

Malkin Muse

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Words: 5030

I look upon the black rock of this distant land and think only about what I am. I no longer trace myself the way a painter traces his finger across the lines of his piece. I am what others see of me, but I am also what lies unseen to the world.

My “self” has acted out of accord with I, and I with it, and so often are we tangled in disharmony that I have become convinced it is entirely possible that “I” and “me” are quite separate beings. In fact, I know it to be true. But now, rolling green hills and black rock fill the landscape, and I am there as often as I am here. For I am not myself. And perhaps I am nothing but the very awareness of myself. And now my self has dissolved into the cold, misty air, and I am displaced with green hill and black rock. And the waves crash against the shoreline, and my rock is specked with mist. But if I am not my body, and I am not my mind, and I am not my self, I can only call this wonderfully anxiety-inducing awareness – of which I experience – a *consciousness*. For this term means more and speaks more to what I am better than any other definition.

Before this moment, I suppose I was more than green hill and black rock. Before, I was a man continuously searching for particles and compounds to fulfill his needs — whether it be air, water, food, or love. But those systems of attraction live because of what we call *I*. The consciousness lurks below the surface, and it seeks order in places where none exists. And I will admit that the consciousness is a fool: a horrible fool with a will subjected to what he calls his “self.” Thus, most men are fools as well. They attempt to tame the chaos within themselves, but the laws of nature control all, and they are chaotic by design.

I doubt I will ever show these words to a living soul, but there’s something to be said about writing them down. Long after my corpse is in the ground, I will have preserved thought and repelled the finality of my being. But to place trust in language is to accept the

limitations of the human mind. And, to understand what *I* is, we must first examine what I *am*.

And to do so, I must introduce you to the man of my flesh and blood.

Part One — The Rain

I

A few years ago, at the height of November, he was living in a wretched little hole. It was the basement of an ancient 20th-century home, made into a suite of the worst condition. For starters, the ceiling was only five feet tall and caused the renter to arch his shoulders (a hunch would develop shortly after). The floors and walls were unfinished, with a dusty concrete base and exposed studs that revealed a clawfoot bathtub in the centre of the room. There was leakage in the wetter months, and most of the furniture had to be raised on milk crates to avoid the inevitable mould.

The man had a way of convincing himself that this was all he could afford. In fact, he had a great deal more money than he would ever care to admit, and for some unknown reason he withheld from ever using it. This chaotic behaviour was not uncommon to him, as he often lived by the flip of a coin. He would change his mind repeatably, never holding any opinion for more than a week at a time. He also attempted to forget truths and implant false narratives, perhaps as a way to construct some element (or illusion) of control within the disorder. His choice to live in chaos within the order of a structured society was only one aspect of his contradiction. He was indeed a man of extraordinary incongruity, and this crawlspace – for all its discomfort and unpleasantness – was a place that emulated a safe haven. It was anything but, but his beliefs held more value than any reality before him.

His name was Robert Donovan, but he called himself Hobbes.

This nickname was an internal creation, most people who knew him had never thought to call him Hobbes. In truth, he was a reserved man with little to show for himself, and his secrets were his most valuable treasures. He worked for a news company, and nothing was kept from the office's weekly mental health assessments. Each employee was required to have their blood pressure taken along with a facial-emotion recognition test. But Hobbes shovelled heaps of black dirt over the corpse of his internal self. Once finished, he plastered a toothy smile on his face to prove that he was a happy, little corporate pawn. But in truth, he was entirely discontent with happiness. He sought power above all else, and yet he was trapped in sufferings of his own design.

This self-manipulation and contradiction would soon rupture part of his being. A voice not unlike his own emerged, haunting his waking life. He woke every day to hear it. Cold, rational, distant. He called it *The Other*.

"Look at yourself," it would say, "This is what you aspire to be? All these thoughts, all this potential, curled up like a fetus in that grimy porcelain tub of yours."

The voice of The Other was always right, no matter what Hobbes told himself the night before.

The rain had seeped into the basement, flooding the entire space with brown water. Many books – trashy paperback copies of historical fantasies – floated around the room like groupings of ships in a bay. His desk and mattress were stacked high with a bundle of art supplies strapped to the top of the mound, and Hobbes lay in the centre of the room, curled up in his claw-footed bathtub, wearing his coat as a blanket.

"You think you've escaped. It feels good to spite them," the Other said, "But you're a pawn in their system, you tell them truths and pretend they're lies."

Hobbes groaned and pushed himself up. He looked into the sludge around his porcelain boat and muttered some limp excuse. He was still dressed from the night before, and let his feet hang from the sides of the tub. He took a pair of stained socks that hung from his side table and pulled them over his shins. From there, he put on a pair of worn running shoes, along with his tattered black overcoat. On his way out, he caught a glimpse of his hair in the mirror, which was ruffled and stuck up oddly on one side. His strange appearance was far from his worries, though, as he still pondered over the Other's sentiments. As he walked up the stairs and out of the house, he noted the empty pizza box and the dozen beer cans that littered the landlady's living room floor. He thought of a stranger, in that moment, upstairs in her bed. The thought quickly dissolved and got replaced by the Other, who taunted him about the constraints of his desires.

"You must dig deeper, you have yet to see what it means to reject the world." Hobbes shook his head from the thoughts.

He walked through the neighbourhood and a cold breeze clung to his skin as it swam through the streets. November was the month of bitter winds, ceaseless rain and eternal darkness. Even during a dry spell, the oceans and mountains wrapped their tight fist around the land. Clouds pooled over the heads of thousands, and the frigid, humid air sank into the bones of all. Hobbes felt the puddles in his lungs and bit the dry skin of his lips. He walked into the newer section of the neighbourhood. Rows of identical houses blurred in his peripheral vision, the sky blocked any sunlight. His mind darkened and sank into thought.

"I am what I am," said Hobbes.

"That's just it," said the Other, "You are an artist. And an artist has his needs. But if an artist is reduced to this... like it or not, an artist must be free."

"I am free," Hobbes thought.

The Other laughed in its all-knowing grace.

“You lie in your hole and believe you reject them, yet you return to the surface and bend the knee.”

“Enough!” Hobbes turned a corner down the street as several cyclists passed him by. They all stared, as if he were some freak-show performer. He hid from their gaze in a nearby alley. It was not uncommon for people to have this sort of reaction, even the lowest dregs of society held their heads high when passing him. Hobbes felt an unpleasant, hot hatred boil over his chest.

I would love to rip you from my insides and show them all how much of an insufferable creature you are, Hobbes thought.

“We are,” corrected the Other, “You know we are one of the same. Go ahead and rip out our innards. It will only make them despise you more.”

Like a madman, he laughed alone in the alley. A nearby homeless man stopped in his tracks to observe. Hobbes was infuriated further when he felt a sudden jolt of embarrassment as he noticed him. He turned on his heels and stormed past the homeless man as if he didn’t exist at all. He moved through the streets with determination, withholding his gaze from everyone and muttering incoherent bits of conversation in his head.

A rotten storm brewed in the clouds above. The rain spilled into the streets, and streams gathered in the walkways. Hobbes sauntered through the city, hands in his coat to thaw his frozen fingers. He progressed slowly and watched the few pedestrians around him. Their doughy eyes lingered inches from their screens as they walked, their glasses plastered their stubby noses in white light, recalling the unfortunate breeding of pugs. His own affairs and anxieties fell to the back of his mind as he observed them.

The sounds of traffic, the honking of horns and the rumbling of engines jerked his glance toward the building on the other end of the road. Each window was illuminated with orange light. Like an intricate dollhouse, the glass unveiled the lives of numerous people inside. Hobbes beheld the lower floor with two lit windows: a man in one, a woman in the other. The woman looked nervous – or eager, maybe – with her hands behind her back and her eyes glued to her door. She was pretty, from afar, with blonde hair that shone gold in the light and a baby blue dress which complemented her figure. The man in the apartment over, on the contrary, had an unpleasant sort of appearance, with unkept stubble and thinning hair. He was wearing screen glasses and his hands were hovering in front of him, making him appear like a sad sort of wizard. Hobbes looked back to the woman's apartment, and her door swung open. She ran from the window towards her lover, a much older man who was unfit compared to her elegance. Moments later they kissed and moved from the window, closing themselves off from the world. The sad man on the other side of their wall removed his glasses and sunk deeper into his sofa. He took a few breaths and collapsed his head onto his hands. Hobbes was sure the man was sobbing, but he felt no pity. Instead, he felt a sickness grow in his stomach. The windows held the people like a zoo for the helpless. The cages the residents found themselves in were constructed with their own decisions, their own mistakes.

City folks chased their desires through the night, and Hobbes learned much about the human condition through his observations. For starters, most of the population sought after the basic three components of survival: food, shelter, and sex were the only drivers for decision- making beyond 5:00 PM. Groups of people stood outside restaurants, awaited cab rides home or searched beyond their lawful perimeters for a lady of the night. Hobbes found the behaviour of the average man to be completely understandable. He, too, experienced desire. But what troubled him was how he seemed to be the only one who felt the immense

pressure of his lack of control. The city dwellers' patterns were repetitive and predictable. Any modern program could analyse their behaviour to construct an entire map of their lives. At that point, all human action could be calculable.

The rain poured, rapping against the crown of Hobbes' head. He looked into the sky above. Droplets splashed into his eyes and dripped down his face. Numerous sensations flickered across his skin and through his bones.

After his trip through the city, Hobbes returned to his humble residence. The light from the landlady's living room illuminated patches of brown grass in the front lawn, and Hobbes stood for a while, peering through the window to ensure the woman slept. Then, once he knew it was safe, he quietly crept up the steps and carefully opened the door. The antique TV's dim light shone through the room.

If I wake her, she will ask me how I've been, Hobbes thought, And I will stop. I will stop, knowing me! And I will begin to mutter some nonsensical greeting—whatever it means to mutter a 'nonsensical greeting,' I will find a way to do it.

The Other was mysteriously silent through this whole ordeal, as it often slept soundly at this time of night.

The house was long and narrow, always smelling of must and smoke. The room adjacent to the living room was the kitchen, with the entrance to Hobbes' towards the back. The dark green walls narrowed as Hobbes creaked past the landlady, asleep on her floral-patterned sofa. She slept soundly as he caught a glimpse of her old TV. It was the subtle things that grasped his attention: the static grain that wavered in and out, the oak-bodied frame which held the thing in place, the various nobs and buttons which likely didn't work after years of use. He moved stealthily across the hardwood floors, sliding his socks through

the room as if he were walking on ice. The boards creaked and moaned under his weight. It was an old house, after all.

The plumbing didn't work in the basement, nor did half the lights, so he filled buckets of water from the hose outside and brought them past the sleeping woman, one by one, down the stairs and into his dreary hole. Littered with rotting trash, the space had developed a smell. He filled his claw-footed tub to the top, and—still dressed in his work clothes—sank into the bath's frigid depths.

The cold sent thousands of needles into his skin. Every nerve in his system spiked his brain. The electrical signals danced around in his head like some kind of horrific ballet. He had every right to follow his desires, to leap from the tub in utter shock and bundle himself in his jacket. But after a moment, the world slipped away. His thoughts went still. A throbbing sensation developed in his fingertips—hammers striking his nails—but he didn't care. His mind split from his core as his heart pumped a mile an hour, circulating waves of hot blood through his fingers and toes. He clung to himself in his illness and coughed up half his lung.

It was then that he noticed her.

A large, black cat was perched on the wall of his bathtub, illuminated like a bat in the orange hue of the light. Her paws curled around the edge of the tub and carved shallow grooves into the porcelain. She watched him steadily, intelligently, as though her feline eyes saw something he never could.

Hobbes watched her shadowy figure melt and twist under the bath water's ripples. Her fur glimmered with the light as if it were made of some metallic material. Hobbes nudged the feline with his bare foot, and the creature leapt away as swiftly as it appeared. He shot up from the water and a wave gushed over the edges of the tub. He looked around the room, but the cat was nowhere in sight. For a moment, he believed he had imagined the entire

incident—a concoction of the cold and a lack of sleep, he told himself. But, just as he believed he had lost his good sense, the black cat reappeared, shimmering in the shadows on the edge of a milk crate. She sprang from the darkness, back to the tub, and looked deep into his eyes. The cat mimicked his every movement, like a reflection in the mirror. Her emerald eyes sparkled, and Hobbes could feel her thoughts piercing into his own. After a long, drawn-out silence, he began to guess what the animal might say. After that, he began to hear her voice—smoother, softer than The Other's, and far more pleasant.

“I am not what you think I am,” she said, “And I am far more and far less than you may come to realize.”

Chapter II

It has come to my attention, dear reader, that I have yet to mention the difference between Strength and Beauty. Strength, as you know it, can be objectively determined. It is calculable and objective: scientific, quantitative, orderly and rational. Beauty, however, is almost entirely subjective: creative, qualitative, chaotic, and irrational, and it is often overlooked because of its complexity. Many will say that Beauty is non-existent, entirely fabricated, or perhaps just an artificial human perception. An evolved way of categorizing what is healthy and what is not. However, those who speak of this nonsense have never spent time in an art gallery. The artist who dedicates thousands of hours applying paint to canvas does not do so in the name of objectivity. There is nothing healthy, quantifiable or calculable about this work, unlike the art of science or mathematics. No, the artist paints his piece out of a deeper, more complex desire to create something that touches the soul.

The morning after Hobbes' first night with the cat, he awoke in his bathtub, drenched and covered in grime. He peeled himself off the porcelain like a mutilated bandaid and left flakes of oily, dead skin in his place. He was ill from that eternal night of fever and sweats, chilled to the bone from his saturated clothes. He had anything but strength – his muscles were wrung out, his skin sagged and had developed a sickly shade of yellow – but, incidentally, he rose from the tub like a beautiful dancer. As he caught himself in the mirror, he saw a glimmer of his own greatness.

As he dressed himself in his tattered clothes, the cat's dark fur loomed out of the shadows. She analysed his movement and spoke to him in a hushed voice, withholding her vigour in favour of the sweet sound of her purrs.

“You live for nothing,” said the cat, “Your self-deception has formed a cage around your soul. A man without action is no man at all.”

“You speak nothing but riddles, damn cat!” He threw his shirt at the creature, and she dove underneath his mattress, “You’re worse than my thoughts ever were.”

“You know very well I *am* your thoughts,” said the cat.

“Tell me, what do you mean?”

“Inaction has you trapped, you are too self-aware. If you want to remain free you must act, regardless of the consequences you know will come. Every action must be deliberate, but not in line with impulsivity or temptation. And your actions should be entirely yours.”

Hobbes pulled his cap over his tangled head of curls.

“My actions are deliberate.”

“Your only actions are rational,” the cat hissed, “Even in your suffering, you take pleasure from it. You hope that someone will notice and feel sorry for your pain. That is not deliberate irrationality.”

Hobbes’ face boiled in anger. He felt his sweltering skin drip, feverish.

“Tell me then, you little devil. Tell me what I have missed. You are right, I love to suffer in my filthy hole. It provides me with comfort. And maybe it’s true, I love to punish myself...”

“And why would you wish to punish yourself? It is not rational to punish the self in hopes that someone might notice, or in frustration of one’s own hopelessness. All you are is a man who lacks control. You bend the knee to the system outside of your hole, and all this self-delusion—that you have no desires of any kind and are a man of unpredictability—is simply an arrogant lie. Because, in fact, you *do* desire, as any man would.”

“You are wrong,” said Hobbes, “Every word you speak is a contradiction.”

“Not once in the history of mankind has an entire civilization acted on rationality. This utopian era is but a blink in the universe. Gods of chaos ruled long before reason and science. You must make the world of reason your enemy. Serve only the system that doesn’t exist.”

Hobbes did not answer. He finished getting dressed and moved to the steps that led upstairs. He slammed the door behind him, leaving the cat slumped on the soggy concrete in the middle of the room. After a minute, she leaped to the windowsill and awaited his return.

Her intelligent, sharp pupils faded into the dull, green eyes of an ordinary house cat.

Upstairs, Hobbes walked through the living room and stopped at the sight of the light-grey smoke drifting through the air. He breathed in a concoction of burnt bacon and toast. It was a rich and potent combination that pulled his head from the front door towards the kitchen. From there, he caught the sound of footsteps from the second floor. He heard thick heels trodding down the steps. With nowhere to go, Hobbes chose to throw himself into the opened pantry. Upon doing so, he stepped on a broom, and within seconds several mops, buckets and cleaning supplies dropped off the shelves and crashed onto the floor.

“Hello?” called the landlady.

Hobbes cursed and muttered under his breath: “If I call out, then she will know for sure. But I can’t make it to the basement. No, not now. And the damn cat is probably down there, laughing at me.”

He could practically hear the cat's sweet, sickening laughter, like a baby's giggles. His landlady walked into the living room and called out again. Hobbes decided it was no use waiting for her discover to him, and chose to face the incident head-on.

"Hello, Anna. It's just me." He took off his cap and held it under his arm.

"Oh, thank goodness, Robert! You scared me," Anna said. She marched into the kitchen and looked him up and down, stunned by the clutter of mops and detergent at his feet. "What have you done to yourself, darling?"

"I... Oh, I tried to get some cleaner for the tub," Hobbes replied.

"What for? We haven't installed the plumbing. I have been meaning to call someone for it, by the way. You really ought to have a bath." She moved to her frying pan and turned off the heat. "Ah shit, I've burnt the bloody bacon."

Hobbes followed her.

"I don't smell, do I?" He felt an eagerness inside that he loathed, as he became aware of it. "Just kidding... Anyway, I better be going."

"No, wait dear, stay for bacon. What's left of it, anyway."

She motioned for him to enter the living room. He did as she asked and followed her lead. He throttled himself in his mind.

"Make yourself comfortable, I'll fix some tea. And you do not stink. In all truth, you look rather charming."

He knew it was a lie. He was still sweating from his fever and hadn't washed his clothes in weeks. He sniffed himself and his nostrils burned. His scent was like rotten fruit, as if he had been slowly decaying all night.

The landlady left the living room. Back in the kitchen, she called out to ask him what kind of tea he preferred.

“Any will do,” he said, “But no milk, please.” Ah yes, because milk would have been too great of a pleasure. He smiled at the thought. He was like a parody of the 1920s working class.

“All I have is cream, anyway,” Anna answered.

After a moment, he heard the kettle’s piercing whistle ring throughout the room. Hobbes’ eardrums buzzed and begged for the sound to stop, but he took no action to lessen the pain.

When it finally came to an end, he heard Anna pour two cups, the water rippling and bubbling near the edge of each mug. Hobbes looked around the room. He had not spent much time on the second floor, and it was only then that he realized it appeared quite different during the day. Without the static halo from the television the walls looked considerably still, and the space itself felt less lively. New details seemed to emerge, like the splotches of white on the rough, brown carpet and the dust and debris that clung to the air, illuminated by the morning light. He also spotted little trinkets and ornaments scattered around the shelves. There were tiny glass deer surrounding some bottles of scotch and dusty bound leatherbacks, with old Irish crosses hung at the sides of what appeared to be a collection of jewellery boxes. An odd assortment of items. The place still smelled of must, but it was far more pleasant than his putrid basement.

There were paintings on the walls he had never noticed before. Each held a particular colour palette and intricate composition. Various shapes of the abstract works were used almost systematically to illicit a particular emotion. The red piece was like a portrait, with negative space guiding the eye toward the work, which led Hobbes to feel vulnerable. The

blue and yellow piece was a clear depiction of the way in which water flowed, and it gave him a sense of calm followed by wonder. Despite the rare exceptions, Hobbes perceived abstract art as a cruel form of manipulation.

“Here you are,” said Anna, as she set down a tray of tea and biscuits. She caught Hobbes off guard, causing him to jump a little in his seat. He hoped she hadn’t noticed, but after he recognized the absent-minded expression she wore on her face, he knew she either had not noticed or did not care. And that disappointed him further.

“Would you care for toast? Might be a little crispy, though,” she added.

“Not at all, thank you,” said Hobbes with enthusiasm. He lifted the teacup to his lips and sipped. The tea was hot and seared his tongue. He winced but gulped it down anyway. Anna didn’t notice. She stirred a little in her seat.

“It’s Mango-Green. I picked it up yesterday,” she said.

Hobbes barely managed a “Thank you.” He cleared his throat and picked up a biscuit.

“I like your paintings,” he said.

“Thank you,” Anna replied, “I’m surprised you didn’t notice them before. They aren’t new.”

Hobbes slid the biscuit into his mouth and took a bite. It was crisp and brittle. Some flakes chipped off, falling onto his chin.

“They’re lovely,” he said.

They sat for a long moment in silence, sipping their tea. Anna tapped her foot impatiently and seemed to expect Hobbes to interject, but he said nothing.

“Listen, if you’re having any trouble sleeping at night...” she began.

“Yes!” answered Hobbes, “I’ve been meaning to ask...”

“Good! Well then, I’ll see someone about the noise from the drainpipes outside. They

keep me up all night, too. I can hardly stand the bloody things.”

“Oh... Yes. The rain wakes me up sometimes. But I assure you, it is comfortable, no leaks and warm as ever.”

“Warm? Even in this devilish cold?” asked Anna, “It must get freezing down there.”

“No, no, not at all.”

The landlady looked at him with a strange squint in her eyes. She took a bite of a biscuit and a sip of her tea.

I talk too much, Hobbes thought to himself. This woman hardly cares enough to understand my suffering. If she fixed the flood, invited me up to live with her even, what would it matter, anyway? I'm happier in my unhappiness than I could ever be with her. I don't care what that cat says, I am free in the hole. My cave allows me to cast my own shadows, to design my own truth. What does it matter if others are there to see it?

“But alas,” the cat’s silky voice sounded in his ears, “You crave their attention. You live in two worlds. You rise to the surface and lack control. You want more. You want your thoughts to infuse the world around you. You wish for Beauty to reign over all.”

“Blasted creature!” Hobbes muttered through his teeth.

“Pardon me, Robert?” said Anna.

“I...” he started.

“I think you should go. You’re going to be late.” She got up and began to clear the dishes and cups. Hobbes felt the sweats of his fever return and a rush of nausea in his chest.

“Would you like to go for coffee sometime?” He blurted out.

“Coffee?” Anna chuckled. “Let me get back to you on that.”

She took the tray of teacups and biscuits into the kitchen and dropped them off before returning upstairs. Hobbes watched her march up the steps, but he didn’t dare speak a word.

After a moment, he got off the couch and stood by the staircase, awaiting her descent. After half hour, the sounds of her footsteps lessened and he decided she wasn't coming back down. On his way out, he checked his reflection in the hallway mirror and was startled by his ghastly appearance. His eyes had grown dark and hollow, like the cavities of a skull.