

Dee knows Henry has killed himself. 'Henry.' Out of nowhere, for no reason, she mouths his name and knows he has killed himself. The knowledge a sensation that rises — a new language, a barely whispered utterance. Then more, bursts of syllables, and these sounds form limbs, eyes, hunger. Dee's countenance, her stiff social exterior, so practiced and precise, remains undisturbed. It is 4:24 p.m. and she knows he is dead.

Henry. He is no more.

The knowledge, a shift in chemicals.

In that instant, the feeling fans up from her fingertips as if a cold glass of wine has just been handed to her. He is dead. The knowledge slides up her shoulder blades and settles around her neck. Henry is dead. She, outside herself, saying the words, 'He

is dead.' This impossible knowledge coming to her without doubt. 'Dead.'

The word resounds. She remembers his face as he stands at her door that first night fifteen years ago. He is holding fruit, of all things: a pear, two peaches, a kiwi and a mango. They squirm in his hands like puppies and begin to tumble down the steps. His eyes are on his hands, trying to control them. His hair is unkempt and he is wearing the same clothes he wore the day before, cords and a baggy grey sweater. He seems ancient standing there, a stranded poet, decrepit and pure. Exuberant Athens, brooding Milan, weary London – any setting would have held him. He is a product of Western history standing there on a rainy night in suburban Toronto. He is a lyrical figure of speech, breathless and confident.

It is not raining but it should be. Standing on the steps outside her door, he knows she is watching his face and will not help him with the fruit. Even though she stands barring the door with her arms crossed, he knows she will let him in and tell him what mango trees look like. His eyes flash open as he tastes one as if for the first time. Then, he tells her how desperately he wants to be a great man, how he wants people to remember his name, to read his writing. She is stunned by his blunt honesty but does not believe him. Instead she humours him, shushes him. Makes love to him. This last she does reluctantly, knowing it is a trap, knowing that men like him build monuments around their lovemaking, as if it is something significant. He does not know how to make love very well, she thinks afterwards; he has a lot to learn about subtlety. She does not tell him this but instead looks across the bed with pity, wondering if she should try to save him. He is dozing off.

But this memory now teeters on the edge of absurdity. He is dead. That first night, even though in the past, sits precariously present on the edge of the idea of his death. That chasm, billowing into her imagination, swirls to fill all her concentration. And it is concentration. Part of her consciousness has followed him. She is curious more than anything else. Dee's mind addresses knowledge as if it were an intruder, as if she has caught language in her backyard late at night, as if it stands between her and peace. The loss of Henry seems almost trivial in the face of the question.

Yes, the question. She stops and looks directly into a light-bulb in the lamp beside her. She is not sure where she is for the moment. Her arm droops behind the chair and she lets her wine-glass drop delicately onto the carpet. She does not even bother to imagine the red fanning out into the weave of the white berber.

The Goldheft Art Gallery reception is winding down, dwindling into cleanup. The cheese platters are nearly gone; glasses and smudged napkins cover the tables. The room smells like old wine on old lips.

While all this is swirling in her mind she has managed to shut out the gallery crowd. It does not take much effort. She has suspended a conversation with a Winnipeg editor who is probably going to ask her out for a drink. White salt stains spatter the bottoms of his pant legs. He published one of her short stories, a fairy tale that begins with a dream and ends in what then seemed like chaos. That was about three years ago and he has tried, in a cloying, pawing way, to keep in touch ever since. Henry has not come up in the conversation.

She leaves the party graciously. No one notices her change in mood as she pulls on her long coat and waves goodbye from

the foyer. They mistake her urgency for an elegant exit and blame it on the demands of a literary star. They imagine the glamorous rendezvous she is hurrying off to.

But there may not even have been a change in mood. Dee puzzles over her reaction as she walks down the wet sidewalk to her sedan. If there was a change, it is from an absence, like from not eating enough. There is no shock. It is not surprising. It seems fitting.

As she drives, Toronto is reduced to light and dark shades, angles and space. She imagines what it is like to die as she descends under the Gardiner. Her thoughts straddle his image and the unanswered question of his absence. (There he is, smiling and bitching about something in the paper. His bathrobe is open and she can see his ribs jutting out of his lanky torso. His teeth are crooked, endearing.) How to be so lost in anything, so immortal, so caged.

As she re-emerges beneath the belligerent dark clouds, she begins frantically shrugging out of her coat. Like grappling with an attacker, she twists and lunges forward and to the side. The car swerves towards the curb. Finally, she tugs the coat free and shoves it out the window. It lands in the street like a body tumbling to a stop.

The streets are wet and empty and the dim outline of moon is jeering.

She vows to never speak of Henry again. Ever.

The Dying Poem:

A Film in Three Parts

Directed by Jay Post
Screenplay by Jay Post

I

Henry

DARK RED FADE-IN, as if vibrantly coloured shutters have opened into a brightly lit space, to a video camera and tripod standing against a sheet-draped background. A DRY, RATTLING HUM suggests the camera is running. Perhaps the camera is facing a mirror; perhaps a second camera is doing the filming.

A VOICE-OVER by a male NARRATOR begins.

NARRATOR

I should introduce myself. My name is Jay Post, the biographer, the documentary filmmaker, the exerciser of Henry Black's last wish. Or should I say exorciser – Henry

would love that. I am his killer, in a manner of speaking. This may be my confession. I have turned myself in. Book me.

Chuckle, then pause.

I am recording this after nearly having completed my work on Henry Black, his life and his writing – that will probably be on the cover of the film case: ‘his life and his writing.’

I don’t know what that means.

SOUND OF THROAT BEING CLEARED, as if disconcerted.

I want, as a closing gesture, to comment on life and writing. Black ended his life and ended his writing at the same time, one would think. But, here, near the ‘end’ of making my film, I begin to wonder about that word. I am thinking now of placing this at the beginning of the film, so it is both an ending and a beginning. We’ll see.

I have been thinking a lot about haunting: how ideas, unfounded yet present, linger just out of reach; how people haunt in their absence by being achingly present; how time is haunted continually, cluttered up with ghosts and untimely appearances. We are haunted by things beyond us that may be

just coming into view. My figchen, coming back after all this is over.

Pause.

I wanted to capture haunting in this film. I have found that this is impossible. Ghosts, by definition, cannot be captured. So, I've failed. Thankfully. I think Henry knew I would; he imagined this just as I imagine him. The bastard.

It is clear, at this point, that the NARRATOR is reading from a script.

Here I am, after talking through and prodding into and poring over and imagining and fingering and reconstructing and abhorring Henry Black's life, daring to speak of him as . . .

Pause.

Here I am reading him. And you, dear viewer, are reading me. I am imagining you in black clothing, in an aspect of mourning as you read me, as you watch this. Ghosts haunting ghosts haunting ghosts in turn.

We slide through each other like vibrations, even while the world is ending.

He is dead. He is no more.

FADE-OUT TO DARK RED. VOICE-OVER CONTINUES.

I speak of him. I contemplate death, a tremulous voice, a fleeting, shrouded image in the distance, a faint sound, shuddering, just out of hearing . . .

TO BLACK.



I don't think for a moment that I'm not going to fail at this.

The video footage is paused, his face frozen on the screen, eyes lazy, mouth open, one hand reaching in the direction of the camera, a gesture for emphasis. He is saying something passionate, but frozen on the screen it becomes a plea, a beckoning. The screen is stilled but flickering back and forth between two images a few fractions of a second apart, Henry's left hand moving a few inches and then back again in quick successive movements. His eyes are also flickering shut, open, shut, open. He wears a tired, tender expression that doesn't fit into the tenor of the interview waiting around this frozen portrait. A band of static snow drifts across the middle of the screen.

Looking at this image of the recently dead is disconcerting. I look closer, looking for the story to exculpate his death.

The photographs are scattered on my teetering coffee table, along with pages and pages of notes: biographical, from reviews and newspaper articles, scattered passages from his poetry. The place is covered with traces of him, layered with his

face, his words, a shroud over my previous existence. I am staying up too late, to that point when ideas start swirling in beautiful but useless patterns. I want to turn Henry's life into a work of art. Maybe my life as well.

I suppose I want Henry to tell me what to do.

You see, this is a project of reanimation, of resurrection. Grave robbery. Placed in the amniotic light of film, the fantasized spark of life, Henry might groan to life. The clips and quotes stitched with narration form a new integrity so that he can stagger into my room and forgive my sins. My elusive companion, in theory, will no doubt make demands I cannot fulfill. I labour on, anyway. A kind of artistic suicide by accretion.

A documentary film profiling him will fail, I know. It will fail because the medium, the thin band of plastic, the light and dark frames, the soundtrack cannot contain what I desire. And even further, it will fail because what I desire is questionable, flawed from the start. Original sin in an agenda, an aesthetic preconception, an already skewed retina, an already tainted negative. I want to do too much – I know if I just stick to the formula, to the prescribed format of a biographical documentary, everything will be just fine. But I want to do too much. I know this, yet ...

My living room is the only place I can work with the video and the printed stuff spread out enough to see all the parts at once. Even though the film was to be a straightforward documentary, I find myself sitting in my living room waiting for direction. Lying perfectly still on the hardwood floor, my body surging and undulating and gurgling, I reach out, listening, wanting to hear ... what? his name? my name? the sound of

thunderous applause? a confirmation? Yes, a confirmation is what I am waiting for. My body fills the room with impatient living. Supine, piteous, I wait. Read me a poem, Henry.

I am smoking too much, nicotine twisting my body like twine.

I can't let him become a puzzle.

I have arranged his books around me in concentric circles.

His doubly double face stares back at me from the screen.

Henry Black was a professor and poet, a romantic figure who captured imaginations but little attention. A 'romantic figure'? He would shudder at such prattle but it was part of what made him attractive and repulsive at the same time. He was famous for being rude and unruly, for keeping a bottle of scotch in his desk drawer, for trying to seduce his students. Writers imitated him and despised him at the same time. Fame eluded him but he lived it anyway. Fame eluded him but he sought nothing of the kind. He battled more elusive enemies than adoration or immortality.

While researching, I couldn't help but feel that I wasn't studying just the life of a man but the profile of an entire generation of artistic men. Or I was trying to make the story too big – it is a weakness of mine. Henry could easily stand for an entire grand tradition and his death for the end of that era. I was young enough to be his son.

I found myself looking at pictures of him, comparing the way he dressed to my own clothes. It irked me that his aesthetic sensibilities attracted me. I should be more contemporary. At the same time, I wondered at my profound disavowal of him. I found myself thinking of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, or Janus. How much of Henry was also part of me? An artist and a man – the

whole history of men flourishing in the grand auspices of artistic fervour flows around both Henry and I. Henry and I standing on the same stolen ground.

I pounded my head like I was in school again; I argued with myself over how much I had learned beyond Henry. But then I remembered a poem called 'King Shit.' I pulled it out of the stacks.

*corridors to walk or hide
shifting beneath my neanderthal
gait my substantial weight
of deeds and letters – master
of letters they call me
out, mantled
erupting*

a foray into the gaseous

A glimmer suggesting we were made of the same stuff.

I found myself panicking a little. I could see my project dying a painful death, another film disaster looming. You see, dear patron, I had never successfully finished a film. I've started grand ventures filled with artistic frenzy and independent quirkiness. But, always, inevitably, I went too far, ran out of money, alienated the actors, the crew. Once I was left at a remote shoot, notes and scripts floating in the breeze, with the angry crew in vehicles disappearing around a bend in the gravel road leading (after half an hour of potholes and swearing over spilt coffee) to a small town consisting of a post office and a bulk gas station.