“Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction”

A Comparative Literature Senior Project by Jane Kathryn Simmons, ‘04
I wrote these poems between January and May of 2004, in conjunction with my first reading of the novel *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust. I decided to do a project in poetry because I wanted to be able to synthesize the world that I was discovering through Proust’s mind, as well as express my personal reactions to his writing – some of the most profound and provocative writing I have ever encountered. All of the italicized lines, including titles, are direct quotations from Proust, as translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, published by The Modern Library.

In my experience, one of the most interesting debates in the field of Comparative Literature is the question of how much our work is “our own.” This project was an exploration for me -- a dance between my own writing and the themes, styles and images presented in *In Search of Lost Time* and the works of James Joyce, William Shakespeare and Wallace Stevens. I decided to adopt a Stevens title, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” for my project because these poems are “notes” toward a work of literature that was tremendously important to me as a student and as a reader. I would like to thank Professor Peter Rabinowitz for allowing me to do an independent and unconventional project, Professor Margie Thickstun for her help and generosity, Carlin Mallman for suggesting that I find a senior project that made me happy, and my parents, who introduced me to the universe of literature and shared my excitement for this project.
Combray

I. Night
*For a long time I would go to bed early*
A thousand deft moments were to take place in the night
But my body lay still as I waited, anticipating them
The stillness of the black room consumed me, like the
Closed mouth of a predator
I played the fish, waiting to be digested on the soft palate
Spine arched, pupils dilated, gills pumping silently
My mind turned in on itself, screaming and writhing
“Sleep,” it hissed, and the very thought
Pulsed through my veins like ice water
I could not read the outstretched arms on my watch
So I would strike a match, let my eyes adjust to the
Sudden burst of light, rest my gaze on the familiar face
Sulfur wafted around my bed, giving a more acrid taste
To the tingling sensation on my tongue
A sense of something much larger than me
Resided inside of me, perched at the tip of my spine
Obsessed with the exact hour, not comprehending the entirety of Time
Waiting, endlessly, for the night to end
To see light in the crack between the floor and the heavy wooden door

II. Day
*That false joy which a friend or relative or woman we love can give us*
Momentary lapse in an otherwise stolid moment
Fleeing adrenaline from an unexpected loss of control
We invent the face and composition of a body that is not ours
The form of an Other, more plausible self
Who catches the radiating vowels and consonants from that transitory god
Tapes them into frames of film, projects the images into their memory
And as the momentary savior leaves, our Other grows cold
We cling to him like a child
But find ourselves embracing cinders, gritty and lifeless under our fingertips
The energy that had passed along two ethereal strands of existence
After lighting a dim wattage in our Other, left us in the dark
Madeleines

crumbs mixed with tea
tiny, floating leaves
dissolved into steamy water
my lips touch cold porcelain
and sweet-soaked morsels
flood my tongue with
flour, vanilla extract, milk
memories linger on my tongue
suddenly the tongue of
a blank-year-old child
smacking his tea contentedly
studying the rivulets of
Auntie Léonies placid face
waiting to live a while longer
she and I are prisoners to
Time inside the ticking parlor room

I hadn’t remembered forgetting
this young mind
so eager and aware of itself
what else had I forgotten?
What phantoms had I
exorcised to become this
aging, haunted creature
inhabiting a body which
a thousand selves had occupied
each bringing their memories
and releasing them
into that void that I had abandoned
Deese  (Goddess)

the most jealous
the most self-infatuated of actresses
self-imposed on a stage
spotlights reflecting off the
lower shelf of her eyelashes
a trained performer,
she instructs her pupils to
accept the assault
cautiously advancing
towards prop landscapes
she dares to utter her first lines
vocal chords trembling deftly
pores open, veins pounding
an answer is spoken from an invisible mouth
she begins to breathe again
with lungs other than her own
the lungs of Phaedre
two globes more perfect and organic than her own
she flicks her wrists
light flashes from glittering silver bracelets
accessories of a stranger, a mere silhouette of a human
the faint outlines of the stage begin
to feel less like the steel jaws of traps
more like the perimeter of a bed frame at mid-morning
pages and ink keep her character
glued into a two-dimensional world

from the balcony
a young boy swims in her image
the entirety of her reflected through shimmering lenses
he forgets the plight of Phaedre,
forgets the thin lace shawl swinging from his grandmother’s arm
the beads of perspiration gathering on his temples
the sea of bodies swaying around him
he peers through magnifying glasses
and sees the actress
Death
a parasite
to our waking life
lingering in our
Memory:
a universe being
born into itself
microscopic elements
expanding the
mass and contents
of our conscious self

Death
an infant child
peering out through
transitory eyes
within a fragile skull
enveloped by translucent skin
unnoticed, it ages
limbs becoming weak and thin
strong features dissolving
simmering in apathy
the world appears bleak

Death
one inhabitant
of our soul
is extinguished
as the next
scatters the ashes
and kindles a new flame
seated on a majestic throne
of impalpable regality
Death wraps itself in
swaddling clothes: nascent
À l’incomparable ami

Mon douce ami
sweetest friend
vous êtes mon seule chance
you are my only chance
regarder cet monde sans mes yeux
to see this world without my eyes
rester dans une minute calme
to rest in a calm minute
comprend les idées silents et abstraîts
understand silent and abstract ideas

mon entire vie j’ai lu
my entire life I have read
tout le monde dans traductions
the whole world in translations
mais vous n’êtes pas une langue
but you are not a language
vous êtes juste un esprit
you are just a spirit
et pour ça, je suis profondément reconnaissant
and for that, I am profoundly thankful
Stillborn

I.
Little Rudy Bloom, ruddy-cheeked in his mother’s womb
Red light permeating his sleepy, unfocused watchings
Molly clicking long knitting needles as she weaves red wool for him
Feeling his small feet move against the inside of her
Tiny fetus dreams consume him, preparing him for the smell of blankets

II.
A man gently pats his lips with a red napkin
Eyes focused on a sea of clouds drifting behind high brick chimneys
Submerged in the sudden memory of hawthorn stalks rubbing together in a storm
Reaching small hands out towards fluttering pink petals
The scents of days long past curl into the low wings of his nostrils

III.
Eleven days. Eleven times the lifespan of a tiny creature emerging from a cocoon
Eleven hush-stained mornings of warmth and shadow creeping across floorboards
Eleven thousand heartbeats before night fell and the ducks abandoned the far pond
Eleven indicated by the long and short hands when she held him to her breast
Eleven days they watched his pink body sleeping in ruddy wool

IV.
Fragments of the novel were bound in his imagination
But loose pages drifted through the dark channels of his mind
Some were blank, others contained nothing but footnotes
Tediously he had suffered the contractions of his imagination
But once in ink, the memories never survived the night
Boy Buoy

Once, when a widow had flung herself into the sea had been rescued against her will
my grandmother had told me that she could think of nothing so cruel
realizing that we could no longer understand her, she gave up altogether
the attempt to speak and lay perfectly still

imprisoned by our resistance, her distress and the snug fit of her fur coat
she resigned to a state of repose and mourned for her dignity
the invisible presence of electricity she had carried was no longer palpable
and suddenly the deep wrinkles on her face and hands blurred her familiarity

Françoise busied herself with endlessly intrusive primping, despite the hair’s frailty
and we watched grandmother’s rolling white eyes for any sign of reciprocity
her silence informed us that our faces were blank obstacles, purely anonymous
and she became a stranger to the household, a body that did nothing but breathe and wait
Remembering the Obituary

*It was the same death whose*
*striking and specific strangeness had recurred to me*
*one evening when, as I ran my eye over the newspaper,*
*my attention was suddenly arrested*
*by the announcement of it*

the name blazed against my retinas in meticulous print
scattering fear across my chest in prickling currents
heat ebbing through my veins in the same waving pattern
as a horizontal blanket shaken by four hands

my memory sought to reconstruct his body,
his form walking towards a bay window
I invented a smile for him, unable to recall the shape of his lips

yielding grief to a more palpable project--
recollect-- I struggled to project the sound of his voice

my throat contracted around the sudden taste of bile
Sister of Charity

*this diversity of deaths makes so moving a paragraph in the newspapers*

Monsieur Swann, a respected member of the Jockey Club
a steadfastly loyal friend, perished after a long illness

Sophia, mother of twins, sister of Charlotte
owner of the wide oak table upon which her grandmother’s crêpes were served
admirer of the lace makers who told amusing stories as they worked

Henry, a devoted gambler, preferred odds to evens
played the clarinet on Wednesdays when he was young
entertaining the guests of the Van de Weils until he had enough money
to ride the train into Brussels and back

Theodore, a man who kept largely to himself
led a private life, adhering to common sense and propriety
sustained a lifelong delight in aesthetic pleasures
read novels in his garden, enjoying the sense that he was always
guarded by stone walls that had been crafted by unrushed masons

Mademoiselle Étienne, daughter of Claire and Johan
deliberately disobeyed her nursemaid one afternoon
left the front yard, forgetting to latch the gate behind her
with her uncle’s money, she bought the heel of a rye loaf
tore off small pieces for the grey-blue geese
and watched them float under the shadow of Judas trees
I said to myself that everything is capable of transposition
and that a universe that was exclusively audible
might be as full of variety as the other
trusting my intuition, I lingered in the possibility
of voices mingling over the clatter of hooves on stone
a man whose only existence consisted of
the sound of his fingers tracing his forearm
symphonies of breakfast plates blending
with the roar of waves breaking, sending foam skyward

the illusion of visual security, once dissipated,
opens the opportunity of faceless encounters
our joys and curiosities are expressed
as the tinkle of brass pieces in a pocket
the thud of a large rock on a flat mossy space
voltage, hesitancy, astronomical phenomena, migrations
each containing a different pitch, feverish melodies
residing in the psychic, spontaneous core of our conscious self
Our blood is only internal survival of the primitive marine element

She lay still, dreaming of wading into a river’s current
to relieve the anxiety of processing her landscapes cerebrally

Water rushing over bare feet, toes gleaming under a white sun
Skin liberated and tender on lichen-covered stones

Her body is a desert, clinging to life
Absorbing what it can from sporadic thunderstorms

Excess water flooding her senses
The mind, once saturated, risks drowning

Her imagination extends from a sandy bank
A green shoot, slender and fragile

The water flowed in the opaline transparence of her bluish skin.
She smiled in the sun and became bluer still.

At such moments she was truly celestial.
Caesura

In the presence of a Vermeer
understanding the shaft of light on a woman’s hair for the first time
frozen in a plane of shadows and textures

The sensation of leaning one’s frame
against carpets that have been rolled off the floors
and leaned against walls that witnessed one’s childhood

Standing on a dock, watching the ripples of a lake
turn into concentric circles after a rock
has interrupted its dark surface

Closing the curtains
after putting an anxious child to bed
obsuring his vision of phantoms with a white quilt

The end of a cello sonata
deft fingers suspending the bow over taught strings
air trembling from the memory of echoes

Shutting a book and resting it
in a folded palm, mind reeling from
the aesthetic journey it has just witnessed

Moments of experience
and overwhelming comprehension
the slightest intrusion / can shatter them / into a thousand fragments
Habit made me a prisoner

I felt that there lay open before him –
before me, had not habit made me a prisoner –
all the routes in space, in life itself
he flew on

his beautiful winged machine
glinted in the low golden light of dusk
propelled upward through striations of blue and white
I clutched the lapel of my jacket, breathless

with every foot of altitude he gained
the harder my emotions pressed against my face
disbelief mingled with dim memories of magicians in black suits

Swam before my eyes like fragments

for a moment the barren rocks by which I was surrounded
and the sea that was visible between their jagged gaps
swam before my eyes
like fragments of another universe

waves collided with the shore
muscles in my horse’s shoulders shuddered against his saddle
the two of us were still, stoic observers collecting salt and wind in our hair
alienated in a cove of black rock and violent movement

if this setting had been painted onto a stretched canvas
the finest oils and tapered camel-hair brushes could not have captured
that sense of foreign activity and isolation
or the drone of a metal bird soaring over an agitated sea
Minutiae

*which was Elstir’s world*
*the world he saw*
*the world in which he lived*

enshrouded by the clarifying hush
and gentle nuance he found in surfaces
a world of orchid pistils

tiny mountain peak ridges of oil paint
frozen branches tapping against sea-green glass
a woman’s coat billowing like a sail

two black olives resting together in a bowl
the worn suede on the inside of a hat’s brim
long glances exchanged over brandy snifters

diagrams of cut apples, seeds symmetrical
empty vases with dried leaves clinging to the insides
curtains winding around a rod iron railing on the balcony

upon completion of the portrait of Cottard’s smile
he turned the glittering canvas towards blank faces
they sought geometry in a blue shoulder, a sheaf of ice

he would not be understood until later, when he appeared
under the swirling vortex of Swann’s sleep as a stranger in a fez
*walking along a path which followed the line of the coast and overhung the sea*
Albertine in Bloom: Five Quatrains

and I sensed this motionless and living semicircle
in which a whole human life was contained
the only thing to which I attached any value;
I sensed that it was there in my despotic possession

I marveled at this sleeping phantasm of flesh and blood
curled into the position she had found before birth
a living spiral nebula, protecting her aging core with youthful arms
fingers trailing away into the void of the dark room

on the chair next to her, an unfinished scarf
I could sense her knitting more threads in her sleep
a universe of intricate loopholes connected by one Thread:
the lifeline from my Ariadne, glittering like a cobweb

my Minotaur resided in the labyrinth I had concealed within me
imprisoning Albertine far from the thin beaches of Crete
the smell of melting wax emanated from her pink nightdress
and I yearned to plug my ears with it and silence my Siren’s primordial cry

if I had merely been in search of pleasure
I would have gone to demand it of unknown women
but now what I had to do was to set out on a journey
was not even to leave my own house, but to return there
Her Sleep, on the Margin of which He Remained Musing

She once stood under a vast starry sky
with wet sand covering her ankles in crescents
absorbing with her naked eye the energy
from a distant planet whose light had traveled billions of years
to illuminate whitecaps on the ocean

Marcel lingered every night
over the bed of his unassuming Albertine
drifting on the ocean of her oblivion
each breath escaping her parted lips
filled the starched sails of his understanding

one could listen for hours on end to the surf breaking and receding
at the moment when his ear absorbed
that divine sound, he felt that there was condensed
in it the whole person, the whole life of the
charming captive outstretched there before his eyes

earlier that night he had not conceived
that any sound but the pendulum of the clock
and a small spoon clattering against a saucer
would encroach on his silent monologue
but the waves crashing from her bedroom had beckoned him

he would lie down by her side, clasp her waist in one arm,
and place his lips upon her cheek and his free hand on her heart
so that it too was raised, like the pearls, by her breathing;
he himself was gently rocked by its regular motion:
he had embarked upon the tide of Albertine’s sleep
A universe which had to be totally redrawn

it had always been there
the whole of that past which I was not aware
that I had carried about within me
memories and imaginary scenarios
blended together, merging truth and delirious hallucinations
images buried in my sleeping self
waiting for a noise or smell to re-awaken them
flooding my body with adrenaline
the thrill of an unexpected encounter with a lost friend

the most influential people in my lifetime
were neatly organized and stored next to the minutia of my mind’s eye
my mother’s voice reading to me, the taste of aged scotch
the terror of feet slipping on a rocky ledge
faceless strangers, imprinted by my desire to witness lives other than my own
incommunicable scents of cool mornings coated with rain
the writer witnessed it all, transcribing it neatly for my records
knowing when to write the truth unblinkingly and when to dull the edges with ambiguity
I busy myself with sensory catalysts, seeking portals to the libraries of my past