never had major surgery, so there are things I cannot fathom for lack of experience.



In reality, we undergo minor change near every day. Nicks and cuts appear on our dermis, sometimes unnoticed until looking in a mirror. The same with strange bruises, scabs, and dandruff. Our posture shifts ever so slightly, our ears and nose continue to grow all through our lives, our skin wrinkles, and our hair becomes gray. After not speaking to or seeing my father for six years (because he's an asshole), I was shocked during our first in person interaction how much he had aged. I spoke to a friend and all I could say was, "Suddenly, he was older". It had

occurred over a long period of time in actuality, but to me, it was like one moment he was younger and the next he aged. Not just physically, but emotionally, we grow and change as we age. Our experiences help us learn our faults, and what things we like, what truly expresses us. We learn true fears, and realities of life. The people we interact with help us learn as much about ourselves as we do about each other. As well, our personality and behavior can undergo metamorphosis in the blink of an eye, be it from trauma, or a conscious decision to behave specifically.

In *Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa awakes one morning from a terrible dream to find he's transformed. A traveling salesman, Gregor is the sole earner in his household, which includes his sister and parents. Now unable to work, let alone speak, Gregor is confined to his bedroom, and is the target of disgust from his parents. Only Grete, his sister, seems to take pity on him, bringing him food, and removing some furniture from the room so he may have more room to scurry. Ultimately, and after much pain and an unfortunate end as a household pariah, Gregor succumbs, and dies of hunger, feeling the contempt of the family who he once served so diligently. After all, it was not his debts he was working to pay down, but his father's. Many speak of the lesson here to be conceptual, and about the unforgiving nature of nearly every society, where working until dropping dead was expected, just to receive barely anything but minor monetary compensation, and hardly any thanks.



Kafka's *Metamorphosis* has maintained a place in the global lexicon since its publication in 1915. Translations from the original German have been numerous, but Kafka seemed to imbue all his works with the essence of himself. An Ashkenazi Jew who grew up in Prague, Kafka was known to be highly suspicious of most everyone, believing that others found him to be repulsive, both in appearance and in personality. Unmarried until death, Kafka was said to be an "incessant womanizer", although this was said to be born again from his insecurities about failure and subsequent judgement. Perhaps Kafka saw himself as monstrous vermin, who despite his clear authorial abilities, was resigned to a painful life without many of the satisfactions many take their solace in. But Kafka's afflictions were not a product of his era, one where we did not have electronic communications yet. Trite yet essential to mention, the connectivity we have at our disposal now has in ways pushed us farther apart from each other. Platforms like Instagram, where idealized and edited snapshots of people's lives can be torturous

to view, especially if you've not been invited to the party at the coolest kids house, and must look upon your desired social circles from a distance, through a screen, through a fleeting cross section of the fun you could have been having.

But Kafka is not the only man who writes of their own othering. James Baldwin imbued many of his stories with subtleties speaking to his dismay with his appearance, even his sweetest harpings on love and longing. Tortured souls from the lost generation spoke of their disappointments in society leaving so many behind. Countless female authors have written about the myriad injustices they have been expected to endure simply for the fact of their birth gender, be it the disappointments of *The Bell Jar* or triumphs in *Little Women*. Even works like Dostoyevsky's *The Double* display the heaps of insecurities over our abilities and lack thereof we are expected to carry each day. But few works as succinctly capture the feeling of being a beast now thrown aside by those closest to you, or so it seemed, without anything to show for it, as Kafka does here.

In the time of COVID-19, now we must be apart, and it is a peculiar kind of disaster. Unlike most other occurrences in history, namely the Spanish Flu of 1918 and the Bubonic Plague, grieving and coping could occur in groups, where the touch of a companion or friendly conversation to take the mind off the tragedy, or thoughtful words of reflection, could make things feel better, even if for a moment. But now, we are without these comforts unless we risk the safety of our friends, and the family we may cohabitate with. Concerned public officials have used their briefings to remind us that this crisis is a mental health crisis as well as physical health. It seems the whole world has undergone metamorphosis, molting into an ugly, homebound beast for the time being. For the sake of analogy, many of us hope for another metamorphosis bringing the days the world can spread its wings and fly once more.

In many ways, it feels the entire world has undergone transformation as we rethink remote schooling, medicine, and work, while also considering better ways to conduct when not in a crisis. Almost every industry, from airlines, to shipping, to restaurants, will be different on the other side of this. Understanding that our hospital systems, already near max capacity, couldn't take the overflow from a ubiquitous disaster is another strange thought, as no one seemed to bat an eye for decades leading up to this. Many have spoken about the seniors, high school and college, who have been robbed of their ultimate spring semester, and the feeling of disappointment and lack of closure that comes with missing a prom or graduation. Love and romance may feel changed, with some people worried about meeting new people, and this worry that you may not know who is carrying some dangerous pestilence, asymptomatic. The traditional grounds of adult enjoyment in bars and clubs may see themselves altered and struggling as people are reluctant to get out there and slip between crowds of bodies moving along the counter. Like so many disasters before this one, living in the shadow of the aftermath may prove to be the most taxing part of the whole thing. Many jokingly predicted a baby boom resulting from some couples being locked up together, but the opposite has occurred: there's been an increase in divorces and break-ups, where people have had too much of each other and feel they should call it quits.

For many, their true nature comes out when the chips are down, be that a goodhearted or unpleasant change. While countless New Yorkers stand at their windows each evening at 7pm to clap, bang pots, pans, drums, and play music for essential workers who put themselves in the line of fire each day, countless others rob pizza delivery men, price gouge sanitary supplies at the local pharmacy, and most alarmingly, fail to grasp the crisis, resisting even the simplest sign of respect for others, to wear a mask. In past generations, contagions and disasters have done



terrible things to the psyche of entire generations. Wars and war crimes, the AIDS crisis, multiple economic downturns where people lose their entire livelihood and home, and terrorist attacks have left their mark on humanity.

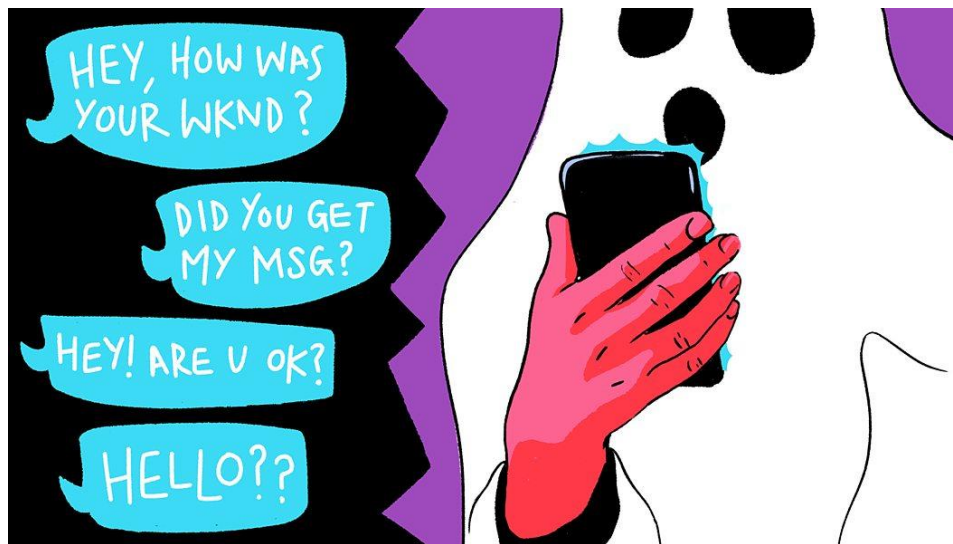
It is clear that change is the only constant in our world, but it sudden or gradual. Nostalgia, although sweet, only serves to remind us of places we've been. How many times have we seen someone try to recapture a moment, a time in their life, a trip, an adventure, anything, and be disappointed or unsatisfied. It's like trying to make lightning strike twice, and this time you'll be ready to bottle it. This is the failure of someone like Jay Gatsby, who cannot force the world to be the way he desires it, no matter all his means and efforts. If anything, this is the greatest fool's errand we know in humanity. The world we will know after COVID will look similar, but will without a doubt be very different. If all life and existence was arranged on a timeline, clearly, we've diverged into a new area, whether or not we wanted this to happen, or were prepared for it, there is no choice but to proceed forward. To accept that life sometimes can change suddenly and terribly, be it personal tragedy or otherwise is an important skill, although one which is near impossible to master.

I certainly am not a master of this patience. Not only is the global pandemic and the reality that I must stay inside causing great stress and strain, it is not a muscle we can exercise on demand, as each tragedy take a unique toll. On a sunny day during sophomore year's fall semester, I was finally able to see a friend I had been haranguing for months to get together with to have some lunch and catch up. Our friendship began at sleepaway summer camp in 2008, and our gravity was immediate, and being that we were both New Yorkers, we could see each other as frequently as we wanted. We would text constantly when apart. From middle school to high school ages now to college, we maintained a connection and if anything, I was the only friend

who remained in his circle at each stop. Now finally at the same school, I was excited by the prospect of the places our friendship of almost a decade would go. After we were both admitted, we sat for brunch at my favorite corner table at my favorite restaurant overlooking the East River and talked about the excitement in this next step in our lives. However, things did not go as planned almost immediately as Miles became distant, and disengaged with all responsibilities. He was staying up until the middle of the night smoking pot and watching movies then sleeping through classes he needed for his major. Along with wanting to see him, I was concerned, and his avoidance of me felt peculiar. When we met his body language awkward, so I questioned him almost immediately about what was on his mind. After hearing that, in his view, we we're never truly friends and that my efforts to get together with him for something friendly had triggered his anxiety, he basically broke up with me, and walked up Broadway out of site as I stood there stunned. It felt like I had been shot and left to bleed out in the bushes of Washington Square Park, while a thousand faces rushed past me heading towards what they needed to do. I wanted to scream but couldn't make my mouth move. I could hardly say anything let alone rebut his claim right there. Finally, I walked and sat at lunch, alone, feeling a reverberation of anger and pain deep in my chest. For nearly a year after, I would intermittently contact him, sharing a fond memory, displaying I missed him, hoping for the real explanation, or perhaps even an apology. We were deeply embedded into each other's lives. The carefully written speech I gave at his bar mitzvah was still magnetized to his refrigerator when I stayed with him at his family's massive apartment the past summer after being kicked out of my house.

Excluding my countless efforts for him to notice me or at least have the decency to answer me, it has been radio silence from someone I thought to be one of my closest confidants. The betrayal was as deep a wound I've ever dealt with. I trudged around New York City for

years, wishing to run into him and scream that he was a piece of garbage, maybe even push him to the ground and spit on him in disgust. I wanted him to know he broke my heart. I wanted him to feel my pain. I grappled with this piece of my soul gone, until finally it occurred quite recently to me that holding a deep and preoccupying hatred wasn't doing me any good, and the fact that the first few notes of certain songs would come on or some other thing I would encounter out in the world would remind me of him, and after the smile would come the sadness and the unanswerable questions I had wasn't doing anything but letting otherwise fine days be ruined by someone who probably never thought of me.



I will carry my fears, worries, neurosis, thoughts, desires, and drive all my life. Be it a betrayal or natural disaster, life would not be life without disruptions and change. There is a quote attributed sometimes to Theodore Roosevelt, sometimes to Napoleon Bonaparte, which I have always loved, that says, "Courage isn't having the strength to go on – it is going on when you don't have strength". All we can do is proceed, unbroken, determined to achieve, no matter the setting, no matter the circumstances. The world may always be stacked against you, but the grit to persevere will be the deciding factor in success or failure.

The lessons of the authors and thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are some of the most thoughtful, profound, and impactful to contemporary events and the future. A bridge between the old world, one without the machinery and convenience which enables so much of our life and industry, these thinkers grew as our world did, perhaps as quickly as the world did, and for that, they are better, and made us better by sharing their insights. Rights were bestowed upon billions, nations were lifted out of poverty, industry blossomed and set forth strong economies, which had previously never been known. Now, we continue to explore the (sometimes digital) world we have invented, and push the limits of our creations, hoping to create the ideal society that so many wrote of during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A great thing about the human mind, is that it sometimes can be limitless. In ways, this is like Jules Vern imagining the submarine for 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea before the modern multi-chamber submersible existed. In others, it foresees futures where happiness of the society is closer to 100% than 10%. While maligned for so many things, such as sensitivity and overreliance on electronics, perhaps a beautiful thing about Generation Z, and their successors Generation Alpha, is that they practically know a world without limits. To the mind of the people who grew up with all the knowledge and history they could need literally at their fingertips, a more equal world is not a dream, but an eventuality. For people like Greta Thunberg, the teenage climate activist, she can go places previous roped off by decorum, with all the bravery and drive to stick a finger in faces, and charge career officials with a career of negligence and inaction as the climate as decayed.

In many ways, the climate struggle is a uniting factor for hundreds of millions, if not billions, around the world. For those who began the true manufacturing and industrial expansion after the baby boom will soon begin to die, and the consequences from their actions will become, if they haven't already, become the problems of people who were not even imagined when it

began. Albert Einstein proposes that no problem can be solved with the same level of effort and brainpower which caused it, and this is an absolute truth. Now, we see direct results from this climate abuse, as shocking as the images of overflowing banks Venice and Bangladesh were, seeing the streets of the same bustling cities empty because of COVID-19, and skies clear from pollution, is as shocking as it can get. Currently, the planet is united in the greatest challenge of the past 70 years, and millions of minds are laser focused on solving this. It has been decades, and perhaps never before even, since so many minds were focused on a singular problem. In ways, regionality is gone as we all have access to the same broadcasts and interests, and can communicate immediately. As well, our societies big and large are becoming more accepting of all sorts of things. Beyond identity acceptance, people are accepting that they may need assistance in some way, be it to speak about their feelings and struggles with a mental health professional, or having enough self-awareness to know your rough edges and know what you need to be productive and successful, but that selfcare or focusing regimens. We may arrive on the other side of this pandemic with an energized to get out there and experience the world we've felt so deprived of, and perhaps bring in a new era. It is difficult to understand a historical event while it is occurring, especially when it is not a war, or fast and abrupt event like a stock crash.

Many of the world's institutions are broken, and not just government. Now in an age where we must keep apart, vital parts of our society, like the covenant of touch, having been severed. Part of the processes of learning and growing is to be selective on what we take in. For each reminder of mask, gloves, social distance, and some other fixture to this waking nightmare, we must remember what to carry with us when we move into the next phase. But touch is one thing that will return, because it must return. Perhaps not in the form of the austere business handshake (which I think could be replaced by bowing) but to hug a friend you haven't seen in a

long time provides relief like no others. Now when we watch Television, we shudder at commercials and shows produced before this was our reality, where close contact would occur and we wouldn't bat an eye. But we cannot allow this to be the forever fate of humanity, where our cell phones have already done so much to drive us apart.

As spoken of above, it would be foolish to see ourselves as the end all of humanity, the final stage in societal and biological evolution. Perhaps the 20s and 30s will not unleash the Ubermensch on the world, the generation of perfect humans, all with ascended knowledge, but we must continue to be our best, and to proceed forward, to learn from what we see around us, and to grow. No matter our vanities, or greatest desires, our obstacles, or personal animus, life is to be lived well, and in forward motion, and if anything, the words and lessons of the various stories above are our guiding principles and motivators for a thoughtful life lived better, constantly in search of aspects and anecdotes to teach us.

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