“Was it really some other person I was so anxious to discover, when I did all of that looking, or was it only my own solitude that I could not abide?”

DAVID MARKSON, WITTGENSTEIN’S MISTRESS

“Markson recognizes the thematic centrality of solitude in his work”

JOSEPH TABBI, COGNITIVE FICTIONS

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The First Page of Diane Johnson’s *Terrorists & Novelists*

Writing is inherently a solitary act. You sit at a desk. You drag a pen or a pencil across some blank paper. You tickle keys that correspond to letters on a typewriter or a computer. However you do it, you do it alone.

Reading, too, is a solitary act. Sure, you can read aloud or be read aloud to. Likely that’s how your interaction with words began, with your parents reading you stories. But most of your reading is probably done alone and in silence—the words, your only partner at the dance.

This, the first issue of *The Scofield*, is for you and you alone, you who are alone, you who write and read and love writing and reading.

Our guiding principle here at *The Scofield* is to create a place where lovers of literature gather. Of course, we aren’t actually gathering. We are still in solitude, reading these words alone. The hope though—as is the hope, I suspect, with all artistic endeavors—is to transcend our loneliness,
to populate our solitude with others.

We’ve populated our first issue with a diverse set of writers, artists, and thinkers. In that way, we hope to be a literary journal in the vein of *The Dial*. We even took our name, *The Scofield*, from Scofield Thayer, *The Dial’s* publisher and editor from 1920 to 1926. Each issue of the 1920s version of *The Dial* seemed to have a who’s who of the arts contributing content. The writers, artists, and thinkers included in the magazine didn’t have the same political ideology, they didn’t share philosophical or religious persuasions, and their work often had very little in common aesthetically or thematically. Almost all of the work was compelling—the quality is beyond belief, especially upon looking back from almost a century on—but the magazine incorporated a mishmash of world views and aesthetic principles. Yet the work was curated in such a way that the seemingly disparate pieces were placed in dialogue with one another. Essays, which on their own sang, suddenly harmonized with a painting or a poem which came after, and that painting or poem in turn interacted with whatever piece immediately followed that. Juxtaposed with one another in the pages of *The Dial*, some of the best art and literature of the 1920s only became more mesmerizing, more powerful, more beautiful.

In the spirit of *The Dial*, we want to create a place for dialogue, for nuance, for ambiguity, for negative capability, where various voices can come together in harmony and in cacophony. We aren’t looking to give you answers, but we hope to echo your questions, and to open up and out the world. Each issue will be an ordered chaos or a chaotic order. Each issue will hopefully work as some sort of patchwork quilt, made of various fabrics, and, most importantly, fraying a bit at the edges. Each issue will also focus on an author who we deem underappreciated and worthy of further exploration and exposure. In doing so, we will also dive into a particular theme that the issue’s featured writer wrestled with throughout his or her career. That said, there will be plenty of content in each issue that doesn’t exactly relate to either the spotlighted author or the explored concept. The two things will act more like a focus rather than an all-encompassing thematic totality.

For our inaugural issue, we have chosen David Markson and Solitude. We chose David Markson, I must confess, because I have long been obsessed with his work, especially the late novels. Five years ago, just after his death, when his personal library was sold off at the Strand Bookstore, I collected hundreds of his books, posting scans of the pages with marginalia on my tumblr blog Reading Markson Reading. Though his acclaim has certainly risen in recent years, the other editors and I still think he is woefully underrated, given how undeniably powerful his final five novels are. Ann Beattie, who I interviewed for this issue, once explained of Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, “That it was not immediately embraced and celebrated, that he did not become the most valued writer, instantly... well, I knew all the stories about Melville blah blah blah, and about Fitzgerald dying without knowing *Gatsby* was a classic, but David’s book was so overwhelmingly great that I was stunned it got rejected even once, let alone the many, many times it was turned down.”

The theme of solitude is everywhere in Markson’s work, as it was everywhere in his life. It’s there in *Going Down*, which Markson called his “old (and in many ways favorite) novel,” and it’s there in *Springer’s Progress*, but it’s especially prominent in the final five novels: *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, *Reader’s Block*, *This Is Not a Novel*, *Vanishing Point*, and *The Last Novel*. Each of those five books is a lonely...
narrative of a solitary figure wrestling with the entire
history of the Western world. “Obviously it is a theme that
has a grip on me,” Markson admitted in an interview.

Kate, whose consciousness we explore in Wittgenstein’s
Mistress, is a woman alone in a post-apocalyptic world.
She’s the equivalent of the Will Forte character in Fox’s
recent TV series The Last Man on Earth. Instead of leaving,
“Alive in Tucson,” in various places around the world, as
Forte’s Phil Miller does, she etches the words, “Somebody
is living on this beach,” in the sand. Unlike in The Last
Man on Earth, for Kate, the last woman on earth, nobody
comes, nobody calls. Yet not only is her story more tragic
than that of Phil Miller, it is also surprisingly more
humorous. Kate’s voice is heartbreaking, but it is also
intimate. She makes you laugh; she makes you cry; she
seduces you. You can’t help but fall in love with the book
and its only character. As Ann Beattie said, “Falling in
love is a perfectly okay way to talk about it because in a
way the book is an enormous seduction.”

Equally seductive are Markson’s final four novels,
which I like to call The Notecard Quartet. In this
quarter, Markson went even further in exploring the
depths of solitude, this time taking as a character a loose
approximation of the writer himself “in which Novelist
will say more about himself only when he finds no way
to evade doing so, but rarely otherwise.” These novels “of
intellectual reference and allusion, so to speak minus
much of the novel,” catalogue the various ways (often
negative) in which artists throughout history have been
treated by society and treated by one another. Steven
Moore, Markson’s editor at Dalkey, in our interview for
this issue, explained that he thinks the inspiration for
the quartet was Arthur Schopenhauer’s decree that some
writer should “attempt a tragic history of literature,” where
the writer would explore “how, with a few exceptions, they
lived tormented lives in poverty and wretchedness, without
recognition, without sympathy, without disciples, while
fame, honour and riches went to the unworthy.” Nations,
societies, and individuals so often hurt rather than help
great artists in their creation of great art, according
to Schopenhauer, and so the life of the artist is one
perpetually misunderstood and ostracized.

But does solitude itself help or hurt the artist? How
should an artist navigate the world? Should he or she try
to be a part of the world or is it better to be apart from the
world? Can one make great art if one is entirely separate
from society? But doesn’t being within society inherently
make it harder to see it whole and comment upon it with
any objectivity? I have a sinking suspicion that these
questions may be unanswerable. There has always been
and will always be a schism between the pro-solitude
and anti-solitude camps. Some claim that solitude is the
mother of creativity, whereas others claim that it is its
murderer. Perhaps solitude is like Gertrude in Hamlet, the
mother-murderer. Isn’t the thing that makes us great often
the thing that destroys us?

In Markson’s books, the true North that the compass
always points to is that underlying conundrum—that
solitude simultaneously breeds creation and destruction,
knowledge and madness, love and hate, empathy and
sociopathy. Not only does society push the artist toward
solitude, but perhaps it is inherent in the artist’s psyche
to be drawn to it, with all of its immanent complications.
“The muse and best-sellers rarely walk hand in hand,” said
Markson scholar Françoise Palleau-Papin. So to attempt to
make great art, knowing that you’ll likely end up like Van
Gogh, who only sold one painting while alive, inevitably
leads to a solitary life. The kind of life where you slice
bits of your ear off. The kind of life where “nobody comes, nobody calls.” Markson knew this, and lived it.

And yet, the artist’s solitude is a peopled solitude. As Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal wrote, “I can be by myself because I’m never lonely; I’m simply alone, living in my heavily populated solitude, a harum-scarum of infinity and eternity, and Infinity and Eternity seem to take a liking to the likes of me.”

Perhaps the ideal life is not one that avoids solitude, but one that finds a heavily populated one.

Markson’s Notecard Quartet is undeniably a heavily populated solitude. We hope you will find that this inaugural issue of The Scofield is one as well.

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David Markson Bibliography

**Novels**
The Ballad of Dingus Magee
Going Down
Springer’s Progress
Wittgenstein’s Mistress
Reader’s Block
This Is Not a Novel
Vanishing Point
The Last Novel

**Criticism**
Malcolm Lowry’s Volcano: Myth, Symbol, Meaning

**Letters**
Fare Forward: Letters from David Markson

**Poetry**
Collected Poems

**Entertainments**
Epitaph for a Tramp
Epitaph for a Dead Beat
Miss Doll, Go Home
David Markson

Ports of Entry

If you’re interested in David Markson, but have no clue where to begin, here are some recommendations for you from some writers and scholars intimately connected with Markson and his oeuvre.

Françoise Palleau-Papin on Wittgenstein’s Mistress by David Markson:

Wittgenstein’s Mistress is my favorite novel of Markson’s. It foreshadows his final four novels, and thus it may be read as a port of entry into his fiction. Of course, the title’s a joke. Wittgenstein probably never had a mistress. His only mistress was Philosophie, a very demanding gal. He liked to isolate himself in a cottage by the sea in Ireland. He escaped Nazi extermination, and like his fictional mistress, he must have felt alone on earth, among the ashes. Unlike Wittgenstein, though, this so-called “Mistress” has no birds to listen to in her seclusion. She is alone, in a post-apocalyptic world. She is mad. She wants to drive overseas, from one continent to another. But one never knows much about her madness, because she is the only voice speaking about her predicament. We see her washing clothes, turning them into art, like statues on the bushes where she lays them out to dry. She plays logical games with language as she writes, and assesses the state of civilization, bundling the Trojan War with the unnamed, more recent war that has left her alone on earth. Read her poetry, her ratiocinations. Listen to her silences. Experience her madness. Find yourself in her shoes. Take her for a lover.

Tyler Malone on The Notecard Quartet by David Markson:

Wittgenstein’s Mistress is generally seen as Markson’s masterpiece, and there’s definitely a great argument to be made that it is his crowning achievement, but The Notecard Quartet, the later novels, his four-part swan song, are for me an even more distilled, more oppressive, more intoxicating experience. They’re easier to get lost in, yet they’re also easier to pick up at any point and read a few pages of. Each of the four is a unique bricolage of intellectual bric-a-brac, tidbits of information of the lives of artists, quotes from their work, and the faint hints of a lonely, old man collecting these odds-and-ends as he attempts to write. They circle many themes, but hone in on two important ideas with relation to “the artist”: 1) that artists are more prone to madness, depression, addiction, and other forms of mental illness, and 2) that artists so rarely get the appreciation they deserve while they are alive, for usually they are shunned, or banned, or executed, or they die penniless and unknown. The despair is palpable on every page, but so is the humor—I often find myself laughing out loud at Markson’s ironic juxtapositions and witty distillations. Reader’s Block, This Is Not a Novel, Vanishing Point, and The Last Novel were never actually intended to be a quartet or tetralogy. In fact, in his last novel, The Last Novel, Markson asks, “Wondering if there is any viable way to convince critics never to use the word tetralogy without also adding that each volume
can be readily read by itself?” So let me state it plainly: Each volume can be readily read by itself, but they’re so captivating that I don’t know why you’d want to stop at just one.

**Jaimie Johansson on Reader’s Block by David Markson:**

Like Walter Benjamin’s last, unfinished work, Reader’s Block collects the “rags, the refuse” of Western civilization. Like his more famous novel Wittgenstein’s Mistress, the reader encounters fragments of lost histories as though they were ancient scraps of papyrus. Reader’s Block documents the afterlives of works and their authors. “Thumbed pages: read and read. Who has passed here before me?” Markson asks. By tracing these passages, Reader’s Block shows how reading can be a productive, creative act. Although Markson’s relative obscurity poetically coincides with his fascination with artists doomed to anonymity, his work should be considered among the ranks of W. G. Sebald and Roberto Bolaño.

**Wes Del Val on This Is Not a Novel by David Markson:**

It’s ironic that a book called This Is Not a Novel has become one of my favorite novels, but of course, despite its title, it is in fact a novel. It’s a novel that, along with Markson’s other work, has ruined other books for me since I first discovered him years ago thanks to New York magazine asking prominent writers who their favorite under-the-radar writers were. Markson was the only one named twice. Who knew that such continual pleasure could be had today by looking back at centuries of the West’s greatest creative spirits at their basest points? A reader can’t help but be greatly comforted that our heroes were human, just as the reader is. They achieved what they did in the space allotted them on Earth and are remembered today for one reason or another, but when their end came calling, there was no escaping. Of course we all know that this is a fact of life, but to be so starkly, yet artfully, reminded and carried along page after page by Markson’s beautiful short sentences makes for an unforgettable experience. His inclusion of regular bouts of cattiness displayed by one artist or writer or musician remarking upon another along the creative timeline of history allows for entertaining, light punctuations amongst all the gloom and doom. I suppose a person could find bleak a book like This Is Not a Novel, which is filled with the demises of name upon name of some of history’s most (in)famous beings, and yet, upon reading even just a few pages of Markson’s ever-discerning, brilliantly-edited text, a profound sense of the humor of reality arose within me. There is no writing I am more eager to grow old revisiting.

**Mary Duffy on Vanishing Point by David Markson:**

The third novel in the Notecard Quartet, Vanishing Point was the first Markson novel I ever read, its stripy graphic cover and understatedly evocative title calling out from the library shelf one day in 2005. “Author has finally started to put his notes into manuscript form,” reads the first line, and the subtle mystery of it and the lines that follow leads to a kind of hyperventilation—each successive note causing a sharp intake of breath, a sigh, a pause, or an exhalation. The reader’s pulse quickening and slowing with every epigram, anecdote, quote. Tears, laughter, heartache, joy, as trite as it sounds. A cabinet of curiosities and a book of hours, a fugue, and still a novel. Perhaps the most novelesque of the quartet, Vanishing Point stands against
Markson’s tongue in cheek claim of *This is Not Novel*, the rabbit of plot has finally been pulled from his hat in the third book.

**Joseph Tabbi on The Last Novel by David Markson:**

Published in 2007, *The Last Novel* appeared at a time of web browsers and social networks. Consistent with the times, Markson created a persona for himself, an aging impoverished “Novelist” who will write “what he damned well pleases” in “his own personal genre.” Formally, this post-print era anti-novel will be, he says: “Nonlinear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage.” A decade after the World Wide Web went live on Tim Berners Lee’s desktop, the first generation of born digital writing had emerged and can be said to have followed Novelist’s self-description. Not that Markson (1927-2010) would have read any hypertexts or done more than glanced at a screen. Though I did once hear about it, when his photo taken with me and Scott Rettberg, contributor to the hypertext assemblage, *The Unknown*, found its way online: “Please, get it off there,” he wrote to me, in one of maybe a hundred pre-stamped 3” x 5” postcards that I had from him which he kept always in his shirt pocket, with his plain note cards. They served Markson all his writing life as email was starting to do for the rest of us. The anticipations of online writing are clear enough, even if Markson was positioning himself definitively at the end of an era, looking back: “I do not see why exposition and description are a necessary part of a novel. Said Ivy Compton-Burnett. … I am quite content to go down to posterity as a scissors and paste man. Said Joyce.” As we all, men and women whose every controlled text is Cut-able and Paste-able, even as each of the above lines was taken by me literally from an ebooks site. I can only imagine how irritated Markson would have been, knowing that his print novels could be accessed with no financial benefit to the author or his estate (not to mention his publisher). But when it comes to his own imagination of the many ‘ends’ of the novel genre, few authors in any genre or medium have captured so well the potentials, as well as what can be lost, in the ongoing transition from print to screen.

**Jenny Eagleton on Springer’s Progress by David Markson:**

In *Springer’s Progress* we see Markson lifting the skirt of his own writing, exposing the pieces of what would become the style he’s now known for. It’s a sexy and supremely literary book, with the difficult playfulness of Joyce. Prose here is diamond-like in its density and demands the full focus of the reader. Springer (think a philandering Leopold Bloom type) is modeled after Markson himself in the way that “the author” in the later books is clearly the same. In fact, Lucien Springer could be the author of Markson’s later works.

**Tyler Stoddard Smith on The Ballad of Dingus Magee by David Markson:**

*The Ballad of Dingus Magee* is one of those books I buy at least once a year. Part *Don Quixote*, part *Lonesome Dove* (though totally its own maniac entity), and absolutely nothing like Markson has written since, I’ve thrust this tiny “Western” on more people than I can count. On a sentence-level, Markson can’t be faded, but with this virtuoso satire, he proves he can also plot with the best of them, despite his later evidence to the contrary. If Dingus Magee doesn’t make you snarf your sarsaparilla, you’re probably a boring person with no character. Buy. Read. Repeat.
Proposition 1 from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

1. The world is everything that is the case.

1.1 The world is the totality of facts, not of things.

1.11 The world is determined by the facts, and by these being *all* the facts.

1.12 For the totality of facts determines both what is the case, and also all that is not the case.

1.13 The facts in logical space are the world.

1.2 The world divides into facts.

1.21 Any one can either be the case or not be the case, and everything else remain the same.

Translated by C. K. Ogden

In the beginning, sometimes I left messages in the street.

Somebody is living in the Louvre, certain of the messages would say. Or in the National Gallery.

Naturally they could only say that when I was in Paris or in London. Somebody is living in the Metropolitan Museum, being what they would say when I was still in New York.

Nobody came, of course. Eventually I stopped leaving the messages.

To tell the truth, perhaps I left only three or four messages altogether.

I have no idea how long ago it was when I was doing that. If I were forced to guess, I believe I would guess ten years.

Possibly it was several years longer ago than that, however.

And of course I was quite out of my mind for a certain period too, back then.

I do not know for how long a period, but for a certain period.

Time out of mind. Which is a phrase I suspect I may have never properly understood, now that I happen to use...
Time out of mind meaning mad, or time out of mind meaning simply forgotten?

But in either case there was little question about that madness. As when I drove that time to that obscure corner of Turkey, for instance, to visit at the site of ancient Troy.

And for some reason wished especially to look at the river there, that I had read about as well, flowing past the citadel to the sea.

I have forgotten the name of the river, which was actually a muddy stream.

And at any rate I do not mean to the sea, but to the Dardanelles, which used to be called the Hellespont.

The name of Troy had been changed too, naturally. Hisarlik, being what it was changed to.

In many ways my visit was a disappointment, the site being astonishingly small. Like little more than your ordinary city block and a few stories in height, practically.

Still, from the ruins one could see Mount Ida, all of that distance away.

Even in late spring, there was snow on the mountain. Somebody went there to die, I believe, in one of the old stories. Paris, perhaps.

I mean the Paris who had been Helen’s lover, naturally. And who was wounded quite near the end of that war. As a matter of fact it was Helen I mostly thought about, when I was at Troy.

I was about to add that I even dreamed, for a while, that the Greek ships were beached there still.

Well, it would have been a harmless enough thing to dream.

From Hisarlik, the water is perhaps an hour’s walk away. What I had planned to do next was to take an ordinary rowboat across, and then drive into Europe through Yugoslavia.

Possibly I mean Yugoslavia. In any case on that side of the channel there are monuments to the soldiers who died there in the first World War.

On the side where Troy is, one can find a monument where Achilles was buried, so much longer ago.

Well, they say it is where Achilles was buried.

Still, I find it extraordinary that young men died there in a war that long ago, and then died in the same place three thousand years after that.

But be that as it may, I changed my mind about crossing the Hellespont. By which I mean the Dardanelles. What I did was pick out a motor launch and go by way of the Greek islands and Athens, instead.

Even with only a page torn out of an atlas, instead of maritime charts, it took me only two unhurried days to get to Greece. A good deal about that ancient war was doubtless greatly exaggerated.

Still, certain things can touch a chord. Such as for instance a day or two after that, seeing the Parthenon by the late afternoon sun.

It was that winter during which I lived in the Louvre, I believe. Burning artifacts and picture frames for warmth, in a poorly ventilated room.

But then with the first signs of thaw, switching vehicles whenever I ran low on gas, started back across central Russia to make my way home again.

All of this being indisputably true, if as I say long ago. And if as I also say, I may well have been mad.

Then again I am not at all certain I was mad when I drove to Mexico, before that.

Possibly before that. To visit at the grave of a child I had lost, even longer ago than all of this, named Adam.

Why have I written that his name was Adam?
Simon is what my little boy was named. 
Time out of mind. Meaning that one can even momentarily forget the name of one’s only child, who would be thirty by now?
I doubt thirty. Say twenty-six, or twenty-seven.
Am I fifty, then?
There is only one mirror, here in this house on this beach. Perhaps the mirror says fifty.
My hands say that. It has come to show on the backs of my hands.
Conversely I am still menstruating. Irregularly, so that often it will go on for weeks, but then will not occur again until I have almost forgotten about it.
Perhaps I am no more than forty-seven or forty-eight. I am certain that I once attempted to keep a makeshift accounting, possibly of the months but surely at least of the seasons. But I do not even remember any longer when it was that I understood I had already long since lost track.
Still, I believe I was soon going to be forty, back when all of this began.

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Calling Wittgenstein’s Mistress “pretty much the high point of experimental fiction in this country,” David Foster Wallace admired how the author actually imagines what it would be like to live in the world of logical atomism. Markson’s book appears not as an illustration of a set of philosophical ideas or even a novelization of the philosopher’s life and thought, but as an original reading of Wittgenstein. Knowing this can shed a certain light on how we might learn to read Markson.

For one thing, the integration of Wittgenstein’s language into the interior language of modernist fiction is an accomplishment unique to Markson. Like most positivist thinkers early in the century, Wittgenstein inveighed against “mentalist language”—the reality of such things as the inner monologue—as “a general disease of thinking,” and later he took a strong stand against the possibility of any “private language.” Yet Markson’s novel, written almost exclusively in the
language of private thought and introspection, manages
to make use of the techniques of positivism.

That the stream of inner speech is so often given
to dreamers, mythical figures, and women—Tiresias,
Molly Bloom as she drifts into sleep, Mrs. Dalloway
on an ordinary day in London—might reinforce this
tendency to regard literature and the arts as feminine
and domestic counterparts to the “hard” sciences.
Markson’s distinctive monologue, given to a woman
who believes she is the last person on earth, is unusual
in that this character—named Kate in the novel—self-
consciously takes note of her own thoughts and analyzes
their structure. Critics have noticed that, through this
character, Markson offers a feminist rereading of history
(“the things men used to do”), but few readers have
taken Kate’s philosophical pretensions seriously. To be
sure, Kate’s thought owes much to the literary figure
of the madwoman in the attic, and Markson also has
Kate repeat Samuel Butler’s thesis—congenial to the
identity politics of our own decade, a century later—
that the *Odyssey* must have been written by a woman.
But this unusual character is no less the contemporary
of cognitive scientists and feminist philosophers of
science who, unwilling to let the bad guys have all the
good words (such as “objectivity”), helped open the
introspective mind to rich and precise descriptions.

No longer treating the inner life of the mind as a
black box knowable only by the public and measurable
behavior it produces, today many cognitive scientists
regard consciousness as a kind of interior language
capable of being studied, parsed, simulated, and
experimented with. Markson’s character, though she
studied visual arts and art history rather than the
sciences, arrives at an analogous control by stripping
away all “accouterments” and living as if the world was
her own mental laboratory. Like Wittgenstein, who
gave away his inheritance and retreated to Galway Bay
in Ireland in order to write the *Tractatus*, and like Rene
Descartes removing to a small Bavarian farmhouse in
1629, Markson’s heroine renounces a great many things
before settling down to take thought. After traveling “the
world” (as she imagines it) in abandoned cars and boats
and spending her nights in museums burning picture
frames and book pages for warmth, Kate has come to a
house by a beach on Long Island, where she takes up her
solitary project:

Baggage, basically, is what I got rid of. Well, things.

Now and again one happens to hear certain
music in one’s head, however.

Well, a fragment of something or other, in any
case. Antonio Vivaldi, say. Or Joan Baez, singing.
Not too long ago I even heard a passage from *Les
Troyens*, by Berlioz.

When I say heard, I am saying so only in a
manner of speaking, of course.

Still, perhaps there is baggage after all, for all
that I believed I had left baggage behind.

Of a sort. The baggage that remains in one’s
head, meaning remnants of whatever one ever
knew.
Though she claims never to have read a word of Wittgenstein, Kate unwittingly enacts his philosophy through a patient and gradual discovery of complexity in the most ordinary language (the mental operations hidden in a mere “manner of speaking”) and an attention to the ways that words set limits on what can be thought. In her careful attention to the “inconsequential perplexities” that arise from the ways people use and misuse words, Kate solves every philosophical “problem” she comes up against, more or less as Wittgenstein in the preface to the *Tractatus* claimed to have overcome the outstanding problems of philosophy. The difference is that Markson’s character, in setting down her thoughts, makes her own cognition available for analysis, and so brings a somewhat different objectivity to introspection itself—that is, to the very area of experience that the schools of positivism and behaviorism wanted to exclude.

Uncontaminated by social interactions or environmental pressures, Kate is able to focus—as did Wittgenstein—on language as a means of understanding the world. As for psychological troubles such as those which presumably led to her present solitude, it is better to accept than to explain them. Such, in any case, is the particular admixture of anxiety and resignation that discourages Kate from going back through her typescript to check a passage written the day before, when she began to feel a depression that has not yet lifted:

I have already forgotten what I had been typing when I began to feel this way.

Obviously, I could look back. Surely that part cannot be very many lines behind the line I am typing at this moment.

On second thought I will not look back. If there was something I was typing that had contributed to my feeling this way, doubtless it would contribute to it all over again.

...Though to tell the truth I would have believed I had shed most of such feelings, as long ago as when I shed most of my other sort of baggage. When winter is here, it will be here.

One reason for Wittgenstein’s rejection of psychology was its proliferation of schools and experimental methods that the philosopher felt were useless “in solving the problems that trouble us,” because “the problems and methods pass one another by.” Markson actually imagines this happening by letting the sources of Kate’s undefined anxiety and depression gradually (and without warning) begin to intersect with her more factual narrative. Her decision not to look back at what she has written occurs near the start of the novel. Near the end, after remembering something said to her by her mother on her deathbed, Kate realizes that she “did not intend to repeat one bit of that just now, actually”:

In fact when I finally did solve why I had been feeling depressed what I told myself was that if necessary I would simply never again allow myself to put down any such things at all.

As if in a manner of speaking one were no longer able to speak one solitary word of Long Ago.

A withholding of speech when one comes up against
the limits of language—"Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent"—is the closing proposition of the Tractatus: when adopted on principle, this becomes a source not only of Kate’s personal solipsism but of the cultural reticence and epistemological caution that characterizes the empirical sciences in our century. Nevertheless, as Bertrand Russell—Wittgenstein’s first reader—pointed out, the “totality” of things that cannot be said still exists, although for Wittgenstein it exists as something mystical. Reacting against this mysticism, Russell argues in his preface to the Tractatus that any such ineffable totality “would be not merely logically inexpressible, but a fiction, a mere delusion.” That is meant as a criticism and dismissal of one aspect of Wittgenstein’s thought. Markson on the contrary discovers concrete aesthetic possibilities in such philosophical fictions.

From a cognitive perspective, one thing that positivist science and philosophy left unsaid is the way that any arrangement of logical “facts” tends to produce, in the mind of a person observing the arrangement, meanings that are larger than, or different from, their sum. This is a common enough insight in Gestalt psychologies and in more recent investigations into the constructive activity of the mind during perception—of objects as well as language units. But few novelists have made so much of the insight as Markson, in passages that, repeatedly over time, release the fragments of atomistic experience into a remarkable narrative flow. Because such meanings accrue gradually, I will need to quote a number of passages at some length, from widely separated sections of the book. Readers will have noticed a certain flatness in the isolated passages cited so far; they, too, carry a greater stylistic charge in the overall context of other, related, passages.

Continuing my focus on Markson’s reading of philosophy, I shall illustrate what I mean by citing some of Kate’s scattered references to Russell and Wittgenstein themselves. The first instance occurs in passing (like all of Kate’s observations), when the thought of a visit by Brahms to Paris reminds her of Guy de Maupassant, a Parisian, who appeared earlier in her typescript, rowing on the Seine:

How one remembers certain things is beyond me. Perhaps Guy de Maupassant was rowing, when Brahms visited in Paris.

Once, Bertrand Russell took his pupil Ludwig Wittgenstein to watch Alfred North Whitehead row, at Cambridge. Wittgenstein became very angry with Bertrand Russell for having wasted his day.

In addition to remembering things that one does not know how one remembers, one would also appear to remember things that one has no idea how one knew to begin with.

Three other items leading to and away from this brief narrative unit are worth mentioning: the theme of teachers and pupils occurred a page or so earlier, in her recollection of a trick that Rembrandt’s students used to play on the impoverished artist—painting florins on the studio floor. “Doubtless,” Kate thinks, “Brahms was once a pupil, also.” This theme of continuity between generations is picked up later, when for example Kate traces an imaginative family relation between Rembrandt...
and Willem de Kooning, or when she notes that Russell in his nineties could recall his grandfather recounting memories of the death of George Washington. The third item is that de Maupassant eventually went mad, “even more mad than Van Gogh,” as noted roughly a hundred pages later. Soon thereafter, returning to Brahms (not for the first or the last time), Kate recalls that the composer was “known for carrying candy in his pocket to give to children when he visited people who had children.” Kate realizes that such details often escape the biographer no less than the abstract philosopher, but they are nonetheless the texture of life:

Certainly nobody writing such information would have put down that one of the children to whom Brahms now and again gave some of that candy might very well have been Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Perhaps I have not mentioned that one of the children to whom Brahms now and again gave some of that candy might very well have been Ludwig Wittgenstein.

On my honor, however, Brahms frequently visited at the home of the Wittgenstein family, in Vienna, when Ludwig Wittgenstein was a child.

Thinking of Wittgenstein, she wishes he were around to help her to find the source of a sentence that keeps running through her head. “The world is everything that is the case,” is what she had typed—the first sentence in the Tractatus. Certainly her own methods and Wittgenstein’s solutions pass one another by!

But in the meantime, in the absence of expert advice (or any human contact at all), Kate is quite able on her own to create other connections and arrive at independent conclusions. She may not have read Heidegger’s essay on the Van Gogh painting of a pair of peasant boots, but she does “know” that “Heidegger once owned a pair of boots that had actually belonged to Vincent Van Gogh, and used to put them on when he went for walks in the woods.” Almost immediately she realizes she may have got that wrong—the boots may have belonged to Kierkegaard!—but her mistake doesn’t keep her from making further speculations, several dozens of pages later, concerning Van Gogh’s footwear:

There would appear to be no record as to which particular paintings Van Gogh painted while wearing the old socks that Alfred North Whitehead later used to put on when he went for walks in the woods near Cambridge, on the other hand.

Although another thing I have perhaps never mentioned is that Ludwig Wittgenstein actually used to carry sugar in his pockets, when he went for walks near Cambridge himself.

The reason he carried the sugar being to give it to horses he might see in fields while he was walking.

On my honor, Wittgenstein used to do that.

This method of proliferating connections in such a way that problems and solutions pass one another
by at every juncture is not only a believable portrayal of a well-stocked mind working in isolation, it is also wildly entertaining and of significant narrative interest. Certainly such a procedure holds more aesthetic interest today than the conventional development from a novel's beginning through the multiplication of middle possibilities to an eventual settling upon one or two well-defined solutions, as the featured character comes into a stable identity and assured position in society. Kate’s character, and her mind, disintegrate by the book’s end. Her conclusions are in every case unlikely but somehow exactly right, as are her mental revisions of the outcomes of narratives by famous authors. Indeed, with the disintegration of her personal identity and the fragmentation of memory into a set of atomic elements, comes the possibility of recombining these elements in new ways, such that they possess cognitive meaning rather than mere narrative inevitability.

Certainly it is possible to speak of the disintegration that precedes such meaning in the terms of deconstruction, which was still in ascendance when Markson’s novel appeared in 1988. I myself recently likened the book’s branching structures to the hypertext forms that emerged in the early nineties. But there is another model, somewhat nearer perhaps to Markson’s philosophical sources and continuing commitments to print literature, offered by Wittgenstein’s older colleague, Willard Quine. Remarking on the construction and reconstruction of science earlier in this century, Quine said that such transformations placed every experimental thinker in the position of a mariner who must rebuild his boat, plank by plank, while staying afloat on it. Quine’s figure may well have been in Markson’s mind when he had Kate “dismantle” a house, or rather those boards that remain after much of the house has been destroyed by fire. A dismantling, not a deconstruction: on this view the novel, like contemporary explorations in cognitive science, can be seen as rebuilding the traditional structure of epistemological inquiry, as it takes shape in a solitary mind and a singular imagination.

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A Fonder Admission of Other Small Things: A Conversation with Ann Beattie

It's now become cliché to call Ann Beattie the voice of her generation, the distiller of the “boomer” psyche. As with all clichés, it needn’t be said, not because it isn’t true, but precisely because it is. Yet her stories are bigger than just a generation, for they speak to us all; they tell us how we live; they explore our desires and our disgusts, our joys and our pains, our loves and our losses. We read her and we see ourselves a little clearer, as though her stories are the shards of a broken mirror, and in each shattered bit of reality, we see a slightly different reflection of ourselves staring back.

She was also the first person to read the manuscript of David Markson’s novel *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*. According to Markson, “She’d been the first person I’d shown the manuscript to, in fact, mainly because I knew that if I’d fallen on my face anywhere she’d be tough-minded enough to tell me so without hedging. Instead she dialed me the next morning with what may be the most unforgettable telephone call I’ve ever received.”

Beattie was, as she put it, “seduced” by the manuscript. She explained in an interview on *The Leonard Lopate Show*, “You know as another writer occasionally you read something that just comes so much from somewhere else that it really just blows you away. You think, you know, this isn’t even any standard to aspire to—I mean this really has nothing to do with what I’ve been reading for most of my life. I think more than just falling in love with it, or whatever, though—and I don’t mean to say this kept me removed from the book—but there was a kind of writerly awe that anybody would dare to be so uncompromising.”

I recently spoke with Ann Beattie about her own writing and about Markson’s.
TM: In your *Paris Review* interview from a few years ago, you said something very interesting: “It took me years and years to realize a very simple thing, which is that when you write fiction you’re raising questions.” As you say, it does seem like a simple thing, but for me that fits well with my idea of what makes great art. For me it’s asking questions, courting negative capability, being ambiguous, having a conversation. Giving answers and being didactic doesn’t seem all that artistic to me; in fact, it seems the very opposite: propaganda, a sermon, a lesson. Would you agree with that definition of great art? Or what do you think it is that makes great art?

AB: There is always the work as it exists for the author, and the work that exists for everyone else, and of course they’re the vast majority. I don’t not write for them (double negative), but it’s always in revising and recasting that I think of others. It’s hard enough to please myself. In the present moment, I guess graffiti sometimes expresses didactic thoughts (though that wouldn’t be inevitably true; I don’t mean to diss graffiti), but how could we endure what the visual arts are doing in the present moment at all, if we rule out unstated questions? Quite possibly, the visual does not—and a basketball floating in a tank is just a basketball in a tank. I can’t pretend to think about this often, as though its existence has really captured my attention.

TM: What are you hoping is there when you complete a story or a novel?

AB: I hope when I complete some work of fiction that I, personally, don’t quite get it. That if I could paraphrase it, or even be totally satisfied with it, that would diminish the writing that I hope in many ways escapes me and eludes me, even after so-called completion. I love it when things lift off the page and have a life of their own. That independent life has often totally astonished the person who created the work—which should be a familiar notion to us, because it’s so often the case between parents and children. There are numerous examples of writers who deny that some meaning attributed to their work is there at all (of course, sometimes it isn’t), but that’s ok: it isn’t the writer’s obligation to explain or to contextualize his or her work. Or even to totally get it. Really: without Pound, did Eliot truly understand what he’d grasped? Did he ever entirely agree with Pound, rather than just embracing the brilliant edit?

TM: I like the idea of the artist not being “totally satisfied” with the work, as you say. It reminds me of the oft quoted Da Vinci line—which seems like it should be in one of Markson’s final four novels even if it isn’t—“Art is never finished, only abandoned.” Can I assume you’d say you abandon your stories rather than complete them?

AB: I don’t want to be too cute about this, but it’s more like they abandon me. I’ve thrown away lots of rough drafts because the organic ending just won’t appear—which is how I think of it: a weird, last-minute visitation. It’s always the part of the story least under my control, so of course I respect that.

TM: Is the beginning of a story then the part of the story most under your control? How do your stories usually first come to you—with an image, with a line of dialogue, with a character, with the opening sentence?

AB: Of the last three stories I’ve written, one involved something that I’d noticed many times, without knowing I’d noticed until suddenly I realized that it wasn’t as routine as I’d always thought (though the “real” moment wasn’t in the beginning of the story, that was what I suspected I was writing toward); one involved a visual...
image—a big Christmas decoration on someone’s lawn in Key West; one came title first (very rare). I hesitate to say that anything in a rough draft is under my control, unless I simultaneously include my lack of control—patterns and symbols I don’t anticipate, etc. Of course a writer has to begin somewhere, but in early drafts, there’s a lot of feeling my way in. Beginnings often get altered significantly, or are eventually deleted.

TM: I reread Picturing Will in the run up to this interview, and I really love that book’s discussions of the visual art of photography (and the connection to the project of writing, which is its own form of capturing moments and “picturing” things). Early in the book, you write, “The photographs that really worked transcended what you expected, however certain the results may have seemed at the time,” which reminds me of the type of things you’ve been saying to me about writing. Is there a link between writing and photography for you?

AB: There’s an analogy between the two that I like, but there isn’t an inherent link. What you quote from my book is, of course, the character’s thought—though I admit, I often agree with my characters. When you photograph, you can adjust the aperture, make the composition from a different angle, etc.—and that certainly seems similar to what a fiction writer does, or at least what this one does. In that particular sentence, though, I was trying to suggest not that the photographer was surprised or moved by something she didn’t see or understand in the moment of taking the picture, but by some mysterious quality that can emerge from a technically “correct” deliberately (and subjectively) composed photograph so that after the fact, the photographer sees it in yet another new way.

TM: Writing is a solitary act, and yet writing also needs to, on some level, be engaged with the world. There’s a danger perhaps of being too absent from the world, but also a danger of being too much a part of it. How do you personally navigate these opposing forces that push and pull on a writer?

AB: For better or worse, don’t writers have to finally decide to be in some one place at some particular time, in order to write—even if that place and time varies? (I’m quite aware that writers will do anything to avoid writing. I’m as guilty of this as anyone.) When I’m writing, the day’s news is secondary and I don’t care who has emailed. Of course I don’t pick up the phone. And who needs to eat all the time, really? If the barking dog seems to be barking in a particularly frightening or frightened way, sure, I’ll go investigate. I don’t think I have to navigate any opposing forces that any repair person doesn’t also have to navigate.

TM: Solitude is obviously central to David Markson’s work. In your interview with Leonard Lopate you called Wittgenstein’s Mistress “the most intense, really visceral, rendition of loneliness that I’ve ever encountered.” Our first issue is not only the Markson Issue, but also the Solitude Issue. I’m wondering if you’d be willing to talk about Markson in that context, as perhaps a paragon of writerly solitude, both as displayed in his texts and in how he lived his life in his last few decades.

AB: Immediate disclaimer: he and I didn’t even live in the same city, except for the brief period when I lived in New York, so I don’t really know exactly how he spent his time. He worried about money, I think disproportionately, but maybe I’m wrong. He worried about his health, and he did have medical problems, but sure, to me there was a bit of hypochondria also. Easy for me to say. I wasn’t in a rent controlled situation where in order to live I could
only make a certain amount of money. I wasn’t his age, and I didn’t have his health problems. But it made me sad, sometimes, that he was so hard on himself. I imagine that a lot of the time, he was like a lot of writers, me included: conflicted. He was bemused by many aspects of life, and he practiced ironic detachment, too. He was very, very funny, and—at least in writing postcards and on the telephone—he was quite self-deprecating. It’s often a blessing when writers don’t take themselves too seriously, but even then, what writer doesn’t appreciate high seriousness beaming at him or her from the outside world? He did not get enough of it.

TM: How did you first meet and befriend David Markson?

AB: I knew a friend of his. We wandered over to his apartment one day. We talked, and he was interested that I knew an acquaintance of his, a writer named Douglas Day. People in New York just love it when it can seem like a small world. I lived in New York at the time. I liked it too. Nothing, though, nothing could have prepared me for Wittgenstein’s Mistress.

TM: I know you were a big early champion of Wittgenstein’s Mistress. You were one of its first readers. Is it still surprising to you that it took so many rejections before it was finally published by Dalkey and that it still struggles to gain the readership it deserves? How can a novel that close to perfection still be so woefully underappreciated?

AB: Well, at the risk of seeming optimistic, which I am not, let me say that many excellent writers are woefully underappreciated, and I’ve always been aware of that. That doesn’t make it any more tolerable, it just makes it more usual. Where is the Library of America edition of Peter Taylor? Do enough people read the works of Stanley Crawford? Glenway Wescott might not be forgotten, but why isn’t he spoken of in the same breath as The Great Gatsby, since it came out at the same time and is a far more radical book? What about the many excellent short stories of Nancy Hale, who published so many stories in the New Yorker? But many writers do get “found” when they’re older. Younger writers keep the flame burning and the introductions to these writers’ works coming, introducing them and re-introducing them to serious readers. My best guess about why Markson had so many rejections of Wittgenstein’s Mistress? In part, because of the age he was when he wrote it. He was without an easy context to place him in. People admired it but didn’t, or couldn’t, go to bat for it. And it was a very, very serious book. America loves stand-up comedians. Good for Dalkey!

TM: In talking about rejection, I’m curious what you’d say to a young writer on how to deal with rejection. It’s such a part of the gig, but it’s never easy for a struggling writer. I’m interested in what your tips might be to weather the storm.

AB: Oh, I don’t know... on different days, I’d answer the question differently. Your question implies that one’s age matters, and I can’t say it doesn’t, but I think it’s possible that younger writers are sturdier and more resilient than older ones. It’s no different than anything else: you’ve got to sort through the criticism/rejection to see if something can be learned from it (which is not always true; or, at least, you’re not necessarily going to learn in that minute, in your current state of mind—whatever that is—from believing that source, about this particular story/poem/play). If we don’t always listen to other people who reject us, whether they be ex-lovers or horses that throw us (I realize a horse isn’t a person; Mr. Ed might make that mistake, though...), why should rejections of our writing be
considered definitive?

TM: You say, “Nothing, though, nothing could have prepared [you] for Wittgenstein’s Mistress.” What exactly is it about the book that floored you? What is it that you love and keep coming back to?

AB: Precisely that I can’t put my finger on it, and given my great admiration for the book, you’d think I could say “exactly.” It’s almost as if the book has a series of permeable walls that can be slid back indefinitely: sometimes we get into the character’s mind more deeply; slide that door back and we see the same character as a doofus; behind the next door, maybe the “real” David Markson hiding (the one who did go to Mexico; the one who does know so much about art, etc.). He sets up a system that I don’t think mimics the mind, but that is perhaps an enlightening improvisation on so-called real thought, in so-called real time. The character retracts a statement; puts forth contradictions; qualifies; takes an aerial view; simply confesses. Not just the method, but the tone: wry; funny; serious; questioning; quick asides; re-thinking; haunted. This all puts us in a different time than the time we’re in reading the book. He’s writing Markson Time.

TM: It’s not mentioned enough how funny the book is (and how funny the final quartet is as well). You’ve been quoted on the back of many of his books as saying, “No one but Beckett can be quite as sad and funny at the same time as Markson can,” which I couldn’t agree with more. Can you talk a bit about the particular brand of Marksonian humor in his novels?

AB: He’s droll. He’s sharp. Irreverent. Has a great sense of timing. (This is hard to dictate or to measure, but of course great comedians have a really good sense of timing). The juxtaposition of the lofty with the banal is amusing. His undercutting Serious Thought is funny, and of course he can write so well and so convincingly that it’s easy to fall into the trap he sets. Read most pages out loud, and you’ll laugh.

TM: One thing that many people often say of Wittgenstein’s Mistress is how Kate is one of the best and most convincing female characters written by a male author. Often she’s mentioned in the same breath as Molly Bloom. I think you, in the reverse, write men quite well, yet that’s such a weird thing for me to say because it’s not about you writing men well, it’s about you just writing characters well regardless of the trappings of their physical body. But I’m curious if you see it as more difficult to write across gender and across other barriers or does that not even really register for you? Is all writing, except perhaps a diary or journal, in some way “writing across difference”?

AB: I think fiction writers have to convince the reader that they know things they don’t know. I appreciate the research that goes into writing fiction. I also Google stuff all the time, like everybody else: Oh, this is the name of the tool used by a cobbler! In a lot of cases, though—well; let’s say constantly, unless I falter, personally speaking—I do and don’t believe what I read, except in the sense that it can and usually does convey some level of information. I wouldn’t know if what I write about a male character I’ve put into fiction is true or not, but I don’t feel that gender has limited me (other things, sure!). Neither would I presume about women or peacocks (O’Connor seems to have done a fine job there) or a dog’s innermost thoughts (I gave it my best try in a story called “The Debt.”), but I have to have the audacity to just grab certain people and things when they’re there (there, as in: in my conscious and subconscious mind). Many writers have said that they’re chosen by their characters or plots, rather than that
they choose them. It tends to be true for me. Men—male characters—choose me a lot. I wish it had been true at school dances.

TM: In your afterword in Laura Sims’ book of Markson letters, you mention you put him in a story once. Though the character’s name was Markson, you admit it wasn’t meant to be him. “It was a little secret hello from me to him, that’s all. He did the same with a line written just for me in one of his books. So I gave a secret wink and he didn’t see it, and he gave a secret wink and I smiled.” I wanted to let you know that I actually own his copy of Picturing Will, and I assume Jake Markson in that book is the character you’re referring to. Well, he did see it, and placed a check next to it in the margins. I can’t say if he smiled, but I’d imagine he did. I mention this because after that little anecdote, you write: “Writers write to other writers.” To tie this back to the solitude of the act of writing itself: Is that how writers combat the loneliness of the act—by writing to other writers, by turning their stories and their novels and their poems into conversations with the authors of the past, present, and future?

AB: I forgot that little wink. The story I had in mind was “Tending Something.” It was silly of me not to put a Post-it note in the book when I gave it to him. But I admit that I also like it when something I’ve done goes unrecognized. In some ways, I count on that; I’m perversely pleased by that, though I do like to surprise people. I can wait ten or twenty years for a joke I’ve planted to pay off. Of course, some never have. But I remember them and think they’re still pending. I can hardly pretend that, any more, about that story, which didn’t just appropriate his name, but was a fonder admission of other small things.
This is all true. Googlable. Except for one stretcher that needed to be added to make all this truth truer. More. Richer. Realer. Summer of 1996: I had moved out of my apartment north of Boston, in Salem, Massachusetts, a town where broom-straddling witches decorated the sides of police cars and refrigerator door magnets. I was staying for a few weeks at my parent’s house south of Boston, in Brockton, Massachusetts, a broken-down post-industrial city of boxing champions and forced bussing failures. I was making ready to leave the state of Massachusetts, to move to New York City, a billion-footed city to which I intended to add two more. I was accepted to The New School’s MFA program in creative writing that fall, and I carefully re-read all of my Amy Hempel and Francine Prose, with whom I would be studying in a couple of weeks. Mid-August: I had dinner in the Back Bay with a friend, a lady friend with whom I had slept in the stacks of the college library back in Salem, where we both worked in college, her cart and my cart of to-be-re-stacked books blocking the transmission of bodily fluids and promises to stay in touch. The friend had brought a goodbye gift for me to our Back Bay restaurant. Across the tiny table she handed me an old hardcover book. On the book’s torn and frayed blue cover was the title: *New Voices ’64: A Collection of Stories, Sections of Novels, and a Few Poems by Enormously Talented Young Writers of the New School*, edited by Hayes B. Jacobs.

The book offered the work of 30 writers I’d never heard of. It was, as well, edited by someone whom I’d never heard of. Going home on the T, I tried to read a short story by Beverly R. Gologorsky called “Oh, Lillian!” about a young woman who “longed desperately to make a good impression” on a Frenchman she was interested in dating. Concerned that her ignorance of the French language would dash her romantic chances, she enlists her French friend, Lillian, to accompany them on their date. But trouble ensues in short order. Our narrator says, “Why, oh, why did I choose Lillian, with the only feminine thing about her being her name.” The story didn’t hold my attention. So then I flipped around in the book, and began—but could not finish (due, no doubt, to my own distractions regarding upcoming MFA program and insecurities about my own work)—the following fictions: Richard Jianos’ “A Good, Greek Father,” David Goldman’s “Smoke a Bowl of Tea,” and Diana Garey’s “When the Banks Give Away Free Money.” Finally, I turned to Jacobs’s preface, in which he described the quality of the book’s writing:

“Each writer is, or has recently been a student at The New School for Social Research in New York, where the idea for this series of collections was born some years ago. One may ask, then: is this “student writing”?—a terrible
term of often-deserved opprobrium heard around literary teapots and ice buckets. Technically, yes; actually, in most cases, no. Anyone acquainted with the character of the student body at The New School, the country’s first adult university, would say no. The writers represented here are studying, it’s true, but they are quite different from the usual college student. They are for the most part people with a good deal more years, training and experience. . . . More than half hold bachelor’s degrees. Many have had advanced professional training—in literature, bacteriology, languages, the dance, drama, theology. Several have master’s degrees, one has a Ph. D., and some have children who are in college. And so I am moved to say, by way of explanation and not defense, that the major portions of the writing here is not what is usually called “student writing.” If you insist, though, then apply another modifier and let it be ‘graduate student writing.’”

In another section, Jacobs speaks to the feeling I have now as I type these words, attempting to produce something that communicates the frustration of their obscurity: “Then too—and this is probably the nub of it—isn’t there something splendid about trying to do something one cannot quite accomplish? Does it matter that one is never quite satisfied with the result?” Onward, ho, I thought.

I decided I would take a new tack with the volume. Instead of flipping through randomly, I would begin at the beginning with the first story: Anne Parsons’ “A Young Person With Get-Up-and-Go,” which explores, as Jacobs puts it, “the internal torment of the self-conscious teenager . . . a boy trying to grow spiritually tall, but who is stunted by the drug of squalor, and shackled by the demands of a helpless, psychotic parent.” Anne Parsons’ young protagonist, Walter, is almost as unbelievably earnest and generous as Charlie in Mel Stuart’s Willy Wonka. His mother is mentally unstable, and so he asks his father for the one thing he’s always dreamed of: “Listen, Daddy, I thought I might fix up the garage, and have a few kids over some night before it gets too cold out. We wouldn’t be in anyone’s way or scare Mama. Just mess around and listen to the radio, or play some cards. I got lots of friends, people who been nice to me, and I’d like to pay them back.” His father, standing at the stove, frying an egg, his back to Walter, flips the egg and says: “Worries me enough, you hanging around with trash, without you don’t bring them here. That’s all this house needs, is a bunch of free-loading bums on the premises. Between you and your brother, I’d come home some night and find we was living in a roadhouse.”

Many of the stories had this theme—a misunderstood protagonist of good intentions who only wants a little joy in life; but the indifferent world ultimately teaches the bitter lessons of life and leaves the protagonist sadder but wiser.

As I read through the stories, I wondered what had happened to these writers. A Google search revealed little. Few of the names even yielded matches for “writers.” But the search did what Google searches always do—dropped me into a world I was neither aware of nor prepared for, prior to hitting that search key. I ended up lost in my research for almost an hour. In the end, I finally pushed my chair away from my desk and felt that hollow sort of post-Google loneliness. And yet I still had a great many questions that Google left unanswered: For example, was the Anne Parsons of “A Young Person with Get-Up-and-Go” the same Anne Parsons who ended up becoming the orchestra manager for the Boston Symphony Orchestra? Or was Anne Parsons the same Anne Parsons who...
published a novel with Cheap Street Press in 1984? And, if so, was that Anne Parsons by any chance friendly with the publishers of that press, husband-wife duo, George and Jan O’Nale, who, in the early 1980s, started and operated Cheap Street, a press that was known for publishing “forced-scarcity” or “artificially rare” books—signed, numbered limited editions of science fiction and fantasy works, which books were renowned as excellent examples of the book-making arts, having been created with elegant, imported silks and bound in leathers with matching slipcases. Did Anne Parsons know that their books were typically issued in editions of 50 to 200 copies, and sold for up to $250 each? Was she aware that George and Jan O’Nale approached primarily only authors whom they identified for excellence in writing quality and did not even respond to or return unsolicited manuscripts? Would Anne Parsons have been flattered to discover this fact? Did she know that George and Jan O’Nale were hermitic in their habits, strange loners living in a fairly unpopulated area in the Virginian countryside? That they collected books and guns? That they were eccentric and irascible, and were known to suddenly and arbitrarily fall into contention with anyone they came into contact with, flashing guns in the faces of people who stepped onto their property and on many occasions firing warning shots in the air? That George was an expert marksman and that Jan was known to wear a pistol in a hip-holster whenever she went into town to run errands? I wondered if Anne Parsons would know if George and Jan O’Nale were acquainted with Carolyn Chute? Did Anne Parsons know that in 2002, the O’Nales, both of them 56 years old, donated their entire collection of books and press materials to Tulane College and then, in the spring of 2003, committed suicide together, citing increasing health problems, some residents claiming that Jan had developed ovarian cancer.

Was she aware that the O’Nales’ planned their deaths carefully? More than 40 boxes of books and papers and at least one copy of everything Cheap Street ever printed, along with the company’s correspondence and much of the O’Nales’ personal collections were transferred to Tulane University in 2002. Or that the O’Nales began considering all of this as long as two years before their suicide, when in October of 2001, they posted a notice on the internet announcing that Cheap Street Press was looking for a library to take its archives, stating that “At this time the proprietors of Cheap Street are retiring the press (and themselves as well).”?

Did Anne Parsons know that they closed their business, and that in April they arranged and paid for their own cremation? Did she know that they boxed and labeled things they wanted particular people to have, and then stored those boxed items in a rental storage space, every item meticulously labeled? Did she know that they prepared their wills, mailed letters to people they wanted to say goodbye to—and then mailed their final letter to County Sheriff McPherson telling him what they’d done, and where he could find their corpses.

Did Anne Parsons know that on May 27, after leaving the post office where they mailed that last letter, George and Jan O’Hale went home and got into bed together and died in that bed, breathing helium through a homemade device described in the book *Final Exit*. Did she know that at least one of the letters said “Due to failing health we’re going to take our lives in a quiet and peaceful manner. And we ask that our privacy be respected.”?

Was Anne Parsons aware that they sent careful instructions to Sheriff McPherson, including a key to their
back door and even labeled their back door so the sheriff wouldn’t confuse it with their laundry room?

Did she know that the O’Nale’s bodies were then cremated in accordance with the last wishes, and their ashes scattered in a location they wanted to keep secret? Was Anne Parsons aware that the O’Nales had no children?

Did she know that the sheriff was quoted as saying that the O’Nales were “considerate” in their act of self-destruction? That they took care of everything except their own bodies? But that even regarding that matter they made a last effort, leaving the air conditioner set on full-blast even though the outside temperature was 60 degrees? And that by mailing letters on the same day of their double suicide they spared the EMS workers having to deal with what is known in the business as “melted” bodies—those bodies that have, due to heat, begun to liquefy, a process that increases the issue of odor exponentially? Or that they did not use one of their many firearms so as not to make a mess for somebody else to have to clean up? Would Anne Parsons agree that it seems weird to call the childless couple who successfully accomplished their own suicide pact “considerate”? Did Anne Parsons know that Sheriff McPherson brought along a high-powered rifle, concerned that maybe this was a hoax and that George and Jan, notoriously unwelcoming of drop-in visits, might take aim at the sheriff?

Was Sherriff McPherson the same Sherriff McPherson from Virginia who (it has been claimed by former Bronx resident and mid-1970s Virginian transplant Lee DiViola) conjured Satan up before a coven of retirement-aged wiccans in a fire-bombed African-American church, those wiccans swearing to local law enforcement and a grand jury that they had had no previous interest in Satanism or soul-selling or organ transplants (or any of the other accusations Mr. DiViola has made) before meeting Sherriff McPherson?

Did Anne Parsons know by any chance if George and Jan O’Nale were members of the infamous Hemlock Society? Would Ms. Parsons have thought they would have made good members or prickly ones, concerning, say, a less fastidious member who would, in fact, choose to use a firearm to make the final exit?

Did George and Jan O’Nale take hold of each other’s hands when they finished inhaling that lethal dose and had removed their lips from the helium device’s rubber tube? Did they look into each other’s eyes hoping to be the first one to expire or the second? Did they want the other partner to see them expire or did they want to watch their lover die first so that the dying partner would feel that they were loved entirely in this world up until and beyond very the moment of their death, and that regardless of what they would find after their deaths, they would not feel that they were going to some unknowable void all alone?

Did they hold each other desperately in those last moments, hoping somehow that in doing so they would be able to find each other easier on the other side? Did they even believe there would be an actual other side? Did they, at the last moment, wish they had not done this? Did they think about how, had they not done this, tomorrow morning might be yet another morning of pain and discomfort but that at least it would be another morning with that person who was at that very moment expiring next to them? Would Anne Parsons happen to know George and Jan’s last words to each other?

Was Anne Parsons the same Anne Parsons who authored a cookbook in 2007?
In terms of mood and theme, David Markson’s last four works have obvious parallels to the elegiac late fictions written by a sequence of aging male writers who had done so much to shape and define a certain kind of postwar American fiction. Starting with *Reader’s Block* (1996), what Tyler Malone has called Markson’s “notecard quartet” seems to absorb the crepuscular backdrop of the millennium’s end and lets that larger cultural sense of proximate endtimes diffuse into the melancholy air of a self-reflexive work whose reflexivity insistently points to the author’s own bodily decline. The shared tone across such works—by John Barth and William Gaddis, as well as by Markson—is indicated by the weight assigned to the word *last* in the titles and key passages of each author’s work. Gaddis’ *A Frolic of His Own* (1994) was originally titled *The Last Act*; Barth’s *Once Upon a Time* is predicated upon the narrator’s claim that this will be his “Last Book” (382). But while the word “last” carries its routine meaning of “final” in each of these cases, it also suggests longevity. These works *last* in at least two additional senses because each writer’s late phase captures some of their best and most *enduring* work, and because the *duration* of their final phase is stretched beyond the confines of a single work.
Gaddis’s last act was followed by the even more terminal Agapi Agape (2002). Barth’s last book was followed by six more volumes of his last words.

Yet, while Markson’s four-part elegy shares a sequence of thematic traits with such works (and, perhaps even more broadly with late, spare, fictions by Don DeLillo and Philip Roth), from a formal and technical perspective, it is hard to identify works that share even remote similarities with his late “novels of intellectual reference” (13). In terms of earlier works, Carole Maso’s AVA (1993) perhaps bears the closest resemblance. With its staccato series of “shifting voices and constant breaks of mode” (184), AVA depends both upon the “accumulated meanings” that stem from repeated phrases and images (129), and what Victoria Frenkel Harris calls the “gaps and silences in her work’s formal dimension” (180), that will become familiar devices in Reader’s Block and later fictions. In Markson’s wake, Evan Lavender-Smith is perhaps the clearest instance of a writer who has adopted and adapted what Markson called “his own personal genre” (Last 4). Lavender-Smith’s From Old Notebooks (2010)—which he abbreviates in text to F.O.N.—is explicit about its literary ancestry on several occasions:

I count David Markson’s literary-anecdote books among the few things I want to read over and over again, yet I have no idea whether they are actually any good. They’re like porn for English majors. (60)

If David Markson hadn’t written his literary-anecdote novels, would I have ever thought to consider F.O.N. a novel? Would I have ever thought to write such a book? (87)

But while Markson’s project is to “see how little of his own presence he can get away with throughout” (Vanishing 93), From Old Notebooks at least plays with autobiographical revelation, replacing the cascade of literary and art-historical reference with the narrator’s more personal reflections on the relationship between writing and family life. Following a less direct line of influence, a comparison might also be made to the compressed parable quality of Teju Cole’s Twitter-issued “Small Fates”:

“Nobody shot anybody,” the Abuja police spokesman confirmed, after the driver Stephen, 35, shot by Abuja police, almost died.

Joining the fight against AIDS, armed men in Edo carted away a shipment of anti-retroviral drugs.

Though less literary, these microfables similarly privilege the striking snapshot over sustained narrative development, and formally explore abstraction over context. Moving away from literature, Roland Barthes—who wrote about the French model for Cole’s project in “Structure of the Fait-Divers” (1972)—might seem a theoretical reference point for Markson, especially in his description of the text as “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (146). Yet even as Barthes’ account of the death of the author seems in tune with the atomistic, cosmopolitan melange of quotations and facts that makes up Markson’s late works, their obsessive biographical focus on the artist’s special status—as well as intrusive appearances from the “Writer” offering “renewed verification that he exists” (Not 82)—seem deliberately designed to empty out the merit of any such comparison.
In late 2003, when I began working on a review of Markson’s *Vanishing Point* for the *American Book Review*, I felt—with at least some of these problems in contextualizing Markson in mind—that the central challenge in writing about his work was to reveal the book’s hidden architecture. While Markson’s novels offer a sequence of self-explanations for their form—ranging from “in part a commonplace book” (*Reader* 61) to “an ersatz prose alternative to *The Waste Land*” (*This* 101)—and later critics have persuasively studied the mechanics of his last books, at the time, I felt that these spare, minimalist constructions were the shadowy counterparts to the vast encyclopedic fictions (by Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace) that had become one of American postmodernism’s signature forms. If, as Pynchon argued, we have come to live among flows of data more vast than anything the world has seen before” (1), then books such as *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), *The Recognitions* (1955), and *Infinite Jest* (1996) are discursive models of that information overload: taking the surfeit of data, and narrativizing it, placing it at the center of labyrinthine plots that are supplemented by essayistic reflections on arcane knowledge. Markson’s books respond to the same overabundant intellectual field, but instead of placing data within an overarching narrative framework, they radically omit narrative (except in its slimmest sense) to create a network out of isolated intellectual particles. Taking the word *encyclopedia* very seriously, I saw Markson’s network of quotations as formally imitative, replicating the evolution of the encyclopedic tradition more broadly. While the earliest encyclopedias were thematically arranged, indicating that knowledge unfolded according to a coherent system marked by logical and “proper relations between subjects,” in the aftermath of the Enlightenment’s explosion of knowledge, the eighteenth-century ascent of alphabetically ordered encyclopedias signalled a landmark break with “systematic organisation,” with intellectual territories no longer tethered to an overarching schema, but instead arbitrarily classified and ordered by language (Yeo 25). As such, I argued that Markson’s books were structured on the threshold between the two systems, merging fairly obvious thematic patterns (say, different writers’ reflections on death, parallels between aesthetics, and so on) with alphabetic structures whose logic depended upon what Markson called a “cryptic interconnective syntax” (*Vanishing* 93). Near the start of *Vanishing Point*, then, we read:

Werner Heisenberg was thirty-one when he won the Nobel Prize.

And nine years earlier had been given a grade of C on his doctoral examinations.

By his own admission, William Butler Yeats, at twenty-seven, had not yet ever kissed a woman.

The Bodleian Library at Oxford, in the mid-seventeenth century, exchanged its First Folio Shakespeare for a Third—on the premise that the latter was more complete.

Actually, *Author* could have begun to type some weeks ago. For whatever reason, he’s been procrastinating.

Karl Marx never in his life saw the life inside of a factory.
Visiting Maecenas at Rome, in the decades before the beginning of the common era, Virgil and Horace were able to use his heated swimming pool.

At thirty-seven, in Key West, Ernest Hemingway badly marked up Wallace Stevens’ face in a never fully explained fistfight.

Stevens was fifty-seven when it happened. (2-3)

Across these seven entries, thematic interconnections are slim: the first two are paired by correlating age with different kinds of personal achievement, while the entries about Marx and Maecenas share a focus on relative levels of privilege. Instead, thematic coherence gives way to arbitrary alphabetic order, with capitalized nouns forcing links between disparate observations: Werner links to William, and Butler to Bodleian, before the intrusion of the author disrupts the pattern; then Marx links to Maecenas, and Horace to Hemingway. By juxtaposing both ordering methods in a condensed space, Markson’s late works seemed to me to ask questions about how we make sense of information, and about what difference an underlying order makes to understanding.

Shortly after the review appeared, I discovered that Markson’s opposition to Barthes’s attack on authorial presence did not only inform the design of his books. “I am half delighted, half slack-jawed” he wrote to me in December 2004, to correct my reading. While he later said that “most readers assume the stuff is just shuffled and tossed in any old way” (letter, 2005), he explained that his books did depend upon an invisible design, but denied that this included “mechanical” alphabetical patterns in a letter that (like much of Markson’s lively, erudite correspondence) deserves a wider audience for the light it sheds on his compositional method:

Patterns, structures, “interconnective syntax,” etc. A for-instance. *This Is Not a Novel*. In the beginning, he announces all the stuff he wants to skip—plot, character, setting, etc. Around P.#10, a protest, Ortega + I forget who else, Forster maybe, a novel *must* have thus + so. After which—“If you can do it, it ain’t bragging”—Dizzy Dean. Skip to the end, next to last page, after leaving out all that stuff, again a protest, “A novel must” etc.—again Ortega + someone—and again Dizzy D, unattributed here, “If you can do it, it ain’t bragging.” And over the page, maybe 5 short paras from the end, after all those other important people’s deaths, Dean’s via heart attack—reminding you, if you’ve forgotten, who said the line re not bragging, + maybe sort of gutsy too, a mere baseball player as the last died-of-whatevers. But more. I wondered: who’s gonna remember the bragging thing from ca. P. 10 to the end? I needed another Dean, maybe halfway, no? Yeah, sure. Indeed, I settled for two—a passing ref, via Marianne Moore (a baseball nut) 1/3 of the way through, + another 2/3 (approx) (via Ezra Pound, actually make-believe swinging a bat). Diagram: P10—P? (1/3)—P? (2/3)—unattrib repeat quote and over—page last use of name—at end.

One of the differences between my interpretation of Markson’s narrative design and his own was a question of scale. I had been trying to unpick the microstructures that stitched the individual units together on a page-by-
page basis, whereas Markson’s method evidently worked at a more overarching, macroscale. Re-reading his last books a decade later, I continue to think that alphabetical structures are part of what ties the books together, though I’m obliged to abandon any suggestion that authorial intent underlies it. Nevertheless, whatever Markson thought of my efforts to explain this particular aspect of his work, by way of thanking me for the handful of reviews I wrote about his work, he did at least—in one of his final letters to me—offer me an “unofficial P.R. position (salary, $1 per decade).” I trust the Markson Estate will honor this serious financial commitment.

i Françoise Palleau-Papin persuasively compares Markson’s compositional method (using shoebox tops, stacked with 3x5” notecards) with Gaddis’s while working on Agapé Agape, but—beyond shared methodologies—the texts themselves share little formal resemblance on a page-by-page basis (253).

ii Coincidentally or not, both Reader’s Block and From Old Notebooks share a fascination with David Foster Wallace, and, particularly, Infinite Jest. Markson lists that novel’s “James O. Incandenza” in a catalogue of famous literary suicides (190), while amongst Lavender-Smith’s many references to Wallace, he imagines “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” (15, cf. 46, 50, 100, 114, 141, 149).

iii In one of the best overviews of Markson’s career, Peter Dempsey explores the way fragments function in these last works, observing the playful way that Markson will include “an unattributed line from a book by Stanley Fish . . . followed by a renaissance proverb stating that ‘fish and guests in three days are stale’” (11). Writing in a somewhat larger context, Joseph Tabbi reads Markson (from Wittgenstein’s Mistress onwards) next to gestalt psychology arguing that his book’s “passages . . . repeatedly over time, release the fragments of atomistic experience into a remarkable narrative flow” (103).

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Homesick:
A Conversation with
Chigozie Obioma

Chigozie Obioma’s debut novel, The Fishermen, explores how the power of a prophetic narrative can shape our fears and futures. Told from the perspective of nine-year-old Benjamin, the text blends the form of the traditional western novel with a more nonlinear, digressive nature found in the tradition of Nigerian oral storytelling.

Though most American readers may associate Nigerian literature with the likes of Chinua Achebe, Obioma expands upon similar themes investigated by his compatriot, but eventually he casts his line into unexplored waters of unknown depth.

It is certainly difficult to categorize his work as entirely Nigerian or western; in a mesmerizing blend of the two worlds, Obioma utilizes elements of Greek tragedy, biblical allegory, and pop culture references which would surely intrigue a younger western audience. Part of the fun of reading Obioma’s novel is to see how references to Mortal Kombat, Mr. Bean, and Chuck Norris can compliment the indigenous Nigerian animals and tense political history surrounding the characters.

I began by speaking with this writer who bridges the waters between two worlds about home and homesickness.

CH: You play with the narrative in several interesting ways, incorporating songs, proverbs, allusions, digressions, illustrations, maps, and references to Chuck Norris, James Bond, and Mortal Kombat. This pleasantly breaks up the more linear direction of the story, and I wonder if the book emerged in a similar way. As this is your first novel, describe the beginning of your writing process. How did Ben’s story come to you? Was it an image? A line of dialogue? A memory?

CO: The germ of the idea came from a very personal place and the emotion of being homesick. I left Nigeria in 2007 and was living in Cyprus. While there, I began to miss my brothers especially, and sisters; growing up in an African family, I shared a lot with my brothers and was closer to them. During a phone conversation with my dad one evening he told me about the growing closeness between my two oldest brothers, both of whom had a very serious rivalry between them while growing up. I started to think about that closeness and what it means to love your brother deeply. Also, I had been reading Will Durant’s The Great Civilizations, and something he said again and again stood out to me. He said “a great civilization cannot be destroyed from the outside; it has to come from within.” These then led me to the question: “What is it that can come between a close-knit family—or just about any entity at all—and destroy it?”

Also, I incubate stories in my mind before putting anything down on paper. Ideas accrue, structures and patterns form; dialogues collect themselves in a vial; scenes
appear sporadically on clips and jotters; until, when I feel it has all come together enough, I put everything down. So, yes, to a great extent, these things were carefully curated and thought out.

**CH:** While the story is set in Nigeria, you’ve also lived in Cyprus, Turkey, and the United States. Clearly Nigeria is an enormous influence, but how did your travels influence the shape of *The Fishermen*?

**CO:** I think I would not have written this novel if I was living in Nigeria. The Igbo say that we hear the sound of a beating drum clearer from a distance than from close proximity. This proverb might not make much sense unless you know what kind of drum they mean here. It is an *udu*: a vessel made of clay. It is spheroidal, with elongated demi-john-like neck that is banged to emit a deep thunderous and even hypnotic bass. In the hands of a deft player, it can release such a loud sound that the Igbo people—until the apocalyptic hurricane of Western civilization swept much away—believed the sound reached the realms of the dead, the ancestral pit, which is the Igbo version of Elysium. Thus, I believe that I could not have heard or seen the novel as I see it now had I been in Nigeria. Since memories of the place were already firmly lodged in my mind, I was able to see a sharp contrast between the geographical makeup of Nigeria and the sere plains, sparse population, and desolate foliage of Cyprus. This contrast enabled my vision of Nigeria to become sharper, so much that it seemed as though I was peeking into something that happened in my past for which I had no memory, and could, by so doing, hear the voice of people in realms of yesterday.

**CH:** Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is explicitly referenced in the novel, and he is clearly a monumental figure in Nigerian literature. *Things Fall Apart* is assigned reading in most Freshman English classes in California, and his story is well known among many American and international college freshman. What kind of influence were Achebe (and Okonkwo) during your high school years?

**CO:** It might sound unpleasant to the ears, but I have decided that if it is the truth, and I choose to write about “humanity,” it will not matter whether what I say is unpleasant or not. Having said that, my answer will be that I didn’t read *Things Fall Apart* at school, nor do I know anyone who did, although I even majored mostly in the arts. Four times more Americans have read that book than Nigerians. We are a nation of people who have near-zero interest in reading, except of course, the Bible and the Koran. My book has been published in four countries so far, and I have just gotten a Nigerian publisher this June. (There are only three functioning ones in a nation of 180 million people.) So, yes, Achebe did not appear in my high school. I read his works on my own.

That said, I think the reference to Achebe’s novel in mine is rather overblown. Many other books are referenced, George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* and Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, for instance. The boys read these books, but it is, of course, Achebe’s book that gives Benjamin and Obembe the courage to attack the madman.

**CH:** Picking up on the last question, how does the W.B. Yeats poem, “Things Fall Apart,” relate to the larger theme of the work? Similar to the poem, much of your narrative is devoted to age, transformation, political and psychological metamorphosis, and the challenging of [parental] authority. One of the most important lines in the novel—Abulu’s horrific prophecy—is swallowed by the sound of a plane passing overhead. It makes the readers and characters’
imaginations fill in the ominous gap. The audience and characters are detached from the moment. It seems as though the falcon cannot hear the falconer. Do you think this pivotal scene relates to the poem? How does the idea of prophecy relate to Yeats’ vision and your own about the relationship between Africa and the west?

CO: I was honestly not thinking much about Yeats in other aspects of the novel except in terms of “parental authority,” which is fully developed in the chapters on the father (“The Eagle”) and their mother (“The Falconer”). But the connection you just made is similarly strong. After writing the novel, as I read through it, I discovered that most of the qualities (and attributes) I have in the novel spread across many of the characters. The madman is not just a madman, he too is a fisherman. He shares the same fate with the boys (kills his own brother). And, in some ways, too, he is a falconer, a “scarecrow.”

CH: I loved the interplay between the languages in the novel, the three most prominent being Igbo, English, and Yoruba. Towards the end of chapter two, you write, “English, although the official language of Nigeria, was a formal language with which strangers and non-relatives addressed you. It had the potency of digging craters between you and your friends or relatives if one of you switched to using it.” Would you mind sharing a little more about how the three languages interweave in Nigerian daily life (or in the lives of your characters)? How does English contrast with Igbo and Yoruba when it comes to subjects like love, passion, fear, business, and humor?

CO: When you are born into a colonial construct as the Nigerian nation, you become bilingual immediately. That is true. I, for example, grew up with Igbo and English, and because we were living in a Yoruba area, the children interacted with neighborhood kids in Yoruba. So, I spoke three languages at the same time as a child. This was something I bequeathed on the main characters of The Fishermen as well. It was simply their reality. But because language is an important composition of culture, the languages became protean in their lives and uses. As Benjamin recalls in the novel, just before the section you quoted here, English was used as the language with which one discussed Western cultural imports like elections, democracy, education, etc. Hence, it is a formal language. You don’t speak it with your parents. It can sound jarring or disrespectful to do so (I do now, though, strangely!). But Igbo is the language used to discuss family matters, and personal things. I believe each person, or group, or family put the languages they acquire to disparate uses.

CH: There were a lot of humorous moments in this book, which beautifully contrast with the tragic events that befall Ben’s family. Abulu is a character who, for me, tiptoes between the grotesque and the comedic. How did this character first emerge to you?

CO: “Can Abulu be real?” is a question I’ve been asked again and again. The phenomenon of a madman or madwoman is very common in our society in West Africa. Folks like him are derelicts who would walk around, unclaimed. They walk about, picking dirt on the street, and doing the sorts of things I describe in the book. As a child, I encountered many of them. Some of them go on to become quite popular, especially in small towns. People would sometimes ask them to dance. I used to be very disturbed by the sight of them. But as children, my friends and I would feel like adults around these people because we could command them. We’d think we had more wisdom. Then one day, you’d wake up to see one of
them lying dead by the roadside, perhaps hit by a car. So, by creating the character of Abulu as a madman, I wanted to be able to bring the plights of his kind to the awareness of West African politicians. That said, once I had the idea about creating a close-knit family and wanted to explore what could come in-between them and destroy their unity, I thought about many possibilities for the catalyst. The idea of something superstitious as the catalyst became the best option, and after many permutations and selections, the madman—imbued with prophetic abilities—emerged as the best solution.

CH: Your metaphors and similes are worth noting (and praising), and they frequently appear in Ben’s narrative. At one point, Ikenna criticizes Benjamin, “You compare everything to animals, Ben.” What I found interesting is that the animal metaphors serve as a structural element in the novel, not merely as a tool for comparison. You often use animals as chapter titles, and there is an interesting ambiguity when it comes to the reader’s interpretation of the metaphors. Spiders, falconers, and egrets connect with the characters on a thematic level, but the animals constantly appear at the narrative level as well. At a certain point, I found myself asking, “Are these really metaphors? Or is Ikenna a sparrow?” How would you read it?

CO: I think the love of animals is a figment of my personality in Ben, the narrator. I wanted to have Benjamin tell the story the way the memory of human beings works; in remembering the past, it doesn’t always come in a linear form; it comes in leaps and bounds. Some things are foregrounded, some are backgrounded. You remember the most poignant thing or event, and then that can lead you to remember certain other details. Benjamin, being fascinated with animals, is able to rationalize the world with what he is fascinated with. That means that everything can be understood through the prism of animals. So, by equating his dead brother to a sparrow, he is able to actually make sense of the tragedy, able to understand it in a way that is manageable to him. That was what made for the conceit of the animal metaphors in the book. But I was also working on an Igbo philosophy that *where something lies something else lies beside it*. It means, to my mind, that nothing can be truly explained without comparing it to something else. So, there is duality of imagination, and of reality. As the writer, I experience the former, and Benjamin, my narrator, the latter. There is no way that his father isn’t in fact an Eagle. How? Is it because he is a human being? Okay, good, but how about what happens to him as Benjamin later describes “Perhaps the killings happen when the eagle travels camel distances for food…and return to find that two of the eaglets had been killed by their own brothers in what is known as Cain-and-Abel syndrome”? Now, this exact same thing happens to Mr. Agwu when he travels “camel distance” to get food for the family. So how different is he from the Eagle? The answer: Spiritually, he isn’t.

CH: Your description of Abulu’s smell on pg. 224 is one of the most memorable olfactory details I’ve ever read. Is there something significant about the sense of smell when it comes to creating a character? Do you feel like smell is often underutilized in literature?

CO: I think it is, but writers like Arundhati Roy, William Golding, and even Cormac McCarthy work with that on a scale I can only dream of. But as for the case of Abulu, Benjamin describes him as he feels it. His observation is undiluted and documentary and sincere. In that part of the book, he is trying to describe what he thinks Abulu smelt of, not what he actually could smell.
Abulu, for instance, couldn’t smell of “the broken lives of others.” It was his way of trying to document, in one full glimpse, his perception of the madman, and the organ of olfactory perception, the nose, is his lens here.

**CH:** How has your time in the MFA program at the University of Michigan affected your writing? Did you ever workshop parts of *The Fishermen*? What place do you think creative writing has at the university level?

**CO:** I had a complete first draft when I got into the MFA program. I had come here mainly because I wanted time and space to write. So I saw it as a residency, rather than a place to get “training.” In my opinion, no one can make a person a writer. You are one already from the day you chose to write. And you get into the MFA program because you are already one. So, I didn’t see any need to workshop the novel. I never did. I wrote stuff for the workshops, gathered whatever feedback I could get, and applied them to my more serious works. I’m a very private writer, and find it dangerous to show serious work to anyone while they are in their embryonic stage. So, I would rather show work to people when the work is at its advanced stage, and I have revised it. But I have seen many writers who rely on early feedback. So it depends on your rhythm.

But, by and large, I think the MFA offers many interesting perspectives into the publishing industry, and can be a good source of support to writers during the time they might most need it. Also, most writers will not be able to live off of their books, and the MFA gives them the chance to professionalize in something they truly care about. This is a great thing. I will, myself, be teaching in such a program (at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln).

**CH:** You wrote a great piece called “The Audacity of Prose” in *The Millions* recently. In it, you warn against the “less is more” dictum. Could you talk a little about your stance on preserving “the artfulness of language”?  

**CO:** That piece was a rant, to say the least. Since coming here and encountering actual writers for the first time, I have noticed that most people simply shy away from writing great prose. Then, I saw too many of the “less is more” thing, and again and again was surprised to find reviews slapping writers with the epithet “self-conscious this,” “self-conscious that.” But what led to that essay was that I started reading a book I will not name, and was frustrated by how well the writer plotted, wrote the dialogue and engaged the reader, but did nothing to make the prose attractive. It was like reading a newspaper report about the price of fruits at the farmer’s market. In a rage, I sat down and wrote that stuff. I just felt someone has got to speak up, anyhow. And I felt I could do that, being a non-American, I am not stifled or silenced by political correctness, or the fear of offending anyone by uttering an opinion.

Thus, I was shocked by the attention the essay got. I wish I had actually composed it more thoughtfully, as I have a whole lot to say about the topic, but having reread the essay to answer this question, I think I pretty much said most of it there.

**CH:** What’s next for you?

**CO:** I’m trying to be motivated enough to complete another novel titled *The Falconer*. But there is also a collection of personal essays about my five-year sojourn in the island of Cyprus.
Then stirs the feeling infinite, so felt
In solitude, where we are least alone;
A truth, which through our being then doth melt,
And purifies from self: it is a tone,
The soul and source of music, which makes known
Eternal harmony, and sheds a charm,
Like to the fabled Cytherea's zone,
Binding all things with beauty;—'twould disarm
The spectre Death, had he substantial power to harm.
Markson’s Plain White Notecards
Part 1: Correspondence from David Markson to Laura Sims

Markson’s Plain White Notecards
Part 1: Correspondence from David Markson to Laura Sims
(continued)
David Markson Dominates Twitter

David Markson would hate this piece. He had no computer, so he would never have voluntarily read it. But if he had been shown it somehow, via smartphone or laptop or printout, he would have despised it. He would have scanned the tweets for factual errors, erroneous claims and misspellings, and he would certainly have taken offense at the one semi-negative tweet I’ve included below. But whether Markson himself would have liked it or not, Twitter is alive with chatter about him and his work. When I’m on Twitter I often do a search for “David Markson” out of curiosity—what does the Twittersphere have to say about the writer whose last four books read something like pastiches of very clever tweets? The answer: a lot. The sum total does not a David Markson novel make, but there is plenty of material for a collage of what the Internet has to say about the man who eschewed it. Call this a poem, call it a strange essay, or song—sung by a chorus of voices from around the world, all (or most) singing the praises of the late, great, greatly underappreciated David Markson.

“Somebody is living on this beach.” – Wittgenstein’s Mistress, David Markson
@Dalkey_Archive

Published this day in 1998 = David Markson’s genius experimental novel Wittgenstein’s Mistress…Cheers. @kylegarvey

When I get rejected I think about David Markson’s classic ‘Wittgenstein’s Mistress’ which was rejected 54 times. Which makes me even sadder. @_RyanONeill

Wittgenstein’s Mistress isn’t just great literary postmodernism, it’s philosophically Wittgenstein’s logical positivism. @EsotericCD

Wittgenstein’s Mistress by David Markson. One more time. @johnkelleytweets

David Markson’s last four novels are some of the best tweets ever. @AM_Davenport

In his prime David Markson would have absolutely dominated Twitter. @thisisweber

David Markson’s This is Not a Novel in class tomorrow. If I could, I’d tweet the whole damn book. @amitavakumar

Often, when I tweet about Wittgenstein’s Mistress, I imagine a handful of you Googling the book & reading the first page. It gives me shivers. @patricknathan
People always say David Markson invented Twitter or at least would’ve been good at it but what about the person who invented the #tombstone?
@frogeyesmusic

@anphimimor

I like when Book Twitter does that thing where we all lament like, I only read 100 books last year! And I realize I’m the slowest reader.
@kennycoble

There’s a Book Twitter? How do I get in on that?
@AhabLives

I think Book Twitter is David Markson.
@rs_sparks

The possibility that we are all part of a Markson novel is so far the best thing I’ve done with my life.
@patricknathan

We’ll all be followed by the David Markson Twitter bot soon enough.
@AhabLives

If Twitter were a David Markson novel, it’d be a hell of a lot more interesting.
@thephthailer

If you wrote Wittgenstein’s Mistress today, wouldn’t the narrator spend the whole time talking about The Simpsons instead of opera?
@parabasis

David Markson-style novel sequence about every mixtape on datpiff.
@copsleepnod

My bid for theater respectability would be an off-Broadway one-man-show adaptation of David Markson’s Wittgenstein’s Mistress.
@EsotericCD

I love when a writer’s letters reveal in his own words the big questions that preoccupy him. David Markson: Who *is* Beyonce?*
@mcnallyjackson

Just realized I’ve put the book I was about to finish & the book I was about to begin on the roof of a car that has since been driven away.
@PaulDempsey

You’ve completely “Kerouaced” yourself… #OnTheRoad. By the way – what were you reading?
@SaintFrankly

Was reading Vanishing Point by David Markson which was/is spellbinding… The spell is broken until further notice.
@PaulDempsey
Courtesy of David Markson’s anecdotes, we know Kerouac had deplorable hygiene as well.
@maryfduffy

Pope Benedict XVI is older than David Markson.
@mattbucher

Another fact by way of David Markson.
@Ingwit_

Harold Bloom says Emily Dickinson was a nihilist?
@olivia8k

He also claims to read 1,000 words per minute with perfect comprehension.
@PierreMenard

I had heard “500 pages an hour”; either way, it’s the playground kid bragging that he can count to infinity.
@olivia8k

Gilbert Sorrentino has a riff on this--in Gold Fools, I think; Google is not helping me find it.
@olivia8k

David Markson also has a riff on it in This Is Not a Novel.
@matt_sperling

That’s it! I was wrong about it being from Sorrentino, thank you!
@olivia8k

I sort of wish in this moment of High Interiority that David Markson will make a huge posthumous comeback
@parabasis

Incidentally (and for no particular reason): David Markson. Know what I mean?
@KirkdaleBooks

#amreading THE LAST NOVEL by David Markson in small deliciously potent sips
@RebekahLattinR

I keep skipping ahead in David Markson’s amazing Wittgenstein’s Mistress to see how David Foster Wallace’s Afterword ends.
@ekbarbarossa

If you are not already, become acquainted with the works of David Markson, who died four years ago today.
@BlackSunLit

@mdbell79

For the past six years I’ve not read anything that moved me as much as David Markson’s last four books.
@wesdelval

First book abandoned of 2015: David Markson’s WITTGENSTEIN’S MISTRESS, page 140 :-/
@austinkleon
“Once, I had a dream of fame. Generally, even then, I was lonely.” – David Markson, Wittgenstein’s Mistress.
@lastbookstorela

“Was it really some other person I was so anxious to discover...or was it only my own solitude that I could not abide?” –David Markson
@kidastronavt

Reading David Markson / thinking of things that could go towards a blog post / also thinking / why not keep my thoughts to myself.
@Tiny_Camels

A Walk at Dusk

Laura Sims

Casper David Friedrich

A Walk at Dusk
Manganese: A Conversation with Will Chancellor

On June 7th, 2009 Will Chancellor arrived in Reykjavik with a packed refrigerator box. Inside were four smaller boxes he then mailed to post offices along a route. He was there to research his first novel, *A Brave Man Seven Storeys Tall*. He started walking. Chancellor walked approximately 650 miles across Iceland—meandering the coast, hiking mountains, traversing fjords. He gave himself one rule: one photo per day. He was alone.

“Because I work best with constraints, I limited myself to one photo per day. This made for some tough calls. If I saw something amazing when I first hit the road at 8AM and decided to shoot it, I had to hope nothing else would devastate me for the rest of the day. A couple times, I made camp earlier than I had planned because I wanted to take an extra picture. Here is my route across Iceland. I more or less stuck with the path as described.”

The photos here were shot with a Rollei 35mm. It is the smallest and lightest 35mm film camera ever produced.
SC: Per your self-imposed rules: Why take this picture?
WC: This was the first moment I felt the spirit of the place. It’s important to keep in mind that if you spin around from this spot and walk in any direction, you won’t find a person for days.

SC: What am I seeing?
WC: It’s funny. The body of this car was the most beautiful purplish pink oxide. There’s a mineral named Rhodonite that’s close to the color. As a kid, I collected geodes and read rock and mineral guides, as much as you can read a book of pictures. I’m thinking now that I was just focusing closely on the colors. Trying to inhabit them? Is that mystical enough for you? It’s not like mineralogy is a part of my waking thoughts, but as soon as this rusted out Datsun came into view, I mouthed the word Manganese. Seems right. And it’s a fantastic word to say in a Sean Connery accent. I thought this hike across Iceland was going to be at least Thoreau-level seriousness. Instead, it was just me doing silly stuff like repeating Manganese for half an hour in every accent and bad impression I can manage.

You’re seeing a rusted-out, manganese, Datsun abandoned by the side of a river in northwest Iceland. In the distance, there’s a mill of some sort.

SC: How would this picture be different if in color? Does it change your memory?
WC: I thought I was taking this with color film. I had maybe four exposures left on the roll. I was very tempted to cheat, capture the details of the oxidation patterns, and load another color roll just to be positive that I had the shot. “No. I’m sure I’ve got color film in here. Totally.” When I looked very closely, the oxidation pattern reminded me of a reef at low tide—but with underwater colors.

SC: In David Markson’s Wittgenstein’s Mistress, the narrator sleeps in at least three cars. What is it like to sleep in a car? Is a car still a car when you find it dead and rusting in the hill country?
WC: When I was little, I’d curl up in the footwell—with that carpeted hump right under my ribcage—and sleep my way through roadtrips to visit my grandparents. I thought about sleeping in this Datsun, but the footwell was raw metal and rubber mats. My tent seemed like it would be more comfortable. I think the driver’s seat would have been a good spot for a nap, assuming I could black out the windows. We’re just below the Arctic Circle here. This was mid-June, when the sun never sets. It’s hangover-light most mornings. You’re tired and you just want dark.

I did think of Wittgenstein’s Mistress when I saw this car. I investigated the scene for tennis balls. And, come to think of it, this might have been the place where I thought of filling the Stedelijk Museum with ping pong balls—floating it away the same way you could raise a sunken...
ship with light hollow spheres. That idea, which I think falls pretty short of the mark for being a good idea, came to me while sitting against the side of this Datsun and thinking about *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*.

With your last question, I can only assume that you’re thinking of tauntauns. They make a tauntaun sleeping bag, I believe. I’ll buy you one for your next birthday—if it’s not too dear.

SC: Why this picture?
WC: Ghosts.

SC: What am I seeing?
WC: Four Icelanders. One peeking through the window and pretending to blow smoke rings with his frost breath. The others leaning against doorways are trying to look severe.

I can’t imagine what they would mill here. It couldn’t be a saw mill—there haven’t been trees in this part of Iceland for millennia. Maybe there was some tiny mining interest in that mountain. I doubt it though. I saw some incredible outcroppings of stones—turquoise and amethyst—but that was weeks later, when I was near the Mid-Atlantic Ridge.

It was probably a wool mill. There are certainly enough sheep and goats. Maybe it was just a barn. But for some reason I was sure it was an old mill.

SC: There is a shaft of light coming down from the middle top of the image. What do you remember of that light?
WC: The light was really cool on those corrugated walls. I can’t remember what color they were. Bleached lime?

SC: Did you enter the building? If not, why not?
And how did you cross that water? Was it cold?

WC: Well, for one, this place is spooky as fuck! For two, I was super cautious with river crossings. I only did it when absolutely necessary. I think at this point I was a solid week of hiking, a hundred miles or so, from my next resupply point. The idea of getting my gear wet, or missing a step and rolling an ankle, trumped curiosity. This whole trip was incredibly foolish, only because if I were unable to keep hiking, I would have been in serious trouble. I don’t think I crossed this river until a few weeks later. I just kept it on my right and aimed for a mountain peak to the northeast. From any ridge in Iceland, you can see about thirty miles, or two days’ hike. Until there’s fog. I didn’t get a picture of the fog, and don’t think I even got it in my book. But, man. There were times I couldn’t see my feet, which is horrible when you’re low on water and trying to pick your steps off-trail.

And yes. The water is glacial melt. It’s silty and very very cold.
SC: Why this picture?
WC: I thought it was amazing that this structure, probably the foundation of a crofthouse, wasn’t a historical landmark—wasn’t even a spot on the map.

SC: What am I seeing? What did you see?
WC: You’re seeing how I imagine Paul Lynch’s novel, The Black Snow. I think there are a few trees in Paul’s version of Donegal. So let’s add the claws of a couple bare trees to this byre.

SC: There is something especially lonesome about this photo. It suggests a community now long gone, maybe even a failed one. Did you touch a stone? Were you tempted to take one? I would be.
WC: Now that is exactly the moment I love most in The Black Snow. Removing the stones from a landmark in order to build something new is how I feel when I’m reading a classic at the same time as I’m working on a novel—which I hope is now a permanent state of plunder.

The summer before eighth grade, I read about this Jungian parlor trick, an imaginary hike that would reveal the deepest psychological truths about someone. Of course I thought, pfff amazing way to pick up girls! This is gold! So picture me at thirteen, at a three-week sleepaway camp in Evanston Illinois, thousands of miles from my parents and armed with psychological gold.

One of the first things you ask the person is to describe a key on his or her path. Is it ornate? Is it modern? Is it functional—meaning, does it potentially fit a lock that you might encounter? And then, here’s the kicker, Do you keep it?

The key is meant to reflect your conception of knowledge. And the decision to keep it mirrors how long you plan to keep reading and learning for its own sake. This little game has been a surprisingly accurate barometer of friendship. Of the dozens of people I asked to suffer this series of questions and my sophomoric psychologizing, the ones who dreamed up fancy keys—and kept them—remain my close friends. You’d be surprised how many people think of a copied silver key. And then leave it in the grass.

I don’t know what a stone would symbolize. A wall symbolizes the inevitability of death. And I’d lower my shoulder into that. No way I’m packing it up as a memento mori.
Practically speaking, I knew my pack weight to the ounce. I cut off half the handle of my toothbrush just to trim a fraction of an ounce. On any hike, but especially on a thruhike, Light is Right.

SC: Why this picture?
WC: This cemetery is in Reykjavik. I took the photo after the two months were up and I was back, mostly whole, among the living. I had a full beard at this point and treated myself to a pair of black tuxedo pants and flipflops to balance out the look. I imagine I had some sort of burned August Strindberg gleam in my eyes, since there were several times I came close to dying. I’m not entirely positive that I didn’t die—making my current existence a reboot of Beetlejuice.

SC: What am I seeing?
WC: For the most part, there are no trees in Iceland. Legend has it the island was denuded to make ships. But it seems to me that overgrazing and volcanism and glacial grinding are at least partly to blame for the absence of birch woodlands. I think these are native birch trees.

SC: It’s such a crowded cemetery. How big was it?
WC: Only two stories. Wonder if there’s a six-story cemetery somewhere—like one of those concrete driving ranges where hundreds of businessmen fire golf balls into the night.

SC: I’m taken with what seem to be protective rods blocking freshly tended ground. Is this so? It looks like both a garden and a cemetery at the same time. Which I guess every cemetery is—but in this case it looks explicitly so. I find that comforting.

WC: Someone has to have had the idea of a tree growing out of each body once each soul has departed. Where’s that religion? Sign me up if you find it.

But then again, Herodotus on the Giza Necropolis is fixed in my head—I tend to go classical when I think of gravesites and to go sci-fi when I think of actual death, like Malick does in Tree of Life—and I can’t picture a tree in an Egyptian desert. This one was like a swamp…in Iceland. I think I took the picture because of the dissonance between this relatively lush cemetery and the bare nothing I had been hiking through, specifically the black deserts of the eastern Highlands.

Emily Dickinson is probably my favorite grave poet:

And so, as kinsmen met a-night,
We talked between the rooms,
Until the moss had reached our lips,
And covered up our names.

Can you see that? The moss, maybe some orange lichen, stretching into the chiseled channels of our names. There’s something about the way moss and lichen cling...
with those fibrilled gecko feet that seems irreversible. And makes beautiful something that would otherwise make me shudder.

Alice Oswald is my favorite poet of her generation. Do you know her work? She’s so good. She buried me just last week with these lines in her poem Vertigo:

And I who live in the basement
one level down from the world
with my eyes to the insects with my ears to the roots listening

Maybe that’s why I can’t get the tree roots out of my head.

To figure out what gear was going to work and what gear would need to stay behind, I went on a four-day shakeout hike. And so much changed. I had this fancy Osprey pack that was killing me. (I’m looking at it now and it’s like a Hemingway writing prompt: fancy blue backpack, unused.) I found a cheap lightweight replacement when I got back to Reykjavik. Traded my heavy alpine boots for a light pair of high tops with a Vibram sole. I ditched my alcohol-fueled camping stove for something called a Jet Boil, which is basically a butane canister that screws into an insulated Big Gulp.

SC: Why this picture?
WC: This one is kind of staged. I’m at a trailhead in South Iceland. The off-trail hiking, the traverse, was in Northern Iceland. This was about fifty feet from a campground with an outhouse.

SC: What am I seeing?
WC: You are seeing a bold horse. These horses probably saw a half dozen hikers a day, so it’s not like it didn’t know what to do with me. People rightly make a big deal of Icelandic horses. They trot like a pace horse, except, with their short stature and short steps, it looks like they have six legs. And they can go over lava fields.

Most of the time I was following goat trails to make sure that what appeared to be a clump of moss on rock wasn’t actually moss, undisturbed for centuries, covering up a ten foot pit. I saw a sheep in one of these pits—sobering since I knew that my instincts and footwork were far inferior to the sheep’s. After seeing that sheep, dead and forgotten at least a few years ago, I was certain that I’d step through a clump of moss and fall into a sharp black pit. Some of these pits must be ten feet deep—I imagined them forming when a big bubble popped in a cooling lava field. Following goat tracks was reliable. Horse tracks were like the autobahn. I came to love horses, purely out of self-preservation.

This horse was just ballsy. It walked right up to me like it wanted to fight. Or just snort close enough to let me know what it thought of me.
SC: While this is the second color shot it seems to be the first dependent on color. The horse’s markings, the rich earthy brown of his coat, the Tina Turner-like mane. I’m glad it’s in color. The horse seems to be saying something. She is revealing something of herself here.

WC: She’s saying, “Back up, chump. And if you even think of trying to hop on one of us, I’m going to buck you off this mountain.

SC: And yet my favorite part of the photo is the green grassy rise. I want to walk up that hill. And see what’s on the other side.

WC: Well, you’re about to. What’s on the other side is a two-day hike that looks like the next photo.

SC: It is very difficult to get a sense of scale in this photo and I like that. I cannot guess how close you are, or how tall those mountains are.

WC: This one’s just batshit crazy. This was day two of the shakeout hike. The weather was great—which totally set me up for heartbreak once I got to my route, along the northern edge of the country, and found two weeks of identical weather: 8 degrees Celsius with steady rain. The river valley you see here is miles wide. The immediate question is, How in the hell did this river ever get powerful enough to sweep out a valley this wide? Absent damming, you need to collect water from an entire continent to get a river this wide. The second question is, Where did all the water go?

Turns out that when there’s a giant glacier capping a volcano, and that volcano suddenly erupts, a torrent of newly liquid water crashes its way to the sea, sucking up rocks and soil and anything in between volcano and sea. This really put into perspective the unthinkable tonnage of power trapped in every beautiful blue glacier I hiked past. Icelandic actually has a word for the floods of glacial water which accompany the eruption of a volcano that happens to lie under an ice sheet: Jökulhlaups.

SC: The clouds seem to follow the slope of the mountains. Sometimes I feel nature talks with itself and we are not privy to that conversation. This photo gives me that feeling. If you were not there to take it, that “alive sense” would exist nonetheless.

Unlike photos of people or animals, a photo like this is a static glimpse of a static existence. The mountains are still there.

The horse is not.

WC: You’ve invited me to write a four-hundred page essay with this question, Scott. Thanks for that. I’ll keep it light.

Unfortunately, you can see how radically the ‘static’ world is changing. Hiking along a glacial margin in Iceland, I saw heartbreaking evidence of rapid climate change in the form of glacial recession. The tips of these glacial tongues aren’t creeping back; you can see where
they’ve fragmented and will never again be. That adjective, *glacial*, has antonymized during the past half century. A glacial pace is now, speaking empirically, exponentially quickening retreat. The entire Icelandic cryosphere (cool word, but get ready for bad news) will probably be gone in less than two hundred years. No more ice caps; no more glaciers.

You can see a through line here between the living, the soil, the glacial till, and the rock. We think of becoming soil as taking an eternity, when, in actuality, it only takes a geologic day before we’re pressed into rock, maybe picked up by a glacier or rolled to the sea. Maybe, if we’re lucky, we get to catch a ride in the next eruption.

Bodies. Who needs em. Why don’t we end on an upbeat note, Scott. Here’s DH Lawrence from *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*: “Vitally, the human race is dying. It is like a great uprooted tree, with its roots in the air. We must plant ourselves again in the universe.”

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Giovanni and one hundred to Giandomo; with the understanding that you do nothing with them but invest them together in the shop. Nothing else.

For the period of the next twenty months there is not a single letter of Michelangelo’s preserved, though it is a safe assumption that he continued to write to his father and brothers during this time. Those twenty months were comparatively peaceable for him. Giovanni de’ Medici was now Pope Leo X, and he told Rome of his old friend, “Buonarroti and I were educated together under my father’s roof.” Michelangelo furnished the comfortable home he had bought in the Macello dei Corvi, and carved steadily on the Moses, Heroic Slave and Dying Slave.

In all probability he would have continued to curve on the Julius II tomb figures for many years; but Pope Leo, and his cousin, Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici, soon became discontented at “the first sculptor of Italy” serving the Rovere family instead of the Medici. Despite Michelangelo’s argerished pleas that he be allowed two more years, in which time he felt he could complete a modified version of the tomb, the Medici demanded that he design a façade for their uncompleted family church of San Lorenzo, in Florence, with many marble figures to make it one of the great churches of the world. To this end, Pope Leo granted Michelangelo another six months in Rome, in which to put his sculptural house in order, after which he was to depart for Carrara to choose, and have quarried, the pure white marble blocks and columns needed for his San Lorenzo façade.

March 31, 1515

Buonarroti,—Enclosed you will find a bill of exchange for nine hundred large gold ducats, which will be paid to me by Lorenzo Benintendi. I think I am leaving to-morrow.

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Pg. 94 of Michelangelo’s
*I, Michelangelo, Sculptor*
The Bus has Long Since Pulled Out: A Conversation with David Markson

I came to New York from out West. I had no job, no idea how to get one, and no contacts. All I knew was that I wanted to write and people did that in New York. I was told to “get clips,” so I started to write for free. Soon, I moved up in status: Jessa Crispin, at Bookslut.com, offered “interview writing” gigs, expenses paid. I bit. A week later, a pile of books came in the mail. They were by David Markson.

Finding my way to Markson wasn’t easy—figuratively or literally. His prose, as readers of his work know well, is deceptively simple. He quotes. He excerpts. He paraphrases. By why? To what effect? With what idea in mind? I’d just written an undergraduate thesis on the English industrialist-cum-experimentalist Henry Green, who used the sentence-level stylistics of Modernism to tell character-based dramas. Where were Markson’s characters? On what level was his drama?

And what was I going to ask him?

I spent a week reading, and then a week Googling, and then I called the number Jessa had given me. Markson himself answered.

“Ah, the Internet interviewer,” he said when I introduced myself. “Fancy that.”

He explained: He’d never been interviewed for the Internet before, didn’t have a computer, nor email; had never actually been—to his knowledge—online. But his publishers thought it’d be good for him to have something there. For the record. For posterity. For the kids.

“I’m getting more popular among the kids,” Markson told me on the phone. I was 23.

When I asked him how he wanted to do this—I told him outright that I’d never done an interview before; he pretended not to hear me—he mentioned the Paris Review ‘Art of Fiction’ series. “They meet a handful of times over the course of a year,” he said. “But what can we do? One afternoon next week?”

Sure, I thought. An afternoon with David Markson.

Of course, I got lost between the subway and Markson’s building; I’d never gotten off at West 4th before. The clerk at Biography Bookshop told me where to go. (“Markson? Yeah, he comes in here.”) Bedheaded and in house shoes, he came down to meet me in the vestibule, nodded, shook my hand.

His West Village walk-up, covered as it was with books and bookshelves—floor to ceiling, wall to wall—made my heart flutter. I didn’t get a tour, but the back rooms seemed dark and musty; the front rooms wide and light. Everything seemed quiet. Even the busy streets below seemed far away.

Markson offered me a seltzer water with lime and I sat on a stiff cushioned couch. He sat a few feet away, behind a small desk. He had a typewriter on it. We joked about the
device, at least I think we did. I asked him if he used it to go online.

At one point, it came out that I’d never read *Ulysses*, his face went pale. “And you want to be a writer?” I thought he might ask me to leave.

We spent the afternoon like that: talking about his work, his process, his writing—my questions, my curiosity, my awe. I asked him silly things and he humored me. He told me stories he must have told a thousand times, and I felt honored to hear them. It was the New York I’d expected to find; the New York where writers lived.

That’s the thing: I was smitten. By his presence. His words. His world. By the fact that I’d been granted access. I was certain we would become friends. That he would mentor me. That, with his guidance, I would read *Ulysses*. I imagined I’d come by once a week all summer and we’d chat.

I went home in a daze, typed up our conversation, printed it out and mailed it to him immediately. A day or two later, he called.

“This is horrible,” he told me. “It’s embarrassing.”

I certainly was embarrassed.

“Do you really think I *talk* like that? All those exclamation points? This is amateur stuff.”

I offered to meet him again (I wanted to meet him again); we could revise the manuscript, have another seltzer water, maybe talk about other things. Really, I wanted him to adopt me, to nurture my talent, to teach me to write. This was, I knew, exactly why I’d come to New York.

“No, it’s fine,” he said. “I’ll write up my own version and mail it to you.”

A few days later, the transcript came in the mail. It was typed out on thin paper with smudged ink; spelling errors were fixed in pen with sloppy handwriting, last minute edits had been made here and there. On the top, he’d left a note:

*Here it is. Stayed up all night working on it. Time I could have spent working on the novel. Time I’d rather have spent working on the novel—no offence. Time is short. I’m no young man. Make what changes you want, but don’t muck it up. Sorry about the joke at the end—needed some way to end it. Sounds like something you’d say, right?*

I never saw Markson again, but I did ask him—in a letter I sent with a printout of the published piece—if he wanted to meet and talk about *Ulysses*. “No, that’s OK,” he wrote in response. “You read it.”

Ten years on, I still haven’t read *Ulysses*. But here’s Markson’s version of what we said about it that day.

*You read it...*
in regard to any such questions. But I did write a comic crime novel in between, and The Ballad of Dingus Magee, and I also taught for a couple of years. While Going Down kept going in and out of the drawer.

JR: You were there between 1958 and 1961, I believe. What sent you?
DM: Money, in a good part. Or lack of it—meaning that you could live on nothing, almost literally. But of course my devotion to Malcolm Lowry and [Lowry’s novel] Under the Volcano played a major part too.

JR: Going Down, like Wittgenstein’s Mistress, deals with characters on the brink of madness. In WM, the reader wasn’t sure whether Kate was crazy, or actually the last person on earth. In Going Down, Fern, the central female character, seems to hang off a similar cliff. Why this theme, why your interest in it?
DM: Well, it all starts innocently enough with Fern. When she is alone in New York, isolated, almost talking to herself about the emptiness in her life—and then laughingly telling herself she is going out of her mind. As anybody might, unseriously, under the circumstances. Oh, but with that deformity I gave her too [one of Fern’s hands is badly deformed], which makes it rather more than unserious. And all this was of course a structural setup for what comes later, in Mexico, at the book’s climax, when she finds the other girl, Lee, hacked to death with a machete. Obviously then she does go over the edge pretty damned far.

JR: Like Kate supposedly did, finding herself the last living person on earth—again, is there something about people at the edge of sanity that appeals to you?
DM: No, not at all, it’s just inviting. What the hell, craziness is a lot more dramatic to handle than sanity. Which Dostoevsky proved all those years ago—trying to write a book about a perfectly good person and it’s the one volume among all his major works that’s a total botch. Unlike all his others, filled with lunacy and suicide and murder, et cetera. Or think about ninety percent of all the literary protagonists we find most memorable—Ahab, Heathcliff, Stavrogin, even all the way back to Don Quixote—every one of them is certifiable.

JR: Madness and religion do often get coupled too, as a literary theme—in your work as well as in those.
DM: It’s much more symbolic than real, of course. When Fern lifts her hand in front of the blind infant and its eyes seem to move—as if she’s some sort of sainted prostitute out of old hagiography or some such. But of course it’s just that she has turpentine all over her hands, from her painting, which I mention several times. I didn’t do that in WM, I don’t think, because I was too preoccupied with all the philosophy that’s buried in there. Wittgenstein himself, but Heidegger also, though nobody’s picked up on him. But with Going Down, yes, even if it’s frequently a matter of local Mexican superstition rather than religious per se. I had a head full of it, after three full years in the country. Indeed, one of the loveliest compliments I ever got was from a bright Mexican gal who used to call me “el estúpido gringo” because my Spanish was so bum—but when the book came out all those years later she said, “All you ever seemed to do down here for three years was drink, but damn it, you were paying attention.”

JR: You’d done a couple of private detective novels before writing Going Down, a “seriously literary” novel. Was there any sort of natural growth between writing genre fiction and writing Going Down?
DM: No connection at all. I remember an essay someone wrote—I forget where—that expressed genuine
astonishment that I’d begun as a so-called crime novelist and ended up writing *Wittgenstein*. But will it make sense if I say that I was never a—quote—crime novelist? I was always the person who was going to write *Wittgenstein* and the others, but at that earlier juncture I simply wasn’t getting it done. So this was simply a way to keep my hand in, so to speak. And I’d been a paperback editor for a few years, so that I’d read a good deal more of that stuff than I ever would have normally—meaning I knew how to do it. The third of them, called *Miss Doll, Go Home*, came about only because someone asked me to write a comic crime film script—and even before it didn’t get made I’d asked my editor if she’d take a fictional version of the thing. Well, and then even *Dingus Magee*, though it’s infinitely closer to literature than those other things, got started as something of a fluke too. Earlier, I’d written some Western stories for magazines, and on that basis a different editor asked me to do a Western novel. But the minute I started I realized that concept bored me, so I turned it into a satire. And eureka, made money on it too. The only time in my life I’ve ever had a real payday.

**JR:** Which was almost forty years ago, if I’m correct. And now you are the author of *Wittgenstein* and all the rest. And yet, still something of a token underappreciated author. How do you feel about that?

**DM:** Token, I love the word, yes. I seem to get written about that way, lately. Somebody sent me a clipping from the *Los Angeles Times*, and somebody else sent the same thing from the *Chicago Tribune*, about some bloggers banding together to promote authors they feel haven’t reached the audience they deserve—such as “the David Marksons of our world,” or something like that. And then in the *Times* here in New York there was something similar, a passing mention of little-recognized writers, and naming me among them. One of my friends told me to be careful before I become well known for being unknown.

**JR:** How does it make you feel, not being as widely acclaimed as many of us believe you should be? Is it frustrating?

**DM:** Listen, you write the way you do because you have to, and because it’s who you are. But nice things happen too, reputation or no. Just recently, for example, a letter from someone here in town, whom I don’t know at all, wanting nothing, simply telling me that if I need anything—if I want to say “lift this” or “move that”—I should give him a call. Or someone else, saying that he’s recently read *Wittgenstein* for a second time, and that he did it aloud, sitting alone in his apartment and speaking the entire book to himself, simply to capture the rhythms and taking two days to do so. Or then again, on a much more concrete level, at least two books about my work are being written that I’m aware of, and several essays or chapters in critical studies, and so forth. What more can someone in my position ask for? In some small way you’re finally paying back the debt you owe to those books that moved you and got you started in the first place—books like Lowry’s, in my case, Willie Gaddis’ *The Recognitions*, Joyce, any number of others. Or am I making all this sound precious, here? [Laughing]

**JR:** Speaking of influences, of other books—I want to make a point to mention the size of your personal library, hanging on all the walls surrounding us, floor to ceiling.

**DM:** Actually, there were more. I’ve sold off quite a few in the last ten years or so, just for breathing space. And in all honesty, I’ve been very tempted lately to dump the whole lot of them.

**JR:** Wow. Why would you do that?
DM: For starters, I’m seventy-seven—toward what 
eventuality am I holding onto them? How many of 
them am I going to reread? Over there to your right, the 
fiction—Hardy, George Eliot, Dickens, even Faulkner, 
whom I once worshipped—am I ever going to open 99% 
of them again?

JR: Some of them might be worth money?

DM: No, virtually none. If you look closely you’ll see 
that they’re all worn and faded—well, I’ve never kept dust 
jackets—plus, they’re written-in and whatnot. A lot of the 
spines are even so tattered that they’re scotch-taped to hold 
them on.

JR: First editions?

DM: Oh, sure, some. My *Catch-22*, probably. I knew 
Joe Heller before he wrote it, so I bought it as soon as it 
came out. *Portnoy’s Complaint* also, since I’d read excerpts 
beforehand. Four or five Faulknners. And others, I’m sure. 
But they’re all in the same beat-up condition as the rest.

JR: Are any of them inscribed?

DM: Some are, yes. But I’ve generally been so broke 
that the most valuable of those I’ve sold long since. Like 
my *Under The Volcano*, say, or Dylan Thomas. Or an *On 
the Road*. Which, incidentally, Jack was so drunk when I 
asked him to sign it that he jammed the pen right through 
the flyleaf.

JR: Kerouac, Lowry, Gaddis, man. Quite a roster 
of past masters. Where did I read that you no longer 
pay attention to more recent fiction?

DM: It’s true. Any fiction, really. I hate to admit it, 
and I don’t really understand it, but it’s some years now— 
it just seems to have gone dead for me. Not just recent 
stuff, but even novels that I’ve deeply cared about—I try 
to reread and there’s none of the reaction I used to get, 
none of the aesthetic excitement or whatever one wants 
to call it, all a blank. With one exception of course—I 
can always reread *Ulysses*. In fact I went through it twice, 
consecutively, just a few years ago. But hell, that’s not like 
reading a novel, it’s more like reading the King James 
Bible. Or Shakespeare. You’re at it for the language. But 
even *The Recognitions*, which I think is categorically the 
best American novel of the twentieth century, just doesn’t 
do anything similar for me. It did, the first four times I 
read it—and four is not an exaggeration, by the way, in 
spite of its length—but the last time out it just went flat. 
It’s not the books, I’m sure, it’s me—I’m just not bringing 
the same receptiveness to them that I used to.

JR: No other exceptions?

DM: Oh, well, there are books by friends, that you 
do give yourself to. You approach them with a different 
psychological stance, somehow, wanting to enjoy. And 
doing so. As with the most recent Gil Sorrentino, for 
instance. Or Ann Beattie’s new collection of stories. But 
there’s simply no impulse toward anything else, and 
certainly not toward the latest generation. They all seem 
like they shouldn’t have driver’s licenses, even. You do 
become aware of the names, of course. Who are they, 
Lethem, Foer, Eggers? Are they mostly named Jonathan?

JR: You know of them, but you’re not interested in 
reading them?

DM: Seriously—to paraphrase Ezra Pound, there’s 
no record of a critic ever saying anything significant 
about a writer who came later than he did. You grow up 
getting interested in books, and the writers of your own 
generation or the generation or two before your own are 
the ones you pay most attention to. But listen, I’m scarcely 
as bad as some of the people I know. But good lord, some 
of the people I went to college or even graduate school 
with pretty much quit about nine days after they got
their diplomas. And haven’t read a poet since Auden, or a novelist since Hemingway. There was one fat novel I did read. In 1996, in fact. I remember the date because my novel Reader’s Block had also just been published: Infinite Jest. Before I’d heard of David Foster Wallace, way back in 1990, he’d written a very perceptive long essay on Wittgenstein’s Mistress for a periodical. Even though I was never able to solve the structure of his novel, to understand why it ended where it did, I admired the hell out of it. Eight or nine years ago even, I wasn’t reading with the equipment I possessed when I was younger. But pat me on the head, I did manage to get through one novel that long in the past decade.

JR: What nonfiction do you read then?

DM: Again, something very similar is happening. Right where you’re sitting, those nine shelves behind your chair, except for a few on the bottom, every single book there is philosophy. But I’ve quit almost completely. Criticism, that whole next section there, even that I read less and less. And nonfiction, I read that less because of interest and more for research value—all those intellectual bits and pieces in my later books, I’ve had to do a lot of browsing to hunt them out. At times it’s almost gotten me into a habit of skimming instead of seriously reading. It’s something I have to fight, repeatedly.

JR: And what are you reading at right now?

DM: Someone asked me that no more than two days ago, and do you know what the answer was? In all honesty, I said I’d spent about an hour that morning rereading some Zbigniew Herbert, and then had stopped to look up something in this year’s Who’s Who in Baseball—and the next thing I knew I was reading that for just as long.

JR: How much is age a factor in all of this—and not just in your reading habits, do you feel it affecting your work?

DM: Oh yeah, it’s there. Forgetting all the damned medical problems that pile up, to begin with there’s a lower energy quotient. It used to be, when work was going well, I could sit at the desk ten or a dozen hours; now I’m ready to go and put my feet up someplace after half that time. But your head just doesn’t work as well, either. I’m not just talking about forgetting names, words, everybody does that, though of course it does become more extreme. But I mean simple things like judging a sentence. I’ll make a note about something I plan to use, and rewrite it five or six times—this just the note itself, knowing it will get revised any number of times additionally when it’s actually part of a manuscript—but almost always there’s this gnawing sense that it’s still nowhere near what it should be. Or where it would have been ten or fifteen years ago. I’ll get it right eventually, dammit, but the sense of lesser facility—slower perception, maybe I mean—really does exist.

JR: To change the topic—or maybe not to—I’ve been sitting here staring at that ancient typewriter near where you’re sitting. Do you not have a computer anywhere?

DM: People have begun to laugh at me, finally, for holding out. In fact, an amusing story about it. A young woman called me the other day, from France, a college student wanting me to solve a disagreement about Wittgenstein’s Mistress she’s been having with her professor. And then she said something about e-mailing me, and I told her I had no computer. So then she asked, “But what do you write on, a typing machine?” “Typing machine,” I loved it. And it wasn’t any question about faulty English, because she spoke flawlessly. So what I realized was that she was young enough so that the word “typewriter”
had never once been part of her active vocabulary. Like “gaslight” or something, for somebody my age.

JR: It’s definitely not a commonly used word among members of my generation.

DM: All I need to hear. Meaning that the bus has long since pulled out and here I stand at the side of the road. In the rain. Thanks a lot, fella.

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Four Poems

Sprezzatura

It should come as no surprise that I am baffled by your message. The sprightly daze you spoke about during the meeting made me lower my expectations for the third quarter where things look about as elegant and refined as a butcher shop. That isn’t to say I like you; it’s just that I’ve become an expert at making my displeasure look alluring. Chalk it up to evolution and weariness. I think it was you who said any mistake can be corrected as long as one has the appropriate tools to cover them up. You can’t rank what’s lacking a publicist. Meanwhile, weary consumers shuffle back into the dark where people are just dying to hear about your summer plans.
Head Home

Let the powers that be know
this is my life, so they should be happy with it.
Light a candle while listening to Can.
All hail those who can make this muck shine.
My room has gone wobbly. My palm is
pressed firmly on the bed.
This is called nonparticipation, from what I gather.
I give you permission to feel like a mutant when I don’t sleep.
My skull feels like a mushy quad.
I am making attempts to flatten my head out
in order to become artless and beveled. When that pill
hits I’m going to feel like a million bucks.
I just don’t trust the air much anymore
because it carries things that are not its own.
There are so many thrills. I realized the day would go
a certain way. I knew I would act a certain way
with a deadbolt. Copper wire is jutting
from my ankle and jaw.

Silvery & Brittle

One can become comfortably ragged before morning
does that special lay-down-and-die thing.
Everyone needs to get away now and then to a place
where the refrigerator hums in a different tone than
the one back home. Get relaxed in a place
where the body feels slack because it is contingent
upon an imminent death delivering a real sense of purpose
to the morning. The sun hits the breast of a male House Finch
and for an instant it looks like its been lit-pink from within.
The skittishness of birds makes me anxious, I do not find them
relaxing to watch in the least. I’m establishing a sense
of the texture of things through touch.
Tonight, I’ll serve Montaigne’s Venetian turpentine wafer
with sweet syrup on a silver spoon.

Heritage of a Star

Explaining the concept of “2 for 1”
to your friends is one way to ward off
nostalgia in this dark time.
And another thing: someone is the champion,
someone is always the champion.
Otherwise things collapse without
the champion parading around while
fans of the champion turn things over;
start things on fire, and get carried
away by their champion’s status.
Great Thinkers on Solitude

“In solitude, we give passionate attention to our lives, to our memories, to the details around us.” Explained Virginia Woolf.

“Here, in my solitude, I have the feeling that I contain too much humanity.” Professed Ingmar Bergman.

“I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself.” Wrote Charlotte Brontë.

Jules Verne disagreed: “Solitude, isolation, are painful things and beyond human endurance.”

Rainer Maria Rilke encouraged: “Therefore, dear Sir, love your solitude and try to sing out with the pain it causes you.”

“Solitude gives birth to the original in us, to beauty unfamiliar and perilous—to poetry. But also, it gives birth to the opposite: to the perverse, the illicit, the absurd.” According to Thomas Mann.
And according to Aldous Huxley: “The more powerful and original a mind, the more it will incline towards the religion of solitude.”

The religion of Henry David Thoreau: “I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude.”

Laurence Sterne: “In solitude the mind gains strength and learns to lean upon itself.”

“The monotony and solitude of a quiet life stimulates the creative mind.” Albert Einstein believed.

“Great men are like eagles, and build their nest on some lofty solitude.” So sayeth Arthur Schopenhauer.

“Solitude is the place of purification.” Preached Martin Buber.

“Solitude is independence.” —Hermann Hesse.

“One can acquire everything in solitude except character.” Claimed Stendhal.

Rainer Maria Rilke, again on the topic: “I hold this to be the highest task of a bond between two people: that each protects the solitude of the other.”

Robert Louis Stevenson felt that: “There is a fellowship more quiet even than solitude, and which, rightly understood, is solitude made perfect.”

“Reading well is one of the great pleasures that solitude can afford you.” Said Harold Bloom.

Perhaps he was reiterating Marcel Proust’s idea that: “Reading is that fruitful miracle of a communication in the midst of solitude.”

“I need solitude for my writing; not ‘like a hermit’—that wouldn’t be enough—but like a dead man.” Insisted Franz Kafka.

Mary Shelley explained: “Solitude was my only consolation—deep, dark, deathlike solitude.”

Guy de Maupassant countered: “Solitude is indeed dangerous for a working intelligence. We need to have around us people who think and speak. When we are alone for a long time we people the void with phantoms.”

Speaking of peopling the void with phantoms, Bohumil Hrabal once wrote: “I can be by myself because I’m never lonely; I’m simply alone, living in my heavily populated solitude, a harum-scarum of infinity and eternity, and Infinity and Eternity seem to take a liking to the likes of me.”

“Then stirs the feeling infinite, so felt in solitude, where we are least alone.” Revealed Lord Byron.

“Solitude vivifies; isolation kills.” The words of Joseph Roux.
Paul Tillich: “Loneliness expresses the pain of being alone and solitude expresses the glory of being alone.”

Or, as May Sarton put it: “Loneliness is the poverty of self; solitude is the richness of self.”

“One can be instructed in society, one is inspired only in solitude.” —Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

“Solitude sometimes is best society.” Admitted John Milton.

“A man can be himself only so long as he is alone; and if he does not love solitude, he will not love freedom; for it is only when he is alone that he is really free.” Thought Arthur Schopenhauer.

“Solitude is the profoundest fact of the human condition. Man is the only being who knows he is alone.” Asserted Octavio Paz.

Aristotle explained: “Whosoever is delighted in solitude, is either a wild beast or a god.”

Jean-Paul Sartre: “God is absence. God is the solitude of man.”

Markson’s Plain White Notecards
Part 2: Correspondence from David Markson to Tyler Malone
In the beginning, sometimes he left messages in the books. Then, he died.

My favorite living author no longer of the living.

Dead, the author of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, which David Foster Wallace called “an erudite, breathtaking cerebral novel whose prose is crystal and whose voice rivets and whose conclusion defies you not to cry.”

Dead, the author of *Going Down*, which Kurt Vonnegut claimed had left him “woozy with sex and death and Mexico.”

Dead, the author of *Reader’s Block*, which led Ann Beattie to admit that “no one but Beckett can be quite as sad and funny at the same time.”

Dead, the author of *Springer’s Progress*, which Jonathan Yardley said is “alive with the pleasures of language.”

Alive?

David Markson, an author who no longer *is*.

“We all understand the meaning in ordinary life of the word *is*. I remark to a neighbor, Today *is* Monday, and there are no questions asked, and none need to be asked, about the meaning of *is*. Says William Barrett in a commentary on Heidegger.”

Writes Markson in his novel *Vanishing Point*.

*It depends on what the meaning of the word is.*

As I write this, we’re fast approaching the fifth anniversary of David Markson’s death. By the time you read this, that date will have come and gone.

For weeks now, I have been scowling over the premise behind this essay. Can it truly be possible that five full years have passed—to the day, come Thursday—since David Markson died on West Fourth Street?

His body was found by his children in his apartment on June 4th, 2010. A death date he shares with Giacomo Casanova, the author and adventurer whose surname is now used to describe all smooth-talking bad boy lovers.

“Markson and I were kindred souls. We were overliterary and oversexed, overvoluble, overexcitable, enthralled with literary Bohemian life. Unlike Anatole, David was humorous and fun. David was known to a select set as a stud lover-boy cocksman. Because he was literary and witty, handsome and hung.”
Being how Playmate Alice Denham described him in her book *Sleeping with Bad Boys: A Juicy Tell-All of Literary New York in the Fifties and Sixties.*

Five years since his death. How many since his “stud lover-boy cocksman” days?


“She seems to be trying to stop time by writing it down, as if that were possible.”
Markson scholar Françoise Palleau-Papin wrote of Kate, the narrator of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress.*

Five years since his death. I repeat it like a Marksonian refrain.
Like: “Nobody comes. Nobody calls.”

Five years.
*The time flew as quickly as a bird.*

The treasure hunt in the stacks of the Strand Bookstore that he foisted on his New York fans in the aftermath of his passing is now long behind us.

Art has a way of preserving people.

I know I can no longer write to him and expect to receive a plain white notecard in the mail a couple days later.

“Tyler, lad—”
I know I can no longer have the pleasure of reading a new Markson novel.
(Unless they ever publish the one he was working on when he died...)

But he’s still here.
Kate in *Wittgenstein’s Mistress.*
Lucien Springer in *Springer’s Progress.*
Reader/Writer/Author/Novelist in his final four novels (*Reader’s Block, This Is Not a Novel, Vanishing Point,* and *The Last Novel*), which I collectively call *The Notecard Quartet.*

David Markson was born only five years after Jack Kerouac.
Only three years after Truman Capote.
December 20, 1927.

He seems to me a man *unstuck in time.*

“Listen:
Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.”
Writes Kurt Vonnegut at the beginning of *Slaughterhouse-Five.*

I do not mean “unstuck in time” in the way that Vonnegut means it—where Billy Pilgrim is a man who travels through time, hopping around to experience his life out of sequence—as Markson, as far as I know, was no time-traveller.
(Though he does seem to have invented the language of Twitter over a decade before it was launched. So maybe?)
He was and is simultaneously of the present and the past. Like he belonged as much in the internet age as he did in the days of Dylan Thomas drinking his way through the bars of Manhattan.

The black-and-white photo of Markson and Thomas talking over drinks at The White Horse Tavern in 1952 still hangs in The White Horse Tavern to this day.

At the Strand in 2007, Markson claimed: “Thomas had a drink in his hand all the time. I did him a kindness one time—you’re not gonna believe the money involved—I’m talking 1952 and for a reading he got $100. Now, certain people...what does Bill Clinton get for a reading today? And I was able to arrange up in Skidmore where I knew some people, and they paid his train fare up and back and his, you know, hotel overnight. So for the next four or five or six times I was with him, of course, I couldn’t pay for anything. But what were drinks in those days? I swear a beer was...if I was drinking beer it was fifteen cents or maybe still a dime.”

On pg. 578 of Faulkner: A Biography, Joseph Blotner wrote that William Faulkner and his wife did not attend the memorial service for Dylan Thomas.

In the margins of his copy of Blotner’s book, which I bought from the Strand, Markson wrote: “Absolutely not so—I saw him there!”

Markson corrects Blotner not just in the margins of the biography itself, but in the text of his own novel Reader's Block:

“The Blotner biography says that although he was in New York, Faulkner did not attend the memorial service held after Dylan Thomas’s death. In fact he wore a gray tweed jacket, an emerald vest and a Tyrolean hat. With a feather.”

Does one also assume that this must be the funeral Markson speaks of on pg. 161 of This Is Not a Novel? “Writer had but a glimpse of Faulkner.” And a few lines later: “Faulkner, at a funeral. Small and beady-eyed.”

Almost twenty years after that funeral, Markson wrote: “For weeks now, I have been scowling over the premise behind this essay. Can it truly be possible that twenty full years have passed—to the day, come Friday—since Dylan Thomas died on West Eleventh Street? My lord, I think I saw him yesternight. And out of what ineluctable, startling legerdemain can I myself actually be older now than he was then?”

Not only was Dylan Thomas long dead by the time Markson achieved whatever small amount of “success” he did, but Kerouac was as well. Capote too, dead by the time Markson’s most celebrated novel, Wittgenstein’s Mistress, was published by Dalkey Archive Press in 1988.

Of course, Wittgenstein’s Mistress was famously only published at Dalkey after receiving what Markson claimed was a record-setting number of rejections.

In an interview, Markson explained:
“I think it set a world record for rejections. You’re not going to believe this, but it had fifty-four rejections. Fifty-four. Some editors are not particularly bright, so some of them didn’t understand it and wrote stupid letters. Some liked it, but felt it wasn’t publishable. And others wrote letters that sounded like Nobel Prize citations, but the kicker always was, ‘I can’t get it past the sales people.’”

“The muse and best-sellers rarely walk hand in hand.” Wrote Palleau-Papin in her study of Markson’s oeuvre, *This Is Not a Tragedy.*

“Van Gogh sold only one painting in his lifetime, incidentally. Although that did put him one ahead of Jan Vermeer at least.” According to *Wittgenstein’s Mistress.*

Much of Markson’s novels, certainly the final four, are about how the artist is quite often rejected by society. His value usually uncalculated until after his death.

On the last page of his copy of *The Failure of Criticism* by Henri Peyre, another of his books I bought from the Strand, Markson scribbled down a list of rejections:

“Gide—as publisher’s reader—rejected Proust
James was bored by *Crime + Punishment*
Yeats could not finish *Ulysses*
Defoe had to publish *Moll Flanders* himself
Thackery ‘... *Vanity Fair*’
Sterne had to pay to publish *Tristram Shandy*
20 U.S. publishers rejected *Night* *(Wiesel)—already out in France—preface by Mauriac
Barzun—called *UtV* ‘an anthology pasted together

by earnestness.’

Hardy quit, after *Jude the Obscure*
George Meredith, as reader, rejected *The Way of All Flesh*
Eliot turned down *Animal Farm* by Orwell
*Murphy*, Beckett’s 1st novel—42 rejects!
*Ironweed*—12 rejs—needed Bellow (Nobel Prize) to convince Viking to do it
Conrad disliked *Moby Dick*—’not a single sincere line.’

Took 8 years to sell 1st printing of 600 copies of *The Interpretation of Dreams*
*Ginger Man*—36 rejections
Poems of *‘Currer,’ ‘Ellis’ + ‘Acton Bell,’ sold 2 copies.
(They paid to publish, also.)
Samuel Johnson—life too short to be wasted on work such as Henry Fielding
*Lord of the Flies*—21 rejections
Proust—Had to pay to publish *Swann’s Way* (see 1st line, above)
Wittgenstein’s Mistress—54 rejections!”

According to *Reader’s Block*:
“Fifteen years after *Moby Dick*, Melville had to pay to publish *Clarel*. With borrowed money.”

According to *Vanishing Point*:
“Not long after Scott Fitzgerald’s death, Scribner’s let *The Great Gatsby* go out of print.
And then rejected the collection called *The Crack-Up*.”

Ann Beattie, the first reader of the *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* manuscript, wrote:
“That it was not immediately embraced and celebrated,
that he did not become the most valued writer, instantly... well, I knew all the stories about Melville blah blah blah, and about Fitzgerald dying without knowing *Gatsby* was a classic, but David’s book was so overwhelmingly great that I was stunned it got rejected even once, let alone the many, many times it was turned down.”


In 2007, soon after the release of Markson’s last novel *The Last Novel*, I found out that David Markson would be appearing at the Strand.

I had never written to a writer before, though in having read enough *Collected Letters of Thrissatandtheitherperson*, I felt strongly that my writing career could never truly begin until I reached out to one of my literary heroes.

As Markson had done to his mentor Malcolm Lowry.

As Lowry had done to his mentor Conrad Aiken.

I wanted to be the fourth link in that chain—Aiken/Lowry/Markson/Malone—so I wrote him an awful, pretentious letter, one I’d cringe to think still exists somewhere.

In it, I think I called New York, “Pneu York,” and thought it clever.

As far as I know, Jenny Eagleton, who worked on organizing his papers after his death, didn’t find the letter, which pleases me to no end.

Laura Sims, a poet who corresponded extensively with Markson, also sent him an embarrassing first letter.

She bravely read part of it at an event at the Strand in 2014, upon the release of a book of Markson’s letters that he had written to her, entitled *Fare Forward: Letters from David Markson*.

Sims admitted before reading from her first letter to him:

“I would like to say I was a teenager or in my early twenties when I wrote this, but I was thirty.”

Markson, too, was embarrassed by the first letter he sent Lowry.

Telling Joseph Tabbi:

“And then finally sent him a letter. Saying God knows what—be my father, or something as asinine.”

Markson went on in that interview with Tabbi to say:

“Of course something I didn’t know at the time was that Lowry had written the same sort of letter himself, as an even younger man, to Conrad Aiken.”

Or as it is explained in an editorial aside in the *Sursum Corda: The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry: 1947-1957*:

“In an uncanny way history was repeating itself, because Markson was now doing with Lowry what Lowry had done, twenty-three years earlier with Conrad Aiken. And Lowry did not miss the parallel.”

While he stood up at the podium, I fingered nervously the envelope that enclosed my letter. I queued up when the signing line began, palms sweaty, jittering. When my turn came, I mumbled a few words about how he was my hero, and I asked him to accept the letter I had written him. He did so graciously.

I assumed that would be it.
I was moving to California in a few weeks’ time, and had preempted the possible missed connection of a return to sender by writing my parents’ address on the envelope. I didn’t think he’d write me, but I didn’t want to miss it if he did.

Two days later, I got a call from my mother telling me I received a plain white notecard in the mail from some guy named David Markson. I was floored.

Years later, when I interviewed Laura Sims re: her Markson correspondence, she echoed my sentiment: “I was sort of shocked, especially by how quickly his response came. You know when you send notes to someone famous, even someone just a little bit famous, you don’t really expect them to write back at all, but you certainly don’t expect them to write back in such a timely manner. But he did—within a couple days—and I was absolutely thrilled.”

Unlike Sims, I made the mistake of waiting three years before writing him again.

In March of 2010, once again living in New York, I wrote him, offering to help him with anything he needed. As before, a few days later, a response came on a plain white notecard.

“My god, you left out Willie Mays!” That letter said, responding to some list I had sent him of the kind of intellectual odds-and-ends that make up The Notecard Quartet. He also mentioned he had “a busted wrist,” but emphasized stubbornly that he does “get by without help.”

Less than three months later, he was dead.

*Are animals lonely? Other animals, I mean.*

I remember waking up on July 27th, 2010, to an email from Audrey Young, the friend who had turned me on to Markson years before. The subject line of the email was “markson’s library at the strand” in all lowercase. The text of the email had a link to an article on the site of the *London Review of Books*, written by Alex Abramovich, and the words “go get it!” Groggy, I sat up in bed.

I read Abramovich’s piece twice through, hoping the second time would help ground this surreal moment in reality. Instead, it made the whole thing seem even more absurd: “It was a shock to walk into the Strand last week and find the contents of his personal library scattered among the stacks.”

When Markson died, he left instructions that his personal library should be donated to the Strand. The bookstore he often said was his favorite place on earth. I’ve been told there were 63 boxes of books in total.

A Strand employee who was working there at the time, Zach Barocas, explained to me: “There was no specific mention of the Markson books
TYLER MALONE

coming into inventory beforehand. Once they started showing up to be shelved, however, much of the staff throughout the store was abuzz, finding them among the other recent buys.”


Gaddis was so underappreciated at the time of his death that, according to *The Last Novel*:

“Not until a year after his burial at Sag Harbor did someone notice that the title of *The Recognitions* was misspelled on the back of William Gaddis’s headstone.”

Markson was so underappreciated at the time of his death that no one at the Strand thought to separate the books he owned from the rest of the stacks, to at least give them their own shelves.

Maybe even charge a little more for them?

According to Barocas, though, that’s not what the Strand does:

“With very rare exception (none comes to mind, but there must have been one along the way), they go into the general or rare stacks without regard for their source. This equal-footing of inventory assimilation is what makes the store a place where one can stumble across real treasures. In this way, it’s a uniquely egalitarian bookstore.”

A week or two before Abramovich’s *London Review of Books* article was published, this egalitarian aspect set into motion the chain of events that would make public this amazing treasure trove and begin the Markson treasure hunt.

A young woman named Annecy Liddell, self-described as “not much of a reader,” came to the Strand because she had read Don DeLillo’s *End Zone* in a class in college, and it was summer, and she needed something new to read.

She decided to read another DeLillo, but she wasn’t dead set on *White Noise*, which is what she ended up picking.

As she admitted to me later, with a shrug:

“That was the only one they had.”

While purchasing the book, the cashier mentioned to Liddell that it was once owned by Markson.

“I pretended to know what she was talking about, but I didn’t have a clue.”

She went home and started reading *White Noise*. She wasn’t a big fan of DeLillo’s book, but she was a big fan of the snarky comments some guy named David Markson had left in the book’s margins.

“Oh god the pomposity, the portentousness—the bullshit!”

One of Markson’s comments in *White Noise* read.

“I’ve finally solved this book—it’s sci-fi!”

Another comment.

“This book may have set the all-time record for boredom. At 1/3 of the length, it might have worked.”

Another.

“Bullshit,” of course, was written throughout.

He wrote “Bullshit” in the margins of a number of
other books as well. It’s not a word he reserves solely for DeLillo.

Some get the word, some get variations on the word.

A personal favorite of mine being a note he made on a page of Camille Paglia’s *Sexual Personae*:

“Bullshit though it may be, this is bright.”

Liddell then posted on Facebook:

“my copy of white noise apparently used to belong to david markson (who i had to look up). he wrote some notes in the margin: a check mark by some passages, ‘no’ by other, ‘bullshit’ or ‘ugh get to the point’ by others. i wanted to call him up and tell him his notes are funny, but then i realized he DIED A MONTH AGO. bummer.”

The professor in whose class she had read *End Zone*, Jeffrey Sever, saw the message and was excited:

“That’s amazing, Annecy. Did he write his name in the front or something? Did you buy it secondhand recently— as in, his family sold off his library?”

“It was misreported at first as though the family didn’t care and they just sort of dumped them. Quite the opposite: it was his wish, whether they were notated or not, that they come to the Strand, his home away from home.”

Ann Beattie explained.

Craig Fehrman, who wrote a piece on the Markson treasure hunt for *The Boston Globe*, talked to me later about how common it is that authors’ libraries get separated and sold off:

“It’s pretty common, both in Twain’s time and in ours. There are exceptions, like many of Updike’s books going to Harvard. That case was both thorough and comprehensive, in part because Updike oversaw it himself. But it was surprising to me to see how many of these beloved libraries were scattered. When that happens we lose not just the books with marginal notes—we lose our sense for all of an author’s books, the ones he read, the ones he didn’t, how he organized them...All of that can tell us something about an author’s reading and writing and the intersection of the two.”

When I talked to Abramovich about it recently, he said:

“I don’t think of myself as ‘owning’ these books; I’m really just holding onto them.”

In the early afternoon of July 27th, I was scheduled to work at Barnes and Noble, the chain responsible for the destruction of just about every other bookstore in Manhattan besides the Strand. I had a couple hours before I had to be there. Even if it would make me late, I’d have to go try to grab some of the Markson booty I had just read about in Abramovich’s article.

I once imagined I would be the fourth link in an authorial chain.

I now imagined I was late to the party, that it was already somewhat picked over. I looked for Joyce and Faulkner and Lowry and Gaddis, but I imagined any Markson fan worth his salt would have already snatched up most of those big names.
Conrad Aiken came to mind.

Markson on Aiken:
“Incidentally he was our last authentic man of letters, also. His criticism would remain seminal if only because he was virtually the first American to recognize Faulkner, or for that matter—credat qui vult—the relevance of Freud to literature. Is there any modern short story writer with a table of contents that can cast a shadow upon ‘Silent Snow, Secret Snow,’ ‘Your Obituary, Well Written,’ ‘The Night Before Prohibition,’ ‘Mr. Arcularis’? Aiken’s five novels go unread, yet Blue Voyage and Great Circle contain passages of sustained ‘interior’ angst surpassed only in Under the Volcano and the Quentin section of The Sound and the Fury. Moreover, lush and sensually self-indulgent as it appears, the layered experimentalism in Ushant may make it the one autobiography of our time demanding use of the word genius.

And the poetry. Was there, finally, more than music? Why was the one book that James Joyce felt it ‘urgent’ to read, in the last days of his life, Aiken’s Coming Forth by Day of Osiris Jones? Why is there so much of Aiken’s ‘Senlin’ in ‘The Waste Land’? A better man than we knew, I suspect. Better, and more permanent.”

All of Aiken’s novels are now, incidentally, out of print.

Even if Aiken’s The Great Circle, I swear I read somewhere, was one of Freud’s favorite novels, though I have never been able to recover where I read that factoid. Seems like one that would appear in a Markson book, but I don’t think it does.

I knew, I just knew, that no one would be looking for Markson’s Aikens.

I snatched up his copies of Aiken’s Collected Novels, Collected Short Stories, and Ushant. Two of the three had been signed to Markson’s wife by Aiken himself, and then also included Markson’s own signature (as all the books he owned did).

Another proud moment on that first day was thinking that maybe The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas could have been mistakenly filed under T for Toklas instead of S for Stein.

I was ecstatic when this weird hunch proved true.

The booty on that first day (in addition to the three Aikens and the one Stein) included: Maxim Gorky’s Reminiscences, Malcolm Lowry’s Satan in a Barrel & Other Early Stories, Robert Graves’ Collected Poems, William Barrett’s Irrational Man, Joseph Blotner’s Faulkner biography, two Richard Ellmann books on Joyce, and much more.

I’ll never forget walking into Barnes & Noble that day, fifteen minutes late for my shift, and carrying a huge bag of books from the Strand. The manager was not pleased, neither by my lateness nor by my advertising that I shop at bookstores other than Barnes & Noble.

I spent the next six months of my life at the Strand. There for a few hours almost every day. Obsessed.

“The theme.”
Wrote Markson in Springer’s Progress.
“Be the same as in Moby Dick.”

The Strand is famous for its seemingly ridiculous claim
“18 miles of books.”
I do not doubt that claim.

My claim, which may seem even more ridiculous, is that I went through every single book in the Strand—not once, but twice. Certain sections, such as literature and philosophy, I combed over hundreds of times. What I mean is that I went book to book in each section, and if there was even a remote chance that that book could have been owned by Markson, I pulled it off the shelf and checked the inside front cover (where Markson always wrote his name in some form):
“Markson.”
Or: “David M. Markson.”
Or: “Markson NYC.”
Or: “Markson London 1967.”
Or: “Markson Mexico City 1958”
Or: ...

“Lord Markson.”
His inscription in his copy of The Selected Letters of Lord Byron.

Why I had to repeat this task twice overall, and many more times in the main sections, was that the Strand didn’t put all the books out at once. In fact, months after Annecy Liddell had unknowingly discovered his marginalia-covered copy of Don DeLillo’s White Noise, they were still putting new Markson-owned books on the shelves of the Strand.

I tried to help as many people as I could to find some Marksons of their own.

Many New Yorkers, a man from Connecticut, a couple from California, a woman from Brazil.

“Somebody is living on this beach.”
The final line of Wittgenstein’s Mistress.

I met a girl there. Beautiful. A girl who looked like she was looking for books once owned by David Markson. I approached her, asking if she was looking for Marksons. She was. I helped her find a few. I got her name, but was too timid to ask for her number or to give out mine unsolicited.

Thought about writing a missed connections classified on Craigslist. Always wanted to write one of those. Still never have.

The perhaps apocryphal story that one of the times when Markson was with Dylan Thomas at the White Horse, Thomas’s wife, holding an unlit cigarette for an ungodly amount of time, as all the young men fawned over her near-mythic husband instead of offering her a match, said to them:
“Would one of you satellites give me a light?”

By the end of my hunt, I had amassed a few hundred of his books, including his copies of: Kurt Vonnegut’s Timequake; Hermann Hesse’s Magister Ludi and Demian; Don DeLillo’s Mao II; Ezra Pound’s Literary Essays and Letters; Homer’s The Iliad; Soren Kierkegaard’s The Concept of Irony; T. S. Eliot’s The Cocktail Party; Bertrand Russell’s An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth, Philosophical Essays, and The Analysis of the Mind; Elias Canetti’s Auto-Da-Fe; Camille Paglia’s Sexual Personae; J. P. Donleavy’s The Ginger Man; Harold Bloom’s Genius; James Joyce’s The Exiles; William Shakespeare’s The Histories; Thomas Wolfe’s The Web and the Rock; Joyce Cary’s The Horse’s Mouth; and the list goes on and on and on...
The whole collection was (and remains) an embarrassment of riches.

According to *The Paris Review* blog:
“It’s an archive worthy of a university but preserved, instead, in bits and pieces on bookshelves all over New York and beyond.”

Since Markson’s writing was so informed by his voracious reading, stuffed with the cultural detritus he’d collect from his library—especially *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* and *The Notecard Quartet*—it is not just a delight to read Markson reading, but it is truly indispensable to any study of the man and his work.

“First and foremost, I think of myself as a reader.”
A line from Borges that Markson used as an epigraph for *Reader’s Block*.

Even before I finished collecting, while there were still Marksons on the shelves of the Strand, I started scanning pages of his books and posting these scans with commentary at the url http://readingmarksonreading.tumblr.com.
I also posted scans other people sent me of their Markson marginalia.

*An author’s reading and writing and the intersection of the two.*

The marginalia, even when it appears as seemingly innocuously as in the form of a checkmark, allows us to see where Markson got the intellectual odds-and-ends that make up his writing.

For example:
On pg. 181 of Markson’s copy of *Old Masters: Great Artists in Old Age* by Thomas Dormandy, he placed a check next to the following sentence:
“At my age,’ Shaw told a visiting journalist on his ninety-fourth birthday, ‘one is either well or dead.’”
And that shows up in *The Last Novel*, written as:
“Shaw, at ninety-four, being asked the same:
At my age, one is either well or dead.”

On pg. 71 of Markson’s copy of *The Crack-Up* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, he placed three lines next to and underlined the following sentence:
“I had been only a mediocre caretaker of most of the things left in my hands, even of my talent.”
And that shows up in *Reader’s Block* as:
“I had been only a mediocre caretaker of most of the things left in my hands, even of my talent, Scott Fitzgerald said.”

These tidbits appear as far back as his early detective novels, but slowly start making a larger presence in the middle of his writing career with *Going Down* and *Springer’s Progress*, until they finally take over the narrative in *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* and *The Notecard Quartet*.

As Sims explained:
“Yes, the detective novels—*Epitaph for a Tramp*, *Epitaph for a Dead Beat*, and *Miss Doll, Go Home*—do feature the intellectual tidbits he later became known for. Beginning, really, with *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, the ‘tidbits’ became much more than that—they became a full-blown project of his, an intricate web or map of the interconnections between artists and writers, living...
or dead, that form the stuff of art. It’s astonishing how he transformed those odds-and-ends into something so substantive and meaningful.”

By the time, he wrote the final four novels, plot, character, setting, and the conventional stuff that makes up most novels, take a backseat to the poetic fragments arranged into beautiful bricolage.


“A novel with no intimation of story whatsoever, Writer would like to contrive. And with no characters. None.” On pg. 2 of This Is Not a Novel.

Next page of same: “Plotless. Characterless. Yet seducing the reader into turning pages nonetheless.”

His own personal genre.

“David shouldn’t thank Fate for letting him write such a good book in a time when large numbers of people could no longer be wowed by a novel, no matter how excellent.” Vonnegut on Markson’s Reader’s Block, from his own book Timequake.

Checked in the margins in Markson’s copy.

The way in which these novels were crafted is touched upon on the first page of Vanishing Point: “Author had been scribbling notes on three-by-five inch index cards. They now come close to filling two shoebox tops taped together end to end.”

In an interview he explained further: “I use index cards. I store them in the tops of a couple of shoe boxes. If I made a stack of them, they’d probably be about two feet tall. I’m constantly shuffling. This goes on for a couple of years. I might have a few quotations about Joyce, and I figure out which one goes where. I try to make sure I don’t overbalance. I know in the end that there’s going to be more literature, but I try to make sure I have as much about art and music, too. There’s always a certain amount of the classics and philosophy. With the historical stuff, it just depends upon its significance or irony. Then, somewhere along the line, I make notes about Author or whoever it is and figure out where they go.”

Thus the name The Notecard Quartet. Because I needed a name that I could call his final four novels so I could stop repeatedly referring to them on my blog as “his final four novels.”

Most people had called them a “tetralogy,” but Markson never seemed too fond of that word. I wasn’t either.

In introducing him at the 92 St. Y, Ann Beattie called the books a “quartet,” which seemed not only a better word than “tetralogy,” but also hit upon one of their least mentioned characteristics: their musicality.

“I think they understood that he was, in his relation to music, a man obsessed and possessed, and that such a man was not rational and reasonable—not in music nor in anything else.” A sentence by B. H. Haggin on Toscanini from the book Conversations with Toscanini, next to which Markson placed a line in his copy of the book.
When I spoke with Steven Moore, the editor of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* at Dalkey, I asked what some of his suggestions for a title of the four books would be, if not *The Notecard Quartet*.

His suggestions:

“One could call it *These Are Not Novels.*”

“Or better yet *This Is Not a Quartet.*”

“How about *Reader/Writer/Author/Novelist* (to use the protagonists of each)?”

“I suppose it would be flippant to call it *So You Want to be a Writer?*”

“Or if I’m right that Schopenhauer partly inspired it, *A Tragic History of Literature*—though that’s not quite right because Markson deals with all the arts.”

Schopenhauer in *Essays and Aphorisms*:

“I wish someone would one day attempt a tragic history of literature, showing how the various nations which now take their highest pride in the great writers and artists they can show treated them while they were alive. In such a history, the author would bring visibly before us that endless struggle which the good and genuine of all ages and all lands has to endure against the always dominant bad and wrong-headed; depict the martyrdom of almost every genuine enlightener of mankind, almost every great master of every art; show us how, with a few exceptions, they lived tormented lives in poverty and wretchedness, without recognition, without sympathy, without disciples, while fame, honour and riches went to the unworthy;...”

Markson placed a check in the margins of Harold Rosenberg’s *Art on the Edge: Creators and Situations*, where Rosenberg wrote:

“A corner of the sculpture garden at the Museum of Modern Art ought to be set aside as a tomb for the Unknown Artist.”

*Reader’s Block, This Is Not a Novel, Vanishing Point,* and *The Last Novel* act together as a sculpture garden of countless artists’ lives and deaths, triumphs and defeats, comedies and tragedies, loves and hates...

Catherine Corman wrote:

“It is as if he had read the entire Western canon, and then presented us with his selections.”

Even if the books are described in their own pages, as novels “of intellectual reference and allusion, so to speak minus much of the novel,” *they are still novels.*

It isn’t “minus the novel,” as is sometimes misquoted, but “minus much of the novel.”

That distinction is important.

“Damn it the ‘experiment’ works—He tries, + he brings it off—who else would dare?”

Wrote Markson in defense of Joyce in the margins of a book of collected Joyce criticism that I bought on that first day at the Strand.

Same could be said of Markson’s own experiments in *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* and *The Notecard Quartet*.

Markson’s posthumous fame is already greater than it was in his lifetime.

The greatest benefit of the Markson treasure hunt at the Strand was not that it allowed fans to snatch up his library, but that it turned new people onto his writing.

Annecy Liddell on DeLillo’s *White Noise*:
“It’s been five years, and I’m still working on finishing it.”
Annecy Liddell on Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*:
“I read it a couple times. That was the most rewarding aspect of this whole thing: finding out about this author that I wouldn’t have found out about otherwise.”

Markson supposedly told his daughter that he was the type of author who would not be famous during his lifetime but would perhaps be recognized after his death.

Like Kafka.

Like Keats.

“Keats. Wondering aloud where Shakespeare was sitting when he wrote *To be or not to be.*”
Markson makes mention of in *Vanishing Point.*

A friend once said to me that “To be or not to be” is great and all, but that the more important question in *Hamlet*—the most important question in all of life, in fact—is found in the play’s first words:
“Who’s there?”

*The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me.*
The reaching out. The attempt at contact.

*Would one of you satellites give me a light?*

“Writer is pretty much tempted to quit writing.”
The admission that begins *This Is Not a Novel.*

DeLillo in *Mao II*:
“The withheld work of art is the only eloquence left.”

“Bullshit” was Markson’s marginal response.
Pretty much tempted to, but never actually could.

Aiken in *Blue Voyage* questioned:
“Why write a book, which one can conceive so much more sublimely than anyone could possibly write?”

Because an unwritten book is an unsent message.
And an unsent message is no message at all.

“There’s nothing in the world for which a poet will give up writing, not even when he is a Jew and the language of his poems is German.
Said Paul Celan.”
According to Markson in *The Last Novel.*

Wondering aloud where Markson was sitting when he wrote *Somebody is living on this beach.*

Certainly not sitting at his computer.

In an interview, after being asked if he owned a computer, Markson explained:
“People have begun to laugh at me, finally, for holding out. In fact, an amusing story about it. A young woman called me the other day, from France, a college student wanting me to solve a disagreement about *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* she’s been having with her professor. And then she said something about e-mailing me, and I told her I had no computer. So then she asked, ‘But what do you write on, a typing machine?’ ‘Typing machine,’ I loved it. And it wasn’t any question about faulty English, because she spoke flawlessly. So what I realized was that she was young enough so that the word ‘typewriter’ had
never once been part of her active vocabulary. Like ‘gaslight’ or something, for somebody my age.”

When told by an interviewer how much easier his research would be with online search engines, Markson replied:
“’It’s funny. When Reader’s Block came out, Kurt Vonnegut called me, two-thirds of the way through, and said, ‘David, what kind of computer did you use to juggle this stuff?’ I told him what I’d done, and he called me when he finished it and said, ‘David, I’m worried about your mental condition.’”

Even though I run an online literary magazine and have various social media accounts and for years posted scans of pages from Markson’s books on a blog, I am partial to his luddite attitude.
The internet is an odd thing: filled with at least as much bad as good, boring as interesting, useless as useful.

“How can people live in that first-draft world?”
Markson once wrote in a letter to Laura Sims.

And yet, it was only through the internet that I let these scans whisper out into the world, let them speak to others besides me.

Only connect!

Is that the purpose of art?

Without the internet, there’d have been no place for us to be reading Markson reading (other than in a museum or university library). But sitting in some library’s archives, would the marginalia have reached as many as it now has?

I’m not saying these books shouldn’t be in a collection somewhere. They should be, and I will donate the ones I’m holding onto at some point, I swear.

But not yet, I want to hold on a little longer...

Toward what eventuality am I holding onto them?

Five years since his death.

I’m glad for the internet, for what it has done to expand Markson’s readership, even if much of the internet consists of banal remarks.

“Remarks are not literature.”
Gertrude Stein said to Ernest Hemingway.
Markson underlined that remark in Stein’s The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas.
And I know this solely because some Strand employee thought Toklas wrote it.

Dan Visel said of The Notecard Quartet re: that Stein quote:
“’But these books are an attempt to make them exactly that.”
Remarks are or are not literature?
All just messages being sent out into the world, aren’t they?

Who’s there?
“Does Writer even exist?”
Markson asks in *This Is Not a Novel*.

Whether or not Writer does or ever did, his messages surely do. They are the shadows his perhaps-existence leaves behind.

The faint hints of an *underground bleeding*.

Kate rambling in *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*:
“And why does it come into mind that I would like to inform Dylan Thomas that one can now kneel and drink from the Loire, or the Po, or the Mississippi?
Or would Dylan Thomas have already been dead before it became impossible to do such things, meaning that he would look at me as if I were mad all over again?
Certainly Achilles would. Or Shakespeare. Or Emiliano Zapata.
I do not remember Dylan Thomas’s dates. And anyway, doubtless there was no specific date for pollution.
One one eight six, the last four digits of somebody’s phone number may have been.”

Nobody comes. Nobody calls.

“Novelist naturally does receive some few phone calls after all.
All too often in these years with news of someone’s death, however.”
Writes Markson in *The Last Novel*.

Later, in same:
“A quirky new impulse of Novelist’s, at news of several recent deaths—
Dailing the deceased, in the likelihood that no one would have yet disconnected their answering machines—and contemplating their voices one eerie final time.”

Hello. You’ve reached _____________. Please leave a message after the beep.

If only—I thought—we had some subtler medium than language...

“Will your ‘please leave a message’ go on for all your sojourn?”
Markson asked Sims in a letter.

*Als ick kan—The best I can do.*

Messages. The only things we leave once we take leave.

Sometimes he left them in the books he read.
Sometimes he left them in the books he wrote.
Sometimes he wrote them down on plain white notecards and sent them to you.
Sometimes he wrote them down on plain white notecards and sent them to your parents.

*Alive with the pleasures of language.*

Schrödinger’s live-dead cat.

We all will be and are being reduced to mere messages. We become only the signals we transmit, the information we keep alive and pass on, the profound but fleeting connections we spark.
We, collectively (but alone), are Kates on the beaches of the barren wastelands of our inner lives, forever looking outward, forever scratching some symbols into a sandy surface, and hoping, beyond reason, that someone will see our words and care and be moved and, for a moment at least, be with us, across oceans of time and space, bridging even the unbridgeable waters that separate the living and the dead.

**Somebody is living on this beach.**

Those final words of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, heartbreaking yet defiant, I see in every checkmark in the margins of Markson's copy of Dormandy's *Old Masters: Great Artists in Old Age* and in all the bullshits that litter the pages of his copy of DeLillo's *Mao II*.

I see these words in every sentence the man ever wrote, in private correspondence and published work.

The isolated beaches are real and daunting and tragic.

But equally real are the messages that hope to transcend, whether or not they ever can or do.

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This essay will also be appearing in the first issue of *Hotel*:  
[www.partisanhotel.com](http://www.partisanhotel.com)

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Pg. 108 of Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae*
To Solitude

O Solitude! if I must with thee dwell,
Let it not be among the jumbled heap
Of murky buildings; climb with me the steep,—
Nature’s observatory—whence the dell,
Its flowery slopes, its river’s crystal swell,
May seem a span; let me thy vigils keep
‘Mongst boughs pavilion’d, where the deer’s swift leap
Startles the wild bee from the foxglove bell.
But though I’ll gladly trace these scenes with thee,
Yet the sweet converse of an innocent mind,
Whose words are images of thoughts refin’d,
Is my soul’s pleasure; and it sure must be
Almost the highest bliss of human-kind,
When to thy haunts two kindred spirits flee.

Judith
He Has Made Facts Sad: David Foster Wallace and *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*

It seems to me that a novel’s afterword is too often situated between superfluous summation and sycophantic fawning, a prettily anemic coda that fails to locate the fire and blood of the original work that necessitated its creation. This is no attack on the afterword’s countless and varied practitioners; rather, I mean it more as a general statement on the limitation of the device. There are, of course, exceptions—perhaps especially David Foster Wallace on *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, whose prolonged and erudite grappling with Markson’s novel is such that it transcends the status of mere literary ornament to become something fiercely iconoclastic, a uniquely vital work in and of itself that serves to elevate (and complicate) its mother text. Originally an essay in a 1990 issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, the peerless Dalkey Archive has done well to position Wallace’s piece, entitled *The Empty Plenum*, as a “new” afterword to the 2012 edition of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*; indeed, it is difficult to read the novel again without experiencing a kind of perceptual doubling—Markson’s masterful prose and the subterranean river of Wallace’s engagement. Its success, to me, is a tour de force showcase of the philosophical underpinnings of Markson’s work, a way of understanding how and why Kate’s facts make a beautiful, vibrant literature out of an abstruse history of ideas. If philosophy is sometimes taken to be too dryly cerebral to be enjoyed aesthetically, Wallace’s afterword maps how even the most seemingly impenetrable analytical work can be mobilized in the creation of the novel’s unique pleasures. In this way, Markson’s dense, adroit, hilarious, and heartbreaking book doesn’t expand the periphery of the philosophical novel so much as complete it.

*Wittgenstein’s Mistress* is, among a great many other things, an artful distillation of the mind-bending tautologies of Wittgenstein with regard to language and meaning, what can be known and what can be communicated. Kate, an ex-painter nearing fifty, is (possibly? probably?) the last person on earth. In this way, the unspooling of her collected facts—both personal and historical, aesthetic and philosophical, banal and profound—become both more and less than what they are, or, indeed, were intended to be (that is, words encoded with particular discursive meanings); rather, they become something of an *environment*, a last stand on a dead earth and an echo chamber of Kate’s own increasingly desperate making. She is, as Wallace aptly sums up, a curator whose job—“to recall, choose, arrange: to impose order & only so communicate meaning”—both ennobles and complicates her collection of facts. More than a historian or tragedian, Kate’s position as the final curator “is marvelously synecdochic of the life of the solipsist, of the survival strategies apposite one’s existence as monad in a world of
diffracted fact.” And yet Wallace’s ultimate question (and, I think, Markson’s, too) haunts the text: “whence facts, if the world is empty?” Enter Wittgenstein.

Marshaling the notorious difficulty of Wittgenstein’s deceptively austere *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* for novelistic use may seem like an impossibly heady task; however, Wallace’s take on what *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* accomplishes is, in fact, bracingly simple: it communicates “the consequences, for persons, of the *practice of theory*.” That is, in Kate’s millennial existence as the last living person on earth with only her own consciousness to inhabit, Markson effectively *quickens* a thoroughly abstract philosophical parameter, making “what is designed to be a mechanism pulse, breathe, suffer, live, etc.” This accomplishment—what Wallace calls “philosophical sci-fi”—manifests an imaginative portrait of what it would be like to actually live in the sort of world the logic & metaphysics of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* posits.” The pain of Kate’s isolation, the freshness of her grief, the fervent desire to be seen, recognized, read—“Somebody is living on this beach”—adds flesh and bone to the ethereal realm of the analytical, in the process demonstrating philosophy’s substantive but oft-forgotten importance to the realm of the human spirit.

Markson’s novel, of course, isn’t the first time an intellectual movement has saddled a novel with an explicatory—or even evangelical—responsibility; indeed, the aestheticization of doctrine by way of the novel has a rich history, particularly in the 20th century. From existentialist (Sartre’s *La Nausée*) to absurdist (Camus’s *L’Étranger*) to Sadean (Bataille’s *L’histoire de l’œil*), the novel has oft been called upon to lend a human face to both niche and popular philosophical movements. What makes *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* special, I think, is its refusal to act as cipher or stand-in—that is, it’s a novel, first and foremost, though it also happens to traffic authentically in the Cartesian nightmare of Western philosophy. The same cannot be said for the previously mentioned works of the French geniuses who, it seems to me, used literature as a kind of mouthpiece, a bullhorn. If it is true they made use of their ostensibly literary means adeptly, a feeling of effortful proselytizing hovers about their work for me. Not so with Markson, whose greatest achievement is perhaps the fact that such esoteric and enigmatic material reads loudly, clearly, and confidently as pure art.

Bertrand Russell famously trashed Descartes’ *Cogito-*tautology, casting aspersions on the validity of “I think, therefore I am.” Wallace, similarly suspicious, sums Russell’s position up thusly: “the truth of ‘I think’ entails only the existence of thinking, as the truth of ‘I write’ yields only the existence of text.” This makes Kate’s monologue terrifying as well as heartbreaking; if we follow Russell’s line of thinking to its end point, Kate becomes impaled on a sort of double doubting—that is, as Wallace elaborates, only her words, as text, render themselves “ontologically secure”; moreover, “the belief in either a reader for [her words] or a (meta)physical presence producing them would require a quixoticism Kate’s long since lost or resigned.” This is perhaps the tragedy that underpins *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, albeit mediated by an abstract distance. If this concept were to remain cloaked in the lexicon of the philosophical tradition (wherein Wallace, if not his readers, is almost obnoxiously fluent), it would fall on an audience that might be forgiven its boredom, if not its disinterest. Again, thankfully we have Markson, whose novel locates the intellectual scaffolding of a difficult idea, encasing it within the aesthetic beauty of a novel.

That Markson’s restating of Russell’s challenge also has
much to say about the role of the writer, the practice of deep reading, and literary meaning in toto is a testament to both his intelligence and his verve. For Kate is, in some sense, every one of us. If her situation is perhaps more dire than our own, her struggles to think, compose, share, communicate, reach across the haunted borderlands of her own consciousness are nothing if not utterly familiar to any reader, to any writer. Wallace’s insistent return to “the plenitude of emptiness, the importance of silence in terms of speech” is an adept evaluation of Kate’s process of burning her pages after she’s read them, of consciously writing something destined for the void—and what writing isn’t? It’s as if Kate has, in her monograph, materialized Wittgenstein’s somewhat terrifying (and bizarrely moving) final prescription in the Tractatus:

“Anyone who understands what I’m saying eventually recognizes that it’s nonsense, once he’s used what I’m saying—rather like steps—to climb up past what I’m saying—he must, that is, throw away the ladder after he’s used it.”

Kate’s statement is the final rung of said ladder, the last step before it is flung away. Markson’s slim novel achieved an explanatory lucidity that thousands of pages of scholarly material have come up short against. It is that genius, and that intellectual generosity, that moves Wallace to admit what we all know after completing Wittgenstein’s Mistress: “If it’s true her ladder goes noplace, it’s also true nobody’s going to throw either book away.” Nor will they throw away Wallace’s afterword; indeed, with any luck readers will be enjoying these two intertwined texts until they, too, are relegated to their earned obscurity.

1. Paul Chowder, from Nicholson Baker’s The Anthologist:

But all right—that’s fine. It’s a plum, not a poem. That’s what I call a poem that doesn’t rhyme—it’s a plum. We who write and publish our nonrhyming plums aren’t poets, we’re plummers. Or plummers. And some plums can be very good—better than anything else you might happen to read ever, anywhere.
2. Annie Dillard, from an interview in Western Washington University’s *Western Front*:

In college I learned how to learn from other people. As far as I was concerned, writing in college didn’t consist of what little Annie had to say, but what Wallace Stevens had to say. I didn’t come to college to think my own thoughts, I came to learn what had been thought.

3. Wallace Stevens, “The Comedian as the Letter C”:

The imagination, here, could not evade,  
In poems of plums, the strict austerity  
Of one vast, subjugating, final tone.  
The drenching of stale lives no more fell down.  
What was this gaudy, gusty panoply?  
Out of what swift destruction did it spring?  
It was caparison of mind and cloud  
And something given to make whole among  
The ruses that were shattered by the large.


Wondering if there can be any other ranking twentieth-century American poet whose body of work contains even half the percentage of pure drivel as Wallace Stevens’.

5. Annie Dillard again, *The Writing Life*:

On break, I usually read Conrad Aiken’s poetry aloud. It was pure sound unencumbered by sense. If I ever caught a poem’s sense by accident, I could never use that poem again. I often read the Senlin poems, and “Sea Holly.”

6. Conrad Aiken, “A Letter From Li Po” (aka Li Bai, whose surname Li [李] is Chinese for plum):

The winds of doctrine blow both ways at once.  
The wetted finger feels the wind each way,  
.presaging plums from north, and snow from south.  
The dust-wind whistles from the eastern sea  
to dry the nectarine and parch the mouth.  
The west wind from the desert wreathes the rain  
too late to fill our wells, but soon enough,  
the four-day rain that bears the leaves away.  
Song with the wind will change, but is still song
and pierces to the rightness in the wrong
or makes the wrong a rightness, a delight.

7. Markson, later in the book:

No further martinis after dinner, Conrad Aiken’s
physician once commanded.

Following which Aiken frequently refused to eat until
practically bedtime.

8. Baker’s Paul Chowder continues:

So you think maybe this plum-poem is good in its
own uniquely free kind of way. Is it? You read a line
or two. No, it isn’t. In fact, it’s oozing with badness.
It’s so bad. How can it be this bad? How can this bad
plum be sitting here, in type, in front of me? I don’t
get it.

9. Stevens, later in the poem:

The words of things entangle and confuse.
The plum survives its poems.

10. Aiken, later in the poem:

… There
look through the clouded to the clear
and there watch evil like a brush-stroke disappear
in the last perfect rhyme
of the begin-all-end-all poem, time.
There are six floors in Novelist’s apartment building. Then again, the paved inner airshaft courtyard is at basement level, making seven. And then the roof.

From high up on the Sistine ceiling scaffolding, Michelangelo was known to now and then drop things—brooms, even fairly long boards. Most frequently, it appeared, when the pope happened to be lurking below for a glimpse at his latest efforts.

When I die, I open a bordello. You know what is a bordello, no? But against every one of you—all—I lock shut the door. Said Arturo Toscanini, to a recalcitrant orchestra.

As a talisman for the future while still young and penniless, Balzac once sketched a large blank representation of a picture frame on one of his garret walls—and designated it Painting by Raphael.


A Frenchman in Delft in 1663, looking to purchase inexpensive art, was shown a Vermeer—on display in a pastry shop. Almost certainly being held there as security for a debt of Vermeer’s to the baker.

Keats stayed up all night on the occasion when he actually did first look into Chapman’s Homer—and then composed his sonnet so swiftly that he was able to messenger it to a friend to read before breakfast.

Van Gogh, in a letter from Arles, some few weeks after having presented a piece of his ear to a woman in a brothel:

I went yesterday to see the girl I had gone to when I went astray in my wits. They told me that in this country things like that are not out of the ordinary.

Shelley, in a letter from Venice, on Byron’s local innamorati:

The most ignorant, the most disgusting, the most bigoted; countesses smell so strongly of garlic, that an ordinary Englishman cannot approach them. Well, L.B. is familiar with the lowest sort of these women, the people his gondolieri pick up in the streets.

The unimaginably cramped cell in which St. John of the Cross was once imprisoned for months, beaten repeatedly and virtually starved, but where he nonetheless managed to compose some of his finest verses.

In a building that no longer exists—but can still be seen in El Greco’s View of Toledo.

At least once, Flaubert informs readers that Emma
Bovary's eyes are brown.
And several other times that they are black.

Sigmund Freud ran his household in such a rigidly patriarchal manner that his wife was literally expected to have spread the toothpaste on his brush each morning.

All of which obviously means that this is the last book Novelist is going to write.

Anton Chekhov died in Germany. His coffin arrived in Moscow in a freight car—distinctly labeled *Oysters*.

During their first four years in the East Hampton farmhouse where they would live until Pollock’s death eleven years later, Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner could not afford to install plumbing for heat and hot water.

Clarence Darrow went out of his way to inform A. E. Housman that he had recited two pieces of Housman’s verse in avoiding the death penalty for Leopold and Loeb, even presenting Housman with a copy of the courtroom summation—which showed he had misquoted both.

Claude Monet’s admission, after standing beside the deathbed of someone he had loved—that in spite of his grief he had spent much of the time analyzing which pigments comprised the color of her eyelids.

That day being come, Caesar going into the Senate house and speaking merrily unto the soothsayer, told him, The Ides of March be come. So be they, softly answered the soothsayer, but they are not yet past.

Says North’s Plutarch.

A woman’s body is not a mass of flesh in a state of decomposition, on which the green and purplish spots denote a complete state of cadaveric putrefaction.
An early critic presumed to inform Renoir.

The devil damn thee black, thou cream-fac’d loon; Where gott’st thou that goose look?
—Wrote Shakespeare in *Macbeth*.

Now friend, what means thy change of countenance?
—Substituted William Davenant, in a rewritten version that was played for almost a century.

His last book. All of which also then gives Novelist carte blanche to do anything here he damned well pleases.
Which is to say, writing in his own personal genre, as it were.

The first one-man artist’s exhibition on record—put together by Gustave Courbet in Paris in 1855.
In a tent just outside the official group show that had rejected him.

Preoccupied with a poem-in-progress, Paul Valéry once paused to glance at a proof sheet in the window of a printing shop, and then without quite realizing it began to mentally revise the lines.
Until it embarrassingly dawned on him that he was rewriting Racine and not himself.

Vermeer died in 1675. At which time one of his largest debts was, in fact, to a Delft baker.
For bread to feed a family of thirteen.

In November 1919, after a solar eclipse had irrefutably verified Einstein’s concept of relativity, British physicists convened a major press gathering to announce it. The New York Times assigned the story to a man named Henry Crouch—a golf reporter.


Said Thomas Bailey Aldrich of Emily Dickinson.

The William Sakspere of Gloucestershire—who was hanged as a thief in 1248.

Along with a letter of homage, Berlioz sent copies of the score of The Damnation of Faust to Goethe.

Who never responded.


Being among the critical greetings for Leaves of Grass.

Not to omit ithyphallic audacity.

Plus garbage.


Among some for the best of Shelley.

Which was also called abominable.


Reserved for Wordsworth.

For the rain it raineth every day.

Actually, Goethe had been gratified by Berlioz’ letter. But then showed the Faust score to a now long-forgotten minor German composer—who informed him it was valueless.

After the 1953 Laurence Olivier film of The Beggar’s Opera, Britain’s Inland Revenue Service repeatedly sent inquiries regarding an address for John Gay—from whom they had not received income tax returns.

1732, Gay was buried at Westminster Abbey in.

I like Mr. Dickens’ books much better than yours, Papa.

Said one of Thackeray’s daughters.

At the height of his career, Richard Brinsley Sheridan had become the owner of the Drury Lane Theater. And subsequently astonished everyone concerned by calmly drinking in a nearby coffeehouse when it went up in flames:

Surely a man may be allowed to take a glass of wine by his own fireside?

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Keeping the Novel Novel:
A Conversation with Steven Moore

Steven Moore is the most interesting scholar you’ve probably never heard of. He was one of the first William Gaddis scholars, and his books on Gaddis remain essential reading if you’re doing any research on the writer of The Recognitions. Moore is also the editor who brought David Markson’s Wittgenstein’s Mistress to Dalkey Archive Press (after its infamous 54 rejections elsewhere). As if that weren’t enough of a pedigree, he was one of the first readers of David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest in manuscript form. Recently, he’s been working on a multi-volume study, The Novel: An Alternative History, which rewrites the history of the novel, reminding us that the “avant-garde” novel wasn’t a 20th century invention, but that it has been around since the early days of the art form.

Whether quoting from his correspondence with Markson or discussing the history and future of the novel, whether describing his attempt to play tennis with Wallace or explaining why it is important to keep the novel
novel, Moore displays his natural aptitude for being a “scholar”—ever-enlightening, always ready to surprise with an interesting take or unexpected tidbit—without ever becoming the thing he dreads: an “academic.”

Erudite but never pedantic, Moore is a lit lover’s dream of a scholar, because unlike most “academics,” he actually is a lit lover himself. We shared our love of literature in conversation.

TM: Your multi-volume study of the novel, *The Novel: An Alternative History*, of which you’ve published the first two books, has been described as both “an alternative history of the novel” and “a history of the alternative novel.” I’m wondering if you could describe how those two tracts of thinking combine to form your project, and what it is you were setting out to do with these books.

SM: I had several meanings of “alternative” in mind. First and foremost, I wanted to offer an alternative to the conventional view that the novel originated in 18th-century England, concomitant with the rise of the middle class. Not only did novels—however you want to define them—appear earlier than that, but England was one of the last countries to produce them, not the first. Second, I wanted to focus not on the standard classics but on “alternative” novels, which go by various adjectives: experimental, avant-garde, innovative, and so on. Such novels are usually sidelined in conventional histories of the novel, but I wanted to highlight them and put conventional, mainstream novels on the sidelines for once. It’s the alternative universe I live in, where Gilbert Sorrentino is a greater American novelist than Philip Roth. And finally, I wanted to write in an alternative style to that used in academic criticism, a style that had the same relation to mainstream criticism that indie-label “alternative” music has to big-label “mainstream” music: edgier, brasher, quirkier—but not so extreme that it would alienate general readers. In fact, it was general readers, not professors and grad students, that I envisioned as my main audience.

The whole point was to defend post-Joyce innovative fiction from charges of degrading the “great tradition” of classic fiction, which is why I constantly refer to contemporary novelists during my historical survey. I wanted to establish a continuum between the innovative writers of the past and present, to demonstrate there is an “alternative” great tradition, one far older, wilder, and sexier than the canonized one.

TM: In your interview on Colin Marshall’s *The Marketplace of Ideas*, you said, “The avant-garde novel is not a modern aberration, but it goes all the way back to the beginning. If anything, the conventional novel that came in the 19th century, that’s the aberration. That’s a very late, conventional development in the novel.” Most casual readers, and even some more advanced readers, will find this thesis pretty radical because it’s not what they have been taught by teachers and so-called “experts.” Why do you think it is important to readjust our view of the history of the novel and see it as the radical art form it seems to always have been?

SM: Two reasons: (1) Though we tend to think of “avant-garde” art as a 20th-century thing, I’ve learned there’s always been an avant-garde: in every generation going back to the beginning of civilization, there is a small number of artists who deliberately flout the rules and try something different. In the first volume of my novel-history I quote a specialist on ancient Akkadian literature on how the author of “Erra and Ishum” used a strange,
idiosyncratic style in “a determined effort to refurbish a rich inventory of inherited expressions to lend them greater force, to do such violence, so to speak, to traditional usage as to command attention”—which is the sort of thing a critic today might say about William Burroughs or Mark Leyner. (2) It’s important to readjust our view so that we don’t continue to banish new experimental novels to the lunatic fringe, as the mainstream book-review media has been doing for decades, but instead realize that radical innovation has always been a property of the novel genre, and the main element that keeps the genre fresh and new (which is what “novel” means, of course). These are the novels that keep the novel genre novel, and they have a more ancient heritage than the more recent realistic novel.

TM: You say in your introduction “things got a little out of hand during the 1920s and 1930s (Joyce’s Ulysses, Woolf’s Jacob’s Room, Faulkner’s Sound and the Fury), but soon settled back on track.” What do you think it was about the 20s and 30s that allowed this eruption of the avant-garde into a slightly more mainstream place?

SM: I hope it was obvious I was speaking from the POV of a conservative critic there. Some writers in the 1920s and ‘30s were inspired and energized by what was happening in other fields: Frazer’s researches into myth and anthropology, Freud’s exploration of the unconscious, Einstein’s theory of relativity, technological innovations in the sciences, etc. Other artists—painters, dancers, architects—were quick to incorporate the implications of these findings into their art, but most novelists lagged behind and continued to write novels from a 19th-century sensibility. Those who experimented with these new findings were accused of sabotaging the genre rather than what they actually did, which was to find formal and stylistic ways to express what it felt like to live in the modern age.

TM: Why do most people not realize that so-called “modernism” didn’t create the so-called “avant-garde” novel, but merely brought it to the fore?

SM: I don’t think most people were aware of earlier avant-garde novels: they may have known of Tristram Shandy, but I’m sure they didn’t know of the oddball novels that influenced Sterne, or 19th-century avant-garde novels by the Brazilian Machado de Assis, or E. T. A. Hoffmann’s Tomcat Murr, or all the other innovative novels I celebrate in my survey.

TM: Elsewhere in that first volume’s introduction, you say: “Only in literature, however, is difficulty considered a fault rather than a virtue.” Why do you think that is?

SM: Difficult literature can be a struggle, and of course most people read for pleasure and insight, not to struggle. (Right now I’m grappling with Miklós Szentkuthy’s Prae and am tempted to tap out.) The time-factor is probably part of it: it doesn’t take long to view avant-garde art, or dance, or listen to a piece of unconventional music, but an avant-garde novel can take weeks of sustained, concentrated work, and few people want to bother with that. That’s understandable, but I only wish they would grant respect to such works rather than denigrate them for being difficult. They should admit, “It’s not you, it’s me.”

TM: You were one of the first real William Gaddis scholars, though I doubt you’d like to be labelled “a scholar,” as you seem opposed to the overly academic course that literary criticism has taken. What do you think is the problem with academic writing on literature? What do you think is lost in that approach?
SM: Actually I’m totally fine with “scholar,” just don’t call me an “academic.” Scholarship represents the older approach to literary criticism, which basically means working outward from the text: you start with the words on the page, look up the ones you don’t know (and trace allusions, quotations, and sources if need be), note the patterns of imagery and structural devices, and work your way up to an explanation of how it all works together, which should result in an appreciation of the writer’s artistry. Since the 1970s academics seem to work from the outside in: they start with a trendy topic, master the specialized lingo and theory associated with it (often shanghaied from a non-literary field), and then find a text on which they can apply that notion—often resulting not in appreciation but in an exposure of the artist’s shortcomings in some regard. It’s like obtaining a new tool, and then looking around for something to use it on, rather than the older way of starting with a text and then choosing the appropriate tools to open it up for inspection. And the language those academics use! So ugly, so tone-deaf, so needlessly obscure. Sixty years ago, any educated person could pick up the latest issue of the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* and read it as though it were the latest issue of *Time* magazine, but nowadays one has to struggle to get through the jargon-laden, obfuscatory prose of academic critics, rarely emerging with new insights into a work of art.

I remember being puzzled when I first started seeing that stuff in the late 1970s; I’d finish an article in the *James Joyce Quarterly* and say, “Well I guess you could look at it that way, though I don’t know why anyone would want to.” I was always reminded of Horatio’s response to one of Hamlet’s convoluted notions: “‘Twere to consider too curiously to consider so.” (Translation: “Dude, you’re overthinking it!”). I think it’s appropriate that one of the meanings of “academic” (as in, “it’s an academic question”) is “having no practical or useful significance” (*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed.). To be sure, most academics are very smart people, and I’ve read some ingenious stuff by them, but I think working in an ivory tower and communicating only with fellow academics can cause them to lose sight of how and why literature is written. The forgotten British novelist Storm Jameson put it better in *Parthian Words* (1970), where she warned critics against “the dangers of retreating into a Platonic realm of forms and essences where the practice of criticism is neglected for the pleasures of constructing scholastically intricate general theories addressed to the circle of initiates.”

TM: In one of your books on Gaddis, you mentioned how David Markson used Gaddis as a touchstone in many of his novels, even as early as his first detective novel, *Epitaph for a Tramp*. In that first book, he does of course write, “And thus it is my conclusion that *The Recognitions* by William Gaddis is not merely the best American first novel of our time, but perhaps the most significant single volume in all American fiction since *Moby Dick*.” Most people talk about the lineage of Markson from Malcolm Lowry, but there’s potentially as much of a link to Gaddis as to Lowry. Do you see Gaddis as a major influence on Markson? And, if so, in what ways?

SM: I can’t improve on the answer Markson himself gave me when I asked him the same question. In a letter dated 11 January 1988, he wrote:

“There is no question in my mind that *The Recognitions* is the monumental American novel of the century. And, having read it twice when it came out, and then again
perhaps five years later, I’d find it a miracle if I hadn’t been influenced. Certainly in writing my novel Going Down, not only with a good deal of the intellectual materials I felt licensed to use, but also in the way I used them, I found Gaddis inescapable. I mean quite literally in what I allowed my central character to ‘know,’ for instance. But probably ‘inescapable’ is the wrong word, since I believed the influence to be liberating more than anything else.”

TM: Tell me about your relationship with Markson. How did you first meet him and how did Dalkey end up publishing Wittgenstein’s Mistress after it had been rejected 54 times by other publishers?

SM: I was doing a lot of research on Gaddis in the 1980s and knew there was a connection between the two, so I wrote to Markson to ask if he had any letters from Gaddis that he could share. He kindly sent me copies of what he had, and after I told him I had already read both Epitaph for a Dead Beat and Going Down, we started corresponding. I was at Rutgers in New Brunswick, NJ, by that time, and in February 1986 I met him for the first time in his book-lined apartment in Greenwich Village. I asked if he had written anything new, and he told me about a novel he couldn’t find a publisher for, and gave me a copy in the fall of 1987. I read it and loved it, and since I had just started working part-time (and long-distance) for Dalkey Archive Press, I told Dave he should ask his agent (his former wife Elaine) to send a copy to John O’Brien there. He likewise loved it, and we published it in May 1988. It was very small-press affair—David supplied the black-and-white cover photo and we only printed about 750 copies—but it quickly turned into Dalkey’s first “big” book, meaning a second printing, then a paperback, British and foreign rights sales, etc.

TM: What was the process of editing that book?

SM: It was simply copyedited. It was clear that David knew what he was doing, and I confined myself to correcting a few typos and misspellings. It wouldn’t have occurred to me to suggest any changes, nor do I recall O’Brien doing so.

TM: For you, what is it that makes Wittgenstein’s Mistress such an important novel?

SM: It’s an incredible balancing act: it is very cerebral but very emotional at the same time; very serious, but also very, very funny; the plot is out of a sci-fi novel, but doesn’t feel like one; it seems very realistic, yet may also be the rant of a madwoman; it contains a heavy load of erudite references, but is handled lightly, even flippantly at times. Very little actually “happens,” but it’s as absorbing as a page-turner, almost hypnotic (achieved partly by the relentless one-sentence paragraphs). It ranges over 3,000 years of Western culture, but is all contained within a relatively short book. The language is simple, almost minimalist, yet keeps slipping away into philosophical complications and whimsy. It’s a tribute to the exalted place that art has in some people’s lives, and is itself a work of art that now has an exalted place in some readers’ lives.

TM: One thing people don’t talk about enough when discussing Markson is his humor, both in his life and in his work. Could you talk about his sense of humor? What is one of your funniest remembrances of Markson?

SM: You’re right: obviously Dingus Magee and Springer’s Progress are comic novels, but as I mentioned there is lots of dry humor in Wittgenstein’s Mistress and in the later novels. His letters were almost always lively and funny; the ones Laura Sims published in 2014 as Fare Forward are typical of his offhanded style. He phoned me often over the years, and though it was often to complain
about his health (especially in his final years) or loneliness or poverty, he usually found a way to keep it light. He was at his best in person; he was quite a raconteur and loved telling stories about the shenanigans of the writers he had known—Lowry, of course, but also Kerouac, Angela Carter, Vonnegut, Heller, Barthelme, Fred Exley—but I’ll be damned if I can remember any of them well enough to retell them here. He retold most of them in his letters, and I hope someday someone will publish an edition of them. (The ones he wrote to me are now at Columbia University, if anyone’s interested.)

TM: Speaking of your letters, I know you were in correspondence with Markson at the time, so I’m wondering if you could comment on the transition from *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* to the final four novels. The novels seem to get more and more spare—more plotless, more characterless, more settingless. His novels always felt a bit like assemblages (even the early genre ones)—he was a master of the perfectly ordered list and of the weighty factual kernel from the beginning—but he seemed to be moving closer and closer to pure poetic bricolage by the end, gutting the novel of its usual expected innards.

SM: Markson was fascinated by literary works that contained lots of referential material and allusions, the kinds of works that necessitate copious notes and reader’s guides by later scholars. And you’re right: you can see that sort of material in his early detective novels, and then more so in *Going Down* and *Springer’s Progress*, and almost overwhelmingly so in *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, by which point the kind of things (references, allusions) that are in the background of most novels become the foreground. He probably felt he had pushed that as far as he could in *Wittgenstein*, but then decided to push it to extremes in *Reader’s Block*, “A novel of intellectual reference and allusion, so to speak minus much of the novel,” as it says on the top of p. 61. And if that weren’t enough, he pushed it further in the three novels that followed, where the traditional materials of a novel (plot, setting, character) are about as bare as you can get. But the pacing and placement of all those factual kernels are handled as carefully as in any traditional novel. That’s what took the most time, he told me; not assembling all those factoids on notecards, but finding the proper order for them.

But all four novels in the quartet share the same theme, which can be found in a book he cites in *Reader’s Block*, Schopenhauer’s *Parerga and Paralipomena*—specifically, the Penguin version called *Essays and Aphorisms* (1970). That’s where he found the misogynistic statement about women on p. 138 of *Reader’s Block*. If you’ll indulge me, I’d like to quote from pp. 210-11 of the Penguin Schopenhauer, for it may be useful to future Markson scholars:

> “I wish someone would one day attempt a tragic history of literature, showing how the various nations which now take their highest pride in the great writers and artists they can show treated them while they were alive. In such a history, the author would bring visibly before us that endless struggle which the good and genuine of all ages and all lands has to endure against the always dominant bad and wrong-headed; depict the martyrdom of almost every genuine enlightener of mankind, almost every great master of every art; show us how, with a few exceptions, they lived tormented lives in poverty and wretchedness, without recognition, without sympathy, without disciples, while fame, honour and riches went to the unworthy;...”

This is what Markson’s quartet is “about,” especially since he regarded himself as an unfairly neglected writer,
though he brings his artists down several pegs by giving plenty of examples of their anti-Semitism, misogyny, self-destructiveness, and other shortcomings. Schopenhauer obviously didn’t have a quirky quartet of experimental novels in mind, but I can’t imagine a finer fulfillment of his hypothetical project.

TM: You call the final four books a quartet, and I’ve called it The Notecard Quartet in my blog. Up until I heard Ann Beattie call it a quartet when she introduced Markson at the 92nd St Y, I had only heard people talk about it as a tetralogy. I know why I prefer the word quartet, but I’m curious what you think the word gives that tetralogy doesn’t? Why do you think of that as the better descriptive word for those four books?

SM: I hadn’t thought about it before now, but “quartet” is more high-literary and implies semi-independent works (Eliot’s Four Quartets, Durrell’s Alexandria Quartet), while “tetralogy” sounds more genre-ish (sci-fi, fantasy, action novels, etc.) and implies a continuing storyline, often with the same characters. So “quarter” is better, but it should be kept in mind that Markson never actually planned to write a quartet (as Durrell did), he just happened to write four novels along similar schemes. In fact, after the second (This Is Not a Novel) I remember him telling me he really didn’t want to keep imitating himself, but he couldn’t think of new format.

TM: It is because of you that we now have David Foster Wallace’s fascinating essay on Wittgenstein’s Mistress. You asked him for a contribution to the Review of Contemporary Fiction issue you were creating on Markson. How did you know Wallace would be interested in writing on Markson? How did that piece come about?

SM: He had ordered a copy of Markson’s novel and liked it a lot, and I knew from The Broom of the System that he really knew his Wittgenstein. I liked the earlier essay I had commissioned from him, “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young,” and wanted to keep working with him, so it seemed like a natural fit. As you probably know, that was during a difficult time in his life, and he struggled a bit at first and almost missed the deadline, but he came through splendidly.

TM: Markson wrote to you in a letter “Don’t-ever-tell-David-Foster-Wallace Dept., but I read five or six of those stories and like his essay on Wittgenstein better than any. How’s it possible for a critical essay to ‘sing’? (Even if it’s on me?).” There’s a lot of talk on Wallace-the-essayist vs. Wallace-the-fiction-writer. Obviously, he was talented in both areas, but which do you see as his greater strength?

SM: First, let’s rewind to that earlier question about “academic” criticism. Can you think of an example that “sings,” or even tries to? But I suppose that’s unfair; few of us, academic or otherwise, have David’s way with words, but all of us should at least try to make our work sing rather than drone. But to your question: I love Wallace’s essays and short stories equally; they display different strengths, so I wouldn’t judge one greater than the other.

TM: You later were one of the first readers of Wallace’s Infinite Jest. Could you tell me a bit about what reading that novel in manuscript form was like and your thoughts on its place in contemporary literature?

SM: My initial reaction was shock that a mainstream NYC publisher was interested in it; it looked like the crazy avant-garde stuff that Dalkey did, or our downstairs neighbors FC2—except longer and better. (We occupied
the same building at Illinois State University at that time, Fairchild Hall.) It was hard to follow the plot, but I loved the bravura use of language and the heartfelt identification with the weird and the depressed (which certainly described me in those days). The manuscript was an eyesore, as I’ve described elsewhere, but it was absorbing and even fun to read. One of its many, many accomplishments was to give voice to a portion of the youth population that wasn’t represented much at the time: people who were born in the 1960s and came of age realizing that they had missed out on an incredible decade and found themselves instead in the stultifying Reagan ‘80s (the real setting of the novel, despite the futuristic chronology). I mean the 20-somethings in Pixies T-shirts with lousy jobs who passed around a dog-eared paperback of Gödel, Escher, and Bach, who were hip in a smart, nonironic way, and a bit lost in the encroaching corporatization of America. Nerds, geeks, bookworms, loners—but not the stereotypes portrayed in films and TV at the time. And Wallace nailed their language, as in the way Orin and Hal exchange lines from the Beatles’ “She Said She Said” on p. 32, the way the students at Enfield communicate, the way Wallace moves between formal diction and slacker talk.

“She Said She Said” is on Revolver, which also contains the bleak “Eleanor Rigby.” Its refrain echoes down through the pages of Infinite Jest: “Ah, look at all the lonely people.” If kids in the Sixties took drugs to expand their minds, those in the Eighties did so to shut them down, to blunt their feelings of failure and alienation in Reagan’s America, to mask their crippling self-consciousness. That demo group has remained with us as America has become even more corporatized and unaccommodating, which I think is one reason why young readers still relate to it.

The T-shirts may now feature the Decemberists, but the feelings remain the same.

TM: In a couple things I’ve read, you seem to be as blown away by his tennis skills as you were by Infinite Jest. Could you talk about the time you had on the court with him?

SM: There’s not much more to it than what I’ve already said. I believe it was just before I left Dalkey in 1996 that Dave and I went out on the tennis court one day. (For the first time: even though we had lived in the same town for three years, I didn’t see him that often and this was the first time we thought to play tennis.) It was late afternoon and too hot and humid for an all-out game, so we mostly just volleyed the ball back and forth while chatting. He asked me to show him my serve, which I did, and he gave me some pointers on how to improve it, then he asked if I would mind if he served a few at full strength. Even though I backed way up, his missiles hit their mark and rocketed past me before I could get near them. But there wasn’t a whiff of trying to show off or to impress me. I’m glad I had the enervating weather as an excuse not to play a real game; I believe “wiped the court” with me is the technical term for what would have ensued. (Again the appeal of his language: I’m tempted to find that part in Infinite Jest where the budding sports-caster invents increasingly wacky verbs to describe how one team defeated another during a tournament.) Scratch that: he would have gone easy on me: he didn’t have that sort of competitive streak to always be winning. He was a super-nice guy.

TM: One of this lit mag’s raisons d’être is to focus on writers who we feel don’t get the praise they deserve. That’s why each issue will spotlight an author we want to give more exposure to, authors who we
think to some degree or another have been cut out of the conversation. I think David Markson clearly fits that bill. Who are some other underrated authors that you’d love to see us do a future issue on?

SM: James McCourt would be at the top of my list. He has published an extraordinary series of novels over the last forty years, very erudite and profound but also campy and fun, and if I had the energy to write another book, I’d do it on him. (If you’ve never read him, start with Time Remaining.) Rikki Ducornet is another: I was asked recently to write a brief memoir about my days as her editor, and rereading her early novels knocked me out. I’ve always felt Tom Robbins never got his critical due: his best-seller status and reputation as a comic novelist obscure how brilliant an artist he actually is. I’ve championed Alexander Theroux in the past and continue to carry a torch for him, though I was disappointed in his last novel. (It was better in manuscript.) I continue to admire W. M. Spackman—I was able to publish an omnibus of his collected fiction in 1997 and hope someday soon to do a collection of his equally remarkable nonfiction—but very little has been written about him. The late great Gilbert Sorrentino certainly deserves your attention. He became good friends with Markson in their final years.

TM: In those final years, Markson claimed he couldn’t read fiction anymore. It all had lost its magic for him, even the writers he cared deeply about, like Gaddis, Lowry, and Faulkner. (Joyce he claimed was one of the only exceptions.) It troubled him. He wanted to continue on with fiction, but at a certain point he had to admit he just couldn’t. Does the potential to get this reading-fatigue ever worry you? Could you ever see yourself being afflicted by it?

SM: To be honest, at age 64 I can already feel it creeping in. I haven’t lost interest in reading fiction, but it takes me longer to get through a novel, and my attention span is shorter. I recall hearing the same from older writers (Gaddis, his novelist-friend Chandler Brossard), so it’s apparently one of the drawbacks to growing old. So get crackin’, kids. Don’t tell yourself you’ll read Proust in your golden years: do it now.

TM: You’ve said, “the novel should always be novel.” Do you think the novel will at some point run out of ways to be novel? Will we ever exhaust the possibilities of invention and thus exhaust the medium?

SM: No. If I’ve learned anything from my researches, it’s that the possibilities for storytelling are infinite and that writers will continue to find ways to keep the genre novel.

TM: As someone who is more well-versed in the trajectory of the medium than most, where do you see the novel in ten, fifty, one-hundred years?

SM: Well, I’m sure that 150 years from now there will still be conventional novels of the sort that dominate the best-seller list today. The delivery-platforms will be more various, but the traditional, linear story has been with us since the dawn of history and seems part of our cultural DNA. And there’s no telling what avant-garde fiction will look like. Twenty years ago it seemed ready to shift into hypertext and multimedia DVDs, but those don’t seem to have caught on. I think more authors will take advantage of printing technology to enhance their works, as in recent fictions by Steve Tomasula and Reif Larsen. More and more books will be preserved in electronic form after their initial appearance, which is good, but how much of that will be worth preserving is anyone’s guess.
A Selection from
*Counsels and Maxims*

All society necessarily involves, as the first condition of its existence, mutual accommodation and restraint upon the part of its members. This means that the larger it is, the more insipid will be its tone. A man can be *himself* only so long as he is alone; and if he does not love solitude, he will not love freedom; for it is only when he is alone that he is really free. Constraint is always present in society, like a companion of whom there is no riddance; and in proportion to the greatness of a man’s individuality, it will be hard for him to bear the sacrifices which all intercourse with others demands, Solitude will be welcomed or endured or avoided, according as a man’s personal value is large or small,—the wretch feeling, when he is alone, the whole burden of his misery; the great intellect delighting in its greatness; and everyone, in short, being just what he is.

Further, if a man stands high in Nature’s lists, it is natural and inevitable that he should feel solitary. It will be an advantage to him if his surroundings do not interfere with this feeling; for if he has to see a great deal of other people who are not of like character with himself, they will exercise a disturbing influence upon him, adverse to his peace of mind; they will rob him, in fact, of himself, and give him nothing to compensate for the loss.

But while Nature sets very wide differences between man and man in respect both of morality and of intellect, society disregards and effaces them; or, rather, it sets up artificial differences in their stead,—gradations of rank and position, which are very often diametrically opposed to those which Nature establishes. The result of this arrangement is to elevate those whom Nature has placed low, and to depress the few who stand high. These latter, then, usually withdraw from society, where, as soon as it is at all numerous, vulgarity reigns supreme.

What offends a great intellect in society is the equality of rights, leading to equality of pretensions, which everyone enjoys; while at the same time, inequality of capacity means a corresponding disparity of social power. So-called good society recognizes every kind of claim but that of intellect, which is a contraband article; and people are expected to exhibit an unlimited amount of patience towards every form of folly and stupidity, perversity and dullness; whilst personal merit has to beg pardon, as it were, for being present, or else conceal itself altogether. Intellectual superiority offends by its very existence, without any desire to do so.

The worst of what is called good society is not only that it offers us the companionship of people who are unable to win either our praise or our affection, but that it does not allow of our being that which we naturally are; it compels us, for the sake of harmony, to shrivel up, or even alter our shape altogether. Intellectual
conversation, whether grave or humorous, is only fit for intellectual society; it is downright abhorrent to ordinary people, to please whom it is absolutely necessary to be commonplace and dull. This demands an act of severe self-denial; we have to forfeit three-fourths of ourselves in order to become like other people. No doubt their company may be set down against our loss in this respect; but the more a man is worth, the more he will find that what he gains does not cover what he loses, and that the balance is on the debit side of the account; for the people with whom he deals are generally bankrupt,—that is to say, there is nothing to be got from their society which can compensate either for its boredom, annoyance and disagreeableness, or for the self-denial which it renders necessary. Accordingly, most society is so constituted as to offer a good profit to anyone who will exchange it for solitude.

Nor is this all. By way of providing a substitute for real—I mean intellectual—superiority, which is seldom to be met with, and intolerable when it is found, society has capriciously adopted a false kind of superiority, conventional in its character, and resting upon arbitrary principles,—a tradition, as it were, handed down in the higher circles, and, like a password, subject to alteration; I refer to bon-ton fashion. Whenever this kind of superiority comes into collision with the real kind, its weakness is manifest. Moreover, the presence of good tone means the absence of good sense.

No man can be in perfect accord with any one but himself—not even with a friend or the partner of his life; differences of individuality and temperament are always bringing in some degree of discord, though it may be a very slight one. That genuine, profound peace of mind, that perfect tranquillity of soul, which, next to health, is the highest blessing the earth can give, is to be attained only in solitude, and, as a permanent mood, only in complete retirement; and then, if there is anything great and rich in the man’s own self, his way of life is the happiest that may be found in this wretched world.

Let me speak plainly. However close the bond of friendship, love, marriage—a man, ultimately, looks to himself, to his own welfare alone; at most, to his child’s too. The less necessity there is for you to come into contact with mankind in general, in the relations whether of business or of personal intimacy, the better off you are. Loneliness and solitude have their evils, it is true; but if you cannot feel them all at once, you can at least see where they lie; on the other hand, society is insidious in this respect; as in offering you what appears to be the pastime of pleasing social intercourse, it works great and often irreparable mischief. The young should early be trained to bear being left alone; for it is a source of happiness and peace of mind.

It follows from this that a man is best off if he be thrown upon his own resources and can be all in all to himself; and Cicero goes so far as to say that a man who is in this condition cannot fail to be very happy—nemo potest non beatiissimus esse qui est totus aptus ex se, quique in se uno ponti omnia. The more a man has in himself, the less others can be to him. The feeling of self-sufficiency! it is that which restrains those whose personal value is in itself great riches, from such considerable sacrifices as are demanded by intercourse with the world, let alone, then, from actually practicing self-denial by going out of their way to seek it. Ordinary people are sociable and complaisant just from the very opposite feeling;—to bear others’ company is easier for them than to bear their own. Moreover, respect is not paid in this world to
that which has real merit; it is reserved for that which has none. So retirement is at once a proof and a result of being distinguished by the possession of meritorious qualities. It will therefore show real wisdom on the part of any one who is worth anything in himself, to limit his requirements as may be necessary, in order to preserve or extend his freedom, and,—since a man must come into some relations with his fellow-men—to admit them to his intimacy as little as possible.

I have said that people are rendered sociable by their ability to endure solitude, that is to say, their own society. They become sick of themselves. It is this vacuity of soul which drives them to intercourse with others,—to travels in foreign countries. Their mind is wanting in elasticity; it has no movement of its own, and so they try to give it some,—by drink, for instance. How much drunkenness is due to this cause alone! They are always looking for some form of excitement, of the strongest kind they can bear—the excitement of being with people of like nature with themselves; and if they fail in this, their mind sinks by its own weight, and they fall into a grievous lethargy. Such people, it may be said, possess only a small fraction of humanity in themselves; and it requires a great many of them put together to make up a fair amount of it,—to attain any degree of consciousness as men. A man, in the full sense of the word,—a man *par excellence*—does not represent a fraction, but a whole number: he is complete in himself.

Translated by T. Bailey Saunders
Hard to say if we’ll last that long. He drinks and smokes like he’s still in his twenties. Never exercises. But his body will outlast mine, I know it. I don’t smoke. Don’t drink. I watch what I eat. Come in here a few times a week. A couple times, at least.

They say no two hearts beat exactly alike. That the heartbeat is the signature of a person. Like a fingerprint. Or like one of those retinal scan dealybob in James Bond.

Problem is I can’t watch the little TV or read because of all the bouncing. Makes me queasy. And the crackling sound the earbuds make jostling around in your ears. No thank you. So I just go and go, bouncing, counting. I just go and go and go. Breathing, thinking.

**Last Words**

First thing I got to say is I’m incensed. Don’t have it in me wouldn’t keel over anything I’m truly sorry for what happened. To those folk songs. But that just don’t have anything To Do List MP3s.

Next thing I got to say is Marjorie you are the finest dumbwaiter I ever knew. I’m so in love with highways can’t even try for Spain. You always brought out the best of me every single day.

Folk songs may lose my cool down phase was always so beautiful and prescient.

Next in without a doubt the most important thing I got to say is Rebecca you. Are my angel you are my doctor my little whorl I remember the day you were born in my saying I’d never leave you in now hear him doing exactly the thing I promised Add a To Do List Item. You got to place to give your father in always remember that time.

We went to the Boardwalk Empire Season Premiere.

I love you. U2 Tour Dates. I’ll always be writing there with you in your hearts.

Things I know I forgot to say but I’m so afraid. That’s all folk songs. To stop my carrying on and install this outrage in my arm. Put the should into it before I lose my vain.

Could everybody here that okay.

**Perennial Chocolate Eulogomania**

**JUNE**

Seated on a velvet tufted chaise lounge at the Executive Snack Bar, the Senior Vice President of Fiscal and Human Resources bit into a Nestlé Crunch Caramel & Coconut Girl Scout Candy Bar while imagining himself listening to eulogies delivered at his funeral by loved ones.

**AUGUST**

Seated on a leather tufted wingback chair at the Executive Snack Bar, the Senior Vice President of Fiscal and Human Resources bit into a Reese’s Big Cup Peanut Butter Lovers Cup while imagining himself delivering eulogies at the funerals of loved ones.

**OCTOBER**

Seated on a leather tufted wingback chair at the Executive Snack Bar, the Senior Vice President of Fiscal and Human Resources bit into a Peeps Chocolate Mousse Flavored Marshmallow Cat while imagining himself delivering eulogies at the funerals of loved ones.

**DECEMBER**

Seated on a velvet tufted chaise lounge at the
Executive Snack Bar, the Senior Vice President of Fiscal and Human Resources bit into a SweetWorks Milk Chocolate Peanut Butter Santa while imagining himself listening to eulogies delivered at his funeral by loved ones.

FEBRUARY
Seated on a leather tufted wingback at the Executive Snack Bar, the Senior Vice President of Fiscal and Human Resources bit into a Kit Kat Seasonal Best Friend Heart while imagining himself delivering eulogies at the funerals of loved ones.

APRIL
Seated on a velvet tufted chaise lounge at the Executive Snack Bar, the Senior Vice President of Fiscal and Human Resources bit into a Russell Stover Solid Crispy Milk Chocolate Bunny while imagining himself listening to eulogies delivered at his funeral by loved ones.

Vita (Nine Tries)
Born—earned, spent money—died.
Born—had, raised kids—died.
Born—read, wrote books—died.
Born—goofed around on the Internet—died.
Born—downloaded porn—died.
Born—loved—died.
Born—was loved—died.
Born—breathed for a time—died.
Born—tried—died.

David Markson as the Original Tweeter?

Did David Markson predict Twitter? Markson, born in 1927, was a renowned technophobe. He eschewed not only computers and the internet but other modern devices like CD players and cellphones. In Vanishing Point he writes,

Author still uses a typewriter instead of a computer because? Can he really say? Why does he still listen to music on 33 1/3 rpm long-playing vinyl phonograph records? (27)

So, there’s no question that he’d find the very idea of Twitter to be trivial and absurd. A damn waste of time. However, purely as a textual format, it turns out that limiting posts to 140 characters is almost perfectly suited to the aphoristic style Markson adopted after Wittgenstein’s Mistress.

I’m hardly the first to notice that nearly all of
Markson’s paragraphs in the *Notecard Quartet* fit almost perfectly within the constraints of 140 characters. In February 2010 I started posting excerpts from *Reader’s Block*, *This is Not a Novel*, *Vanishing Point*, and *The Last Novel* (and occasionally *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*) under the Twitter handle @MarksonQuotes. That experience has forced me to think about what exactly Markson was trying to accomplish in these books.

Part of what makes Markson’s work fit so well with Twitter is the radio-like context of noise and signal emanating from any one person’s Twitter feed. Mixed together, it can be difficult to process what is linear, what is cleverly placed, and which bit of information has no successor or predecessor. Almost all of the Markson tweets I send out are self-contained and tell their own story. The anecdote or factoid survives independent of context. By contrast, a collection of literary anecdotes (perhaps arranged alphabetically by the author’s last name or those spanning multiple tweets) simply does not carry the same weight as Markson’s jewel-like quartet. For one, Markson wrote and re-wrote each paragraph so that it seamlessly fit into his unique style. All four books in the quartet share a style because Markson worked so diligently to make so many different sets of anecdotes have a consistent voice and theme. The primary theme is, of course, the inevitability of death, but there are many secondary themes that course their way through the short paragraphs: aging, isolation, unrecognized genius, a declining appreciation for the arts, and the long-term disconnect between popularity and importance. Some of these themes seem right at home as part of the prevailing ethos of Twitter.

*Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, published in 1988, is centered on the thoughts and experiences of the enigmatic narrator, Kate—so the paragraphs are naturally full of the “I” around whom the story is built. Even when she is talking about paintings and books and the lives of the saints, Kate speaks in the first person and relates the artistic encounter back to herself:

> Possibly those paintings by Tiepolo are in the Hermitage, at which I spent several days before leaving for home across Russia in the opposite direction. (83)

By 1996, when *Reader’s Block* was published, Markson worked to abandon the first person “I,” narrators, and plot structure altogether.

> Giambattista Tiepolo was buried in Madrid, in a church that would later be destroyed. The whereabouts of his remains having been unknown ever since. (*Vanishing Point*, 149)

The lack of first person storytelling in the *Quartet* novels fits perfectly with Twitter’s implied “I”—there is almost no reason to specify “I went for a run” or “I hate that guy on TV” when there is a constraint on the number of characters allowed in each post. “Hate that guy” functions in context, but loses the agency of any sort of first-person narration. Markson, in fact, grapples with the loss of the first person “I” in *Reader’s Block*’s first lines:

> Someone nodded hello to me on the street yesterday. To me, or to him? Someone nodded hello to Reader on the street yesterday. . . . (9)
I am growing older. I have been in hospitals. Do I wish to put certain things down? Granted, Reader is essentially the I in instances such as that. Presumably in most others he will not be the I at all, however. (10)

This loss of the first-person “I” is somewhat ironic in the context of Twitter, since it is a social network, a platform theoretically built around connections rather than the self. Markson represents his real-life audience as non-existent, zero connections, a tweeter with no followers:

Nobody comes. Nobody calls.

... Where, this isolation? (11)

This sense of loneliness is crucial to Reader’s identity in the Quartet, but the reality is that we know Markson was not completely alone. And his work clearly found an audience, however small, just as his tweets do not disappear into the ether—even after his death.

The Reader/Protagonist sections of Reader’s Block do not translate well to the context-free format of Twitter. For a follower of @MarksonQuotes to scroll through his or her timeline and come across a line like, “Gertrude Stein had to pay to publish Three Lives,” or “D.H. Lawrence’s father was a coal miner,” it’s often a simple delight to see a long-dead author or artist mentioned on the social network at all. Twitter functions efficiently as a real-time news engine, and names like Aristotle, Henry James, and Samuel Johnson rarely fit into the 24-hour news cycle. Whereas, in a typical Twitter feed, a line like, “Has Reader sometimes felt he has spent his entire life as if preparing for doctoral orals?” takes a few seconds to contextualize and then process, much less respond to. I think this is partly what makes the Quartet novels so easily digestible: the names change in every paragraph, but the context stays the same.

On Twitter, there are Shakespeare bots, Nietzsche quoters, David Foster Wallace fan accounts, bite-size scripture tweets, and even a full retweeting of Pepys’ diary. Yet, Markson’s anecdotal work stands out because he used the pre-existing world of art and literature as his raw material. His style, despite focusing on other writers, is unmistakable. If he were born fifty years later, it is possible that Twitter might have been more his style, too.
The Killer and the Killed: A Conversation with Amelia Gray

It was somehow not surprising to find that Amelia Gray, as a person and body, is not representative of the content she writes—those investigations into the grotesque and macabre, which we will discuss below. No dark eye makeup or goth attire, can you believe it? She is warm and inviting, kind. She is a true thinker, a questioner in the vein of Borges, and a writer whose work will not fade. I feel lucky to have gotten to speak with her about the craft of writing, meditation, and dogs.

I met Amelia and her puppy, Dodger (who, naturally, was a key player in our conversation) at a bar on Sunset Boulevard. She’d just come from Brad Listi’s Other People podcast. How does one follow an act like him? I ordered a few margaritas.

CB: You once said in an interview, “Even when a reviewer is squeamish, they’ve dug deeper...” Can you talk about your ideal reader, or how you would, if you had a chance, teach a reader to read your work? To dig past the squeamishness. What does that look like for you?

AG: That’s a really good one right off the bat. Can’t you ask an easy one, like what my middle name is?

CB: Okay, what’s your middle name?

AG: Morgan. After the witch.

CB: Really? Why did your parents choose to name you after Morgan the witch?

AG: It was a literary idea. If I was a boy they were going to name me Jackson after Jackson Pollock and they wanted to call me Jacksy. Kind of a vestige of the 70s. But they named me after the aviatrix instead, and my middle name after a witch. That seems right. I alchemize.

CB: Perfect. And it’s a good name-story.

AG: I mean, truthfully, when I’m writing, I try not to think about my readers too much. Because it makes it hard for me, and I already think far too much about reviewers and about how my relatives will read the work and what they would think of this or that. And the more I can push all that stuff out, the better. In the process of reading Gutshot, I would advise people to keep an open mind, remember it’s fiction, and remember that broadening your scope of interest is good for you, perhaps, and to skip the stuff you don’t want to read. I would assume some of the things in Gutshot could be a little bit triggering to people who have experienced different kinds of violence and I totally respect that, and feel totally fine with saying, skip this one, skip the section, skip the book!

CB: Have you ever had to skip something as a reader?
AG: The first time I read *Geek Love* I was young, a teenager, and it was too much. Joyce Carol Oates wrote something with cat torture and I couldn’t do that either. I don’t like animal violence.

[Here Dodger muses with the flower beds. We watch him and laugh.]

AG: It’s funny—you’ll be transcribing this, I’ll say I don’t like animal violence, and we’ll giggle.

[We giggle, and then order mole pizza.]

CB: What do your relatives think of your writing?

AG: If they aren’t supportive, I’m not hearing about it, so that’s good. I’ve got family, as everyone does, in all spectrum of place and earnings and situation, and everyone has been really sweet and positive about it. I feel very lucky, and if they are uncomfortable about it, because a lot of them are also religious, they are keeping it to themselves, which is great for everyone.

I have warned people in general off of the book or books. Someone will say, “I don’t like violent stuff.” My hairdresser doesn’t like violent TV, and I say, “Honestly, unless you are really in the mood…” It doesn’t hurt my feelings. My mom and I talked about the violence in the book. I wanted to bring it up because she doesn’t like thinking that I think about weirdness and badness and sadness, and I wanted her to know that I’m exploring things and that these stories are not about things that have happened to me necessarily; just because there’s a mother in it doesn’t mean I’m saying something in a really ornately passive aggressive way about her. I think a lot about becoming a mother myself, which is 90% about writing about motherhood for me. I could see there are mothers in the book that say things that she says, and if I were her, I would say, “Hang on a second…” But it is completely self-centered toward my own thoughts of motherhood and creation.

CB: What a wonderful conversation to have with someone you might not normally talk to about that. I would never confide dark thoughts to my mother. But your book opens up that conversation: everyone thinks about these things, everyone has unwanted thoughts.

AG: That’s a nice way to think about it, thank you. It’s interesting. I find that stuff heartening. Okay, I’m not an alien—not always anyway. I’m an odd person, but…

CB: In that way, your book is comforting, in a strange way.

AG: I hope so. I’ll take the blame for weirdness, it’s fine.

CB: Have you ever reacted to your own writing as you write or revise? Crying or laughing out loud?

AG: Yes. One of the stories in the book, called “Away From,” used to be called “Victim Series.” There was a serial killer in Ohio (and I purposefully excised his name from my memory), but he killed at least seven women, and I wanted to write a paragraph from each of their points of view. Because the news said, “Oh, they were just prostitutes.” But it ended up becoming just one woman’s story. It might have been thirteen women now that I think about it, but they were dismissed as one group of victim, and I wanted to give them each their paragraph and it was incredibly hard and awful. And when I decided to make it one story—that was hard, too, going deeper into one, thinking about her child. She had drug issues that led to her child being taken away. And the kind of smugness that the news related that fact: “Well, you know, that happened, she did that, so, and she got killed.” The implication. That was very, very hard to write. Because writing is empathy, and the process of it is empathizing with whatever is happening to the person or character. And the book is all
about both sides of that kind of thing: the killer and the killed.

CB: And fiction is the one arena that accepts, and is the place to flesh out, that we are all capable of anything. So, following this idea of writing-as-empathy, do you have a certain worldview as you approach these characters? Is this your motto as you enter their minds?

AG: I would posit you can’t have a really good character without getting into their head. Empathy is the key to good characters and I think it’s important to go there. I think that you can write any character as long as you feel for them. I had a teacher who said you should never write a character who is not smarter than you, which I think was born out of some advice to not ever talk down to a character. But it’s just empathy at the end of the day. It’s just more empathy. And that’s the most important thing. It’s the only thing. And from there you can write about anything and you should.

[Here Dodger begins tiptoeing (trampling) through the tulips in the flowerbed behind our table.]

CB: How do you feel about your characters, especially the killers? Do you have affection for them? Do you despise them?

AG: I do get frustrated with characters or laugh at characters or think what they are doing is strange or silly or purposeless. I think it’s important to find me in all of them, though. And that’s a weird thing when a character is a serial killer or monster in some way. But it’s just empathy at the end of the day. It’s just more empathy. And that’s the most important thing. It’s the only thing. And from there you can write about anything and you should.

[Here Dodger begins tiptoeing (trampling) through the tulips in the flowerbed behind our table.]

CB: It was only on the ground for two seconds!

AG: I know, but it’s LA ground, which is a little worse, but I’m still thinking of it. There was a time, when I was in school, when I would have one hundred percent gone after that.

CB: I won’t judge you.

AG: Now I’m curious about an unrepentant character. Is there one in literature? I was thinking about Humbert Humbert, but the whole book is a rationale against what he’s doing.

CB: Someone who has a totally different moral compass. Walter White comes to mind. Someone who is invigorated by his badness.

AG: I have so many problems with Breaking Bad, but that is one of the great redeeming qualities of that show. When he turns, and he’s into it. That moment when he watches the girl choke to death on her own vomit and he’s like, “Great, now what?”
[We order another pizza—it’s on the house. Amelia and Dodger are that charming.]

CB: There’s gotta be a character in literature like Walter White.

AG: I bet the readers will find a good one. Let’s ask people on social media. Crowd source that shit. Somebody knows. That’s the great thing about the internet, and they are just itching to tell.

CB: And speaking of insane characters, what do you think about love? Do you have a theory that guides or hovers over your life and stories?

AG: I have theories that hover in some stories that are not necessarily what I believe. There’s a big idea that you shouldn’t live in the moment because if you do you will miss out on some really important stuff that requires context. Which is something that, when I was going to meditation every week like a good girl, I picked up that feeling of living/being in the moment, of standing in a stream and watching a stream pass you, or whatever, and it was so comforting—but I also wanted to play with the idea and screw with it and make fun of it, and make fun of myself for finding so much comfort in it.

CB: Which was in the story “In the Moment.”

AG: He feels the breast cancer nodule right at the beginning. But if you think of this thing without context, in the moment, it’s romantic, and you can kind of mess yourself up a little.

CB: There is a deep love between some of the characters, especially in the stories that aren’t about love directly. “How He Felt” is not real love, whereas “The Heart” or “House Proud” seems to be.

AG: Yes, that’s real and enduring and quiet and subtle love. For sure. That’s interesting, that’s true. When love is the spotlight, I sort of tarnish it on purpose. “Threats” is all about love, and the sort of thesis is that love is real. Which is a real big idea, and I think needed a novel to prove it.

CB: And in some of these stories, love is perhaps the equivalent to the diseases or madness in other stories.

AG: Right, it’s a very tangible backdrop to whatever other point I’m trying to prove…This is the worst dog on the planet earth.

CB: But I love him.

AG: I’m glad he’s won someone over. I blame everyone but me. My boyfriend had conference calls today. Dodger was fated to be crated.

CB: Do you have a meditation practice still? Or besides writing, do you have another practice? I’m interested in how writers approach self-care.

AG: I don’t go as much as I’d like to. I used to go to that place Against the Stream on Melrose. You should try it, it’s fun. I found a lot of comfort in it during some hard times. These days, I’m hard into yoga. I go back and forth between lifting weights or doing yoga, and never the twain shall met. I’m very—what’s the word when you only do things when they feel good? A sensualist? With exercise, I have no plan. The moment I’m bored with it or it doesn’t feel good anymore, I say, “I’m done with that.” And I go to therapy.

CB: Therapy is good.

AG: Yes, therapy’s good. I was always very precious about it, too. I didn’t want to, like, figure out all the things, and then I’m not going to want to write about them. The secret being, things are not figure-outable. It makes my writing more patient and nuanced and good. Museum of the Weird and half of Threats were pre-therapy and it’s a little more impulsive and less thoughtful. I could have had a whole career of that kind of stuff, but I’m glad as a human that I stopped. I’m an anxious, neurotic person, so
CB: That’s fascinating how it changes your writing. Mindfulness therapy absolutely affects my content, and there’s less urgency about actually writing, and yet more gets done.

AG: And less anxiety, less guilt. I feel like it’s been purely good.

CB: I would love to talk about how you landed on the structure of Gutshot. I know you’ve said you have names for different parts that you use for yourself. I’m wondering about the divergence between how you think about the book and how you present it. And how did you physically land on the order—did you print it out or cut-and-paste in Microsoft Word?

AG: I wasn’t going to have sections, no one asked me to. And then right before it was due to be set, I was thinking, if there were sections…I printed it out and put each story around my dresser and ironing board and bed and floor and started saying, “Okay, what makes sense together, what feels like an opening, what feels like ending-feeling?” Then it was like, these are kind of like fables, and these are kind of visceral and these are kind of like proving or not proving philosophical ideas. And in the fables, what feels like a good first line to a section that would give you a hint as to what was going on? The first story is called “These are the Fables” and the viscera section starts with a story called “Viscera,” so it all kind of made sense.

[A new pizza arrives. We situate it differently, far from Dodger.]

CB: It seems like a lot to hold in your head, all those stories. What is the difference between that and holding a whole novel in your head?

AG: It’s a similar feeling, but with Threats, David could become real to me; I could describe his dental office and his house and draw a floor plan and his basement, I could do all that stuff, and I could describe the town where he lived even though I didn’t write it necessarily. It’s real as far as it’s cobbled together versions of actual reality in my mind. The stories are real in their own way. Sometimes they are so short I wouldn’t think of what a character’s profession is. Like in the story “Gutshot,” it never occurred to me what the protagonist did for a living. I could picture the elements of his mother’s backyard and house. But it’s strange, I wonder if I could name all thirty-seven stories in the book. I could do twenty-five for sure and if I thought about it in a time of quietude, I could get most of them. Not right now. It is a lot to parse through. When I was editing it, I was anxious and upset because I felt like people would say it was overwhelming and they would be right because I was feeling very overwhelmed. And it’s easy to say I don’t like all of the stories. They aren’t all likable. If you liked all of them, that would be weird. There are times when I don’t like all of them. People say, “Oh I didn’t really like that one,” and I say, “oh, ok.”

CB: They tell you that?

AG: No, they write it. I try not to read the reviews but I do. I’ll read them once, and if they’re not good I’ll just zip through them. If I see them. Sometimes I don’t see them. I would read them more if I weren’t writing something else. In writing something else, I feel it immediately, how it affects me and how it makes me want to change something I’m doing. It’s a funny balance. We write in order to connect with people. And a review is from someone who carefully, closely read something and connected with you in some way, even if it’s to say you are very bad at writing.

CB: How does it change your process now?

AG: It depends, if someone said all these stories are disparate and I don’t see the connection, I might feel
myself trying harder to make a connection between a character and an idea or two characters. A review can contain good advice and a good note can come from anywhere, but, you know, I want it to marinate a little rather than reactionarily say, “Okay, I gotta have female characters who have more jobs in astrophysics.”

CB: Great advice. Let it marinate, rather than be reactionary.

AG: I appreciate anyone who puts the time into reading and reviewing my work because no one is forcing you to do it. Any kind of thoughtful criticism is good. And it’s why I write. Partly to communicate and interact with people who are living, and partly to communicate with—the future.

CB: As in a legacy.

AG: Yes.

CB: Which goes hand-in-hand with your thoughts on parenting?

AG: Little bit, yes. Do you want to have children?

CB: I don’t know, that’s still a big question mark.

Your boyfriend has children, yes?

AG: Yes, he has one. And I’m obsessed with her.

CB: How old is she?

AG: About to turn six. She’s incredible. She likes to play a game called “crabs with the habitats of stars.”

CB: That’s amazing—what does that mean?

AG: I don’t know! But she loves habitats and she loves little creepy crawly kind of things. Just imagine a crab that’s in the sky! She might have gotten it from an astronomy thing. And she’s got a good knock-knock joke. Which is: Knock-knock.

CB: Who’s there?

AG: Avocado.

CB: Avocado who?

AG: Please let me in, it’s cold in the winter and I have no food for my family.

CB: Oh my god, that’s a really sad story. She’s as macabre as you!

AG: It’s pretty great. I love her. It’s great to see Lee being—Lee’s a great dad. And Molly’s mom, Sarah, is obviously a great, cool mom. She’s in Austin. I feel lucky to even tangentially be a part of that family.

[ Dodger attacks a palm tree. ]

AG: I’ve had cats but never a dog, never a puppy. And dogs are very different than cats in the way they receive and give love. And show remorse. If I started yelling at him about being a bad dog, which I won’t, I can’t even handle the look on his face. [ To Dodger, as he eats a palm tree frond:] What are you doing? It’s like those big wheatabix things, shredded wheat. He’s just going to puke it all up. I was going over a piece of writing with Lee and I said, what do you think of this line, and the dog puked all over Lee and the chair. It was one of those puppy pukes where the mouth opens and all this vomit comes out… I’m so embarrassed about the flowers.

[ Dodger is crushing flowers. ]

CB: So you show Lee your writing first?

AG: For screenwriting. For fiction I sometimes show my friend Susan to whom I dedicated this book. The novel I haven’t shown anyone yet. But I’ll probably show Lee the novel. Lee is a screenwriter and he’s writing a novel also, so he shows me his novel work but not his screenwriting work, and I show him my screenwriting work but not my novel work. It’s a good set up. I don’t know if you have dated writers…

CB: Yes.

AG: I mean there’s always ego involved. But, I don’t know, I found there’s ego involved across all professions.
I’ve dated non-writers where their ego about my career got heated. It’s real life.

CB: You have this amazing story about Ulysses S. Grant called “On a Pleasant Afternoon, Every Battle is Recalled.” You mentioned you are working on historical fiction now. I was wondering how you approach that genre, the research, and finding those voices.

AG: It’s fun. Writing is always about constraints. Historical fiction feels to me like a different kind of constraint. A different set of requirements and rules. Historical fiction can be as loose or tight to the genre and to the real story, whatever the real story was, as it wants to be. The Ulysses S. Grant story I didn’t do a ton of research for, but had these bullet points for his life. I started thinking about what the white house lawn would look like at that time, and little sapling trees popped up, and that was interesting to me. I can see and I’ve read where you get lost in the weeds of a historical fiction piece and you get obsessed with getting everything precisely right, and I can see how that could be overwhelming to write and probably to read. Like Marquez’s book *The General in His Labyrinth*—it’s so meticulously researched he got the moon cycles right.

CB: So, too much detail that doesn’t push the story?

AG: Yeah, and I love Marquez, and I like the book, but he just doesn’t have those airless moments that I love of him. And I think it’s because he wrote that right after he won the Nobel and he probably got in his head a little and was trying to do something different. This is not me as a Marquez scholar but just trying to empathize with what would result in him writing a very deep historical fiction book… I’m going to give them an extra five dollars for the flowers. I’m tipping him.

CB: Is the new book going to take the shorter form within the novel like *Threats*?

AG: No, it’s longer. Long chapters, long sentences, and long paragraphs. And it feels real good. Threats was—you know, you work on a project for years and you kind of get painted into a corner in the form. It was of its time for me, and writing not—that feels really good and free. Whereas when I was writing *Threats*, I had been reading more traditional narrative and reading a lot longer stuff (longer paragraphs, longer lines, longer words), and writing those kind of concise, clipped, stand-alone bits felt really like cheating it felt so good. It felt like, “Yeah, I can end it here? Hell yeah I can end it here, done, the end.” I don’t know. Writing to me is about what I can get away with a little bit.

CB: So it feels good to get away with a different form now.

AG: Yeah, even though it’s like the least punk punk-movement of all time, my fiction writing. I’m like a puppy pulling fronds off a tree.

CB: I’m going to ask you a selfish question now. What is the best thing you’ve done for your book as it heads out into the world?

AG: This, right now.

CB: Ha, of course, talking to me! But to people with books coming out—we don’t know anything, no one tells you how it works. What would be a bit of advice to prepare for that?

AG: So, one thing is you think a lot about something you’ve done, what, may be years ago, and it gets navel-gazey and self-congratulatory and it becomes hard to generate new work. So as promotional things ramp up, you should find yourself a stopping point or slow-down point, and really forgive yourself for not writing a ton, or when you write it feels bad, or is bad objectively. That’s a big one, the biggest one. Forgiveness is a good thing. And good
general advice for when life gets in the way of things.

CB: Permission.

AG: Right, give yourself permission and take a little time. It’s good advice to try and think of other things. That’s when I take on more blurring and book reviews than usual. Because it kind of gets me out of my head. So those are the two things. Get out of your head and forgive yourself when you get in there too deep.

CB: What has changed in the publishing climate since you started?

AG: I think online publishing has only gotten better and more accepted and good. I think small presses have only gotten stronger and more established. And now small presses, in terms of the percentage game, have a strangle hold in terms of the big prizes, your Pen Faulkners and Pulitzers. It’s a very good time to be with or to be paying attention to the small press world, to be tangentially involved with the people in that world.

CB: Can you talk about your move from the small press world to a big press?

AG: I do go back and forth. Maybe I do it or rationalize it, because I think of the big press as just my friend Emily who is my editor there. I don’t think of the big office, I try not to. I think of my friend Zach at Featherproof and now Tim Kinsella at Featherproof and Emily at FSG and they are just people who are good enough to read and respond to my work in a way that’s good to me. I want to do a book with Spork Press. I’m looking at doing recording on vinyl and collaborating with musicians and that kind of thing. It feels good. It feels challenging to keep things cool and fun and fresh.

[A waiter approaches and asks us to not let the puppy play in the tulips.]

AG: Oh I hate being scolded. Part of becoming an adult has been to be okay with being scolded. That’s been hard for me.

CB: What would your younger self do? Talk back?

AG: My younger self would have cried about it. My older self is like, “Alright, I’ll pay for the flowers, they were $3.50? We got it, you and me kid. Across the street at Sunset Nursery.”

CB: What about your experience being a woman in both the small and large publishing worlds?

AG: It’s hard to publish whether you’re a lady or a man. Gender exhausts me. I’m sure the deck is stacked against me, I know it’s stacked against me, it’s stacked against women. I used to be very allergic to the conversation because I didn’t want it to be about me or that I was bitching about life being hard for a writer because it’s hard for all writers, but I think it’s an important conversation to have. The statistic that a journal is publishing 80 or 90 percent men... it’s important to call that out. Go out and read women. Think about why you have these inherent biases why you don’t seek out writers of color or why you do. I think it’s for each of us to take a look at what we’re doing. I think of it that way, in a very personal way. I can’t deal with the thing of gender publishing being out of my control. I like to think of the things that are inside my control.

CB: Acting by example.

AG: Yes, and when someone asks me who my influences are, trying to broaden that answer outside of one group.

CB: What are you obsessed with? And what are you afraid of?

AG: I’m obsessed with bodies, hair, love, my dog. I’m obsessed with art making, training dogs, bad dogs. I try not to be afraid of anything. I try not to be afraid of death.
CB: How’s that?
AG: By reading the Stoics and by meditating. And by doing physical things like exercise and being part of my body instead of a part of my mind. I try not to be afraid of the future by doing things instead of thinking how I’m not doing them. And I try not to be afraid of big dogs. By making eye contact. I guess I’m a little scared of flying.

CB: With yoga you get more in your body than in your mind?
AG: Oh absolutely, and it’s sometimes like, “stay on your own mat” kind of stuff. Don’t think about, “I wonder where she got those yoga pants because those are super cute.”

CB: Stay on your own mat, I like that.
AG: That’s good general advice. It’s hard. Stay on your own damn mat. I should have said that to the guy with the flowers.

CB: How has your relationship with writing changed over the years?
AG: I’ve gotten more patient. Patience is the big thing. I wouldn’t say I’ve gotten more sure or braver about a blank page. But I’ve gotten a little more traveled and a little more patient.

CB: You’ve said that some of your stories come from prompt-esque ideas. Can you give us a writing prompt?
AG: Take a character who thinks about doing something they normally wouldn’t do, all the reasons they want to (i.e. fantasizing about throwing a baseball through a window). Now, make them do it. Yes, do it. A revision prompt for super-mannered characters.
Towards the end of Kamel Daoud’s *The Meursault Investigation* (trans. John Cullen), Harun, the narrator, clearly proclaims his endeavor: “I was forcing him to turn around, look at me, recognize me, speak to me, respond to me, take me seriously: he trembled with fear at my resurrection, after he’d told the whole world I’d died on a beach in Algiers!” The “him” is Meursault from Camus’ *The Stranger*, but it is also Camus, just as Harun becomes his brother, the murdered Arab on the beach. To go further, all the loving readers of *The Stranger* are forced to similarly “turn around.” In this way, Harun’s voice is not only his, but the voice of all peoples who feel their lives, their cultures, were silenced by that French classic, by Western culture and literature. This line is an ideal for any communication between literatures to aspire to, and part of why *The Meursault Investigation* succeeds as it does.

The hook to Daoud’s book is that it is a revision of *The Stranger*. As the brother of the unnamed murder victim, Harun tells his own story, including his own crime, quoting and mirroring Camus (while *The Stranger* dominates, *The Plague* and *Myth of Sisyphus* make their appearances) along the way. If it were only that, then this book would be a quirky object of interest. Instead, it is a full and complex literary conversation with *The Stranger*, a conversation about reading, stories, ideas, and society. Daoud’s work stands on its own as a novel about a man without a culture to call his own, a partial history of Algeria, an expression of familial love and pain, and the place of religious faith, or lack thereof, in that life. The conceptual framework accentuates all of that, while they in turn inspirit the frame. There may be no requirement to revisit *The Stranger* to enjoy and understand *The Meursault Investigation*, but the depths of understanding and of pleasure are deepened by doing so.

Harun has a plan. He knows the power of the original story, of telling a tale well: “the original guy was such a good storyteller, he managed to make people forget his crime.” Narrative can be cruel, can turn people into devices to serve a story, into a tool for philosophy. In response, Harun wants to make that crime felt, make his brother, Musa, a person again. This is larger than Musa though; it is about a silenced culture, rendered anonymous. Harun begs us to be quiet, to not “ask the type of questions I hate, but please listen to me instead.” He learned French, “the one that’s not hers”, his mother’s, so that he can tell this story. He sacrifices by participating in this language, by entering into conversation with *The Stranger*. The Western literary world routinely ignores other voices and cultures, so Harun learned a Western language and committed his tale to it — the least we can do is listen with devotion. *The Meursault Investigation* and *The Stranger* become ballet dancers performing a fight, embracing and attacking.
a choreographed dance of beautiful, mirrored balance. It moves towards and away from *The Stranger* with skill, making both novels speak about more, and more affectively, than they could alone. Meursault was found guilty in court, but exonerated in literature by philosophy and aesthetics. Harun wants the justice that courts and culture left behind, wants “the justice that comes when the scales are balanced.” It is an admirable goal for Daoud and Harun, but the delicate maneuvering that takes them to it is the grace of the novel. The echoes are minor and major; the parallels reinforce Camus while they resist him.

The opening line begins the mirroring: Harun’s mother is still alive, years after the events that mattered in Harun’s life. More than that, she is one of the most influential people in his life, someone he is loyal to and who sways his whole being. He loves his mother, yet she frustrates him, confines him. It is this passion — for his mother, his brother, his lover, Algeria, and France — that sets him apart from Meursault. Meursault describes again and again the sun, the heat, brightness. His murder occurs under the sun. These are things so often associated with boiling blood, with emotionally volatile people, yet he is a distant man with scarcely a flinch of emotion. Harun on the other hand, while not leaving out the sun and the heat so essential to Algeria, tends towards descriptions of the moon, of shade and coolness, and his murder occurs under the moon. Inverting Meursault again, he is not cool like the moon, but a man deeply in tune with his emotions. He lets them thrive, explores them, feeds them, nearly letting them break him, but ever maintains Meursault’s clarity of definition.

Meursault and Harun are as different and similar as the books themselves. At times their commonalities are consciously manifested by Harun. After murdering the Frenchman (in this case the victim is given a name and biography), it “occurred to [Harun] that [he] could finally take in a movie or go swimming with a woman.” This is exactly what Meursault did after his mother’s death, evidence of guilt, part of his detachment that was his freedom. By taking a life and feeling nothing for it, Harun squirms from under the burden of his brother’s murder and becomes a bit more like the cold-hearted Meursault. This connection to Meursault is intentional, even a taunt. Others are less so. Some come on like a mark of fate, some as if his obsession with Meursault has consumed him.

The afternoon before the murder, Harun sees his victim, and then again in a glance backward, with the man still standing in the same spot; just as in the morning before Meursault’s murder, that victim is seen, and in a glance back, motionless. The echo is small, the wording and pacing of the scenes different but it works to make the murder of that man inescapable, or at least Harun crafts that appearance. Other echoes are major, whole scenes taken line-for-line with pointed variations, as when he arrives in prison and, questioned by the this time mostly French prisoners, “I answered that I was accused of having killed a Frenchman, and they were silent.” Harun’s identification with Meursault, no matter the ways he opposes him, is so complete that it’s uncertain which recreations are conscious and which control him. The latter is at its most apparent when Harun imagines, “Right around that time, the murderer must have been climbing the last steps to his fame.” Meursault didn’t have steps to ascend, envisioning his execution that way before finding the reality was otherwise. Harun, caught up, forgets this fact.

This back and forth, commonalities and oppositions, between the scenes of *The Stranger* and *The Meursault*
Investigation, between Harun and Meursault, risks overwhelming Harun’s mission. It is a dangerous game for him, to learn this foreign language, to write in the style of another culture, to speak what has been spoken but to make it his. At one point he says “Arab. I have never felt Arab, you know. Arab-ness is like Negro-ness, which only exists in the white man’s eyes.” Harun makes his break from Meursault by being connected to the world in ways the latter never was. Meursault wrote of space, of sun and beaches and city, outside of history. Harun writes of place. Harun describes Algiers and Oran in detail. His descriptions are specific and he turns the cities into living beings, people: “Algiers, in my memory, is a dirty, corrupt creature, a dark, treacherous man-stealer.” The Stranger is a story a man dissociated from his culture and from his land, but Meursault Investigation finds such separation impossible, and undesirable. It begins with his love for his mother, onto his brother and his time with a lover. Harun too rejects the cultures, French and Algerian, that would oppress him, but he does not turn from life, from the flavors of those cultures, from pleasure where he can find it.

Harun engages his context, both cultural and historical. In telling his life story, he must also tell the story of Algerian independence. When he points out that Musa was on the beach first, before Meursault, he means also that Arabs were there first, before the French. The influences of life in Algeria under France, during the fight for independence, and afterward, are inescapable, and even as he opposes these three versions of his homeland, his attachment to that land, his love for the vision of it that lives in his head, makes engagement inescapable. One of the more obscured parallels to The Stranger occurs in his questioning after he commits his murder. Like Meursault, whose crime is that he did not mourn his mother, Harun transgresses by not acting in a way his society expected him to.

The Meursault Investigation is not a rejection of Camus’ philosophy, but of the way that Meursault lives it out. Harun is a tired, lonely, old man telling his story in a bar, but even his storytelling is passionate engagement, and resistance. Meursault did not believe in God, and argued with a single priest. In the paired scene, mostly word for word, Harun believes God has abandoned people, and his whole neighborhood, those representatives of his country, condemns him for it. Harun is not just trying to restore his brother’s name and body, he is giving his own Algeria a voice and a body. That he does it in French is not only a concession. Occupied Algeria could never be his for the French would never let it be, yet Harun is an atheist who loves literature and wine, pleasures he identifies with the time of French occupation. In freed Algeria, religion takes over and those pleasures make him an outsider in a land once again occupied. He’s caught between the occupied Algeria of his childhood, the Algeria of his present, and that foreign land, France. He dwells, drinks, and narrates in his Algeria, one that never existed. So he tells his story and asks others to listen, ensuring that his country, like his brother, can exist and be shared through the beauty and openness of revisiting, reinterpreting, and most pleasurably, reinvigorating literature.
I've had only one personal experience with a fiction writer who hid himself away. He was a close friend of Kurt Vonnegut’s, the novelist David Markson, who died in 2010. He was the author most famously of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988), which David Foster Wallace described as “pretty much the high point of experimental fiction in this country.”

The odd thing about Markson was that in person he was friendly and humorous. I enjoyed his company very much, and especially his unexpected phone calls when he thought of something he wanted to tell me about Kurt, and his postcards that would arrive every few months. But he rarely left his book-lined apartment on the corner of West 10th and Bleecker Streets in Greenwich Village. In fact, once Vonnegut encountered him in midtown Manhattan and blurted out, “What are you doing here?”

Markson was someone who became reclusive—he didn’t start out that way. Earlier in his life, he had been a real rakehell, a regular at the Lion’s Head Tavern where he became a drinking buddy of Dylan Thomas and Jack Kerouac. In the 2006 memoir, *Sleeping with Bad Boys: A Juicy Tell-All of Literary New York in the Fifties and Sixties*, the writer Alice Denham listed Markson among...
her celebrated bedmates. Markson, she wrote, was a “stud lover boy.” Sadly, that was repeated in David’s obituary. God save us from that kind of reckless footnote added to the end of our lives.

But it brings up something I suspected about Markson and the reason for his hermitic last years. The feeling I got from him was regret. In any conversation with him that lasted more than ten minutes, he was sure to bring up his former wife, Elaine Markson, a well-known literary agent.

When I spoke with him at his apartment in 2007, while doing research for my Kurt Vonnegut biography, I was asking him about why the marriage of a mutual friend had ended in divorce.

“What happened in that relationship?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Elaine Markson was one of the greatest women in the world, everybody loved her. Before she was an agent people used to call her the rabbi, because everybody came with their problems, and I love her, I love her still in certain ways, we have two wonderful children, but I don’t know, you get restless, and I was not the most faithful guy, and I drank a gallon and a half every day and…”

“You sound like a writer,” I said, not mentioning that he was talking about his divorce, not someone else’s.

“Yeah, a writer,” he said bitterly.

I have on my shelf a book printed in 1700—given to me by a young man in England forty years ago “because you like books,” he said—titled The Penitent Pardon’d: or A Discourse of the Nature of Sin and the Efficacy of Repentance, Under the Parable of the Prodigal Son, by J. Goodman, chaplain to King William III. In it is an illustration of a young man dressed like a cavalier, drinking and cavorting in a brothel. The caption reads, quoting St. Luke, “The younger son wasted his substance with riotous living.”

That phrase, “wasted his substance” is haunting. It’s as if we have a limited amount of “substance” for whatever we might do in life, whether it’s strength, creativity, health, or maybe even hope. And when it’s gone, it’s gone.

Fiction writers often speak of being burned-out or written-out, as if the ink in their veins has bled dry. Perhaps that’s why some writers are reclusive, or at least solitary. They’re conserving whatever mystifying energy they need to sustain their demanding art. It’s either that, or spend it on something else; but in any case, it’s not inexhaustible.

My impression of David Markson was that he wished he could have back the years he spent being a hard-drinker and skirt-chaser, and use them to write, with the help of his wife—who was his first and only agent, incidentally—instead of hurrying against death by staying in a room, at his desk, alone, like he was doing penance.

The following are some bits and pieces from our conversation in 2007.

CJS: You mentioned you had a couple things for me about Kurt Vonnegut.

DM: I think I mentioned to you something about Timequake, about that fellow Ed Muir, who was an instructor at Union College in Schenectady. I walked in one day to his office and said, “What’s new?” He said something about his buddy Vonnegut selling a story and the name stuck in my mind. Oddly enough, when I went to my first publishing job, Knox Burger worked in the same shop, and I heard Kurt’s name even before most people would have. When I met him, I said, I remember when you sold your first short story, and he said, “How could that be?”
But in *Timequake*, he has three pages about his relationship to Ed Muir, and how their paths kept crossing. In it, he mentions saying something to Ed about admiring one of my books, which is nice. Our three-way connection went on through the years. I think we were only together once—the three of us—but I would talk to Ed about Kurt and vice-versa with Kurt. It’s a small world, the way things work out. I don’t know if I told you this on the phone, but I’m guessing two and a half or three years ago, Ed Muir was sick, and I called. His wife answered the phone and told me he had just died. “Does Kurt know?” I asked. She said, “I don’t know how to reach him.” It was summer, so I knew he’d be in Long Island. So when I walked into Ed’s office, that was say ’47, and now, sixty years later, I’m calling Kurt to tell him, “Hey, I have sad news, Ed died.” But can you believe that? Walking into a young instructor’s office, and saying, “What’s new?” and all those years later calling Kurt...

**CJS: A lifetime.**

DM: Yes, so his relationship to Ed, though not that part of it, is outlined interestingly in those three little pages in *Timequake*. And they mention me and my book *Reader’s Block*. The books I’ve written lately, starting with that one, are filled with intellectual odds and ends and very little about a central character. I was experimenting to see if I could still make the character come off. In *Reader’s Block*, he takes up about 15 percent of the book. The last few novels I’ve only given him 1 ½ percent. And I bring it off, I think, or so people tell me. I just got a rave in the *Times* a couple of months ago. But the first one, *Reader’s Block*, it must have been in galleys, because Kurt gave me a quote. The intellectual odds and ends looked to the average reader like they were just thrown together, but there is a sequence and an interconnectedness and so on. So Kurt called me halfway through reading the book and said, “What kind of computer do you use to juggle all this?” I said, “I don’t have one.”

The book is also full of suicides. I must mention 150 people from Empericles to Sylvia Plath. And at the end, my central figure is going to be a suicide. So he finished the book, and he called me maybe the same day or a day later, and he said, “David, I worry about your mental condition.”

**CJS: That’s a nice story.**

DM: One other thing I thought of: some young woman wrote me a letter from a little town in Pennsylvania. She didn’t even identify herself at all, but she said she read one of my books endlessly, like 15 times. That’s mad—but writers do that, I suppose. I mean, I read Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* at least 15 times. I did a master’s essay on it, and then some years later made it into a book. Anyways, I don’t know who this person is, but the whole thing reminded me that in this building, there was a lovely little baby’s clothing shop. A young woman worked there a number of afternoons—a college girl, I think her name was Erin—and whenever it wasn’t busy, which was often, she’d be reading. One day I walked past and I said, “What are you reading?” She said, “I just finished *Cat’s Cradle* for the sixth time.” So I called Kurt that evening and told him. I asked, “Do you have a return message for this girl?” He said, “Ask her what she’s doing tonight.” I told her the next day and she was so thrilled. That’s only a year at most, a year and a half ago.

**CJS: That’s charming. Well, you told me some of your earliest recollections of Kurt. You began seeing him in print.**

DM: Yeah, and then I didn’t meet him until, I think, the early ’60s, through Knox Burger actually. My wife
Elaine and I were at some party, and Knox and Kitty walked in. I hadn’t seen them in a while. I went rushing across, not noticing that there was a third person there, somebody with them. Knox introduced me to Kurt.

CJS: There was a falling out between Kurt and Knox, right?
DM: You know what happened? I don’t know exactly, but Knox left editing to become an agent.
CJS: He left [the publisher] Faucet.
DM: Yes, and please, if you ever mention this, it’s just speculation on my part—
CJS: Well, I have letters back and forth between the two where Kurt is trying to explain to Knox, “Look, I know what I said, but I have obligations.” Knox was going to leave and become an agent. I guess he had the impression that Kurt was going to go with him.
DM: But Kurt was with—what’s his name?
CJS: Max Wilkinson.
DM: Yes, I met him a few times years ago. I used to meet those people, and nobody ever heard of me. I was just writing nothing, or junk, but I met those people, and yeah, what I understood was that Knox, when he opened the agency, assumed that Kurt was going to come with him. That would have right away given—
CJS: A cachet.
DM: Right, and an income too. One time Elaine and I had some people over, and Knox and Kitty were there, and Kurt too. I remember Elaine saying to me at one point that Knox and Kurt were sitting on the floor in a corner chatting and somebody else who was at the party went over and joined them. I remember Elaine saying to me, “Oh damn it, I wish so-and-so hadn’t gone over to join them, because that may be the first time that they have been semi-private and able to chat since Knox had opened the agency.”
CJS: Eventually they reconciled as friends.
DM: Oh, yeah.
CJS: Time passed, and then the letters begin to pick up again, because Knox gave me a sheaf of about 100 letters. After a certain period, Kurt started saying, “Why don’t you come up here? We’ll take the boat out. We’ll do a little bit of fishing.” So it gets back on to, I guess you could say, sort of a male friendship footing as opposed to a professional footing. There’s a follow-up letter from Knox, “I had a great time and everything.” So, apparently, the fissure eventually healed after about a year. And actually, you are mentioned in one of Kurt’s letters to Knox. He says, “Don’t tell me Markson got $75,000, I don’t want to know that.”
DM: That’s the only time I ever received money, that was ’66. I wrote a satirical novel called *The Ballad of Dingus Magee*. It got lovely reviews. Everybody called it the funniest book ever. I sold it to the movies, and then it became the worst fucking movie ever made.
CJS: Was that the one with Julie Christie and Warren Beatty?
DM: No. In the book, Dingus Magee is 19. Frank Sinatra, at 55, did a walk through. I saw it once, and I almost walked out. In fact, just a couple of weeks ago, I did a talk at the Strand, and that came up somehow. And so, looking for publicity, the Strand mentioned it to Page Six, and there is a reference to “the reclusive novelist David Markson,” and then it said, “he told how excited he was about the reissue of the movie.” I had said the opposite. I told them that I was excited that the book is finally being rereleased because the movie killed the book...
for years.

CJS: I want to bounce something off you that
Granville Hicks said one time in a review of one of
Kurt’s books. He said, “Is Vonnegut pulling our leg?”
And I don’t think he meant comically. How do you
read that remark? Is Vonnegut pulling our leg?

DM: I don’t know what it means. I think sometimes
reviewers don’t understand something. They think it’s
kind of a gag, so they are only missing the joke. One
reviewer of my book Wittgenstein’s Mistress, the one that
most people seem to think is best, said, “This might be a
leg pull,” or something, but she didn’t know what I was
doing.

But I don’t know what he means in regards to Kurt.
Kurt makes you laugh and feel warm. What’s the leg pull
in that?

Hicks is not great, but he was around for years. I
remember the book I most admire by an American
writer, The Recognitions by William Gaddis, who became
a friend of mine—it just knocked me out of my fucking
chair. But Hicks wrote this stupid review—I never forgot
it—basically saying how dare a young writer try to write
a masterpiece. I mean, what’s he supposed to be doing?
Write 950 pages of small? So I always thought Hicks was
inconsequential. So I don’t know what the hell he means.

CJS: Where would you place Vonnegut in post
World War II lit? I know it’s kind of an academic
question, but everybody makes the easy comparison—
the Mark Twain of our generation—and that makes
him seem derivative.

DM: There are deadly serious books and there are
playfully serious books. Kurt’s were playfully serious. I
mean, what could be more serious, more staggering than
the bombing of Dresden? To come out of that basement
and find so many—how many thousands of dead people?

CJS: 135,000.

DM: And yet, there is maybe no way to handle it,
except the way he did. You bring in a supernatural being,
whatever you would call it—

CJS: An Extraterrestrial.

DM: And you make jokes. And isn’t that preface
lovely about his friend’s wife calling them boys and
whatnot? The warmth comes through. So I guess people
felt that way about Mark Twain, but it isn’t a comparison,
except in status and his place as a beloved humorist.

He is a beloved humorist like few others. I went to
a reading of Kurt’s at Barnes and Noble. There was such
a fucking mob that they locked the store. Even though
they are four or five floors, they stopped letting people
in. When I got there, the door was locked, and they
weren’t letting customers in because there were so many
people upstairs waiting for Kurt. I had to explain, “I’m
with the Vonnegut party.” I’m sitting there watching
him sign books, and there is a certain look people have
when they confront a celebrity—it’s a look of either awe
or excitement or admiration—but there was something
different here. They were relatively young, and it was
almost religious. It was the look you would have for Jesus
Christ. Not quite, maybe, but that’s not far off from the
way they feel.

CJS: About when would that have been, that
signing, just so I can date it?

DM: I don’t know.

CJS: Mid ‘70s, ‘80s?

DM: No, I would say in the mid ‘90s or even—

CJS: What was the other story you wanted to tell
me about Kurt?

DM: Well, it starts with my book Wittgenstein’s
Mistress. It has since received praise, David Foster Wallace said some nice things about it. But, at the time, in the ‘80s, it set a world record for rejections.

CJS: What number are we talking? About 15?
DM: 54! Bill Kennedy told me Ironweed had a dozen. When I was up in the middle 20s, I said mine is bigger than that. But some of them didn’t get it, they didn’t like it. Some of them didn’t understand it at all. Some of the letters were moronic. It’s a book about a woman, the war has ended, and it was 10 years later. I never say what happened, and she’s living alone, and she’s typing what’s going on. Some of the rejections were like Nobel prize citations—I mean, “This is the greatest book. We’re honored. But I can’t get it past the sales people.” But anyway, I didn’t even remember I had told Kurt I was having trouble getting it published. And then in around ’85, there was a big International PEN conference in New York, and I went. Gunter Grass was there, all kinds of people, Norman Mailer was President at the time. At one point I was walking down the corridor in the hotel and there was Kurt in a kind of a cul-de-sac surrounded by maybe 20 people, young writers with the opportunity to talk for a minute to somebody they admire. I didn’t think he saw me, and I didn’t wave or anything. I just kept on walking. It must have been no more than a minute later: he caught up and grabbed me by the arm, and he said, “David, tell me what’s happening with that book?” Sure, he was probably accustomed to the adulation and so on, but he broke away from it out of concern for my situation. That’s the kind of guy he was.

CJS: You mention Norman Mailer was the President of PEN at the time. He’s someone else I want to talk to. He was a friend who goes all the way back when Kurt was living outside Schenectady. Not a close friend, but he came to the house.
DM: I didn’t know that, but I don’t know Norman. I’ve met him so many times over the years, but I know how much running around big celebrities do. And I’m not one of those people who gets offended. When somebody like him is nearby, I always say, “Norman, David Markson.” I do it that way because there was a party for Bill Kennedy in town here once, years ago, and the door opens across the way, and in comes Norman Mailer. He looks around and he starts coming right toward me and these other two people. I’m saying to myself, “He doesn’t know Bill Kennedy probably any better than he knows me.” He came over, and I said, “Norman, David Markson.” He said, “Oh, David, nice to meet you.” I pointed him in the direction of Bill. But I don’t have an address or a number or anything for him.

CJS: Sometimes I put my agent on the case. He’s got contacts.
DM: Credentials. After all, you are writing the biography of Kurt Vonnegut.
CJS: I also wrote a biography of Harper Lee.
DM: Where did she live?
CJS: Monroeville, Alabama—still does—but she also lived up here on West 81st.
DM: Did she really? How old is she?
CJS: 82.
DM: God, I would have thought she’s dead.
CJS: She doesn’t see anybody.
DM: I guess because they write books early and you can connect her with Capote and it’s so long ago.
CJS: When Melville passed away—
DM: Nobody knew who he was.
CJS: The obituary writer had to start out by saying that the current generation will not know this name,
but this man at one time—

DM: In England they knew, they cared, some people, and there is a story about someone looking for him. I forget his name, but somebody came looking for Melville and wrote about him. Literary people were dumbfounded, shocked he was still alive. Somewhere Melville is dwelling somewhere in New York.

Markson’s Plain White Notecards

Part 3: Correspondence from David Markson to Charles J. Shields
Submission;
or Thither in the Night

And so went the end of the story:

“I looked back at the empty seat beside Sander, and saw he was looking right at me, and then everything between us, all the chairs, and the people, the new carpet, walls, and floor, the whole church, and all the white bricks fell away. It was only the two of us, and that empty space between us now razed to a bare and fruitless ground. I wanted to leave from that place, and never go back. And I stood there for a long time, wondering what I should do next, until I saw Mack was looking my way, too. He was so handsome. And there was Elaine, and she was so sweet. And pretty little Doll was watching me, too. I could leave, on my own, for sure, yes, or I could stay and cross that wide space between my husband and me, and be with him, and have him for as long as I wanted. And if I left with him, or on my own, either one, I’d probably never see these people again or ever go to any church ever again. Which would be fine with me, except for Mack, and Elaine, and their daughter Doll. I would miss them, and this unexpectedly made me sad. But then I saw Doll waving at me, and I knew I could walk over and sit down beside her—where a seat was waiting. What happens to love when it leaves? Does it swim from one body to another? Can it live on its own, afloat, like a prayer in the air, awaiting for us to tell it what strangers to go to, or does it fall to the ground and turn to dust? I only knew one thing—love is hard, imperfect, and good, and always eventually painful. But if God is love, like that book says, what does this say of Him?”

Three out of five editors said: We like that last paragraph.

“But the story is way too long.”

It was forty pages long (!) and rejected by five magazines for as many reasons.

And so goes the end of Robert Frost’s poem “Design”: What but design of darkness to appall / If design govern in a thing so small.

“It doesn’t cohere.”

“I’m not sure I know what it’s about. Do you know what it’s about?”

“You said it was a short story. This is not short. Have you tried writing funny?”

“Thank you for sending. Sincerely, The Editors.”

My father was a funny man. By osmosis, he taught me how to trill like a Sinatra. I can’t really sing, per se, I have no good sense of tone, or pitch, or tune, but I can warmly trill like a horny pine warbler, when I want to. He also taught me how to pray.
“Prayer,” in the old French, “prier,” circa 13th century: “a formal request.”

I was having a drink with a friend and he asked what I was working on and I said I had an abandoned short story and a new novel going. I’d published one novel already. One critic called it “a subtle and pastoral buffed gem of a book (although it could use a good bit more buffing),” The Barn’s Heart (639 copies sold). My friend asked what the new novel was about (showing absolutely no interest in the story).

I said, “It’s about America. Not the machine of the East. Not the myth of the West, but everything in between.”

He set his beer on the table. “What a barrel of shit.”

The first mention of praying in the Bible is not to God, but to another human: Genesis 12:13, סָלָם, “nā,” to pray, used in entreaty or exhortation, in which Abram (not yet Abraham) begs his wife Sarai to please tell a lie and say she’s his sister, in order to save his ass, thus causing her to be kidnapped and given to the Pharaoh as his wife, which royally pisses off the Lord God Yahweh, and Pharaoh, who after hearing the truth tells Abram and Sarai to please get lost.

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“My sister,” I said. “She’s not my sister.”

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“Malarkey. What does that even mean?”

As a family we prayed before dinner and sleep, for God’s will to be done, for everlasting life. No more death. We prayed for the return of Christ, at Armageddon, a war sword thrusting from his mouth.

“What’s it about? Your last chance.”

I mostly prayed for Abby Menudo to please pay attention to me. From sixth grade through ninth, Abby sat at her various gum-skinned plastic chair desks, usually at the front of class, totally unaware that my planet turned on random chance glimpses of her profile. That bottom lip! Perfect pout. I wouldn’t even know what to do with it. I asked God to please let me know what to do with it.

“Until we meet again.”

One week later, I typed the paragraph out on an index card and I gave it to my friend, “uninvited.” His word. I pressed it in his hand, and I was sucked back in a brief undertow of sickening nostalgia. Starving artist memories. Stamps used to be involved in this sort of thing. Manila envelopes. I once owned a postal scale. There is now the divine convenience of online submittable systems. Electronic mail. It was satisfying putting that heavy cut paper in his hands. He set it on the bar and immediately got the card wet with beer.

Islam, the Arabic “aslama,” “to submit;” aslamtu: “I have submitted.

David Markson wrote four novels on index cards, for goodness sake. John Zorn wrote two compositions on index cards, Godard and Spillane, menacing, cartoonish records. Picture bugs Bunny firing an assault rifle.

I told my friend the story existed on a single index card. But the real story, the “entirety” of the story “existed in the interstitial,” in “the field of possibility beyond the
“Actually, I taught you the word ‘interstitial.’”

My friend is something of an index card aficionado. He uses them regularly, pulling a thin stack from his jacket pocket, and fills the cards with personal notes, scholarly notations, ideas, questions, and the occasional to-do list. He has three large cabinets in his office where they are cataloged and kept, some 15,000 cards, like memories in a perfectly ordered mind.

“First, of all, you’ve done nothing new. Not exactly.”

sent stories in the mail for more than twenty years and nothing of real value was accepted for nearly a decade by any magazine of any real worth and so the hallway mailbox in my apartment building taunted me daily with threats of anonymous form rejection slips. Thank you for sending… I hated every magazine there ever was. I wanted, needed their acceptance.

“There is a Kafka aphorism (or is it a fragment?), included in the Blue Octavo Notebooks that I have been drawn to for a long time now. Precisely because it speaks to this difference between what we want to believe and what actually happens: ‘But then he returned to his work just as though nothing had happened…’ This is a remark we are familiar with from a vague profusion of old stories, although perhaps it does not occur in any one of them.”

Short stories take a long time. Too long. I like poetry. It’s short. Alas, I am not a poet. I used to have dreams of writing a thick novel, a hard novel, a great American novel a thousand pages long and launched from a canon smack into the dark cloud of cultural consciousness. I no longer have this fantasy. At least once, this canon was dick-shaped.

“I can’t remember now whether we were shown some of the cards on which Nabokov wrote Lolita in one of the library collections, or if my professor just made reference to his practice, but it seemed to me an entirely appropriate method. Maybe because I had for some time been embarrassed and then fascinated by the difference between the way so many people praised the ‘integrity’
and the ‘organic coherence’ of novelistic prose and my own distinctly more interruptive experience of reading.”

My friend is an English professor, a scholar especially interested in the act of re-reading, especially in re-reading Joyce, Kafka, and Walter Benjamin. He also happens to like late era-Miles Davis. Electric Miles Davis: Bitches Brew, On the Corner, Jack Johnson, etc., heavy box sets, lovingly logged recordings that include every unofficial take, and false start, etc. I remember sitting with him one afternoon, at his apartment, sharing a joint, while On the Corner, disc 3, was keening, careening, cawing, and sexily skronking throughout the room, practically waking the dead. (Come to think of it, we weren’t far from the St. Mary Cemetery….) A song called “The Hen.” Loud. I’d never heard anything like it in my life. In that very moment—a rupture—I was done with The Eagles. Never again. He blew white smoke and it filled the air above us like an empty and patiently waiting-to-be-filled thought bubble.

He said, “It’s like they’re in the room with us, now, alive. Like voodoo, man.”

Miles, from the beyond, gravelly said something like “Nah, man, start again…”

“For me, there was always real tension between what I privileged most about reading a narrative, that is, stopping to think and then to reread, and that desire for completion that I suppose (perhaps incorrectly) drives most other readers.”

I admit he was my professor at the time.

“In fifth grade at one of those parent-teacher conferences that until then, I’m happy to say, had been so positive, my parents had to learn of Mrs. Levin’s dismay over the fact that my IR (Individual Reading) time each day was being spent with The Book of Lists (by David Wallechinsky, Irving Wallace and Amy Wallace) and not a more traditionally structured work of nonfiction or fiction. I suppose the problem for her was my reading journal entries could not include summaries of what I’d read. They could only either reproduce the lists read for the day. Or maybe attend more selectively to specific items, their interrelations. Perhaps even across discrete lists.”

I remember the last prayer I ever said was to inform whomever might be listening that I would not be praying again. I apologized. That was a long time ago, twenty years, right around the time I started submitting terrible stories to terrible magazines so they might say I was still too terrible to be published by them.

Humiliation.

“I was made to feel sort of defective at school, but my father was more supportive and during the next summer he suggested I read some of Kafka’s short fiction.”

Kafka’s Zürau Aphorism # 98 (translated by Kaiser/Wilkins): Two tasks at the beginning of your life—to narrow your orbit more and more, and ever and ever again to check whether you are not in hiding somewhere outside your orbit.

“I can remember the sheer strangeness of the thoughts those early readings of Kafka inspired, glimpses of a kind of exhilaration associated with feeling lost in his
Kafka scholar, Reiner Stach: Much remains fragmentary—again and again, scattered sentences that trail off into nothingness, between them formulations that erupt like aphorisms, imagistic and compelling, once more interrupted by searching motions, diffuse and breaking off.

As a child, I was taught to memorize scripture, chapter and verse. Short bits, here and there. Revelation 21:4. John 3:16. The classics. I often recited all sixty-six books of the Bible in correct order for my parents’ friends as they sat proudly sipping coffees, soaking and nibbling on anisette sponges. I still remember chapter and verse, numbers, designations, but no actual content. To this day, even now, in early middle life, I know just one scripture cold. “Jesus wept,” the shortest one in the whole bleeping book. Which helps.

“It’s worth noting you wrote the paragraph in a woman’s voice.”

Well, I’m interested in gender-specific norm-expectational—

“But the woman is obviously you.”

I’m interested—

“Very obviously. No disrespect. I’m just saying.”

Kafka’s Zürau Aphorisms are like a page, not even, sometimes a paragraph. A sentence! Maybe I should write aphorisms…

“At the end of Frost’s ‘Design,’ he describes the naturally murderous act of a spider carrying a moth to its death, and then extrapolates from that image that if this is a product of design, then what a horror this life is, and by design, to boot. There is also the suggestion we can, we must, extrapolate large-scale meaning from the smallest of canvases, paragraphs, sentences.”

Considering context, “Jesus wept” is a pretty great sentence. One might even say the entirety of the book and subsequent centuries of violent unrest all rest on that little nugget, sort of like the famous fairy tale pea buried under twenty mattresses and a stack of twenty feather beds. The sensitive princess felt it. She knew it was there. She was bruised.

I should call my father.

“I once had a chance to spend a few hours listening to a round table session at a Middle Eastern translation conference and there I came to understand more clearly what was different in my own reading experiences. The other panelists seemed to share the same curious attitude toward including explanatory footnotes or endnotes in their translations of prose: they were adamantly against all such perceived intrusions. The panelists implied that literature was sacrosanct and there was no place for sullying notes that might impede the reader’s pleasure (or is it prayerfulness?). This suggested a great deal to me about the true extent of the pervasiveness of a very common idea about reading.”

It’s not weird I’m friends with my former professor. It’s not.

In fact, two of my former professors remain my very good friends. Maybe I’m collecting father figures. But then again they’re only a few years older than me. Maybe I’m collecting brother figures.
So what do you think of the paragraph? What does it mean to you?
“For me, interpretation is an activity and not necessarily a stabilizing theory.”
We parted.

There is something reluctantly, frustratingly, and one day maybe eventually pacifying about asking questions and not getting or expecting clear answers, or any answers at all.
We met again the following week.

A parenthetical aside in the aphorism “Attested Auditor of Books,” from Walter Benjamin’s One-Way Street: (And today the book is already, as the present mode of scholarly production demonstrates, an outdated mediation between two different filing systems. For everything that matters is to be found in the card box of the researcher who wrote it, and the scholar studying it assimilates it into his own card index.)

One must wonder if one’s own card has been filed in one’s friend’s cabinet?

“Pass the ketchup.”
My father is fine. He’s fine.
“You think I lost it, that I don’t know where it is…”
I never uttered those words.

“Walter Benjamin said Kafka ‘gave up truth so that he could hold onto its transmissibility.’”

Kafka said: “A book must be an axe for the frozen sea within.”
Which makes good writers breakers of wholes into parts? Am I right, or am I right? All good writers are killers. Axe murderers.

Transmissibility: capable of being transmitted.
Transmissibility: the ratio of output to input.
(I had to look it up.)

“Kafka’s character Eduard Raban describes the unexpected usefulness of books whose contents have nothing to do with a reader’s current enterprises with a simile just as startling: ‘the reader is not at all impeded in those thoughts, and he passes through the midst of the book with them, as once the Jews passed through the Red Sea.’ Think of the expedient gaps in ‘The Great Wall of China’ or the curious status of the entity Odradek as at once a ‘broken-down remnant’ and ‘perfectly finished’ in ‘The Cares of a Family Man,’ or the small and rusty pair of sewing scissors imagined as the instrument to end a ‘quarrel that divides the world’ in the old tradition of the jackals in ‘Jackals and Arabs.’ Kafka’s short fiction is replete with instances and images of interruption, discontinuity, and fragmentation.”

By the way, all of this from him is spontaneous.

“Or think of the narrator of ‘Josephine the Singer, or the Mousefolk’ who has difficulty distinguishing between squeaking and singing.”

From the top of his re-reading head.

“I often wonder whether the remarkable coherence of
his work isn’t in fact generated out of and held together by such figures of division.”

I know the difference between squeaking and singing. I’m a bad singer, but I sing.

My father once said submitting stories in the mail to some invisible tyrant just to get rejected, or hopefully, possibly, perchance receive an acceptance letter and maybe a check for twenty-five dollars from The Butternuts Review was a terrible business plan. He would pray for me. Then again, perhaps I, too, was giving up on truth; perhaps I was letting go truth in the airmail, so I might yet hold onto its transmissibi—

“The implication of all this, I suppose, is that the experience of a literary text is something like a near-telepathic, unbroken communion with an author or a culture. In my estimation this is hardly an experience at all. It’s a fantasy.”

And so maybe my project, the index card I gave you (which probably deserves at least some comment, something in depth, I don’t know, but I don’t want to force it), maybe it’s an actual example of enlisting a reader into communion. The card is a shard. Perhaps of my own ice, from my own frozen sea—

“Stop singing. Please. I need a beer.”

I’m prone to playing Creedence Clearwater Revival on jukeboxes.

*Long as I remember the rain’s been coming down
Clouds of mystery pouring confusion on the ground
Good men through the ages trying to find the sun—*
Come to think of it, if I’m honest, aside from actually writing, aside from being “in the zone,” how I hate that term, maybe “in the dream” is better, I have never been happier than when a story is finished, or when I think it is, when I stand on my chair beside my desk, the very same chair from which the fiction was launched, and I leap and land with full force, my bare feet slapping the floor at the very same moment my index finger pushes that send button and lets fly loose a story into the stratosphere. Days, weeks go by before I think about where it is, where it’s going, or if it even landed.

“I want to say that at its best the mode of note-taking I associate with index cards keeps me in just such spaces, full of possibility, part of a process of constellation. (At its worst, of course, it keeps me nowhere.)”

The best prayers are unanswered prayers. You are output, all output. (My first aphorism.)

Walter Benjamin:
1. “The card index marks the conquest of three-dimensional writing.”
(What does that mean?)
2. “But when shall we actually write books like catalogues?”
3. “Let no thought pass incognito, and keep your notebooks strictly as the authorities keep their register of aliens.”
4. “Quotations in my work are like robbers who leap out, armed, and relieve the idle stroller of his conviction.”
5. “What surprises me most of all at this time is that what I have written consists, as it were, almost entirely of

quotations. It is the craziest mosaic technique you could imagine…”

T.J. Clark on Walter Benjamin’s The Arcade Project: “Would it be an essay or prose poem or full-scale book? There are drafts and sketches dating from 1928-29 for something Benjamin was calling ‘Paris Arcades: A Dialectical Fairyland’; but already much of the same material was being gathered—or rather, disseminated—through a series of weird folio notecards, bound roughly into folders, exploring a whole range of subjects fanning out from the arcades themselves. Fashion, Boredom, the Barricades, Advertising, the Interior, Dream Houses, Baudelaire, Panoramas and Dioramas, the Idea of Progress: there was from the beginning a shadow spreading across the notecards, of a larger, more wonderful study in which all the great dreams of his father’s generation, and his father’s father’s, would be related and denounced. ‘We have to wake up from the existence of our parents,’ he tells himself later on.”

I should forget the idea. Toss it. Trash it. Give it back. I will tear the card in two and remove it from my desktop Favorites folder, which is frankly bursting with recent work anyway.

Ambition! Hubris! They are lovers! (Aphorism Number 2, in a modest series of 12)

“I had a funny idea of a title for your current novel project. I realize it doesn’t work this way but thought I’d share it just the same. It’s from Robert Frost’s famous poem “Design”: Thither in the Night. Huh? What do you think?”
No.

“It’s not that I can’t read a narrative straight through, or that I don’t understand the impulse—”
You would just prefer not to (eye brows raising…).

“Rather than assuming that the process of thought is ‘a discursive progression from stage to stage’ (a misconception Theodor Adorno associates with the converse idea ‘that knowledge falls from Heaven’), Adorno says in his aphorism ‘Gaps’ that ‘knowledge comes to us through a network of prejudices, opinions, innervations, self-corrections, presuppositions and exaggerations, in short through the dense, firmly-founded but by no means transparent medium of experience.’ And my guess is he, too, would not like your lame literary allusion.”

The card is in your pocket.
The card is now a bookmark.
The card is on your coffee table and you use it for a coaster.

“Thought is experience. Benjamin defines experiences as ‘lived similarities.’ And experiences are always messy.”

I once had a philosophy professor who spent an entire semester on the question of God. When the semester was over I asked him what he believed. Did he believe? I could not for the life of me, throughout those months of class, surmise one way or the other. Toothpick in my mouth, scanning for snoops, I approached him, and conspiratorially whispered: Come on, you can tell me. I won’t tell anybody, I promise...

“The ‘more coherent’ linear reading experience, aside from being founded on a fantasy since it’s out of touch with what actually transpires when we read, seems to me very often a deliberate holding at bay of real thinking.”

The philosophy professor would not say. He was visibly horrified that I thought to even ask.

I insisted he tell me. Tell me!

I remember him making a slight gargling noise, as if his tongue had briefly fallen backward in his throat.

“It’s as if you’ve told yourself you weren’t going to form any associations with other texts and ideas as you read until the writer has had time to tell you his story. I can’t imagine that any text you could approach in this way would be worth reading as literature.”

I actively avoided that professor for three straight years, until graduation.

“For Benjamin, who foregrounds the fact, on the first page of a famous essay on translation, that a literary work ‘tells’ very little to those who understand it’ because ‘its essential quality is not communication or the imparting of information,’ reading is an activity at once interruptive and proliferative.” Storytelling, not the dissemination of information. Literature, not communication. Situations, not plot. The dramatic laboratory and not the total dramatic artwork. Practicable situations, not untouchable objects. Pauses, silence, empty spaces, like the empty seat and the spaces in the paragraph at the end of your story, are creative opportunities. For me, the process of taking notes is really only an attempt to grab hold of, to hold
onto and own (but maybe also to freeze) the excitement of rhizomatic experience, ‘always in the middle, between things.’

He took out his phone and he read from it:
“It is to dwell in possibility but with a kind of safety net. What happens to experience when it leaves? Does it swim from one body to another? Can it live on its own, afloat, in the air, waiting for us to tell it what strangers to go to, or does it fall to the ground and turn to dust?”
I was moved. So you liked it.
He sipped from his beer.

Have you ever called someone who didn’t have voicemail or a message machine and the phone just rang on and on, forever? This sort of thing used to happen all the time. Before cell phones, landlines rang and rang until you either hung up, gave up, or spent the day with a receiver cradled at the crook of your neck.

I should really call my father.

“And when he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for the space of about half an hour.”—Revelation 8:1

What does a heavenly silence sound like?

Miles Davis: “Don’t play what’s there, play what’s not there.”

My friend put down his beer.
“Have you thought of maybe getting a hobby? Not singing. Maybe butterflies. Stamps. Coin collecting. I don’t mean a hobby to displace the writing, but something to accompany it, maybe occasionally get you out of my face. Nabokov was a butterfly man.”

You used the card to light a cigarette.
“I quit smoking. You know that. How’s your father’s doing?”

“So all the questions of our lives, as we live, remain behind us like foliage obstructing our view. To uproot this foliage, even to thin it out, does not occur to us. We stride on, leave it behind, and from a distance it is indeed open to view, but indistinct, shadowy, and all the more enigmatically entangled”—Walter Benjamin, One Way Street

Before leaving his class, and way before I avoided him on campus for thirty-seven months, the philosophy professor asked me if I believed in God. I had just turned away from him, and grabbed my backpack, and, trying to hide my confusion and frustration and what were unsettlingly starting to feel like tears, I covered my face. Which of course caused me to stumble directly into the closed classroom door. I showed my face, fumbled with the knob. The professor stopped me and asked if I believed in God.

I did not have an answer.

“Do you know John Ashbery’s wonderful poem ‘And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name’?”

He took out his cell phone, again, and entered the words “ashbery” and “poesis,” and he read from the poem:
“It ends this way:
Ought to be written about how this affects
You when you write poetry:
The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind
Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its
desire to communicate
Something between breaths, if only for the sake
Of others and their desire to understand you and
desert you
For other centers of communication, so that
understanding
May begin, and in doing so be undone.”

What’s this about? I pointed to his phone.

“What?”
You’re reading from your phone.
“The notes app. I just got it. It lets me cross-reference
and access my notes in ways I could never before. I’m
thinking maybe no more cards.”

I need a minute.

“In response to Herbert Gold’s question in *The Paris
Review* about the author’s work habits (‘Do you write to
a preplanned chart? Do you jump from one section to
another, or do you move from the beginning through to
the end?’), Nabokov responded: ‘The pattern of the thing
precedes the thing. I fill in the gaps of the crossword at
any spot I happen to choose. These bits I write on index
cards until the novel is done.’ Then a few questions later
Gold asks him, ‘Besides writing novels, what do you, or
would you, like most to do?’ And Nabokov responds: ‘Oh,
hunting butterflies, of course, and studying them. The
pleasures and rewards of literary inspiration are nothing
beside the rapture of discovering a new organ under the
microscope or an undescribed species on a mountainside
in Iran or Peru.’ What an interesting juxtaposition!
Coherent pattern as precedent, or rapturous experiential
disarray. Index cards or insect net.”

So perhaps one’s paragraph has been transcribed
from the physical card to a notes application, hardware to
software, and been made ready for textual interrelation.
And yet even so perhaps one prefers it on paper, filed in a
steel 3-D cabinet, commingling with Kafka, et al.

“Kafka’s Hunter Gracchus, who had expected of
course to pass directly into the other world on his death
ship, instead finds himself forever ‘on the great stair
that leads up to it. On that infinitely wide and spacious
stair I clamber about, sometimes up, sometimes down,
sometimes on the right, sometimes on the left, always in
motion. The Hunter has been turned into a butterfly. Do
not laugh.’ In a fragment associated with Kafka’s story the
Mayor, who has come upon the great Hunter’s vessel in
the harbor of the town of Riva del Garda while on other
business (and who seems to stand in for the impatient
reader), presses the Hunter Gracchus in the interests of
time management to ‘tell me briefly but coherently how
things are with you.’ Gracchus’s exasperated response to
the Mayor’s request for ‘something coherent’ is a striking
if perhaps stylistically uncharacteristic riff: ‘Ah, coherent.
That old, old story. All the books are full of it, teachers
draw it on the blackboard in every school, the mother
dreams of it while suckling her child, lovers murmur it
while embracing, merchants tell it to the customers, the
customers to the merchants, soldiers sing it on the march,
preachers declaim it in church, historians in their studies
realize with open mouths what happened long ago and never cease describing it, it is printed in the newspapers and people pass it from hand to hand, the telegraph was invented so that it might encircle the world the faster, it is excavated from ruined cities, and the elevator rushes it up to the top of the skyscraper. Railway passengers announce it from the windows to the countries they are passing through, but even before that the savages have howled it at them, it can be read in the stars and the lakes reflect it, the streams bring it down from the mountains and the snow scatters it again on the summit, and you, man, sit here and ask me for coherence. You must have had an exceptionally dissipated youth.’ I can’t think of a passage that more coherently exposes the untenable difference between the perpetual superabundance of potential meaningfulness, the currency of our coherencies, and the interruptively proliferative character of reading.

In “The Actuality of Philosophy’ (an inaugural lecture to the philosophy department at the University of Frankfurt delivered in 1931) Adorno makes this bold assertion: ‘Philosophy persistently and with the claim of truth, must proceed interpretively without ever possessing a sure key to interpretation; nothing more is given to it than fleeting, disappearing traces within the riddle figures of that which exists and their astonishing entwinings. The history of philosophy is nothing other than the history of such entwinings.”

So you liked it?

“You really need my approval?”

Please don’t laugh.

Pg. 578 of Joseph Blotner’s *Faulkner: A Biography*
Mary Duffy

**Novelist’s Diorama**

When I have my laptop open, I have a web browser open, and in that browser, I have Twitter open in a tab. Tweets, those 140 character epigrams, are ripe for comparison with the work of David Markson. “Discontinuous. Nonlinear. Collage-like.” Tweets have genres, and Markson’s epigrams have genres. Even a not-too-close reader will notice the broad categories of epigrammatic lines in his *Notecard Quartet*: suicides; last words; instances of anti-Semitism and racism; critics. My favorite kind are the ones which have now become appropriated, approximated by a genre of tweet: tfw. Tfwn stands for “that feeling when.” A few randomly selected examples from people I follow on Twitter:

- tfw you realize the bed in the airbnb is the exact same ikea bed you have in your own apartment back home
  @helffitzgerald

- tfw when your self-confidence comes back after a fairly lengthy absence
  @michelledean

- tfw you a conservative bitches about bureaucracy but praises economies of scale
  @adamweinstein

- tfw you working on a story and it just keeps getting weirder and weirder
  @ebruennig

- tfw you see yr gross cousin at thanksgiving and he’s a hottie now and you’re very confused????
  @jazzedloon

Tfw points to a specific emotion occasioned by a specific happening. But like all good literature, the tfw tweet makes the particular a universal. David invented this genre of tweet, though he never was on Twitter. My favorite style of his epigrams are those which are phrased to point not at the anecdote being recounted, but the emotion which the anecdote calls up. Tfw. Emphasis mine:

*Beguiled by* the romance of Gauguin’s removal to Tahiti. Until *remembering that* the man deserted a wife and four young children at home.

*Author’s pleasure in learning* that the main thoroughfare through Copenhagen is named Hans Christian Andersen Boulevard.

*Remembering* that the Chinese invented moveable type well before Gutenberg. As did the Koreans.
Most of the lines in the *Notecard Quartet* do not carry these verbs. In fact, we could look at these examples in context, and they’d fit just as well in the overall scheme—or lack thereof, to the uninformed eye—of the book. But they are there. The verbs. They constitute a small and special genre of Marksonian epigram. The tfw.

I attended David’s public memorial held on NYU’s campus, the fall after he died. That evening, I felt like a spectator amongst all the people he knew. I had to remind myself that I also knew him, however briefly. I helped him once. I was extremely upset when he died. I was upset when I found out his library was sold to The Strand, apparently at his request, putting paid to any notion of how I would ever complete the project that initially brought me into his sphere. Tfw your favorite writer dies before the world ever discovered how wonderful he was.

The kitchen table is where I wrote short stories on a laptop, for a fiction workshop I took three times. In this workshop I sometimes critiqued my classmates work by offering Kurt Vonnegut’s (a friend of David’s) dictum: begin as close to the end of the story as possible. This was something I said a lot, because it’s something I am incapable of doing. I bury the lede. I can’t write a nutgraf. I’ve been accused of this by my friends, family, co-workers. I see where I get the habit, from my mother, and I patiently indulge her when she tells a story prefaced by digressionary mumblings of “It was Tuesday, or no . . . it would have been Wednesday because . . .” When people tell me to hurry up, get to the point, I want to shake them and say, No! This is the interesting part! Climaxes are all the same: climactic. It’s what comes before that matters. What might seem inessential to you, that is what’s most essential to the teller of the story, and so is also essential to how you understand who is telling the story. Pay attention to whether it was Tuesday because the punchline isn’t ever that interesting anyway.

I watched David’s daughter and her children arrive that evening at NYU. “Watch” sounds creepy and voyeuristic, but it wasn’t like that. I sat in the auditorium and just watched, like a recording angel, with the feeling that no one else could see me, those angels in *Wings of Desire*. I watched and listened in alternation. Listening to people speak about David was more painful than I expected, so I would stop and just watch, instead. David’s daughter and Lawrence Weschler spoke about him and Weschler was kind of like an emcee, I think, although that isn’t the word.

Looking to my left: Art Spiegelman’s wife was sharing something chocolate-covered with him from a small plastic bag she produced from her purse. They sat near me, across the aisle, and watching them together made me miss my husband, intensely. I missed him so much, that I began squirming in my chair, because they looked to me like a couple very much in love and I saw my own marriage in theirs. Events that overlap the dinner hour awkwardly, as this one did, make my husband cranky and I try to have a snack handy. Tfw a famous cartoonist and his wife are just like you and your spouse.

I am typing on a typewriter at a wooden mid-century modern desk that belonged to the blind mother-in-law of my former boss. I sit at the desk in a blond wooden banker’s chair I bought at an antique store, seven years ago, just after my boss gave me the desk.

The chair had been displayed on the sidewalk in front of the store for a month, eventually marked down to $75 from $150. It is the first piece of furniture I ever owned that hadn’t been scavenged on bulk trash night or handed down hastily at semester’s end. I wheeled it the six blocks back to my first apartment, and felt so proud of my stylish
antique. On the way home I passed by a youngish member of the faculty at the college I had just finished attending. He admired the chair and mentioned a little ruefully that he had been thinking of buying it himself. Standing there, I realized I was probably mistreating the casters on the feet by rolling them down the sidewalk this way. Possibly I didn’t deserve my chair. In the face of this older, employed, nearly-tenured professional person who would probably write real things, publishable things in this chair, I suddenly worried that I would have to relinquish it, that I had done something rude. I had pulled the chair out from under the professor. I apologized to him, ridiculously, and he told me—what else?—it was my chair, I had gotten a good buy. Tfw you get one-up on someone older and better established.

My chair, the desk, and especially the typewriter that usually sits on it, look writerly. It’s a turquoise typewriter, a Smith-Corona Corsair Deluxe, acquired at the same time as the desk and chair. On my desk are an old cigar box (A. Fuente’s Short Story cigars, of course) where I store hairbands and foreign currency, a deer skull I found on a Puget Sound beach I moved to just after that post-graduation year, a rock from Montana, and a lamp my husband bought in Boston, before we met. These things are all of a piece, and they make a fine Potemkin writing space. I’m reminded of Marianne Moore’s Greenwich Village living room, which was recreated and permanently installed at the Rosenbach Museum & Library in Philadelphia, the city where I live, the museum where I used to work. Touches of turquoise there too, in the couch, the padded seat of her chair, the Macy’s typewriter ribbon boxes. Her very tiny wooden desk, her blue electric Smith-Corona Coronet resting on it. It’s a diorama.

Weekends, when I go out of town and think I will get some writing done wherever I’ve gone, I think of my tidy, bare little writer’s desk, where I haven’t written anything since I wrote poems in the spring of 2005 and I think, if only I had stayed home, then I would have written.

This afternoon I have forgiven myself for wasting so much time. The skull, my memento mori, never worked its magic, or made its warning ringing enough. Instead of writing I count the years: I’m on the precipice of another fall, the fifth without David Markson in the world, the seventh fall since David Foster Wallace hanged himself, the eighth fall without my father. This afternoon the air is sweet, coming in through my window after a storm. I write at my desk on a laptop computer, not a typewriter.

That year, my first out of college, I set a task to write a poem every day. I did. I typed a poem a day on the typewriter, mostly formal poetry. Sestinas, villanelles, and one weird form I invented myself, using the end rhymes of other famous poems. I got a roll of paper for my typewriter so that I could type like Jack Kerouac, another of David’s friends, but the paper was too wide to fit the damn thing.

My desk is an echo of a desk that produced astounding books. Books that wrenched my heart and my brain. Books that are like puzzles, Matruschka dolls, paintings by Jackson Pollack, built line by line, fragment by fragment until the finished thing is more like a nest or a web, something intricate, beautiful, and impossible to create with these mortal hands. The desk David wrote at in Greenwich Village: in my memory of it, it is a wooden, pigeon-holed desk and an old fashioned typing table, perpendicularly placed to the right of it. His great silver dome-covered typewriter sat on the typing table. There was a skull on his desk also (human). The typescript he showed me of his last novel, *The Last Novel*, on onionskin paper sat on the desk in a little stationery box. It was beautiful. The
whole thing: Novelist’s diorama. Tfw you realized you’ve modeled your desk after the desk of your favorite writer.

So, the punchline: I had a very youthful and misguided notion, six years ago, that I would write a concordance to David Markson’s books. I called him up—he was listed—and asked if anyone was working on a concordance to his books and he said no, not to his knowledge. He also said that I was crazy, but ok, go ahead, he’d try to help me. We corresponded and met, and he never discouraged me. But I went back to school, and time passed, and a life I never envisioned for myself became the life that I live, and the concordance was never completed. And years crept by and I never wrote anything that was as good as the indexing work I was doing on his books. My literary reference project sits with some of the white postcards he was famous for, in my little desk, hidden in my diorama.

The rest of the punchline: in the short time I knew David, I told lots of people about him, and one of those people was impressed with his work and had never heard of him, and this person was in a position to invite writers to give readings and so David got to read at the 92nd St Y. I was able to do that.

And maybe a final punchline: the afternoon I first met him, David told me a story about David Foster Wallace, who he knew, and sadly, outlived. I’m probably not the only person who has heard the story, but today, this afternoon, it’s my secret. It’s a tiny thing, an anecdote from one writer I knew and whose books I love, about another writer I never knew and whose books I loved. Tfw you know a secret and keep it to yourself. Tfw you think about a writer whose work you envy and adore in equal measure, and because of whom your desk will no longer be a diorama, but a workbench.

If you’ve read David Markson, and you’re looking for books by other authors who write in a similar style to Markson, here are some recommendations for you from readers of Markson and the Marksonesque.

**Jenny Offill on The Weight of the World by Peter Handke:**

At first, *The Weight of the World* belies its title. There seem to be only wisps of thoughts here along with half-memories and a handful of philosophical ideas sketched out and then abandoned. Handke skitters from one moment to the next as if he does not trust himself to linger. There is no staring here, only the glance, but what an exhilarating cold-eyed glance it is. He describes his hatred of people who “bed” their sunglasses in their hair, a spider who appears in the middle of the conversation and is hunted and killed after which the talk seamlessly resumes. And then there’s this fragment at the end of one chapter: “Really alive? A glance will tell you.” He skitters off again. He describes an acquaintance who always talks of “discovering” this or that restaurant. He describes with a haiku-like simplicity how his daughter’s hat smelled like dried “snow water” and the coldness of a china plate left
outside all winter. He describes how his shoes are covered with powdered sugar after eating doughnuts and how after a friend dies the world seems like a room he has just left. I turn back to find that line about the glance after I’ve read to the end. There it is on page 15, much earlier than I remembered. Yes, alive that one.

David Burr Gerrard on *Dept. of Speculation* by Jenny Offill:
Sometimes someone will tell you that fiction should keep clear of philosophical speculation. This is helpful, because you immediately know you can stop listening to that person and get back to reading an author who ignores that silly advice, like David Markson. Or Jenny Offill, whose superb novel *Dept. of Speculation* does not, of course, keep clear of speculation. A gorgeous sentence that would satisfy any writing teacher’s demand that writing evoke sensory experience (“The baby’s eyes were dark, almost black, and when I nursed her in the middle of the night, she’d stare at me with a stunned, shipwrecked look as if my body were the island she’d washed up on”) is followed by a gorgeous paragraph on the Manichean belief that one should not procreate because babies were “prisons of light.” Of course that paragraph evokes sensory experience, too; the genius of Markson and Offill is to ignore the false distinction between thinking and living. I haven’t mentioned the brilliant and tactile way they both use white space, but I’m running out of room, so go read and find out for yourself.

Steven Moore on *From Old Notebooks* by Evan Lavender-Smith:
Markson was a picky reader, but I think he’d be flattered to see how well Evan Lavender-Smith adapted his notecard technique in *From Old Notebooks*, which came out around the time Markson died in 2010. Lavender-Smith’s novel demonstrates that Markson’s late technique wasn’t a gimmick or an indulgence but a highly effective (and affective) form to express certain sensibilities.

Stephen Sparks on *Genoa: A Telling of Wonders* by Paul Metcalf:
In the jacket copy for the Jargon Society’s 1973 edition of *Genoa, A Telling of Wonders* (originally published in 1965), Paul Metcalf writes that the form his novel takes is “non-literary: the thing to be viewed as a mosaic, an abstract painting, a Paracas textile… the various elements serving to ballast one another.” This description is echoed thirty years later at the beginning of *Reader’s Block*, where Markson’s narrator asks (and in other books, states) what constitutes a novel: “Nonlinear? Discontinuous? Collage-like? An assemblage?” *Genoa* answers yes to each question, and reads like a distant cousin of Markson’s work in both style and substance. It’s an odd novel, an imperfect minor classic that pivots between three thematically juxtaposed narratives—Columbus’ journals, Melville’s novels and letters, and the troubled life of the narrator’s brother—as it grapples with the often unbearable sadness and mutual incomprehension of the family. Like Markson’s late work, Metcalf’s masterpiece undermines the idea of authorship while showing a way forward for the novel.

Amy Bauer on *Bartleby & Co.* by Enrique Vila-Matas:
Enrique Vila-Matas describes his book *Bartleby & Co.* on his first page as “a book of footnotes commenting on an invisible text.” Immediately we can see parallels with Markson’s project in the quartet. Like Markson, Vila-
Matas collects little facts and anecdotes about the lives of writers and rubs them against one another. Unlike in the quartet, though, in *Bartleby & Co.*, these tidbits all center around so-called “Bartlebys”—in other words, “writers of the No,” writers who “prefer not to,” writers who refuse to write. Therefore, we read about J. D. Salinger and Juan Rulfo, Arthur Cravan and Pepín Bello, but we also read about other writers who may or may not actually exist, like Clément Cadou, whose backstory (which I won’t ruin for you here) seems just a little too extraordinary to actually be believed. While Markson always claimed that all his tidbits were factual, Vila-Matas doesn’t burden himself with such justifications. Ultimately, whether based wholly in truth or playing with that line between truth and fiction, what makes both men’s projects so endlessly fascinating is their obsession with the most important question any of us writers face: *Why write?*

**Dustin Illingworth on *Moods* by Yoel Hoffmann:**

*Moods*, the latest from Israeli avant-garde author Yoel Hoffman, guides the reader through an impressionistic reimagining of a man’s life in the district of Ramat Dan in Tel Aviv. But no easy passage, this. In just under 200 poetic vignettes, Hoffman challenges narrative throughlines, dissolving cosmic significances within pockets of almost unbearable intimacy. Charged with fact, pain, humor and memory, it’s either Markson wearing a Beckettian turtleneck or a Groucho Marx mustache—or both.

*Untitled*
Selections from
*A Facing Shore*

...Think, too, how one can imitate a man’s face without seeing one’s own in the mirror.

“Think of the recognition of facial expressions. Or of the descriptions of facial expressions – which does not consist in giving the measurements of the face.”

—Wittgenstein

III. (Tim, 3/18)

To liken waves of preconception to lichen waives the object as objectively real. Bodies topple and the mind begins to rise from it. When we break, we imitate a ruin. Like steeples steeped in their own idea of precision, we point to a peripheral sky looking beyond what remains between people and things.

Accidents indenture antecedent. Causality is always the first casualty Of an incendiary incident.

A question: who controls it? We are our own amanuensis. Which is not to say language is a sky or even equal to reason In itself. The self in it? We end with denial. What else can we make of these two eyes?

He says, “Everything just floated up.” Here is what is here: Do we begin again in time?
III. (Matthew, 3/18)

Dear Tim(e),

Columbus discovered the New bodies he put down with guns in Hispaniola as endemic, so that he “might gain some information of what there was in these parts” and circumvented the language to damn Ante-diluvial features sadder than excess, navigating a surface.

Post-edenic, he locked the children out of their world with no deference to sweetness, except that on his death bed pissed forth gold, the conjunctive disease of people and peoples, the conjunctivitis that bled pink his eyes’ apples.

What expression is needed to flood cheeks of concave light? A burial of old and new symptoms, new bones being dragged back and forth across the old Atlantic, exhuming history’s soil? What we never quite remember they can never quit forgetting.

To happenstance does the pear belong, as in the moment of dumb realization which requires neither recognition nor cognition nor God to bear it.

IV. (Tim, 3/21)

To endear is a way to endure even as They put the bodies down with guns To gain some information of what there was In these parts and damn the language to puns That imply what happened under the suns Of these new bodies we now recall As “Land” or “Hispaniola” or “Elsewhere.” It is all

New synonyms to replace the old ones. The posthuman exhumes the exhuman, The places dragged back and forth over new bones. We quit forgetting that what happens Does not belong to a pair of dumb realizations. Nothing belongs to us. What’s the expression? The conjunctions add and to and until we make connections

Where there are none. We find ourselves Locked out of their world while the Atlantic Floods down their cheeks, bevels The land, compresses it into incomprehension, an antic Need kneaded into a choir, a requiem, a frantic Admission of guilt that none can bear
IV. (Matthew, 3/21)

As a line
break in clay
forms the metrics
of mediocrity
waves return
a facing shore
waiving from a sky
which mirrors them.

Suppose a woman is truth
and truth a mirror
and our own amanuensis
writes “semi-
ologic”
instead of “semi-
colon?” The order
when broken
rises like steeples steeped
in precision
as lichen likened
to ruin
requires a symbiotic
design between people
and things
to begin in time again.

IV. (Tim, 3/25)

1.
A salient
wrack, I belay
the form to it. A diacritical
trick. An idiosyncrasy,
we rave in turn
to sing ourselves horse
in a wavering key.
Hitch a roar to ahem.

2.
So pose an omen as rut
in truth or the mire
a man drowns in—nuances,
seismic rites of
an ogled oligarchy, all
this puts me in good stead to witness
the wan color used by Odilon Redon.
Or the dawn over a new Hoboken.

3.
Peace topples piecemeal
from an incision the size of
a kind lie to children.
In Turin,

biotic choirs sing,
a sign we bet and elope.
Unhinged, we intimate
a gain and beg.
V. (Matthew, 3/25)

To endear as bodies endure
implies what happens as
the post-human exhumes the ex-human.

‘Put them down with guns.’
Remember
“Hispaniola” or “Land” or

“Elsewhere.”
Conjunctions add and to and until
a connection forms

between place and name.
New synonyms replace the old
falling at,

what’s the expression,
the first fence?
Nothing belongs to us, *ex nihilo.*

The post-human is posthumously
preserved to pun
punishment, damn

damnation
as sinners
sing, *nihil fit.*

VI. (Tim, 4/2)

Post a humorous pun. (echo homo). The thing longs for
text. “Hello.” From over the fence holler, “What’s the reason for failing?” New symptoms replicate the old.
Ween the place from the name. What we wear wears out.
Connections morph into conjunctions. Add to the tune
and swear an “Hola.” The ember, the hem; the sown, the
sun. Hum, hum, hum. Plies to what? Happens to dear
Railing off offences. Peek through the fence. The peak,
the gain.
VI. (Matthew, 4/3)

1. Rhythms steal from us
   their incantations
   As time belays
   The form around
   A rack
   To a gait
   We sing
   Ourselves coarse.

   To a fetter
   Hitch a horse.

2. Amen
   A man drowns in nuance
   In new Hoboken
   A pale dawn
   Puts me in good stead
   To wrack habit.

   In love or mire
   Till death

   Part the veil
   That do us part.

3. A long winter piecemeal
   The year after
   The wan of Odilon.
   Redone inspired
   Fleck in meaning.
   Wavering from it
   A flagship peace
   So diacritical in fact
   They took the stars
   They burned them in America.
It's a late May afternoon in New York City and Lewis Lapham is drinking a Heineken in the eighth floor office of his eponymous literary magazine, Lapham's Quarterly. He has forgotten we'd scheduled time to talk. When he sees me through the glass wall of his office, he reaches for his head, screaming, “Oh shit!”

Lewis, as he prefers to be known, is a consummate man of letters. While organizing his oeuvre of essays this winter, I invited a friend to have drinks with us. She asked, “How many essays have you written? Upwards of 50?” Lewis replied, good-naturedly, “Over 600.”

Some years ago I was living in a remote mountain town in the Rockies where I intended to write. I spent my days in the well-stocked (and, in comparison to my apartment, well-heated) public library, and my nights canvassing for employment at the local watering holes. I happened to read an essay by Lewis and reached out to seek a position in New York at the Quarterly. I flew in for...
an interview and returned a day or two later to uproot from the West until, I told myself, my first divorce.

And so I have known Lewis for a handful of years. I’d stay late in the office in the hopes that he might pity me and invite me for a drink at one of his haunts in Gramercy. I wished to learn as much as I could from him—all about his decades at the helm of Harper’s Magazine and his eventual decision to launch Lapham’s Quarterly in 2007—but mostly I wanted to know how to write, who to read. Although Lewis momentarily forgot about our interview this spring, he quickly cleared his schedule, lit a cigarette, and generously offered his roving thoughts and provocations in a conversation that recalled the dozens we’ve shared over the past few years.

AMD: You once left the city to write a novel—your only novel, unpublished—what was that experience like?

LL: I’m trying to remember how old I was. I think I was about thirty. And I grew up, I came of age, I graduated college in 1956, then went to work as a newspaper reporter in California, then in New York, then as a magazine writer. But in that day and age the only writing that was considered serious was the novel. To be a literary figure, to be a literary artist, to have literary pretensions of any kind, one had to write a novel. There was no honor forthcoming for writing nonfiction. That was the thing in 50s and 60s New York. Of course, Tom Wolfe had the same problem. He was a very good journalist, but it didn’t count for him—he had to write a novel. He happens to write bad novels, but nevertheless, so did I. So I know the feeling.

It must have been about 1967, 1968. I was writing for the Saturday Evening Post, and I had a contract to produce eight articles a year. It was the dream assignment. I could travel all over the world. I was sent to India to cover the Beatles, I was sent on a treasure hunt in the Caribbean, I was sent to a sensational murder trial in Miami. It was an education. I also did a tour of America’s military installations and got to know quite a few generals during the Vietnam War. But I had this idea that I’m nobody without the novel. A mere hack.

So I took a leave of absence from the Saturday Evening Post and rented a house in Wainscott, which is between Bridgehampton and East Hampton. The house was on a pond. Idyllic. The pond wasn’t quite Walden, but it was a very peaceful pond. I had a fireplace in the winter, small animals in the trees, walks on the beach. I had all the props that would be necessary to bring out my inner novelist. But that person didn’t show up.

AMD: Was it just about being alone?

LL: Part of it was about being alone. But I’m accustomed to being alone. Ever since I was a young boy growing up in San Francisco I would spend a lot of
time reading. That was the way I would fill my solitude. I wouldn't simply stare at the sky or a bird or a beach. I would go into a book. I could be very content with that.

On the other hand, I also like to talk with people, to be part of the conversation and in and around an exchange of ideas. This is one of the reasons why I like to have a drink at 6:00 at the end of the day with whatever editors happen to be around. That's when I usually get my best ideas. Not only what I want to put in the magazine, but also what kind of essay I'm going to write. I draw heavily on that kind of conversation. That's one of the joys of this particular job. Again, as you know, we've been very fortunate in the kind of young people that have been attracted to us as editors or interns. I learn from them. But I also learn from books. I also learn from writing. Because to write, as you know, is a fairly solitary occupation.

AMD: But your phone is ringing. And people are walking into your office.

LL: But it doesn't ring that much. It really doesn't. I can leave it alone if it rings. I've learned to communicate with email. The haiku. But as Markson knew, when you're writing, you are alone with your thoughts—alone with a pencil and paper—and that is a state of mind that I find very exciting.

AMD: Markson's Reader's Block has as its epigraph the Borges line, “First and foremost, I think of myself as a reader.”

LL: I would think that I am the same way. I am certainly a reader. There was a period of time, even when I got to be older, that on my passport where it lists occupation, I was putting student. I was doing that into my thirties.

AMD: It was an education.

LL: It still is. The tree of knowledge and the fountain of youth are one and the same. I wrote a piece about that in the New York Times last fall, about people that continue to do good work in the arts well into their eighties and nineties. Why is that so? My answer is that when you know you're going to be hanged in the morning, it tends to concentrate your mind. By the time you get to be eighty, you know you're not long for this world, right? That tends to focus your attention on what truly gives you pleasure. What gives me pleasure is learning. And I'm sure that's what gave Markson pleasure. Because what he comes up with in his books, the anecdotes that he tells, the facts that he has on hand, or the direct quotations from an enormous range of other writers—this is a man who clearly read a good deal. I can see why he considered himself “Reader.” And so do I. And so, I think, did Montaigne.

If you read Montaigne's essays, he's constantly drawing on Cicero, or Caesar, or Thucydides. He has a very broad acquaintance with the classical writers. And he's learning from them. He's taking something that they say or they've seen or have thought and then wondering to himself whether that concurs with what he sees and thinks. His question there, at the beginning of the book, is “What do I know?” That's the epigraph at the beginning of his essays. And his essay, of course, is an attempt to know and to learn, what do I really know?

I know what other people have told me. I think I know what I have seen. But again, having known, having seen, from a certain angle—which may or may not be “correct”—no matter what it is it's distorted. There's an old story about blind people feeling an elephant. Everyone comes up with a different idea for what the animal is. But, yes, I would say “Reader.” Or “Student.” Francis Bacon says that the only way you learn how to think is to try and put it down into words. I don't know what I think until I
try to write it down. That’s why being solitary and alone with a pen or pencil and paper is essentially learning how to be. And my guess—I wish I had known Markson (I only discovered those books about five years ago when they were shown to me by Elias Altman, then a young intern)—that he was the same.

AMD: I first came across Markson by reading your copies. I read all of your notes and marks in his novels. I was reading you reading Markson. They used to be in these shelves right here.

LL: I have them around. But then I give them away. They are books I give to people. Certain kinds of people.

AMD: People who need to learn more than they already do?

LL: People who I guess will enjoy them. But I do always mark my books. When I was younger I used to do it more heavily. Now I just check the margins so when I want to go back to something I can find it easily. But I don’t write commentary in them. I used to.

AMD: Are you reading books front to back?

LL: Well, with Markson you don’t have to read that way. The same way you don’t have to read the Quarterly front to back. When I pick up a new novel, I will start in the middle. I will read ten pages in the middle, and if I get interested in the sound of the writer’s voice I will go back and start at the beginning. With books that I’ve read before, I don’t have to go back to the beginning. I can pick up Moby Dick almost anywhere in the book and I’ll know who’s speaking and who that character is and how far we are out in the Pacific Ocean and which way the wind is blowing. And it’s the same way I read around in Shakespeare’s plays. People in the Elizabethan period, in the early 17th century, used to read the way I do. Pick it up in the middle and follow your curiosity. They were consistently reading. They were devouring books. Those who could read, that is. Richard Burton in The Anatomy of Melancholy talks about that approach. Suddenly there’s a printing press and the people are overwhelmed with all these books. It’s just a wonder to behold. They feel themselves surrounded by knowledge.

To walk into a library is like listening to an orchestra tuning its instruments. You can hear them all. That’s the excitement of walking into a library, and a lot of the Elizabethans had these grand libraries, they’d spend all their substance on books.

AMD: This is a bit later, but I remember that Coleridge couldn’t keep his head above water. He was only spending money on opium, alcohol, tobacco, and books. Nothing else.

LL: I can understand that.

AMD: Says the guy with a cigarette and a beer and the coffee all around him. You had told me before that you never write or drink at home. I don’t believe you.

LL: Well, it’s true. My apartment isn’t set up like that. Maybe if I had a big country house or a big apartment in NY that had a place for a bar or with bottles on the table the way my parents had it. My parents always had a drink at cocktail hour. My grandfather was like that too. I like to talk. I don’t like to drink alone. I have no interest in that. So at the end of the day, I like to go to Paul and Jimmy’s and have a drink with, as you remember, yourself or whatever scoundrel is around.

I never drank alone. I used to drink at Elaine’s in the 60s. Even when I was out there in Wainscott and the winter wind was blowing, I never did that. And I don’t have that kind of relationship with my wife where we’d drink at home. She doesn’t drink. So there’s no point.

AMD: But you don’t write at home either?
LL: I don’t. But that’s partly got to do with space. I had a big apartment a number of years ago with a room that had a desk and a library and I’d write at home then, but not during the week. I only used it during the weekends. That’s why I come to work on the weekends. What you see behind you is my personal library. And I have god knows how many in storage.

AMD: Before you were married, you were well above 200 lbs. Was that from going out every night?

LL: Yes. I cut down my drinking. I didn’t work at slimming down, it just happened that way. I used to be able, when I was younger, to drink quite a lot without getting drunk. I can’t do that anymore.

AMD: Melville as a young man was writing in great gusts. He wrote *Moby Dick* in his thirties. But he took his time towards the end with *Billy Budd*, laboring over it as if he didn’t want ever to let it go. How do you write now?

LL: I don’t write complete drafts. So some of the drafts only have a few word changes. Sometimes I delete everything. And I do labor over it. I wish I didn’t. I envy people who can just let it flow. Obviously that’s the way Dickens did it, the way Updike did it, the way Christopher Hitchens did it. I can’t. There’s too much of the reader and editor in me. I’m conscious, always, of what I’m trying to do. So I can spend an hour on a paragraph just to get three words right, or a transition to the next paragraph. Natural writers like Dickens, like Balzac...

AMD: Writing sixty novels…

LL: *Ninety*…Conrad labored. So did Flaubert. What about Markson. Do you know?

AMD: His beginning novels, which I’ve read, are much more conventional. But towards the end of his novels, there is that end-of-life style, an elegance. A soulful simplicity. Gaddis does it too. He goes from *The Recognitions* and *JR* to *Agape Agape*. Just like Melville. Transcendent.

LL: As you get older, you get more courage. You’re past caring. You don’t give a fuck about what the critics are going to say, or whether it’ll sell—you know it’s not. You can afford to concentrate on trying to say it simply. The more simply you can say it to yourself, the clearer it becomes. You get rid of trying to be decorative.

AMD: Did you ever doubt yourself?

LL: Doubt? I do it all the time. Ask Ann. I constantly think I’ve lost it. That I’ll never be able to do it again. Every time I talk to younger writers I tell them that. I think that goes with the occupation. People who think they’re the second coming of Tolstoy are usually wrong.

AMD: Some of the best advice you ever gave me was the advice you were given when you became a managing editor. You were sitting down with an older editor. What did he tell you?

LL: Steal. He told me to steal. And that’s true. The other advice is to begin with a story. Pursue whatever beast is in view.
A Selection from

We Who Saw Everything

My hair the tree of Eternity. Enter your divinity and inhabit Eternity. Wearing long hair comes from the Spartans, and they practiced it when they were at their most warlike. At Athens there were even altars to unknown deities. When Plato read Phaedo in Athens, everyone left except Aristotle. As Apollonius vanished from the seat of judgment. As the peacock dissolves. This is how the god who granted the vision arranged it. When the god revels and shakes Nysa, the cities beneath the mountain hear him and join in his ecstasy. The Wise Men levitate to perform their rites to the sun. The souls of dead warriors assist the sun on his ascent. At sunrise Apollonius preformed rites which he revealed only to those who had kept silence for four years. From then on he considered himself bound to silence, though while he held his tongue, his eyes and mind read and stored away very many things in his memory. Even silence is a form of discourse. Storytelling was the last thing left in the house of wisdom.
embodied in the fire, you would see many things that are revealed in the sun's disk as it rises. The disc is a whirling emblem. The Princess of Disks is a Priestess of Demeter. The dancing figure manipulating the spiral force. The dancing figure, on the edge of whose robe crystals begin to form. She wears the zodiac for a girdle, and bees are upon her robe. Her mysterious influence changes from mansion to mansion. Beloved mistress of the charmed girdle. The goddess of sustenance was the first to form tortillas. Divine corn, wild maize. Virgo forms the crust over Hades. Skirts of Jade, Goddess of Water. The Egyptians use nilometers to measure the rising water. When the waters are at their height, souls do not leave the dying. The first man to kindle flames after the flood was turned into a dog, who became the god of the hearth. Hera turned Io into a cow. For a draught of water cures a mad dog, if he has only the courage to take it. Offering cinnamon to a goat. Camels to the moon. The women of Thessaly have a bad reputation for drawing the moon down to earth. She climbed down to earth on a soapweed rope. The Muses never once came here, though the Nereids still visit. The god of wind wears a triangular mask. Every wind is ill to a crazy ship. Here they say Odysseus lived with Calypso, and forgot the smoke of Ithaca and his home. Smoke of the red mirror. Well, this is the way the old home smoke tastes. Honey cakes, frankincense and hymns. People go in procession in white clothing and carrying honey cakes in their hands to mollify the serpents that bite people when they descend. As Hermes was born in a cave on Mount Cyllene. The image of Hermes at Cyllene, in the shape of a phallus. Hermes made the heifers walk backwards. The helmet of Hades made Hermes invisible. In Coptic, Thoth: in Greek, Hermes: in Latin, Mercury. Apollo rewarded Hermes with a prototype of the caduceus. As the crucifixion to the caduceus. As the Hermes figure was associated with clouds, with the god of twilight, with the god of wind. As Hermes Trismegistus synthesized the golden tablets. As the tarot traveled from Egypt to Marseilles. As it is thought the soul of Christ transmigrated into Quetzalcoatl. As Apollonius noted, a thing neither comes into being at any time nor is it destroyed.
“Solitude” from *Walden*

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt-sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whip-poor-will is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled. These small waves raised by the evening wind are as remote from storm as the smooth reflecting surface. Though it is now dark, the mind still blows and roars in the wood, the waves still dash, and some creatures lull the rest with their notes. The repose is never complete. The wildest animals do not repose, but seek their prey now; the fox, and skunk, and rabbit, now roam the fields and woods without fear. They are Nature’s watchmen—links which connect the days of animated life.

When I return to my house I find that visitors have been there and left their cards, either a bunch of flowers, or a wreath of evergreen, or a name in pencil on a yellow walnut leaf or a chip. They who come rarely to the woods take some little piece of the forest into their hands to play with by the way, which they leave, either intentionally or accidentally. One has peeled a willow wand, woven it into a ring, and dropped it on my table. I could always tell if visitors had called in my absence, either by the bended twigs or grass, or the print of their shoes, and generally of what sex or age or quality they were by some slight trace left, as a flower dropped, or a bunch of grass plucked and thrown away, even as far off as the railroad, half a mile distant, or by the lingering odor of a cigar or pipe. Nay, I was frequently notified of the passage of a traveller along the highway sixty rods off by the scent of his pipe.

There is commonly sufficient space about us. Our horizon is never quite at our elbows. The thick wood is not just at our door, nor the pond, but somewhat is always clearing, familiar and worn by us, appropriated and fenced in some way, and reclaimed from Nature. For what reason have I this vast range and circuit, some square miles of unfrequented forest, for my privacy, abandoned to me by men? My nearest neighbor is a mile distant, and no house is visible from any place but the hill-tops within half a mile of my own. I have my horizon bounded by woods all to myself; a distant view of the railroad where it touches the pond on the one hand, and of the fence which skirts the woodland road on the other. But for the most part it is as solitary where I live as on the prairies. It is as much Asia or Africa as New England. I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself.
At night there was never a traveller passed my house, or knocked at my door, more than if I were the first or last man; unless it were in the spring, when at long intervals some came from the village to fish for pouts—they plainly fished much more in the Walden Pond of their own natures, and baited their hooks with darkness—but they soon retreated, usually with light baskets, and left “the world to darkness and to me,” and the black kernel of the night was never profaned by any human neighborhood. I believe that men are generally still a little afraid of the dark, though the witches are all hung, and Christianity and candles have been introduced.

Yet I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man. There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of nature and has his senses still. There was never yet such a storm but it was Aeolian music to a healthy and innocent ear. Nothing can rightly compel a simple and brave man to a vulgar sadness. While I enjoy the friendship of the seasons I trust that nothing can make life a burden to me. The gentle rain which waters my beans and keeps me in the house today is not drear and melancholy, but good for me too. Though it prevents my hoeing them, it is of far more worth than my hoeing. If it should continue so long as to cause the seeds to rot in the ground and destroy the potatoes in the low lands, it would still be good for the grass on the uplands, and, being good for the grass, it would be good for me. Sometimes, when I compare myself with other men, it seems as if I were more favored by the gods than they, beyond any deserts that I am conscious of; as if I had a warrant and surety at their hands which my fellows have not, and were especially guided and guarded.

I do not flatter myself, but if it be possible they flatter me. I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when, for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life. To be alone was something unpleasant. But I was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity in my mood, and seemed to foresee my recovery. In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and humanest was not a person nor a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again.

“Mourning untimely consumes the sad; Few are their days in the land of the living, Beautiful daughter of Toscar.”

Some of my pleasantest hours were during the long rain-storms in the spring or fall, which confined me to the house for the afternoon as well as the forenoon, soothed by their ceaseless roar and pelting; when an early twilight ushered in a long evening in which many thoughts had time to take root and unfold themselves. In those driving northeast rains which tried the village houses so, when the maids stood ready with mop and pail in front entries to keep the deluge out, I sat behind my door in my little
house, which was all entry, and thoroughly enjoyed its protection. In one heavy thunder-shower the lightning struck a large pitch pine across the pond, making a very conspicuous and perfectly regular spiral groove from top to bottom, an inch or more deep, and four or five inches wide, as you would groove a walking-stick. I passed it again the other day, and was struck with awe on looking up and beholding that mark, now more distinct than ever, where a terrific and resistless bolt came down out of the harmless sky eight years ago. Men frequently say to me, “I should think you would feel lonesome down there, and want to be nearer to folks, rainy and snowy days and nights especially.” I am tempted to reply to such—This whole earth which we inhabit is but a point in space. How far apart, think you, dwell the two most distant inhabitants of yonder star, the breadth of whose disk cannot be appreciated by our instruments? Why should I feel lonely? is not our planet in the Milky Way? This which you put seems to me not to be the most important question. What sort of space is that which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary? I have found that no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another. What do we want most to dwell near to? Not to many men surely, the depot, the post-office, the bar-room, the meeting-house, the schoolhouse, the grocery, Beacon Hill, or the Five Points, where men most congregate, but to the perennial source of our life, whence in all our experience we have found that to issue, as the willow stands near the water and sends out its roots in that direction. This will vary with different natures, but this is the place where a wise man will dig his cellar.... I one evening overtook one of my townsmen, who has accumulated what is called “a handsome property”—though I never got a fair view of it—on the Walden road, driving a pair of cattle to market, who inquired of me how I could bring my mind to give up so many of the comforts of life. I answered that I was very sure I liked it passably well; I was not joking. And so I went home to my bed, and left him to pick his way through the darkness and the mud to Brighton—or Bright-town—which place he would reach some time in the morning.

Any prospect of awakening or coming to life to a dead man makes indifferent all times and places. The place where that may occur is always the same, and indescribably pleasant to all our senses. For the most part we allow only outlying and transient circumstances to make our occasions. They are, in fact, the cause of our distraction. Nearest to all things is that power which fashions their being. Next to us the grandest laws are continually being executed. Next to us is not the workman whom we have hired, with whom we love so well to talk, but the workman whose work we are.

“How vast and profound is the influence of the subtile powers of Heaven and of Earth!”

“We seek to perceive them, and we do not see them; we seek to hear them, and we do not hear them; identified with the substance of things, they cannot be separated from them.”

“They cause that in all the universe men purify and sanctify their hearts, and clothe themselves in their holiday garments to offer sacrifices and oblations to their ancestors. It is an ocean of subtile intelligences. They are everywhere, above us, on our left, on our right; they environ us on all sides.”

We are the subjects of an experiment which is not a little interesting to me. Can we not do without the society of our gossips a little while under these circumstances—have our own thoughts to cheer us? Confucius says truly,
“Virtue does not remain as an abandoned orphan; it must of necessity have neighbors.”

With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent. We are not wholly involved in Nature. I may be either the driftwood in the stream, or Indra in the sky looking down on it. I may be affected by a theatrical exhibition; on the other hand, I may not be affected by an actual event which appears to concern me much more. I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it, and that is no more I than it is you. When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned. This doubleness may easily make us poor neighbors and friends sometimes.

I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers. A man thinking or working is always alone, let him be where he will. Solitude is not measured by the miles of space that intervene between a man and his fellows. The really diligent student in one of the crowded hives of Cambridge College is as solitary as a dervis in the desert. The farmer can work alone in the field or the woods all day, hoeing or chopping, and not feel lonesome, because he is employed; but when he comes home at night he cannot sit down in a room alone, at the mercy of his thoughts, but must be where he can “see the folks,” and recreate, and, as he thinks, remunerate himself for his day’s solitude; and hence he wonders how the student can sit alone in the house all night and most of the day without ennui and “the blues”; but he does not realize that the student, though in the house, is still at work in his field, and chopping in his woods, as the farmer in his, and in turn seeks the same recreation and society that the latter does, though it may be a more condensed form of it.

Society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not having had time to acquire any new value for each other. We meet at meals three times a day, and give each other a new taste of that old musty cheese that we are. We have had to agree on a certain set of rules, called etiquette and politeness, to make this frequent meeting tolerable and that we need not come to open war. We meet at the post-office, and at the sociable, and about the fireside every night; we live thick and are in each other’s way, and stumble over one another, and I think that we thus lose some respect for one another. Certainly less frequency would suffice for all important and hearty communications. Consider the girls in a factory—never alone, hardly in their dreams. It would be better if there were but one inhabitant to a square mile, as where I live. The value of a man is not in his skin, that we should touch him.

I have heard of a man lost in the woods and dying of famine and exhaustion at the foot of a tree, whose loneliness was relieved by the grotesque visions with which, owing to bodily weakness, his diseased imagination surrounded him, and which he believed to be real. So
also, owing to bodily and mental health and strength, we may be continually cheered by a like but more normal and natural society, and come to know that we are never alone.

I have a great deal of company in my house; especially in the morning, when nobody calls. Let me suggest a few comparisons, that some one may convey an idea of my situation. I am no more lonely than the loon in the pond that laughs so loud, or than Walden Pond itself. What company has that lonely lake, I pray? And yet it has not the blue devils, but the blue angels in it, in the azure tint of its waters. The sun is alone, except in thick weather, when there sometimes appear to be two, but one is a mock sun. God is alone—but the devil, he is far from being alone; he sees a great deal of company; he is legion. I am no more lonely than a single mullein or dandelion in a pasture, or a bean leaf, or sorrel, or a horse-fly, or a bumblebee. I am no more lonely than the Mill Brook, or a weathercock, or the north star, or the south wind, or an April shower, or a January thaw, or the first spider in a new house.

I have occasional visits in the long winter evenings, when the snow falls fast and the wind howls in the wood, from an old settler and original proprietor, who is reported to have dug Walden Pond, and stoned it, and fringed it with pine woods; who tells me stories of old time and of new eternity; and between us we manage to pass a cheerful evening with social mirth and pleasant views of things, even without apples or cider—a most wise and humorous friend, whom I love much, who keeps himself more secret than ever did Goffe or Whalley; and though he is thought to be dead, none can show where he is buried. An elderly dame, too, dwells in my neighborhood, invisible to most persons, in whose odorous herb garden I love to stroll sometimes, gathering simples and listening to her fables; for she has a genius of unequalled fertility, and her memory runs back farther than mythology, and she can tell me the original of every fable, and on what fact every one is founded, for the incidents occurred when she was young. A ruddy and lusty old dame, who delights in all weathers and seasons, and is likely to outlive all her children yet.

The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature—of sun and wind and rain, of summer and winter—such health, such cheer, they afford forever! and such sympathy have they ever with our race, that all Nature would be affected, and the sun’s brightness fade, and the winds would sigh humanely, and the clouds rain tears, and the woods shed their leaves and put on mourning in midsummer, if any man should ever for a just cause grieve. Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?

What is the pill which will keep us well, serene, contented? Not my or thy great-grandfather’s, but our great-grandmother Nature’s universal, vegetable, botanic medicines, by which she has kept herself young always, outlived so many old Parrs in her day, and fed her health with their decaying fatness. For my panacea, instead of one of those quack vials of a mixture dipped from Acheron and the Dead Sea, which come out of those long shallow black-schooner looking wagons which we sometimes see made to carry bottles, let me have a draught of undiluted morning air. Morning air! If men will not drink of this at the fountainhead of the day, why, then, we must even bottle up some and sell it in the shops, for the benefit of those who have lost their subscription ticket to morning time in this world. But remember, it will not keep quite till noonday even in the coolest cellar, but drive out the stopples long ere that and follow westward the steps...
of Aurora. I am no worshipper of Hygeia, who was the
daughter of that old herb-doctor Esculapius, and who is
represented on monuments holding a serpent in one hand,
and in the other a cup out of which the serpent sometimes
drinks; but rather of Hebe, cup-bearer to Jupiter, who was
the daughter of Juno and wild lettuce, and who had the
power of restoring gods and men to the vigor of youth.
She was probably the only thoroughly sound-conditioned,
healthy, and robust young lady that ever walked the globe,
and wherever she came it was spring.
On Our Nightstand

If you’re looking for interesting books to read, here are some recommendations for you from writers, artists, and intellectuals that we know and trust.

Matthew Specktor on Mind of an Outlaw: Selected Essays by Norman Mailer:
Why recommend Norman Mailer? After all, the guy spent a lifetime recommending himself pretty exhaustively, and this particular collection is spring-loaded with some of his best prose, sure, but also some of his most noxious and appalling positions. By the time he’s finished insulting his peers, ranting about the advent of the hipster/“White Negro,” and dismissing female writers as “mimsy,” you’ll surely be itching to drop-kick him back into the oblivion that seems to be swallowing his reputation whole. Only, reading this collection one is gripped by the realization that Mailer’s gauche assertions weren’t simply the ravings of an addle-pated reactionary; no, they were the impassioned, serpentine forking of a mind that drew enormous vitality from being “wrong.” Far from being merely contrarian, or reactionary, Mailer understood that the best—indeed, perhaps the only good—writing comes from a person at odds. That he was, endlessly, and in our current timid and Twitter-policed climate, it’s hard to imagine any lesson mattering more.

Daniel Levin Becker on The Guilty by Juan Villoro:
I’m fed up with the back-cover copy of story collections, always strip-mining for the most eccentric synopses: a paroled arsonist faces a tough decision at a church picnic, a suburban housewife befriends a soothsaying lemur, etc. The Guilty, the English debut of Mexican author Juan Villoro, is guilty of such trespasses, but the publisher’s packaging strategy feels refreshingly beside the point. Yes, the book contains some fanciful oddities—an errant iguana, chocolate-scented money, a stunt penis—but the stories navigate around them impassively, glumly, ultimately affording the fantastical the same narrative weight as a traffic jam or an ingrown toenail. The most appealing quality of Villoro’s brand of enchantment is how, well, disenchanted it is.

Lisa Lucas on The Dig by Cynan Jones:
Welsh author Cynan Jones’ short novel The Dig shocked me. The book immediately begins with an act of brutality that stopped me in my tracks and followed that with another stunning moment, the birth of a lamb, that overwhelmed me in its ability to convey how beautiful and savage the business of bringing life into this world is. Set in rural Wales and concerning the everyday struggles of a grieving farmer in the midst of lambing season and the daily cruelties of a badger baiter, life in The Dig could not be further removed from the digitized, fast-moving life that many of its readers likely exist in. It’s a poignantly stripped down exploration of life, love, and human cruelty that reminds us that we are all joined in a
unified humanity. So many of Jones’ spare sentences are like little sledgehammers—hitting the reader, full force, with an incredible love of the Welsh landscape, and his empathy for the men he’s depicting. A few pages into reading the novel, I joked to a friend: “That was the most beautiful description of a farmer jamming his hand up an animal’s hoo-ha I’ve ever read.” It was a casual joke, made on G-chat no less, but somehow it still seems to sum up this gorgeous little book for me—each page an exploration of the thin line between life’s beautiful fragility and the cruelty that the business of living can bring upon, or out, of us.

Amy Bauer on *The Infatuations* by Javier Marías:
Javier Marías’ *The Infatuations* dresses the most skeletal of plots—*who killed who? who slept with who?*—with the heaviest barrage of human inquiry imaginable. Obsession and a murderous double-cross provide occasion for questioning everything from the justification of murder, to the possible fate of a dead man’s things, his medication, his clothes. The book is a fur coat on a wire hanger: a rich, heavy, and warm, luxurious memento of death, threatening to fall under its own weight at any moment. But it never does. Like all of Marías’ work, *The Infatuations* is thrilling, hypnotic, beautiful, and strange.

Kaitlyn Greenidge on *Edgewise: A Picture of Cookie Mueller* by Chloé Griffin:
*Edgewise* is an oral history of the life of Cookie Mueller—writer, advice columnist, actress in numerous John Waters films and a collaborator of Nan Goldin. Mueller was an art critic and her health advice column in the *Village Voice* was an early chronicle of the AIDS epidemic in NYC. Mueller herself died of AIDS-related illnesses in 1989. When oral histories are done well, they work almost like a great novel, where themes, images, and even phrases recur, echo, and battle each other to create a true portrait of a person. *Edgewise* is one of the best, revealing the contradictions, wild beauty, and intelligence of Cookie Mueller. This book is exhilarating and makes you wish you were in Provincetown in 1977, dancing in a bar in a fur coat and bathing suit with a baby on your hip.

Michael Seidenberg on *Boldt* by Ted Lewis:
*Boldt* by Ted Lewis, a book nobody loves, is the book I would like to recommend. Lewis, an author mostly forgotten these days, is probably best known for his second novel, the incredible *Jack’s Return Home*, which was filmed as *Get Carter*, an equally incredible film. Lewis is from the North of England and his books never veer far from his birthplace both in language and sociology. With *Boldt*, Lewis has hit the trifecta of political incorrectness—the book is filled with racism, homophobia, and misogyny. In fact, he achieves all this in his very first paragraph, yet he somehow does it beautifully. Reading Ted Lewis is a constant surprise and a delight, but since he allows his characters to be who they are and not who we might want them to be, you sometimes keep company with personalities you might otherwise want to avoid. Never is this more true than in *Boldt*. As Bertolt Brecht said, “Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.” I strongly recommend this book and I know that it has so much to offer the readers who can find their way into it.
Lisa Mecham on *The Lost Daughter* by Elena Ferrante:

I’ve been in the throes of Ferrante fever, reading each and every Italian-to-English translated novel written under the pen name Elena Ferrante. While visiting Naples this past spring, I attended a gallery opening where the conversation turned (as it inevitably does, I was told) to artists debating the true identity of their city’s mysterious, prolific writer. In her first-ever flesh and blood interview in *The Paris Review* (Spring 2015), Ferrante says of her anonymity: “I came to feel hostility toward the media, which doesn’t pay attention to books themselves and values a work according to the author’s reputation…Once I knew that the completed book would make its way in the world without me…it made me see something new about writing. I felt as though I had released the words from myself.” Of all her novels *The Lost Daughter* is by far my favorite. Leda, a lonely, divorced middle-aged woman takes a vacation in an Italian coastal town and with one impulsive, bizarre move sets a dangerous course for herself with a family of “bad people” aka The Camorra, the Neapolitan Mafia. This menacing plot gives way to a brutal examination of Leda’s past as both a daughter and a mother. Ferrante’s prose, deftly translated by Ann Goldstein, is deceptively straightforward. You won’t believe how deep her blunt knife can cut.

Audrey Young on *Inventory* by Dionne Brand:

Dionne Brand keeps a running tally of our complicity with empire: “I have nothing soothing to tell you, that’s not my job, my job is to revise and revise this bristling list, hourly.”

Pg. 224 of Don DeLillo’s

*Mao II*
Buenas Noches, Gato

1 sugar cube
2 dashes orange bitters
1 dash angostura bitters
1 ½ ounces rye whiskey
½ ounce Chartreuse
1 lemon peel

Mash sugar cube, bitters, and whiskey in a glass. Add ice and stir for approximately 30 seconds. Rinse chilled cocktail glass with Chartreuse. Strain drink into cocktail glass. Twist lemon peel, rub along the rim, and slide peel into drink.

Making a drink inspired by Wittgenstein’s Mistress sounded like a fun project when I first heard about it. Sounded and heard not being the correct words, of course, as I never actually heard anyone talk about this project. As a matter of fact, I read about this project in a Facebook message from Dustin Illingworth.

You might not know Dustin, but he is one of the editors of the magazine you are currently reading.

Well, you might know him actually. To be honest, it’s hard for me to know who you may know and who you may not know.

The editor-in-chief, who you also may know and who you also may not know, was looking for someone to make a cocktail based off of a David Markson novel.

Developing a cocktail based on a novel proves to be more difficult than one might suspect.

Coming into this, I didn’t know anything about Ludwig Wittgenstein or his mistress or the book Wittgenstein’s Mistress.

Even wondering if Wittgenstein actually had a mistress?

I picked up the novel and began to read Markson’s words. Or were they Kate’s words?

Markson’s words being Kate’s words, in this instance at least.

“Nor can I remember, any longer, if I happened onto the poster with my name on it before or after I saw the cat at the Colosseum.” Kate says. Markson says.

Or should it be Kate writes? Markson writes?

Truth be told, I still know next to nothing about Wittgenstein or his mistress as of this writing, even though I have now read Wittgenstein’s Mistress.

It’s hard to write about only thoughts and nothing happening, and it turns out that it’s even harder to think of what one might prefer to drink while reading about one’s thoughts and nothing happening.

Really though, what else is there to focus on but one’s thoughts and nothing happening when there are no other humans to talk to?

Maybe there are other humans to talk to.

Perhaps this is obvious.

“The cat at the Colosseum was orange, if I have not
indicated, and had lost an eye.” Kate writes. Markson writes.  
Or should I put it in the past tense and say Kate wrote? Markson wrote?

After all, the writing is done. The book is in my hand.

Amusing thoughts can be lonely with no one with whom to share them.

It would have been easier to say that amusing thoughts can be lonely with no one to share them with, but one never knows where one’s editors stand on the whole issue of ending a sentence with a preposition.

Once again I wrote it would have been easier to say when actually I meant it would have been easier to write. 


Looking for some inspiration. What sort of drink for this sort of book?

I saw an orange cat flash past the window one night. Possibly one might drink to that.

Not only might one drink to that, but one might also create a drink around that.

“Kneeling to pet Gato,” Kate wrote at one point. “And he is obviously in my head,” Markson wrote immediately following.

Though obviously Kate could have written the latter and Markson the former as well.

When, in actuality, both obviously wrote both. Possibly one might drink to that. 

To what? 

To both writing both? 

To an orange, one-eyed gato one may or may not have knelled to pet? 

Need one need something to drink to? 

Buenas noches, gato.
“We Are All Related” from *Good Talk: Conversations I’m Still Confused By*
Proposition 7
from Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

7 Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

Translated by C. K. Ogden
Masthead:
Editor-in-Chief: Tyler Malone
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Amy Bauer
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Alyssa Bishop
Joseph Blotner
Dionne Brand
Matt Bucher
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Tyrer Stoddard Smith
Stephen Sparks
Matthew Specktor
Joseph Tabbi
Scofield Thayer
Henry David Thoreau
Enrique Vila-Matas
Juan Villoro
Kurt Vonnegut
David Foster Wallace
Randall Winston
Ludwig Wittgenstein
Tim Wood
Audrey Young
Ann Beattie is the author of eight novels, nine short story collections, and the novella *Walks With Men*. She has been celebrated as a voice of her generation. Her recent collection *The New Yorker Stories* gathers forty-eight short stories that have appeared in the premiere magazine for short fiction. Tyler Malone interviewed her for this issue. In addition, a scan of a page from her book *Picturing Will* with David Markson marginalia appears in this issue.

Carmiel Banasky is a writer, teacher, and editor from Portland, OR. Her first novel, *The Suicide of Claire Bishop*, is forthcoming from Dzanc Books (Sept 2015). She is now an active member of the cult of Los Angeles. She interviewed Amelia Gray for this issue.

Amy Bauer is a writer and translator. In this issue, she recommended the book *Bartleby & Co.* by Enrique Vila-Matas for our Markonesque section and the book *The Infatuations* for our On Our Nightstand section.

Daniel Levin Becker is the youngest member of the Oulipo. He is the author of *Many Subtle Channels: In Praise of Potential Literature*. In this issue, he recommended the book *The Guilty* by Juan Villoro for our On Our Nightstand section.

Joseph Blotner was a William Faulkner friend and expert. He composed a 2,115 page biography of the great American writer that was so full of minutiae (including menus and postmarks), that it was sometimes dismissed as overwhelming by critics. A scan of a page from his book *Faulkner: A Biography* with David Markson marginalia appears in this issue.

Alyssa Bishop is the Creative Director of *The Scofield*.

Dionne Brand is a Canadian poet, novelist, essayist, and documentarian. She was also the third Poet Laureate of Toronto. In this issue, Audrey Young recommended her book *Inventory* for our On Our Nightstand section.

Amy Bauer is a writer and translator. In this issue, she recommended the book *Bartleby & Co.* by Enrique Vila-Matas for our Markonesque section and the book *The Infatuations* for our On Our Nightstand section.

Matt Bucher is a writer and editor living in Austin, Texas. He runs the @MarksonQuotes twitter. For this issue, he wrote an essay entitled “David Markson as the Original Tweeter?”
Jeffrey Cassvan is a lecturer in the English Department of Queens College of the City University of New York. He was the Director of the Irish Studies program from 2011 to 2014. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in Irish literature, modern poetry, and literary theory. He is currently at work on a comparative study of Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man. In this issue, his story “Submission; or Thither in the Night,” co-authored with Scott Cheshire, appears. A photograph of his notecards also appears within the story.

Michelangelo Buonarroti was a gifted Italian sculptor, painter, architect, poet, and engineer of the High Renaissance. His work has had an unparalleled influence on the development of Western art and aesthetics. A scan of a page from his book I, Michelangelo, Sculptor with David Markson marginalia appears in this issue.


Lord Byron was a leading figure and poet of the Romantic movement. Known for his libertine excesses, he died young of a fever caught while in Greece, leaving behind a body of lengthy narrative poems still widely read and studied today. An excerpt from his poem “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage” appears in this issue.

Paul Cézanne was a Post-Impressionist painter whose work helped to drive the transition from the 19th century conception of artistic endeavor to a new and radically different world of art in the 20th century. His painting Portrait of Anthony Valabrègue appears in this issue.

Will Chancellor is the author of A Brave Man Seven Storeys Tall. Scott Cheshire interviewed him for this issue. Photographs from his journey across Iceland also appear within the interview.
Scott Cheshire is the author of the novel *High as the Horses’ Bridles*. His work has been published in *AGNI*, *Electric Literature*, *Guernica*, *Harper’s*, *One Story*, and the *Picador Book of Men*. He is a Managing Editor at *The Scofield* and lives in Los Angeles. He interviewed Will Chancellor for this issue. In addition, his story “Submission; or Thither in the Night,” co-authored with Jeff Cassvan, appears.

Todd Colby is a poet living in Brooklyn, New York. His latest book of poetry, *Splash State*, was published by The Song Cave in 2014. Four of his poems appear in this issue.

Matthew Daddona is an editor, writer, and reviewer living in New York City. He is a founding member of FLASHPOINT, a jazz and prose improvisation, and has been involved in numerous poetry and art collaborations. He is a Senior Editor at *The Scofield* and is currently working on a novel. Excerpts from his chapbook of poetry, *A Facing Shore*, co-authored with Tim Wood, appear in this issue.

Jonathan Dale is currently pursuing his Master of Library and Information Science through San Jose State and tending bar at Panama 66 in Balboa Park, San Diego. For this issue, he created a Markson-themed cocktail named Buenas Noches, Gato.


Andrew Mitchell Davenport is a writer and an educator in Brooklyn, NY. He is also a Senior Editor at *The Scofield*. He interviewed Lewis Lapham for this issue.

Edgar Degas was a French painter and sculptor. He was considered one of the founders of Impressionism, although he rejected the term, preferring Realist. His paintings, most notably of dancers and racecourse subjects are famous for their psychological complexity and sense of movement. His drawing *A Jockey on His Horse* appears in this issue.

Wes Del Val is Associate Publisher at powerHouse Books. In 2014 he published *Fare Forward: Letters From David Markson* by David Markson and Laura Sims. In this issue, he recommended the book *This Is Not a Novel* by David Markson for our Ports of Entry section.
**Mary Duffy** is a writer, editor, and genealogist at work on a book about the Jewish refugee crisis prior to America’s entry into the Second World War. Currently without a permanent home, Ms. Duffy is traveling for research in the summer of 2015. She is a Senior Editor at *The Scofield*. For this issue, she wrote an essay entitled “Novelist’s Diorama.” In addition, she recommended the book *Vanishing Point* by David Markson for our Ports of Entry section.

**Don DeLillo** is widely considered one of the greatest living American novelists. He is a Guggenheim fellow whose work has received the National Book Award, the PEN/Faulkner Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. A scan of a page from his book *Mao II* with David Markson marginalia appears in this issue.

**Elena Ferrante** is a pseudonymous Italian novelist who has been heralded as the most important of her generation. In this issue, Lisa Mecham recommended her book *The Lost Daughter* for our On Our Nightstand section.

**Caspar David Friedrich** was a 19th century German Romantic painter. Known for his mid-period landscapes with figures silhouetted against morning mist, night skies, and Gothic ruins, he is generally considered to be the most important artist of his generation. His painting *A Walk at Dusk* appears in this issue.

**Jenny Eagleton** spent her formative years huffing first editions of *Ulysses* in Tulsa but has since moved on to getting an art degree and making a living as a beer expert in New York City. In this issue, she recommended the book *Springer’s Progress* by David Markson for our Ports of Entry section.

Whit Griffin has two books on Skysill Press. His third, *A Far-Shining Crystal*, was published by Cultural Society, who will also be releasing *We Who Saw Everything*. Recent material appears or is forthcoming in *Golden Handcuffs Review*, *Chicago Review*, *Elderly* and *Hambone*. An excerpt of his poem *We Who Saw Everything* appears in this issue.

**Jack Green** is the pseudonym of Christopher Carlisle Reid. He is a literary critic known for his staunch defense of William Gaddis’ work, particularly his 1955 novel *The Recognitions*. A scan of a page from his book *Fire the Bastards!* with David Markson marginalia appears in this issue.

**Kaitlyn Greenidge** lives in Brooklyn. Her first novel *We Love You Charlie Freeman* is due out from Algonquin June 2016. In this issue, she recommended the book *Edgewise: A Picture of Cookie Mueller* by Chloé Griffin for our On Our Nightstand section.

**Chloé Griffin** is an artist, actress, and filmmaker living in Berlin. In this issue, Kaitlyn Greenidge recommended her book *Edgewise: A Picture of Cookie Mueller* for our On Our Nightstand section.

**Peter Handke** is an Austrian novelist, playwright, and political activist. In this issue, Jenny Offill recommended his book *The Weight of the World* for our Marksonesque section.

**Scott David Herman** is a U.S. expatriate writer/designer living in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. His essay “Plums,” which includes some of his photos, appears in this issue.

**Conor Higgins** is a writer and professor. He interviewed Chigozie Obioma for this issue.

**Yoel Hoffmann** is a professor of Japanese poetry, Buddhism, and philosophy at the University of Haifa. He is an Israeli novelist, poet, editor, scholar, and translator. In this issue, Dustin Illingworth recommended his book *Moods* for our Marksonesque section.
Mira Jacob is the author of the critically acclaimed novel, *The Sleepwalker’s Guide to Dancing*, which was shortlisted for India’s Tata First Literature Award, honored by the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association, and named one of the best books of 2014 by Kirkus Reviews, the Boston Globe and Goodreads. “We Are All Related” is an excerpt from her graphic memoir in-progress, titled: *Good Talk: Conversations I’m Still Confused By*. An Excerpt from her book *Good Talk: Conversations I’m Still Confused By* appears in this issue.

Jaimie Johansson is a post-doctoral candidate at the University of East Anglia. She is currently completing a dissertation on Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of history and the work of David Markson. In this issue, she recommended the book *Reader’s Block* by David Markson for our Ports of Entry section.

Dustin Illingworth is the Managing Editor of *The Scofield*. His work has appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The Rumpus*, *Full Stop Quarterly*, *3:AM Magazine*, *Quarterly Conversation*, and *Review 31*. For this issue, he wrote an essay entitled “‘He Has Made Facts Sad’: David Foster Wallace & Wittgenstein’s Mistress.” In addition, he recommended the book *Moods* by Yoel Hoffmann for our Marksonesque section.

Diane Johnson is an American-born novelist and essayist notable for her satirical novels featuring American heroines living abroad in contemporary France. She was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. A scan of a page from her book *Terrorists & Novelists* with David Markson marginalia appears in this issue.

Cynan Jones is a Welsh writer whose first novel, *The Long Dry* (2006), was awarded the Betty Trask Award. In this issue, Lisa Lucas recommended his book *The Dig* for our On Our Nightstand section.

John Keats was an English Romantic poet. Though his work was not well received during his short life, his reputation grew posthumously, and he is now one of the most beloved and analyzed English poets. His poem “On Solitude” appears in this issue.

Gaston Lachaise was a 20th century American sculptor of French birth whose female nudes helped to redefine the form. His bust *Scofield Thayer* appears on the title page of this issue.
Tyler Malone is a writer and professor of English. He is the Editor-in-Chief of The Scofield. His writing has appeared in The Huffington Post, The Millions, Full Stop, and elsewhere. For this issue, he wrote the Letter from the Editor and an essay entitled “In the Beginning, Sometimes He Left Messages in the Books.” In addition, he interviewed Ann Beattie and Steven Moore, and he recommended the book The Notecard Quartet by David Markson for our Ports of Entry section. Also, correspondence from David Markson to him appears. He drew the portraits of the various dramatis personae for this issue.


Ted Lewis was a British writer, best known for his book Jack’s Return Home, which was adapted to film as Get Carter. In this issue, Michael Seidenberg recommended his book Boldt for our On Our Nightstand section.

Lisa Lucas is the publisher of Guernica, an online magazine of art & politics. She also serves as nonfiction co-chair for the Brooklyn Book Festival and is as an advisory council member for the National Book Foundation and Wordstock. In this issue, she recommended the book The Dig by Cynan Jones for our On Our Nightstand section.

Norman Mailer was an American novelist, essayist, playwright, journalist, actor, filmmaker, and political activist. He founded The Village Voice, and his novels, most notably The Naked and the Dead (1948) and The Executioner’s Song (1979), earned him two Pulitzer Prizes. In this issue, Matthew Specktor recommended his book Mind of an Outlaw: Selected Essays for our On Our Nightstand section.

Tyler Malone is a writer and professor of English. He is the Editor-in-Chief of The Scofield. His writing has appeared in The Huffington Post, The Millions, Full Stop, and elsewhere. For this issue, he wrote the Letter from the Editor and an essay entitled “In the Beginning, Sometimes He Left Messages in the Books.” In addition, he interviewed Ann Beattie and Steven Moore, and he recommended the book The Notecard Quartet by David Markson for our Ports of Entry section. Also, correspondence from David Markson to him appears. He drew the portraits of the various dramatis personae for this issue.

Javier Marías is a Spanish novelist, translator, and columnist. His work has been translated into 42 different languages. In this issue, Amy Bauer recommended his book The Infatuations for our On Our Nightstand section.
David Markson is the author of the widely acclaimed novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. His final four novels provoked Ann Beattie to admit that “no one but Beckett can be quite as funny and sad at the same time as Markson can.” *This entire first issue is based around his work. He is the subject of much of its content. Excerpts from his novels *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* and *The Last Novel*, published by Dalkey Archive Press and Counterpoint Press respectively, appear in this issue. Also, correspondence from him to various people and marginalia from his library appear.*

Lisa Mecham is a writer whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Rumpus, Juked,* and *BOAAT,* among other publications. She serves on the Advisory Board for *Origins* literary journal and as a Senior Editor for *The Scofield.* A Midwesterner at heart, Lisa lives in Los Angeles with her two daughters. *In this issue, she recommended the book *The Lost Daughter* by Elena Ferrante for our On Our Nightstand section.*

Ved Mehta is a master of the essay form. A staff writer for *The New Yorker* for over 30 years, Mehta was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2009. *A scan of a page from his book *Fly and the Fly-Bottle* with David Markson marginalia appears in this issue.*

Paul Metcalf was an experimental American writer. *In this issue,* Stephen Sparks recommended his book *Genoa: A Telling of Wonders* for our Marksonesque section.

Charlie Meyard is a guy who likes to draw the funnies. *His comic strip *The Panel of Dead Authors* will appear in each issue of *The Scofield.**

Steven Moore is an American author and critic. He is known as the preeminent scholar of William Gaddis. He was the managing editor of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* from 1988 to 1996. *Tyler Malone interviewed him for this issue. He also recommended the book *From Old Notebooks* by Evan Lavender-Smith for our Marksonesque section.*

Chigozie Obioma is a professor of Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. His debut novel, *The Fishermen,* was published this year. *Conor Higgins interviewed him for this issue.*
Françoise Palleau-Papin teaches American literature at the University of Paris 13, Sorbonne Paris Cité, where she codirects the pluridisciplinary research center Pléiade. She is the author of the first monograph on David Markson: This Is Not a Tragedy (Dalkey Archive, 2011). In this issue, she recommended the book Wittgenstein’s Mistress by David Markson for our Ports of Entry section.

Jenny Offill is the author of Last Things, and most recently, Dept. of Speculation. She is the coeditor, with Elissa Schappell, of two anthologies of essays, The Friend Who Got Away and Money Changes Everything. Her children’s books include 17 Things I’m Not Allowed to Do Anymore, 11 Experiments That Failed, and Sparky. She teaches in the writing programs at Queens University, Brooklyn College, and Columbia University. In this issue, she recommended the book The Weight of the World by Peter Handke for our Marksonesque section. In addition, David Burr Gerrard recommended her book Dept. of Speculation for the same section.

Camille Paglia is an American academic and social critic. She has been a professor at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia since 1984. A scan of a page from her book Sexual Personae with David Markson marginalia appears in this issue.

Henri Peyre was a French-born American linguist, scholar, and Sterling Professor of French Emeritus at Yale University. A scan of a page from his book The Failure of Criticism with David Markson marginalia appears in this issue.

Odilon Redon was a French Symbolist painter, draughstman, printmaker and pastellist. His painting To Edgar Poe (The Eye, Like a Strange Balloon, Mounts toward Infinity) appears in his issue.

Joey Rubin is a writer who, while not having read Ulysses, has written for the San Francisco Chronicle, Nerve.com, and The Argentina Independent. He teaches high school in Las Vegas, Nevada, where he promises to at least assign his students Dubliners. He interviewed David Markson for Bookslut and that interview has been republished with a new introduction in this issue.
Arthur Schopenhauer was a German philosopher best known for his magnum opus _The World as Will and Representation_, in which he argues that the phenomenal world is driven by a metaphysical will that perpetually and malignantly seeks satiation. **An excerpt from his book _Counsels and Maxims_ appears in this issue.**

Joseph Salvatore is the author of the story collection _To Assume A Pleasing Shape_ (BOA Editions, 2011) and the co-author of the college textbook _Understanding English Grammar_ (Pearson, 2015). He is the book review editor for fiction and poetry at _The Brooklyn Rail_ and a frequent contributor to _The New York Times Book Review_. His writing has appeared in _The Collagist, Dossier Journal, Epiphany, H.O.W. Journal, New York Tyrant, Open City, Post Road, Rain Taxi, Salt Hill, Sleeping Fish, and Willow Springs_, among others. He is an assistant professor of writing and literature at The New School, in New York City, where he founded the literary journal _LIT_. **In this issue, his short story “The ______ from ________ Makes a Deal with the ______” appears.**

Egon Schiele was a major figurative painter of the 20th century known for his intensity and raw sexuality. **His painting _Portrait of an Old Man_ appears on the cover of this issue.**

Michael Seidenberg is the man behind Brazenhead, the best bookstore (and hangout) in all of New York City. **In this issue, he recommended the book _Boldt_ by Ted Lewis for our On Our Nightstand section.**

Charles J. Shields is the author of _And So It Goes: Kurt Vonnegut: A Life, Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee_, the highly acclaimed, bestselling biography of Harper Lee, and _I Am Scout: The Biography of Harper Lee_ (Henry Holt Books for Young Readers). **For this issue, he wrote an essay entitled “Like He Was Doing Penance.” In addition, correspondence from David Markson to him appears.**

Dave Shanfield is the Designer of _The Scofield_.

Rebecca Shmuluvitz received her BFA in at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Her work has been shown in juried exhibitions at the Decker Gallery and Area 405 in Baltimore as well as the Escola LLOTJA in Barcelona. She now lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. **Her painting _Untitled_ appears in this issue.**
Henry David Thoreau was an American author, poet, philosopher, abolitionist, naturalist, and surveyor. A leading Transcendentalist, Thoreau is perhaps best known for Walden, a reflection on simple living in natural surroundings. An excerpt from his book Walden appears in this issue.

Laura Sims is the author of Staying Alive, forthcoming from Ugly Duckling Presse in 2016. She edited Fare Forward: Letters from David Markson (powerHouse Books) in 2014. For this issue, she wrote an essay entitled “David Markson Dominates Twitter.” In addition, correspondence from David Markson to her appears.

P. T. Smith is a writer and reader in Vermont. His work appears in Three Percent, Quarterly Conversation, and Quebec Reads, among others. For this issue, he reviewed Kamel Daoud’s novel The Meursault Investigation.

Tyler Stoddard Smith is a widely published humorist and the author of the book Whore Stories: A Revealing History of the World’s Oldest Profession. In this issue, he recommended the book The Ballad of Dingus Magee by David Markson for our Ports of Entry section.

Stephen Sparks is a writer and bookseller in San Francisco. In this issue, he recommended the book Genoa: A Telling of Wonders by Paul Metcalf for our Marksonesque section.


Joseph Tabbi is an associate professor of English at the University of Illinois, Chicago. He is the author of Cognitive Fictions and Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk. In this issue, his essay “Reading David Markson,” which originally appeared in Context, has been republished. In addition, he recommended the book The Last Novel by David Markson for our Ports of Entry section.

Scofield Thayer was the publisher and editor of The Dial from 1920 to 1926. He is the namesake of The Scofield.
Ludwig Wittgenstein was an Austrian-British philosopher who worked primarily within the philosophies of logic, mathematics, mind and language. During his lifetime he published just one slim book, his magnum opus, the 75-page *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), one article, one book review and a children’s dictionary. Excerpts from his book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* appear in this issue.

Tim Wood is the author of the book of poems *Otherwise Known as Home* (BlazeVOX, 2010) and co-editor of *The Hip Hop Reader* (Longman, 2008); he has a second book of poems, *Notched Sunsets*, forthcoming from Atelos Press. His critical work can be found at ActionYes.org and Jacket2.org as well as in Convolution and Leviathan; his poetry reviews can be found at the Colorado Review, The Iowa Review, and the Boston Review. He was a recent Fulbright scholar at the University of Tübingen in Germany and is currently an associate professor of English at SUNY Nassau Community College in Garden City, New York. Excerpts from his chapbook of poetry, *A Facing Shore*, co-authored with Matthew Daddona, appear in this issue.

Randall Winston is a filmmaker, photographer, and doctoral researcher based in Brooklyn, N.Y. He enjoys ginger beer and gingerly approaching strange people/animals. His photograph *Sea by the Sea* appears in this issue.

Enrique Vila-Matas is a Spanish novelist whose many works explore the boundaries of meta-fiction. In this issue, Amy Bauer recommended his book *Bartleby & Co.* for our Marksonesque section.

Juan Villoro is a Mexican journalist and an award-winning novelist, essayist, short story writer, playwright, and children’s book author. In this issue, Daniel Levin Becker recommended his book *The Guilty* for our On Our Nightstand section.

Kurt Vonnegut was a beloved American novelist whose works, including *Cat’s Cradle* (1963), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), blended satire, gallows humor, and science fiction. A scan of a page from his book *Timequake* with David Markson marginalia appears in this issue. He is also the subject of the interview of David Markson by Charles J. Shields.

David Foster Wallace was an American novelist and essayist, and a professor of English and Creative Writing at Pomona College. Best known for his novel *Infinite Jest* (1996), David Ulin called Wallace “one of the most influential and innovative writers of the last 20 years.” He is the subject of the essay “‘He Has Made Facts Sad’: David Foster Wallace & Wittgenstein’s Mistress” by Dustin Illingworth.

Randall Winston is a filmmaker, photographer, and doctoral researcher based in Brooklyn, N.Y. He enjoys ginger beer and gingerly approaching strange people/animals. His photograph *Sea by the Sea* appears in this issue.
Audrey Young is a researcher and translator living in Los Angeles. In this issue, she recommended the book *Inventory* by Dionne Brand for our On Our Nightstand section.