

THE
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In our age of globalised finance capitalism, if Jewish folk serve as great scapegoats for capitalism, Asians now are becoming those for globalisation and its attendant inequities.

What I love most about poetry is the power of words to move you, even when you are not moving.

Interesting was a word for when there were no other words. It was a word for affectation.

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Letter from the Editors

Dear Reader,

The Midway Review began as a response to the ever-increasing need for nuanced thought, and now, more than ever, we are committed to publishing essays that gesture to ideas beyond status quo arguments that have been rehashed to death in the culture sphere. In this issue, our authors ponder questions personal, political, and pedagogical. Rosemarie Ho turns to histories of anti-Asian racism and anti-Semitism to interrogate the relationship between racist thought and systems of capitalism, May Huang meditates on the rhythms of both writing and dance, and Danny Licht re-examines the words of an old professor. We hope that the ideas and sentiments contained within will strike a chord or spark a discussion. At the very least, we hope you come away with fresh eyes, ready to examine the familiar world you're immersed in from day to day.

—The Editors

American Pastoral: When Privilege is Coded as Whiteness

Rosemarie Ho

In a much discussed scene from the newest season of Issa Rae's show *Insecure*, protagonist Lawrence (Jay Ellis) ends up being seduced into a threesome with two women who, as it turns out, sees him as little more than a black dildo. In the throes of sex, one woman cries out in a *Get Out*-like quip, "Your black cock feels so good in my white pussy!" The other complains about Lawrence's inability to stay hard for her, chiding him for what she evidently sees as a failure of his black masculinity. True, as a recent *Vulture* article¹ points out, the scene succinctly deals with the fetishization of black (male) bodies, the tendency to reduce the black male in the American sexual imagination into little more than an erect penis, both feared and desired for its virility. Here's the kicker: one of the instigators of this threesome (Hayley Kiyoko) gone terribly racist is Japanese-American.² We've been here before: the dragon lady becomes the downfall of an unsuspecting male, only that in our age of racial progressivity, the man in question can now be black.

Rest assured that this essay is not about *Insecure*. This essay is also emphatically not yet another think-piece lambasting the Left for a perceived over-reliance on identity politics that construe similarly coloured bodies as necessarily having the same interests, and rely on essentialist interpretations of identities themselves. I

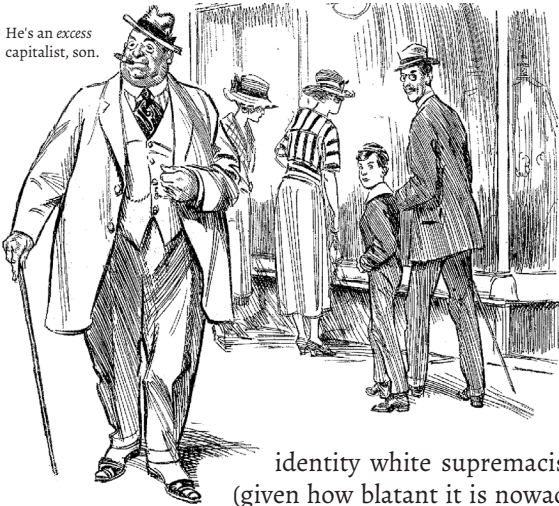
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1. Angelica Jade Bastien, "Hella LA' is *Insecure*'s Boldest Episode Yet," published August 14th 2017 in *Vulture*, last accessed on August 29th 2017 (<http://www.vulture.com/2017/08/hella-la-insecure-boldest-episode-yet.html>).

2. I'm not even going to delve into how Kiyoko is an openly queer pop culture figure, and how her lesbianism complicates our discussion of race here.

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He's an excess capitalist, son.



am not interested in the Mark Lilla, anti-PC version of the argument that identity politics spawned a resurgence of white supremacist movements. What this essay is is a response to the myopia that is sadly all too common when it comes to discussing the roots of racism—that although it is easier for the ragtag Left to identity white supremacist thought and colourism (given how blatant it is nowadays), there is credence to the Marxist notion that racism functions as an outlet for releasing discontent against our capitalist society. It is this dynamic between systemic power, reductionist perceptions of racism as anti-blackness, and economic inequality that is partially begetting the lack of a coherent critique of anti-East Asian sentiment. It is to our detriment as progressives to collapse economic privilege with race, without clarifying racism's multifarious relationships to capitalist economic development.

Worth noting here is that the “Yellow Peril” has been around since at least the 19th century, when Germany and other imperial nations required justification for what could only be fairly called an attempt to seize and plunder the rest of China and Japan. The East acted as the stage upon which the colonialist West could inscribe their anxieties about their masculinity, cultural hegemony, and above all, miscegenation in its multitude of footholds in the global South. Lurid fantasies about the decimation of the West through the chattel-like reproductive capabilities of Chinese immigrants were myriad; it is an undisputed fact of colonial historiography that what we consider to be whiteness today came into existence because of the reconfiguration of the native—black, yellow, or

brown—as sexual threats to a newly defined, white status quo. Yet for America (as with Europe), this has never just been a question of sexual insecurity, as seen in a labour organiser’s op-ed prior to the ratification of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act:

*Our moneyed men (...) have rallied under the banner of the millionaire, the banker and the land monopolist, the railroad king and the false politician, to effect [sic] their purpose. We have permitted them to become immensely rich (...) to find the meanest slave on earth—the Chinese coolie—and [import] him here to meet the free American in the Labor market, and still widen the breach between the rich and the poor, still further to degrade White Labor. (...) We are men, and propose to live like men in this free land, without the contamination of slave labor, or die like men, if need be, in asserting the rights of our race, our country, and our families. California must be all American or all Chinese. We are resolved that it shall be American, and are prepared to make it so.*³

Fitting that rhetorical strategies from the 1880s are still employed today against minorities in face of similar economic scarcities. For the white labouring class, it was always a question of economic anxiety, of displacement and a perceived deprivation of their entitlement to “their” lands and resources, intertwined with xenophobia and racism. During the very same period of increased aggression towards these migrants was the economic depression of 1873-78, whereupon one of the most influential investment banks at the time, Jay Cooke & Co., went bankrupt due to rampant speculation, and New York Stock Exchange had to be shut down for ten days.⁴ Unemployment and labour strikes were at an all-time high. It may have been far more politically expedient to lay the blame on a group of perceived foreigners that turned into larger than life figures hellbent on exterminating the white race than to cajole the rapidly growing industrialist middle class into allies against an economic system that begot financiers and speculators.

But what the organiser here suggests is that the spectre of Chinese immigrants is one and the same as the realities of capitalist-catalysed impoverishment, making it less likely to be just a tactical deployment of anti-Chinese agitation. The Chinese immigrant in

3. Dennis Kearney, President, and H. L. Knight, Secretary, “Appeal from California. The Chinese Invasion. Workingmen’s Address,” *Indianapolis Times*, 28 February 1878. Last accessed August 29th 2017 (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5046/%7C>).

4. History summarised in Francois Furstenberg’s July 1st 2011 article, “What History Teaches Us About The Welfare State,” in *The Washington Post*.

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this op-ed is less a racial caricature and more a *material* symptom of the ills of their time, an impossible accomplice to the greed of industrialists seeking to deprive the working class of the barest of subsistence. Note that the organiser stops short from labelling the Chinese as malicious agents altogether, placing the ethical responsibility about the industrialist class, presumably out of an orientalist refusal to consider the Chinese to be capable of conniving thought. In our age of racial progressivity, however, it is now possible for the Chinese to *be* the ones behind such machinations against so-called real Americans. If this sounds altogether unfamiliar to you, you need only take Steve Bannon's recent phone call to *The American Prospect*:

*"We're at economic war with China," he added. "It's in all their literature. They're not shy about saying what they're doing. One of us is going to be a hegemon in 25 or 30 years and it's gonna be them if we go down this path. (...) The economic war with China is everything. And we have to be maniacally focused on that. If we continue to lose it, we're five years away, I think, ten years at the most, of hitting an inflection point from which we'll never be able to recover."*⁵

5. Robert Kuttner, "Steve Bannon, Unrepentant," published August 16th 2017 in *The American Prospect*. Last accessed on August 29th 2017 (<http://prospect.org/article/steve-bannon-unrepentant>).

6. But obviously he is still very much a racist asshole.

7. Heather Long, "Think what you want about Steve Bannon, but he's got a good point on China," published August 17th 2017 in *The Washington Post*.

Bannon, not exactly like his fellow racists-in-struggle, is not concerned with the racial composition of America insofar it has no impact on what he sees as the global war for ultimate financial dominion.⁶ On his radio show prior to his short-lived White House tenure, Bannon has repeatedly lambasted immigration policies that he considers to only serve both East and South Asians, allowing for high-skilled immigrant workers to take over lucrative jobs for which native-born Americans are ostensibly no longer competitive enough. The Asian immigrant now takes the place of scapegoat and accomplice to the domination of global capital and globalisation, only that specific state actors (i.e. China) are also attempting the obliteration of the American republic. For what it's worth, *The Washington Post* has published a piece in response to Bannon's comments entitled "Think what you want about Steve Bannon, but he's got a good point on China,"⁷ and anti-globalist politicians worldwide repeat all the same talking points about Asian immigrants—leading, for example, to a surge in hate crimes against Chinese communities in France.⁸

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Nothing I've traced so far is new. The premier model for seeking out material embodiments, culprits and architects of an abstracted economic system designed to subjugate the labourer has historically been anti-Semitism. The Left has yet to develop a pithy summation and/or analysis of anti-Semitism: the texture of this hate instinctively feels different than that of anti-blackness or any other variant of racism, especially when Jewishness in America has been (albeit not unproblematically) subsumed into whiteness for the most part, and is associated with vast amounts of white privilege by the undiscerning person. But anti-Semitism is precisely the rejection of Jewish assimilation into our white supremacist society—that the Jewish person is emphatically *not* white, and should not be able to access the same privileges as the white person. Anti-Semitism (as opposed to various forms of anti-Jewishness writ large) is then a historically contextual argument against socio-economic conditions generated by a system that demands the constant accumulation of capital, albeit one made intelligible through xenophobia. As Marxist historian Moishe Postone aptly explains:

Modern anti-Semitism, then, is characterised not only by its secular content, but also by its systematic character. Its claim is to explain the world—a world that had rapidly become too complex and threatening for many people. (...) [A] careful examination of the modern anti-Semitic worldview reveals that it is a form of thought in which the rapid development of industrial capitalism, with all its social ramifications, is personified and identified as the Jew. It is not merely that the Jews were considered to be the owners of money, as in traditional anti-Semitism, but that they were held responsible for economic crises and identified with the range of social restructuring and dislocation resulting from rapid industrialisation: explosive urbanisation, the decline of traditional social classes and strata, the emergence of a large, increasingly organized industrial proletariat, and so on.⁹

To belabour his point: the Jewish person is identified as the *cause* by which the anti-Semite mediates her understanding of economic trials and tribulations. It makes sense, however perverse, when neo-

8. Consider, for instance, the BBC's reportage of anti-Chinese racism and resulting police brutality in France.

9. Moishe Postone, "Anti-Semitism and National Socialism," in *New German Critique* No. 19 (Duke: Duke University Press, 1980), 107.

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Nazis and white supremacists march on Charlottesville, ostensibly against the removal of Jim Crow-era racist monuments, scream slogans like “Jews will not replace us.” It makes sense that notable figures on the alt-right like Richard Spencer have no problem doing the *sieg heil*, or associating globalism with the long-extant conspiracy theory about Jewish families controlling the global economy. Economic protectionism thusly coincides with a perverse, pessimistic theory of why people—mostly white people, but a few scattered handfuls of people of colour and minorities—never seem to earn enough for a decent standard of living, of why they never seem to benefit from a system that allegedly rewards the hard-working.

It may seem far too forgiving of anti-Semites to basically call them racist anti-capitalists upon first glance. But the power of anti-Semitic thought lies in its providing the dispossessed with material descriptions and arguments to latch on through its close identification between the Jewish person and the pitfalls of capitalism—to render the abstract into terms one can easily understand. Young Karl Marx, as he struggled to articulate what he would later call the reification of labour, the reduction of human work to a base means of subsistence, started his career by utilising anti-Semitic tropes to explain what he saw as the greedy, exploitative core of the capitalist system. In a passage that could have been taken from anti-Semitic pamphlets, he states:

*Money is the jealous god of Israel, beside which no other god may exist. Money abases all the gods of mankind and changes them into commodities. Money is the universal and self-sufficient value of all things. It has, therefore, deprived the whole world, both the human world and nature, of their own proper value. (...) The god of the Jews has been secularised and has become the god of this world.*¹⁰

10. Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 50.

The abstract machinations of capital are personified into the Jew, traditionally associated with rejecting the Christian injunction against money-lending and commerce, modes of acquiring greater capital and monetary wealth. As Postone notes later on in his essay, industrialisation and its accompanying woes coincided with a growing number of Jewish families’ having assimilated and

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Paunch-coat requests a portrait



enjoying relative prosperity; anti-Semitism relies on this disjunction—that it should have been white folk who should have reaped the benefits of capital. The trope of shape-shifting, conniving Jews comes to

mind. In this sense, modern anti-Semitism is also the indexing of a growing proximity to privilege by the Jewish people, or rather, their perceived ability to negotiate and subvert the terms by which all people lived.

Why is the (Ashkenazi) Jewish population identified as white then in mainstream identity politics, to speak nothing of the almost complete destruction of Jewish culture via the Holocaust? Back in the 1980s, it was still common to refer to people of Jewish and Italian stock as “ethnic” whites. But there is a social, a cultural construction of linkages between the colour of a person’s skin and her perceived economic productivity and advantages within the context of capitalist production. Whiteness is the natural proximity to economic privilege, to the rampant accumulation of capital, the default position doubling as a descriptor for a skin colour our economic system has been engineered to benefit. In its common usage, whenever we call a Jewish person (or really, any person) white, we are already speaking of privilege, the extent to which she has access to systemic power. For the anti-Semite, the Jewish person is the arbiter of privilege, a conspirator building a world in which the white person is systematically abused.

It should be made exceedingly clear that I am not arguing against the existence of the multitudes of relative privileges Jews enjoy over their black and brown kin—only that our examination of the Jewish person’s situation in 2017 reveals that the usage of the term white

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is less a skin colour descriptor and more so a general descriptor of relative socio-economic privilege. The Jewish person is deemed white in non-anti-Semitic society insofar as whiteness is another term for a particular level of economic standing—nothing more than that, because it should be clear that the Jewish population is not safe from violence in the year 2017. Hyde Park's Jewish Community Center had to be evacuated because of multiple bomb threats after the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency, to use just one example. But to the anti-Semite, the Jew is only *masquerading* as white, making her even more insidious a danger to the social organisation system that he mistakes late capitalism to be. To the anti-Semite, the Jew is why he suffers so.

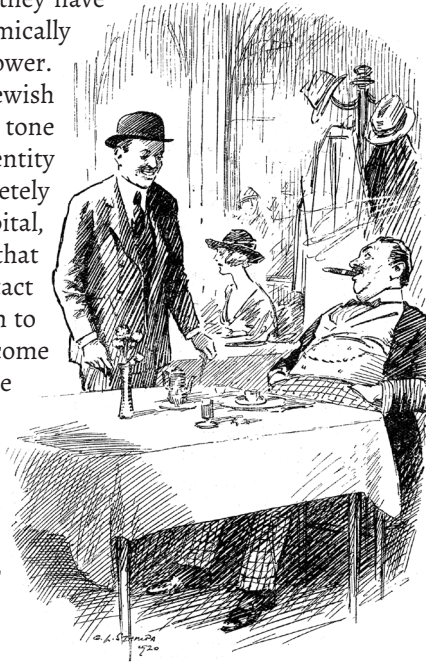
How the Jewish person's sublimation into whiteness is related to our previous analysis of anti-Asian racism has yet to be made clear. But as Asians become ever more assimilated into American society, occupying more and more echelons of privilege, as Asians (especially Chinese-Americans) become more and more proximate to capital and wealth accumulation, we risk collapsing economic privilege with inherent structural privilege when analysing the Asian situation—much in the same way the Jewish community can no longer speak of anti-Semitism in mainstream discourse without resorting to accusations of racism, which necessarily comes off as a much weaker claim than, say, those of Black Lives Matter activists (and for good reason). We need to be clear about what we mean when we discuss structural privileges, and the system that generates it: it is a *description* of power differentials, not a prescription.

It really is telling, then, that Hayley Kiyoko can be written off as white in some reviews of the *Insecure* episode before their eventual correction, *because* it makes sense, in this framework of whiteness as socio-economic privilege, to lump white and Asian women together as the same categorical threat to black masculinity. And it really doesn't help that we now have the equivalent of the Jewish stereotype of being obsessed with money and frugality in the myth of the model minority, easily warped into insinuations about Asian desires to *be*, quite literally, white. Ask your average passer-by if an Asian person

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is brown, and I guarantee you that any answer you get will come out a confused mess of unclear and competing terminologies. In our age of globalised finance capitalism, if Jewish folk serve as great scapegoats for capitalism, Asians now are becoming those for globalisation and its attendant inequities.

Let me be clear: if white supremacy is a socio-economic program benefitting the descendants of the original American settler-colonisers dependent on the construction of racial difference, if white supremacy is *the* organising principle of capitalist society and its processes of social stratification, of reifying unequal power differentials between races, then we should be ever more careful about our analysis and criticism of groups that we increasingly dismiss as beneficiaries of a white supremacist state. Never mind that it diminishes solidarity amongst different races underneath the Leftist banner—we would be buying into the argument that Asians and Jews, personifications of the ills of capitalist deprivation, are partially responsible for the maintenance of this hellhole we live in, that it is on *them* that they have gained access to a more economically privileged form of systemic power. The constant criticism of Jewish and Asian privilege *qua* skin tone and other performative identity markers then becomes completely beyond the point. Global capital, our enslavement to a system that deprives us of our own intact selves, encourages every person to identify with and attempt to become part of the class of respectable accumulators of capital. Any critique of privileged groups in this vein will always read more as an assimilationist approach to power than a demand for a complete dismantling of our power structures.



We don't earn
money, we
spend it!

Swinging Out of Writing: On Balancing Rhymes and Rock Steps

May Huang

May Huang is a third-year in the College majoring in English Literature.

1. Major Jackson, "Why I Write Poetry," in *Best American Poetry* 2013 (N.p.: Scribner, 2013), 59.

I have called myself a writer for nearly all my life. Diary entries, short stories, and poetry began dancing their way into my notebooks since I learned how to spell. Throughout high school, I read voraciously, submitted to literary magazines, and wrote nearly everything down. I expected to always easily sustain myself, as Major Jackson beautifully put it in his poem "Why I Write Poetry," on a "steady diet of words."¹

I discovered swing dancing much later on, during my first week of college two Octobers ago. A social dance from the 1920s that is danced to jazz music, swing includes dance styles such as Lindy Hop, Charleston, Balboa, and Collegiate Shag. On the blank page



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of the dance floor, a leader and a follower can improvise an entire dance simply through partner connection. In the beautiful, neo-gothic Ida Noyes Hall on campus, I caught the jitterbug in a frenzy of flying feet, friendly dancers, and big band jazz, and have been swing dancing ever since.

Zadie Smith published a piece in *The Guardian* last October titled “Dance Lessons for Writers,” in which she describes the connections between dancing and writing. Both offer “lessons of position, attitude, rhythm and style, some of them obvious, some indirect.” Smith distinguishes between the dance styles of Fred Astaire (“untethered, free-floating”) and Gene Kelly (“grounded, firmly planted”) to point out how she usually has to choose between elevated and commonsense language when writing. She also compares dancers like Janet Jackson, Madonna, and Beyoncé to writers like Muriel Spark, Joan Didion, and Jane Austen who “inspire similar devotion” through “total control”²—dancers mesmerize crowds with fancy footwork, while writers capture readers with striking language. Both art forms give us an audience to which we present, sometimes boldly and other times with great vulnerability, our personal style.

2. Zadie Smith, “Zadie Smith: Dance Lessons for Writers,” *The Guardian* (29 Oct 2016).

But when I fell in love with swing dancing, I did not think about how dancing and writing intersect in terms of lessons (although this influence certainly exists—I’ve written poems using meters that match the six and eight-count rhythms of swing). Rather, I thought about dancing as a distraction *from* writing. In an interview with *The Millions*, poet April Bernard called poetry a dance. This is a metaphor I can understand: diction, like footwork, can be light and acrobatic, while the way a poem reads, like the way a dancer moves, can be smooth or erratic. But I could not hold writing and dance together.

This essay began as a response to the age-old feeling of writers’ guilt: the nagging sense that I should be, but have not been, producing creative, written work seriously on a routinely basis. For me, my guilt culminated in the almost unbelievable realization that, instead of spending my free time devoted to reading and writing, I was... swing dancing.

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My mother once commented that I seldom keep still these days, for my feet start shuffling whenever a jazzy tune plays in a department store. Dancing has made me, someone who used to be content staying in the same spot for hours with a book, restless. Yet this is dangerous—for in order to write, I must sit down and focus. For some writers, music helps; Haruki Murakami told the *Paris Review* that he considers “the chords, the melodies, the rhythm, the feeling of the blues” helpful when he writes.³ When I write, however, jazz is a distraction. I cannot compose lines in iambic pentameter if eight-count rhythms are lodged in my head. As the time I spent dancing (or even thinking about dancing) overtook the time I spent writing, a dilemma began to present itself: would I rather stay in my pajamas in bed, trying to write trochaic verse, or dress up and triple step? Too often, I have chosen the latter, heading out the door with a book and dance shoes in my bag, barely getting through a couple of pages on the train yet swiveling, shuffling, and hopping in my well-worn shoes for hours into the night.

3. Haruki Murakami, *The Paris Review Interviews*, IV (N.p.: Picador, 2009), ed. Picador USA Staff and The Paris Review, 366.

My priorities became even more pronounced back home in Hong Kong last summer, when I had to choose between going to the weekly social dance and poetry open mic, both of which took place on Wednesday night. A fifteen-minute walk separated the two venues; theoretically, I could have swung by both if I made the effort. But this compromise involved attending the open mic first, missing a chunk of swing, and buying drinks twice. Choosing one was more time and cost-efficient. That summer, I did not attend a single open mic night.

Should I have felt guilty about my decision? I didn’t ask myself that question until I was on a plane ride back to Chicago in late September. I can’t say I regretted much—I met kind dancers, collected a wealth of new swing era songs, and improved at leading swingouts. But I could not shake the feeling that I should have spent more time writing and reading like a “responsible” writer would. I should have been collecting lines from novels, not new moves from the dance floor. Swing dancing was a hobby, while writing was supposed to be a lifestyle, a potential career path. Dancing slacked my writing muscle as my body muscles instead grew accustomed to tracing the steps of a swingout, maintaining the close partner

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I have to go to
my next dance
at 3am, sorry!

connection of Balboa, keeping my lead arm up while dancing Collegiate Shag. I was swinging out on a weekly basis and, in doing so, swinging out of writing.

After all, swing dancing—unlike writing—is a social activity at heart. One becomes a better writer by reading widely, an activity most properly done in solitude. Conversely, one becomes a better dancer by going out to social dances and festivals. Susan Sontag wrote that being a writer “demands a going inward and reclusiveness, just plain reclusiveness—not going out—staying home all the time—not going out with everybody else going to play.” The writing life involves tasks that require solitude, such as describing personal memories and composing sentences. But social dancing is about making diverse connection points, collaborating with different people’s ideas to lead or follow a dance. Instead of fully living the solitary “book-drunken life”⁴ that Sontag credits for turning her into a writer, I spent my weekends happily and, with other dancers, collectively “swungover.”⁵

4. Susan Sontag, “The Project of Literature,” sourced from Maria Popova’s blog *Brain Pickings*.

The disparities between writing and dancing most sharply emerged for me toward the end of last year, when I was living parallel yet double lives with both crafts. I was enrolled in a poetry workshop, experimenting with various poetic forms and working on

5. Term borrowed from the swing dancer Bobby White’s blog, *Swungover*.

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a new poem almost every day. I was also dancing every weekend at the Java Jive, the social dance hosted by the university's swing dance club, and attended my first swing workshop in late November. I fell into a regular routine that quarter: every Saturday night, I would dance for almost three hours, and every Monday afternoon, I would upload a poem I had written that week to be workshopped in class the following Thursday. My days were measured in dances and poems.

The poetry and dance workshops I took part in, although nourishing, nonetheless divided my time and belonged to different lifestyles. When writers gather to workshop their writing, they critique one another's work in order to later revise it independently, perhaps well into the night. Yet when swing dancers converge for workshops, they look forward to the social dances that extend past midnight. Offering someone critique on the social dance floor is usually considered poor dance etiquette. Gabriel García Márquez once said, "when I sit down to write, which is the essential moment in my life, I am completely alone." But the magic of swing dancing happens with a partner—the conversation between a leader and follower, the familiar ways you can respond to a stranger on the dance floor.

I certainly find it easier to dance than to write. When revising my final portfolio for my poetry workshop, I felt exhausted after an hour of writing, worn out by fixing a broken meter. Strangely, writing seemed a more strenuous activity than what I had done two weeks earlier—dance almost non-stop from 9:00 AM to 3:30 AM. "Dance is a body's refusal / to die," writes Cathy Linh Che in the July/August issue of *Poetry*. When dancing, you have your partner's stamina, the pulse of the music, and the energy of the dance floor to sustain you. You offer and receive happiness, swinging your partner out and being swung out yourself. But Che concludes her poem describing "pleas" that are "looped in writing, / the stutter of a body's / broken grammar."⁶ Poetry can be particularly adept at accessing the dark, troubling, and intensely personal past in ways that emotionally exhaust the writer, travelling alone in their endeavor. Writing means investing much of your own energy into your own work. Seldom does someone complete a rhyming couplet for you the way dance

6. Cathy Linh Che, "I Walked through the Trees, Mourning," in *Poetry Magazine* (July/August 2017).

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partners can simultaneously and immediately snap fingers during a Minnie Dip at a break in a song.

At a workshop, swing dancer Daniel Repsch described swing as a “chill dance.” Writing is decidedly less “chill”—I begin every dance feeling more surefooted about my rock step than I do about writing the opening sentence of a short story, and I could have completed a thousand swingouts in the time it took for me to think of how to end the last poem I wrote. Form is vital to every poem I write; the sestina, sonnet, ghazal, and other styles put constraints on meter, diction, and rhyme, making me more anxious than ever to choose the best words for my poem. No such belaboring is possible in a social dance, when the length of a song decides the time you get for one dance. Unless you are choreographing a routine, there is seldom a sense of revision present in swing dancing; if you miss the only break in the song, you miss it, and carry on until the song ends. Music also helpfully inspires movement, whereas the blank page stares up at me, unhelpful and unblinking. Swing dancing liberates me from the burdens of perfection that haunt me when I write.

But I am drawn to dancing for reasons that extend beyond the simple fact that social dancing is more enjoyable than writing, which more often seems like serious, stagnant work. All the poems I have written are based on what I know—myself, my family, my history. As such, writing is studying my reflection. As Seamus Heaney once said, “I write to see myself, to set the darkness echoing.”⁷ But dancing showed me new features of my own reflection that I had never seen before. Swing was nourishment and growth. I brought to the dance floor a sense of humor and willingness to improvise that I had never seen in my writing. Writing was introspective, swing dancing was exploratory. Writing kept me in my room, dancing took me downtown. Writing made me still; dancing made me move. What began as a newfound hobby rewrote my life in more ways than I could have expected.

Yet I could never dance away from writing completely. Swing dancer Jerry Almonte wrote on his blog, *Wandering & Pondering*, that Lindy Hop is “not an escape. It’s just another way of experiencing the world.”⁸ And writing is ultimately how I unpack every experience I have. Dancing the Lindy Hop is one heck of an experience, as is

7. Seamus Heaney, “Personal Helicon,” in *Opened Ground: Selected Poems, 1966–1996* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2000), 14.

8. Jerry S Almonte, “Favorite Videos and Parting Thoughts on 2012,” from his blog *Wandering & Pondering*.

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waking up to snow, revisiting my childhood home, and watching a familiar city disappear below me from a plane. Writing allows me to look at these moments squarely in the face and study them with silence, pause, and discipline. Dancing with a stranger, forming a connection, and playing with their momentum in response to live music is wonderfully intimate, but the intimacy of a poetry reading—which exposes me to a stranger’s hopes, joys, and frustrations—sends reverbs through me in ways that dancing cannot. What I love most about poetry is the power of words to move you, even when you are not moving.

9. Anne Lamott,
*Bird by Bird: Some
Instructions on Writing
and Life* (New
York: Anchor,
1995), 237.

Despite the solitude of the writing life, it is also true that, as Anne Lamott notes, writing gives you “a shot at dancing with, or at least clapping along with, the absurdity of life, instead of being squashed by it over and over again.”⁹ Frankie Manning described dancing as a two and a half minute-long love affair between a dancer, their partner, and the music. Writing feels like the opposite—“I hate writing,” Dorothy Parker once said. But the second part of Parker’s quote is, “I love having written.” Time, of course, is essential to my dilemma, the reason why my dance and writing lifestyles compete, and also why dance so frequently wins: although both dancing and writing are hard work, a dance can make me smile within seconds, while a poem might take days, weeks, and sometimes not at all. Yet while writing is not always immediately enjoyable, the way dancing usually is for me, a completed poem (if ever) is a reward that has its belated, and often immense, pleasures.

Zadie Smith wrote about dance lessons for writers and there are certainly writing lessons for dancers, ways in which both art forms move in tandem. Swing dancers could learn a thing or two from Hemingway, whose unadorned yet clear prose teaches us not to overuse variations or lead complex moves that might confuse our partner. Similarly, dancers should pay as much attention to music breaks as poets do to line breaks; these are moments in our craft where we show that we are listening to the music, thinking about what precedes and follows a phrase. Anne Lamott also notes that “to be a good writer, you not only have to write a great deal but you have to care.”¹⁰ What makes a poem or novel important, and not only well-written, is the problems they set out to address and

10. Anne Lamott,
Bird by Bird, 107.

MAY HUANG

The newest dance move: the Goose



the conversations they hope to inspire among readers. Swing dancers, who spend most of their time on the dance floor physically connected to another human being, especially need to care.

My favorite essay about swing dancing is Bobby White's "The Listening Leader,"¹¹ in which he writes about the importance of leaders paying attention to their follower's variations, personality, and mechanics during a dance. Listening and responding is what makes partnered dancing a

11. Bobby White, "The Listening Leader," published in *Swungover*.

conversation, instead of a soliloquy. White also emphasized taking your partner's physical and psychological comfort into account—to be kind. To care. In the years to come, I will write poems I'm happy with, have delightful dances, abandon stories I find hopeless, and have frustrating moments on the dance floor. And just as one's writing style evolves, or the plot of a novel takes unexpected turns, my relationship with dance will certainly change. But as a writer, I will always try to produce a good piece of writing that moves people; as a dancer, I will always want to dance well and know that people enjoy moving with me.

This August, I attended my second weekend-long dance event: the "Great Lakes Balboa Escape" in Chicago. I had, of course, writing I wanted to complete over the weekend, and ideas for poems I had been tossing around in my head all summer, but I nonetheless put them on hold as I practiced Balboa toss outs instead. On the last morning of classes, Andreas Olsson and Olga Marina showed us how scatting aloud can be a helpful way of keeping musical rhythms in mind while you dance. *Shoo-ga-shoo-ba-da, shoo-ha-shoo-ba-da*. Andreas's voice overlapped with the slow rhythms of the music playing in the background as he and Olga shuffled across the floor, demonstrating the footwork and figures of slow balboa. It sounded like poetry.

Still Life with Provisions

Danny Licht

Danny Licht is a fourth-year in the College majoring in Philosophy.

I once had a teacher who said many things that moved me. His name was Abraham Bennahum, but we only ever called him professor. In the beginning it surprised me that I was so taken by his words, because he was, as he put it, a teacher of paintings, and I was not someone interested in art.

When he lectured, his eyes enlarged and squinted, and his hands drew arcs in the air. To him, the painting was not just another thing like a table or a raspberry. It wasn't just one more thing found hanging on the wall. The painting for him was an invitation into the world, an exciting connection between other people and their ideas about what is what.

It was January when the term began, and on our first day of class there was a blizzard that covered the campus in quiet. That morning we made our way to the top floor of a small campus building, and we warmed ourselves inside the classroom on the top floor that bore no number. When we walked in he was positioned already at the lectern and reading a long dark book whose title I could not make out. He was always there before the rest of us, unmoved by the weather, sitting with a blue and white porcelain tea set, paying us no mind until the clock hit nine.

"Good," he said, and he took off his glasses. Without introduction he began to lecture on a painting that he said was exemplary. *Exemplary* excited me.

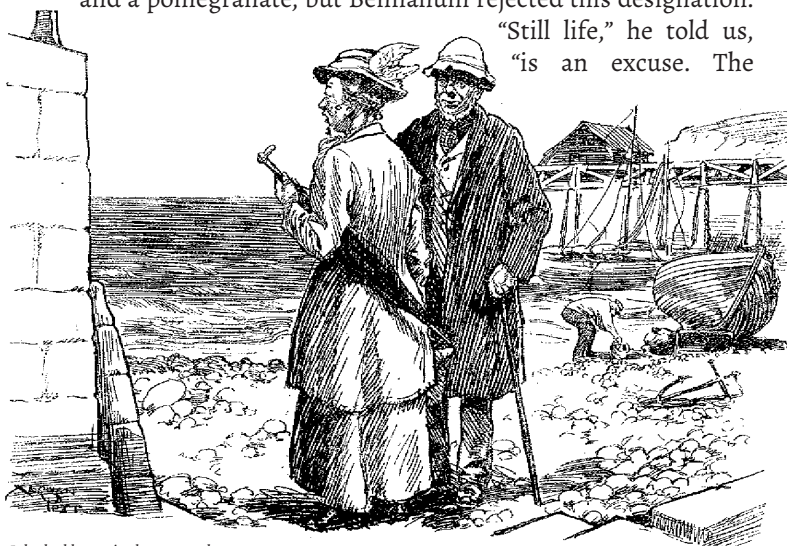
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When he spoke, I listened, and in that room in the blizzard, he went on to speak for an hour and a half about this exemplary painting. Bennahum's gray beard was full and grown, and his long voice maintained the sculpted intonations of his childhood in Germany. What exactly he said on this first day remains to me a mystery, but it felt so right to me that I left that lecture feeling moved; I felt I had discovered something, but I did not know what. I started writing down long passages from his lectures.

Walking across campus later that day, it occurred to me that if only I knew what was exemplary, then I'd know what I should do that summer and then I'd know what to do for lunch. Over winter break, I had started to really understand the University as this place of total opportunity, of infinite choices, and this I found paralyzing. It pushed me into anxiety, and I thought of almost nothing else. I did almost nothing because of it. It was the exemplary that I wanted to know and understand, and it shook me to realize that Bennahum seemed to know this about me, that he began his course in this particular way, that he seemed to be looking at me more than anyone else as he spoke.

The subject of the next lecture was a still life with bread, wine, figs, and a pomegranate, but Bennahum rejected this designation.

"Still life," he told us,
"is an excuse. The



It looked better in the postcard.

STILL LIFE WITH PROVISIONS

invocation of the term is an abrogation of our duty as humanists. It is a renunciation of our responsibilities as writers of painting." As I write this, it reminds me of something he told us some time later when, at the end of a lecture, he was asked a question about the role of painting in modernist art, to which raised his voice with a fist. "Guard yourselves from isms, my dears!" he said, speaking with a type of seriousness that I had never before encountered. This led to a silence in the room that even in memory makes me nervous. But after a minute, he let out the beginnings of a grin. I suppose the two caveats were similar in purpose.

In the lecture on this still life, he spoke almost entirely about the colors of the painting, the interactions of blues with grays, of reds with blues, of traces of other colors and of colors that did not seem to belong. "And yet," he said, "they belong absolutely."

He used words like value, contour, and chroma to describe the colors, and he used them with such authority and pleasure that I imagined I knew what each of them meant. "Each separate color," he told us, "suggests an emotional, physical, experiential communication that is distinct unto itself as a color in the painting, and the force of each color in the painting comes always and only as



I don't think Mother'll appreciate the grass stains.

DANNY LIGHT

precisely specific to the painting that is at hand. That is to say, the power of the colors that we describe here is a power and a look that is always provisional.

"Indeed," he continued, "everything I tell you in this lecture hall shall be altogether and always provisional, and the provision shall be the painting itself, and the provision shall be the moment in time we share together, and the provision shall be I, your teacher, Abraham Bennahum." I had never met anyone who spoke like this before.

The winter moved on, and his lectures became increasingly involved. The concepts he described related to earlier concepts he had defined. His language became more arcane, sometimes incantatory, and yet more and more familiar. It felt as though he spoke a different language from the rest of the world, which is not to say that it didn't engage us. We spoke it with him. Each of us was left rapt by his speeches. We hung on his every word. What would come next? To what conclusion could his horticultural metaphors and zoological allusions ultimately arrive?

We could speak to each other using his vocabulary, reciting his phrases. Someone started calling the course "Introduction to Bennahum" and others took to this too. They weren't wrong to call it this, but I always found it too derisive. It became hard to distinguish between what we actually understood and what we were just saying for the sound of it. The spirit of his language invaded us, goaded us onward, but the acuteness of his insights remained always one step beyond us.

Midway through the course, he told us there would be a paper. "There will be a paper," he said, just like that, and he put on his glasses and opened to a page in an old book called *The Painting*.

"Professor," someone in the front row said, in a high pitch and stuttering. "What's the paper supposed to, um, do?"

"Of course!" he said slowly, his eyes closed. "That is the right question. Let us consider it together." He took off his glasses and closed the book. "In the first place, a painting! We must choose a

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painting that we will consider, and the painting we choose should be a good painting. So long as it is good, none is ill suited to this undertaking.

“Once the choice is made, we should find *what* exactly is good in the painting and we should name that thing, the thing that is right, and the thing should be so right that it takes us in and it takes us away. It should be a spirited moment within the painting that wakes us up, perks the mind, says, *You over there, you ought to marry me!* And here, analysis begins.

“We move forth,” he said. “We should come to locate the place and the power of that particular moment in order that we may take it as a standpoint for the consideration of the work as a whole. This relation between the part and the whole should help us then to find a rule, and once we find that rule we should formulate that rule and we should state it clearly. This discovered and delineated interrelation that we have named and now stated will come to reconstitute the moment as a shape and a name for something greater than itself—namely, the painting. Writers of painting should give their readers a new and good way to think about the work, and if they do not, they should let go of their pens and put their minds to better use in the field of molecular gastronomical economics, and this is the first movement we will make in our writings on painting.

“If,” he continued, “we can achieve this movement, we will have written a paper that is good, but we will not yet have written a paper that is right. We move together! Once we have made our way up and out to this high elevation of formal generalization, out from our moment and into the whole, that is, into a particular reading of this fine painting, the paper that is right will climb *back* down the ladder of consideration and back to the brushstrokes themselves, back to some particular moments of the painting, these moments in all their particularity, and still and carefully and always in relation to the original moment of our original engagement. Once we are there, we should not stop but keep climbing down, and I should warn you that trouble may find us there on that ladder, rungs will be missing, there will be no light, but with tenacity and grace we shall not drop our pens until our movements have found us back on the solid ground

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of truth and actuality. And in our domain of painting, as in all others, that ground, I hope you know, is life itself.

“If we can do that, if we can house our writing in the locality of existence, and this is no easy task, let me tell you, nor is it required or expected, we will have done what we have needed to do as writers of painting. We will have achieved something finally worthwhile in this peculiar domain that is aesthetics.”

I loved him. The way he spoke was instinctive and wild; it seemed to be wise with centuries of understanding.

Yet something does bother me when I read back through these lectures that I transcribed. I cannot help but feel I was under some kind of spell or living in a dream while I was in his classroom, because in my notes, when the meaning of his words verges on conclusion, which it always does, and with high drama, the conclusion ultimately does not come, and this leaves me unsure of what I actually learned from him.

One of his final lectures focused on a painting by Gaston La Touche from the turn of the century called *Pardon in Brittany*. It was on display at the museum downtown, and he called it the finest painting ever made. He refused to project an image of it onto the classroom’s screen because, he said, “I am not a violent man.” We had to go see it.

“The *Pardon in Brittany* gives a sky that has gone lilac at dusk,” he told us. Pilgrims are gathered in black and white clothes. They are holding candles and standing close. There is a horse in the crowd and a priest there beside it, and a woman with a baby is sitting on the horse. A mess of white hats turns blue in the light. The faces are hard to see and so they are hard to describe, ripples of paint spilling into each other as they make their ways across the canvas. Bennahum described the painting with vividness and color, performing what he once called an optical exfoliation. But something strange happened towards the end of the lecture, something that was unlike him. At the time, I did not understand what exactly had happened, but now I do. He stopped before climbing down the ladder of consideration.

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"I have told you many things about this painting," he said, speaking now with a low voice, "and I could tell you many more still. I could speak about it for hours on end. I could recite for you a monograph from the heart, and, by God, I would find pleasure in doing it. Yet were we to compare this handsome treatise to the actual power of the actual painting, still after ninety-six hours of magnificent insight I will have nonetheless told you nothing of the painting. We could lecture on a painting until the deathbeds rumble in, and still we would never arrive there at the painting. In discourse, we must always come to a halfway moment before we come to its object as it is, and so we never do. All that I could tell you of the painting must be spoken from an impassable distance from what this painting actually is and what the painting actually does. It must be this way because all I have said and all I will have said and all, alas, that I could ever say about a painting will and will always be, indeed, objective.

"Now, dear students, it is our ninth week together, and here in this moment we have at last reached the signature puzzle which plagues the discussion of painting. It is this. When we speak of a thing, we do not speak of ourselves. When we speak of a thing, we speak of a matter at hand, and insofar as we speak of a matter at hand, we are speaking objectively. There are six hundred ways to speak about a painting as a matter at hand, and the librarians can direct to you to each of them with ease. Each of these discussions—mind you, I do not mean to disparage them—is worthwhile insofar as it is. There is much to say about a painting formally, historically, biographically, and so on.

"But who here among us," he said, peering around the room, "in our right minds could call a painting, when all is said and done, at the close of the essay and the heart of the lecture, something that is finally objective? How could we, in this course on the discourse of painting, painting as what it is, and not simply as a matter at hand, limit ourselves to the discussion of things, of matter and tangibility? Is a painting just a matter, just a thing, or is a painting much more than a thing?

"Indeed, I believe that it is *much* more. To speak of a painting and

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not *about* that painting we must speak subjectively, because in the painting the senses are awakened and a sense of ourselves and our being is awakened in the world and in time.

"Then again," he said, "in order to discuss something subjectively, we must speak always of the subject and of subjectivity, but when we do this, we must take fine care to not slip down the slope that tempts us. For if we do not take such care, the subject and subjectivity might well become nothing more than two more matters at hand! And when they do, the painting will have vanished, and we will find ourselves speaking without saying much of anything at all.

"At the same time, however, we must never once in our lives forget that writing is for reading while feelings are for feeling. This leaves us in a precarious tangle of linguistic contortion. After all, what can we then say that is not simply our feelings and, at the same time, is not simply a discussion about some matter at hand?

"When we speak to one another of a painting, what can we say that is the painting and the *being* of the painting and what is *right* of the painting?

"What I have been trying to say to you, dear students, is that *Pardon in Brittany* is many things, but beyond all these things, it is a painting, and as a painting, it is interesting."

Interesting! The word pierced me. His tone was high. He was almost screaming.



But look, it has Daddy's nose!

STILL LIFE WITH PROVISIONS

His voice was inflected with the movements of drama, and this—*interesting*—was all he had to give us. I couldn't understand.

The lecture ended. The word did not. It haunted me for hours and through the night, the following days. Interesting did not belong in Bennahum's vocabulary, and yet there it was. That was it. His voice had risen and fallen. Something had to be coming, something good. But instead of resolution, instead of insight, he gave us a word that was meaningless, a stroke of nonsense. How could he call "still life" and "modernism" inhumane descriptors, irresponsible choices of language, and then go on to say that the finest painting ever made was all just very interesting!

Interesting was a word for when there were no other words. It was a word for affectation. It was not a word for Abraham Bennahum. *Interesting*—the word crawls like a gnat down my ear. "Now, *this is interesting*," says a man in a white suit waltzing through museum galleries. His observations end all discussion. Everything he describes gets closed beneath vitrine. To think of Bennahum dressed in this costume sent through me pangs of grief so intense and punishing that I'd be embarrassed to describe them in any detail.

Nevertheless, my anger did give way at some point, sooner than I thought it would, and it gave way to doubt. Was it possible that interesting did actually mean something? I had used the word before, but I was not Abraham Bennahum. I had used it many times even, especially at museums, and I have used it again since. Maybe what I mean to say when I say that a painting is interesting is that you should go look at it. Instead of a description, I should give directions to the museum. But maybe that is not what I mean at all, because maybe you should not go see it. Maybe you would find it boring, because our interests are not identical. Something about the word refers specifically to the speaker, and in that way it seemed to be an inappropriate concept for pedagogical or advisory purposes.

Clearly Bennahum did not worry in this way. At least part of what he meant when he called the painting interesting was that we *should* go see it, and so I did. Obviously it is a good painting. Something about it excited me. Bennahum had described it well, the lilac sky,

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the huddled pilgrims, the flames of light, the horse and priest and woman with child.

When I stood at *Pardon in Brittany*, I noticed that I wanted to be there. Not where I was, but where they were, the pilgrims, forgiven. Together they achieve absolution on the canvas, absolution from the priest, from God, and so too, presumably, from one another. I wish such an event were possible in my own life. Since the first time I saw it, this painting has assumed for me the shape of total exoneration, of communal forgiveness. The pilgrims seem to know each other fully and to love each other still.

An old comic once described a conversation he overheard at a party between a distraught young woman and a little crowd that had just formed around her. She expressed to them her longing for the promises of happiness she remembered feeling in childhood. "Oh yes," an elderly man jumped in. "Yes, yes, yes, and above all, the happiness of childhood is to get a good beating!" It's true that there is something about total forgiveness, final bliss, *Pardon in Brittany*, that one could achieve only with the mind of a child, an impossible conception of eternal righteousness—a slap, and it's yours! Maybe that is what the old man meant at that party, and maybe that is what I like in this painting. Standing there by it, I am taken by this fantasy of total absolution.

Come to think of it, maybe that is what I liked about Bennahum too. There was something boyish and impossible in my reverence for him. I let his words ring in my head like an oracle, or like a child hears his parents, the words unfolding through time with meaning. What the professor said did not always make literal sense to me, but it did feel right, and it moved me.

Short Treatise on Interesting

How meaningful can interesting be? On the one hand, it can mean nothing. Someone might say, "That is interesting," and have said it just to have said it. Before objects of complexity, it can sound right when nothing else comes to mind, when one is overwhelmed. In this ungenerous reading of the word, interesting plays a social

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role as a pretentious substitute for meaningful observation.

What could a more forgiving reading of the word look like? To begin, we should distinguish between two kinds of a potentially meaningful interesting. The first is “interesting that.” When we say that something is “interesting that,” we mean to say that there is more to say, a comparison to be made, a connection to uncover. For example, “It is interesting that he put it that way.” We might also call this “interesting because.”

The second is just interesting. There are moments when we confront an object that is just interesting. There is nothing to say; there is just that it is, and that it is interesting. Any objective statement about this thing would obscure our actual relationship to it; that is, our immediate interest. Because it is difficult to describe, the just interesting remains mysterious and strange. Around it we are silent. A well respected person may announce with finality and seriousness that a painting is *really quite interesting*, or *beyond all else interesting*, and we will likely not ask what is meant for fear of revealing ourselves to be out of the loop or otherwise for sounding insolent. At the same time, it is a word that everyone seems to understand.

What makes something just interesting is, in the first place, some relation between a person and an object. To call something interesting, then, is not to say something about the



You didn't contact my agent, asshole.

DANNY LICHT

object so much as it is to say something about one's relationship to the way that the object presents itself to that person. Something can be interesting only insofar as it interests someone.

The just interesting, then, contains elements of both the subject, who is interested, and the object, which interests him. Because it is caught between the subjective and objective standpoints, which are conceptually opposed, language finds trouble. The just interesting individualizes the interested individual by opening this person to a relationship that involves both the person and the object. The just interesting waves away the distractions of the world to remind the individual of his own particular relation to the world. Without an exhaustive explanation of the interested party (who he is and how he got to be this way, what associations this object before him might evoke and why, how tall he is, when he last showered, what the air in the room feels like and who else is there, what he did this morning and what kind of shoes he put on, and so on), the just interesting could not mean to someone else what it means to him. Empty of objective meaning, the word has immediacy. This immediacy is its meaning.

Because works of art have historically been made to engage perception in this way, nothing can be said *of them directly* beyond that they are interesting or that they are not interesting. However, much may be said about them.

