

Works Cited

GEMMA KANEKO

I.

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.

—*J. D. Salinger*

I don't remember not being able to read. I've always been impossibly puzzled when someone asks me, what would you save if your house were on fire? Paper burns quickly, and there is so much of it. I was three years old, or so I am told, when I began to carry around my first book. From *Madeline* to *The Brooklyn Follies*, I have traversed the globe. I have seen Calcutta, Paris, and Mars, not to mention numerous and similar small English villages. Of course, reading became more than a way to live vicariously in other worlds. Very quickly, books became interesting puzzles. Is this teacup a metaphor for time or death? Are they the same? No story is simple—any simple object can signal absolution or condemnation. A speck of dust can be as heavy with meaning as any statement of fact.

Said grit settles quickly on the fifth floor of King's Books. I was on the top story of this massive structure of used tomes, all well-thumbed and welcoming. They sit on the shelves, waiting. Fingers have run across these pages, eyes have scanned these words. Perhaps others have brushed against the grimy windowpanes of this room, seen the sunlight filtered inexpertly across the stacks. I was so happy there, crouched against a stool, entranced. It wasn't David Copperfield-style information that could define this experience, or *Catcher In the Rye* snark—it was *David Copperfield* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. I suppose there could have been no other way to begin. Rob Fleming in *High*

Fidelity says, “What really matters is what you like, not what you *are* like” (117). For me, they are the same thing.

II.

A story has no beginning or end; arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead.

—*Graham Greene*

When I was ten years old, I cut open a cow’s brain. The rest of my fifth grade class stood around the table, equally disgusted and fascinated. After passing the knife to Megan, I slid my bare finger beneath the oddly stiff membrane that covered the gray matter. Approximately four hours later, I realized I did not believe in God. In touching that springy material, it occurred to me that divinity is a physical thing. Belief is really nothing more than one neuron communicating with another. This “God” is no separate being of substance but a pulse across fibers that connect tissue to tissue. This realization really wasn’t a traumatic thing. Megan informed me that I was going to hell, but in the way of ten-year-olds, I forgave her by the next day’s recess.

Of course, there are people who have taken apart *human* brains and seen the signature of the maker himself. Not I. The perception of that mark is made by the marked. So, if I didn’t believe in God, what did I believe in? In elementary school, that was easy: grammar and Ducky. Despite the John Hughes name, he was not a perpetual quirky sidekick, but a counselor at my annual summer camp. His real name was Dave, even though he barely answered to it.

The year I was eleven, watching hawks circle mournfully through the sky over capture-the-flag, Ducky was twenty-seven and therefore a possessor of innumerable secrets of life. We sat on the hill together, me gazing and him bound in conversation with Emma, another counselor.

My wandering reverie was interrupted when he asked me what I thought of his drawing. It was of Emma curled up on the old couch in the office, back facing out, and carefully asleep. In the nature of people confronted with surprisingly accurate representations of life in ballpoint pen crosshatching, I simply replied, “Wow.”

“No,” Ducky insisted. “Not like that. Just look at it and word associate or something. I need a caption for it.”

“Sleep, dream, nightmares, waking . . .”

Was there a time I didn't want to be eighteen and old enough to sit in his living room and discuss books and movies? I wanted so badly to be erudite enough to say something profound, good enough for that caption.

I couldn't get past the content of the picture. Every time the right word eluded me, I felt more crag-bound. I finally fell when Ducky disappeared at the end of that summer, never to be heard from again. What words would have been enough to keep him? I could diagram a sentence and define "demonstrative," but I could not give him the words to make his scripture. Ducky's drawing of Emma did not carry me away. There was nothing in front of my eyes but the practiced command of a pen. But that wasn't as it should be! Obviously, I did not understand something, because I was supposed to be overcome with a torrent of words and thoughts that threatened to drown me. It was a failure indeed, but not mine. That drawing should have borne me up on wings high enough to graze the sun.

III.

If we were to open to a random page in her journal—which she must have kept and kept with her at all times, not fearing that it would be lost, or discovered and read, but that she would one day stumble upon that thing which was finally worth writing about and remembering, only to find that she had no place to write it—we would find some rendering of the following sentiment: *I am not in love.*

So she had to satisfy herself with the *idea* of love—loving the loving of things whose existence she didn't care at all about.

—Jonathan Safran Foer

I have never looked at a painting and seen more than the subject portrayed. The great surges of emotion that people seem to feel in reaction to art have always eluded me, though that didn't stop me from trying to find them. Pulsing through my hippocampus along with Ducky's picture is my first attempt at deifying art: Toulouse-Lautrec's *Rousse (La Toilette)*. The Moulin Rouge was running through my head, not in lithographs and pastels but in panning shots and Elton John covers. Jane Avril was no blotchy illustration, but Nicole Kidman and a golden elephant. Toulouse-Lautrec himself was not a dying alcoholic, but a well-meaning man who believed, above all things, in love.

This exhibit was going to be the Bohemian Revolution. By going to it, I was identifying myself with beauty, freedom, truth, and above all, love. Who could fail to be passionate about these things? In every painting, I saw this

sweeping romance. Each sketch was a testimony to the hidden purity of humanity, each print an explosive, burning kiss.

Standing in front of the picture, I simmered in false nostalgia and regret. Ren stood next to me, my sidekick, my umbrella holder.

“I don’t understand this. He’s just copying Degas. It’s not actually anything new.”

“Well,” I sniped, “I like it. It’s Toulouse-Lautrec building on Degas, and is anything ever *really* new?”

The painting became to me an altar. I told myself that such art was elevating. I convinced myself that I was filled with unnamable joy instead of an ill-defined want. When I was fifteen, looking at *Rousse* was an immediate flight to some colossal hidden knowledge. Now, it is simply an aesthetically attractive painting of a woman with red hair.

IV.

Someone—Rubenstein, maybe—once said, when asked if he believed in God: “Oh no, I believe in something bigger.” And someone else—was it Chesterson?—said that when men stop believing in God, it isn’t that they believe in nothing: they believe in everything.

But everything is not a bigger secret.

—*Umberto Eco*

It was after reading “Art Objects” by Jeanette Winterson that a circuit clicked and whirred. Her essay made art into a chapel for salvation. A museum became the exaltations of St. Theresa. Nobody really sits in front of a painting and weeps, or “flees” from the passion inspired by a nameless illustration. Unfortunately, her painful hyperbole and florid language were close friends of mine as well. I was not really finding meaning in art. I was creating it because that was easier than admitting I felt nothing. If beautiful art inspires no feeling in me, either I’m not smart enough to understand it, or I am not a full human being.

Not too long ago, I stood in front of Jonathan Safran Foer’s table at the Brooklyn Book Fair, paperbacks in hand. They were worn smooth like rosaries, soft like prayer shawls. I held them out as coolly as I could. Suddenly, even though I had promised myself I wouldn’t, I burst into some useless rhapsody over the work. He signed my books, but his response was a dismissal. Gentle, but a dismissal nonetheless. As with paintings I have turned from, he did not validate my otherness, my desire for some burst of emotion and superiority.

I was standing in my kitchen, washing the orange juice residue out of a glass, when I realized that I had tried to misuse art, long-gone people, and books to lift myself into some kind of an exalted state of being. How could I help but be disappointed?

V.

He was on the road again, traveling the continent westward, going off to further and further years, alone by the wastes of life, alone, looking towards the wastes of life, alone looking towards the lights of the river's cape, towards tapers burning warmly in the towns, looking down the shore in remembrance of his father and of all life

—*Jack Kerouac*

I understand what's happening. I've read *The Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *The Town and the City*. This is the time in my life when the idols I have been venerating are unceremoniously knocked down. This is when I realize that Ducky was just a lonely guy, that art is not mine, and that authors are only people with a good command of words. I'm supposed to be angry, confused, and contemplative. Everything that I think now should be a revelation to me, the kind that gives people a decade older a touch of a smirk.

There's a script for this. How many novels have I read in which the protagonist abruptly realizes that his illusions are built on sand? So, I know that I'm supposed to feel lost and yearning. I do, but I thought that by letting those words slide into my subjectivity, I would be able to avoid this destruction of idols because I already knew it was coming. Knowing the symptoms, I could quickly identify the problem and eliminate it. Instead, I find myself embodying the cliché.

But there are things that I have not been able to find in Holden's story, Scout's recollection, and Peter's uncertainty at the beginning of his literal and metaphorical road. There is a space between the coming-of-age and the existential-crisis novel. This is what happens to Peter Martin as *The Town and the City* ends. He hears the voices of all his youth calling to him, and then he draws up the shoulders of his coat and begins the walk down his metaphorical road, alone. What is along that road? Which novel comes next? I have strictly followed the rest of the story, and suddenly, I am left alone in this wordless wilderness. There are only vague indications of what comes next. Edna Pontellier drowns (Chopin), and Huck Finn departs to Oklahoma (Twain). I want to turn another page, because I have to know how I am supposed to leap from "All children grow up, except one" to "Mother died today."

In Umberto Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum*, Jacopo Belbo is a man searching for the address to "the Divine." However, he is a skeptic who cannot place his faith in anything. His skepticism is transformed into a search for the ultimate opportunity, the one chance to be purely in the eternal instant. Belbo creates a plan on which to blame his perceived loss of this opportunity, and it takes on flesh.

It was easy for me to mistake Belbo's journey for my own. I want answers presented to me in cleverly turned phrases. I too feel as though I have missed some great and capitalized possibility. But I am not a searcher as he is. The secrets I think I have discovered are outlined and edited in draft upon draft. His tale ends with the idea that wisdom comes only at the end of existence, and that is a new and easy dogma for me to consider. But I do not believe that death will bring me to a sort of wisdom. It is likely that I will wander many years bemoaning my lack of it, cursing the cliché I am living. But I do know that I can finally see the patterns of my thoughts, not unlike that ten-year-old girl prodding the brain of a cow, thinking about perception. *The Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, in discussing the human nervous system, tells us that "it is so automatic that people hardly realize that seeing what they see and hearing what they hear is only an interpretation. Each act of perception is a hypothesis based on prior experience; the world is made up of things people expect to see, hear, or smell, and any new sensory event is perceived in relation to what they already know."

My own literary collection has formed my experience, so my world is made up of things I expect to happen. Love is either gentle and refined (any Austen novel) or passionate and painful (*Another Country*, James Baldwin, 1963). My series of searches for meaning are making up for the lack of God (*Hey Nostradamus!* Douglas Coupland, 2004). Every emotion is supposed to be enormous and flamboyant (*Everything is Illuminated*, Jonathan Safran Foer, 2002). I will react to my first unpleasantness like Scout, and when I begin to cast off the shadow of my youth, I will take to the long winding pathway of Peter Martin. If I didn't know how to read, I wouldn't know how to live.

VI.

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.

—*Charles Dickens*

If there's a gap, if there's a space between the period at the end of the next novel I read and the capital letter at the beginning of the subsequent one,

something has to fill it. When I find out what that is, I'll be sure to write it down—once I've found a way actually to live in that space.

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