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Anachronisms

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Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition 2016

Anachronisms

Big Ben sounds, and Mrs. Dalloway dissolves into the London streets. Gatsby looks up, and Carraway's clock breaks. David Mitchell is frenetic: he's synchronizing the gears of six watches all at once. Borges can't seem to find his watch—nor does he care to. The clock inside the home on 124 Bluestone Road eerily moves backwards. Camus's clock is also broken: the hour hand is stiff, but the life of the second hand ticks eternally. He thinks he'll call it Sisyphus.

I began collecting books when I began collecting words for my writing. It was a time when what I read was almost entirely determined by the strictures of syllabi, typed neatly in a formal font. I would obey the commandments of the unmalleable syllabus by borrowing from dusty, hand-me-down shelves, where worn-down, water-damaged books would wait idly. And so it was with my writing, as well. My writing consisted of sterile words and even more sterile sentences. Everything I wrote, I wrote from a language that was not mine, a language that came from an anonymous voice that resided in the trailers for blockbuster movies and the salesman-summaries of pop-fiction books that I never read.

Then came Joseph Heller. It was my sophomore year in high school, and I decided that I was going to write one of my research papers on *Catch-22*. It only took me a few pages to discover what it was that made Heller so special: He broke the rules. A story was supposed to be exposition, climax, and resolution in that order and that order only—or so I thought. Heller proved me wrong. He disjointed time: beginnings turned out to be middles, middles turned out to be ends, end turned out to be beginnings. He ended the novel with what could be just another

beginning—Yossarian taking off into the mad and unknowable future. Heller taught me chaos, and chaos was what I needed to write. So like Yossarian, I too took off running.

A year ago, I took off to *Cloud Atlas*. Mitchell melted down the walls of temporality for me. This gave me a chance to see the words of the past, present, and future unpacking themselves in infinite regress. Inside one story were multitudes of more stories, all scattered about among space and time, yet all happening at once in the single act of reading. The languages of Robert Frobisher, Sonmi-451, and David Mitchell himself aligned themselves into a diachronic symphony of sublime heteroglossia. When it was finished, I was tangled in strings and nets of new words. As I wrote to untether myself, I learned that writing ought to dissolve the illusory boundaries between people. I learned that the true practice of writing consists of giving credence to the multiplicity of voices and stories that move among us every day. To write one word requires listening to a thousand more.

Every now and then, I take off to Borges's *Labyrinths*. Whether it be by essay or parable or short story, Borges guillotines certainty from me. And I couldn't thank him more for that. He forces me to deconstruct what I take to be given so that I might understand the conscious experience of both myself and others in new ways. He reminds me of the writer's ultimate duty: to crush reality so strongly so as to reveal it in its most intensified form.

Today, I take off to *Mrs. Dalloway*. I have read it twice before, and yet I still experience the same hours that I experienced then, the same hours Mrs. Dalloway experienced crossing Bond Street, and the same hours Virginia Woolf spent piercing pages with pens in 1924. Past and present collide to show me, yet again, the vital shocks of life that leap out in the smallest bits of time. Writer, reader, narrator, and character all clash together like flint and steel, producing sparks of life encapsulated in linguistic bodies. I continue to strike the flint and steel together so

as to make a fire. Then, Woolf reminds me that fire comes from sparks. It is the small, fleeting moments that truly construct the vibrant display of life. I need the words that capture the infinity of a passing moment in the most ordinary of spaces, words that can capture life and death on a walk to buy some flowers.

Tomorrow, I will take off again. The act of collecting will never cease. I will pass through some bookstore, or perhaps an old library. I will run my fingers through printed pages. I will lay my eyes on a text. Ink, paper, and two eyes will contradict time, and I will attempt to collect whatever words I can. These words will be the ones whose meanings I will attach to the timeline of my life. They will be the ones that I will use to tell stories of my own, stories that can perhaps corrode through temporal barriers and pass something valuable on to someone else. They are, they will be, they have been, a lexicon of my own with which I try to plant a perennial whisper—a whisper that will manage to overpower the sound of a ticking clock, so as to say, “Here is a life well-lived. Here is a story well-told.”

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