

Epilogue. It's about time.

AND SO we reach a coda, the last dance, the tail. A coda is a singular thing, but there is a plural: "code," as in **Codell**, born at dawn after a long labor, my love song to Detroit.

To this I can attest: at five in the morning, in the silence, solitude and shadows, there is a mental fecundity in which words sprout before they take root. If not immediately tended to, they wither before anyone ever reads them.

Tending to them - by writing them down - gives birth to them, words born out of solitude into a cacophonous world. They bear life, not necessarily your life speaking through the words, but rather words speaking through you and apart from you. The words take on lives of their own, a particular type of exhilaration, the one requisite being imagination. They grow up to become characters in a world far different in place and time; in these fictions, the world is Detroit, 1980. Like the few people throughout life whom you love, the characters live within you and without you, more alive than the living, in an arrogance that only you share their lives. It doesn't matter if the characters are rank and ugly, for what parents don't love their misshapen children, and their children love them all the more in return? "The greatest thing you'll ever learn," sang Nat King Cole in "Nature Boy," "is to love and be loved in return."

Loved or unloved, Detroit's Cass Corridor, like all inner cities, was reputed to breed street crime, more visible but no more destructive than the hidden crime in rural communities and suburbs where crime is "out of sight, out of mind." In the city, the reverse is true; crime is in sight and therefore in mind. Thus rural folk and suburbanites denigrate cities as unsafe while the suburbs and beyond decay from within.

Codell, along with Victor, Michael Blumenthal, and other characters in these fictions lived in that place and time, Detroit 1980, and now romanticized in retrospection. Bohemia? Ethereal realms of personal fulfillment? Tee-shirts emblazoned with "Cass Corridor"? Please, no! Rather, they were born into challenging circumstances. Challenged, they exude audacity like steam, a vigor of possibility. The greater the challenge, the greater the audacity, even in the face of the impossible. If there were an underscore to these characters, one as good as any is dynamic uncertainty. If there were a theme to these fictions, one as good as any is a chimera: something hoped for but illusory. Hope is as necessary for life as imagination is for creativity.

An ending to these fictions, however, is not requisite. True to life, some of these fictions drop off precipitously or lead to an unknown future. Readers, like the characters, don't know what happens next. But if the fiction works, readers keep thinking and feeling after closing time. T. H. White, an idiosyncratic novelist described as a mash-up of "Evelyn Waugh, Laurel and Hardy, John Erskine and the Marquis de Sade," ended his

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677 page tetralogy *The Once and Future King* with this sentence: “the cannons of [King Arthur’s] adversary were thundering in the tattered morning when the Majesty of England drew himself up to meet the future with a peaceful heart.” White gives us not even a summary of what becomes of Queen Guenever, Lancelot, Mordred and other characters, an ending to be continued, disappointing as that may be to a reader who expects a *denouement*.

Like endings, neither is making a point or having a moral necessary for these fictions. If a reader does discern a point, a different reader may discern a different point or a different moral, two-faced ends of the same idea, both true and both false. Dr. Montarco in Miguel de Unamuno y Jugo’s story “The Madness of Dr. Montarco” lamented that:

five people have already approached me to ask what I meant by writing the piece of fiction I just published, what I intended to say, and what bearing did it have. Idiots, idiots, and thrice idiots! They’re worse than children who break dolls to find out what’s inside. . . . They believe no one could write except to prove something, or defend or attack some proposition, or from an ulterior motive. One of these blockheads asked me the meaning of my story and by way of reply I asked *him*: ‘Did it amuse you?’

Along with amusing myself while I write them, my intent in these fictions has been to entertain you, dear reader. Like Nikolai Gogol, I’ve tried to “present the face of life and not discuss life.” If these tales come across as anything beyond piquancy, as nostalgic lamentation, celebration, castigation, that is secondary to provoking a smile or a question. Failing that, it suffices if these fictions serve as unblinking accounts - or perhaps blinking once or twice. On the surface, they account for the characters in Detroit, circa 1980. But perhaps they make you think of someone else, some other place, some other time. There are ambiguities. For example, *Codell loved women, more than they knew*. What do we make of the word “more”? Do we account for “more” quantitatively or qualitatively? More love, more women, or both?

Yet in a broad sense, ambiguity aside, fiction accounts for events past, present and future. “Man moves onward as a whole,” Michel de Montaigne wrote, “towards his growth and towards his decay.” Inevitably all cultures decay, annihilated or assimilated or absorbed or evolved or metamorphosed. The decay may be fast or slow, from within or from without, from other cultures or from climate. The globe heats up and cools down; droughts and ice come and go, taking civilizations with them. Intolerant cultures live until some other intolerant culture negates them as they negated earlier cultures. The weak and the bright burn first and fast, quickly relegated to the past. The past can devour us with bitterness or saccharine deception. Stained by imperfect memory or intentionally rewritten, the past becomes false. Ultimately, the past fades, erased by time, a book of blank pages and then no book at all.

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We might mourn or exalt when a past decays, dried up and rubbed away like the skin of a molting snake. But what if the past won't die? What if "the past never passes / it simply amasses"? We tend the graves. It can be a paralysis for better or worse, a life that keeps on living after death or a life that keeps on dying.

When decay is violent, of, by and against the people, the results are the same no matter what you call it - riot, protest, looting, mob, rebellion, uprising, insurrection, war. If you crash and smash, if you grab, damage and destroy, if you tar and feather, everyone is diminished. Instead of productive people and safe places, we have reductive people and dangerous, desolate places.

As mutable as the past is through decay, the future, through wishful thinking, action and willful inaction, can be doomed by self-fulfilling prophecy that wrecks the present as well. Or instead, perhaps the prophecy saves the future? Either way, what choice have we but to foresee the future as best we can, conscious of our limited vision, and push passionately towards a thing desired?

In pushing forward, we defer to and take refuge in the present. We may mourn decay, but it's incumbent on us to accept decay as necessary for regrowth. To accept decay is a condition for cultivation, for any regrowth imaginable.

As Codell grows from inaction to action, so has and will Detroit, starting from ground levels, resettlement of neighborhoods that brings consternation for the losses of yesteryear and hope for the future years. Perhaps the combustion engine combusts. Perhaps land returns to agrarian uses. Detroit will regrow as it has always regrown: with pride, grit, and perseverance in the face of adversity. Detroit is not Detroit Doomed; it is Detroit Hopeful.

Detroit's hope is a hope I share. I hope that, in the fraction of time that has been my life, at least some of my ignorance and stupidity has been supplanted with wisdom. It's a slow lesson that we may call "life experience" and by which we cope with the senseless and illogical. We somehow carry on in a world of eternal evils and loss: murder, accidents, war, illness, infidelity, hypocrisy, cruelty, rape, inequity, poverty, slavery, malevolence, hunger, violence, barbarism, financial collapse, leaders turned despotic - the list is endless. Truth can be irrelevant. We learn to muddle through and balance, uncomfortably. We learn that anything more is short-lived and vanity. With each humbling lesson in life, it's well to restart not by living the past and the future at the same time as the present, but by forgetting the fears of the future, and the failures of the past, that have become lesions instead of lessons. I confess that I often failed.

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Eventually, if we reach old age, we become so good at forgetting that we forget there was ever a time when we did not forget. We take root in our private decay, deaf to the thunder of youth, cold to the heat of passion, clinging to our slipping memories and our failing intellect, balancing on our walkers, tottering and shrinking. My own decay, being thus far timely and not debilitating, has let me remember fondly such happiness and love in this blessed, lucky moment that has been my life. We are no more than specks in our own moments, together sparkling in a vibrant, pointillistic universe - but oh, what brilliant specks!

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