

Feast

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A Thesis

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Of
English

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Abstract

Feast

Kasper Hartman

Feast is a story about consumption in the new world – primarily from the perspective of a second-generation Canadian for whom the new world means the exciting, and sometimes debaucherous, world of early adulthood, but also from the perspective of his father for whom it means the new country.

This project is the culmination of three years of work. *Feast* began as a novel, turned into a series of short-stories, a long poem, a book of short-poems, a play, and finally into a combination of these things. The work is meant to be both formally and tonally vibrant. Though the different voices are mediated and arranged by a single narrator, there is no clearly discernible authorial presence and, as a result, no easy judgment of the characters and events in the story. Jake's sensual lifestyle is both overindulgent and a source of exuberance and poetic energy; Stanislav's ascetic choices are both desperate and the source of genuine self-recovery. In their various affirmations and denials, the characters in *Feast* all seek intimacy and happiness while acting within (or against) a culture built on the promise of consumable bliss. This cultural promise is, like everything else in the work, an object of critique, humour, and celebration.

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Dedication

For my parents.

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Cast of Principal Characters

JAKOB (Jake) KIESLOWSKI is a poet and bicycle thief. His favourite foods include chicken-burgers and honey-garlic chips.

STANISLAV (Stan) KIESLOWSKI, Jake's father, works on an assembly line in a car plant. He feels guilty when drinking pomegranate juice because pomegranates are exotic and expensive.

DANUTA (Danusza) DROBNIAK, Jake's mother, smokes to subdue her appetite.

AGNIESZKA BORUC, their neighbour, orders spicy Indian curry almost every night.

PENNY FLAME, Jake's internet dream-girl, loves strawberries dipped in daiquiris.

MIKE and *LUKE (The Twins)* will eat almost anything.

The *NARRATOR (Director)* makes an excellent tofu stir-fry, but is not vegetarian.

Part I: Champions of Recess

“I can sit without farting or
accidents, without punching the person in front.

I don’t grab the girls or yank it out.

Don’t laugh out loud, although I want to,

like a bomb,

like a lion swallowing the room.”

– from “In Class,” by John Steffler.

Rats

While Jakob's parents were busy scrubbing the kitchen of their new apartment, Jakob snuck away. He rushed from the building and past the rented van. If they were going to live here, it was important that he know the place. The surrounding land was full of bunkers and hideaways. Perfect for war games, he thought. He clawed his way up the tallest mound of gravel; from its peak he searched for signs of enemy troops.

Jakob followed markings in the ground – shoes and paw prints – over an embankment toward a stream. There's got to be boys around, he thought, gangs of them hiding somewhere, fishing in some ditch.

The water in the stream was clean and deep. It came to his knees. He waded across with short, deliberate steps. Fishing tomorrow, he decided. The water's plenty deep. The rods were sticking out somewhere from a box, and Jakob knew how to hook a worm. He'd gone fishing many times in the days when his father still ate meat and fish.

There were no completed houses here, no outlines of pavement or a road. A concrete mixer rested beside a slanted shed. It didn't look like a workman's shed – more like a tree-house that had fallen from its tree. Orange flags marked the limits of various lots; Jakob kicked a few out of their place.

In the distance, the apartment building pushed against the sky. It was the only enclosed structure on the site, with the exception of the wooden shed. Everything else looked blown open. He sat against the blistered planks; on the other side of the shed, something scampered, scratched, squeaked. Tiny claws dug into the soil. He peeked through a crack in the door.

“Git your own rats!”

Two shirtless boys – his own age, more or less – came poking toward him from beyond a bunker. They were identical, except one was wearing a baseball cap.

“I'm Mike, this is Luke. Who the hell are you?”

“Git your own rats,” said Luke, the one with the cap.

Jakob stepped out of the way. One brother pulled the door open; the other sprinkled Smarties inside.

“They only like the red ones,” Mike explained.

As his eyes adjusted, Jakob realized the rats weren’t in front of him, but circling in a pit below. A hole had been dug, two or three feet deep, and the shed hastily built around it.

When it rains

On a wet September day,
the boys crowd their desks
and argue
about which game to play.

The twins say, "Bloody knuckles!"
but Jakob's got a new trick
where he calls out
any card you pick.

On a clear day,
those thin, wiry twins
run like cheetahs and win
no matter what the game.

But when it rains
they slouch in their seats
as little Jakob cheats
and cheats.

Kicking up dust

Out in the field
by the tall fence
where the dark dog roams,
limbs collide
and the gathering swarm tightens,
binds –

They snap back
and the circle widens;
inhaling exhaling
huddled children heaving
jagged cries
of elbow swinging,
leg sweeping, stomping
the swollen opponent down.

A teacher sprints into the field
as the games scatter across the asphalt.
“Enough!”

The bell rings;
lines of children form.

The schoolyard is quiet now,

empty

but for Jakob

and the twins who linger

out in the field by the tall fence

plotting ways to break the dark dog

from its leash.

Jakob's gang

We're the boys who spit, swear
and sling rocks
at Father Crowley's car.

We shoot marbles
for keeps in the dirt.

Feast

The sun was gone; slivers of pink clouds trailed across the sky. Jakob sat on a slab of concrete with his Wendy's grilled chicken burger. He was late getting home, but he didn't care; the apartments loomed in sight. He forced himself to eat slowly, to savour the meat and extra tomatoes. The chicken breast was tender and the lettuce crisp. He couldn't explain it, but the burger tasted even better outside in the dark.

His stomach was full, but he kept munching on the fries, and sucking on his salty fingers. When the last of the fries was gone he still wanted more. Jakob wished he could eat like this every day.

He sealed the empty bag and popped it like a balloon. The noise burst across the suburb; in the distance a dog began yapping, but it soon ceded in response to another, fiercer dog's cry.

The clamour brought Agnieszka to the curtains. She stood in her nightgown and peeked out the window. A few seconds later she slid the balcony door open and lit a cigarette, smoking it in quick puffs while glancing back into the bedroom. Jakob's father was sleeping, and his mother was away.

Inside the apartment was dark, but he could see Agnieszka's snowy flesh in the light of a street-lamp. She began to slowly rotate her neck and shoulders, absently poking her breasts out toward him. She bent down to scratch her leg and, oh God, how the silk had come to pleat just above her thigh!

Kiss 'n' chase

The twins are too quick
to be caught
and kissed;

Jakob is one of those
who slows strategically;
he only pretends

to squirm
in Antonella's arms.

7-4 in the foot-hockey game

They slide in their snow pants

and steel-toe boots;

they'll shatter shins

to win. The worst is:

you can't beat two twins

together; you can't split them

either. I play goalie

on the losing team –

shit, here they come

charging as one;

and me,

flapping my winter coat

like a bullfighter!

Traveller

We moved into a house
near a hostel –
sometimes when it was full
travellers camped on our lawn.

One night it was raining,
and the tent of a girl
going to Winnipeg
was ripped and leaking.

My parents invited her in;
they drank borscht
and talked about the sun.

She finally undressed
while I hid in the kitchen;
that night I dreamt

of her sneaking across the floor
to open the door for her boyfriend
and her brothers.

Part II: Late Nights at the Kiwi Mouldy

“Gentlemen of the moon:

I don’t even have

my real shoes on ...”

– from “This is Thursday. Your Exam was Tuesday,” by Denis Johnson

Pre-drinking

He promised the bartender they wouldn't be staying long. After all, the sign says 1 a.m. on weekdays. But it's his birthday, and Jake continues laughing it up with his new girl, both of them just sipping their beers. The bartender should've known – a young man's word means nothing at night.

The man behind the bar
has grown sick
of you and me
and my sliding tips,

so he kills the music,
clears his throat,
and floods this dive
in fetid water.

But gramps, we're not here
for the atmosphere –
only to finish
these flat pitchers

I paid for!

Kiwi Mouldy

I know another bar
built into the ruins
of a burnt casino;

it's dark green and cavernous –
scooped from a forest
of card tables.

The Mouldy's famous for its slots
and squished kiwi shots.

If you're restless we can dance –
there's an alcove for that
in the back.

If you're hungry we can eat –
baskets of salty chips
line the wooden bar.

3:19 a.m.

We close the bar
and head home
over the empty bridge;

we touch
on topics of birthdays
and crippled pets.

Your twenties'll be great, Jake.

*You'll finally feel
in control of your life!*

A fall wind presses
the black dress
against her tits.

*You can tell he dreams
of chasing rabbits
when the stump wiggles.*

If not a dog

If that's not a dog

in the alley by the window,

it could be a cat

scrounging for scraps,

or a raccoon

clawing at a sack of chicken bones.

It could be a skunk –

though skunks don't groan –

or maybe my father

fishing for his comb.

Whatever it is,

it's not the wind.

Tell me about your father, Jake.

He's a good man.

What makes him 'good'?

The things he won't allow himself.

For example?

Never drinks;

never smokes;

never eats meat;

never takes the final seat;

never gambles on cards or dice;

would never trample a sheet of snow.

Has he always been this way?

Damned if I know.

...

My apartment resembles a cheap tool shed, but I do not spend much time there. After work I walk into the city for cigarettes. I know many of the locals by name – I have given them good prices on Levis'. But I will not be sneaking things across again, I promise. I was never much of a gambler. In a game I can bluff once and get away with it, but any more than that and I get into trouble.

I like living in a foreign place. I like drinking and playing cards with men who have left home. Some are here only for the money, but I sense that most would have come for less.

There are musicians here. All of them brought their own instruments from Poland, and they hold concerts on the weekends. There is even a troupe of actors who put on a play once a month. Last week it was Maeterlinck, I think.

Life here is full of good spirit, no matter how heavy the work. We eat well and we drink together, and every night I walk Danusza back to her apartment. There are thirteen other bases just like ours, all pushing into Siberia and the far-east reserves. Most likely, each one will be stripped and abandoned after the pipes are down. I often wonder what will happen when we finish. I know I will not be coming home. Danusza says I should follow her to Warsaw. I would like to go much further than that.

...

Excerpt of a letter from Stanislaw Kieslowski to his father,

Nowopolock, April, 1979.

Dream of Amsterdam

The school-girls ride bicycles

in red skirts,

and leave them unlocked

by the candy shop,

while the school-boys

pick tulips

to press between the pages

of Dutch porn.

A week in the life of Jake Kieslowski (circa May, 2003):

Monday: Works on his poems while eating fries at the corner McDonald's.

Tuesday: Goes bicycle hunting with a pair of shears in his backpack.

Wednesday: Drinks himself into confidence and reads poems at an open mic.

Thursday: Plays poker and reads poetry in a friend's basement.

Friday: Anything can happen on a Friday...

Saturday: At the Kiwi Mouldy the girls drink for free!

Sunday: Jake rests.

Amber

We've been playing eye-footsy,

and God she's gorgeous!

I'm tempted to follow her

to the bathroom,

and compliment

her Cherry Chapstick.

As I get up to go,

my friend leans across the table,

“See the way she's been looking at me?!”

I ask if he means

the mischievous gleam

of a cat

with two fish in her mouth.

“You son of a bitch!”

Poems to be read at Thursday's poker game:

"Mountain Wine," by Peter Van Toorn

"Crazy About Her Shrimp," by Charles Simic

"This is Thursday. Your exam was Tuesday," by Denis Johnson

"Don't Sleep, Take Notes," by Piotr Sommer

And maybe also...

“Night Club,” by Louis MacNeice

“The Card-Players,” by Philip Larkin

“how to be a great writer,” by Charles Bukowski

“Blood,” by Raymond Carver

“Bargain,” by Irving Layton

“The Fool,” by Hugh MacDiarmid

“Root Cellar,” by Theodore Roethke

“Driving,” by John Newlove

“The Party,” by Adrei Voznesensky

“The King,” by Mark Strand

A girl named Stef.

I know the parts of her

I'll criticize

in the morning:

her stubby legs,

veiny thighs,

and eyes that might have been

set less far apart.

For now she is here

and pissing

naked with the door open.

...

We were laying a section of pipe twenty kilometres from base. It was cold and icy and the pipe was frozen to the ground. The engine wheezed and whined. After a series of spasms the crane finally tore the pipe away, along with a great chunk of ice still stuck to the bottom. The added weight of the ice had made the pipe too heavy. The head swung past the trench and the chain stretched like an elastic band. It snapped and the pipe crashed toward us. The dullness of the sound was unexpected. A steel pipe crashing onto ice should not have made that kind of thud. We searched one another's faces and realized it was Malek who was missing. He played cards with us often: a bear of a man who threw javelin and counted on his fingers. Only seconds earlier I had caught the end of a joke he was telling:

“... in communism, man exploits man, but in capitalism it is the opposite!” Muffled laughter had burst through his thin, checkered scarf.

I attached a new chain while the others chiselled and cut away the ice. No one hurried to see what was underneath. The pipe was hoisted into the air and we all watched suspiciously as it dangled above us. Malek looked like a pumpkin dropped on the sidewalk. We shovelled the pieces of him into the trench and buried him beneath the pipe and the snow.

Before leaving, I marked the place with a cross made of sticks.

...

Excerpt of a letter from Stanislav to his father,

Nowopolock, January, 1980.

Bicycle

Somewhere in a city in Ontario, a little girl cries over her missing bicycle, while her father wishes he had bought a better lock. On the other side of that same city, the son of an immigrant haggles for a fair price.

I bring the man
at the pizza counter
a blue bicycle
with a basket.

I hold it up
with one hand
and crank the pedal,
grip the brake,

ring-ring
ring the little bell.

We agree on thirty-
five dollars
and any slice
and soda
I want.

...

Today, on my twenty-third birthday, I am resolved to leave Poland even despite Danuszka's many doubts. Nothing is certain. There are rumours that they deny travel papers to pregnant women. Each day she is growing bigger, and tomorrow she must interview for her tourist visa. We will wake early and force as many sweaters over her head as possible, and we will fill out the sleeves and ass with scarves. But her stomach will still bulge. I keep telling her that she must learn to carry herself like a large woman. When faced with their questions she must pretend to be a hippopotamus who is merely going on a trip: *Are you pregnant, Miss?* I am an Artiodactyla. *What will you do with your two days in Prague, Miss?* I will rub my snout in its foreign swamps. *What will you do with your one day in Vienna, Miss?* I will bathe in its golden waters. *Have you any intention of not returning?* I intend to make my way south until I reach the Upper Nile where I will follow the rivers to South Africa. *Have a pleasant trip, Miss.*

...

Excerpt of a letter from Stanislav to his father,

Warsaw, August, 1980.

Boardwalk

The dock is no place to bring a woman, Jake –
not in a summer dress
and cheap heels
that clamble down cobblestone.

The gift-shop and bar close early;
the wind whips off the water.

The Love Song of J. Kieslowski

Friends, and friends

of friends,

welcome;

let us squish

into my apartment.

I'm told many of you are jaded

and pretty.

*

How the night passes;

soon the liquor store closes...

Can I steal a beer

from the back of my own fridge?

*

I am single, I am single,

I will drink, and dance, and mingle!

*

It's been fine,

it's been fun, no,

it's all been really nice,

but now you have to go
and leave me with Mariko;
my bedroom has no door
and I'm hoping for more
than just kisses.

Mariko

The spindly legs of spiders
keep you from eating,
from sleeping,
from kissing straight.

The threat of all that
movement.

How do you spot them
crawling on the ceiling
in the curtain-drawn night?

“Kill it! Kill it!”

I stand on my chair
and swing a slipper,
but you're still drawn
to the twitching legs.

Kiss

Had it broken?

she said;

I knew what she meant.

Be honest!

But in a fire I thought

better to burn than repent.

Do you love me?

she said;

I was barely making rent.

Should I keep it?

By the dark pulse pulled

into her mouth I went.

...

Her family came to see us off at the bus-station even though it was raining. They stood in a line like it was a funeral, or a firing-squad. No, it did not look normal. When you see a girl in a frock with vertical stripes, and her parents and her sisters and her uncles all crying and waving goodbye, well, you don't expect she is going away for only three days. I did not say goodbye and I did not shake her father's hand. I hope they were not angry with me, but I did not want to attract more attention!

We got onto the bus, and we even sat together. At first I did not want to sit together because we were not supposed to know each other. But it was going to be a long trip and I did not want to sit with anyone else for all that time. I held her under the blanket and she cried as the bus pulled away. I became nervous when she rested her head against my shoulder. I noticed the controller in the back row staring at us, but I kept telling myself that sometimes people just stare. After all, even strangers have to sit together every now and then, if the bus is full, and they both happen to be travelling alone.

...

Excerpt of a letter from Stanislav to his father,

Warsaw, October, 1980.

Dream of Helsinki

Two strangers
heading for Helsinki
from the German coastline;

we both came late,
no spots left
on the ferry.

We sat close in the tall grass
with a carton of wine;
neither of us knew
where to sleep that night.

As the captain waited for evening tide
and swollen twilight beat,
beat against the hull,
a voice rang out:

“One bed is free!”

I scribbled you my number
and bolted for the sea!

Name:

Jake Kieslowski.

Nationality:

Canadian.

Occupation:

Between jobs.

How do you pay rent, Jake?

I play cards and busk at the bus terminal;

sell the odd poem;

whatever else it takes.

Like stealing bicycles?

Yes.

And asking your father for money?

Yes.

What was really wrong with Stef.?

Her eyes were too far apart.

Second Skin

In the red restaurant light,
she could've been the twin
of Natalie Portman; I savoured
that image through dinner

and dessert. But later that night
in my slanted apartment,
I couldn't picture her face
or any of her films –

I was staring at the chubby
inner thighs of a stranger.
She coaxed my tongue
from one to the other...

Friends, it tasted very much
like salty paradise.

Confession

I pump out poems
for contests
and to impress
women
from New York.

I peek at the cards
as I'm dealing.

I smoke cigarettes
and spill wine
in my neighbour's bed;

laugh at the lame
when they struggle.

I steal, fight, and piss like a dog
on blankets of pure white snow...

But father, you should know:
I'm not even
the worst of my brothers.

Third period in the hockey game

We don't have a hockey team, but there's a team nearby that everyone cheers for.

On game-nights I go to the bar and drink what everyone else drinks,

and tell the bartender about the twins I used to know.

I'm the only one who can tell those two apart.

Neither is a captain, or all-star, at least

not yet; but they are good players.

I'm filled with such sadness

and pride when they glide

down the ice, deke,

once or twice,

score!

Dream of Paris

We drink wine and tear baguette
in a crooked room;
the snow outside
softens the city.

We scoured Montmartre
for the best in blue cheeses;
the knife we stole
from the café across the street.

We burst open fruit –
juices spatter
the sheets, our cheeks,
the hotel wall.

By the time we sober
and board the train,
the pomegranate stains
will purple and dry,

and the maid will curse
the country we came from.

...

The concrete wall was tall enough that we could not see the place we were waiting to get into. There were hundreds of us, Poles, Russians, Yugoslavs, Hungarians, Romanians, Czechs, all huddled on the wrong side of that thick wall. The military base at Treiskirchen had been turned into a refugee camp. I knew it would be bad inside, a place full of factions and crimes and mattresses all cramped side by side in the converted bunkers. But that is exactly what we were waiting for. That is why we were pushing and shoving and getting into fights, because we knew no matter how bad it got inside, it was still better than open ground.

...

Excerpt of a letter from Stanislav to his father,

Treiskirchen, November, 1980.

Carmallina

I play lousy when I'm loose;
after a few drinks,
and a few poems,

I walk home
as empty busses
lumber through the snow.

It's already morning

as I crawl into bed
and snuggle
your warm ass; your skin

compels me

to whisper:

Carmallina, I will buy you

a blueberry breakfast!

Dream of Agnieszka

Young boys laughing,
nothing to do with us,
kicked cans,
a train in the distance.

I grab her by the belt-loop
of her jeans, brush the black hair
from her eyes; our mouths
almost meet.

Feast (as a play in three scenes)

Scene One

A fast-food restaurant interior. JAKE, twenty-something, sits at the middle table. He strikes the keys of a typewriter with one hand and holds a half-eaten burger in the other.

The keys make no sound, but he makes the appropriate tapping noises with his mouth.

AGNIESZKA eats curry at the table beside him.

JAKE Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap...

AGNIESZKA How have you been, Jakob?

JAKE Can't complain... You look amazing.

AGNIESZKA ... *(smiles.)* How's your dad?

JAKE Tap-tap-tap-tap-ding.

Scene Two

The setting is the same. The CARDPLAYERS play cards in the corner. Their game is sombre. In the back, DANUTA leans against a counter and smokes. There is another woman beside her. STANISLAV walks on stage with a pickaxe and begins hacking at the floor. The pickaxe makes no sound, but JAKE supplies the appropriate banging noises with his mouth.

JAKE Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-crack!

STANISLAV *(Stops and says a single word in Polish. A sapling sprouts from the newly made hole in the floor. The sapling grows and soon it is so thick that STANISLAV can sit back against its trunk.)*

JAKE You can't do that!

STANISLAV *(Shrugs his shoulders.)*

JAKE Put the damn floor back!

DANUTA *(DANUTA walks over to STANISLAV and waters his tree. STANISLAV says thank-you in Polish.)*

JAKE *(Reluctantly.) Are you hungry? (He extends a fistful of fries, but his father nods no.)*

STANISLAV *(Pointing at the CARDPLAYERS) He is dealing from the bottom!*

CARDPLAYER 1 *(Rises with a book.) It's time for a haiku!*

CARDPLAYER 2 *(Puts down his cards.)*

CARDPLAYER 1 *(With an elevated voice.)*

After the road,
in the winter field –
nothing.

CARDPLAYER 2 *(Looks at his cards.) That was nice.*

(The woman in the back walks over to JAKE's table.)

PENNY FLAME

(Back toward audience, facing JAKE.) I like poems too, Jake.

(She climbs onto the table. The CARDPLAYERS turn their chairs toward her.)

Scene Three

The setting is the same, but dimmer. Electronic music plays in the background. An exit sign tints the stage red. Everyone is gone except JAKE, who sits in his chair, and PENNY, who dances slowly on the table.

Part III: The Penny Flame Sonnets

Penny's pit

Penny has a knack for the act of love;
she plays it sweet, rude or rough.

But I never

find enough free shows

to fill my need. So I say:

“Some things are worth paying for,”

and I close the curtain, and pretend

that day is night and she is everything

she claims. God how she strips,

like a peach to its pit,

and lingers

against the wet

walls of my mouth

all night.

Mid-western Penny and I saddle up and ride across the country

All night

I wait for Penny

to ride into town

on her naked horse.

She gallops in the rain

wearing nothing

but a cowboy's coat,

soaked,

and buttonless.

She's on the run

from the men of Big Boat River,

where tonight

someone didn't love her right,

so she cut his throat.

Cell-block c

So she cut his throat
and now poor Penny's
under my watch.

She strips her stripes

and scrubs in the shower
longer than the other women.

I feast on the sight
of her soapy tits

from behind my dark,
mirrored glasses.

I slap her like a slab
of meat, and make it clear

that if Penny won't love me,
Penny won't eat.

...

The rations are meagre and the bunkers smell of piss, and we all sleep next to each other on filthy mattresses. A lot of the men plot and steal and there are gangs and parts of the compound you must definitely keep away from, especially if you are a woman. That is why they prefer it if you are a family, I suppose. A single man is more likely to become idle and cause trouble for others.

...

Excerpt of a letter from Stanislav to his father,

Treiskirchen, December, 1980.

Office affair

Penny won't eat
with the other secretaries;
she stays behind
to send out the poems

I slipped into her bin.
But the boss is there too,
caressing his tie,
while whispering the promise

of a Christmas bonus.
He sweeps the mess
from her desk and pulls
Penny from her swivel chair.

She bites her tongue and winks at me
as I copy in the copy-room.

Emergency room 2b

As I copy in the copy-room
something sparks
from the machine
and everything is tingly;

I wake bandaged
as naked women wheel me,
pin me to a gurney,
and hear a crackled call:

Paging Nurse Penny,

one of your boys

is sick again!

The love here is clinical,

it's all white gloves

and no mercy.

Final words at the guillotine

Have mercy,

Queen Penny!

I am but a jester

with no notions

of your fancy theatre.

When I saw you on that stage

in the garments of your role,

I did not know

that it was a lie, of sorts,

a sly trick for diversion,

and not an honest call

to tie you

in the tower

as your mouth did claim.

...

I hold her at night, even though it is annoying to lie that way because it is so stuffy inside the bunker, and because her hair gets in my nose and makes it itchy. But I do it every night until she falls asleep, and then I sneak outside for a piss and a smoke and think about God so He knows we have not forgotten about Him. I do not think about Him often because so much is happening and I have to be very concentrated to make sure it is going well, but I know it is important to think about Him sometimes, and I am only good at it when I am alone and it is dark and I am smoking.

...

Excerpt of a letter from Stanislav to his father,

Treiskirchen, December, 1981.

The Municipality of Big Boat River v. Penny Flame

As your mouth did claim
so many of our men, and did offend
so many of our women,
this court decries

you shall be stripped
and cleansed in the river,
and thereby delivered
from your mischievous ways –

even allowed to stay, if you promise
to behave. But know that we are men
of honour, Penny, and if scandal
should re-offend, everyone will say,

*Surely as a soup needs salt,
surely it's the nymphet's fault!*

Geography class held in the furthest possible portable

Surely it's the nymphet's fault
that I'm drawn beneath her desk
toward those pink socks
pulled over kissing knees.

*Pardon me Penny,
but what is the capital of Zambia?*

She springs up like a tiger
woken by a snake.

God, I hope she knows it,
because one more mistake
and I may have to keep her
another year...

When she says the word "Lusaka,"
I say, *Damn well done my dear.*

After the cabaret ends

I say, *Damn well done my dear,*
and jump on stage with roses.

The photographers follow
for a few blocks, but we escape

into a Holiday Inn
where we play married
and normal. Three days later,
while I'm in the sauna,

she steals my wallet
and leaves me
with a note saying,
"This way you'll want me more!"

Penny loves to be too much;
she has a knack for the act.

How are the poems coming along, Jake?

Meh.

What does that mean?

They're too ornamental. I need to scale back more... you know, write sparse, get to the essentials.

That's funny.

Why is that funny?

How is your father?

Heh?

*Haiku Interlude*Win

I was good tonight –
listen to the coins
clink in my pockets!

Lose

One final card...
and now, please
one more!

Part IV: The Fast

“One day an overseer happened to notice the cage, and he asked the attendants why this perfectly good cage, with rotten straw in it, should be left unused; no one could say until somebody, prompted by the tally-board, recalled the fasting artist. They poked around in the straw and they found the fasting-artist underneath. ‘Are you still fasting?’ the overseer asked, ‘when on earth are you going to stop?’”

– from “A Fasting-artist,” by Franz Kafka

Day 1

March, 1981. Stanislav and Danuta eat their first Canadian meal at an airport McDonald's. Stanislav points to the Chicken McNugget combo and asks for "two times" while baby Jakob sleeps over his shoulder. A female employee offers them a high-chair and, though they don't understand a word, she names all the happy characters plastered upon it. After the meal Danuta feels a little sick. Stanislav feels satisfied, though bloated. He thinks of writing a letter to his father, but first they need to warm Jakob's milk, change his diaper, and figure out how the public pay-phones work. By that time the Kieslowskis are quite exhausted.

Day 2

1981-86. They rent a one-bedroom apartment in a dingy neighbourhood. To save money, Stan builds all the furniture himself. He installs curtains to separate the kitchenette and the baby's room from the rest of the apartment. Now it's a three bedroom, he brags. There is a corner store nearby; in its aisles, all kinds of colourful snacks. Every Friday evening Stan turns off the lights and tells Danuta to wait in the kitchenette with the curtain drawn (she calls this "theatre time"). He turns on a desk lamp and, after ample hesitation, he undraws the curtain to reveal some new and exotic combination of sweets: a pack of quadruple-fudge cookies, or cherry-chocolates, or strawberry filled Viva Puffs ("they taste like cartoon clouds!").

Day 3

February, 1987. Stan looks exhausted and Danuta has been heard shouting at night. They need a vacation and decide to take a trip to Toronto on a VIA train. Danuta asks about the restaurant wagon. She is told there isn't one. Twenty minutes into the trip, the train stalls, then stops. A female attendant pushes a snack-cart down the aisle. She apologizes for the delay and tosses out turkey sandwiches. The sandwich is very tightly wrapped and something isn't quite right with the meat. But the coffee, Danuta claims, is delicious. Stan and Jakob do not eat on the train: Jakob sleeps the entire way; Stan says he can wait until Toronto.

Day 4

“What would one know of life as it should be lived or nights as they should be spent apart from meals?”

– from “Life is Meals,” by James Salter

Day 5

Ever since arriving in Canada, Stan has been learning to give things up. At first it is a means of scraping together money. He stops smoking to pay the bills; he stops drinking to buy a house; he realizes that without drinking, he doesn't much enjoy going out to dance.

Even after the job at the factory, and the steady hours, and steady pay, and his wife steadily sleeping in another room, Stan never feels like reviving old habits. In fact, he thinks increasingly about the habits that he can break. He stops eating chocolate; he stops eating meat; he stops eating fish, and as a result, he stops fishing.

The house smells like tamarind; the neighbour's dogs are always howling; God only knows where his son is. Danuta has a habit of flushing three (sometimes four) times a night. Stan finds the suburbs too loud – the way the noises scatter like spiders across the ceiling and the walls. He buys the best earplugs. Sometimes he holds his breath.

In his most tranquil moments Stan wonders what life would have been like had he stayed in Poland, had he returned to Russia, had he sailed to Australia. In each place the habits he might have formed would have been different, but not the acts of denial. Those, he realizes, are always the same.

Day 6Stanislaw Kieslowski's favourite foods as a boy:

Bigos

Barszcz

Kotlety schabowe

Zapiekanki

Or, in the Hollywood version:

Stew

Borsht

Pork Chops

Toast¹

¹ The Hollywood version opens with a young Billy Crudup at a bar on open-mic night. He grips a beer in one hand and a microphone in the other. He clears his throat. No one in the bar (who is listening) is sure whether or not this marks the beginning of a poem.

For now, that is the only scene committed to film. The project has been stuck in production for months. Everyone involved agrees that a young Billy Crudup will make a fine Jake Kieslowski; but they cannot agree on who should play Stan. The production company wants Richard Gere – he has a contract with them. But the director demands Javier Bardem.

“Javier Bardem!” the producer says. “Bardem can’t play Polish!”

“Well, then, what about Johnny Depp?”

“Oh please... How about Sean Penn? I might be able to get Sean.”

“I like him,” the director admits. “But I don’t love him...”

Day 7

“You will disappear if you eat any less,” Danuta says.

“Men have survived longer in the desert,” Stan argues.

“But we don’t live in a desert,” Jake interjects.

Day 8

The two basement rooms are cool even in the summer, but rarely used other than for storage. Stan chooses the smaller of the two for his fast. The larger room is full of unpacked boxes and glass jars containing strawberries and blueberries and dried apricots. He sits with Danuta on a bed he once constructed – a few planks of wood with an old mattress on top. It is the size of a cot. A tiny wooden desk (which he also made) is pressed into a corner. It has a desk-lamp and books stacked against the wall.

Eating is a habit, a product of cellular memory, and the habit can be broken if your will and your faith are strong enough.²

Danuta knows there is no use in arguing. There are things that her husband never pays attention to, aspects of the world which mean as much or as little as a doctor's warning. On the rare occasion that Stan catches a cold, or has a headache, he refuses to take any remedy that he didn't make himself.

The sun casts its dying rays through a half-window overlooking the garden. The walls are bright and bare. They sit very close on the little bed, not touching. He's healthier than men half his age, she reasons. But in her mind she is already making a list of people to call for help, and foods to force down his throat: tangerines; yogurt to soothe his lips; and water – water first.

² From "Living off Light," by Razmataz, a spiritual leader from Australia. Numerous claims of insight and salvation have been linked back to her teachings on breatharianism. Also, three deaths. The most recent occurred in a suburb of Hamilton, where Andrea Gallinari came to the belief that, after eleven years of living in Canada, he no longer needed to eat. He left the suburbs in search of clean mountain air. He pitched a tent beneath the trees. After 2 days he displayed symptoms of acute dehydration. After four days he lost 10kg. After seven days his pulse had almost tripled and, soon after, both his kidneys failed. Then, after eight days, the teenagers camping beside him began to wonder if something was wrong.

Day 9

“What *are* you, apple! There are men

Who, biting an apple, blind themselves to bowl, basket

Or whatever and in a strange spell feel themselves

Like you outdoors and make us wish


We too were in the sun and night alive with sap.”

– “Still Life,” by George Oppen

Day 10

The table is set
 for the stranger my parents invited
 who may still come;
 who may still come
 late because of a flat tire
 on the highway –
 seldom does anyone stop
 at night.
 The stranger may still come
 and I can warm what's left
 in the microwave;
 though my parents have long retired
 I still peek through the curtains,
 nose pressed
 against the winter glass.
 The street is empty; somewhere a dog
 moans for its master.³

Dziesiąty Dzień

Miejsce przy stole nakryte
 dla nieznajomego,
 który może jeszcze przyjść.
 Który może jeszcze przyjść
 spóźniony, bo złapał gumę
 na autostradzie -
 mało kto pomoże
 nocą.
 Nieznajomy może jeszcze przyjść
 a ja mogę podgrzać posiłek
 w mikrofalówce. 
 Rodzice już dawno poszli spać
 a ja nadal patrzę przez firankę
 z nosem przyciśniętym
 do zimnej szyby.
 Ulica jest pusta; gdzieś w oddali
 wyje pies za swoim panem.⁴

³Jake sent the English version of this poem to *Can. Poetry Can Magazine* in June 2003. It was never formally rejected.

⁴The Polish version is found undated in the early pages of Stanislav's blue notebook, which he keeps tucked beneath his mattress. It's unclear which version came first.

Day 11

For the first time in years Jake sleeps in his parent's house. His mother says she feels better having him there. The sheets on his bed are clean. Nothing in the room has changed since he left – the same hockey posters, the same tin boxes full of cards and smoothed out candy wrappers (Aero, Mars, Milky Way). Meanwhile, Jake's father sleeps alone in the basement and spends his days in the garden, sitting on a wooden bench beneath a tree. Jake doesn't know if his father is aware of him in the window, or if it bothers him. His eyes are mostly closed, and even when his eyelids flutter he doesn't seem to see or to look at anything. For the first time since Jake can remember, he cannot stop thinking about his father. He cannot stop staring at him. Stan scribbles the occasional thought in a diary that rests on his lap, but mostly he just sits there, all morning and all afternoon, listening to the birds and recovering a stillness which, it seems to Jake, his father has always had.

Potrzebuje świadomości, że są na świecie słowa które znaczą to samo, bez względu na to na jakim kontynencie czy w jakim kraju są wypowiedane⁵.

⁵ From the notes of Stanislav Kieslowski.

Day 12

Here come the fireman and Jake's old biology teacher on their daily jog through the neighbourhood.

"So tell us, what's wrong with him?" the fireman asks.

"He thinks he's a plant," Jake says.

"A plant!? What kind of plant?" the biology teacher demands.

"A sunflower, I guess, I don't know."

"Yeah, but what the hell's wrong with him?" asks the fireman.

"A sunflower, Jake? Don't you mean a cactus?"

Jake reaches for a Twix bar melting in the pocket of his leather coat. "Gentlemen, please, why not ask him yourself?"

Day 13

Jake sneaks into the basement room while his father sits in the garden. He examines the spines of books on the desk. Some are notebooks, while others are by authors he has never heard of. Many of the lines in the notebooks are arranged in stanzas, but the script is difficult to decipher, and besides, he does not read Polish well. His vocabulary is limited to the words of phone-calls from his parents, and as the conversations became more brief over the years, so did the horizon of available words.

Some of the books seem like nothing more than spiritual jargon, the kinds of books he often mocks with his friends. *New Age*. Jake glances through the window and sees his father's boyish feet. His pale toes fidget in fake leather sandals.

*The force that moves the human machine is not chemical; it is etheric. The body can be sustained on prana alone.*⁶

The room feels much emptier with Jake in it, and he leaves, and hopes that his father will never realize that he had been there.

⁶ A quote copied into Stanislav's notebook – original source unknown.

Day 14Spotkamy się na Wileńskiej 39

Pamiętaj, wejście od podwórka

I schodami do góry,

po lewej znajdziesz me drzwi.

Mieszkam tam z rodzicami

Są cudowni, posznasz ich

W domu mam swój pokój z piecem

A w ogrodzie rosną bzy.

I uważaj jak będziesz szedł Pragę

No rozumiesz,

Nie jesteś tam swój.

Czternasty DzieńI'll meet you at 39 Wilenski

Take the entrance off the playground

and up the stairs

you'll find my door on the left.

I live there with my parents

who are wonderful, you'll meet them

There are plants in the garden

Oh and be careful

walking through my neighbourhood.

Well, you understand –

you aren't from here.⁷

⁷ From a note Danuta once left for Stan.
Wilenski street is in the Praga district of Warsaw.

Day 15

Danuta tried on many occasions to quit smoking. She paid for special gums, patches, and even attempted hypnosis. Nothing worked; then one day she caught Jakob smoking with the twins at a bus stop. Jakob was thirteen at the time. She slapped the cigarette from his mouth and promised him she would never smoke again. She has kept that promise, more or less, though some days are worse than others. For example today, on the fifteenth day of her husband not eating, not drinking, not sleeping in her bed, Danuta smokes a Player's Light cigarette on the front porch. The warm familiar haze comes back and fills her body, but then it seeps out slowly, and it's gone even before she's finished.

Day 16

“Not that I want to be a god or a hero.

Just change into a tree, grow for ages, not hurt anyone.”

– “Longing,” by Czeslaw Milosz

Day 17

Danuta dangles a thread over a jug of filtered water. Jake can see words forming on her lips as she waits for the needle to still, then to sway, and finally to settle into a slow clockwise turning.

“I did this with your milk when you were younger. Do you remember?” she asks.

“Not really,”

She retrieves a bottle of Windex from the counter beneath the sink. She twists off the nozzle and pours the blue liquid into a glass.

“First on the toxic one,” she says. “You remember?”

Jake cannot remember the last time he closed his eyes other than to sleep. He holds them shut and concentrates only on the question she repeats in his ear:

Is this Windex good for me to drink? Is this Windex good for me to drink? Is this Windex . . .

“Ask an honest question if you want an honest answer,” Danuta says.

He repeats the words while trying very hard to ignore how absurd they sound; instead he focuses on the shaking of his arm, the swaying of his wrist, and the feel of the thread pressed between his thumb and index finger.

“There, you see?” his mother says. “Your direction is opposite to mine.”

Jake opens his eyes and watches the clockwise turning of the needle above the Windex. There’s nothing ambiguous about it – its direction, its speed, its rhythm; everything is certain. He shifts his hand over to the jug of water. His mother covers his eyes and whispers:

Is this water good for my father to drink? Is this water good for my father to drink? Is this water . . .

The needle spins in the other direction. His mother ruffles his hair the way she did when he was a boy.

“Take it down to him,” she says.

Stan has a beard now, with vague patches forming around the cheeks. The jug is heavy, and some of the water spills as it exchanges hands.

“Dziękuję,” Stan says. “Ale nie to mi potrzeba.” He leaves the jug on the desk and turns on the lamp. The veins on his arms bulge like railroad tracks.

“Ile teraz masz lat?” Stan says.

“Twenty-three.”

“No, jusz z ciebie facet!”

Day 18

The final rehearsal takes place in a high-school gym on the last night of November. They are upbeat about their progress – each of the players has come a long way in learning to play him or herself on stage. They run through the one-act play four times, and each time they can feel the pauses, the intonations, the awkward glances... everything is where it should be.

“I think we’re going to be just fine,” the second cardplayer says.

A makeshift buffet has been prepared for the evening: three big bags of chips and a bottle of sparkling wine.

Jake and the cardplayers huddle around a desk and play poker. They joke about playing straight through until tomorrow night. Then, after a few bad losses in a row, the second cardplayer tips the desk over. He clears his throat: “I’ve only myself to blame / for twisting into the dark hours, / and money spent / on everything / I never meant...”

“Must we hear this one every time you lose?” the first cardplayer interrupts. “Am I right, Jake?”

“Yeah, recite something else,” Jake says. “That one’s a downer.”

“Fine, Mountain Feast then,” the second cardplayer says. “You said to come hungry / so I didn’t eat. / Oh, maybe a Tic-Tac or two, / but nothing else. For three days / I sharpened my teeth. / And for what? Beets? / Black olives!?! / I’m not complaining / about the music / or wine, / but here in the mountains / it seems like a trick / to offer a meal / but no pig to slit.”

Penny tosses a soccer ball into the hoop on the far side of the gym. Stan watches her shyly and answers her questions about the fast.

“I really can’t understand how you did it,” she says. “It’s insane. Not that you’re insane, of course. But it just, I didn’t think it would be possible. I mean, just the thought of dieting makes me hungry!”

Danuta sneaks out of the rehearsal early. She is out in the cold, twisting and turning the key in the car – the white Ford Topaz won’t start.

“You are joking,” she says.

Day 19

Ślad szczęścia umyka ci z oczu

Mówisz – odnaleźć go chcesz

Świat cały już przeszukałeś

Czy myślisz, że wiesz gdzie jest?

You really think you can find it?

You already searched your pockets

You repeat: It's here somewhere

But it's all been spent.

Day 20

“In the parable, the prodigal son returns home and his father welcomes him with all sorts of attentions and kills the fatted calf for him. In the parody, on the other hand, the fatted calf runs away in terror as soon as the prodigal son comes back, knowing well what his fate is to be. So they wait for him to return. The fatted calf keeps them waiting quite a long time and then decides to come back. In the intensity of his joy the father, in order to celebrate the return of the fatted calf, kills the prodigal son and makes a feast of him for the calf.”⁸

– from “Boredom” by Alberto Moravia

⁸ In the parable, father and son finally share the meal they have both secretly been waiting for. In the parody, on the other hand, Jake eats his father. Then, one night after a few too many, Stan sprouts from the side of Jake’s head. He grows so large and so lambent that Jake tips over and spends the rest of his life grounded amongst the drunks. The drunks couldn’t be happier, because Stan protects them from the elements.

Day 21

Stan comes up from the basement on exactly the night he promised he would. He kisses his wife and shakes his son's hand. His movements are sparse and uneasy. Danuta brings over a jug of boiled water that has been cooling by the window.

"We're celebrating!" Stan says. "This calls for juice!"

Danuta rifles through the fridge and the freezer, but there is only an old frozen can of concentrated orange juice.

"I'll drive to the store and pick up something special," Stan says.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Danuta yells. "You can't drive!"

Jake drives his father to the supermarket. He adheres to the speed limit. The radio is off; they listen to the engine and the tires turning on the asphalt. He notices his father holding onto the door handle, and he slows well below 50 km/h. Slick and streaking cars pass them on all sides.

The street ahead is alive with neon signs: Super Dry Cleaners; Johnny's Pizzeria; Freshies Supermart; Super-1 Video; and not far beyond is the Kiwi Mouldy.

They pull into an open space a few rows deep in the parking lot. Two cars rev their engines and begin blaring their bass. Stan reaches for Jake's hand as they cross toward the entrance.

Inside, the building is open and cold like an airport hangar; Stan shivers from the air-conditioning. Jakob is taller than his father, and he feels like he is leading a sick child. He pulls his father past the fruits and vegetables, the tank of crabs, the cheese-woman, and finally into the aisle of organic juices.

It takes Stan a very long time to sort through all the types. A hint of avocado fills the air, and Stan shuts his eyes to better hear his son's voice reading the ingredients. After considering

an expensive wild berry mix, Stan finally settles on a bottle of pure pomegranate juice. And though he feels increasingly still and stable inside, he continues to grip his son's hand.

The light is unbearable to Jake. The night-shoppers (many of them women) keep passing them by, making little comments about his father's appearance, about two men holding hands, about the language they are speaking. Jake feels embarrassed; he wants to unclench his hand and escape back into the parking lot. There are only two cashiers and both lines stretch past the aisles. More and more shoppers keep entering the store. The sliding door welcomes each one like a mouth.

End.

Have you spoken to him about it?

Has he said anything?

Do you believe he really stopped eating for all that time?

When did he start eating again?

...

Hello?

I'm sorry, who are you looking for?

Um, hi, is this Jake?

Afraid not. He came by late last night, and now all his clothes and books are gone.

Do you know where I can find him?

No, but if you see him, remind him about the rent.

*Afterword*Dream of Southwestern Ontario

I left home

to live with a girl.

We rented great films,

and ate spicy food;

we were never disappointed

by the lack... She owned a car

and we drove fast

on the highway at night –

within two hours,

we could have anything.

Opening night

After the rehearsal, Jake took the cardplayers for all that they were worth. By morning he had won over \$700 and a black Honda Civic. Emboldened by this win, and perhaps unsatisfied by the modesty of their play, he drove out of town. It's not clear which direction he was heading in, or how far he got. A waitress in a highway diner said she served a young man who spoke of New York and Montreal.

The play was hardly a success, and yes, some of it was my fault. When Jake failed to arrive it fell to me to take his part. I knew the lines, but there was no chemistry. Throughout their performances, Stan and Danuta were visibly shaken by the absence of their son. The cardplayers were far too depressed and hungover to contribute any greatness. And in the final scene, Penny didn't dance for me the way she danced for him.

The Kieslowskis were kind to me afterwards, and invited me for tea. Stan was more talkative than I expected, though he deflected most of my questions about the fast. It was never meant to be a spectacle, he said.

I continued to visit them in the following weeks – we often spoke of Jakob, though of other topics too. One doesn't often meet people who would open their lives to a stranger. Stan introduced me to bizarre and wonderful recipes, and he had an exuberance for health and activity that was infectious. We played tennis together, and took long walks in the park (and Danuta brought the dogs everywhere we went!).

I took Polish lessons in the basement of a church, and Stan and Danuta were eager to facilitate my learning. Within a few months I was translating excerpts of those notes and letters that Stan was willing to share. We even began outlining another play – longer this time, and more elaborate. But it wasn't long before we bickered over the details. Danuta said I was pandering to consumer tastes; and I accused Stan of withholding

information. Even though we didn't get very far, I found the second play's unravelling more disheartening than the first.

Stanislav Kieslowski's Famous Sunday Salad:

1. Wash lettuce and tear into pieces
2. Peel and shave half a carrot
3. Find a soft mango and cut it into strips
4. Add some chopped pieces of cauliflower
5. Add two spoons of grapefruit juice and one spoon of miso
6. A dab of extra virgin olive oil
7. Sprinkle blueberries, and seedless red grapes
8. Dangle a needle on a thread

Smacznego!

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