

Partial Repts

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For those who tried

Who knows what I was up to? Maybe I was up to nothing. Maybe I was just being myself.

-Alexander Portnoy, *Portnoy's Complaint*

There are, in life, always good and valid excuses for every failure.

-Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*

How I Met Jerry

It was 2015, the year before leap year. Since February started on a Sunday, March did too, so both had a Friday the 13th. I don't know why that seems important to mention, but there was something about the late winter and early spring that seemed to have stalled with the dates and days repeating and twice having to endure the ill luck of such a Friday. You needed all the good luck you could get.

In early May I moved to a new apartment in the same neighborhood. As I unpacked my desk supplies in the lambent light of the setting sun, something I had never been able to see from the illegal basement unit in which I had lived before that, I got an unexpected call. Michael was a music director putting together the band for a musical theatre production in my hometown. He had been given my name by a guy who had once been a friend and later drifted south to California. I was working as a guitarist at the time, mainly playing the blues for drunks and the bartenders they kept employed. Once a guy dressed as a pirate had said, in what could have been either his actual tone or that of an urban buccaneer, "How does a young fella like yourself have the blues so bad?"

"I've lived through a lot." I didn't want to get into it any more than that at a gig, not with a pirate, a lawful seaman, or a landlubber.

"Aye." He nodded somberly. He had the tact to refrain from making the sound I had expected. His respect evinced a blues of his own. He was a pirate, or whatever he actually was, but we had an understanding.

If you don't have the blues when you start as a musician, you'll get them in the course of the work. All kinds of things had happened, and I had survived, but only barely. Not since

boyhood had I had faith in a god who would love and protect me, and the little faith I had in humanity eroded as I stood somewhere in one or another bar several times a week, giving voice to the music within the guitar's hollow wooden body, the stinging acidity of the air hurting my nostrils, while sorry people hoisted alcohol to their faces. Even without partaking of the poison, one can spend only so much time on the precipice of the alcoholic abyss without suffering spiritual harm, and I had been there three to seven times a week for years. The landscape inside me had been shrouded in darkness for as long as I could remember and that kind of musical work did nothing to alleviate it.

By the time Michael called, I had tried for years to break into theatre. I was good at reading, and getting better with hours of daily practice. My mentor Tim had praised my vibrato and rhythmic feeling and my musicianship in general.

"I can count on one hand the number of people under forty with your work ethic," he had said once. "Actually, I only need one finger."

That praise sustained me through many days of grinding darkness.

I dreamed of succeeding, of playing in the orchestra for a show in Las Vegas, spending my days in an air-conditioned house on the edge of the desert, engaged in my musical, scholarly, and spiritual work. I didn't know what I would do when I would be without my mentor Tim, without a studio where I could go on the pretense of a lesson and get so much more, where the pristine bathroom inexplicably contained an autographed black and white photo of a once famous French actress from another time, where a one-hour lesson could last all afternoon and Tim would regale me with the tales of his life. Within two years of that day he was dead. I was getting worn out from surviving people I loved.

Michael would be music director for a musical theatre show in a theatre that only a few years before had been an abandoned lacuna in the middle of downtown in my hometown. A wealthy family had bought the place, renovated it, and put their youngest son, Vinny, in charge of it. According to a newspaper article I had read at the time, spring 2013 or something like that, he had gone to a small private arts college back east, some place with an old name in sylvan environs. He had done some theatre internships in Manhattan, and he now wanted to bring Broadway out our way (or some such phrase that seemed to aspire to pun status).

The show Michael was putting together was one that was known mostly for a nude scene. That and something about hippies getting high were about all I had heard of the show. I was worried about what would be expected of me.

“Are the actors really going to get naked on stage?”

He said they would.

“Is the band required to?”

No.

“Thank God. Nobody wants to see this naked.”

He thought that was funny. He playfully suggested that was not the case; he had looked at the photos on my Facebook profile and website.

“And hair—I’m bald and I can’t do anything about it.”

That’s ok.

“I’ll wear a wig, I’ll wear makeup, I’ll wear a costume—whatever you need. Hair, however, is not going to happen naturally.”

That would be fine. He liked the idea of a bald man in a hippie band.

We went over the rehearsal and performance dates, the pay, and the rest. After we hung up he sent a text message with punctuation that, viewed askance, made smiles and winks. I wondered if he had been flirting with me, if I had been hired for my looks. It was times like that I wished I had been gay because it would have been a much easier life. As I resumed unpacking, the light of the setting sun hit the room and windows just right and made the whole room glow. It was two months until the show, and there was hope. When I celebrated the move and the new gig by going to a vegan restaurant and eating at an outside table, instead of alone at the kitchen counter with my head resting on a cupboard, I felt as if I were in flight.

Because I had moved within the same neighborhood, I continued going to the same gym. It's not that I had any particular allegiance to it, only that it was the closest one to my neighborhood that I could afford and that didn't intimidate me. Even after almost three years, from the first week I had lived in town in summer 2012, I didn't know anybody there. Well, I had been accosted a few times, but I had never made a friend there. I did once ask out Janice, a stubby lady with long dark hair and a big ass who worked the front desk. We had matched through a dating website, and I had asked her out in person rather than through the site. It made sense to me at the time. I didn't see her much at the desk after that.

At the time of that move I was reading *The Closing of the Western Mind*, which I had been meaning to get around to since reading his other book *AD 381* not long after moving to town. Ancient and medieval European history, especially the period before and during the forced conversion to Christianity, had been an interest of mine since apostatizing from the Catholic Church in my teens. I wanted to reclaim the heritage that Christianity had attempted to eradicate. There had been some highlights from this self-guided study—namely *God Against the Gods* and *The Barbarian Conversion*—and I had been developing something of a new theory of history

that posited a planned transition of power from the Roman Empire to Christianity, from a dominion of land to one of ideology (that still had the land). It seemed remarkable that in spite of civilizational collapse, Christianity had endured, expanded, and even retained much of the administrative organization of the Empire. How had all the best real estate in Europe remained under its control for two millennia? It was an idea I worked on while eating, or when walking with Ben, who listened patiently.

I had decided before the move, during those repeating months, to read more of the classics rather than whatever happened to be in the library's recommendation display. *The Odyssey* and then *The Canterbury Tales*, from which I remembered reading excerpts in high school, were the first on my list. Chaucer had me laughing out loud on the elliptical. It was an attempt to give myself the education in literature I had always wanted. My initial goal had been to read one to two classics per year, an aspiration so modest because I was still trying to overcome the belief, inculcated during a childhood I'll not get into now, that I was stupid and would only be confused by such things. A remark my first music mentor made compounded that fear of literature.

"I read for information, not entertainment."

Whether he had intended us to take this as a commandment, I don't know, but that's how I took it. Once in a while I would, as if he were looking over my shoulder, sneak in something subversive like *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (a lot of stuff about female fox spirits and ghosts seducing young men to steal their vitality, and some coy bits about homosexuality that made me laugh out loud) or *The Arabian Nights* (which didn't get into the bands of thieves and genies and magical objects as quickly as I expected, and the weird fixation on blackamoors abducting pale maidens got kind of tiresome after a couple hundred pages).

I brought a book to the gym every day because I did a lot of my reading while on cardio machines. Once I had forgotten *The Affair of the Poisons* beneath the rowing machine, and I had been in suspense all that day and night about Louis XIV, Madame de Pompadour, and all the rest. Reading at the gym is a practice good for neither reading nor training, but that's what I did back then because it was the only time I had. Nearly all my hours outside the gym were occupied with practicing, sales calls, hauling gear one place or another, gigs, and often protracted arguments to get money from clients who knew that a guy working for a pittance hadn't the resources to give them any legal trouble. The only reading time outside the gym was during meals. Library books often dropped through the return slot with hot sauce spotting.

One day in May, probably no more than a week after my move, I was in the locker room changing with a copy of Paul Johnson's *Intellectuals* on the bench in the center of the locker corral so I could take it out with me. Some keyword or subject search had revealed it, and it had seemed like good general background.

"You like Bertolt Brecht?" someone asked.

I looked up. He was an old guy with that leathery look of the fit and elderly, standing unsteadily in his white briefs and indicating the book. The names of some of the figures profiled were on the cover. I barely knew who any of them were.

"I haven't gotten to his part yet."

He said some eloquent things about Brecht and literature and the theatre that sounded good to me. I really wasn't sure. I wish I could remember it now because it was on a higher level than most of what gets said, and also because of all that happened later.

I thought maybe I had seen this old guy around before. He stuck out for some reason, I guess.

“What’s your name?”

“Grant.”

“I’m Jerry,” he said.

We began to talk each day. We often arrived and left at about the same time, and he, with his infirmities, changed slowly, so most of this happened in the locker room. I would stand with my bag over my right shoulder (to give my left shoulder a break from the weight of the guitar) and talk as he struggled in and out of clothes. He moved slowly enough that if we started changing at the same time, I could shower and change into my normal clothes, and he would still be at it.

At that time I didn’t have a particular program. I went to the gym five to seven days a week, usually late morning. A typical session began with about a half-hour on an elliptical or bike (or stair machine, if I wanted a real challenge) and proceeded to a circuit of weight machines: a set at one, a set at another, and around until I had done three sets apiece on a handful of things that moved in different directions. Although I exercised every day, it was really working out rather than training in that there were no goals and no plans. It was important to me to be fit, and I thought of myself as a scholar, athlete, and musician, but I had misgivings about being too serious about it and I resented people who were stronger or faster or had better physiques. Didn’t they have jobs? Didn’t they have lives outside the gym? Their lives must have been easy. That’s what I thought at the time.

On some day—it could have been any day because I had no program—Jerry sat at the lat pulldown machine bench while I strained at the angled pulldown machine. It definitely wasn’t a Tuesday or Saturday because those were Jerry’s rest days. It might have been late May by this point, I don’t know. A song that had been popular since I was in high school played, one in

which the singer said he wanted to heal, to feel, and to know something real. I saw Jerry sitting there, but I didn't look over.

“That’s a lot of weight, Grant,” he said when I finished the set of fifteen reps. In high school weight training, Coach Stills had taught us to do three sets of ten to twelve reps each, so I figured more reps was better. Fifteen also felt like a cleaner number for being a multiple of five and for not having a bunch of messy ways of being divided—there was only one.

“Yeah.” It seemed obvious. What else to say?

“You don’t need to lift that much. It’s hard on your joints. If you keep at it like this, you’ll have ground your connective tissue to bits by the time you’re my age.”

Since I had expected to die before 21, I had already lived several years beyond my life expectancy. Making it to Jerry’s age of 74 seemed unlikely. There was hardly a reason in living at all, and inventing the necessity of going to the gym was one way of giving myself a reason to go on living. No matter what befell me, I could still leave this life at any time, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop it if it came to that. There was a freedom in knowing there was always an out.

“What should I be doing?” I was a little irritated at having been interrupted.

“Tabata intervals. That’s what I do.”

“What intervals?”

“Tabata.”

I had to ask him to spell it for me so I could visualize the word and more easily hear it.

According to Jerry, Tabata is a high rep, low weight regimen consisting of eight sets of eight reps. He said some things about it having been developed by a Japanese researcher and

scientific characteristics, its effect on the body. I didn't really look into all that for about another year and a half. I just took Jerry's word.

I adopted this protocol and his system of training one body part per day. My new schedule was as follows: back on Monday, biceps on Tuesday, triceps on Wednesday, chest on Thursday, and legs on Friday. He taught me how to use the free weights. He taught me which benches to use and how to adjust them. I learned terms like hammer-grip and shovel-grip to identify hand positions appropriate to their respective attachments. Jerry taught use of the cable stations, both those with fixed, slotted posts and—his own favorite—the one with articulating arms, which adjusted along two axes. My grandmother referred to Jerry as my coach when I talked about him.

Before Jerry, there had seemed to be an invisible barrier separating the free weight area from the cardio and weight machines. What little I had learned in Coach Stills' weight room had sloughed off over the years until only the pads and tracked movements of machines felt safe. There were even little pictures on their frames to show you how to set up and which parts of your body were supposed to be exerting themselves. I was scared to go over there, past the invisible boundary between the padded seats and circumscribed movements of the machine area. There was even a change in flooring, from light blue institutional carpeting of low pile in the machine area to some hard, black plastic composite. And there was the difference in sound: the occasional ring of a pin and slack going out of a cable lifting a weight stack versus the rattling of plastic and metal of barbells and dumbbells knocking against racks, the dull thuds of weights hitting the floor, and the belabored breathing of those testing their limits. Nobody over there looked uncertain; they all knew what they were doing and where they were going without aid of machines. And then I was on that side, superior to those timorously milling about on the carpet.

Things started to harden up and define themselves. I felt productive rather than merely busy. I was moving in a direction, not just moving around. Still, it took me a while to figure out what to do without there being a machine moving along a track. Sometimes I would be doing a movement I had seen with no idea of what it was supposed to do or feel like. I had lost a lot of years to work without progress.

When I adopted Jerry's program, I made sure to designate days differently than he did so we wouldn't be in the same areas all the time. A little space was necessary.

The Day After Fathers' Day

I had gone south to my hometown for the weekend of Fathers' Day. Although Merriam-Webster online told me every year when I wrote the cards that it was Father's Day, the plural possessive made more sense to me because I had more than one, and that's how I wrote their cards. It was actually a bit of fun to have to pick out differing cards for differing fathers. My father liked staid, normal cards with the expected platitudes:

Dad,

In all the things you do,

And all that you've done over the years,

Know that I've always looked up to you.

It was something like that. I would hesitate before signing, "Love, Grant," and sometimes, to evade the issue, I signed only "Grant." The card was always in the recycling can by the end of the week, so he probably never noticed the subtle way the signature charted the vicissitudes of our relationship. There was a landfill somewhere full of respectful, sedate, reticent Fathers' Day cards.

From my step-father I learned a more creative approach to greeting cards. When he bought cards for my mother or grandmother, his mother-in-law, he liberally modified the text, added drawings, and even picked cards from other sections of the display if he liked the design. Most greeting cards written to be given to women by men had a lot of apologetic text ("I know I don't say 'I love you' as much as I could" and that kind of thing) that he crossed out.

“Most men hardly think of their wives until it’s time to buy a card for a birthday or holiday,” he said once. “I love my wife every day of the year.”

Staid was not the right tone for him. As he gave, he liked to receive: a card with funny images or one of those singing, shaking cards with salutation corrected was best. After picking the staid card for my father, I could have fun looking for Fathers’ Day cards in unorthodox sections. “Birthday - Young Son” was best because the colors were the most saturated, the textures most varied, the shapes farthest from rectangular, and the songs or sound effects the most outrageous. All one had to do was cross out “Son, you’re four!” and write “Happy Fathers’ Day.” It was a creative outlet, anyway, doing both the conventional and unconventional both. It was like playing two versions of yourself in concurrent shows, trying to keep each audience happy. It could be a tough crowd sometimes, but the shows had to go on until the audiences or the actor died.

Two fathers, two mothers, a grandmother—holidays took a lot of planning. You had to put in at least two shifts, one with each set and maybe additional hours to make up for your dead brother. Sometimes I resented his having become the uncontested favorite; had he lived, had he continued to mature, he would have appreciated the difficulties of managing our fathers, and we might have discussed it. The most pressing problem was how to spend one Fathers’ Day such that each father felt he had gotten more of my time. It meant doing a lot of the conventional things twice: two backyard gatherings with step-siblings and neighbors and such, two meals that came off a grill and had that taste of flames fueled by lighter fluid and cheap charcoal, two sessions of making small talk and answering again questions about what it was I did up there in the big city (music) and when I would settle down and have children (probably never), two

rounds of cards presented and opened, two of everything except brothers to bear one another along.

Such days could be, and often were, fraught. Fathers were capricious, mercurial, thin-skinned, quick to interpret anything as a slight. They carried around the hatred of their own fathers, long dead. It had probably been like that since man stood upright in the gloaming of history. They grew up slowly, fathers. They lost their tempers. They had tantrums. They had to be consoled. They felt threatened. They were frightened. Two fathers was a lot of work for one son. I did the best I could, knowing my presence would quickly be forgotten and this supposed absence of mine added to the tally of my many shortcomings. I got through another Fathers' Day and made it back home that night.

On Monday I was back in my home gym after missing two days of training. It was a quiet day. Why some days are quieter one week than another I've never figured out. Life moves according to cycles apparent—such as the seasons—and unapparent. Sometimes it seemed as if everyone you had ever met was at the gig. Sometimes it felt as if town had emptied out because everybody went somewhere without telling you. That day was somewhere in between, muted but not desolate. It being Monday, I was training back. After taking a drink from the water fountain near the back machines and the windows that looked in on the pool, I stood up to find Jerry there.

“How was your Father's Day?” he asked.

“I survived and so did the fathers.”

“That's a low standard for success.”

“It's better than not surviving. How was it up here?”

“It's not much of a holiday for me.”

“Because of how your father died?”

“Among other things.”

Jerry had once alluded to his father’s demise. The man’s alcoholism had gotten the better of him in his last years. He had trouble walking. He often passed out on the couch. He soiled himself. A younger woman had started come around, trying to get Jerry’s father’s money, of which there had apparently been quite a bit. Jerry referred to her only as the gold-digger or the bitch. She was there when he died. It had been an ugly scene. It was a terrible thing to see one’s father laid low.

“I came here in the morning and did some yardwork in the afternoon,” Jerry said.

“Is that safe?”

Jerry seemed to have his Parkinson’s under control, as much control as a man could have over what would eventually seize up his body and kill him. He had strength, and he could move more weight than guys young enough to be his grandsons, but his balance was bad and he couldn’t get any lower to the floor than sitting if he wanted to get up again. How he was able to shower and get in and out of his white briefs and cargo shorts at home I had no idea. It was a peculiar fitness Jerry had, one adapted to the isolationist logic of the gym.

“I’m not ready to relinquish one of the few things I can still do.”

I understood that. He couldn’t do much that wasn’t done from a chair. Outside the gym, driving to medical appointments, the appointments themselves, reading, watching movies, and eating were about it for him. His life was as circumspect as the exercises he did in the gym, moving along certain paths again and again and never straying from them. The disease and the body that had it were ready to die, but he wasn’t.

“How did it go?”

“I fell down once, but my neighbor helped me up.”

Jerry was reticent about a lot of things, and he had never told me exactly where he lived except the name of the neighborhood, but he had mentioned this fellow, who was his executor. I think that’s right. Jerry didn’t reveal much, so it was hard to piece together anything he didn’t want you to know.

“What if he hadn’t been there?”

“And I slipped with the shears and accidentally cut myself.”

“What if he hadn’t been there?”

“Then I either get up on my own or die there on my lawn.”

His bluntness about his frailty sometimes took me aback. I worried about him. I wasn’t ready for another dear one to die on me.

“Just be careful.”

Jerry was leaning on the wall by the fountain for support. I was facing toward the windows onto the pool. Some people were thrashing through their laps. Two fat old women were walking along on either side of the buoyant lane dividers, talking to one another.

“If I’m too careful I can’t live.”

“Maybe your neighbor could spot you.”

“I like my independence.”

I thought about how to respond. It was hard to make sense of all that I was feeling, imagining the old man out there with his Parkinson’s and melanoma and everything else trying to shape his yard into suburban perfection and how isolated he was back there behind this body that was betraying him to his death. I wanted to say something, but I couldn’t get it together in time because Jerry had moved on.

“Hardly anybody was here yesterday,” he said. “They were all out barbecuing with their sons and fathers.”

“They could have trained before barbecuing.”

“Only the most dedicated of the regulars were here.”

“You, of course.”

“And Justin, whose laundry day was yesterday.”

“How could you have known that?”

“He was in a loose-fitting tank top that showed off his development nicely.”

“He’s a titan among mortals, a titan who does his own laundry.”

“He was a bit bashful when I complimented him on his physique.”

“Why? He and Tony are the most accomplished guys in here.”

“Justin doesn’t like to show off.”

“Just his presence is showing off. You can’t miss it.”

“He usually wears tights under his shorts to cover his calves and loose sweatshirts to cover his back and chest.”

“I guess I had never noticed that it’s Tony who wears the homemade cutoffs and not Justin.”

Someone came up to the water fountain, so I stepped back. She took a drink, and I watched her walk away.

“There’s something commendable about that,” I said.

“What you just saw?”

“That wasn’t bad,” I said. “No. I meant Justin doing all this work and refusing to make a show of it.”

“For the work itself is its own fruit and just reward.”

“It’s the purest motivation there is, to pursue it for the pursuit itself.”

“We all do that to a certain extent, but all of us, even Justin, are still doing it partly for vanity.”

“Still, there are varying levels of exhibitionism, purity of devotion, and artistry from one guy to the next.”

I looked around. Some people were on the crunch and core twisting machines, but nobody was close enough to hear. Neither Tony nor Justin was around.

“I have a theory about Tony and Justin,” I said. “In any setting there are people who set the tone, who, through their comportment, determine the feel of that place. I think in this gym they’re the ones who do that.”

“This gym is different. There’s something about it that’s not like the ones I used to go to.”

“Listen,” I said.

We were silent a moment. There were sounds of slack going out cables in various machines. Ellipticals and stationary bikes whirred as their flywheels went around. Somebody was jogging loudly on a treadmill.

“What are we hearing?” Jerry asked.

“It’s what we don’t hear,” I said. “No grunting or yelling. Nobody’s dropping weights. Nobody’s talking louder than necessary. Nobody’s on the phone.”

“People are more pleasant to each other here than in most places.”

“That stereotype of lunkhead guys making passes at women isn’t the case here.”

“I hadn’t thought of that, but you’re right.”

“Without anyone being conscious of it, Tony and Justin are the moral paragons for the gym.”

“I don’t think they’re aware of that.”

“It’s not conscious for anybody.”

“I’m certainly glad they’re here.”

“I am, too,” I said. “And it’s both of them, as a duo. Either one alone wouldn’t have the same effect.”

“In talking to them, they’re different apart than together.”

“Like brothers. Brothers need each other to be brothers. Otherwise you’re just a guy on your own.”

Sadie (I)

That autumn my tendinitis got so bad that I had to stop lifting. On Wednesdays I had Kristi's yoga class, and on Saturdays that yoga class, which Levi sometimes did with me. That left five other days of the week to fill with something at the gym. To get some exercise and to see Zack, Jerry, Tom, and the other guys, I would go in and do successive bouts of half an hour or more on two cardio machines: recumbent bike then stair machine, or elliptical then standard bike, or some such combination. I tried to get some variety of movement patterns even if it was all basically rotary motion in the sagittal plane. The stair machine offered the best challenge because one had to do more than rely on pedals and because it worked the posterior chain better than any other cardio machine. It offered a view of the gym from its most elevated point, a nontheistic spiritual climb that interested me very much. You could also check out women all over the gym from up there.

I had had tendinitis before, but never that bad. Not being able to practice much made me realize just how much I had been practicing and how much I had circumscribed my life. Without the guitar in my embrace for most of my waking hours, I was at a loss as to what to do all day, and I felt out of shape at the gig at night, which I had to see through to its closing in late October. At first I thought the tendinitis would give me a chance to read more, and that I could make some good progress on the medieval chivalric literature I had bought for reading : *Le Chanson de Roland*, *Tristan and Isolt*, *Piers Plowman*, *Parzival*, and some Penguin collection of Anglo-Saxon fragments. And I still had *Le Morte d'Arthur* to finish, which, after the episode of Sir Tarquin and some other later bit about abducted maidens in an enchanted cauldron, was kind of a slog, but one that I would not let get the best of me. As so often in life, aspirations exceeded

achievements. There was only so much I could read, often very little, when fretting about the state of all those tiny muscles and tendons that had to contract and relax precise amounts to play guitar. I was worried that my forearms wouldn't recover in time for my cruise contract for which I was scheduled to fly out a few days after the election, on Veterans Day. It had taken three years finally to secure such work, and I had hoped to spend a few years doing contracts until I could parlay that into something in Las Vegas or on Broadway, anything that would allow me to make a decent income performing. That was my dream, anyway, until the first evening show onboard when I learned the truth. Lying on my bed and staring at the ceiling each day as the contract approached and the increasingly weird election loomed, wondering if my soft tissue would heal and what I would do with my life if it didn't, was not a career I wanted to continue exploring.

One day, maybe in early or middle October, somewhere around my last birthday of the decade, I was in line to get a smoothie from Zack. Jerry already had his and was waiting at one of the tables. His right arm rested on the metal table next to his drink, making small twitches. Sadie, one of the trainers, was behind me. Trainers came and went like wisps of smoke, but Sadie had stayed for some reason, and by then had been working there for two years or so.

I remember the first time I saw her. God, I didn't think there were women built like that. On top she was compact and nearly flat-chested and then her ass and thighs came out of nowhere. She had quite a collection of different kinds of tights, bright colors and geometric patterns (but none of those garish leopard- or zebra-print ones that I liked for their trashiness), some with that mesh on the side or the little windows on the flesh, and you could see how some skin. It was incredible. Because her thighs were too thick to walk normally she had a strange gait that was both alluring and a little disgusting. In those early days you could tell from the way she

held her head and moved her eyes that she was probably self-conscious about being fat, which she was, but in the best possible way.

My first girlfriend, Caitlin, herself a voluptuous woman, had a theory about this. Sometime in early July of 2013, after finishing a gig—something for two useless drink tickets and the hope of a piddling amount in tips, a forgettable gig duly forgotten—I had gone to hear her sing at a karaoke bar downtown, and after her rendition of a song with a swooping, vertiginous melody set to insipid lyrics, we sat in a dark corner booth that had that feeling of being at a remove. She held my hand, which was still a new thing for me. Whenever we went out during our brief courtship, Caitlin liked to assess and rank the attractiveness of everyone in her sight: men and women, performers and audience, servers and customers, everybody. She had an eye like a butcher, seeing each person as a collection of parts subject to her appraisal. Any time we were intimate my physical shortcomings—chest, arms, shoulders, stomach, penis, and knees receiving the most criticism—were enumerated anew, but when we went out her attention was on others. That night she focused on women. Each woman who passed the booth or sang karaoke to a backing track was pointed out to me.

“Do you like her?”

“I don’t know.”

“What about her?”

“I guess.”

“What about over there?”

“Not really.”

“She has a fat chick personality.”

“Pardon?”

“Look at how she carries herself.”

“I don’t see anything.”

“She holds herself like a fat chick.”

“That sounds kind of reductive.”

“Look at me.”

I glanced over. She was showing a lot of skin and a lot of cleavage. She was plentiful.

Clothes could not contain her.

“I’m fat—”

“I like your figure.” I did, but I had also learned that she often asked for reassurance.

“—but I don’t carry myself as a fat chick.”

“You do have an aura.”

“I know I’m fat, but I don’t think of myself as a fat chick. She does.”

I felt sorry for this unknown woman. Did everyone judge her thus? Did she know it?

Maybe she was cold in the air-conditioning. Maybe she was shy; we would have understood one another. Was she grieving? What had her life been like? What would happen to her? I wanted to understand her life, what had led her to this moment, what motivated her, what she thought. I wanted her to be ok, I guess.

“That’s the difference between being fat and having a fat chick personality,” Caitlin said.

Indeed, Caitlin was more appealing even than slimmer women, more conventionally pretty women. There was something powerfully erotic about her comportment. Men and women alike noticed her. She commanded attention.

I had made a few observations of my own since then. There was the old sweatshirt around the waist trick, a somewhat more stylish version of the too-long sweatshirt trick. It was a

tactic with a motive so obvious there may as well have been a sign. Other times I was fortunate enough to see a perfect ass, a sight so sublime I made an effort to imprint it on my memory to cherish always. Without fail, any time I did this I would later hear the same woman telling a boyfriend or trainer or some other guy that she wanted to lose ten, fifteen, twenty pounds to have a smaller butt and thighs that didn't rub together when she walked. It was painful to hear that, and I wished they could understand they were gorgeous—impossible, of course, because women can comment on your body, but not the other way around. Women invent these ideas about how they should look that have no relation to attraction or even to the physical reality of the body. Where were they going to take those twenty pounds—their arms? The numbers didn't make sense. What a waste, what a shame to be beautiful and want to be rid of it, to be blandly ordinary.

Over time Sadie gradually seemed more confident, and was eventually in some kind of managerial position, interviewing, hiring, and supervising trainers. She started training in a sports bra and high-waisted tights. She had tattoos that ran down from under the sports bra, along her flanks, and below the waist band. I didn't I had never seen a ring nor had I seen her with a guy who might plausibly be her boyfriend.

For the duration of her employment, I had fantasized about meeting her and impressing her—with what, I don't know—and somehow getting her to fall in love with me. Having such fantasies, I had done what was most natural and logical—I had avoided her. Now we stood near one another and I had a reason to talk to her. I was kind of nervous.

I turned around in line.

“Hi. You're a trainer, right?”

Charm was not one of my strong suits.

“I'm the head trainer.”

I knew that, but I also knew that you had to pretend to know less than you did because powers of intelligence, observation, and memory were regarded with suspicion. You had to pretend to be a little daft lest nobody want to talk to you.

“Do you know anything to help with tendinitis?”

Then it was my turn in line.

“Hold on,” I said.

“The usual concoction?” Zack asked.

“Make it as thick and chunky as possible.”

“Like poured concrete.”

“But more vegetables and fruit than stone.”

“You got it.”

I put my bag down by the other chair at Jerry’s table and went back to the side of the juice bar. Sadie put in her order: the Sunshine Special.

She stepped over next to me. She stood closer than I expected, as if we knew each other better than I realized. I took a step back to give her some room. Women don’t like to think a guy is making a pass or anything.

“What were we talking about?”

“Tendinitis.”

She showed me some stretches for the flexors: placing the palms together in front of the sternum like a prayer; the same thing with hands rotated so that the fingers point down; and extending one arm and using the other hand to pull against the downwardly extended fingers. I had already learned these plus a flicking exercise from Carly. Still, it was nice that she was being helpful even though I wasn’t her client or anything.

“What about calisthenics?”

“What?” The blenders and the television were both going. It was hard to hear. There was something on the television about football players kneeling during the national anthem and what the presidential candidates thought of it.

“I’m about to go work on a cruise ship for a couple months,” I said. “I don’t know if there’s going to be a gym there.”

“That’s so cool,” she said. “What will you be doing?”

“I’ll be playing guitar in the orchestra.” The company called it the orchestra; musicians called it the showband. Orchestra made it sound more elevated than just playing electric guitar with some guys, which people always assumed was like a music video—hair blowing in the wind and pouty expressions and six-pack abs and a never-ending party—which it was not. It was like being a plumber, except it required more education and paid less, and it paid less because of the assumption that it was easy and guys who did it were lazy. “I’ll probably have to do some solo sets, too,” I added.

“I bet you’re really good.”

“I do the best I can with what I have.”

Zack put two smoothies on the counter. There were a few other people waiting for theirs, and, because we were friends, Zack sometimes made mine last, so I wasn’t sure if those were our smoothies.

“Do you have a lot of fans at your shows?” Sadie asked.

“I’m in the background,” I said. “It’s just a service job, like being a caterer.”

“I would pay attention.”

“Don’t forget to tip. I need it.”

She smiled.

“Your smoothies are here,” Zack said of the drinks that had been on the counter.

We went to get the smoothies. Her hand brushed against mine, and I felt a frisson of fear, a flash of anxiety that this would be blown out of proportion as harassment and that I would be banned from the gym.

“Sorry,” she said.

“Ok.”

“Let’s go back to my desk. I have some routines that might be good.”

“And that won’t aggravate the tendinitis too much.”

I left my smoothie with Jerry, who expressed something quizzical and salacious with his eyes, and followed Sadie to her desk. One unwieldy lycra-clad thigh slid past the other—it probably got warm there from all the friction—until she sat down behind her desk on all that behind. She unlocked a drawer and pulled out a cell phone.

“Have a seat,” she said.

I sat on the other side of the desk.

“I have this calisthenic warmup I do with clients,” she said. “I’ll text it to you.”

“You can just print it. I’ll want to print it anyway.”

“I’ll text you.”

“I could take a moment to write the routine on some scrap paper.”

“It’d be easier to text you.”

I handed her my card.

“Grant Lovejoy,” she said. “Like the street.”

“Like the street.”

“Are you...?”

“No relation,” I said.

“These are really nice.” My card at that time had on the front my website, email address, phone number, and a little trident-like logo of my devising, and on the back a black-and-white photo of my face, artfully obscured by the neck of one of my Telecasters. Within a couple years they would be little more than relics of my brief music career.

“Thanks,” I said.

“If I remember the name of this bodyweight program that’s good, I’ll text you that too.”

I thanked her and began to stand up.

“We can talk for a bit,” she said. “I have some time before my next client.”

I sat back down.

“What else do you do besides come here and play music?”

“Practice. Do all the managing and sales calls and hustling. Read. Write ideas and bits of stories in my journal.”

“Are you going to write a book?” She crossed her legs as she sipped her smoothie. Dear God, what legs.

“I’d like to do a whole series about being a traveling musician: *On the Road, On the Ship, In the Van, On the Plane, On the Gig.*”

“That sounds exciting.”

“It’s one of the main reasons I want to do this gig: to gather material.”

“I don’t read much, but I would read that.”

“I’m about start working on something that would be an update on Tommy Tedesco’s books on reading for guitarists. The provisional title is *First Call.*”

She seemed to be making eye contact with someone somewhere behind me. She smiled at that person.

“I’d also like to do one about being a local musician called *Two Drink Tickets*.”

She looked back at me.

“I don’t have much material yet, except things that happen at the gig.”

“Is it crazy?”

“Yeah, but not the way you might think. People say strange things. The most common occurrence is for a venue operator to try to stiff you.”

“Really?”

“It’s not even that much money.”

“How much?”

“Very little. For the average bar gig, as low as tips and two drink tickets—thus the title I mentioned—to fifty, maybe seventy-five dollars.”

“You could make more as a trainer.”

I gave her what I hoped was a wry smile and eyebrow raise. “Are you trying to recruit me?”

She laughed. “It’s my job.”

“Seriously, though,” I said, “Is it worth it?”

She put down her smoothie and leaned forward. I leaned toward her a little, but not too much.

“Here it’s not that good,” she said. “But trainers working for themselves or in a boutique gym can make good money.”

“A boutique gym? Where you can work out and then purchase bone china?”

“What?”

“It was a joke.”

“Oh.” She put the smoothie straw in her mouth and pursed her lips around it, sucking.

“Nevermind,” I said. “What’s a boutique gym?”

“They’re those small gyms where you have to have a trainer to go there.”

“How many of these are there in town? Two? Five?”

“Way more than that. At least fifteen on the west side near where I live.”

“That many people have trainers?”

“There’s money in telling people how to work out.”

“Are you still trying to recruit me?”

“Maybe.” She smiled. “I think you’d be good at it.”

“Even if I have tendinitis and can’t grip anything?”

“Your arm will get better.”

“Maybe it won’t. Maybe my music career is over.”

“Even if it is, you’d be a good trainer. People can feel safe with you.”

I looked at her without responding. I wasn’t sure where this was going. It sounded like a compliment, which I didn’t trust because it meant someone wanted to take something from me.

“You have kind eyes,” she said. “We need kind trainers.”

“Thanks,” I said. I’d heard it all before. The only thing that would have topped it off would have been a comment about my cute face or my arms or something. What was she after?

Sadie checked her phone. “I should get ready for my next client.”

I stood up.

“Thanks for the tips, the chat, and the encouragement,” I said. “I need it.”

“You’d make a good trainer,” she said. “And you could still do music on the weekends.”

“It demands more time than that, but I’ll think on it.”

“I’ll send you that warmup and the name of that program once I remember it.”

“Thanks,” I said. “And send my forearm wishes for a speedy recovery.”

She smiled. “Ok, Grant. Time to go now.”

“Ok,” I said. “Bye bye.”

I walked away with more force in my step for having been the object of interest for a few minutes. It had felt good to talk about my book ideas. When you could go years without a woman meeting your eyes, to be noticed, even if it was related to her job, was something you remembered for a long time. Plus there was that ass she carried around with her.

Jerry had finished his smoothie. Mine remained untouched. I sat down and pulled my phone from my bag. Sadie had already sent the warmup routine in one message. A second one, something complimentary I can’t remember now, had some of those little cartoon faces at the end, those colorful ones. The menu from which you chose them had weeping ones that made me too sad even to look at them. Sadie’s little faces seemed to be smiling with their eyes closed, perhaps even glowing a little. One was smiling upside down. Was that better or worse than regular smiling? Maybe I had done something wrong. All I wanted was help with my tendinitis.

“Who’s your new lady?” Jerry asked.

“She’s not my lady,” I said. “I asked her about tendinitis.”

“Did she tell you anything you didn’t already know?”

“Not really,” I said. “Also, I kind of have a crush on her, so I wanted to practice talking to a woman.”

“I don’t think she’s interested in you.”

“I don’t think she’s interested in me either. I’m hardly interested in me.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“It was a joke.”

We talked some more. I drank my smoothie and ate some baby carrots I had brought. We discussed what I had left to do before leaving, what appointments Jerry had coming up, what we were reading, the upcoming election, what the next four years could be like, having to choose between bad and worse for president, Jerry’s dinner plans that night. Eventually it was time to go, Jerry to his afternoon appointments and I to do some shopping for the contract. I needed to buy some of the things on the list the agent had given me and some suitcases to get it all there and back without exceeding fifty pounds and getting charged by the airline for it.

About an hour after leaving, when I was in the basement of a dingy department store trying to find affordable luggage to take on my contract, Sadie sent a text message with the name of the program—You Are Your Own Gym—and more of those little animated faces. A few years earlier I had made the punctuation mark ones, the old fashioned kind, when dating an older woman who was a singer. The two smiling faces together were to tell her how much I loved her; it didn’t last long after that. With Sadie, though, something of a routine developed: we talked at the gym and then in the afternoon, while she was on duty and I was elsewhere, she would send text messages, most of which had those expressive little faces. I, however, had learned to keep to words and avoid the small faces.

hey what are you up to

Resting my poor, tendinitis-stricken forearm. Reading. Trying to finish Le Morte d’Arthur before I leave. What are you up to?

candy crush Im bored Lol

Meanwhile your unfortunate clients are injuring themselves because you're ignoring them to crush candies with your phone.

lol Nooo!!! Im between clients. Theres nothing to do

Perhaps I can interest you in reading some medieval literature with me? I promise it won't make your phone as sticky as smashing pieces of candy does. Why would a person do that?

oh my god lol I think I like candy crush more

You're really missing out on the best that fifteenth century England has to offer. Thrilling stuff.

lol grant stop your making me laugh out loud. I might get in trouble!

Stop I shall, fair lady. A courteous knight should never endanger the honor of a passing fair maid.

It might not have been the right venue to mimic Malory's style, but I liked doing it and she seemed into it, I guess. The small colorful faces made me wonder if she was flirting. They supposedly expand the possibilities of visual communication, but I found them confusing even when they seemed to be smiling. What exactly is that little face expressing? What do all these images mean? Sometimes it got annoying and overwhelming to be getting text messages all afternoon and evening. I had work to do, after all. She did seem to think I was funny, which was nice. Sometimes I got to talking with Holly or Kristi and wouldn't have time to do more than wave to Sadie, and I wondered if somehow that was the wrong thing to do. Other times we didn't see each other at all.

did you leave already

No, that's still a little ways out. I had to come at a different time to do errands.

will you be here tomorrow?

Yes.

I was always at the gym the next day. Where else would I go?

After a while I figured we were getting to be friends and it would be ok to find her on Facebook. Women can be really antsy about phone numbers and Facebook and things, so you usually have to go very slowly or wait for them to ask you. It seemed ok, though. I had exchanged more text messages with her than anyone else.

What's your last name? I asked one night while I was out at a country bar and the band was between sets.

why

I'd like to take our friendship to the next level—the Facebook friend level.

lol My facebook name is Sadie de Sade. You can probably guess why

Because, like the Marquis de Sade, you profane the Catholic Church in print and deed and derive pleasure from elaborate games of domination and role reversal during the course of which you inflict pain on others? If so, I'll be very careful around you. I'm easily hurt, you know.

lol what?! No the porn star

I found Sadie on Facebook. She wore tights and tank-tops in most of her photos. She looked better in person. It also seemed that she was older than I had thought: she was sometimes with a young guy who may have been her son. There were also photos of her doing things like preparing for skydiving or suiting up for a motorcycle ride with a guy who may have been her brother. The posts said things about missing him, how long it had been, how often she and others thought of him. There were those miniature graphics of breaking hearts and crying faces. She, too, had outlived someone she loved. Eventually we all would, if we ourselves were not first to die.

I found the other Sadie de Sade, her namesake, on one of those online hubs for pornography, the one where I usually went to meet my own needs. I had, during a period of fascination with antinomian philosophy, read some books on Satanism in particular and the left-hand path more generally, among these Francine du Plessix Gray's biography *At Home with the Marquis de Sade* and a collection of Sade's short fiction called *The Crimes of Love*. The architecture of his mind fascinated me, the way he seemed to think in terms of chambers within chambers designed to confound the reader. Reading him was a contest of wills, his deceptive, dissembling, hostile, labyrinthine one against the unwary reader's. I finished the books; I didn't let him get the best of me, nor did I exactly win. The editor and translator of the story collection had written that Sade's rejection of the then dominant convention of fiction as moral education had been influential on subsequent literary developments. Personally, I got a bit tired of reading what were clearly his rape fantasies that ended with contrived nods to propriety.

That was about all I knew of S&M, some general things about one of its namesakes and a few things I had picked up from reading the weekly Savage Love column. Porn of that kind really didn't interest me. All I wanted was chubby white chicks with fat asses getting it on with muscular white guys, and that's what I would watch on my computer for an hour or more once every five to ten days while pumping my dry right hand up and down my erect penis. It always made me feel dirty, jacking off, especially afterward when, with my pants down at my feet and a paper towel full of pungent semen in my hand, muted videos of sex played while somewhere, somehow, life went on without me. Since I had never figured out how to sublimate the libido in music, and since sex was just not a regular part of my life, I managed jacking off the way those post-bop jazz pianists had managed their heroin addictions: a need to be kept to a minimum, hidden from others, and attended to without dwelling on it. It was, I convinced myself, my one

vice. Sadie de Sade was not the most extreme S&M out there, but it was still more than I wanted to see of dominated men being struck and trod upon. What the other Sadie meant by choosing such a name I suspected but never learned. I thought it would be inappropriate to ask.

Maybe a week before I was to ship out Sadie posted on Facebook that the next day would be her last day at the gym. I took a break from cleaning and packing to call her. I paced in the living room as the ring on her end came through the speaker next to my ear. She answered.

Where was she going?

A boutique gym on the west side of town. She was burned out with the managing and sales at our gym.

Would I be able to see her before I left town?

How about Saturday?

That sounded good to me. Where in town?

My neighborhood, she said. She wanted to see my apartment.

My roommate might be around, but I promised he wouldn't bite. He hadn't yet.

She thought that was clever. She hoped I would give her a private concert. She wanted to hear me sing just to her.

Sure, I could do that. No charge. Pro bono.

See you then.

See you.

It had sounded as though there were someone else there with her, a male someone. She hadn't said, and she had seemed—I don't know. I couldn't tell. Maybe it had nothing to do with me. Maybe it did.

Then it was Saturday. In the early afternoon, after Levi and I had gone to the gym and eaten takeout from the organic grocery store at his apartment, I was walking home. It was cool and overcast, but not likely to rain. I had prepared everything I could have known about for my contract and had turned in my ballot the night before. I had begun having ominous dreams about the election and the era to come. Either way looked grim. The date with Sadie, if it was a date, was one of my few remaining engagements. I harbored hopes for the evening. I had even cleaned the living room and my bedroom and changed the sheets, just in case.

A text message from Sadie came.

hey sorry I'm out at my nieces birthday party and i'm not sure Ill be there in time

We can meet later. When would you like to meet?

I really want to but i have to get all the way back

I didn't know what that meant.

I called.

She didn't answer.

Alone that night in my apartment, ensconced in my sleeping bag to save money on heat and to see if the elective confinement helped my insomnia as it sometimes did, I watched a new movie that had been made to look like an old silent film from the early days of cinema. It was about the vocation of the artist and the travails he faces as the world moves on without him. It was . There was a sadness that made me want to cry without actually enabling that catharsis. After the movie, in my apartment situated on a dark corner a block away from the main street, feeling a pull toward Sadie, I checked her Facebook page. She had posted, about an hour before, photos of herself at a bar in town. And she was not alone. There was a man with her, and he was definitely better looking than I was although he had the well-tended skin and hair nicely cut and

groomed that looked kind of gay, which made it hard to figure out what was going on. In the photo their faces were pressed together. I guess there was even a third person there to take the photo. It was cold in my room, so I stayed in my sleeping bag. The utility bill had to be kept down.

Zack told me later that

Zack offered some consolation on Monday morning when I stood in front of his juice bar counter.

“That sucks. You deserve better, man.” He was not cleaning the counter or moving blender parts around. He stood in front of me and looked directly at me. “I know how you feel about girls canceling—”

“It’s more than that.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I know the guy you mean. He’s definitely gay, so you don’t have to worry about that.”

“That’s not the main issue.”

“Sadie—Sadie’s complicated. She has a lot going on.”

“Like what?”

“I’m not supposed to say.”

I nodded.

“She’s had a hard life.”

“So have I.”

“Not like this.”

I didn’t want to try to win a contest of hardships.

“Don’t get down about it, Grant. You’re going to be on a ship in Hawaii—”

“The Caribbean.”

“—in the Caribbean in less than a week. You’re going to meet some good people, you’ll be playing music, you’ll get a tan. It’s going to be ok, man.”

I supposed he was right. It still hurt. I never did get used to the way women pretended to be friendly just to be able to reject you. No matter how many times it happened, it never made sense. It would have been easier to be gay or to be free of sexual desire entirely. The whole thing was nothing but hassle and headache.

But Saturday night I had endured alone. Something seemed to be receding; something was moving away from me, leaving me apart. I looked up people I had known a decade before, people I had once liked and had cut off in a fit of anger after my brother died, when I had been preparing my own exit. Somehow I had made it through that and other periods, and now felt the loss anew. I sent a lot of Facebook friend requests to recapture something of the possibility from those days. Some remembered me. Most did not.

When I finally fell asleep in my sleeping bag, there was one fewer day until my departure and one fewer day until the election.

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Building a Body of Work

Notes on *Partial Reps*, a Novel in Progress

A Novel Idea: Its Genesis and Development

The earliest version of *Partial Reps* was a general notion written on the back of a receipt: “*Cheers*, but in a gym.” I have never been a fan of the television show *Cheers*, and actually know very little about it, but have long enjoyed the sentimentality and promise of fraternity in theme song’s refrain (“...where everybody knows your name / and they’re always glad you came. You wanna be where people know / people are all the same. You wanna go where everybody knows your name.” and the variation “ You wanna be where you can see / Our troubles are all the same”), the minor tonality of its verses meandering towards the dominant to set up the chorus, its step-up modulation near the end as vocal overdubs accrue as if the whole gang joins in the song as they arrive, and the somewhat cheesy lyrics and timbres (especially the soprano saxophone solo). The song’s chorus (the verses are another matter) is wholly earnest and full of feeling, a dream of fraternity and recognition for the everyman. The brittle timbre of the piano figure at the beginning suggests a common rather than elevated setting, and one in a time gone by (emphasized by the sepia-toned photographs in the accompanying visuals). The concept of a gym adaptation of *Cheers* remained little more than an amusing, inchoate notion, something of a literary contrafact, attached to a few images of men ascending or descending stairs with gym bags or standing at the juice bar and talking.

Around the same time some then-friends at my then-gym and I invented alter-egos for one another. Somehow Grant Granite was given me. In an attempt to amuse those friends, I

began spinning yarns about Grant Granite: an accomplished bodybuilder, a model, a natural artist in many media (poetry, painting, music, etc.) and a diligent scholar who loves his parents, volunteers to help widows and orphans, and, in his modesty, fails to notice the many women throwing themselves at him (sometimes literally). This marked the first appearance of Grant as a character, although at this point there was a limited emotional range in the stories (a “perfect man” fails to comprehend women, hence comedy) and no development; each yarn (I am reluctant to call them stories) played out the same issues with minor variations in detail (Grant in the yoga class, Grant at the weights, Grant at the beach, and so on). Grant’s stories amused those gym friends, so I tried to write them, at which point I discovered that when fixed in writing this particular notion fell flat; it was one thing to have some laughs about the broad comedy of the general idea, but it somehow did not translate to actual literature.

That autumn I began my post-bac studies at PSU. I took my second creative writing class, a graduate seminar in creative nonfiction. One of our exercises was to write a hermit crab essay, which our professor defined as a form ostensibly addressing one topic in a particular form with a second concern peeking through; the name derives from the hermit crab’s practice of using as its own shell objects it finds. The hermit crab essay’s apparent form (its shell) gives form to and conceals the vulnerable body of the central concern. My exercise used the form of an introduction to strength and conditioning in the voice and according to the training method of an NSCA program as a shell to house writing on severe depression. Despite my satisfaction in this piece, it did not yet occur to me that it was related to the Grant yarns or that either it or they were preliminary versions of something larger.

Time passed. I worked on other things. I didn’t think much about Grant’s tales or the hermit crab piece. My interest in the power and possibility of form grew. Sometime in summer

2019 I began thinking about a short story cycle organized around a training cycle with one story for each kind of training day: leg day, arm day, chest day, back day, active recovery, rest day, injury, etc. I procrastinated on doing much with the concept for fear that it would turn out badly or that I would run out ideas (indicative of faults in my thinking at the time). It was not until winter 2019-2020 that I began making notes for stories, and not until spring 2020 that I began “Leg Day.” This marked the convergence of the titular character from the Grant yarns, the method of concealment from the hermit crab essay, and the use of the training split as a form. At this point in the development of *Partial Reps*, training occupied much more of the narrative and Grant was not yet the narrator. From this effort I observed the difficulty in rendering exercise in scene rather than summary or leaving it outside the narrative scope; reading each rep and set would make for a long and boring set of stories.

As I worked on the idea over the summer of 2020, the gym project (which still had no name other than this designation) acquired its general defining characteristics: a first-person narrator named Grant describes his friendship with a septuagenarian named Jerry and his encounters with other gym-goers. Some experiments that took Grant far from the gym seemed unfocused, which led me to try to restrict the setting to the gym. My interest in taking narrative reticence to an extreme resulted in many experiments in stories consisting only of untagged dialogue. The stories themselves were no longer bound by the split-days stricture, but I was experimenting with the possibilities of the fragment and the found document. In early winter of 2021 the title *Partial Reps* attached itself to the first of what was to be a series of pieces comprising overheard dialogue; by that summer the series also included interspersed excerpts of lyrics to songs heard in the gym, partly as environmental detail but primarily as an expression of emotion repressed elsewhere; Grant, Jerry, Zack, and company might not talk directly about their

heartbreak and sadness, but the male singers of popular songs played as background music in corporate gyms do.

Criticism in the winter term thesis workshop helped refine the project. Issues of copyright and permissions would preclude using long selections of song lyrics. Unprocessed lists (of slogans on shirts, slogans on posters, and so forth) and collections of unmoored bits of dialogue were less interesting to read than to consider in theory. The fragments and vignettes seemed incomplete, insubstantial. Placing everything in the gym needlessly limited the project's possibilities. Each critique prompted a modification in the project: lyrics of popular songs would be alluded to or quoted in garbled form (generic lyrics of my invention could be used at greater length), the lists could be broken up and sprinkled throughout for environmental detail or made the subject of conversation (as in a yet unfinished draft in which Jerry compares Grant to a model in one such poster), and collections of dialogue fragments could likewise be broken up and rendered as environmental interruptions (as overheard dialogue is in *Catcher in the Rye* and Ann Beattie's "A Vintage Thunderbird").

Although much work remains to be done on *Partial Reps*, its character seems to have coalesced into its definitive and genuine form. A significant amount of work remains: expansions of drafts from the fragment stage; sequencing chapters; checking consistency of chronology, character detail, etc. across chapters; composition of new chapters; addition of musical and environmental detail to nearly complete chapters; and a general smoothing out (including finalizing character names). This being done, the manuscript can then be pitched for publication. The last two years of working for the MA—fiction workshops, literature classes, the thesis process—have been an important stage in the development of *Partial Reps*. Although this project requires a lot more work and my future remains uncertain, there is joy in having arrived at the

concept of *Partial Reps*, in composition and revision, in having these ideas to carry around with me, in having a worthy vocation. As at the gym, good work is its own reward.

Physical Culture

The most obvious place to begin with research for *Partial Reps* is with other novels about the gym and gym culture. This micro-genre, however, includes only one book: *Body* by Harry Crews, which, being about professional female bodybuilders, is still not a direct analogue. Research must of necessity encompass writing about other forms of physical culture, defined, for the purpose of this project, as any primarily physical endeavor, which includes codified sports (e.g.: baseball, football, powerlifting, etc.) as well as outdoor pursuits (e.g.: hunting, fishing, backpacking, etc.). From the literature of physical culture I hoped to learn, and have learned, how to write about physicality (repetitive and codified movement, competition, specialized argot, depicting niche pursuits to a general audience, the movement of bodies in space, and the fact of mortality that gives physical achievement its meaning) and how to understand the human dramas playing out in physical culture.

Of sports, baseball and boxing seem to have inspired the most American writing. Although the sports themselves bear little outward resemblance to amateur training in the chain gym, they and their literatures provide lessons for as for the composition of *Partial Reps*. In baseball we see the slow, pastoral rhythms and rustic equipage (a bat, a ball, some bags, some gloves, and a field) of the sport's origins on farms in nineteenth-century America; we see play organized radially rather than linearly (as in football); and we see a quiet contest in which players are, for the most part, stationed at considerable distances from one another. Contrast this with boxing, a primal sport (which is, excepting the modern conventions of gloves, ring, ref, and

so forth, perhaps humanity's oldest sport) in which bare-chested men at close quarters fight to be the last one standing; it is less abstract than baseball and also more existential in playing out the drama of man endeavoring to stand tall and withstand the blows of life; boxing, like baseball, intertwines with America, which, in the case of boxing, has historically been a focal point for racial tensions.

Neither baseball nor boxing are likely to make an appearance in *Partial Reps*. The foregoing generalizations indicate the rich possibilities in studying sport in the manner of theatre or performance art. How do the sport's patterns of movement relate to its spirit? How can emotional meaning be embedded in a narrative through attention to setting and staging? What kinds of narratives tend to emerge from a particular physical pursuit? (Consider the emotional palettes of, say, *Field of Dreams* and *The Sandlot* in comparison to *Raging Bull* and the *Rocky* films.) How can life in a sport—training, competition, ascendance, decline—be related to larger issues of politics, history, philosophy, social class, etc.? In reading about forms of physical culture other than weight training, I learn to articulate such inquiries and then adapt them to *Partial Reps*.

Hemingway

In spring 2019, early in my thinking about developing a literary method for writing about the gym, I selected as my first literary model Hemingway. He seemed a natural choice for his reputation as a writer on hunting, fishing, bullfighting, and war, the narrative strategies of which could all be applied to gym writing. Studying Hemingway also allowed me to return to a favorite

of my teen years, when my first writerly aspirations surfaced, and, in reading what once inspired me, thereby examine the development of my authorial persona.

When I returned to Hemingway that year through *In Our Time*, *A Moveable Feast*, and *The Sun Also Rises*, I failed to find whatever had enamored me as a teen. What I did find were stories that, contrary to decades of misinterpretation and confusion of the works with the author's celebrity persona, were only superficially about self-sufficient tough guys doing tough guy things. These were stories in which men with unnamed, hidden wounds and unspeakable grief removed themselves or were removed from society and struggled on the margins; these were stories of men who did not know how to understand women, one another, or themselves; these were men who had failed and could not quite redeem themselves. As it turned out, these lessons in the literary portrayal of male grief and vulnerability proved more instructive than Hemingway's style.

My Hemingway studies continued with *Across the River and Into the Trees*, *To Have and Have Not*, *The Green Hills of Africa*, *The Dangerous Summer*, *The Garden of Eden*, *Men Without Women*, and *Winner Take Nothing*. I watched the Ken Burns documentary. At a distance, Hemingway was the champ, the hero of my present and young selves; at close range, he was more disappointing than not and often an outright bad writer. Disillusionment, too, proved educational: for *Partial Reps* because of its concern with failed fathers (actual, step, divine, and otherwise) as described by a narrator with serious shortcomings of his own; for arriving at a nuanced and paradoxical relation to a literary father as both inspiring and embarrassing; and applying that understanding of a literary father to my actual fathers. The wise perspective encompasses all the traits of one's influences, regarding them with compassion, which then permits a fuller understanding of oneself.

Music: The Sonic Environment

Music is also an important element of the fictional world in *Partial Reps*. The narrator works as a musician, and is thus interested in, knowledgeable about, and sensitive to music, the instantiations of which can be divided into three categories: music he performs, music he listens to, and music as part of the setting.

The third of these is the most crucial. The gym in *Partial Reps*, like nearly all corporate gyms, plays music over a sound system with speakers throughout the facility. (Sound technicians refer to this as BGM, for background music.) Televisions showing music videos or album covers are also located around the gym. Speaker and television output alike are punctuated with advertisements (for the products and services for sale from the corporate gym, such as memberships and personal training, for equipment, supplements, training, and related services provided by other vendors, and sometimes for sweepstakes and contests related to currently popular songs). The playlist in such a space is determined by the corporate office and standardized across all locations. From one day to the next, that playlist is largely the same and limited enough that one hears certain songs every day and others most days. Currently popular songs enter the playlist, become mainstays, and gradually migrate out again. At least a few times a year, a major adjustment of the playlist places more emphasis on either current hits or the hits of yesteryear. No musical logic underlies playlist selection or sequencing; new songs seem to be selected for popularity (both in the sense that they are currently popular and in the sense that their inclusion on many such corporate playlists makes them popular and is the means for measuring popularity) and older songs for their familiarity (the repetition of a small number of

old songs reinforcing their familiarity and leading to their continued repetition), and all songs play in whatever order the playlist places them. This gives rise to sequences of songs with no relation (musical, lyrical, temporal, or by any other measure) except their perceived utility to the curators of the corporate playlist.

In early drafts, numbered sections entitled “Partial Reps” consisting of snatches of unattributed dialogue and long quotations of song lyrics, were intercalated among the narrative chapters. I had thought that by placing intellectual property information in either the front or back matter of the eventual book that this quotation of songs would be covered under fair usage. Boast informed me that this is not the case, that long quotations require permission from the owners and administrators of the songs’ licensing, and that there is often a fee associated with this use. These facts make the initial approach financially unfeasible. In addition, the prevailing critique of this method of collected fragments was that it did not accomplish much in literary terms.

The current draft incorporated these lessons. When songs appear they do so through indirect quotation or citation of the title or prominent phrase (eg: the waiting is the hardest part) brief enough to avoid copyright issues. Having thought more about the lyrical conventions of gym music as a genre, I have also begun writing fragments that resemble many songs in general and no song in particular (eg: “Girl, I wanna be with you all night / You know you make me feel all right”) to circumvent entirely the copyright issue while also examining tropes in popular music and how they might be understood when considered in the context of the gym novel. As work on *Partial Reps* continues, the musical element will generally be added late in revision process when the narrative elements are developed enough to make clear which song reference will best serve the episode, the chapter, and the book as a whole. I select songs on the basis of

their function as environmental detail (songs that one does or would hear in a corporate gym), fixing of the narrative in time (songs that were hits at a particular time and played little or never afterward), and the quotability and recognizability of lyrics (why “The Waiting” works well, whereas “Radio Free Europe” would not), and contribution of lyrics to the emotional climate of the text. This last I determine largely by intuition; lyrics easily read as directly addressing Grant’s foremost concerns or present circumstances (eg: Beck’s “Loser” and Stevie Nicks and Tom Petty’s “Stop Draggin’ My Heart Around”) are obvious choices; those that seem to articulate his aspirations or relate to his current circumstances ironically (eg: Whitesnake’s “Here I Go Again”) also work. It is important to note that music in *Partial Reps* does not represent a compilation of my favorite music; some songs, such as Linkin Park’s “Somewhere I Belong” and Zedd’s “The Middle,” I have included or will include, despite the fact that I dislike them immensely, because of their useful contributions to the project.

Music: Sustenance for Composition

In addition to studying music as subject matter for *Partial Reps*, music has been important as creative sustenance. It has to be the right kind of music; the wrong kind of stimulation is no help at all. Through a process that was intuitive in the doing, and is now analyzable in retrospect, I found the kinds of music most helpful to my creative work and listen to those as a preliminary to writing (usually at meals, to be followed by literary work).

The most obvious class of music that has helped in composition is the music of the gym. For this I pay attention to what comes on at the LA Fitness in Hyde Park where I train. Any time something with potentially relevant lyrics catches my ear, I make a note of it. My interest in the

potential fertility of Tom Petty songs as vehicles for displaced emotion came about during the last year or so. In an earlier phase of the project, I also experimented with dialogues around The Weeknd's "Blinding Lights," which, despite the aptness of the lyrics for the emotional palette of *Partial Reps* and its frequent appearance on the gym playlist as an important element of verisimilitude, cannot be used because the song was released after the events of the novel.

In addition to noting songs in the current playlists old enough to have been on the playlist at Grant's gym between 2015 and 2018 (e.g.: Tom Petty, Whitesnake, Harvey Danger, Duran Duran, INXS, Depeche Mode, etc.), I must also draw on my memory of this period. Some songs that were hits (e.g.: Madonna's "Give Me All Your Lovin' " and The Strumbellas' "Spirits") are no longer on rotation, but were during the temporal setting of *Partial Reps*. Others were hits well before the time of *Partial Reps*, but have since drifted out of the corporate gym playlist; David Bowie's "Let's Dance" (which may or may not appear in *Partial Reps*) is, in my memory, a prime example of the way the selection of hits from a particular era changes even as that era remains a source for the gym playlist.

The second class of music that has been important to me in writing *Partial Reps* does not appear in the text at all: music to which I have most frequently and extensively listened for cultivation of the right states of mind. Beginning in earnest in autumn 2018 after a long nascence, I began to practice what I defined as sensory input discipline. It is well established that what and how much one ingests correlates strongly with changes in the physical body; a diet consisting largely of nuts and fruit and one largely of beer will lead to different outcomes even if the caloric amounts are the same; a nutrient-rich, high-calorie diet and a nutrient-rich, low-calorie diet will likewise differ in their outcomes. I believe that similar principles apply to other inputs, namely visual and aural. What one reads, watches, and listens to affects the mind just as

physical inputs affect the body. And as with substances ingested physically, quantity and quality matter; the composition and volume of inputs depend on one's goals. The bromide "you are what you eat" is well known; I believe that you are also what you read, what you see, and what you think. It is therefore important to read and watch the kinds of things that will best serve the project at hand, and to do so in the right amounts. As with caloric count, too much or too little can be deleterious.

Over the course of its development, there have been different kinds of music that have provided creative nutriment for *Partial Reps*. It was in late summer 2020 that medieval and Renaissance chant, especially the Naxos recording of Dufay's *Missa L'homme armé*, served as inspiration for work on the project. At that time one of my goals was to suffuse the work with a sense of spiritual yearning and, without stating it explicitly, have the events of the narrative occur as both realistic events and as a spiritual endeavor in the medium of physical exertion. This is something like allegory, but not quite; the idea was that the narrative carried one set of meanings when understood on the plane of physical realism and another set when considered on a spiritual plane. This aspect of the project receded from attention after a few months; whether it fell out of the project or was assimilated to a degree that is no longer conscious I cannot say.

Over the last several months, perhaps close to a year, I have been listening primarily to piano music of the 19th and early 20th centuries. That this stimulated my creative mind and provided the verbal centers a respite I knew well; that it also indicated something about the project became apparent only within the last several weeks. Grant's rhythms of thought and speech resemble those of an era before his time. These are the books and ideas that interest him; this is the diction he uses (or tries to use). Music of the late Classical, the Romantic, and early modern periods helps me think and feel at the pace of one interested in that era. The tension that

emerges between Grant's mindset (formed by his interests in periods before the second World War) and the time about which he writes (the 2010s) creates some of the novel's propulsive force. Like many of the other tensions, this one will likely transform and change in intensity, but it will not be solved.

The Breath of the Work: Rhythm, Pacing, Timing, Motion

In earlier stages of the work, when *Red Cavalry* and *Jesus' Son* were the primary structural models, I thought the work would take shape as a collection of shards. The physical analogue I wanted to emulate in feel—pacing, emotional tone, narrator's attitude, third- rather than first-person narration—was artillery fire. Sudden, rapid, explosive, disorienting, confrontational—these were the adjectives I had in mind. As I came to better understand the idea—the characters, the tensions, the emotions, and so on—this approach was superseded by another, one that emerged through intuitive work and that only later I could analyze.

Partial Reps is not, I learned, a collection of reticent fragments. What at first seemed related stories in the form of the fragment, through revision transformed into chapters marked by digression and frequent commentary. Grant is not the hyperbolically taciturn and reticent narrator or an unidentified character in dialogues without attribution as in early drafts; he is a discursive yet elliptical narrator who is complexly perspicacious and obtuse. *Partial Reps* is, in many ways, a traditional *bildungsroman* and *künstlerroman*. That it transpires in the mid to late 2010s and describes smart-phones, Facebook, internet pornography, dating apps, and other artifacts of this period obscures its relative conservatism in form, a term I use with neither

pejorative nor political connotations. I like to think of this novel as a nineteenth century novel written and set in the twenty-first century.

A change in structure entailed a change in rhythm. The physical analogue now most apt is that of the breath: sometimes long, sometimes short, sometimes placid, sometimes agitated, but always regular without being metronomically precise. The form *Partial Reps* now follows the shape of Grant's reminiscences, and thus, in a sense, his breath. Just as the physical breath modulates, so too does the rhythm of the work. The clearest ongoing distinction in rhythms occurs between speech (often colloquial and restrained with little emotional revelation) and thought (associative, ruminative, loquacious, nakedly emotional). Rhythms also modulate as the narrative moves from books to the gym floor to the locker room to the juice bar to the gig to dates to sexual encounters.

That the novel by design proceeds at the pace and with narrative strategies from the nineteenth century while set in the recent past creates a tension. My hope is that that tension provides some of the narrative interest. In composition and revision I have tried to find ways for Grant to express his thoughts that sound formal, perhaps even like self-conscious, stilted attempts at floridity, without obscuring the temporal setting. Perhaps many of the other dramas of the novel arise from this disparity, especially the repeated drama of social misunderstanding (the romantic interest of women and the kinds and degrees of intimacy with men). Grant's literary adroitness should also create dissonance with his musicianship; he has chosen to be a musician, and struggles. (The ways in which this is attributable to lack of skill, bad luck, the local music scene, the nature of the music business, and a temperamental mismatch will both be developed in subsequent chapters and left partly to the reader to interpret.) As a *künstlerroman*, the novel will also chart his growing awareness of and attention to his literary acumen. Whether

or not the novel will include some kind of culmination of his move toward literature (e.g.: descriptions of the composition of *Partial Repts*, publication of that or other works, accolades and awards, etc.) remains undetermined at this stage, although my sense is that the specifics will be implied and will at times be secondary to other travails (especially the effort to discover what happened to Jerry and to understand the nature of their friendship).

The Corporate Gym as a Place

The corporate gym is a fixture of many American cities. Its familiarity obscures the traits that make it a fruitful subject for literary inquiry. *Partial Repts* is unlikely to address overtly theoretical analysis of the corporate gym as a place, but these concerns have been an important part of my thinking during composition.

Like airports, corporate gyms have a placeless quality. Their relations among one another are more apparent than the relation between any one location and its surroundings; a 24-Hour Fitness in one city is very much like a 24-Hour Fitness in another, and other than the employees, nothing in such a gym is identifiably local. (The titular metaphor of *The Gulag Archipelago*, at the center of that work, has been helpful in thinking about geographically separated facilities united in function, and divorced from their locales. The less dramatic and more common metaphor of corporate locations being part of a chain is also useful to consider, particularly in light of the fact that its connotations go unnoticed because of its familiarity.) Equipment is standardized across locations according to type and brand. Wallpaper and other patterning (such as at LA Fitness, where collaged images of Los Angeles are overlaid by photos of models exercising and terms presumably meant to be inspirational) is also standardized; the patterns are

simple enough that in gyms with a lot of wall, they repeat. Subtler aesthetic elements (including carpeting, lockers, towels, soap dispensers, and exercise mats) are also standardized across locations in the same chain. Lighting, too, contributes to the placelessness effect in corporate gyms: it is fluorescent, unvarying by season, and, in the case of some gyms (such as the fictional one that is a principal setting for *Partial Reps*), the only source of lighting in an enclosed space without windows. All of these factors contribute to the experience of the corporate gym as a placeless place.

The corporate gym, like the airport (the other principal example of a placeless place), is one of the few spaces where people of differing backgrounds mix. Because of the cost involved (membership fees, transportation, etc.), there is a barrier to entry; because of the availability of deluxe options elsewhere (boutique gyms, underground gyms, luxury gyms, in-home personal training, etc.) the upper reaches of the socioeconomic hierarchy are likewise not often represented in the corporate gym. Nonetheless, a variety of backgrounds prevails, ranging from working-class people (both as non-managerial employees and members) to the relatively wealthy (including those able to purchase personal training). In addition to the range of class backgrounds, there is also a range of ages with members as young as 18 and the only upper limit being an individual's mobility and cognition. The range of physical abilities exhibited by gym-goers correlates with age, but is not coincident with it; there are fit old people and unathletic young people. Physical ability also corresponds with body composition and dedication to training, both of which are distributed over a range. A complete accounting of measurable characteristics distributed over a wide range could go on longer, but the list so far suffices for the purposes of explaining some of the background to *Partial Reps*. The gym is unusual in being a place of this kind of mixing; most of American life is self-segregated such that people seek out

those like themselves and tend not to venture beyond that; this is true of employment, housing, education, religious affiliation, and many other variables. That such mixing occurs in a placeless place in which there is a high degree of anonymity and intimacy (especially in the showers and locker rooms) makes the gym an interesting setting for literary inquiry, one that can to a limited extent function as a societal microcosm.

Although the corporate gym is a placeless place, it is not static. Cycles of vary in length from the day to the year. Over the course of the day, different kinds of people come with different intentions and different levels of seriousness. The 5am crowd, the 10am crowd, the 5pm crowd, and the 8pm crowd differ markedly in size and character. The precise ways such differences manifest is best explored narratively rather than explained. *Partial Reps* is largely a novel about the late morning and early afternoon crew; there will likely be some exploration of later times. There are also weekly cycles, most apparent with classes (such as yoga) that the instructor teaches once each week. There are also weekly cycles on the gym floor. Weekends differ from weekdays in number and character of members in attendance. The weight-training programs themselves often call for training on weekdays, and many organize muscle groups in similar ways. (A gym owner once told me that Monday should be called National Bench Press Day because most men start their training week on Monday, and that training week almost always starts with chest day.) As the year passes and seasons change outdoors, this affects the atmosphere of the gym, albeit in ways that can be contradictory. Sometimes the arrival of good weather brings in the less serious crowd with their hope of losing weight in time for summer. (The dedicated know that weight loss in time for summer has to happen in late winter. By springtime it's too late.) At other times of good weather, the gym crowd is sparse as people flock outdoors. Similarly paradoxical rushes into and out of the gym characterize periods of cold or

rainy weather. Yearly holidays complicate the seasonal cycle, perhaps especially those associated with heavy drinking and eating (an observation providing the putative occasion for Jerry and Grant's dialogue in "The Day After Fathers' Day"). The statistical likelihood of weight gain following a succession of holidays of gluttony (Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Eve, and perhaps to a lesser extent Halloween before the gauntlet at year's end), the custom of new year's resolutions, and the corporate gym's offer of membership bargains in January cause the spike in attendance during that time. The regulars, for whom January is just another month in the training cycle, plan around the influx of novices (who can be relied upon to not pick up after themselves, take up more space and equipment than they need, make a big to-do about themselves and the accomplishments they consider *fait accompli*, and generally to make a mess of the place) and their inevitable disappearance by mid February at the latest. And then there are longer, less predictable cycles, as people move into or out of the neighborhood, as management in the gym turns over, as some gym-goers become more fit (a few even entering competitions) and others become less fit, as relationships change and fade away, and as everyone gradually ages together.

The foregoing is a partial survey of the nature of the corporate gym as a placeless place. *Partial Reps* addresses some of these issues explicitly and some implicitly. Although some of its characters (namely Mark and Zack) express strong opinions on the corporate gym, the work itself should not be understood as a condemnation but as an investigation of human nature as expressed in this kind of environment at a particular time. Like prior novels with an institution or set of institutions (e.g.: the military, the legal system, the financial sector, the maritime vessel, etc.) as a central concern, the corporate gym gives *Partial Reps* its shape and scope.