

This, of Course, Is Spiritual

Matt Lombardi

When we discovered our professor had locked himself inside the fifth-floor bathroom of the Walcott building, we collected in the hallway and listened to him rant like a madman.

“Quivering thighs, the blood in poor circulation, my digestive tract piled upon the excretory system for hours as I finished *Gilgamesh*, first read Byron or *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, and Tate, Berryman, even an entire *New York Times* during the Iran-Contra Affair, cover to cover, and with a big red circle halo-ing my ass.” I could hear him pacing around in there. “Of course, that was in my young adulthood before my physician warned it strained the anal and rectal veins. I did some of my best reading in the john.”

Tom, the janitor, informed the class Professor Kern had resided there since late afternoon, almost three hours and had threatened Tom with termination if he unlocked the door or alerted any colleagues or authorities. So Tom stood with us listening and I swear it was a newfound loyalty, not fear of unemployment, in the way Tom held his mop beside himself dutifully like a rifle, the wooden pole erect, next to his ruddy face as it rested on his shoulder.

“I’ve never made my wife come!” The heavy wooden door blunted Kern’s yelling, but the words held their motivation like the low fidelity of an old cassette tape.

A few students widened their eyes and shared open-mouthed grins. This brand of blatant expression had led us here in the first place, I supposed, all of us eager to write poetry as graduate work. Tom, who stationed himself in front of the bathroom door, pulled his shoulders back and straightened his posture as if he had just received military orders.

About thirty years ago an unexpected air mass of low pressure swept through the Northeast and May was cool and moist. The wet sky draped low over New Jersey. On the New Brunswick-Piscataway campus along the Raritan River, Rutgers Stadium was filled with damp people steeped in a relentless drizzle. They waited patiently without escape from the moisture. Women opened their purses to mists. The fedoras of elderly men and mortarboards

of graduates were filled with perspiration. Humidity collected itself into fat droplets and spiraled down the flowered cones of tubas, mellophones, and trombones in the brass section flanking the stage. A mallet slipped from the hand of a bass drummer in mid-swing.

The damp university president took the microphone at center stage to welcome the crowd and praise the most recent alumni. He introduced the adored keynote speaker, "...A man from a humble Kentucky background, who left Vanderbilt University in search of truth. Honored not only by prestigious awards—the Pulitzer Prize, National Book Critics Circle Award, Bolligen Prize, National Book Award—but by the hearts and minds of this great country. And at such a young age he has not only taught in our cherished American universities, but has brought his knowledge to the small villages and big cities of Laos, Africa, Nepal, and Russia. We are grateful to read his significant words and are grateful that he is here with us today. Please welcome our nation's poet laureate, James Kern."

The audience clapped their wet hands. Students screamed their admiration. Kern walked across the slippery stage in a decorated robe, squishing along in his wet socks and penny loafers. He held the podium and leaned into the microphone, his wet hair matted to his forehead. Kern's deep voice came through the PA system and echoed through the arena, "Thank you President Bloustein, Dean Bellamy, Provost Wheeler, other members of the platform party, faculty, honored guests, family, friends, and most importantly the graduating class of 1971, to whom I offer my most sincere congratulations."

The audience applauded again. Kern applauded too, then waited for the lull. "I would like to begin with a poem," he announced.

He looked down at his wet words printed in a hardbound collection sitting on the podium. He adjusted the soggy tie knot beneath his robe, surveyed the immense gathering and began. "The—"

And as soon as he uttered this most recurring article of the English language, as soon as he released his tongue from the back of his teeth in conclusion of the digraph, the grim sky relinquished and its clouds rose from Earth dissolving as they approached a large sun. Kern was overcome by the instant and brutal blue of a newborn sky. The arid warmth permeated every cleft and fissure of the sodden stadium. The faint sizzle of rapid evaporation was audible to the silent audience, or so the story goes. They tilted their heads back and let the brilliant atmosphere gently cook dry their exposed teeth and limp hair. Eastern Goldfinches swooped in and out of the arena and the

musk of the Northern Red Oaks had somehow navigated its way through Newark on a current of coastal air, giving Rutgers Stadium a fragrance its land had not celebrated since the pre-industrial era.

Kern looked down at his poem, then surveyed the crowd once again beneath the divine transformation. He leaned into the microphone and looked up into the sky. “Oh, what’s the use?” he said and walked off stage.

The audience barked with authentic laughter. Kern was given a standing ovation. The audience cheered and clapped in the potency of spring.

Days later, Rutgers University’s 205-year-old motto was brought to the attention of the public—*Sol iustitiae et occidentem illustra* (Sun of righteousness, shine upon the west also)—which further confirmed the commencement speech of 1971 as legendary.

A half hour before my entire workshop class had gathered around the door of the restroom where Kern had entombed himself, I had originally tried to enter that bathroom. That’s when a voice inside chanted, “It’s *ocupado*, please do not disturb. Iambic pentameter!”

I recognized the baritone vibrato as my professor’s voice, although I had never known his moderate temperament to be so gregarious. I used the bathroom on the floor below and proceeded to class. I waited in the classroom with the other students. I said nothing about what I had seen or heard. I respected the fact Kern’s bowels may have been uncooperative. This was not anyone’s concern but his, and by happenstance mine. But after twenty minutes, when some students were deciding to leave, I suggested I knew where our teacher was. I told everyone to wait for a moment. In light of my brief encounter with Kern I felt obligated to do something. I left the classroom and walked down the hall with a half-conceived strategy: I would try to enter the bathroom. If our professor was not there, in the bathroom, I would agree with the other students that class was cancelled, thus fulfilling my sense of obligation.

I pushed gently on the bathroom door. It clicked to a halt against its spring bolt, prompting Kern again. “If I yell into the stall, my voice acquires a slap-back echo reminiscent of the reverberating effect Spector had Lennon use on his vocals post-Beatles. ‘I, I found *owoo-owt!* I, I found *owoo-owt!*,’ Do you feel it?”

“James?” I asked in my most concerned manner, although I was reeling with nervous delight.

“Yes, Matt?” He recognized my voice too.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“It used to be so radical to call your professor by their first name when I started teaching. I love it *now* as much as I did *then!*”

I waited to see if he had anything else to say, but I just heard him pacing around. Two students from class crept down the hall and joined me.

Kern’s voice resonated, “Have you ever drunk from a tall glass whose beverage was on ice? And when you finish your drink or sip what has melted from the ice, you tilt the glass toward your face? The ice in the glass’s bottom pauses for an instant as if poised to attack, then rushes at your face in one swift movement, sometimes punching your nose. It always startles the hell out of me, but I derive great pleasure from it as it is somehow always unanticipated.”

The two students stared at each other. They looked worried, but also excited. Here it was. We had finally entered the authentic literary life.

Since our undergraduate studies, we had been an engrossed audience for writers who were teachers and teachers who were writers or sometimes for writers at readings. They would regale us with bizarre and impressive stories of the literary cosmos, the kind of compelling anecdotes that made us feel we were writing in the wrong era. Accounts of literary psychopathy, absurdity, rivalry, suicide, one-upmanship, unusual tendencies, appalling eulogies, financial jeopardy, contemptuous behavior, general hijinks. We heard stories about famous poets who locked other famous poets in chicken coops in one-hundred degree heat, while they slipped a piece of paper back and forth between the chicken wire for three days straight. The captor poet made edits on the paper and he continually passed it back into the coop, refusing to free the imprisoned poet until the poem was perfect.

Stories about our favorite writers bringing starter pistols to readings, drowning, sticking their heads in ovens, stealing each other’s lovers and spouses, fist fighting at cocktail parties, committing crimes, becoming reclusive, accidentally shooting loved ones, soundproofing rooms out of paranoia. We traded these stories with each other, retold them at cafés and bars, thought about them while we wrote. And these stories, no matter how depraved, fanatical, or idiotic, were always pure heroism. Now, as we stood outside the bathroom, listening to Kern, we were part of the mystique, part of the lore of the literati.

“We drain the Varanasi and ship it to America in bottles to sell to the un-thirsty. Destroyed villages! Dead babies!” Kern shouted. “Where do the pipes in here go?”

By then the entire class, ten students including myself, had congregated outside the bathroom. That's when Tom the janitor found us and clarified the situation as best he could. We stood and listened, not knowing what to say or do.

"Have you ever opened a dark refrigerator with a burnt-out light bulb and felt intrusive because it is as though the food is dreaming of its future?"

Kern preached a barrage of disjointed observations. His sermons were short and odd, sometimes personal. We listened attentively, but gained nothing. Soon the class, with the exception of Tom, who warned against doing anything, began discussing what action should be taken. Someone suggested slipping Kern some paper and a pen underneath the door. Someone else suggested we call 911. A third student suggested Tom give us the key and we open the door, but Tom clutched the tambourine of keys clipped to his belt loop. Before we reached a decision we heard Kern ask, "Whose pieces are we workshopping today?"

We were silent, unsure of how to approach the situation, until someone answered, "Tanya's."

"The quiet girl who always writes in couplets about her dead grandmother?" Kern asked. "Or is Tanya the one who talks all the time and steals lines from Anne Carson?"

"The quiet girl," the Anne Carson thief said.

"Well, bring it to me," Kern ordered.

We collected our belongings and copies of poems from the classroom and gathered in the hallway. We sat cross-legged on the floor and looked at each other with astonished expressions. Those scheduled for that week slipped their drafts under the door. Kern conducted class from inside the bathroom. We could tell by the proximity of his voice that he was sitting against the door. Everyone assumed their natural roles and the critiques followed their typical pattern. The normalcy that formed around the bathroom door as class went on as usual was almost comforting, but there was an underlying thrill too. When another student walked by or a passing teacher gave us a curious look we just smiled proudly, which defused the situation. Any casual observer around here knew better than to question an artistic process.

When Kern dismissed us, it seemed appropriate we should depart as usual. After all, we wanted to think Kern was in full control of the situation and could release himself from the bathroom whenever he felt the need.

"I've always wanted to grow tomatoes on an urban roof. A field of them," he shouted.

We said goodnight to Tom.

On the subway ride home I decided I would come back early the next morning to see if Kern was still there.

I walked into my apartment eager to tell Arielle my remarkable new story. I couldn't wait to tell her about James Kern locking himself in the bathroom, raving with lunacy. I looked forward to telling the story in five years. I looked forward to telling the story as a published writer. I looked forward to telling the story as an aged professor to a rapt class of students who were eager to experience the unusual literary life themselves.

Arielle was sleeping on the couch in our small living room, cuddling one of her psychology books. The television was on. When I shut it off, she woke up and I told her the story.

"He's re-experiencing the innate need for self-realization," she said. "He's investigating the abandoned substance of his own past life and trying to integrate these materials into his existence."

I could tell Arielle was slightly turned on, either by my story or hearing her own voice in its aggressively analytic mode.

"Maybe his individuation is having a second coming," I said. We often read each other's work. The dry dissertation she was writing was a nice break from the overindulgences of poetry.

"Good," she said. "Or a third. It's an innate, continuous need. There's a tension between impartial, chaotic fluidity and individuated subjectivity." She pulled me down on the couch. "These dichotic qualities are embodied by the Dionysian and Apollonian respectively."

"Nietzsche?" I asked.

"He wasn't exactly the first, but sure." She smiled approvingly then rubbed the inside of my thigh. Her auburn, slept-on hair was half in her face. "Nietzsche argued that the perpetual, irresolvable tension between these two opposing aspects of nature cultivates the conditions necessary for the creation of tragic art. Your professor is definitely a poet." Arielle climbed on top of me and her large textbook fell to the floor. She unbuckled my belt. "And according to Jung," she whispered, "self-realization can be separated into two distinct epochs of a life. In the first half of our existence we separate from humanity. We attempt to construct our own identities."

I slipped my hands under her T-shirt. She was not wearing a bra. "I think he's lost his identity," I said.

She undid the button and zipper on her own jeans. "Well, he's probably already had two identities thus far. The first is the destructive teen-angsty one, which is usually expressed as animosity toward parents and other various symbols of authority."

“I know that identity well.”

We kissed intensely.

She pulled back to speak. “I once slashed a tire on my father’s Volvo.”

“Me and Ned held our high school’s mascot costume ransom. Sent an anonymous Polaroid of me wearing nothing but the oversized plush lion head to the principal.”

“Jung also said we have a sort of second puberty that emerges while approaching our forties.” She pressed her head into my chest and braced her bare feet against the coffee table behind her. “Which is when the position shifts from emphasis on materialism, sexuality, and having children to concerns about community and spirituality.” She lifted her body slightly and slid both pairs of our jeans down past our knees simultaneously. It was an impressive trick.

I pulled her back on top of me. She slipped her underwear off and I followed her example. With one hand she guided me inside of her. “In the second half of our lives, we reunite with the human race,” she said. “We become part of the collective once again. This is when adults start to contribute to humanity.” She was rocking against me using the rebound of the couch cushion beneath us. “They volunteer their time for what seem to be worthy causes. They build, garden, create art—mmm—rather than destroy.”

“But he teaches,” I said. “Here, put your leg like this.” She swung her leg up and pressed her heel into the couch cushion beside me. “He’s been teaching well past his forties.”

“But only teaches poetry. And as I recall, he hasn’t written anything in over thirty years.”

“That’s true.” I pulled her shirt off over her head.

“Don’t slow down,” she said. “The older one gets they’re also more likely to pay attention to their unconscious and conscious feelings.”

“It’s resulted in manic frustration.”

“Well, how often do you hear a person—uh—say, I feel angry, or, I feel sad?”

“All the time,” I said and grabbed her hips more firmly.

“It’s because they haven’t rejoined the collective according to Jung. A common theme is for the disillusioned and frustrated person to search for their true selves and—mmmhuh—realize that a contribution to humanity is essentially a necessity for a whole self.” She established a faster rhythm.

“Maybe he’s been through—wow—maybe he’s come full circle or is revisiting both stages simultaneously, merging them into this breakdown.”

“Oh, yes. Yes! I guess that’s possible.” She was breathing more heavily now. “Jung proposes that the ultimate goal—oh, right, there—of the collective unconscious and self-realization—oh, *ob*—is to pull us to the highest experi—*oobbbbbb*. This, of course—uh—is *spiri-tual*...”

“Yes, yes?”

“And if a person does not proceed toward self-knowledge—oh God—neurotic symptoms may arise. Oh, God! *Ob, God, Matt! Ob...*”

I opened the door to Kern’s dead body lying before a wall of hieroglyphics he painted across the white bathroom tiles in his own blood. I opened the door to Kern’s dead body lying before a wall of hieroglyphics he painted in his own blood and feces. I opened the door; Kern wasn’t there. I opened the door and Kern was sitting on the toilet lid calmly going through his wallet, singing to himself. I opened the door; it was dark. I slipped my hand inside to feel for the light switch. I opened the door to a dense cloud of miniature kites jitterbugging above Kern’s whistling breath. I opened the door and heard the soft cough of a collapsed sequin evening gown. I opened the door, “Surprise!” I opened the door, the last days of the Byzantine Empire pungent and choking. I opened the door slowly, the way we release our hands from prayer’s gesture. I opened the door and Kern was drinking from the sink’s faucet. I opened the door and observed Francesca’s cracked mural, the first pregnant depiction of the Madonna. I opened the door. Arielle was standing there. I opened the door to neighborhood lawns humiliated by their eczema. I opened the door; drawn shades plaqued the handfuls of twinkling teeth tossed into the skyline. I opened the door. Kern was sitting on the floor across from Tom, who was sharpening the end of his mop stick with a machete. I opened the door. ☸