

# Some Things Last A Long Time

“Tant que mes jambes me permettent de fuir, tant que mes bras me permettent de combattre, tant que l'expérience que j'ai du monde me permet de savoir ce que je peux craindre ou désirer, nulle crainte : je puis agir. Mais lorsque le monde des hommes me contraint à observer ses lois, lorsque mon désir brise son front contre le monde des interdits, lorsque mes mains et mes jambes se trouvent emprisonnées dans les fers implacables des préjugés et des cultures, alors je frissonne, je gémiss et je pleure. Espace, je t'ai perdu et je rentre en moi-même. Je m'enferme au faite de mon clocher où, la tête dans les nuages, je fabrique l'art, la science et la folie.”

— Henri Laborit, Éloge de la fuite

“All my adult life I have kept a distance from other people, it has been my way of coping, because I become so incredibly close to others in my thoughts and feelings of course, they only have to look away dismissively for a storm to break inside me.”

— Karl Ove Knausgård, A Man in Love

"In the contradiction lies the hope."

-Bertold Brecht

I think the only really worthwhile human expressions are poetry, autobiography, and, perhaps, music. From a borrowed philosophy I would posit that nothing is intrinsically real, apart from the experience of the illusion. Although music is more intrinsic than any of the other expressions, it is a rarer gift to be able to translate one's thoughts into melody with intent and precision. Fiction has its

merits but ultimately you are writing about a hall of mirrors you see of yourself. There has to be some kernel of hard truth which cannot be distorted by the imagined or unimaginable. Reality can be far more ineffable than something that has to correspond to manmade logic. I first started writing poetry when I was 17. I'm a rudimentary guitar player and have never mastered singing and playing at the same time although I like to sit in solitude in my room playing my dad's old acoustic guitar. Melody is an essential human accoutrement.

I remember going to smoke a joint with my newly-made acquaintance at university, Hugh, and was impressed by his leather-bound notebook full of handwritten poems and journal pieces. There was something wondrous about the uniqueness and individuality of the whole ceremony, with the ink of the handwritten word shining in the moonlight. It was perhaps that night or shortly afterwards I wrote my first poem. It was called "A Water Song", and it was crude and poorly written. It didn't mean much at all but was a roughly-fashioned expression of youthful frustration. I'm not sure if I had lost my virginity by that point or if it was shortly afterwards but there was a beautiful French-American girl in my English literature tutorial group that I wanted to expose my lustful affections to. Needless to say, this was unsuccessful but something had begun. Time seems to be recalled in several month chunks in distant retrospect – it's difficult to place things exactly, as if they are shifting under the tide of the present moment. I feel I've learned a lot about writing since then. In short: keep it simple. The first word that comes to mind is usually the most appropriate. Don't try to show off. Be authentic, not dishonest.

It must have been around that time, in the autumn of 2013 that I started reading T.S. Eliot because I used a spooky sepia image of his out of phase face as the repeating tiled background of my blog. I had hastily set it up online to showcase my inchoate poems and I kept it for several years. I still have the poems saved to a portable hard drive but the blog has been dismantled and taken down. I also still consider *The Waste Land* to be one of my favourite poems. I love the fragmentary mysticism of Eliot's style.

I think the best art is intuitive. I intuitively wanted to study English at university as I wanted to be a Writer. I think more for the image I had of myself as the flaneur and of the intellectual coterie more than any coherent desire to do anything in particular. Hugh was one of the first writers I met and although I owe him a debt for inspiring me to write I wouldn't say I owe him anything in regards to what I actually wrote in terms of content in the ensuing months. We had different images too. He soon made a sudden and stunning transformation into the dishevelled weed-smoking long-haired hippy archetype of the writer with loose jeans and loose knitwear. Whereas I was more of the heavy-jacketed leather-booted archetype of the writer, dressed in dark blocs of colour and endlessly smoking cigarettes.

I didn't study hard at university. I had all the intentions too but I think the rigid structure of 9am lectures and a frenetic schedule of reading at least a novel a week stifled my enthusiasm if not directly conflicting with my desire for the pub and for profoundly altering my mental state at regular intervals with a various array of soft drugs. I also had no keen interest in literary criticism but rather, if I could, would have spent my time reading the poets and novels that I adored. Looking back, the

famous quip is true: "Youth is wasted on the young". I was also more interested in meeting as many pretty girls as possible. I never had much success with girls at school due to being the shy, quiet, possibly interpreted as brooding type, albeit with a markedly above average intelligence. Here I had a fresh, clear slate. I had chosen St Andrews University over Glasgow on the simple notion that it would allow me to live away from home, away from the confines of home life. My parents are kind people. Mildly authoritarian but nevertheless generous and kind. They are one of those rare couples who rarely argue and have now been married for 25 years with no real discontent. I needed more excitement. Due to my lack of exposure to girls at school I did what any young man of humility would do and consulted the

internet for dating advice. I soon found a labyrinth of new and exciting Pick Up Artist advice. It's generally poor advice and is a manual for teaching insecure men to attract insecure women using tired lines and antisocial attitudes. However, it bootstrapped me into the confidence to approach and talk to girls at university.

It must have been into the second month of Michaelmas semester at St Andrews and I was coming back from a night out in Dundee. The two student halls on the North Haugh had booked a club called Fat Sams for a slightly different environment from the St Andrews bubble. I think a group of us went to the Dundee student union and I have the hazy memory of Hugh giving me half an ecstasy pill for a tenner. Drugs would catch up with me later. Anyway, the university had hired a fleet of double decker buses to take us back across the Tay and I caught word that there was going to be after parties at Agnes Blackadder Hall (our fierce rivals, of course for no particular reason). This was welcome news as I hadn't pulled any girls at the clubs in Dundee and the way I saw it the night was still young. We drunkenly traipsed through the byzantine corridors of Blackadder looking for more booze and company.

I remember knocking on a kitchen door looking for people. A girl answered and promptly said "Oh, you have to meet my friend Ivy". She confidently walked to the first bedroom along from the kitchen and a girl answered the door. She was in a dressing gown, which I thought was an exuberantly feminine thing to do, and invited me in. There was about half a dozen other guys in the room excitedly talking; there was music playing on a laptop on the bed. It probably sounds sleazy but it wasn't really. Ivy probably loved the attention of it all. She was Asian with long obsidian-black hair and was potentially the most beautiful girl I had seen in my life, in person, up until that point. She had an endearing, rebellious attitude; we smoked cigarettes out the ajar window. She must have been quite drunk as I remember her loudly singing the Chinese national anthem and when I went into the en suite toilet to smoke a cigarette sitting on the toilet she burst in, quickly leaving while giggling. She thought I was taking a shit. She eventually told us all to get lost at some point in the early hours of the morning and I vaguely remember her mentioning she was a model and had a shoot that morning. I thought that was endlessly attractive and bohemian. I woke up at

about midday later that day and sent her a message on Facebook, asking if she wanted to hang out. She said yes.

I made the short walk from Andrew Melville Hall to the front benches of Agnes Blackadder and waited there trying to act nonchalant and composed while the heart was silently racing and I began

to sweat. She walked out of the front entrance shortly afterwards with the bona fide grace of a catwalk model and sat next to me, lighting up. We talked for hours. It was a peak experience. We talked about everything: I found out that she was from Hong Kong, was studying psychology, philosophy, drugs, everything. Her personal philosophy was hedonism, the pursuit of pleasure and mine was more or less similar. We easily raced through a pack of the duty-free Marlboro Gold cigarettes that she had with her and talked. There was no small talk, we rushed through every idea with utmost reverence. I remember we went inside to the foyer of the hall and sat on the wooden tables near the entrance as the occasional student sauntered by. I remember her quietly saying that I was much more interesting than she thought I would be. I think that was when she first realised that she liked me.

One of those students was a girl I would become fractious friends with. She was going to the beach with a couple of her friends that cold evening and intently and skittishly looked at us while she passed. By the time she returned Ivy and I were still talking. I remember a comment by one of her friends to the effect of "You guys are still talking?". I hung out with that girl, Hannah, quite a bit afterwards. I had first met her at the Russian society's freshers event as she was looking for weed. We would drink a lot and hang out in her room, watching videos and listening to music. She was a damaged person. She had dropped out of Oxford University to come to St Andrews, obviously brilliant but with an insatiable sex drive and manic tendencies. I later found out that she had selpt with Ivy, Ivy apologised years later for making me sad. During she conversation she confessed that she had never realised I had liked her. I had always had values of loyalty, kindness, and without being too sanctimonious you have to experience what you are not to accurately discern what you really are.

I met Ivy a few times after that during the autumn semester, trying to keep the connection alive. She was one of the most attractive girls in our year and I must have had many potential rivals for her affection, although I preferred not to think about it. One night she messaged me asking me to come to meet her in the hall. I had been at the pub that evening. She was judging a "drinking competition" with her friends, When I arrived it seemed a lot more subdued than any kind of competition. She was there with her closest friend at the time, Flannery, and a heavy set Asian guy whose name escapes me now. I was sitting at the table, as usual trying to act cool and composed with an air of disinterest. She got up, walked behind me and wrapped her hands round me, hugging me. She was probably simply trying to make the Asian guy jealous but it was a fond expression nonetheless. I got up and left shortly afterwards, sticking to my bullshit bible of pick up artistry, trying to show as little interest as possible.

It was interspersed during this night that I got with her friend, Flannery. Obviously, it was a childish thing to do, but I was trying to make Ivy jealous as that way I felt I could provoke her into showing me more affection. I kissed her with the mouth of a man who hadn't glimpsed water in a week, biting her lips with vicious intensity. Ivy came out with an air of haughty beauty and indignance, ostensibly she was wondering why we were taking so long over a simple cigarette. If she didn't see our kiss I know Flannery told her about it afterwards. She laughed about it later.

It was probably a couple of weeks later and we had met up a few times. I remember her phoning my mobile one morning asking me to help her with some philosophy homework and I told her that I didn't do any work before midday and she should phone me another day after that time. Eventually, I got a call from her asking me to meet her one night at the usual place at the smoking bench. I might have been getting ready for bed so I hastily got changed and headed down the steep path from Melville to Blackadder. She was there smoking and drinking cheap supermarket beer. I don't know

what we talked about but Flannery was there so I was feeling a bit sheepish. We went inside and got the lift up to her floor together. I had assumed the three of us were going somewhere to hang out but Flannery gave me a knowing look and slowly headed off in the other direction. Ivy was confidently walking ahead and didn't once glance back so I followed her to her room. We sat on her bed on her laptop and she showed me some of her poems. At this point I still didn't really think anything would happen; I had the shallow confidence of a young man with acne and a handful of intimate experiences with girls. We listened to music for a while and she went to her en suite to get ready. It was silent and I had some kind of terrified epiphany. She came out and we lay on her bed for a while. I should have made a move but I didn't have the confidence. Eventually I started to doze in and out of wakefulness. She was curled up, pointing towards me, awake but breathing deeply, as if in meditation.

Eventually I rose into consciousness with her straddled above me, long black hair streaming down into my face. She began biting my neck, softly at first but then more forcefully. Still I didn't do anything. Eventually she must have resigned herself to my impotence and we fell asleep in her bed, fully clothed. I woke up with dawn's bright daylight illuminating the room. We went outside for a cigarette. She was dressed in black jeans and a camel coat and looked utterly beautiful. The whole brief moment was like a sharp vignette. I said we should go for a walk next to the lake later and she looked at me, holding my gaze for a good 30 seconds. That was when I should have kissed her, but I didn't. She suddenly turned and walked back into the hall and the automatic doors slid quietly closed behind her. I went to bed with a strange feeling of sadness and pride. We didn't go for a walk around the lake then but we would, in a sense, a few years later.

There were two swans living by the lake. It was an bucolic idyll among the daily ennui of student life. A good place to walk and feel integral to nature, which is a part of experience easily forgotten in the urban landscape of the town. The main road to the rest of Fife was hidden by a dense border of trees and you could feel, almost, as if there was a diaphanous, impermeable barrier between two realities; a transparent veil that marked the boundary between reality and unreality.

The rest of the academic year passed without us seeing each other much. There were brief moments like when I saw her heading towards town where she touched my hip, looking intently at me and suggesting I should come meet her at the club. Usually if I saw her out in town she would be the centre of attention in a group of lascivious young men and I didn't want to define myself as part of that category. One night we were at a bar in town and she was in her characteristic group of propitiating men and she drank some of my beer. We were heading back to halls as we lived about 5 minutes apart. She sat down, running two fingers along her jugular vein counting her pulse to the jumping movement of the seconds hand of her watch. She thought I had spiked my drink with some

kind of amphetamine and had given it to her. This was an odd thing to say as she had off-handedly asked for a drink. Spiking drinks definitely isn't my style. But I remembered when we had first met she had confided to have problems with drugs when she was younger and it was probably some paranoia creeping in, some psychosomatic expression of fear.

I decided to work at Blackadder as a cleaner over the summer as they routinely hired university students and I liked the lifestyle of living away from home. One of the last times we met before the first year of university broke up she had brought me a carton of duty free cigarettes as a gift and said she would give them to me if I called her the most beautiful girl in the world. I said that I couldn't do that as I didn't know every girl in the world. She smiled and gave them to me anyway.

That summer I was the ghost haunting the experience. Wandering the corridors of Blackadder, cleaning rooms, mopping floors, I must have been subconsciously been trying to get close to her, to her memory. I messaged her a few times to intermittent replies. She was in Berlin on a research internship. I tried to cling on to the relationship so I started writing poems directly about her and to her. It was a decision made out of fear and anxiety but I was also trying to show that I cared and to do something special for her that I didn't think others would necessarily do. I was trying to create a shared mythology, a narrative for ourselves, a kind of Bayeux tapestry of the whole affair. I met some other students who were staying in St Andrews over the summer and we smoked a lot of weed and drank a fair bit. I grew my hair long.

I stayed in St Regulus Hall for my second year as I had passed enough of my resits over the summer to justify being allowed to continue studying at the university. I felt sadder and lonelier than in my first year, at the top floor of the monolithic Scottish Baronial building. I kept smoking cannabis, more and more frequently until it became a daily habit. I went out to the student union with some of my new friends who I had met at that year's freshers and as we were entering, I

saw Ivy sitting outside, alone and smoking, like some kind of apparition, a phantasm. I went up to her and told her "Just because I wrote you those poems doesn't mean I love you.". This was a lie. Not missing a beat, she replied, "I could never love you with a face like yours". That hit like a punch to the diaphragm. The friend I was with laughed and headed inside. I asked her for a cigarette and she obliged so I sat next to her. I don't remember saying anything and she soon headed into the union. That comment destroyed my fragile psyche for a long time afterwards and should have been the end of any notion I had that we could ever be together. I didn't know it at the time but she had a boyfriend. She was probably trying to get me to leave her alone; she had moved on, I had not.

I spent that year until May half-heartedly studying. Nothing really had any meaning since the girl I had grown to love had lost any interest in me. Things subliminally began building up within me regardless. Smoking weed and drinking soon became my *raison d'être*. I started reading David Icke, looking for some kind of meaning, some kind of consolation, isolating myself, my foothold on reality becoming looser and looser. I still wrote poetry; it became darker and darker. Everything became darker.

I remember staying up all night reading fearful theories, everything seemed paranoid and terrifying. I remember going out the back of the halls on that morning for a cigarette and, looking back, I had lost it. I thought I was a saint, a martyr, a god, everything. My sense of who I was had imploded. I sent Ivy flurries of rambling and disjointed messages during that period. I told her I loved her, she replied that she liked me, it was a weird friendship but a good one. I don't think she realised how bad I was. Some people did, however. One of my friends came to my room to visit me after I had sent him messages which had worried him. I was sitting at my desk chain smoking and talking in mystical tones, he was almost crying. I had no insight then. Everything in my life had compounded to break me.

I've talked about vignettes. I was unwell and I had just been to Tesco to buy a pack of cigarettes and was slouching back to my hall. I was deathly thin, unshaven, unwashed, but with grace, I had cut my hair. I met my friend, Alex, on the street and we stood talking about politics or whatever the topic of the day was. We stood on the street and I stood exhaling blue-grey smoke when I saw her. She was cradling her laptop like a baby. When she saw me looked directly into my eyes with a smile. Her eyes twinkled and her face shone. There was something there, some kind of hidden love. It's the small moments that define it for me. I stared back we held each other's gaze the entire time as she walked by, as if time had momentarily stalled. Alex's conversation became incessant and extraneous to my attention as the buzz of a bluebottle whilst trapped in a daydream. I considered running after her but resigned myself to diffidence.

The rest was a torrid stream of days. A group of my friends and I had booked a trip to Barcelona to go to a music festival and I went with them to the airport, completely out of my mind. I was deep in psychosis, barely able to hold myself together, as if I was made of glass. I didn't have a boarding pass and was apprehended by airport security. The police drove me to Glasgow where I met my dad and we went home. I ended up in the psychiatric ward at Crosshouse hospital shortly afterwards and stayed there for over a month. As my psychosis had lasted so long, albeit with a brief period of respite where I had attended a writer's retreat in the forests of Dumfriesshire I was diagnosed by the consultant psychiatrist with schizophrenia.

The next year was the toughest of my life. The body blow of a diagnosis like schizophrenia – the very word screams of discord and fear – and the inability to immediately return to university. Also, the weight of a lifetime affliction daunted me. Eventually, I did become well enough to return. Sadly, most of my time was spent in a pleasure-stanching anhedonia. I probably shouldn't have returned; if I could, by some divine intervention, rerun my life, I would have dropped out of university after my first year. But I wanted to see Ivy again. She has been the prime motivator for my art, my foil and muse. My melody. My sine qua non. So I returned. And I did see her again. I learned much more about her, things I wouldn't want to share in any writing, private and personal things; secrets.

I did everything to show I still cared. During my leave of absence when I was recovering from losing my sanity, I had gone to one of her fashion shows at her invitation and had given her a poem. She has the only copy. She sent me a postcard from Hong Kong. I spent time in Sussex with a friend who

had seen me deteriorate. After a long conversation where I explained what had happened, I went to visit him. I remember explaining to him on a balmy spring night at St Salvator's quadrangle how I felt about her. He gave me the best advice I've had so far about the situation; he is the most intelligent person I know. Briefly, he told me you'll only meet a slim few people you feel this way about in your life so you should put your all into it while you can.

One of the swans that lived by the lake died. I saw unmarked men from an unmarked white van tending to the body and hurrying it away.

At the time, I felt the antipsychotics I had been prescribed dulled me, made me fat and lethargic so I wanted to stop taking them. They were tiny white, sickly sweet dissolvable pills that let everything make sense but as if you were looking at the sky from the bottom of a swimming pool. I saw a doctor in St Andrews who agreed that it was my sole decision whether to take medication and since I had been on them for over a year, I could risk abstaining from them. Stopping my medication didn't work out as I had envisaged. I became almost bedridden with suicidal ideation and depression. Everything became black again, yet sober and not having the illusion of the profound that comes with mania. One night at my worst, and loosely toying with slicing open my wrists I heard my phone ringing. I saw it was Ivy, and even then, I seriously contemplated ignoring it. I didn't. She wasn't feeling well. She was like a mirror image of me, in bed, depressed, not able to sleep. We talked for a while and I tried to keep it superficially light. She asked me what I did if I couldn't sleep and I told her to read Shakespeare. Looking back, I should have gone to her flat to see her. It was one of those gifts from god, the universe, whatever you want to call All That Is in your philosophy. But my depression made everything negative, black and bleak. The main trope of my depression was that I was physically repulsive; now I have stopped caring. I believed there was no hope.

We went for tea (Earl Grey) the next morning as we often did. I went to a fashion show with her in St Andrews next to the lake I had imagined having a romantic walk around years before. She left me for a hook up halfway through the night, later claiming she forgot why she had left and went to bed. I don't know why I put up with this kind of flaky indifference for so long but I wanted to cling onto something that made me feel so alive when everything else deadened me.

The following day she took me out for dinner. I told her about my diagnosis and how I had always liked her. I wanted to be honest about everything for once, to get

things off my chest and see where things settled. She said we would always be friends. I thanked her for her friendship. The depression I thought I had left behind returned to cloak me as the sun set and I returned to my friend's house where I was staying. The sun was bloated and carmine as it dropped behind Queens Gardens.

The last time I saw Ivy was in the summer of 2018. She messaged me asking if I would like to go for a coffee and we talked on the phone, vaguely agreeing to go for a meal or a coffee. I got the commuter train to Glasgow, she was slightly late as was usual for her. We went for a drink, played pool – she's better than me so it's refreshing to find someone whom I can contend with. She seemed

to be off alcohol as she spat out the Gin & Tonic I had ordered. I asked if she was pregnant. "Would I be smoking if I was pregnant?", was the characteristically brusque reply. She was heading to the Pride parade in Glasgow that afternoon, she said she was seeing someone. I weakly smiled, keeping my mouth shut but silently devastated. I got home and messaged her. I asked her out on a date.

"We're mates, mates don't go on dates"

"acquaintances maybe

Anyway, these things aren't set in stone"

"Right, well in terms of not going on a date, there is no flexibility I'm afraid."

"Bye then"

I blocked her after that.

A few months later I unblocked her and said I had had to take a break and asked her how she was. She then blocked me. So it goes.

I wonder if I will ever talk to her again, ever see her again. Her favourite poet is Auden, and, now, he is one of mine. She stalks the dreamscapes of my day. What I have to show for my formative years is an undying unrequited love, a chronic – although no longer debilitating mental illness – a litany of poems, some friendships that have stood the test of

time and some that have not. Now, I am mostly happy and well. I am "high-functioning" and symptom-free. I am lucky.

Despite it being against my best interests I hope against hope to see her again, but maybe it's more than anything else a pining for some kind of youthful nostalgia, when things were uncoloured by sorrow or regret. I have a deep spiritual understanding, almost an apophenia but sober and cold. Nevertheless, people like me see things in a way that other people do not; sometimes it is nonsensical and sometimes it is profound. Sometimes madness is an appropriate response to reality. It would be better to find someone who actually cares, but maybe not to look for them. Paradoxically, when I stop looking I start finding. Some things last a long time, and some things last a lifetime. Even fool's gold.

One day I may get married. I may have two children, a boat, a house in the suburbs, a job in the city, holidays to the continent twice a year. I have never met anyone since that inspires in me the

creativity and adoration that Ivy has, however, and I would trade all the aforementioned vessels of pleasure to be with her, on any terms mutually agreed and pleasant. A conversation and cup of Earl Grey with her outwits all the wives and children in the observable universe to me. I have never met anyone like her before and since: she is a defining aspect of me.

Or perhaps I am in an extended stage, a purgatory, of grief. I exist beyond desire, I go on.

I wait for her like a tired housewife consulting astrology and all the irrational markers of self-reflection. The horizon of my future looks Godless and moonlit, a dreary desert. Perhaps this is why I am so reactionary and populist in my politics; the past seems inextricably tied to happiness, the future joyless and endless.

Forgetting is the most difficult, most improbable act to be imposed on the soul. But living, even if just to see what happens next seems the most rebellious act. I can still write, see the sun rise in the morning, eat good food, drink good beer, smoke cigars, listen to haunting music, hike Kilimanjaro, and move to a monastery in the Himalayas. However, it's all hollow without a part of yourself that in a different life with good fortune you could have had but in this can only peer at through the mottled and vicarious gaze of memory.