

Chapter 11 of *The Debate*, Vol. 2 by B. Douglas Robbins

douglas@medialawgroup.net
bdouglasrobbins@gmail.com

Copyright © 2000 by B. Douglas Robbins.
All rights reserved.

The quarter wound down and the days became colder and shorter. Students around me began to sort of freak out now and again under the stress of finals. People who hadn't attended class all quarter bought Lecture Notes from S.S.E. and tried to swallow them whole, like lukewarm boa-constrictors disengaging their jaws ear to ear. The scene, needless to say was overtorqued and about to snap. Students formed study groups like hopeful leeches, grabbing a hold of each other and sucking and swallowing as much pulp and blood as their little bloated bodies could hold. Green was full, and the twenty-four hour study room churned light non-stop.

I kept to myself. I had taken extensive notes, and had kept up with my reading and writing assignments. Some strangers even approached me out of the deep blue, and asked if I wanted to study with them. As I had nothing to gain and only time to lose, I politely declined. Also, I had had enough leeching for the year; I was concentrating on keeping the blood I had left.

I received my Berlinski paper on *Othello and the New Criticism* back from the T.A. Most comments made by T.A.'s on essays were so hopelessly inane you could dismiss them altogether without so much as a penseless sigh, but the criticism I received on this paper struck me as particularly astute:

Very good--Thanks Elric. Excellent work, as you know. Sometimes I sense that some feeling for the context of your ideas is lost because of your interest in (obsession with?) argumentative details and precise conceptual content. It is a weakness of my own in fact. Remember to always avoid the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, in which intellectual abstractions are afforded more concrete status than the vague realities they pertain to. This fallacy is the plague of academia and you are prone to it.

-Wes

A few nights later I visited Hailie in her attic in the Museum. I rapped the door two quick, two flat handed. The door clicked open. I entered the green sanctuary. I walked slowly through the corridor and then sat cross-legged before Hailie. She had taught me to sit in a Lotus position, at great pain to my hamstring. I had become accustomed to it though, and discovered it afforded me a more comfortable sitting position, for a longer period of time than any other posture.

The attic was warm and verdant. Exposed beams connected to flinting brackets and reflective bolts the size of your fist. It was a comfortable place to be, in that Hailie was there, her belongings, a sleeping mat, bedding, a green two burner Coleman stove, a three gallon tank of water, and other miscellaneous articles were there as well. Misplaced clothing lined the pentagram and pans and various toys, mostly little free things, like a tiny Zima ballbearing puzzle, and a spinning hologram disk, hinted at impermanence, transience, and the very riskiness involved in living uninvited, like the uneasy soft stepping, the controlled locution, the terrifying possibility of being busted at any time. It set me into a strange buzz, not dissimilar to that of when I was ten and told to abide by my bed time but stayed up in a dark area of the stairs, unobserved, watching my parents and their friends talk about things I couldn't entirely understand.

Hailie was eating yellow rice and some kind of yellow vegetable I thought was squash, "Want some?"

"No thank-you," I stretched my arms like a cat in it's den.

"I'm **really** happy to see you Ellie."

I felt elated at hearing that. I smiled, "I'm glad to see you too."

She chewed her rice thoughtfully, "I want you to know I think you're a wonderful person. No-one ever says good stuff to each other, just all the unhappy stuff—you know? So I want you to know that I really **really** like you."

I was mildly stunned. I didn't know what I had done to deserve her admiration and affection, "Thank-you, Hailie. Uh, I guess." I resisted just telling her I liked her too; it smelled of mindless reciprocity and would have tritened her heartfelt sentiments. I took a breath and told her what I really thought, "I mean thanks, but if you knew me better you might not say that."

She moved her bowed head side to side over her rice bowl, long hair glistening an occasional green beam, "That's not true,

Ellie. You like to beat yourself up and all, but it's not true. You're an amazing person and you're going to do amazing things, so why don't you cut yourself some slack?"

"Hailie, this is goofy. I don't **want** to be arguing with you over this, but I really like you too, and you're always speaking so honestly to me, like no one ever does, so I'm trying, with all my heart to be honest with you, and the fact is, and I wish it weren't so, but the fact is I'm not such a nice person. I'm kind of...well...selfish, and I think a lot of the shit I'm dealing with now is some sort of punishment."

"Bullshit," I'd never heard her cuss before, "You're so full of it Ellie."

"WHAT?" Here I was pouring my heart out to her and all she could tell me was *I'm full of it?* My knotty stomach flipped and waved.

Her lugubrious glance penetrated straight through me, "You're not bad, you're not even naughty, you're just a person. Bad stuff happens to everyone. If you want to be on some Christian trip, and be all sinful and wretched, that's your business, but it doesn't have to be so. You have so much beauty to offer, Ellie, if you would just let yourself off the hook!"

"If I have so much to offer why do I feel like shit all the time. This is the thing: I'm so dissatisfied! And no matter how I try I can't ever imagine changing that."

"What are you saying?"

"I mean, here I am, I graduate, let's say I get a job at a prestigious company or say I even start my own business, it doesn't matter. I wake up much too early, go to work, make stuff or sell stuff, or push things around and then I go home and I'm beat. So I begin to live for the weekends, but that doesn't work because the weekends are too short, like as soon as I get into something, I mean really get into it and wind down and relax, Sunday rolls around, and *rrwinggggg!* I'm wound back up again! So I find some nice girl and we fall in love and it's beautiful, but soon we get **used** to each other, and those small glimpses at eternity become shorter, more seldom and further between. All the while we're creeping closer to death and then it's all over, and for what? For nothing! It was meaningless!"

Hailie moved her head side to side again, while her perfect eyes held fixed to mine, like holding hands, and I experienced the strangest kind of sloshy sensation in my gut.

She held out her hand, "Gosh Ellie, no wonder you feel like

shit. Give me your hand.” I did, where upon she began slowly caressing a small portion of my wrist where it joined the butt of my palm, and then harder until an electrified pulse burst along my middle finger, forking up my elbow, so hot and incisive, I thought she was burning me. I recoiled, but she held my wrist firmly.

“Relax. The heat is your own, like resistance in a thin wire. Your system is twisty and all bunched up. Relax. Now show me where it hurts.”

My head flopped weakly toward her. I was inebriated through eyelids tingling and lips swelling. “Here,” I indicated the pinkie side of my palm where a distended sharpness pulsed. She brought both of her hands toward it and pinched the area like vice-grips.

“Hey!” I yelped weakly.

“This will hurt but it’s the only way,” and she clamped down and held it there, “Now relax. Fix upon your death bed. You’re looking back over your life, then you slip away.” And then, I swear to God, her voice dropped two octaves and expanded outward from a colorless depth: “**Know it...**”

Vooooosh!

That was a very good job

Thank you sir

Strutting Strutting

Your Honor Your Honor

You’re out of order

I’m out of order I’m out of order this whole fucking court is out of order you’re out of order

But you know they can’t pay

Of course they can’t and if they could they wouldn’t **need** our help

I’m sorry

She looked more beautiful than I’d ever remembered and sadder too

We just can’t make each other happy anymore

Is that what we were doing

She was wearing clothes I had paid for thousand dollars and it was worthless

It's not anybody's fault you know
You mean it's not your fault
We can't make each other happy anymore
Did she ever love me
Her exposed shoulders shined like porcelain moons under the
chandelier **she** picked out
Now this baby goes from zero to sixty in nothin' flat *BAAAMM*
SMAACK
Hee-hee that's nothin' you should see the rough stuff
The rough stuff
I had to know *how close were we*
Like porcelain crescent moons *we were as close as two people can*
be
Okay okay you're right but were not going to be losers on this
This is my final offer take it or leave it
I have one last idea
Congratulations
Case dismissed
No comment no comment
Vroooooom vroooooom
I ain't never seen that before cracked that case right in half
See she's leaking red crap everywhere
So you're the infamous Elric Grundle
Infamous
Her shoulders shined I couldn't believe how beautiful she looked
I'll always remember her that way
Howclosewewere
Fretting
The rough stuff is never enough
They need you in New York
I don't need New York
Do you realize what's riding on this
Who gives a fuck you know

The A.C.L.U. won't touch it it's too hot the N.R.A. won't touch it
for chrissakes

So you're the infamous Elric Grundle

I'm well known for all the wrong reasons and you are

Lookie here a veritable who's who of promising Republican
candidates

Strutting Strutting

I'm free floating like a random orbiter "Hailie! Hailie!"

"You're safe. Be well."

A static pinch at my hand like a great **heave** and pressed and there
is my body decaying in front of my eyes, my right knee locks so I
go to a specialist who inserts a metal pin and a pound of nylon
riders and then my eyesight and then my teeth, my hearing dims
and soon my prostrate; plastic contact lenses, polyurethane
adhesive to hold white metal enameled teeth, laser surgery to fight
against the erosion. Small things like a gradual stoop, drooping skin
on the face, and I forget things. Not too often and I make up for it
but I can't recall white lightning as I did in my twenties and
thirties and so I revert to staccato clichés and now a sunburn is an
irregular mole and a cat scan but it comes up negative.

"The world is alive with death and dying," I almost yell.

"Of course."

"All the dying and decaying trees feed the moss and the black
ants—half of its useful life above ground. *But I can't die.*"

"You will as you are a part of the world."

I'd never thought of it, "Apart from the world at large?" grave to
the cradle.

"A **part** of the larger world. You are as we all are."

"Am I separate?" Grail King!

"No! A part like dust."

"I've never died before, how can I die now?"

"You've died many times—though it was a slow decay—you've
known the dead—your body's not the same, not a single cell, your
mind is reshaped, like the oak tree after the acorn and soon not
even that!"

VOOOOOSH! SHHHH! SHHH!

I grab her back it is hard and I can feel her ribs flexing one after another her hard body and as I push my hands down she gives way to the creamiest smoothest roundness the craziest round shape you could ever touch some sort of perfect shape going around and around that curves under my hand anticipating my placement swooping up and then under and so yielding so crazy you can't **make** something curve like that that shape not seen it could only have been made by the hand of God or the perfect love of natural passion

Your breasts smell so pretty

She moves rhythmically as old as the very syncopations in my own genome ten twenty million years she spreads wet before me and wetter and burning arch to the air gasping while a damp place cools on her uptake drawing in the vacuum below her above me two backs hair smoothed across while she promises me the universe and always

How close were we

We were making people

Daddy are dere really angels

Well some people think there are

But are dere **really**

Well I think there are

Ana ana have you seen 'em

No but some people say they have

Ana did dey **really**

I don't know

Who know

No one really knows

Then how come dey believe in them

No one knows

Ana ana why don't no one know

No one knows that either I'm afraid hee-hee

Does Mommy know

What cannot be will be. Turn. Turn. Turn. A brilliantbeam

explodes behind my eyes and I see the decay of myself at an alarming rate until I am shrunken and withered. *I'm dying! I need the body! You can have all the rest, but not the body!*

“What do you see?”

“Ooooh! I'm slipping away!”

“What will you lose Ellie?”

“Everything! The world!”

“The meaningless world? That's what you say.”

“Yes, the meaningless world, but it's not for meaning anyway. It's for being. God, I am so afraid.”

“Relax, Ellie, I'm here. We're together.”

“It's not enough! Even love isn't enough. I'm so afraid.”

A crashing vortex spins like gloppy rainbows swirling while I drop, falling and falling 32 feet per second per second until the blackness, and I am the blackness, and there is nothing left. My skin melts away into the soil, buzzard feast on my gut, rats and ants que through my jawbone, setting eggs in my jowls, and an unkindness of ravens make nests with my hair. I am as before I was born, not a self, certainly not *myself*, yet a thing-in-itself, outside and light warms and death becomes a laughable absurdity. Fishing with the worm, eating of the king, through the guts of a beggar.

“At the eleventh hour all the panic and pain is absurd! What a fucking waste!” I begin laughing like a giddy madman. I feel truly mad, and elated still. It's a perfectly lovely mania.

The hand Hailie is holding is numb. I squeeze open my eyelids, and the comi-tragic force blasts back into my cranium at the speed of light, and the universe is created again in three dimensions and touch.

“Holy shit!”

“Shhhhh!”

“Holy **shiiiiit!**”

“Quiet, Ellie!” Hailie held a finger to her saturated lips.

I sat bug eyed and fizzing like agitated beer, twitching and fluttering. The drab attic seemed abnormally vivid, everything from dark corners to small texturized flakes of bedding cloth or metallic pintles and hinges moved inside of me. I couldn't stop fidgiting and giggling alternately.

I gripped my jaw, numb lower lip, and forced myself to whisper, “What **was** that?”

“That was the Sight,” Hailie shifted expressions like someone ten years older and a lifetime more sober. Her features seemed to float in a shamrock glitter of milk.

“Hailie! How did you do that?”

“I don’t know.”

“You saw things, didn’t you? Did you see all that?”

“No. It’s your life.”

“I could have sworn you were there!”

“What did you see?”

“Everything! I saw it all. I saw my own death, and the weirdest thing happened, only as I died did anything amount to anything. The rest was a wild waste of—no, it wasn’t a waste, but my life just seemed like a long interim where I suffered all the indignities of **doing the wrong thing**, cowardly protecting myself against a future that never came, and I couldn’t help it. All so I might become old enough to do something of any significance **at all**, namely, die and seep into the world.”

“Why couldn’t you help doing the wrong thing?”

“I don’t know. I just didn’t know it. I had conned myself into permanent skepticism and the universe of doubt raises unlimited fears and apprehensions.”

“You lived for the future.”

“I lived **in** the future and for that I perpetually regretted the past.”

“And the present?”

“A banal novelty. God, what a mess,” I thought to myself, “Was that really my future?” but it was not a private thought. *Did I just say that?*

“I think it’s what you imagine your future to be. It’s like heightened dreaming,” Hailie yawned, “Ellie, I’m sorry, but I’m really drained. I need to go to sleep.” She sipped her red tea.

“Oh! Sure! Of course. Would you like to spend the night at my place? It’s not an attic or anything but it’s okay.”

She hesitated, “Uhhh...”

“You know, Hailie, it’s just not safe to live here.”

“Where should I live?” she stared at me blankly; dark eyes

buoyant in a milk bowl.

I was going to suggest she live with me, but did not. I was thinking about how I would explain her to my roommate and how I was supposed to hide her from the Mirrielees administration. It was complicated and untenable, “You can stay with me for a **little** while.”

“Then what?”

Pause, “There are Foster Homes or something.”

She shook her head wearily, “This is my home. At least for now.”

I nodded. I gave her a hug, “Thank-you.”

Her fatigued smile pressed my cheek, “You’re welcome,” pretty eyes blinking slowly.

I moved through the heavy tentacles, walked down the hall, and into the cool drizzle. Where does a girl like that come from? “The Sight, eh?” I said out loud.

That evening I saw how to do something that I had forgotten to do in a long while, and it was a matter of remembering. I saw how I might love myself—all because a young girl said I was wonderful, and showed me what she meant.