

# **FROM OLD NOTEBOOKS**

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Even now, whenever I accidentally touch this book, almost every sentence turns for me into a net that again brings up from the depths something incomparable: its entire skin trembles with tender thrills of memory. The art that distinguishes it is not inconsiderable when it comes to fixing to some extent things that easily flit by, noiselessly—moments I call divine lizards—but not with the cruelty of that young Greek god who simply speared the poor little lizard, though, to be sure, with something pointed—a pen.

Nietzsche

SHORT STORY ABOUT A CHURCH on the ocean floor. Congregation in scuba gear.

Memoir in which narrator struggles to describe her childhood—offering two or more contrary accounts of the same event—having been raised by divorced parents with unresolved anger toward each other such that discrepancies between parents’ accounts of each other’s involvement in her childhood have damaged narrator’s memory beyond repair.

Academic essay entitled “*Cute Title: Serious Subtitle: On the Preponderance of Precious Subtitling in Academic Essays.*”

Novel in chapters, each chapter spanning one year, 1977–2006. In lieu of chapter number, photograph of Tom Cruise’s face from that year.

Story about a garbage man who cannot fathom how anyone might be content living a life not wholly dedicated to being a garbage man.

Something entitled “Born Dead.” Or “Born Died.”

Novel that suffers from the Y2K bug. iPods all the craze in 1906, etc.

Short story about someone living inside of a piano.

Short story about a male professor whose academic specialty is representations of female prostitutes in novels and films. One day after class he sneaks away to a hotel room on the outskirts of town in order to experience, firsthand, the forbidden delights of real live prostitute sex, to finally *defeat the hooker simulacrum*. But the prostitute, upon learning that the skinny balding man struggling to unbutton her blouse

is a literature professor, becomes eager to chat about novels and films, especially those containing representations of female prostitutes. She suggests that these films and books have strongly influenced the way she *performs* being a prostitute; the professor passionately insists she is mistaken; she demurs; argument ensues; prostitute finally stands up for herself with all the clichéd self-regard of prostitutes in novels and films, storms out of the hotel room.

Novel in which the verb *to be* and all inflections thereof appear italicized in every instance.

Scene from a film in which Steven Spielberg carries his severed arm across a war-torn battlefield.

Essay arguing that Aaron Copland is the best American composer.

Essay arguing that Aaron Copland is the worst American composer.

Screenplay in which screenwriter includes a cast list with Hollywood stars cast in improbable roles:

Arnold Schwarzenegger    TRANSVESTITE PROSTITUTE

Bruce Willis    DEAD GUY IN MORGUE

Angelina Jolie    LEPER

Jim Carrey    DRIVE-BY SHOOTER

Julia Roberts    CRACK WHORE #1

Tom Cruise    CRACK WHORE #2

Novel about a haunted cryonics storage facility.

Memoir beginning with detailed narrative description of subject's rich and fertile childhood slowly disintegrates into list of difficult books he read as an adult.

Reality television show in which ten writers living in the same house compete for a two-book deal.

Novella in which protagonist, sitting in a chair at the airport waiting to pick up old friend who never arrives, looks down at feet to find laptop case. Decides to leave airport with, if not old friend, laptop. At

home, discovers directory on hard drive with 30 folders inside, each named a year (1977–2006); within each of those, twelve more folders; within each of those, 28–31 folders; within each of those, 24 folders; within each of those, 60 folders; within each of those, anywhere from 1–60 .txt files. Opens one of the .txt files to find what seems a bunch of gibberish—*like contemporary poetry*, he thinks to himself—opens another and another, all the same, but occasionally certain words seem familiar: the first name of his girlfriend appears, or the word *death* appears alongside the names of streets he regularly drives on or foods he regularly eats. Protagonist slowly comes to realize laptop contains textual transliterations of his own thoughts from those moments in time. Novella alternates between narrative account of finding laptop, slowly discovering therein a file structure corresponding to his life, etc.; and *Principia*-type laws he derives about the file structure. E.g:

*Law 3* Any break in the contiguity of the file structure's numeration represents a period during which I was unconscious, that is, not producing recallable thought-data.

*Law 4* The current rate of file growth is inversely proportional to my current rate of conscious thought.

At story's end protagonist sits reading his thoughts from story's beginning, story's middle, story's end.



Academic essay, after Moretti, quantifying the extent to which Jackson Pollock's paintings influenced late-20th-century hairstyles.

Story about a mother who develops an allergic reaction to her kids.

"The boy lost the spelling bee on the word *metrorrhagia* and cried all the way home."

Short story in which the most crucial plot details are divulged in footnotes, the most trivial details in narration.

Character whose job is to talk people down from manic fear-of-death episodes.

Pamphlet quantifying the difficulties of quitting smoking v. quitting drinking.

Baby in story chokes on errant outlet cover, dies.

Short story in which protagonist becomes addicted to drugs because he has a drug-bully friend who appears to suffer tremendous affront upon protagonist's suggestion, "Maybe we should call it a night," such that it seems to protagonist their relationship will suffer irreparably if he doesn't stay out all night with drug bully, doing all sorts of drugs.

Story about a child who excitedly goes to see a 3-D movie, but his *strabismus* prevents him from looking through both lenses simultaneously, so he sees the movie in either 2-D blue or 2-D red. A huge theater, everyone around him *ooohing* and *aaahing*, flinching, throwing their heads back in unison. Child sitting motionless. Getting up, excusing himself from aisle. Hurriedly exiting auditorium, finding a bathroom, locking himself in a stall, weeping.

Short story about a world in which fear of death is physically infectious.

Satiric essay/story in the form of a reality-show contract.

Title of Carmen's hypothetical self-help book for new mothers: *How to Take a Shit While Holding Your Baby*.

Something called "Shivering in the Sun."

How as a child I once felt that everyone but me was an automaton.  
—As I sometimes feel still, except for that *but me*.

Just because/ I dream about/ Tom Cruise/ doesn't mean/ he dreams  
about/ me. Just because I/ dream about Tom/ Cruise doesn't mean/  
he dreams/ about me. Just/ because I/ dream about Tom/ Cruise  
doesn't/ mean he/ dreams about me.

Something entitled "The Pleasures of Consciousness."

Character whose dog's name is Virgule.

Dying character's last words: "I wish I would have eaten more fruit!  
God, how I wish I would have eaten more fruit!"

Scene in which a father tells his son that his—the father's—penis is slightly smaller than average, and that the son should expect for his penis to be the same.

When I look down to find my T-shirt hiked up, my boxer shorts ballooning out over my belt.

In high school, when I *bagged my pants* and wore extra-large shirts, a friend one day alerted me to this same condition, so pronounced on this day that when I sat down on a concrete bench outside the cafeteria, my shirt bunched up around my waist to reveal a section of pure bare thigh below my boxer shorts, above my pants.

Something called "The Misanthropic Principle."

Essay describing the structure of *Infinite Jest* as Hofstadterian *strange loop*, the novel's structure being that of a circle with a missing section—between the last and first pages—which must be *filled in* by the reader who has been, by the end of the novel, prepared, practiced, coached to do so, just as life allegedly teaches one how to die.

Short story about a career Bookmobile driver.

Character who ejaculates on dollar bills before setting them back into circulation.

By waving my hands before my face I effect physical processes of unfathomable complexity.

—As I do when thinking of nothing at all.

When reading something I greatly admire, pretending I wrote it. Reading something I greatly admire, pretending I wrote it, and pretending I'm someone other than myself who's greatly admiring it while reading it. Pretending I'm Tom Waits's best friend. Reading

something I've written and pretending an author I greatly admire has written it.

Monologue spoken by an aging pianist-composer, based on Prokofiev, beginning with the following sentence: *My fingers have grown very tired.*

Something entitled "From Old Notebooks," simply a transcription of entries from these notebooks.

Story involving a couple whose divorce proceedings center upon the allocation of the books contained in the family library.

Living off-campus on the outskirts of a city where I knew no one, in a studio apartment the size of a large walk-in closet, I would occupy myself in the evenings with an obsessive study of the shadows of my hands against the wall as I faux-conducted piano concertos; and later, after having taken three Ambien, intimate conversations with bits of magma crawling across the carpet that had detached from the glowing wires on my electric space heater. That same year, in a fit of

manic loneliness, I invited a raccoon into my apartment with a trail of cracker crumbs.

Do not let Jackson and Sofia live off-campus as undergraduates.

Cached auto-complete entry options that appear when I type the letter *e* into the search field in the toolbar of my internet browser:

*evan lavender-smith*  
“*evan lavender-smith*”  
“*evan lavender smith*”  
*evan* + “*lavender-smith*”  
*evan* + “*lavender smith*”  
*evan* + *lavender* + *smith*

The letter *f*:

*fear of death*

Contemporary authors who construct a thick barrier between themselves and their readers such that *authorial vulnerability* is revealed negatively, i.e., via the construction of the barrier.

If Team USA had a mascot, it would be God.

Character who refers to Wellbutrin as his muse.

“I hope to one day storm out on Terry Gross during an interview because I am that kind of eccentric famous author.”

Story about a character who goes around knocking on the front doors of strange houses, claiming to have once lived there, receiving gracious tours.

Artists who take comfort in the potential posthumous legacy of their art must forget they have no chance of cheating *death* but only *oblivion*, and that only for a moment.

James Joyce might seem to me less dead than most dead but to him he is just as dead as all the rest.



How it took Carmen and me more than two years to call Jackson by his real name, how many ridiculous nicknames we shuffled through—*Buttbutt, Buttface, Angelbuttface, Bean, Beanbutt, Beaner, Beanie, Beaniebutt, Beaniebuttface*—before recently landing on his real name.

How, after two months, we've called Sofia only *Baby Sista* or *Beanetta*.

“Mr. Lavender-Smith, welcome back. It's been nearly 850 billion years since you were last alive. How are we feeling this morning?”

Removing a copy of Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* from the shelf at Barnes & Noble to find all pages inside blank—either a printer's error or joke—purchasing the book anyway, taking it off my shelf from time to time to thumb through it.

Short story about a psychotherapist who sues his client, a novelist, for stealing and plagiarizing his ideas.

My response to Carmen's apprehension when I told her I planned to use her real name in "From Old Notebooks": "What, are you scared to be immortalized or something?"

The suggestion that *Ulysses* might someday be considered the final part of a trilogy beginning with the Old and New Testaments.

"Old people with tennis balls on the feet of their walkers, the pretentious bastards."

When taking the garbage out to the street on Wednesday nights I shield the sky and stars from my eyes with my hand so to not spark needless ontological distress and ruin my evening.

My grandfather is born, my great-grandfather dies, my father is born, my grandfather dies, I am born, my father dies, my son is born, I die, my grandson is born, my son dies, my great-grandson is born, my grandson dies.

Story about a character whose mother attempts suicide the day following a major argument between them. The son stands firm and continues to ignore her.

The next issue of *McSweeney's* printed on the exterior of its cardboard shipping box. The next issue of *McSweeney's* printless, recited to subscriber by mailman.

The next issue of *McSweeney's* printed on a roll of toilet paper.

My second worst fear would have to be *telephonophobia*, fear of telephones, specifically, fear of talking on telephones. It's rather difficult, however, to distinguish between my actual fear of talking on telephones and my affectation of my fear of talking on telephones. As if my telephonophobia were at once entirely sincere and totally fake.

Stressed-out mother in story prescribed Xanax for anxiety, begins crushing up pills, sprinkling in kids' cereal. As kids' tolerance increases, mother ups the dosage. Etc., etc.

I feel comfortable putting off *getting spiritual* for another 15 years just as I feel comfortable putting off *getting in shape* for another 15 years.

“It makes no difference to me where or how I live so long as I have my family by my side, my wife and children.” Meditative pause. “And of course my books.” Another. “And my porn.”

“Dada doing?”

“Just trying to kill this fly.”

“Dada killing?”

My after-meal cigarette, my *post-prandial*.

Someone said that the color white does not exist in nature, but that someone did not see my son or daughter’s skin in the first moments after birth.

A moment of exquisite romance, Gloucester asking his son to lead him toward a cliff for the purpose of committing suicide.

*From Old Notebooks.* If only to make a record of a very important period in my life before I forget the details, the sounds and the smells.

After dating my high school girlfriend for over a year without engaging in physical activity beyond *macking*, one day I wore shorts—rarely did I wear shorts back then—and, as we lay in the backseat of my car *sucking face*, she reached into one of my shorts' legs to commence my life's first-ever *hand-job*.

When it was over, I said, sincerely, "I should wear shorts more often."

Memoir which is a scratch-and-sniff affair.

It is alarming to pull something out of the fridge to find that its expiration date elapsed in the previous century.

In our day-to-day use of the English language we possess a perfect record of the language's evolution; when we hear ourselves speak we listen to the voices of all those many millions who have come before us, who have, in their own use of the language, constructed ours, as we continue to construct it.

Whether or not we're able to decipher this record is another matter altogether.

Short short story about a trio of preteens hiding in bushes next to the green of a blind Par 3, waiting for golf balls to land, scrambling to gather balls and place them all in the hole before golfers arrive, diving back into bushes, waiting expectantly.

“I need to sit down and catch my breath, i.e., have a cigarette.”

I took my brother to a strip club on his sixteenth birthday and he fainted while receiving a lap dance.

That same night a man with Down's syndrome waited in line to give a dancer a dollar. Holding a bare breast in each hand, she bent down to grasp the dollar bill in her cleavage; the retarded man spit the dollar from his mouth and bit her on the nipple. She yelped and

slapped him, stood on stage crying with a trickle of blood on her breast.

The countless hours I have spent scrutinizing grout lines in public bathrooms.

Novelization of the film *Weekend at Bernie's*.

The wonderment when someone first revealed three nymphs crowded around a man's erect penis within the drawing of the camel on a pack of Camel cigarettes.

“No diaper, Dada. It's just a fart.”

A rhyming abridgement of *Ulysses*. For children.

Two days without a cigarette. Two days without drinking.

Three days without a cigarette. Three days without drinking.

Two days without a cigarette. Two days without drinking.

*From Old Notebooks: A Memoir.*

*From Old Notebooks: A Novel.*

*From Old Notebooks: A Memoirvel.*

Title of my dream autobiography: *Hookers & Blow.*

How I feel proximity to Bloom such that when I read “Then he read the letter again: twice,” I perceive a violence upon the contiguity of his consciousness to mine, and my eyes must return to the beginning of the letter: twice.

Pouring a tumbler of Jameson too late in the day—7 PM, already time for beer—unable to find the funnel, hiding the glass on my desk behind a stack of books, for tomorrow. Or for after beer.



Is there some critical mass of the number of human consciousnesses that must exist before a single human consciousness will, through physical chance alone, be repeated?

Of course not.

When jazz musicians have symphony orchestras at their disposal.

No matter how I live my life, they will either say, *He lived a very good life*, or, *He lived a very sad life*.

Something called “The Thinking Man’s Pimp.”

Story about two dogs in a backyard, J-Lo and Ben, the former always sneaking off and jumping the fence to get some action from neighborhood dogs.

Since having children my handwriting has taken a dramatic turn for the worse.

“With my first book I hope to get all the cult of personality stuff out of the way.”

Wittgenstein’s proposition that the immortality of the soul would be no less enigmatic, no less inexplicable than mortal existence—which remains the single most disturbing reading experience of my life, having had hitherto placed all my eggs in the basket of the promise of immortality—may be an example of a startling thought that will seem perfectly obvious to the children of the future, as the cogito seemed to us when we were kids.

How after we buried Sara in the backyard all the other dogs of the neighborhood came and sat together on a hill overlooking her grave.

“Dada, where moon?”

“I think it’s a new moon tonight.”

“Huh?”

“It’s a new moon, hon. I’m sorry.”

“Huh?”

“I’m sorry, sweetie, but I don’t think there’ll be a moon tonight.”

“Oh, Dada! My so sad!”

Marcus Roberts's left hand in the E-flat-minor section of "The Entertainer" may suggest something fundamental about the condition of being a blind musician.

Seven-year-old Drew from next door who drowned when his hand got caught in the drainpipe on the floor of his swimming pool while we were away on family vacation. Upon learning of his death, Mom saying, "If only we hadn't been on vacation, maybe we would've heard him screaming and been able to do something to save him." Dad, "But we wouldn't have been able to hear him. He was underwater, at the bottom of the pool."

Surely I'm misremembering.

Story entitled "M" about two men attempting to scale the heights of the letter *M*.

Do philosophers who write in the aphoristic mode contradict themselves *of necessity*?

The entries in *From Old Notebooks* are the shadows cast by my life, which is the story just beyond the reach of the book.

The entries are the evidence of story?

The mistaken notion I've carried with me my whole life—and continue to carry with me despite my certainty that it is entirely mistaken—that things with me will generally turn out OK, that things concerning me and my life and things concerning those people I care about will in the end work themselves out for the best. Although this entirely mistaken notion continues to be reinforced day in and day out, I do not doubt that it is entirely mistaken, that it is in fact *the very opposite* of what will happen—everything will work itself out for the absolute *worst*, everyone I care about will *die*—and yet somehow I go about my life actually believing in this nonsense.

The women I've been with in my life have displayed an aptitude for armchair adjectivizing: *strappy, schticky, sucky, skanky, crampy, trampy, headachey, boutiquey, colicky, pee-em-essy, salady, garlicky, lemongrassy, swimsuity . . .*

The apparent influence of *Notes from Underground* on so many of my favorite novels.

—“The Ranting Cellar Dweller; or, From Dostoyevsky to Bernhard.”

Once again feeling emasculated by the Network Connection Wizard.

In a Mexican brothel with members of my MFA class, a bouncer led us and two middle-aged prostitutes out the back door, through an alley, down a staircase, into a different building, through a hallway and into a poorly lit bedroom where we watched the prostitutes perform a sex show *from around the world*, showing us how they do it in *France*, in *Morocco*, in *Greece*. . . . The sheets on the bed were Spongebob Squarepants, a curious detail then, but now . . . *Were we in a child's bedroom?*

Patches/gum for alcohol addiction.

A play which presents the goings-on of the backstage of a play, the stage of which is, ostensibly, the backstage of our play. Characters are

hurled from our backstage (their stage) onto our stage (their backstage). Our stage (their backstage) is a barren, apocalyptic wasteland of no hope. Every moment they are on our stage (their backstage), characters yearn to return to their stage (our backstage).

How incommensurate to belong to such a self-conscious species.

How I used to imagine women peeing in a deluge rather than a stream.

At the age of six I fell asleep holding a teddy bear . . . at sixteen holding a book . . . at twenty-six holding a woman nursing a baby . . . at twenty-eight holding a toddler holding a teddy bear, a book, and a woman nursing a baby.

Mock interview with “Larry Peters, Dallas Maverick and American Poet,” beginning with the following question: “You were awarded last year’s NBA Rookie of the Year Award as well as the Yale Younger Poets Prize for your book *Reasoning the Fruit*. How do you manage to get poetry written with such a rigorous road schedule hanging over your head?”