

Nominal

Cases

Thomas Cotsonas



Black
Lawrence
Press

*For John Francis Loughney
&
for Karina*

CONTENTS

Company	3
Questionette	6
René Renée	13
Mapmaking	22
Avow	35
Borges' Pseudonymous <i>Yellow Book</i>	39
Quartet (1)	45
The City's Father	53
RM: A Slideshow	58
⌘; Or the Story of Isaac and His Mother	89
Quartet (2)	96
Walts Waltz	100
Colloquy	
I. Anecdote of the Bar.	112
II. Bend Over Backward.	113
III. Mimesis.	117
Little Private Systems	120
Field Notes	132
Walt's Waltz	143
Quartet (3)	148
Deposition	156
Quartet (4)	161
Zeno's Parachute	167

I, the solemn investigator of useless things...

—Fernando Pessoa (as Álvaro de Campos), poem #445

Everything happens by means of short cuts, hypothetically...

—Stéphane Mallarmé, Preface to “Un Coup de Dés”

... [I]t is difficult to discover any objection to a forged Vermeer, except that Vermeer did not paint it...

—Hugh Kenner, *The Counterfeiters*

My father has a red bandana tied around his face covering the nose and mouth. He extends his right hand in which there is a water pistol. “Stick ’em up!” he says.

—Donald Barthelme, “Views of My Father Weeping”

COMPANY

Harold Cornelius Eccles was watering the yard from the patio, standing thoughtlessly there, unconsciously moving his pale denuded arm back and forth so as to spread the hose's stream over patio plants and shrubs, the rose bushes and the vegetable garden, the marigolds and pansies, and back again to the yard itself just in front of him as he stood there, outside himself but not, forty-one, Vice Executive Accountant to the Executive Accountant of the company's coming merger with Ace Pharmaceutical, in a crisp white short-sleeve button-down shirt and khakis, looking hale but not willful, kind but not pathetic, a numbers man, a brown-paper-bag-for-lunch kind of man, a breakroom man who reads the *Wall Street Journal's* Sports section first, ten years married/seven years a father, standing there, his back to his wife Ellie and young son Ivan, both of whom sit cross-legged and patient on the floor playing Boggle in the cool of their air-conditioned stone colonial on Briar Hill Road in Gladwyne, Pennsylvania on Philadelphia's Main Line, a Neighborhood Watch Community, Volvos and Audis and Saabs, tax-deductible hybrids and winding roads in the watershed of the Schuylkill, a neighborhood of longtime neighbors and old money and private schools with names like Haverford and Bryn Mawr, around which exists much potential influx,

many potential shareholders, all of whom have sculpted yards and meticulous houses and pretty-but-not-stunning wives with hale but willful children who are often left to their own devices on days like this, hot August days that are good for watering the yard or letting the sprinkler water the yard or calling up the gardener maybe even though it's Sunday to water the yard, in which case it might not be a bad idea to have a drink, some Scotch or a microbrew, because that's what men do is it not, that's what these men do, these briefcase-carriers and R5-riders, inhabitants of this little valley upon which the August sun shines erumpent and hostile and cloudless, in this the Two Thousand and Ninth Year of Our Lord, Anno Domini, a year before the merger, a year before Harold's promotion to Executive Accountant, a year before his move upstairs to Corporate, a year before Ivan's inconceivable, out-of-nowhere, thumbing-the-nose-at-the-father-type mastery of Byzantine economic theory even he, Harold, a Vice Executive Accountant, had found difficult and convoluted and reflexive, before other things, before Ellie quit teaching and took up raising Ivan full-time, before nights turned into weekends and weekends into weeks without Harold seeing Ellie & Ivan at all, Ivan their Gifted Child, Ivan who needed to be scuttled around the country to various competitions and universities, many of which competitions Ivan won, before this, before Harold found himself masturbating regularly for the first time in years, before he started renting an apartment in Rittenhouse Square so he wouldn't need to go all the way back to the empty house in Gladwyne in the evening, before the long exhausting work nights that helped enable this purchase, before Molly, Molly from Corporate, Molly from Corporate whose wrists were small and insect-like but also somehow pretty,

before her, before others, before he felt himself cliché, before all this, before everything, before before:

Harold was watering the yard from the patio and felt, for the first time, as if he were himself and something else, himself and someone else perhaps, a thing for which he had no coherent language in any case, a frameless thing among other frameless things, a condition that led him to continue standing there watering the yard for the better part of the day, just beyond the length of Ellie & Ivan's Boggle game in fact, a game that took close to three-and-a-half hours to complete, a game that Ivan won and upon winning ran hurriedly upstairs to record in his journal, an activity Ellie seldom ever had to push him to do, an activity she had done as a child and still sometimes did as an adult and that she often urged Harold to take up but he didn't, couldn't, just as he couldn't do anything now, just as he couldn't move, just as he stood there ankle-deep in a pool of water gathering on the patio, just as later Ellie stood behind him calling his name, Harold, asking him repeatedly just what it was, exactly, he thought that he was doing—a question for which he said that he was certain he had no definitive answer.

QUESTIONETTE

On a scale of 1 to 10—1 being the worst, 10 being the best—how would you say you feel today? At what age, on average, would you say points of embarrassment about one's character become points of pride about one's character? What does it mean to you to be original? Do you take it for granted you're the only life form on earth that's able to think critically about itself? How often do you think about thinking? Did you know Einstein's brain was preserved, studied, and sliced without his family's knowledge or consent? Can babies be cruel? Do you think math and/or music is god's language? Have you ever been to an outdoor sporting event? What about an outdoor concert? Do you give money to charity? Have you ever seriously wondered what it's like to be homeless? How do you shave: with the grain or against it? Do you shave? If given the option of soup or salad right now, which would you prefer? How do you get to work: a) drive; b) bike; c) walk; or d) public transit? Do you work? Do you go by your first name, your middle name, or some other name? Are feelings something you can trust?

How often—if ever—do you write Letters to the Editor of any publication? Do you enjoy videogames? Would you say that you and your siblings—if you have siblings—are friends? When's the

last time you spoke to your parents—if your parents are still alive—because you wanted to, not because you felt you had to? Is there any difference between a film and a movie? How many suits do you own? Who really likes hollandaise sauce? Do you believe in astrology? Does it really even matter who killed JFK—shouldn't we be more interested in why he was killed? How often do you brush your teeth: once a day? twice? more? less? Do police interrogators think in questions more often than the rest of us? Do you believe in ghosts?

What about breakfast: is it actually the most important meal of the day? Do you say “dinner” or “supper”? Why do some people say they're standing “in line” while others say they're standing “on line,” and further, which is correct? Isn't Freud just kind of full of shit, don't you think? How many hours of television would you say you watch in an average week? Is it okay there's such a thing as agribusiness? Why do we call all tissues “Kleenex” and all cotton swabs “Q-Tips”? Are you one of those people who say they don't see race? Is it really necessary to have so many highways? What percentage of people would you say leave the bathroom without washing their hands? Has god ever spoken to you? If so, what did she/he/it say, and in what language?

If you own a car, how often do you use the parking brake? What's the measure of a good day? Have you ever wondered what it might mean to actually lose time? If someone tells you to “get your head straight,” what exactly do you think they mean? If you knew Mark Zuckerberg somehow, do you think you'd call him an asshole to his face? Have you ever wondered how it feels to be waterboarded? Would you leave the country if they reinstated the draft? How many

of us, when we get right down to it, would take our own lives if we had concrete knowledge of some kind of afterlife in which suicide wasn't punishable? Do you talk on the phone and/or text when you drive? At what point does perception become memory? Is a dog's memory purely sensory? Have you ever been assaulted? Do you think you've maybe done something wrong somehow when, after wiping your ass, there's nothing on the toilet paper, or do you think it was just a perfect dump? Are multivitamins helpful?

Isn't it really just kind of silly that movie stars and athletes make so much money? How is it even possible we haven't blown each other up at this point? Are you an optimist? Do you believe in global warming? How many languages do you speak? Did you know Victor Hugo wrote in the nude and had his butler hide his clothes so he'd be forced to stay inside and do his work for the day? What's the point of procrastination? Can you quantify boredom? What if we had no memory at all—how would language work? What kind of person becomes a policeman? If we know we can never know the answers to certain questions, why do we continue to ask those questions? Is it possible to measure confidence? Why does pain exist? And disease: what's its point? Is it possible to cry yourself to death? What about laughter: can we laugh ourselves to death or would we just die of something like dehydration or malnutrition first? In either of those cases, would laughter be listed as an accomplice? Did Joyce really think people were going to read *Finnegans Wake*? Why haven't more people jumped into the Grand Canyon in an attempt to kill themselves? Can you say, in 100 words or fewer, what the phrase "life-changing experience" means to you? Are you an organ donor?

Isn't it obvious at this point that the person Jesus Christ probably wouldn't have been white? What does it mean when people say we should leave the market alone because it will eventually correct itself? How do you explain the sensation known as déjà vu? Are there degrees of truth or are things just simply true or simply false? If someone tells you you're a cliché and that bothers you, how do you go about trying to fix it? If you're standing on a street corner waiting to cross and a stranger walks up and punches you in the face, do you punch them back? What's the point of art? If there are, say, two paintings in a room, and one of them is a real painting by a famous artist and the other is the same painting by an amateur, and then several well-respected critics come in and agree that one of them is the real painting and the other is a fake, does it matter if they're wrong? Isn't it clear at this point that anybody seeking public office is unfit for it? If you steal something from a store at the age of, say, eight but then pay for it several years later at the age of, say, thirty-two, is it still considered stealing? Why can't Texas be its own country? What about Québec? If people always get better after taking a placebo, can that thing still accurately be called a placebo? Have you ever prayed—genuinely? When we say "I wish I was someone else" does it occur to us we're speaking nonsense? Do you think linearly or associatively? What's the difference? Do the galaxies rotate? If so, in what direction? Does "direction" even make any sense in this context? Which one: right brain or left brain? Is it impolite to clip your nails in public?

If someone says, "Who are you?" what's the first thing you think of to say in response? Do you say your name? Do you tell them what kind of work you do? Do you tell them where you're from or where

you live? How do you explain yourself? What if you were not you? What if, say, you were still you, but then somehow, one day, when you woke up you were not you, you were someone else? Which is to say: what if you were you, but also some kind of entity called “not-you”? What if, for example, you had always felt you were a man, but then one day—or over time, it doesn’t really matter—one day you realized you were not a man at all you were a woman instead? Or no, what if, for example, you’d been living your life as a priest—or a pastor, or a bishop, or a rabbi, or a nun, any of these are fine, really . . . a person of god, how about that?—what if, for example, you’d been living your life as a person of god, but then one day you realized you were actually not a person of god at all, you were an atheist instead? What would you do? Would you change your life and become an atheist or would you hold onto your faith and continue to be a person of god? Or no, how about this: what if you’d been living for, say, thirty-three years as a US citizen, but then one day you received a call from a French private investigator who explained to you in French-inflected English that when you were born the hospital staff mislabeled you and got you mixed-up with another baby, and that this mix-up happened to be an international one because the baby you were confused with was actually the son of a French couple who’d been living in the US for several years at the time of his—and your—birth, so that now, talking on the phone with the French private investigator, you realize you grew up with the wrong parents in the wrong house in the wrong city in the wrong country, and that you are not an American at all, really, you’re a Frenchman, and your co-mixup-ee, he of course also grew up in the wrong life, which means he’s actually not a Frenchman at all, really, he’s an American—what about that, for example? And what if it made

sense to you somehow? What if, upon finding out about your true Frenchness, you started to feel more French? What would you do? Would you embrace it or reject it? Would you call your co-mixup-ee on the phone or send him an email or write him a letter asking him if maybe you could talk to him sometime? Would you try to meet up with your real parents? What if, at first, your feeling more French only made sense in the form of, say, taste in food, or taste in music or art, some of which tastes were already pretty French-seeming anyway, but that later, after having been aware of your true Frenchness for a while, you started to realize it went deeper than all that? Like, for example, what if all of a sudden—and this is all still just hypothetical of course, but still—what if, all of a sudden, when you spoke, your English sounded French-inflected like the French private investigator's? And then what if it got worse? What if you started dreaming in French somehow, and in the dreams the French made sense to you? What about that? And then what if, through some kind of unexplainable DNA-level thing, your English actually started to deteriorate at a rate equal to and in direct inverse relation with your rate of acquisition of French, so that eventually you couldn't speak English at all anymore you could only speak French? What would you do then? Would you move to France and be French, or would you stay in the US and be a Frenchman abroad? And what if you had a family? How would you explain all this to them? Wouldn't they think you were faking it for some strange and unacceptable reason, probably? Would you hire a translator for this explanation session? If you decided to stay, would you keep this translator on board in order to try to make it work? Or would you take English classes to try to become more American again? Perhaps you'd just abandon your family and use

this as an opportunity to start over, as a kind of free pass to try and find that thing you'd always felt had been missing from your life, as a way to do whatever it is you've always wanted to do, whatever that thing may be, perhaps? If you did do this, how would you think about your abandonment of your family? Would you consider it somehow fundamentally different from the abandonment of the more conventional deadbeatdad-type abandonment? If you could consider your abandonment somehow fundamentally different from the more conventional deadbeatdad-type abandonment, would you try, then, to be a kind of better person as a Frenchman than you had been as an American? Of what would this consist? If you succeeded in becoming a better person, if you were able to quantify that somehow, if you were able to come up with some criteria that made sense to you as a reasonable criteria for what it means to be a better person, would you then be pleased and satisfied, or would it still feel as if something was missing? What if your answer to this question was a matter of life and death? Do you think you'd be able to come up with a meaningful answer on the spot? Would you be brief or prolix? Would you try to say exactly what you meant to say, or would you just try to get your point across? What, for example, do you think someone like, say, the person Jesus Christ would do? What about Kant; or, say, Dostoevsky? Or even better: what would a Frenchman do? An American? Is there any difference? In answering this matter-of-life-and-death question would you express remorse? Or, differently put, would you be sorry? Are you sorry? Why or why not? To what end? If you are sorry, how does it feel? Does it help? Do you "trust" it, this feeling sorry? Do you "trust" it? Well, do you?

Answer in as many words as necessary.