

Rose Harbor

I won't try to tell you there isn't any madness in this house—there's that, too.

I haven't told you yet about the alms I leave outside the house at night, two or three times a week, on top of the old gray stump of a dead spruce tree next to the front stairs, the alms I leave in a white plastic bag, after I've finished my dinner and savored a glass of wine and whatever spirited discussion I happened to be watching on TV, that endless plume of watery small talk and fluttering invective emitted by those colossal smokestacks owned by Comcast and Disney and Twentieth-Century Fox, has cut to its last commercial break.

Alone outside at this hour?

The air is still, the spruce trees silent, and Rose Harbor and her surrounding Maine have been plunged into the darkest and most pungent of night. Alone at this hour, I remember that not everyone has found their way into the grand mesh gears of the machine. That some people are just oil, the oil that mars and stains and defaces the factory floor even as it keeps the factory running, even as the machine requires oil for lubrication. They go by so many names—"the poor," "the homeless," "the immiserated," "the divine"—because the lights of this country do not shine for them, not even language itself knows what to do with them, they are quite literally the unspoken for, unreported on by those smokestacks in Manhattan that plume and plume, figures in the backdrop of our consciousness as stationary as the signs over an overpass, as immaterial to our lives as a termite flattened by the footsteps of stampeding children in a classroom in India, or the knowledge that Eritrea exists—and day after day their lives might as well go out for them like the light of a flame but for the grace of their mammality, but for the heart that beats and beats without anybody's permission, but for the will to live that persists within us whether or not life has in fact opened up any sweetness or succulence to live for at all.

I remember the night I first encountered them here in Rose Harbor:.

It was July.

J.J. and his partner Aubrey were still here at the lake house, using it as their summer home. We had just finished an early dinner, and I had stepped outside to smoke a cigarette and read a Bret Easton Ellis novel in the loveseat on the front porch—*American Psycho*, one of J.J.'s favorites.

The hollow rustling of tin and aluminum cans in the distance.

I opened my eyes, and the first thing I noticed was that the sun had set, the aquarelle colors of a soft pink summer afternoon in Maine retinted into the blue-gray hues of dusk. Fifty feet away, at the end of the driveway, the lid of a blue curbside recycling bin had been opened, and an old Negro with white hair in a camouflage fatigue jacket was rummaging through it, rifling through its contents for refuse to collect into a black refuse bag that sagged next to his leg.

I could still hear J.J. and Aubrey in the living room, their voices layered over the voices pluming out of the T.V. ("—*societal fractures that Russian intelligence units had sought to exploit through sophisticated social media*—"), laughing boisterously about a press conference that Donald Trump had held earlier that day with Vladimir Putin in Helsinki.

This is dream logic, I remember thinking, squinting my eyes, mesmerized by the sight of the underclass Black man who I had read and watched so many BAFTA-winning documentaries about as a young patrician in Paris. What was he doing here? Had the sincerity of my protest against white elite rule, first in Europe and then in every last crevice of the developed and undeveloped world, given birth to a transient whose presence here in Rose Harbor is every bit as outlandish as an outbreak of cholera would have been in the stands of this year's French Open?

Be still, my heart.

Has lily-white Rose Harbor given birth to an heir?

I stood up.

No, let me be candid—I sprang up. The smile that spread through my body had settled in my toes as a rush of warm, unctuous, red-hot brotherly blood (or—as a very cynical parodist might have put it in Paris: if you've ever seen a Rottweiler's eyes grow wide and vulgar as a steak dripping with blood is dangled over its snout, such were the tears my eyes must have salivated at the sight of that innocent man and his even more innocent hunger).

I sprang up with such force that a ligament must have torn loose in my calf (“Aïe!” I let loose then). Only then did the old man jerk up from the sound of my emission, his head slamming into the lid of the bin, sending it flying open. His eyes stared back at mine with a look of denuded reproach.

I realized then that my intention to be lovely to him must have gotten lost in translation, must have taken on the more sinister presentation of an old white slavemaster rising out of his porch chair to address the dark-skinned interloper who had trespassed onto his property—*l'homme le plus dangereux d'Europe*, indeed. “*Je ne suis pas américain*,” were the first words to come out of my mouth—oh, how words fail us at the most inopportune times! “Want some help?” I finally said again, rapturously, my two hands pointed to my chest.

The figure at the end of the driveway did not move.

(“To understand me,” my caricaturist might continue, “you must understand one thing:”—this next to a cartoon of a lynx lecturing a cageful of skittering mice with his index finger pointed up and his eyes closed smugly—“To nourish the hungry is my only hunger.”)

“Who, you? You want to help?” the old man said. Suddenly he is smiling. “You want to give me some cans then?”

It was as if my outstretched hand had been slapped away and replaced by a second, more luminous outstretched hand, the hand of an old marksman who had more audacity than I had been counting on.

I pretended not to understand.

Pretending not to understand is the last refuge of the thoughtful speaker, is the invention of distance between two solidified souls that forms an icy lake for the souls to skate on. I listened patiently as he spoke. He wanted to know whether we had any used cans or bottles that he could take with him to the local recycling plant ten miles away. Five cans at 8.5 cents per can, the old man explained, added up to forty-two and a half cents, times 50 houses, added up to \$21.25—more than enough for a week's meal. “*What I want is nothing so quaint as assassination or blood running in the streets*. What I want is *mundanity*, what I want are *little* subversions!” All around us now, the blank white slabs of Rose Harbor slept

like diamonds sitting inside steel settings. “What I want is for your world of bright lights to be invaded by the pitch black!” The heir of Rose Harbor turned away from me then, and I turned away from him. “What I want is for all the little things you love about your life to be taken *away*, chopped up into little pieces and tossed like putrid meat to the mice outside the castle.”¹

So that’s how it was.

There was no point in arguing. The soft pink colors of the afternoon were gone. I knew if I asked the old man where he lived, that he would tell me about gas stations and rest stops and highway underpasses, and if I said, “But *why* do you have nowhere to go? Why did the most powerful country in the world let this to happen to you?”, that he would simply lift up his arm, and point me to his skin color—and so I turned away from the man, kept my gaze on a bright yellow firefly circling the porch light. Night had fallen, and with night the vanity of having a home that makes us from within the blazing orbs of our portholes three numbers more cautious, and three numbers less grateful.

Inside the house I could still hear the TV going and J.J. and Aubrey’s voices flickering in and out of the voices on the news—and I, alone outside with the fruit of my labor, my thrilling betrayal of my class, *my sin against Rose Harbor*. “What I want is for you to remember who wrote the laws and why. What I want is not performance art—what I want is for your children to be replaced by the children of Gypsies! What I want are refugees arriving ship after ship onto the shoals of your homeland, is the intrusion of the homeless into the clean white bedrooms of your urban estates, is the invasion of suffering into the sweet white center of your succulent souls—if indignity is to exist at all then what I want is for indignity to exist *among* you, *inside* you. . . . I dream of Sudanese mothers huddled inside blankets on top of beds you no longer sleep in, of plump little Chadian schoolgirls feasting on the remains of your posh and chatty little public schoolchildren—oh I dream of replacement, *replacement!* What I want is not a thought experiment—what I want is for everything you have inherited by virtue of your country of birth to be taken away from you and slaughtered like lambs in front of your eyes, is the stench of the dying writhing in full view of your pantries, is the stench of decay writhing in full view of your abundance. What I want is nothing so quaint as spit in your face or vinegar in your eyes or for your children to lose their inheritance.”

A pair of headlights appeared in the black distance.

“*What I want is for your world to fall apart at the seams.*”²

¹ These unsettling quotations and the paragraphs below are excerpted from William Machaut’s 2016 Nobel Lecture, “The Egalitarian’s Proxy War.”

² There is no defense for the words excerpted here and I will not try to provide one. These are grotesque and hateful extracts from a grotesque and hateful speech. Controversial from the moment it was delivered on the floor of the Swedish Academy on December 8, 2016, before an international audience of European officials, foreign dignitaries, noted academics from Europe and North America, and members of the Swedish royal family, “The Egalitarian’s Proxy War” elicited confusion almost immediately from its opening sentence (“We have been alienated from the suffering we purport to disrupt, we the humanists, we the learned ones; we have been fighting proxy wars in place of sincere revolution, we the noble ones, we the egalitarians”), quickly inciting outrage, revulsion, disgust, and eventually many members of the audience to leave the auditorium altogether.

Various described by critics as everything from “a declaration of throbbing, fiery, brittle class rage” (*The New York Times*) to “an ideological programme for the destruction of the First World” (*The Economist*), “The Egalitarian’s Proxy War,” at just shy of forty-five minutes, is a rambling, incoherent, and often self-contradictory speech. By turns self-loathing (“*I am the hypocrite of hypocrites!*”) and self-aggrandizing (“. . . my mastery of your masterly elocution an elegant ruse, the fruit of a lifelong

enterprise to insinuate myself into the center of your world, your language, your music, your poetry—to taunt you sweetly from the inside”), the speech begins by listing the household net worths and recent acquisitions of several prominent members of the audience, before quoting their public statements on immigration, climate change, and global economic inequality (intended, presumably, to demonstrate some inconsonance between observable behavior and stated belief—this is absurd, of course, since it presumes that only the poor have any right to speak out against inequality).

The passages that follow seesaw wildly from brooding and philosophical (“We are born into our natures and nurtures alike, into both the capacities that our genes engender for us and the opportunities that our environment assigns to us”) to manic and accusatory (“An egalitarianism without *barbs*! An egalitarianism with its thorns removed, an egalitarianism that smells perpetually of rosewater . . . oh, won’t anyone in here dab out your fragrances? The air in this room is too sweet, too sweet!”). Indeed, allusions to “rosewater,” “sweetness,” and “succulence” abound throughout “The Egalitarian’s Proxy War”—metaphors, ostensibly, for human freedom, which Machaut describes as the capacity to “see our desires, minute and existential, through to fulfillment.”

But, Machaut continues, the capacity to “see our desires through to fulfillment” is insensible as a general virtue because private desires are by definition insular. In a world in which almost everything we could possibly desire is scarce (e.g., social status), relies on scarce resources (e.g., the desire for loved ones, capital, or wealth to purchase other people’s labor), or else involves the interaction of competing and often antagonistic value-judgments (e.g., the desire to realize a certain political end), one’s fulfillment of a private desire necessarily intrudes—even if minutely, obscurely, and remotely—into other people’s capacities to fulfill their own. “‘Too bad, so sad,’ the victors have cried,” Machaut continues, his voice bellowing from the lectern, “the victors who with their eyes closed and their fingers plunged into their ears will go on to tell the have-nots that abundance is *everywhere*, that freedom is *everywhere*. And yes, yes, abundance for the victors, indeed, is everywhere—freedom for the victors, indeed, is everywhere!”

The “lie repeated,” Machaut continues, is that freedom is not zero-sum—but this lie is repeated by egalitarians “addicted to rosewater,” egalitarians addicted to seeing their passage through life unhampered by scarcity as a matter of routine (namely, the “succulent class,” who Machaut defines as “anyone for whom the experience of freedom is a mundane and ordinary event”). A society that valorizes the freedom for the victors is “insularly” free, but not “generally” free, and while insular freedom is fine for the victors of society to aspire to, it is not something that we can reasonably expect all rational beings to get on board with and be excited about. Only general freedom is sensible as a general virtue. The fate of freedom as a social virtue and the equal distribution of freedom as a social virtue are inextricably tied—to demand the former without making provisions for the latter is to inevitably raise the question, “Yes, yes, I understand you want it, but why should I lift a finger to help you have it?”

To answer this question, the succulent class have invented an exhaustive system of values in which their access to scarce resources is justified by what Machaut calls “the sweet scent of human virtue” (e.g., the virtue of one’s productivity is used to justify one’s material wealth, the virtue of one’s personal qualities is used to justify one’s social status). “You the have-nots should also desire more freedom for us, because we the victors are better than you.” But a system of justification that links human fate to human virtue is the “second lie of the egalitarian”: a lie that functions at both the level of how those virtues were derived (the lie favors those virtues that can justify a victor’s access to scarce resources) and what those virtues actually are (an accident of fate, assigned to each human being by some impenetrable interlace of nature and nurture).

From this lie a spectacularly false and mendacious equality was born to replace our natural and intuitive notions of human equality: the equality of opportunity. “You have every opportunity in the world to do better than us and become victors yourselves,” the response goes, “so go out and do it. Go on! Look—we’ve even set up a system to make it as easy as possible for you. If you don’t become victors within the span of your lifetime then you have no one to blame but—oh, *won’t somebody in this room dab out their fragrances? I can no longer breathe!*” Never mind, Machaut points out, that the social and political institutions of the world—legal institutions, in particular—were designed to maintain stasis and equilibrium under the guise of stability and equal treatment, a bias that inherently favors the interests of the haves over the have-nots (here Machaut quotes Anatole France: “The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, beg in the streets, steal loaves of bread.”).

The larger fabrication is a system of values that justifies why good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people in the first place, the meritocratic propaganda that makes us believe that winners and losers somehow deserve their fates. Morality, in this view, is an ally of the succulent class and the enemy of the true egalitarian. “How quickly under the watch of the sullen moralist,” Machaut

writes, “that explanations of inequality blossom into justifications for inequality! But life in its primal and unobserved state is neutral, neutral—all rosewater is undeserved, and all brutalities too.” Even the redistribution of wealth advocated by the modern egalitarian, Machaut argues, concedes too much, functioning only to entrench a system of values that justifies the victor’s place as superior and the have-not’s place as “humble recipient of the victor’s largesse, charity, and benevolence.”

What should give the egalitarian pause, Machaut points out, isn’t the unequal distribution of resources, but the unequal distribution of inputs—intrinsic and extrinsic, biological and environmental—at the time of birth and throughout the course of a human life. “This is the first inequality, and this is the inequality that the egalitarian waves away, refuses to stare in the eye.” The reluctance to confront the suspicion that characterological determinism (the principle that everything we do arises from our characters, and we have no transcendent ability to choose or create our characters) renders the principle of justice inapplicable to human fates. “This is the final bridge humanity has left to cross, and how humanity, even after it has let go of God and so many other security blankets, refuses to cross—refuses to strike some courage into a neighing horse!”

The central thesis of “The Egalitarian’s Proxy War” appears to be that the modern egalitarian’s alienation from human suffering has deadened his innate sensitivity to the inequality of human fates. His first impulse is no longer to linger on suffering but to exclude as much suffering from his field of vision as possible, by virtue of distance or else personal failing, leaving behind an exactly winnowed population of “virtuous have-nots” toward whom all sentimental efforts are finally directed. Under the banner of efficiency, these efforts are discharged from the private realm to the public realm, a displacement that serves two functions: first, since public institutions were intentionally designed to maintain stasis for the comfortable, the displacement ensures that improvements for the underclass—if they come at all—come slowly, at a rate that the comfortable can tolerate.

More insidiously, this displacement allows the comfortable to discharge their compassionate impulses into what Machaut calls “proxy wars”—battles fought in the public realm on behalf of the underclass that pose, even in victory, no risk of diminishing the comfortable’s primary advantages. The gains by the underclass are symbolic only, while the general terrain of human inequality and the system of values that endorses it remain unaltered. The modern egalitarian, so addicted to rosewater, is then able to transform his participation in proxy battles into “public remonstrations”—into more “succulence,” into more “virtue,” into more “rosewater for himself.” When confronted with the possibility of Utopia, the comfortable quickly retreat into the refuge of impotence (“We do what we can”) or else disseminated self-interest (“But what about me? I worked hard for what I have, and everything I do is for my family, everything I do is for my children”).

“To be inside anyone’s life too intimately,” Machaut concludes, “is to eventually want for them what they want for themselves—this is the secret of art, and this is the divine engine of literature. An egalitarianism that threatens no one is a limp and impotent thing indeed. Those outside cages will never lift a finger to change the conditions of those inside cages. You who sit before me are among the freest people in the world. The systems of the world tilted in your favor! Insularity breeds like mice among you. . . . The general will change only once we are *all inside cages!*” The passages that follow are too inane to summarize here. Suffice it to say their vulgarity was enough to diminish whatever philosophical value the text might have had in the eyes of the Nobel Foundation, who in an unusual move decided not to make a video of the lecture publicly available on the internet.

“I have failed in my life at comforting the afflicted,” Machaut explains, “so now I shall turn all my attention to afflicting the comfortable.” This was perhaps a miscalculation, since afflicting the comfortable ultimately meant alienating the only audience who might have given Machaut’s ideas a sympathetic hearing. Instead, “The Egalitarian’s Proxy War” found itself in a cultural no man’s land—too combative to be taken seriously by the bourgeoisie (“Privileged White Male Tries to Make ‘First World Privilege’ a Thing,” scoffed *The Australian*), too pedestrian to be of interest to philosophers, and too abstruse to be embraced as a populist manifesto in the developing world. “What bonds the modern left and right together,” Machaut told *Valeurs Actuelles* in April 2017, three weeks after a British newspaper cited Machaut’s Nobel Lecture as a possible inspiration for a terrorist attack that killed five people in Sweden, “is their collective insistence on perpetuating their perfumed conditions into infinity, into absurdity.”

Revelations by Machaut’s half-brother that Machaut had physically and emotionally abused his wife of fifty years further accelerated the damage to Machaut’s reputation, prompting the Nobel Foundation to take the unprecedented step of formally rescinding Machaut’s Nobel Prize on May 4, 2018, after amending the language of its own official statutes. *Toppled*, a documentary about the Machaut affair

co-directed by Elaine Fischer and Todd Raichlen, was released by Netflix in 2020. Its title alludes to the closing lines of “The Egalitarian’s Proxy War,” delivered by Machaut in a soaring voice as many inside the Grand Hall had already begun standing up to leave: “*Topple over yourselves! Topple over yourselves! Rawls is dead, and I have pissed a star on his grave!*”