

Four texts for Charles Guilbert and Serge Murphy, written  
for the anthology NOTRE-DAMES-DES-AUTRES  
By NELSON HENRICKS

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#### TEARS (PLEURS)

"It's strange what makes a man cry," I thought, looking at you in the darkened cinema, the wet tracks of your tears illuminated by the flickering screen. I was sitting beside you. I could hear your breathing but otherwise, you did not sob; you did not make a sound. Your steady respiration accentuated the weight and mass of your body. The hairs on your forearm brushed lightly against mine. Your subtle warmth seeped across the armrest. Later, when I looked again, I saw the drying silver trails on your cheeks, one descending under each eye. They seemed to glow on your dark skin.

On screen, a father and son. A memory of his father can make a man cry. A memory that reminds him of failure, and of himself. It seemed strange to me that this could make you cry. Remembering my father -- the ways I see myself in him and our shared failure -- doesn't move me to tears, though I know it should.

How strange then that, later that same day, I walked into a theatre, and found myself so overwhelmed by the beauty of what I saw that I had to restrain myself. The usher took my ticket and guided me to my seat. I didn't want to make a fool of myself in front of him. Stumbling, I retained my composure until I found my place. I sat there and savoured this feeling, that warm tickling under the eyes, letting it slowly ebb until it vanished.

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#### DEATH (MORT)

My neighbour is dying of cancer. I can hear him coughing through the wall. Lung cancer. The lights are on in his apartment. His wife is doing laundry. The stars twinkle in the sky above. I don't find their presence mocking or cruel. Rather, their eternal, feeble flickering is comforting. Something permanent in a world where nothing lasts.

When I remember the dead, I think about all the things they're missing. Events keep happening. Narratives

evolve. New ones begin. This phenomenon seems to be the true essence of life: endless drift, a slow accumulation of details that add up to these buildings, these yards, this neighborhood.

When you are really living, you notice little things. Trees and lawns become *this leaf, this blade of grass*. The air feels clean and cool in your lungs. Everything smells the way it does after the rain. It's enough to make you want to fall on your knees and stick your fingers into that raw, muddy earth. Push your face into the grass and roll on your back. You'd stay like that forever, taking pleasure in all the things you'll miss once you are dead. But that would be crazy. You can't just roll around on someone's lawn all day. People would talk. So instead, you hasten your step and move on to the metro station. You have things to do, places to go.

When I am dead, I won't wonder how all these stories end. I won't care what people will be wearing in fifty years, what music they are listening to, or who will rule the world. Instead, it's the changing of the seasons that I will miss: the spinning of the stars and the fluttering of the leaves as they grow, wither and die, and grow back again.

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VOICE (VOIX)

My bicycle rolls down the hill. The wind is roaring in my head. The gears are clicking rapidly. The tires crackle against the gravel. I love these sounds. My ears pick out everything as I speed past. A bird's cry. The church bells ringing. A faraway siren. A truck beeping as it rolls backwards.

At home, the refrigerator sings. The microwave oven hums pleasantly. Through the windows, I hear the sounds of the neighbourhood. Late-twentieth century sounds. Beer bottles rattle in a cardboard box. A garbage truck rumbles by. Dogs on a nearby balcony, barking.

Children are playing in the alleyway. Their voices echo off the red brick walls, and spread out across the city. Dusk falls like yellow pollen flecks on a rose petal. The clouds look half-asleep, stretched out red, pink and grey against the dusty blue sky.

I hear the sound of your keys as you lock up your bike and enter the house. The sound of your footsteps as you come up the stairs. The sound of your voice, that sound I adore most of all, which slowly says my favourite words. I love these words not for what they mean, but for how they sound. Chocolate. Number. Spoon. Cellar door. Oak. Elm. Maple.

What's your favourite word? Prestidigitator.

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#### MUSIC (MUSIQUE)

It's the first time you've heard this song. It sounds really good. It's impossible that any song could ever sound as good as this one. You play it over and over again, studying it, marvelling at its brilliance. It's not just that the chords change well, or that the melody is catchy, but the lyrics seem to sum up some essential and irreducible truth about your life. You play that song the whole day long. The pleasure of hearing it never wanes.

A performance is captured on tape, in a recording studio, or by a travelling ethnographer. The recording becomes legendary. You get ready to listen to it. The disc feels heavy in your hands: an object of enormous density, loaded with latent potential. This performance, replayed for decades, convinces us of the singer's power.

But the singer knows what we don't know. About the best performance. About that one unrepeatable occasion when everything was perfect: the pitch, the phrasing, the breathing, the pure raw conduit of expression. It was a day or two before the recording, during rehearsal, before the tape was rolling, before that ethnographer came to town, in the kitchen, while washing the dishes, when no one else was around.