



Susan Olding

Unruly Pupil

In my second year of university I took a job at an independently-owned bookstore. The place was called Reader's Den, but there was nothing den-like about it. No mahogany, no oak, no crimson curtains, no whisper of sweet tobacco, no leather club chairs—no chairs of any description. Instead, the place boasted bright track lights, row upon row of cheap white melamine shelves, a long newsstand continually in need of restocking, and an enormous floor-to-ceiling plate glass window that jutted on an angle to the southwest. The window overlooked busy Bloor Street. Across the road loomed the Royal Conservatory of Music, and beside it, Philosopher's Walk, a curving pathway to the campus shaded by horse chestnuts and maples. From the raised dais behind the cash, I could see its wrought-iron gates and the leaves on the old trees, lime green in spring, darker in the summer rains. I could see people come and go from the nearby shops and pubs and doctor's offices—mothers tugging their children's hands, lovers licking each other's ice cream cones, tourists consulting their maps. I liked this vantage point. High enough to offer prospect, yet close enough to yield details. It gave me licence to stare.

Once in early June, I was standing at the cash gazing out that window, watching the white candles of the chestnuts blow themselves out on the ground when I heard a familiar voice.

“You brat!”

It was my eleventh grade English teacher, Ms. Abeles. She lived nearby; I knew, because once she had taken my entire class to a performance of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Afterwards, we'd gone back to her ground-floor flat for coffee. Perched on her low couches or crowded, cross-legged, on her kilim carpet, we'd analyzed the play while gawking at her high Victorian ceiling, her framed theatrical

posters, her plants, her bentwood rocker, the objects on her fireplace mantel, the fireplace mantel itself—everything carefully chosen, everything deliberately arranged, everything advertising a woman of independence, and all of it evidence of an urban sophistication that none of us possessed and most of us envied. Finally, she led us all to the subway and from there to the commuter train that would take us home to the suburbs. The slumbering, insipid, suburbs.

Now, she looked me up and down. “What are you doing here?” she said.

We talked. I told her what I was studying and when I expected to graduate. She raised an eyebrow, as if to say that prognostications were all very well but she’d save her praise for when she saw the proof. Then she paid for her magazine and walked out into the late spring afternoon, her long, dark hair rippling in the breeze as she disappeared into the crowd.

The “brat” remark stung. I thought I’d been a good student in that English class. Good in comparison to how I’d been in most of my other classes, that is. At least I’d done the reading. At least I’d participated in discussions. But it seemed Ms. Abeles saw things differently. Or else my actual performance had left a less lasting impression than my general reputation. I’d been wayward, wilful, irresponsible, and often truant as a teen. I was still most of those things.

Loose sally¹

Reader’s Den was almost as big as it was bright. To the left of the door was the newsstand and across from it, humor. There was a section for new releases and best-sellers, and a display area for big, expensive coffee-table books. The window often featured the beautiful and esoteric Japanese art books that our manager couldn’t stop herself from ordering, even though they didn’t sell. There were shelves for classics, shelves for current fiction, shelves for poetry and drama; aisles for mysteries and thrillers and fantasies and science fiction. Our children’s section was one of the best in the city. We carried spiritual guides and

¹ Samuel Johnson

religious books, reference guides, self-help and psychology, science, business, travel, photography, film. We stocked history, criticism, philosophy, political science, sociology, and anthropology—not the expensive tomes you could find at the academic bookstore down the street, but mass-market copies of Plato and Foucault and Marx, meant for general readers. We also had a special-order desk, where one staff member always stood pencilling the date of receipt on the flyleaves of new hardcovers and wrapping them in cellophane to protect them from fading. If you couldn't find what you wanted, we'd look it up in the massive volumes of *Books in Print* and request it for you.

On lunch breaks I set out for the walkway, looking for an empty bench where I could unwrap my sandwich and eat. Sparrows and squirrels appeared, hoping to catch a crumb. The sounds of vocalists warming up and pianists practicing their scales drifted from the Conservatory windows. My thoughts drifted with them. I had the worst kind of independent mind; I paid attention only to what interested me. I had the best kind of independent mind; almost anything could snare my interest. Professors sought in vain for a thesis in my papers and I rarely submitted anything on time.

Greased pig²

Most shifts, I staffed the cash. There, besides ringing up sales and recommending books, I was supposed to watch the newsstand and re-stock it as required—a dirty, mindless, and sometimes frustrating task, subject to continual interruptions. But when the store wasn't busy, I read. All of us did, even Debbie, our manager. We considered it one of the chief perks of the job.

It must have been during the lead-up to the holiday season when we received the *Times Atlas of the World*. This was a massive volume with an equally massive price tag. We covered it in shiny cellophane and placed it on the display table near the front of the store. And there, for several weeks, it stayed. People glanced at the cover, but it was too heavy and unwieldy to pick up. Which is why, when it disappeared, we

² Edward Hoagland

didn't at first accept the fact. What could have happened to it? It wasn't exactly inconspicuous. It wouldn't be easy to steal. You couldn't hide the thing in your pocket or in a bag or even under a coat. Still, we'd searched every cranny of the store, and there couldn't be any question. The atlas was gone.

Debbie gave the matter some thought. If someone had walked off with the book, that suggested it was in demand. Someone *else* might therefore want it enough to pay for it. And the theft, after all, was probably a fluke. A one-off. There wasn't a lot of resale money to be made in books. Somebody had simply coveted the volume enough to risk walking out with it in plain sight. Surely that wouldn't happen again.

But our second copy also disappeared. This time, the store's owners showed up to investigate. Ordinarily, they might go weeks without visiting us, and when they did come, they arrived singly. Now they appeared as a team, both wearing dark suits and serious expressions. They tested the sight lines from the cash, organized the rearrangement of some shelves, counselled me to keep my eyes on the door, to call them at their other location if I noticed anything suspicious. And to stop reading.

Again, the atlas slipped through our hands.

*Warm body*³

Like most bookstores, ours had a mixed clientele. The woman with clipped consonants who came, carefully coifed, each week on the dot of ten to pick up her newspaper and who never looked at anything else. The curator of the nearby museum. Professors from the university. The secretary who suffered from migraine and preferred the escape of fantasy; the science fiction nerds in their thick glasses. The pimply teenage boys who came to leaf through *Penthouse* or *Hustler* and then tried to hide the evidence; later, while dusting, we'd find the crumpled centerfolds behind picture books in the kids' section. In winter, we also got our share of homeless people who came inside to get warm. We used to offer them our discarded

³ Cynthia Ozick

paperbacks, minus the covers, which we'd return to the distributors for rebate. Whether they read them or used them for insulation on the streets we didn't know, but the homeless, like many of our customers, became regulars.

One man, a Czech refugee, made it a habit to stop in every day. Winter or summer, he wore the same dingy white shirt; the same blue cap, blue trousers, and blue jacket. His eyes, too, were blue—a strange, pale tint like an iceberg in the North Atlantic. Typically, when he came in, he wended his way to a freestanding shelf in the middle of the store, the one behind poetry that had no name. On that shelf we kept the books we couldn't easily classify. Not fiction, not humor, not self-help, not religion, not politics, not philosophy, not biography, not business, not art, not drama, not sociology, not history.

What were they? Most, but not all, were collections of shorter pieces by a single author. I recognized some of the writers' names.

*Slithery fish*⁴

It was my fault those atlases had disappeared. I wasn't paying attention. Too absorbed in my 19th century novels. I was lucky I didn't lose the job. But my face was bland and presentable. I wore a mask of respectability to hide the rebellious streak. Customers liked me. The owners liked me. What did they know?

Ms. Abeles could have warned them. For, against instructions, I continued to read at work, even while serving at the cash. True, I tried to make the behavior less obvious. I stopped placing my open books on the countertop and instead took to hiding them on the shelf beneath the till, slipping them out as soon as Debbie and my other co-workers got busy at the back of the store. The only real concession I made to the new rule was to choose my reading material from a different section. No more long—and admittedly tedious—novels. Now I picked from the unnamed shelf. The one that attracted our Czech émigré. The

⁴ Elizabeth Hardwick

one that held collections of shorter pieces. That way, I could take quick dives and surface more quickly when I needed to ring up a sale. I wouldn't have to interrupt the flow.

*Spell*⁵

Our Czech émigré had a wandering eye. Not the kind that shadows women, but a strabismus. His pupils were not aligned, which meant that his focus was never fixed. He was forever looking both here, and there; straight, and slant. Together with the ice blue of his irises, the effect was eerie. Almost hypnotic. No wonder I followed his lead.

Woolf. Then Orwell. Connolly. Baldwin, Dillard, Didion. Gretel Ehrlich. William Gass. Adrienne Rich. Alice Walker. Richard Rodriguez. Clark Blaise. Bharati Mukherjee. Susan Sontag. Roland Barthes. Walter Benjamin.

I was naïve, avid, indiscriminate. What sense did I make of these meditations, these peregrinations, these disordered yet artful disquisitions—these “essays,” as I was learning to call them? I didn't “make sense.” I drank them in, I absorbed them. Thrummed to their teeming pulse.

*Verbal swarm*⁶

If words were bees, they'd dance. They'd rise in clouds, unified in their busy multiplicity. They'd meander through meadows and gardens, forage, burrow, probe. They'd proliferate and cross-pollinate, nurturing the growth of hybrids. They'd flash past, braid the air, build mosaics, sing. They would honey our lips with the gifts of prescience and eloquence. They would vibrate with intention, they would *sting us wide awake*.⁷

⁵ Virginia Woolf

⁶ Jean Starobinski, as quoted by Brian Dillon, *Essayism*.

⁷ Virginia Woolf

*Baggy pants*⁸

The death of a moth. The search for an adequate pencil. A hanging. The brutality of a British boys' school education. Impediments to a creative career. Being black in America. The metaphysical meaning of an eclipse. An elegy for a lost city and lost youth. The vast, healing emptiness of the west. Kinds of blue. Female identity. Unearthing a female mentor. Ancestral ghosts. Gentrification, AIDS, crisis of conscience. Living as an "alien" in a foreign or familiar land. The aesthetics of camp. Illness as metaphor. The photographic accident. Unpacking a library. Like those pleated, paper-bag waisted trousers that people wore in the 1980s, it seemed you could stuff an essay's pockets with almost anything and get away with it.

The essay could take so many shapes, so many forms. It was attracted to definitions, but never definitive. Not a narrative, although it might include one; neither was it a tract, though it might argue. Not a list, but it loved enumeration. Not a commonplace book, but often riddled with quotes. Not a letter, but just as intimate and conversational. Not a diary, but as immediate and artless. Not poetry, but frequently lyrical; not poetry, but older versions did appear in verse; not poetry, but made of metaphor.

An essay, it seemed, could look like almost anything and concern itself with almost anything. More—and this is what I found so heady, so mysteriously compelling—an essay was never about just one thing. It was forever fracturing and forever *finding its unity in and through the breaks and not by glossing them over.*⁹

*The reflection of all there is*¹⁰

Or, as David Foster Wallace put it, "basically an enormous eyeball floating around something, reporting what it sees."

⁸ Joseph Epstein

⁹ Theodor Adorno, "The Essay as Form".

¹⁰ Elizabeth Hardwick

Also, famously, a test. A trial. From the French *essayer* and the Latin *exagium*, a scale.¹¹ As in the scales of justice. Related to *examen*, referring to the needle on that scale, as well as to a swarm of bees. For yes, Virginia, the essay requires some “fierce attachment to an idea;”¹² for all its digression and dilation, it has a point.

It turned out that the loss of those expensive atlases wasn’t my fault. Covert observation by the store’s owners revealed that we had a criminal in our midst—one of my co-workers, who had been taking not just atlases, but dozens and dozens of books, on those nights when he closed on his own.

Unruly pupil

Pupil, 2. a). *a person who is being taught by another. (Of multiple origins. Partly borrowed from the French, partly from Latin. Middle French **pupille**, opening in the iris through which light passes into the eye... and its etymon classical Latin **pūpilla** in same sense; transferred use of **pūpilla** female child, also doll, so called on account of the small reflected image seen when looking into someone’s pupil.)*¹³

Alas, Ms. Abeles saw me more clearly than I saw myself. I failed to distinguish myself as a student that year. I could not think in abstractions, could not yoke my mind to an air-tight argument, could not produce the kinds of papers I was being asked to write, now that I’d seen what was possible. I wanted, I needed, to wander.

What, then, is an essay? A familiar voice. A musical meander. An atlas of the world. A refugee, perhaps, or an enlightened immigrant; a being without a home. A hidden, forbidden pleasure. A sideways glance. A many-chambered hive, both hazardous and sweet. A master or mistress of disguise. A thief of

¹¹ Jean Starobinski, as quoted by Brian Dillon in *Essayism*.

¹² Virginia Woolf, “The Modern Essay.”

¹³ Oxford English Dictionary

unwarranted conclusions and beliefs. A disco ball, spinning above the dance floor, reflecting the world in bits—forever breaking it apart, and by breaking it, making it whole.