

## **Chapter 6 of *The Debate*, Vol. 2 by B. Douglas Robbins**

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1994 was my furious Autumn. Rain and rain. If there was great wisdom in fury, I should have been King Solomon that season. I began to enjoy the blue wet because it did what I could not, and there was no deceit in it.

I did not see much of my friends in debate, David, Skip, Keith. A few of them called me from time to time usually to find out if I had this back file or that, if I had a counterplan to Malaysia, or if I knew where to get some good, fresh nihilism answers. I must have sounded either very put off or reeking of self pity, because soon the phone calls ceased.

Even friends outside debate began to wane. I was like a man with a numb foot. I went walking around in puddles of rusty nails, and wading through scorching asphalt in the summer, not feeling a thing. I was numbly walking through glass, unaware of the blood.

I hovered through the sandstone campus like a wraith those months. I had come to Stanford specifically to join their legendary debate team; now excommunicated, I couldn't debate. I lost my best friend; he turned into a black, black dagger and all the goddamn rain teased me over dry eyes. I was not allowed to cry because I had never let myself, and like karmic revenge, that groins a celibate man when he's down, I was as dry in the eyes as I was wet in the face.

Now about the rain...

I had seen rain before in Southern California. It came down carelessly and without regard to place or person. Southern California rain was the hazard bus crash. It came down in spats and stops, irregularly, without commitment. In Southern California, the rain came capriciously, then went away. Everyone in targa tops and convertibles would groan and whine about the gray wet stuff. Some would try to challenge it by leaving their tops down, their roofs off. Idiots. The rain was mindless, like a drunken child, never pernicious, never purposeful, but certainly not benevolent either. The quantity of rain deposited in the region was far from enough to sustain the populous, it was somewhat helpful,

and allowed the natives to kid themselves into thinking they were part of the natural world, but again it was more of a formality. It was cynical rain, rain as a technicality, a tradition done for tradition sake.

That was how I always thought of rain. This rain was different.

The more it rained that late Fall quarter, the more it taught me until tears came. I tasted the water on my face for salt and was happy when it arrived. I actually began to feel better walking to class in the rain. By early November I wore less and less rain gear. I showed up to my classes, drenched, and content.

I functioned well enough. I fed myself with a knife and fork like everyone else, I performed well enough in school, I formed normal and dull enough sentences about implicit and explicit theoretical critiques, textural analysis and such, but the essential fact of that Autumn was I had no real understanding why I bothered to do the things I did anymore. This rain freed me from formalism, and in its wake was the deepest uncertainty you could imagine. One has to cry for loneliness if nothing else.

Debate was so much of my vital identity and Jared was as much of a friend as you could have, and it all came apart like cheap muslin. You really couldn't know anything. I mean if Jared could do what he did, anyone could do anything, and it's all up for grabs and there is really no reason why the world wouldn't just erupt into chaos and fire bomb the embassies, the libraries, the day-care centers; why not arrest people and hang them from the ceiling by the genitals for whimsy or sport?

On a dry November day, I spied Jared walking with a friend around the teens of Mem Chu's arcade. The arched passage was a bulwark from the rain and the elements of erosion, under which two digit numbers nested in diamond floor tiles. Going back to the late nineteenth century, each diamond held a time capsule deep below, buried by that year's graduating class. Jared stood around the 16's and 17's and 18's.

"Hey Grundle!" he blared, "What are you doing?" He left his friend in the lurch and jogged down the hall while the water fell. He looked relieved to see me, as if he had been looking all over for me and now he had found me among the time capsules, just like he imagined all along.

"Hey," he stopped short, breathing, the squeaky echo of rubber on old monastic time, "We're playing Ultimate tonight. Want to come?"

“I don’t think so,” I said civilly.

“Oh come on! It will be great! Angel is gonna be muddy as hell!”

“I don’t think so. I don’t want to kill the salamander,” I joked. Stanford used to host a tradition of Greek mudsports for philanthropy in the Lake during the summer until it was discovered that we were killing the native salamanders and the annual event had to be shut down. Thereafter the salamander took on mythological significance as a scapegoat stick-in-the-mud.

Jared thought that was the funniest thing he had ever heard, “Haaaaa! Haaaaa! Fuck the salamander! Come on, I dare you.”

“No thanks.”

“Okay, but the Grundle I know never can turn down a dare,” he called backing up 98, 99, 00, 01, 02, “Show up tonight and prove you’re the same old Grundle!”

I shook my head imperceptibly.

“Salamanders! Ha! I’ll see you tonight...” he was certain. He turned around and ran after his friend.

I didn’t think anything of it. It was the first time I’d seen Jared since Las Vegas and I didn’t think anything of it. I do remember later the same day the rain stopped and the sun came out to burn right through my listless eyes. The heat grew until noon like a muggy kindle. The sun rose the humidity. The heat was like a four pound mallet brought down fast on my head. Where was my drizzly Fall? The humidity teased me—here is wet! Here is moist! I could not touch it. I could not muster a tear.

By two in the afternoon I had an intense headache staggering to my Shakespeare and the Law class with Professor Berlinski, the bitter European, who gleefully sought to prove himself, by every conceivable standard, exceedingly more puissant than his students or peers. It was the class Jared had dropped. Berlinski’s snide comments and nasty shut downs had been known to reduce some students to tears. Some accused him of sexual harassment, a charge that thus far had not stuck. The process only embittered him further.

At the beginning of class he snorted a rancid caveat, “Attention! I am not interested in having sexual relations with any of you. Not today. Not ever. I am not in any way tempted to perform sexual acts with any of you **weemen**—womyn with a ‘y’ of course—nor with any of you fine young men. Furthermore, by my rejecting you from my bed, I do not intend to create a **hoostile** atmosphere in my classroom. This must be clear!”

At which point one of the female students stood, blazing at Berlinski, “Sexual harassment is not a joke Dr. Berlinski! Many victims of harassment are uh, victimized by men.” Nervous stuttering ballooned into an ersatz auspicious pause, long enough for the doctor’s caustic wit:

“Dear! Dear! I do not mean ‘dear’ rather, I mean womyn with a ‘y.’” He spoke out of the side of his mouth like William F. Buckley, “I **am not** joking. I do not, and will not engage in sexual activities with any of my students. So you need not fear whatever sort of wrathful potency you might imagine I am endowed. If that is a problem for you, I suggest you use the door.” A tense pause as Berlinski turned away and then quickly pivoted back again, “You **do** know how to use the door? No one held it open for you on the way in, I am to assume?”

The student grabbed her notebook and green backpack and ran out of the lecture doors. I caught a quick eye of her profile as she left. Her nose was morose and she first pushed on the left hand lever, finding it locked by way of breaking her exit flow, and then tried the other, finding it unlocked though requiring great force; she looked like a dismantled wrestler.

“Now that we have thinned the herd, shall we speak of higher matters?” The class was typically silent. We had learned early in the quarter that any comment, no matter how benign, was subject to Berlinski’s invective and it just was not worth the price, “I take it from your silence that you have consented. Very well, we shall proceed,” mumbling nasally, “Ah, the silence of sages and fools, equally sweet.”

For Berlinski, ferocious rebukes were light stuff. Before the siege of sexual harassment claims, his rage and scorn was much more transparent. Over the course of the quarter he seemed to have crawled back into a shell of allusion and entendres to make his ugly din. In a way he actually heightened the disdain, to a darker, more malevolent level in his forced retreat. His meanings took on a multiplicity, like a mordant troglodyte that regenerates two heads for every one lopped off.

How he chastised that poor girl and how we were all disposable in his narrow summation, squeezed me like pain. I could not abstract the idea. Take people and turn them into formula. It was so damn dry, you see. My head and the squeeze and all those feelings about the world when the fire-bombs came...

Berlinski was prolific, “Among the Herculean tasks required of me by the Administration, is that of teaching you critical thinking skills. What the bureaucratic luminaries mean by

‘critical thinking’ and how it might be imparted, even if they did know definitively, is circuitously beyond **their** spare critical analysis. It is not as if I can say, ‘What’s wrong with this picture?’ and when you fail to perceive the elementary flaw I can say, ‘Damn it man! Think critically!’ and majestically you spread your untried wings and take flight. No, no, no. More likely the case, I will have to relieve you of your blunted cogs, ground and withered, and **proviide** you with the answer. Now, you have not learned critical thinking, and all I have learned is what I already know: hope is an anachronism.

“Now, how do I think critically? Well I don’t know and no one does. To know that is to know how the brain works, to solve the perennial riddle, and if we did know thaaat, well then, we could relieve the simpletons of their confusion. From idiots to critical thinkers is as loaves to fishes, truly a miracle best seen before believed. We can not do that of course. It is difficult enough to encourage the bright students of Stanford University to think for themselves, and as for everyone else, stupid people will always be stupid, as God has made them, blessed each and every one.”

Berlinski pivoted 180 degrees, stepped to the very wide blackboard—a green surface in fact—and scribbled unreadable things. Midway through the scrawl, he stopped, placed his right hand on his hip, where his well tailored gray wool gabardine trousers were slung, and angled his stiffly chiseled head toward us, “For you more tenderhearted types, I would emphasize, just because one is doltish, that is no reason why one could not go on to a **normal**,” he paused to dwell for a moment on what it was to be normal, “socially useful life. You will be pleased to note that many of them attend University—the census in this class may be my testimonial. Now-” He turned back to his scribbling.

Besides holding tenure, he was among the most respected professors at Stanford. He supposedly broke ground in *Othello* within what was called the New Criticism. His good name seemed to be of a size inversely proportional to his tact. He never should have been a teacher, and in all likelihood he never wanted to be.

The lecture hall was stone quiet as he wrote notes on the board, as if everyone had forgone sneezing and coughing, as if colds and flues took the holiday, as if the requisite pulmination was scaled back to the most scanty of breaths. I was simmering and getting hotter. I felt sweaty under my ass and my seat back stuck to my shirt. My head was about to cave in at any moment. I could not even see straight. The class was blurry and wobbly and waved with the thumping of my dry brain pan. I finally noticed I was thirsty, and it shook me as a novel sensation that before I had

always taken as a given.

Berlinski began his lecture in defense of Iago. He argued that Othello in some deep psychic sense wanted, even needed Iago. Othello, according to Berlinski, was as responsible for the fruits of Iago's betrayal as Iago himself. Normally laconic, I was unable to contain myself in this case. I argued, to the delight and shock of my peers that Iago was a scumbag and nothing that Othello may have unwittingly done excused the black ensign.

"Yessss, Mr. Grundle, but you would concede that absent Othello's self-loathing, Iago has nothing to do," he was smug.

"Iago should have nothing to do in any case," a billowy headache pressed my brow.

"It doesn't have to be Iago, it could be anyone. The universe is a Manichaen clash between opposing forces. Evil is ever-present. Iago is but a single servant. The **difference** one might make is in how susceptible one is to the evil that will try to ensconce in the heart. Iago makes no place in Othello that Othello does not already make in himself."