

AS IT FALLS

Donald Breckenridge

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Once, long ago, I was sometimes overcome by a sort of grace, a euphoria. It was as if, first of all, every notion, every reality was emptied of its content. After this emptiness, after this dizzy spell, it was as if I found myself suddenly at the center of pure, ineffable existence; it was as if things had freed themselves of all arbitrary labels, of a framework that didn't suit them, that limited them; social and logical constraint or the need to define them, to organize them, disappeared. It did not seem to me that I was the victim of a nominalist crisis; on the contrary, I think that I became one with the one essential reality, when, along with an immense, serene joy, I was overcome by what I might call the stupefaction of being, the certainty of being, the certainty that the social order, politics, language, organized thought, systems and systematizations, limitations and delimitations were pure nothingness and that the only true thing was this sensation or this feeling or this assurance that I existed and that this "I exist" was wholly sufficient unto itself, and freed of everything that was outside of it. I knew that nothing could prevent me from being, that nothingness or night or doubt no longer had any power over me.

I say that with words that can only disfigure, that cannot describe the light of this profound, total, organic intuition which, surging up as it did from my deepest self, might well have inundated everything, covered everything, both my other self and others.

Eugene Ionesco, *Present Past Past Present*
Translated from the French by Helen R Lane.

IDREW A DOOR ON A PIECE OF SCRAP PAPER with a black roller tip pen. The ceramic coffee cup on my desk was decorated with house sparrows. Potato chip bags scattered over the wet sidewalk, then blew into the street. Garbage cans and bulky black plastic bags lined the curb. A storm began to move through the region yesterday afternoon and it had rained all night. The rain tapered off while the coffee was brewing on the stove. The morning news covered rising death tolls in Northern Italy, stark predictions regarding fatality rates here in NYC with health officials stating that hospitals would be overwhelmed in a matter of weeks, city officials stressing the importance of sheltering in place, additionally, there were highlights from the recent DNC primary debate that was televised without a live audience, and an article on the Dow that covered its weeks-long nosedive. The garbage men gradually made their way down the block in bright green fluorescent vests while pitching bags and dumping the contents of cans into the back of their truck.

Michael woke up in a Cadillac. The plush red leather interior with chrome trim would make for an elegant and practical

coffin. He had discovered a purple splotch on his right ankle in early March. Unfortunately the keys were missing from the ignition. A cluster of calloused nickel-sized purple splotches appeared on his chest two weeks ago. His wallet was in the inner left pocket of his black wool overcoat. On Monday he tested positive for Kaposi's sarcoma. "In addition to this being an extremely rare form of cancer," the bespectacled grey haired dermatologist quietly stated, "these lesions are one of the first visible signs of a new disease which is, unfortunately, already in the process of destroying your immune system." Last summer, hundreds of young gay men throughout the city began dying from this mysterious illness that everyone was calling Gay Cancer or referring to as "it," as in: And now the actor Michael Davis has got it. The dermatologist placed his gloved fingers on Michael's throat, "How long have your Lymph glands been this swollen?" "Months..." Removing his fingers the doctor explained why the glands were swelling, before claiming that without a functioning immune system any number of opportunistic infections would soon kill him. Michael claimed that it was just exhaustion because he was working non-stop, confessing that he had been drinking too much, before adding how his last real vacation was more than three years ago. After some prompting the dermatologist learned about the flu Michael had in December, the ongoing stress headaches, the chronic diarrhea, his nearly complete lack of appetite—Michael shed ten pounds in the last two months—an extreme bout of pneumonia which lasted nearly all of January, his insomnia, and lately, when he was able to sleep, intense night sweats that soaked through the sheets once, sometimes twice a week, then finally, yes, the appearance of these purple lesions. "Which until quite recently," the dermatologist interjected, "was an extremely rare form of cancer," before claiming that everything hammering away at him were all fairly common symptoms for what the medical

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community was now referring to as GRID, “which is an acronym for gay related immune deficiency.” The dermatologist apologized in advance for the intrusiveness of the next set of questions and then told him, “You have a one in three chance of dying in the next twelve months.” He held Michael’s gaze while adding that most patients found themselves as shocked and frightened as they were defensive when diagnosed with this as of yet incurable illness.

He was driving with both hands on the wheel as she described being blindfolded during her psychology class. A blue and yellow billboard announcing the construction of a sprawling tract development—ON THIS 300 ACRE SITE—dropped away from the rearview mirror before the two-lane road cut through a winding sequence of rolling green hills. After being blindfolded the professor clasped her forearm then led the way through the parking lot and into a greenhouse with the entire class following close behind. She leaned forward in the passenger seat and lowered the volume on the radio so her description wouldn’t have to compete with that silly hairspray advertisement. The rain clouds were breaking up and broad columns of sunlight began to appear overhead, which prompted her to declare: Look at those celestial searchlights. The man behind the wheel countered with a sardonic quip about omnipresent surveillance, and how they ought to behave themselves or prepare to face God’s wrath, before encouraging her to tell him what happened next in that greenhouse last Wednesday afternoon. Her classmates were chided into silence as she was positioned right in front of what was soon revealed to be a waist-high table crowded with dozens of blooming orchids. His desire was linked to anticipation while focusing intently on where those blindfolded images she just planted in his brain were taking his overheating imagination. The click from a stopwatch indicated her five contemplative

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minutes of silence were up, and while still blindfolded, she was told to begin identifying all of the things she could smell in that humid room.

Agenor was a descendant of Poseidon who emigrated from Egypt to the land of Canaan where he wed Telephassa. They settled on a large farm by the sea before having five sons: Cadmus, Phoenix, Cilix, Thaus, Phineus and one daughter: Europa. From high atop Mount Olympus, Zeus, the most powerful god among all the immortals, noticed Europa going about her daily chores and immediately decided that he wanted her. And on the very next morning, while Europa was tending the family herd, Zeus transformed himself into a white bull to join the other cattle as they grazed in a wind-swept pasture overlooking the sea. Europa was completely disarmed by the surprisingly docile nature of this stocky white bull. His short horns were studded with rubies and emeralds. Small waves broke upon the stony shore while the sea shimmered beneath a dazzling yellow sun. She overcame her apprehensions by feeding the bull handfuls of dandelion greens. Europa grew enraptured as this friendly white bull would not leave her side. After crowning his head with garlands of wild flowers an emboldened Europa climbed onto the bull's stocky shoulders, the playful white bull ambled down to the shore, waded into the sea, and proceeded to swim away. Incoming swells rose then gradually fell around them as she clutched those jewel-encrusted horns while imploring the bull to take her back home. These increasingly desperate pleas went ignored as the bull swam all the way to Crete. When they finally reached solid ground the bull transformed itself into an eagle and dragged Europa beneath a tall evergreen, then raped her. Only afterwards did the eagle reveal itself to be Zeus. He made Europa the queen of Crete and eventually she bore him three sons.

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A flock of pigeons flew away when Michael got out of the car. The black Coupe DeVille was on the otherwise deserted upper level of a parking garage somewhere in lower Manhattan. "Are you a homosexual?" Jersey City lay across the lead colored Hudson. "I'm bisexual..." The World Trade Center loomed behind him. Michael unbuttoned his overcoat before unzipping his pants, then removed his cock and cratered a wide hole in a mound of blackened snow with a thick stream of piss. "Do you frequent the bathhouses?" After zipping up he walked over to the waist-high concrete barrier, then silently counted the six quick stories straight down. "No..." Michael shook his head. "Have you contracted any sexually transmitted diseases in the last ten years?" A homeless man was pushing a shopping cart up the street. "No..." Michael shook his head. A large black dog on a short rope was tied to the shopping cart. He hoisted himself onto the barrier—extending his arms for balance—while standing up straight. The dog limped beside the man on three good legs and, after they rounded the corner, Michael closed his eyes, and stepped off the ledge.

She exclaimed how her blindfolded trip last Wednesday might have been her first visit to a greenhouse but it would certainly not be her last. She had recently conjured up a comparison that she was absolutely certain he would find compelling: Although, it isn't coming to me just now. Hopefully once the analogy, however slippery, was excavated from her memory then dusted off and ceremoniously presented on a silver platter, the man behind the wheel would find it insightful; perhaps he would even think that it was brilliant. The man behind the wheel must have enjoyed her youthful digressions because he was certainly willing to indulge them. But looking out the window at the wooden horse fence running alongside them was not bringing the words back to her. Clearly

she was well past the point of distraction, and so, the right words in perfect order, those effortlessly timed words, had been misplaced, maybe they were lost entirely, gone forever, words dashed on an invisible reef of sugar coated artifice. Her heart began thumping in the back of her throat in time with the realization that those perfectly formulated lines might have actually vanished, like so many butterflies. She imagined dozens and dozens of butterflies flitting away from her misfiring synapses, pictured a scorched neurotransmitter with tiny white butterflies pouring out of it on so many pale wings. What can I say? She quietly mused then silently elaborated: What can I possibly come up with to impress upon you how happy I am to be right here right now? Readily assuring the man behind the wheel: I'll probably remember in another minute when I'm thinking of something else. She was much too young for Alzheimer's so it was probably a brain tumor devouring her memory, and if that was the case then how many more days did she have before death robbed her of every profoundly beautiful thing spontaneously occurring all around her at every given moment? Instead of continuing to draw attention to the fact that for whatever reason she could no longer recall that deliberately concocted and uniquely insightful impression gleaned from her greenhouse experience. Exactly what was it that she had walked away with last Wednesday afternoon? And so instead of continuously stumbling over that lost line, the teenage girl in the passenger seat described those vaporous damp clouds of musky sweet human-flesh-like scents rising from the table full of blooming orchids, which she now claimed smelled just like a perfume made from human corpses. The man behind the wheel gave her a skeptical look, prompting her to elaborate on the utterly strange something in the warm air, which smelled like a sweet perfume derived from rotting human flesh. Assuredly adding that not too long afterwards a few whiffs of more familiar sharp

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green smells—pesticides and chemical fertilizers—called up a memory from childhood, of the dark brown mosquito truck slowly passing through her neighborhood on warm summer evenings. Relating how along with her brothers and sisters she would occasionally run behind the truck and get deliberately caught up in the falling cloud of chemicals that dampened her bare limbs while she and her siblings inhaled aerosolized toxins deep into their young lungs. And of course, there was the professor's assistant who supposedly forgot to let go of her forearm, she recalled the vibrantly dank stench of the young man's cheap aftershave and stale coffee breath, yet making no mention of those foul odors, so as not to offend that gangly boy to his greasy, acne-pocked face, blindfolded or otherwise, although it must have been obvious to everyone gathered around the head of the table that he was crushing hard on her. The man behind the wheel ended his silence long enough to inquire: He was holding onto you the entire time? Shaking her head: No, I guess not, she slowly elaborated, I mean he was standing very close to me and at some point I took a step, maybe it was a few steps back, and almost tripped over something on the ground. I was still blindfolded, still describing the things I was smelling, so he kept me from falling, supposedly, you know just like this, reaching over and squeezing his shoulder to illustrate. But then he wouldn't let go... this was towards the end... and he made a big deal about it afterwards as well, about how I could have been hurt if he hadn't been standing beside me... He was just so arrogant, she took a beat to reflect, like he was deliberately making his presence a part of the experiment, and had the actual audacity to suggest that when I wrote about it I should include the way we interacted in my summary. And so she freed herself as discreetly as possible from his octopus-like grasp, knowing full well how any mention of his decidedly oppressive chemically infused masculine stench would lead to a bruised ego and, more

importantly, negatively impact her grade. Turning toward the man behind the wheel while asking: Why is it that ugly men feel the need to macerate themselves in cheap cologne? Before he could respond she added: I don't mean just their physical appearance either, but spiritually as well. She took a beat before reflecting once more on the inherently superficial nature of men in general, then proclaimed: Because what you can't see is still right there beneath the surface, and what they're broadcasting with the stench they're camouflaging themselves with is an inherent cheapness of spirit. He shrugged before offering: It's an easy way for some men to hide their insecurities. She readily agreed with his assessment, this glittering ruby of insight the esteemed sultan had finally deemed worthy of bestowing upon the lowly waif. After being tossed this extraordinary gem of wisdom she readily assured the man behind the wheel, who happened to be as handsome as he was wise, just how much she absolutely loved the way his body smelled, before abruptly reproaching herself for the nicotine stench on her own fingers—holding out her right hand for the man behind the wheel to take careful note of those barely discernible yellowish stains between the index and middle fingers—this is truly disgusting, loudly declaiming, neither of us should be smoking.

Meanwhile a furious Agenor ordered his sons to go out and find their sister. Telling all four of his sons, and in no uncertain terms, that they were forbidden to come back home until Europa was returned unharmed. Telephassa joined Cadmus and his men in their search. They set sail for Rhodes, where they erected a temple to Poseidon in the hopes of securing Europa's safe return. Telephassa and Cadmus also oversaw the construction of another temple to Poseidon on the island of Thera before extending their fateful search further into the Edonians.

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Michael told the cab driver where to go as they pulled away from the curb. The wipers swept rainwater off the cracked windshield. They drove past a homeless man digging through garbage bags while a black dog inhaled scraps of grey meat off the sidewalk. Michael was still a bit drunk, and couldn't remember how he woke up fully clothed beside a naked Japanese couple sleeping peacefully on an orange futon in a palatial Soho loft. Charlie Parker was soloing on the radio over a dusty twelve bar blues intro. The cab driver eyed Michael in the rearview mirror while coming to a stop before an intersection. Michael had moved to New York in '71, a week before turning eighteen, and worked Off Broadway while waiting tables for nearly seven years until, with the help of several well-placed friends, he began to land choice roles on Broadway. A lengthy feature about Michael ran in Warhol's *Interview* magazine while his performance as the lead in *Oedipus the King* was being praised to the skies. Black umbrellas hovered over beige raincoats clustered around a stainless steel coffee cart while pedestrians navigated the flooded crosswalk. In the interview Michael came off as unguardedly good-natured, flirtatious and exceedingly polite. When the light changed the driver inched the cab through the current of traffic, then pressed across the intersection. Michael insisted that his split from the downtown scene, where he nurtured his craft during a remarkably fertile decade, was completely amicable, really nothing more than a trial separation: However, he was tired of being broke. An ambulance gradually overtook them as flashing red lights ran down the gutter. He was matter of fact about his bisexuality but playfully discreet about his partners. The interview touched on the dynamics of his working friendship with Sam Shepard, fluffed up all the gossip about his widely rumored affair with an iconic film actress who shall forever remain nameless, mentioned a few of the scripts he

was seriously considering, covered the absolute worst job he had ever held, his favorite roles, his favorite films, where he partied, and concluded with a fairly comprehensive list of his favorite brands of tuna fish. By tacit agreement the brutal childhood Michael overcame went unmentioned after the interviewer turned on her tape recorder. The yellow cab was faintly reflected in tall tinted windows while it came to a slow stop before another red light. Half a dozen people in winter coats were standing beneath a green awning advertising cold beer, cigarettes, newspapers, lotto, chips, and sandwiches. A blue police barrier blocked off a portion of the intersection where a ruptured pipe sent billowing plumes of steam skyward as the radio announcer elaborated on Charlie Parker's revolutionary contributions to post-war jazz. When the light turned green, the cab drove around the barrier, then sped up the avenue. Michael readily acknowledged how hard he had worked to become successful, yet expressed genuine surprise at his newly minted fame, before claiming to be more than a bit wary of all the praise and attention being heaped upon him. After *Oedipus* closed, Michael signed on to play a major supporting role in Robert Altman's latest project, which was slated to begin shooting in June. The cab turned left onto West 11th, then headed down the block until Michael indicated where they should stop. He took a ten from his wallet and handed it over before telling the driver to keep the change.

Telephassa died suddenly while crossing the Hebros River in southern Thrace. To assuage his grief after burying his mother and to temper the mounting frustration over the seemingly impossible odds of actually finding his sister, Cadmus suspended the search and traveled to Delphi. The Oracle told the young man to abandon this pointless quest—neither he nor any of his brothers would ever see their sister or father again. Advising Cadmus to drive a cow through the countryside

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without rest until it dropped from fatigue. He was to sacrifice the cow to Athena. This daughter of Zeus would be his guide, for on the spot where the cow collapsed he was destined to found a city. Soon afterwards Cadmus acquired a cow that he and his men drove eastward without pause until it finally collapsed from exhaustion on what would soon become Thebes. While preparing the sacrifice, a giant serpent emerged from its nearby lair and killed nearly all of his men before Cadmus managed to crush its skull with the largest stone he could heave at its head. With a few mortally wounded companions looking on, Cadmus finally sacrificed the cow. Athena immediately appeared; as foretold, she praised the young man for his devotion and bravery, then instructed him to sow the serpent's teeth into the soil. Upon doing so an army of heavily armed giants sprang up from the tilled rows. Fearing for his life Cadmus ran into a nearby forest. While hiding behind a tree he pelted a giant on the back of the head with a rock. A vicious brawl broke out among the giants over who threw it. Only five of these sown men survived the brutal fight. Cadmus cautiously emerged from the forest after he mustered the courage to address these exhausted giants. These five found themselves swayed by the young man's conviction, and upon swearing their allegiance to Cadmus, they became the founding fathers of Thebes.

He turned to the pretty chatterbox seated beside him and casually reminded her that when they stopped for gas, just twenty minutes ago, she had asked him to buy her a pack of cigarettes. It's going to be my last pack, she flatly declared. Sunlight hung over the wide stream while the clear water sparkled where it pooled. A long drum roll rumbled beneath them as the Skylark drove over a wooden bridge. Until the next pack, he countered. I'll need your help if it's going to be my last pack, she dramatically stated. By enlisting me to help

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you, he turned to her before interjecting in a matter of fact tone, then you'll have to do exactly what I say. Well you're the doctor, she added before commenting that this should be a fun game. Separating the two acts of providing for a growing family while pursuing whatever willing young thing that happened to catch his eye was a fun game, and the married man played along with an air of detached interest.

How long have you been smoking?

Three, maybe four years.

How old were you when you started?

I started sneaking my father's cigarettes when I was fifteen, then I dated a boy in my junior year who smoked, and so I smoked his cigarettes as well, then after we broke up I started buying them.

You haven't been smoking long enough for it to be that difficult to quit, and if you're as revolted by smoking as you claim to be then it should be easy for you to quit.

The last time I tried to quit I gained almost five pounds.

You're not going to get fat. But if you continue to smoke you will, in all likelihood, eventually get cancer.

I don't want to get fat.

It still wasn't the right time to mention that other observation she wanted to share about the way the word love has always been hiding in plain sight within the word revolution. It was still too soon to mention the word love even while offering up a recently gleaned anecdote that she discovered scrawled on a campus wall. Love was the least urbane thing imaginable, and it was also too pointed, even if deployed ironically; it was too risky with all of those grandiose bell ringing and clinging connotations, and besides, what if he didn't respond to her observation? Yet she used the word effortlessly enough a few miles ago when she claimed to love his smell... Especially when you aren't wearing cologne ... although that mention of the word love was nearly the same size as a sparrow's lunch.

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The married man was aware of how things fell apart because assessing accidents was part of his job. He was always portraying himself as careful, precise, and attentive to the smallest details.

Do you think I'm pretty?

What do you think?

I honestly don't know. Which is-

If you were to guess-

why I'm asking you.

-what would it be?

You need to tell me.

Really?

Maybe. Yes, really.

I think you're very beautiful.

The man behind the wheel told her how he wanted to take her blindfolded while seated in a chair, with his hands cupping her breasts, as she lowered herself onto him. She shifted toward him while saying that the professor had used a bandana to cover her eyes.

A road sign indicated they had just crossed the county line.

What would that be like? He asked.

She took up her purse then pulled out a dark blue silk scarf while offering him a willfully provocative look.

So you do like my body?

Indeed.

The broken yellow line ended before the road narrowed to a single lane.

Very much.

If the human race possesses the highest form of consciousness, she proclaimed, according to the collective wisdom of that very same human race, before undoing the seatbelt, then we still have so much to learn from nature, while sliding over to the center of the wide dark blue vinyl seat, inside that greenhouse, then draping her left arm over his shoulders before

triumphantly declaring, it was like I was enveloped in a warm envelope.

My biological mother was a nineteen-year-old college sophomore majoring in English literature. According to the papers I received from the Children's Home Society of California, my biological father was in his mid-thirties and married with three children. In the questionnaire my mother stated that he was an insurance adjuster who enjoyed playing the piano. When people ask I tell them that I'm from California. If pressed further I'll add that I was born in Palo Alto, usually including the caveat that I grew up in a Navy family, how we moved around quite a bit along the East Coast, that I moved to NYC when I was twenty, that I've lived in Brooklyn for the last thirty plus years, and so no, I'm not really from California although I was born there. If they want to know more about my origins I'll tell them I was adopted when I was three months old, that my biological mother was a college student from central Ohio, how my biological father was probably one of her professors, or possibly an older writer who was mentoring her. From the questionnaire I learned he was of Welsh and Scottish descent, and that she was from a large Irish Catholic family. I've always presumed, with a wavering degree of certainty, that the career title of insurance adjuster she bestowed upon him before signing me over at the adoption agency was an allusion to Franz Kafka.

Midway through applying her makeup Kate felt an overwhelming dislike for her own face. Decades ago a talented actress exchanged youthful beauty for financial security, and while a love of money darkened her eyes, because Lawrence's money had the power to brighten nearly every corner, until inevitably, Kate's delicate outer layers began to give way: Thinning eyelashes and crow's feet first appeared, then deep

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marionette lines surrounded her full lips, while two rows of discolored capped teeth were now prominently displayed whenever she opened her mouth. At twenty-one Kate had been teleported to fame by a full-color feature in *Playboy*. On this warm September evening those very same glossy images of the impossibly youthful Kate lying languidly on white satin sheets while bedecked in frilly black lace with a come-hither pout unfurled before the forty-five year old woman who, framed in her illuminated vanity mirror, could only smirk back at the memory of what had once been her body. Kate was twenty-two and Lawrence was fifty-one when they met and married in Hollywood during the summer of '58. Their most recent trial separation had proven once again that Kate could not be alone. Thankfully Lawrence was no longer healthy enough to trade her in for a younger version of herself. It would be humiliating if she allowed Michael to feel her age. Kate put down the powder brush and picked up her wine glass. Lawrence had been steadfast in his refusal to pay for any plastic surgery that would enable her to wrestle even a modicum of dignity back from the hands of time. Since Michael was never late for rehearsals Kate gave herself another fifteen minutes to finish putting on her face. If she couldn't be faithful to her husband at least she had finally learned how to be discreet. Instead of wallowing in self-pity, the woman seated before the illuminated mirror was going to pencil in her brows and rake her lashes with mascara before applying a faint dusting of light blue eye shadow and then brushing out her freshly tinted auburn hair before painting her lips with a dark shade of red lipstick. Her most important films still aired on television. The very same critics who had written Kate off as long past her prime would soon claim that while portraying Jocasta she positively shimmered beside Michael's ascending star. Nearly thirteen years ago Lawrence's possessive jealousy at Cannes made international headlines while simultaneously

wrecking what was probably her last best chance at a second Oscar, although it was earlier, while Kate was pregnant with Melanie, when the exceptional offers from the major studios began to evaporate. And it was just yesterday afternoon, when Melanie declared toward the end of their long distance screaming match, how she despised both of them equally. Kate reminded herself that now was not the time to dwell on Melanie's innumerable issues with her father, though if Lawrence actually died this time she knew Melanie would never forgive herself for not coming home from Paris and at least putting in a sullen cameo at his bedside. Kate tried to convince Melanie that time would eventually heal her wounded pride, assuring her daughter that something not quite identical but eerily similar occurred between Kate and her own mother; fortunately they managed a brief but genuine reconciliation. And with the clock finally running down on the old man who was supposedly responsible for so much of her daughter's unhappiness, Kate focused all her attention on touching up a few light blemishes on the back of her left hand instead of dwelling on something well beyond her control. Assuring herself that once Lawrence was finally dead and buried she would be able to hire as many surgeons as necessary in order to revitalize every inch of her time-ravaged being. But what if Michael called right now at the very last minute and coldly apologized for having just remembered a previous commitment—bluntly indicating an utter lack of interest in pursuing anything beyond their working relationship despite all the warm signals they exchanged during rehearsals. Kate wore pale pink polish on her fingernails which she cut so short they almost hurt. Wasn't the role of Jocasta enough? Applying one drop of Chanel behind each ear she reminded herself that everyone who really counted was already assuring her that the play was going to be a huge hit. It certainly wouldn't be the first time she had been misled by a handsome lead's lingering

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second glances. So much of the right money was behind this production. Besides, Michael flirted with nearly everyone, and Kate found his assertively broadcast bisexuality to be as confusing as it was unfair. If her career had once been firmly anchored to a decades old and perhaps best-forgotten beauty, then she would learn how to rely on talent and intelligence, or the appearance of intelligence, in order to remain relevant. It was a cool and clear September evening with a waning crescent moon. If aging gracefully meant learning how to rely on others in order to survive, then Kate was presently primping to thrive. All she needed was a capable partner in crime. As an autumn breeze parted the bedroom curtains, the faint smell of damp leaves brought Kate back to her reflection in the illuminated mirror just before the doorbell rang.

Although King Laius ruled over Thebes during an unprecedented period of tranquility, his inability to have children with Jocasta put a strain on their marriage. Laius consulted with the Oracle of Delphi, who informed him that any son he fathered with Jocasta would prove to be his murderer. To prevent this from happening Laius locked Jocasta away in her chambers without providing her with an explanation until one night, either out of frustration or boredom, she freed herself, donned the costume of a temptress and plied her husband with wine before indulging his drunken lust. Jocasta kept the resulting pregnancy hidden from Laius until after giving birth to a boy. When Laius discovered the baby he commanded that it must be destroyed. Jocasta was forced to surrender her baby, then watched as his tiny ankle was pierced with an iron rod before the infant was taken far from Thebes and left for dead on a desolate side of Mount Cithaeron. A well-meaning shepherd rescued the baby and presented it to the childless rulers of distant Corinth who named the boy Oedipus, on account of his swollen ankle. King Polybus and

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Queen Merope raised Oedipus as their only son and never told him that they were not his actual birth parents. As a young man this prince of Cornith learned of the curse blackening his existence—that he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother—so Oedipus struck out on his own and put countless leagues between his loving parents and this horrific fate. Unwittingly Oedipus murders King Laius when a roadside altercation between the two men over the right of way turns fatal. Soon afterwards Oedipus solves the riddle of the Sphinx. As a reward Oedipus was bequeathed the throne of Thebes, and then wed to the recently widowed Jocasta. King Oedipus ruled over Thebes, and Jocasta bore him four children: Eteocles, Polynices, Ismene, and Antigone.

Michael removed his clothes while standing before the mirror mounted on the bathroom door. Cryosurgery could erase these lesions. The dermatologist explained that it was a simple, short-term cosmetic procedure, and his chest hair would eventually cover the scars. However, the dermatologist assured Michael that before too long these lesions could very well cover the inside of his mouth, then invade his lungs, and would most certainly kill him when they cropped up on his brain. An infection might already be in the process of destroying his vital organs. A virus, bacteria, or maybe a parasite—depending on whatever opportunistic organisms were lurking around—even a common cold could deliver a fatal infection before the cancer got around to killing him. His organ systems would shut down one by one, or his organs could actually destroy each other while fighting off an infection. While rinsing soap from his torso under the steaming shower Michael decided to forgo getting a second opinion, and to indefinitely postpone making an appointment with that blood specialist the dermatologist insisted he consult. He would just kill himself. There was probably enough wine in the kitchen to wash

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down a few handfuls of pills. Or he could do it where he stood by opening the veins running along both wrists with a razor blade: Michael slowly dragged his thumbnail down his left wrist then closed his eyes, and imagined laying down in the bathtub as it filled with his vibrantly red blood.

It was fifteen minutes till noon when he gathered a few items from a side drawer and put them in his briefcase. The thirty-five-year-old married man standing in his shared office space took the beige raincoat off a hook and pushed his right and then his left arm through the sleeves. He assessed the productive looking clutter on his desk and slowly walked across the office while clutching the briefcase in his right hand. He informed the receptionist that he was going to grab a bite down the street before his one o'clock appointment. He then embellished his schedule by adding how he would probably try to swing back by the office around three although he needed to be downtown by four-thirty. And so if his one o'clock ran late then he would call in around three. She told him not to get too wet with the right amount of sarcasm coloring her tone before answering a call. The man in the beige raincoat pushed his way through two sets of glass doors, then headed over to the dark green Buick Skylark parked halfway down the block while thinking about how much he would enjoy fucking the receptionist right there on top of her desk. She was rather stout and somewhere in her forties with a dour disposition, possibly German or Yugoslavian but probably of Polish extraction, a prominent mole on her left cheek. She wore a colossal blue black beehive, yet never any makeup. Bejeweled cat eyeglasses were forever balanced near the end of her nose and she always dressed like an uptight high school teacher. She read him like a dull book five days a week. What really turned him on was how utterly immune she was to the entire arsenal of his charms. Her husband was a detective and

over time his no-bullshit demeanor must have rubbed off on her or perhaps his hard as nails disposition simply accentuated all of that inherent Eastern Bloc warmth. The rain had ended although heavy showers were in the forecast for the afternoon. While letting the engine warm up he turned on the radio and immediately recognized Clifford Brown's trumpet on a live recording of "Quicksilver." He turned up the volume and sat back in the drivers seat: The Jazz Messengers were on fire the night this song was recorded. He never had an opportunity to see Clifford Brown perform live, although he made an effort to catch Art Blakey and the latest incarnation of the Jazz Messengers whenever they came to town. This recording was released thirteen years ago, when he was still playing with his own quintet, although they were running on fumes by then. That was well before he got married and the arrival of their son, when the idea of settling into a nine-to-five existence seemed patently absurd. And all of that was just fine because in retrospect those tuneful beatnik miscreants under his stewardship were never going to make any recordings that could hold a candle to the brilliance coming through his car speakers right now, or be anything other than a reliable foil for getting laid at parties. Nowadays he played the piano for himself and usually just long enough to justify its professionally tuned and meticulously polished presence in his tastefully furnished living room. Maybe one day his children might be drawn to the piano, although now it didn't seem like they would ever be interested. He began playing when he was seven and his tutor immediately recognized his potential. Starting in middle school he became a disciplined student who exhibited a keen instinct for guiding harmonies. This passion for music came to define him especially after his tastes shifted from the baroque to be-bop. When "Quicksilver" ended the announcer listed the personnel on that live Birdland recording before the station segued into its regularly scheduled international news

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program, which opened with a story on the military coup that had recently taken place in Sierra Leone. He turned off the radio and drove up the street, then turned left at the light. With the transition into adulthood his need for playing every day lost its urgency, and while he would never outgrow his love of music he could no longer devote the same amount of time and energy into making it. Instead he provided a comfortable life for his growing family and set about earning money and investing all the capital he could spare with the same determined approach he once brought to playing the piano; living comfortably became the extended harmony that held the most importance.

That I was adopted was never kept from me. I was twelve when my adoptive parents told me my biological father was considerably older than my biological mother, and that he was married with children. Apparently my biological mother had been attending college in central Ohio when I was conceived and moved to San Francisco in order to live with her aunt while carrying me. This information was shared at the beginning of a cautionary, blush-inducing lecture about being a responsible and respectful boyfriend who understood the meaning of the word consent and always used condoms. Perhaps my biological father was an actual insurance adjuster who enjoyed playing the piano. My long standing insistence that my biological mother outfitted him with that job title as subterfuge for a writer could be nothing more than a fantasy. Generally speaking insurance adjusters are considered to be empathetic and deliberate. And so how does a married father of three who supposedly possesses those high-minded traits impregnate a teenager? Perhaps adorning himself with virtues was part of his rarefied sensitive male schtick. She was young and presumably naive enough to have been lead astray. It's always been easier for me to imagine her being

intimate with a man she shared a passion with, like writing, in addition to what I've presumed was their mutual physical attraction. Considering their age difference at a time when it was considered deeply reactionary for anyone in their teens or early twenties to trust, much less be romantically involved with, someone over the age of thirty, it's entirely plausible that he was a writer. Although the sexism of a gendered May-December romance when the male is the elder certainly speaks to that era as well. If my biological father was one of her professors then she was most likely coerced into being intimate with him. Or had she been dazzled by the dim lights and gratuitous verbiage of some deeply insecure English professor? She could have been just another one of his wide-eyed assistants—unpaid and meagerly credited—and if so how long did his charm campaign last before she gave herself to him? I've been dwelling in exacting illustrative examples of how their relationship could have played out for too long. My not knowing what brought them together may have made many of these speculative forays come off as overwrought and gratuitous, and I've discovered that repeatedly sketching their inevitable undoing all the way down to its final dissolution can be surprisingly painful. His identity could have been concocted during a sophomore writing exercise. Maybe my biological father was just one of the half-dozen young men who cycled through her during the late spring and early summer of '67. Did she frequently indulge in drunken unprotected sex with faithless middle-aged business men? These last two prospects seem unlikely, and the more debauched variations on our story have never been my truth. My biological mother has always been a hero of mine. For the sake of these pages she is my Antigone. I've never wanted to discover her identity: We went our separate ways the day I was born, and so be it. I've always wanted to possess a photograph of her from around the time I was conceived. Even a black and white snapshot

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would do. Hopefully a few pages in this book provide an adequate portrait of that nineteen-year-old college student who claimed just days before giving birth to me that she liked to write plays.

While coming to a slow stop beneath the red light he eyed a shapely blonde in a paisley mini-dress crossing the street, then remembered the brunette that he was on his way to see. With any luck it would start pouring right after they met up. That way they could seek shelter in his car. His schedule was clear until four, so hopefully she wouldn't feel obligated to act too coy. He parked behind a police cruiser, then cut the ignition. Maybe she lived in one of the apartment buildings on the opposite side of the street, and with any luck they might end up in her bed before the afternoon was through. He got out of the car and closed the door. As an afterthought he retrieved his umbrella from the backseat. The police cruiser pulled away from the curb, then sped away with its lights going as he walked toward the park entrance. There was nobody around, which wasn't surprising for an overcast weekday afternoon. He buttoned his raincoat against a damp breeze just before he saw her turning the corner. She was dressed in a bright yellow knee-length plastic raincoat with sheer purple pantyhose and black ankle boots. He smiled and she waved in return, then skipped along the walkway like a young girl merrily, merrily, merrily, making her way towards the playground.

The married piano playing insurance adjustor had already fathered three children, and so did that somehow qualify him to be the most likely parental candidate? Was he flatly dismissive or hostile when she finally confronted him with her pregnancy? Maybe none of her coolly passive or increasingly desperate messages were ever returned. Did my biological father resemble the owner of that late model dark green Buick Skylark?

DONALD BRECKENRIDGE

Not surprisingly their weekday lunch hour interludes ended soon afterwards. Or was she hired by the insurance adjustor and his wife to be their live-in nanny over the summer break? Perhaps my inopportune appearance hijacked a delectably discreet summer of love adventure quietly taking place in the quaint guest bedroom above their two-car garage. Maybe the wife of this philandering piano playing insurance adjustor upended their marriage after she discovered that her husband had impregnated a teenager. Maybe his wife tolerated the affair for the sake of their marriage, or perhaps she was too consumed by her own infidelities to even care. Regardless of how it might have played out my mother uprooted her life and moved thousands of miles away from the city where she was attending college in order to give birth to me in California. Given these circumstances the burden of carrying me to full term must have been humiliating because in 1967 she did not have any other choices. My mother probably wasn't his first young fling, and yet I've never faulted them for being human. Hopefully neither of them made the same mistake twice.

Michael walked by the florist on the corner and doubled back to admire the flowers. The roses were beautiful, and he knew Kate would appreciate them. But maybe it was still too soon to show his hand? Michael passed the dry cleaners while wondering how appearing on her doorstep while dressed in a trench coat, just like Richard Burton in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, and presenting Kate with a bouquet of roses would qualify as circumspect, especially if her husband happened to answer the door. Besides Kate couldn't be his Claire Bloom because they both die at the end of the film. Although if she was his Claire how soon would it be before she would come to rely on him as the very personification of cold war discretion? Lines of headlights streaked down the avenue as a siren got caught up in the evening traffic. Michael considered the

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possibility that he was falling in love with Kate. He strongly suspected that he was falling in love with the idea of being in love with Kate—which was the perfect way to complicate an already daunting rehearsal process. Perhaps he should buy a trench coat on his way over to her place along with a ten-dollar bouquet of roses and a heart shaped box of chocolates. But what if he appeared in that getup and Lawrence greeted him at the front door? It was nearly cool enough to have worn a trench coat even though Halloween was a little more than a month away. Scratch those flowers and chocolates. He walked by two leather-clad punks panhandling for change. Besides, Richard Burton would turn up half in the bag with an open quart of scotch under his left arm. While Michael was appraising his reflection superimposed over a grey wool suit in a tailor's darkened window, an autumn breeze accompanied his realization that years of determination, hard work, and sacrifice were presenting him with some highly unlikely yet very real possibilities and from this moment forward it would be wise to follow his heart with the utmost caution. While facilitating connections, Michael made a game out of accommodating desire, and each one of his form fitting adaptations had been made to measure all the way down to the smallest most seemingly insignificant stitch. Further down the same block he paused before a table of used books. Eyeing rows of paperbacks before selecting a thin pocket-sized bilingual edition of Pasolini's poetry, he slowly thumbed through the pages, randomly landing on a dislocated sequence of terse yet melancholy lines that mirrored his cautionary anticipation. The price was faintly penciled atop the front page, "It says three dollars," removing his wallet and handing the bearded man seated beside the table three folded singles. The man thanked Michael, who slid the book into his jacket pocket before heading toward the bar on the corner. There was an empty stool between a knot of college students arguing about

football and a haggard middle-aged drunk in a soiled trench coat with red-rimmed bloodshot eyes and thinning sandy hair quietly conversing with an empty highball glass. The bartender eventually approached Michael, who ordered a vodka tonic just before "Emotional Rescue" began playing on the jukebox. The clock beside the payphone indicated he had time for just one drink. The stubbed-out cigarette smoldering in a red plastic ashtray trailed smoke into the grey cloud above the bar. The television was showing Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* without sound. Michael watched Bruno Antony pocket Guy Haines' monogrammed lighter as the bartender placed the vodka tonic in front of him. Sipping the drink Michael recalled surfing similar omnipresent waves during his first few years in New York, when turning onto even the most random corner prompted him to begin spinning associative lists wrought with implications into possible opportunities. While crossing the next street another towering swell would lift him even higher off the curb then send his imagination racing along the sidewalk as the wave broke beneath him.

Dressed in rags and covered in filth the desperate citizens of Thebes have gathered before the royal palace and are begging the gods to save them from the plague presently ravaging the city. When Oedipus appears he acknowledges their hardship and agonies as his own. Assuring the crowd that he sent his brother-in-law to Delphi in order to consult with the Oracle. Insisting that Creon will soon return with the guidance he needs to lead Thebes back from the brink of collapse. At that moment Creon makes his way through the crowd, informing Oedipus and all those within earshot that according to the Oracle the killer of Laius is a native of Thebes who happens to be living freely among them, and until the killer and all co-conspirators are banished, the gods will offer no respite from the pestilence decimating the city. Creon reminds

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Oedipus that King Laius was making his own pilgrimage to Delphi in order to seek guidance from the Oracle on how to rid Thebes of the Sphinx when a band of thieves set upon his party and murdered everyone except one slave who managed to survive the assault. This slave's terrified account of the attack served as the sole testimony of their former ruler's violent demise. Oedipus sends for this freed slave, now living out his twilight years as a shepherd in a remote village, before vowing to uncover all those responsible for killing Laius and to banish them. With great reluctance, the blind prophet Teiresias is lead onto the palace steps. Despite his good natured flattery and cajoling, Oedipus fails to learn from the seer who among them is responsible for the death of Laius. Instead the diviner begs Oedipus to let the matter go. Oedipus refuses to do so, and Teiresias bluntly suggests that the King get his house in order because the velocity of his impending fall cannot be understated. Oedipus responds with indignant fury, accusing Teiresias of being in league with Creon, whom he suspects of plotting to rob him of the throne. During a round of withering exchanges Teiresias claims that Oedipus is the killer he seeks. Oedipus states that Teiresias is incapable of helping him find those responsible for killing Laius. He was equally incapable of solving the riddle of the Sphinx. A heroic man of action with both feet firmly planted in the real world will save Thebes, and not some old blind fool steeped in the innards of slaughtered animals with a head-full of nonsensical bird lore. Teiresias declares Oedipus to be a true son of Thebes with actual blood on his hands. Oedipus is a father killer. Oedipus is a father-supplanter. His rule is the sole cause of the pestilence presently ravaging the city. Soon he shall cast a withered shadow upon the land while wandering from hovel to hovel in pitch black for the rest of his miserable mortal existence. In turn Oedipus continues to belittle Teiresias while mocking the gods he serves until the blind seer takes his leave.

End of excerpt.



<https://ellipsispress.com/2022/10/31/as-it-falls-by-donald-breckenridge>

PRAISE FOR *AS IT FALLS*

Donald Breckenridge has been the best novelist writing about and in New York City since the MTA used tokens and Giuliani was halfway sane.

—Joshua Cohen, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Netanyahus*

While reading *As It Falls*, this powerful new novel by Donald Breckenridge, I kept asking myself, *how does he do it? How does he build so much everything into so few pages and with so little fuss?* Art, love, death, desire, dailiness, awe...you name it: it's here. I've read novels three times as long that don't reveal a third as much about what it's like to live a life on this weary old world.

—Laird Hunt, author of *Zorrie*, a National Book Award finalist

According to the tenets of Greek Tragedy, mucking around with destiny is never a good idea, and there is no escaping your fate—unless you are Donald Breckenridge who seamlessly constructs a world that blurs the borders of that mythology and merges the elements of our everyday dystopia with the lives of modern-day actors in a production of *Oedipus the King*. Oedipus, as you may remember, gouges out his eyes after unwittingly impregnating his mother, Queen Jocasta, who in turn faces that incestuous truth by hanging herself with the bedsheets. And while the Queen had attempted to forestall this prophesy of shame by abandoning her infant son, Breckenridge turns the myth upside down, speculating that his biological mother had surrendered him soon after his birth as an act of courage and faith.

As It Falls sweeps us up in a whirlwind of existential possibilities and we are borne along by gritty and surreal images of city life. When a pair of pterodactyls bearing a cartload of beer-can recyclables board a stalled Z train, it seems perfectly plausible. When Oedipus appears in a pair of mirrored aviator sunglasses that conceal his empty eye sockets, it's just another leap into a world of existential perplexities anchored in the saga of what the author calls a "cracked moral compass." The Greek tragedies so well portrayed the absurdity of the human condition. But Breckenridge does it better.

—Pamela Ryder, author of *Paradise Field*

Refracting and crosscutting, DB's alter-/autofiction permutates Sophocles' *Oedipus* trilogy into an acerbic yet tender meditation on writing, theater, youth and desire...role play, inheritance, knowledge and freedom...imperfection, intimacy, mortality and escape. This time-jumping, detail-amping New York novel vibrates with obsession's interpretation of scenes, expansion's observation of contexts. Noirish while sans criminal—its lead characters include a femme spectrale (ghost writer/iteratively imagined young woman/elusive biological mother/Antigone avatar) and an intense, yearning, AIDS-facing actor—*As It Falls* hints that the way in is the way out. Cynicism flips to compassion, aggression to reflection, cliché to deeper version. But the unsettled and unsettling mood remains suspenseful. A prismatic maze of haunted, formally inventive intrafiction.

—Moyna Pam Dick, author of *I am writing you from afar*



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