



Derek and me:

The Memory Addicts, Frameshifts, & Other works, compared

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From "In Memoriam, e.e. cummings" in HOUSE OF A THOUSAND ROOMS by Richard Rose (2022)

I wish now
to wish now
that it is now . . .

—Gertrude Stein

Whatever tiff one may have with the writers of the period between the world wars, they admittedly had a lively sense of the immediacy of language. Gertrude Stein loved to feel *sentences diagramming themselves*, and particularly loved to unfurl the sentences of Henry James. Perhaps underlying the convictions, manners, and—yes—preciosity, was a postwar sense of the preciousness of life. The breathless, run-on sentences of Dos Passos, Joyce, and Cummings, as well as the deceptively simple and concise style of Hemingway, were determined to deter the mind from going on about business as usual after such horrendous upheavals of humanity—thereby missing the necessity of making *isness our business: LOOK HERE! SEE THIS NOW AS IT REALLY IS!*

The same determination to be fully alive from moment-to-moment that is found in the works of de Beauvoir and Sartre, and in the determination of Husserl to document the sensory phenomena of existence, is echoed by William Carlos Williams, Alan Watts, and the Zen poets of *being present*, Gary Snyder and Jane Hirshfield. And the *isness business* of would-be gurus flourishes in sets of inspirational mp4s, meditational seminars, countless poetry readings, self-improvement texts, futurologists and experts in *carpe diem*, like Tolle (in *The Power of Now*); writing classes, and annual conventions—all of which are evidences of the popular religiosity of Americans, as described by Charles Lippy¹. Varied ideas and practices converge, he says, on a common spiritual pursuit that is individualistic, inchoate in structure, and syncretic in content. Exhortations to *pay attention* and not to miss *the immediacy of now* challenge our sensory and spiritual lethargy. Not to be with-it-in-the-moment is an eighth deadly sin, only corrected by long sessions sitting cross-legged on a yoga mat. And even then—

So, what if you lived only in the immediacy of now—making *isness* your business—like Elise?

her task is not to shore up her attachments to a dead world, but to strengthen herself for this one. And that means learning to live like an animal. An intelligent animal, better able than most to manipulate her environment but less dependent than old-world humans on systems that must be maintained.

—*The Memory Addicts*, p.98

Elise is one of the characters in Derek Kannemeyer's *The Memory Addicts* (Atmosphere Press, 2022), a novel that accompanies me as I shut down a household and way of life—shut down, in fact, *a life*—and enter the euphemism of independent living, an oxymoronic existence which begins with casting away everything you've done before so that you will be appropriately *downsized* for the straitened pursuit of vacuities. Like the novel's victims of a virus that has stolen their memories, my business will soon also be *isness*.

In Derek Kannemeyer's thought-experiment, the global pandemic of the memory-virus, certainly informed by the COVID-19 pandemic, has had varied effects. Victims living at the small colony at Heartwood, an abandoned farm in Virginia, are functional because of an imperfect cure, called X-7, which restores memory in such a random, patchy fashion that it creates a craving for additional fixes. That is, it creates *memory addicts*. While its effect is compared to the memory-awakening taste of a Madeleine in Marcel Proust's *Rembrance of*

¹ Charles H. Lippy, 1994, *Being Religious, American Style: A history of popular religiosity in the United States*

Things Past (or *In Search of Lost Time*), its side-effect is the creation of false memories. Overuse of the drug recreates the victim's personality. One cannot help thinking that Derek shares current preoccupations with Alzheimer's disease and with the false beliefs which animate American theocratic and socio-religious sects, like Turning Point, Rod of Iron Ministries, and QAnon. But he expresses his puzzlement with these social phenomena in the novel's poetic narrative—which I prefer to a rant.

The thought-experiment raises some questions about making *isness your business*: you must keep re-learning to do the simplest tasks, for example. Under these circumstances, history has a savor, a precious, addictive quality. You must write down what you want to remember. You must tell others, on the chance that they may later recall. You must frequently remind yourself of what you do and who you are. And even then—

Some memories are presumably not missed—traumas, consequences of poor decisions, grief, mistakes, impaired thoughts—but such a forgetting is closer to denial than to the innocence of a *tabula rasa*. So many intentions, actions, and creations arise in response to remembering and misremembering. Grief-works are made of painful memories. Without memory, there is no testing of Rumi's notion that the cure to the pain is in the pain. A hidden record, whether veiled by denial or black-out, is not susceptible to test, reflection, correction, or renewal. Without memory, there is no Buddhist meditation on the *right view* of the fundamental nature of suffering; nor is there a discovery of wisdom through suffering, as described in the famous passage from the *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus:

**(Zeus) leads us on the way of wisdom's
Everlasting law that truth
Is only learnt by suffering it.
Ah, in sleep the pain distills,
Bleeding on the memory,
And makes us wise against our wills:
God's grace by solemn force.**

—Aeschylus, *The Agamemnon*, Strophe 3 (trans. Paul Roche)

The instant but somewhat hideous availability of knowledge on smartphones makes us cavalier about how knowledge is acquired—how, indeed, understanding has often come at tragic cost. Carelessness about information and history arises from what we euphemistically call *access*, instead of calling it what it mainly is: *disregard*. At what level of disregard do you become a servomechanism, *responsive* in the same way that a photocell responds to a ray of light? It's all very fine to nod at Sam Johnson's statement that there is knowing of *what is*, but also a knowing of *where to find* information; in Johnson's day, however, you had to empty the chamber pots, change the straw in the cot, kill and pluck the chicken for supper, and read by candlelight. Sleek conveniences and talking devices had not yet slyly slid between hands and the physical world—devices that ultimately have estranged humans from their own ways of physically being in the world. No longer a simple matter of *nor can foot feel, being shod*, the estrangement of humans from habitat that offended Gerard Manley Hopkins now extends to conversation, community, and one's own thoughts, a situation eloquently described by David

Brooks in *How to Know a Person*. The posture of our age, the *downward gaze*, is not a position of reflection, meditation, or modest acceptance, as in a medieval painting of the Virgin; it is a posture of restless distraction, as one is staring at a tiny screen. The operative euphemism is *engagement*. (I recently came across the phrase *the projectile engaged the target*, meaning someone was shot.)

Why “Derek and me”?

The curious conjunction I have felt between Derek’s work and mine, is about more than the fact that similar ideas have occurred to us. I read *The Memory Addicts* while I was tossing away books and journals and trying to decide not only what to keep but whether to continue the practice of writing and musical composition. Certainly there was no demand for my work, but there never had been. Like Derek, I wrote in the midst of teaching, moving, and raising a family—often, like him, writing between lesson plans. The narrative forms of the work were poetry, prose, and musical theatre, and were usually responses to losses—the deaths of a favorite aunt and uncle, the fatal accident of a college friend, the suicide of a favorite teacher, the death of my first wife after a long illness. The sense of transience in the passing of the childhood of my sons, and of my own childhood, and of life slipping away—*this* had been the *demand* that compelled me to write. Rilke expressed the grief of transience in the Second Elegy of his *Duino Elegies*:

**. . . And those who are beautiful,
oh, who can retain them? Appearance ceaselessly rises
in their face, and is gone. Like dew from the morning grass,
what is ours floats into the air, like steam from a dish
of hot food. O smile, where are you going? O upturned glance:
new warm receding wave on the sea of the heart . . .
alas, but that is what we are.**

(translated by Stephen Mitchell)

The Law of Supply and Demand applies to writing poems, but only in the sense that disappearing voices dear to us demand to be heard. Both Derek and I could feel the voices that demanded a hearing, even if we didn’t hear them saying, *look in thy soul and write!*

We wanted to listen to them to speaking in their own way, as John Dos Passos listened *with greedy ears taut to hear* the people around him in order to make his 1930 book, *U.S.A.* and to convey in it *the speech that clung to the ears, the link that tingled in the blood: U.S.A.* (pp. v-vi). In the same way, Tom Farley, the poet commissioned by Crawley to write about the Fellowship of the Attentive, argues with Crawley after giving him:

***the lines he wanted.*
--People are speech, Avery.
--Well, signals, perhaps.
Waveforms, maybe.
--Speech, Avery!**

*To catch their speech
is to imagine the reality they feel.
I need more latitude—
Lines as breath-units—
--Forty syllables, Tom.
Map your meaning on that.
Breathe into it!*

—From *Frameshifts*, vol. 2, pp. 296-297 (also in *House of a Thousand Rooms*)

In *The Memory Addicts*, Andrew talks about second-guessing the mental players with whom he bargains for a morsel of true memory:

What I love most but trust least—my drug-peddler, my rationalizer, my storyteller, my articulator of faith—lies deeper in the floodplain, where the hippocampus swims and swallows and spits up anything that shines. To measure the nows against the thens; to ask the who I ams. As I shift and explain my meanings. As I sift; select; divert the data streams.

Okay, so I've lost most of my long-term memory. But I've enough of it still—thanks to the restorations of the madeleine drug; thanks to our warehouses of community records, and my private notebooks—to exploit what I do have.

—*The Memory Addicts*, p.157

In both *The Memory Addicts* and *Frameshifts*, and our other works, Derek and I are giving voices to the many characters we hear—even the nonhuman characters. His virus is the vehicle for raising questions about memory, like the questions posed by Lewis Hyde in *A Primer for Forgetting*. But Derek's method of putting the remembered self to rest and *moving on* is more brutal than Hyde's: the virus simply kills off memories, leaving some victims like the walking dead, others demented, and leaving the few who are immune or less disabled to take control of society. In *Frameshifts* (2011), I used a *viroid* as the vehicle for heightening victims' awareness of the ongoing environmental catastrophe. Infection by the viroid permits the victim to hear the groaning of the living world under the oppression and exploitation by humans. Edvard Munch depicted this visually in *The Scream*, which he also called *The Shriek of Nature*. Behind the central screaming character who *hears* the Shriek are men in top-hats who are simply enjoying the view from the jetty. So in *Frameshifts*, Avery Crawley is a biochemist who hears and feels the viroid—unlike his theocratic neighbors—and shares the message, founds a colony, the *Fellowship of Attentive*, in response to the message. The Heartwood Community in *The Memory Addicts* is also a colony devoted to healing and survival. Millar collects and transcribes the stories and daily logs of all the members, thereby maintaining the identity of the community. As a cultural protector, he fulfills the role of poet, scribe, and historian.

Avery Crawley plays this role in the Fellowship of the Attentive² by maintaining a research lab, school, library, and recycling plant; by commissioning poetry, music, and scientific

² In "Transactions with Emptiness," another spinoff of *Frameshifts*, and the anchor story in *Forms of Resistance*, the obsessive-compulsiveness inherent in the role of a conserver is taken up several notches by the character Jim Utley, whose piles of collected books and notes are described by the secretary hired to compile his posthumous work : **Some confusion is to be expected, but the first rule of excavation is to present material as you find it. I'm**

research, and by running a memory-museum of special objects, like what Sherry Turkle describes as *objects to think with*. Crawley calls them *vessels of memory*:

**As sundials made a tool of shadows
he had made vessels of the darkest and most stubborn
human behaviors;
As escapements made timing independent of the sun
so he had released his memories
to the care of the messengers around him.
He could come to them
for signs to recall those feelings and memories.
But now his duty was changing.
The tools he'd handled, the animals he'd held,
The children he had lifted up—**

**All these messengers reappeared before him
in their fresh and accidental fullness and insignificance.
Nothing was lost.
He'd cultivated a temporal confusion
that kept his memories untouched.**

From *Frameshifts*, volume 2, p.259.

Derek has been a teacher, translator, poet, and leader within the Poetry Society of Virginia; a playwright and photographer, and an actor with Richmond Shakespeare Theatre³. Some of his works are the whimsical *Alphabestiary* (2018), *The Play of Gilgamesh*, a poetry collection, *Mutt Spirituals*, and *Unsay Their Names* (2021), a work of photojournalism and lucid commentary on the downfall of the statuary of the Lost Cause during Richmond's tumultuous year of change, 2020-2021. As a participant-observer, he reveals his own experience as a twice-transplanted *Cape Colored* South African coming to terms with America and its obvious issue with acknowledging and correcting injustice—even 155 years after the end of the Civil War. He calls his website, www.petalridge.com, a *labyrinthine folly*. I have the same feeling about the www.frameshifts.com website, which I began with the foolish idea that the internet would support truth, artistic expression, empathy, and understanding. The folly was to believe that it would not also support falsehood, mercenary attacks, and hatred—all supplied in a monetized, overloaded stream of frivolous information.

the Compiler. 'Compiling' sounds more professional than 'sifting dirt,' but to me it's all a dig . . . This is just as well, since the disarticulated members of the body of Jim's great project . . . lie accusingly around the room . . . (in) heaps of uncollated, curiously dated and incompatible files, stolen letters, and unwadded notes retrieved from trash cans . . . (pp. 22-23)

³ Quill Theatre became Richmond Shakespeare Theatre in 2020.

Despite or perhaps because of the folly of our endeavors, Derek and I continue not only to write but to use the writing to connect with the Richmond community. Derek says that his photo-journal was made:

as a group portrait of the Richmonders who felt drawn to bear witness; but it's also a personal document, since I am of that number—seeking to know more about the names we are saying and unsaying, and what brought us to this summer of reckoning.

—From *Unsay Their Names*, p.4

In two of the spin-offs of *Frameshifts* presented in 2018, after living for seven years in Richmond, I also was *drawn to bear witness* to my connection to the city and its past in the poetry collection, *Coming Around* (Brandylane Press) and its companion work, the chamber-opera *Monte and Pinky*, performed at the Black History and Cultural Museum and other venues in Richmond in 2018. Derek also presented an impressive exhibition of photographs from *Unsay Their Names* at BHCM. *Coming Around* begins with a man named Simon Abouette on a *boatload of slaves* in 1815—the phrase found in a family record about one of my ancestors, who was responsible for bringing the *Roses*, the boat, and the cargo to Louisiana. Unlike Derek, who can put some distance between himself as a South African-Brit and the events in Richmond after George Floyd's murder, I have a sense of complicity. Like Bill Sizemore, with whom I made joint presentations in 2018, I was engaged on a journey of reckoning with the past. Bill is a former investigative reporter, so his approach was to write the genealogical journal *Uncle George and Me*, a record of his ancestors' involvement with enslaving people and of his discovery of the living Black members of his family—like his elderly uncle who still lived in the house where he was born on the former Sizemore property, and where his grandfather was born enslaved. My approach was to write a poetry collection about past and current residents of Richmond and Louisiana, and to write and produce an opera about a laundress and her former employer who find themselves roommates in a nursing home. The laundress, Pinky, also a character in *Frameshifts*, was based on a person who worked for my aunt. After the performance at BHCM, a small ensemble also performed dramatic readings from *Frameshifts* and from the works of Delores Kendrick, Maya Angelou, and Elizabeth Clark-Lewis about the lives of domestic workers during the Great Migration.

Derek continues to reckon with his history and American history in *The Memory Addicts* through characters like Kitty Boggenpoel, a victim of the memory-virus who was the daughter of a Lakota mother and a Cape Colored father who wrote poetry. Kitty retrieves her family memories just before her own death, reminding me of a story I wrote as a sixth grader in the fifties after seeing a scary animated film about Civil Defense from nuclear war. In first person narrative, I described my own death—watching from a mountain in the Black Hills while mushroom clouds sprouted on the horizon. Kitty sees herself and her father's poems going up in flames. Then she turns her attention to his poem about a pyramidal cairn in Forest Ridge Park, like a small version of the 1869 Monument to Confederate War Dead in Richmond's Hollywood Cemetery. Committing herself to flames of obscurity, like the eighteen thousand soldiers at Hollywood, the unknown cairn-builders, and her father's poems, Kitty (and Derek) says,

I lost my life, which I had treasured, but I was exhausted enough to feel release. I relinquished the sprawling novel of us, treasuring as flame-glimmer my small pages of it, but I still wished. (*Let Millar get out with his archives; Edie with her lab gear; Matt with his awkward tenderness; safe and whole with their love of us; with their difficult sanity.*)

—*The Memory Addicts*, p.334

Just before the catastrophic storm⁴ at the close of *Frameshifts* is a poem entitled *In a Hurry*, which ends with these lines:

***There's nothing in this row to keep—
nor need I find this song's design.
Head swallows tail. Time's got away—***

***Let even Earth expire
in unremitting fire—
distress our senses;
shed our "essences—"
ashes divisible
to jots invisible:
these easily suffice
another world to splice.***

--From *Frameshifts*, vol.2, p.338 (also in the anthology, *House of a Thousand Rooms*)

The last lines of *The Memory Addicts*, still in Kitty's voice, are:

Stories and images I'm no longer there to sift the sense of. Let the ash and the air make of them what they will.

--From *The Memory Addicts*, p.334

Casting off a life, leaving a durable mark—even if only a pile of stones—and moving on like a flame—this is the act of relinquishment which must follow the act of making. In anticipation of this time of down-sizing and relinquishment, I finished off five projects in 2022-2023:

House of a Thousand Rooms, an anthology of most of my poetry
Forms of Resistance, a collection of stories reckoning with current issues
Death on His Heels in Richmond, a spinoff of *Frameshifts*
Nightcaps, an opera score to the script of Brooke Vandervelde, who produced it in 2023
Escape Plans, an unproduced opera, with libretto included in *Death on His Heels*

⁴ The same storm is featured from another viewpoint in *Escape Plans*.

Perhaps, as Theodore Roethke might have said, this essay is only so much *straw for the fire*, but, like Kitty and Derek, I'm hoping for something more durable, something to be carried on by others—which is, I suppose, why I'm writing this. So I close with a less flammable image—the shedding of one skin—one role, one way of being—for another:

*Ask any butterfly
how many lives she shed
for one bouquet:*

*how many larvae, each
a craftsman, learned and died
in starring roles.*

*In fifty years of craft,
from every role I played,
these skins remain:*

*this house of changing rooms;
this sail-cart down the street
racing Father;*

*this tractor flinging me
over berms: these skins
itching to switch parts—even to shine.*

--opening poem from House of a Thousand Rooms

