

AMOR FATI

By Jonah Howell

WHY WE LIKE IT: *An endlessly literate and abundantly intelligent intellectual innovation. In this densely packed, psychologically layered introspective study, sentences are gloriously, mellifluously drawn out, stretched, spun, and coroneted to become the acrobatic equivalent of narrative 'stream of conscious'. We are dropped into a dazzling forest of beauty where we discover mytho-poetic excursions into Zarathustra, Delphic dances of tarot and Christianity and a portrait of relationships in which time both empowers and transcends itself. The prose is deliciously opalescent; the voice phonically radiant. We're pretty sure that if Howell had lived in the 17th century his name would be Robert Burton and he would've written The Anatomy of Melancholy. Quote: 'You see a light in front of you: You're not sure what it is, nor whether it portends anything particularly good, nor whether, indeed, you are moving toward your front at all; but nevertheless you see a light in front of you, and it gives you hope, if nothing else, which is precisely what you have wanted—no, needed for a very long time; and, if nothing else, it gives you some metric by which to determine the direction you're headed, which makes all of your arduous labors seem more grounded,...' Five stars.*

Amor Fati

1

Love is impatient. Love is blind. Love is ravenous and uses every part of the animal and rips its heart out and blows it up casual like a balloon and doom to all who spurn its morbid muezzin call to sacrifice. The world is its altar: It cannot be satisfied: The knife is raised.

2

That is, we—Claire, Earnest, I—sat in a triangle. Claire and Earnest had met only hours before. I had known Claire for a month or two, but she had drunkenly forgotten all of the conversations that, to me, defined our friendship. Earnest was my closest friend for years, but in a schizophrenic break he became convinced that I was contracted by the FBI to gather data on him,

and since then he's flowed in and out, his eyes read vacant or occupied, and right then they looked occupied, but who can be sure...Accordingly, though we sat in a triangle, and though Claire's Brooklyn dorm room was miniscule, and though we had put away a twenty-four-pack of Rolling Rock and half a fifth of bottom-shelf vodka in the past who-knows-how-many hours, we did not allow our knees to touch; and so the room was filled with an electric tension like that which grips a stadium as a bull locks eyes with its matador; and because the room was coated in mirrors—one on the desk in the back, a full-length on the wall behind Earnest, three smaller ones on the door to my right and Claire's left—, this tension multiplied, amplified, such that it imbued our every motion with sparking weight. Hence our heavy drinking.

Claire indicated that I should trade places with Earnest so that they would sit directly across from each other. "I'm going to read his tarot." That's her way, and with Earnest, it's as good as any.

He shuffled. He's an expert shuffler, the cards slid into place like smooth magic, he made them bridge upward and down. He drew three, indicated which should be past, which present, and which future. Claire took a long huff of poppers to clear her head and set out gravely, flipping through the book that accompanied the deck.

Past: "That doesn't look good. Let's see what this says...apparently you have—and I'll change this to past tense—'undergone enormous strife, felt your way through the most wretched of caves, from which there was little to no hope for escape, though such escape teased you from afar—enveloping echoes, in dreams a sly and teasing dance in untappable time, at every moment—; and though those who shared your cave spoke of times which were not so dark, which speech always sounded to you something like a reversed Messianic hope, such that you despised these hideous optimists who wished to return to their glowing past; for memory offered

you no such refuge; and you had either forgotten or never experienced such halcyon days; and so you had no choice but to long for a brighter future, though, having resided in such a cave for as long as you could remember, you had no way to know what such a future might be like and therefore no way to plan for it, no way to construct it in your head, so that, though your hope was what some might call pure, it was nonetheless groundless and endless, in every sense that either of these terms may carry.’ Jesus Waterbleeding Christ, does that sound right to you?”

“Absolutely.” Earnest grinned at me. It did, indeed.

(Forgive me, by the way, if I don’t remember exactly the captions in this tarot book and must, for lack of reference, improvise.)

“Sorry, man. Hold on, *I’m* gonna need some self-care after that one—” Claire took another, longer hit of the poppers. She closed her eyes, bowed her head, and started to reach out and grab my arm but quickly retracted her hand like it had found a searing pocket of air. (The tension-lines between us quivered in neon agitation.) After a deep sigh, she resumed:

Present: “This is much better. Not incredible, but certainly better. ‘You see a light in front of you: You’re not sure what it is, nor whether it portends anything particularly good, nor whether, indeed, you are moving toward your front at all; but nevertheless you see a light in front of you, and it gives you hope, if nothing else, which is precisely what you have wanted—no, needed for a very long time; and, if nothing else, it gives you some metric by which to determine the direction you’re headed, which makes all of your arduous labors seem more grounded, though of course, in the end, they’re only grounded in this ambiguous light, whose color you are not yet close enough to discriminate, and whose significance is only up to you until you reach it, which may be a long way off or only tomorrow, for the light’s size and amplitude give no

indication of its distance, which is of no import to you, anyway, for it has only appeared to give you a *direction*, to indicate that you are moving, which is, after all, a far cry better than walking in empty darkness, notwithstanding that it presents to you, for the first time, a measurable test for *failure*, which grants to your present struggles a new dimension of pressure.”

Earnest burst with a room-shaking belly-laugh. “I have something to ask you two, once we’re done.” Our tension-lines twitched and scattered sparks: Some snapped, some found new roots, they could not be mapped.

“I’m all ears,” Claire tipped up the corner of Earnest’s future. “I’ll just give you the gist of this one.” She flipped it.

Future: ““You have finally succeeded in that upon which you have labored patiently...a release, a time of healing, an open clearing in a dense forest, finally time to grapple with your past...the tangle has not quite unraveled, for the tasks you set yourself are too immense to *resolve*, but it has, at least, shrunk by a considerable width...the world seems smaller, more remote, without the crushing weight of expanse...you allow yourself to rest.”

“God damn.” She looked over the three cards in awe. “Helluva glow-up.”

Earnest doubled over, quaking with laughter. When he raised his head, his eyes were humid. “How’s that sound to you?”

“Utter bullshit,” I beamed. “That future is impossible; if it weren’t, it’d be your Hell.”

He nodded and shot me a knowing squint. “Now, what I was going to ask y’all: It seems inarguable that any serious politics has to grapple with the fact that the human population *needs* to shrink—I’m talking *drastically* shrink. For environmental reasons, psychological reasons, yadayadayada. You know what I mean. But what I haven’t figured out is how to *say* it without sounding like a genocidal asshole.”

Claire, agape, looked at the three cards then up at Earnest, three cards, Earnest, three cards, me.

We went outside to smoke. Claire decided we each should diagnose the others' "most toxic traits."

I pointed a finger at each of them and said, bluntly, "Paranoia."

Earnest pointed to me and replied, "Dissatisfaction."

Claire laughed. "I have nothing to add."

3

This, from an old German legend: When the hermit Zarathustra meets the "loneliest man alive" on a mountain and claims that all forking paths that lead from the door named Moment are infinite, Loneliest tears off his mask to reveal a monstrous head with a long, black snake in place of a tongue. He tries to suck the snake back into his mouth; but Zarathustra, though he appreciates the strength in this gesture, pulls the snake out to its full length and tells Loneliest to bite down. He does, and Zarathustra tosses the poisonous head of the snake away.

But if Loneliest had lived with that snake in his mouth for so long already, such drastic action seems, at best, reactionary. At the same moment the poison is ripped from his tongue, Loneliest faces the dangers of bleeding out, of infection, of permanent speech impediment.

Nonetheless, the snake tossed away, Loneliest *laughs*, "and this was no human laughter."

Tarot, tea leaves, casting bones: If the future's brightness can be *confirmed* beforehand, the present and past can be loved without reservation.

But causality disintegrates, piece by piece, while you wait.

To laugh watching his own tongue tumble down the mountain, Loneliest must have grasped *exactly* what tarot is built to avoid. Love is impatient. Love is blind. Love is ravenous and devours everything in sight and uses all parts of the animal, even the parts that aren't there.

4

Claire read my tarot as well. I was not as interested. All I remember is my

Present: I am in the process of being waylaid by betrayal. Either my own or someone else's.

(Ah, this selective memory of mine...I often claim to have a phonographic memory for conversation. When I was younger, I would repeat everything I said silently, moving only my lips, and as I grew older, I shifted this process inward, so that I memorize all I say and hear. You can trust, then, that this story is completely true and that I am, in the end, guilty, regardless what I say to the contrary.)

I then offered to read Claire's. I don't remember the cards. I only remember what I told her, as a summary of the three:

"All these mirrors...you think you're vain, but what you call vanity is only paranoia turned inward: Your past declines through its shaky present into a low future because, though the

past was good, you have lost faith in it; and you have occupied yourself too completely with dredging it to have energy left to propel it into the future you want; and so the goodness of the past appears to be a mask covering an ugly face for which you search but which you can't find, will never find, though it becomes more and more real the more you believe in the mask, until eventually you will *create* that ugly face; and it will drag your future into ugliness with it unless you can turn out from yourself—that is, unless you can begin to see walls and not mirrors; for really there are no mirrors in this room, I swear, only walls; but this is precisely why you are such an empath: You desperately search in other people's faces for a mirror by which to see the ugly face you're certain you have, somewhere under there; and you so easily revere people because you want to see, in each person, the x-ray vision that will show you your own imagined *fatal flaw*, which must exist because you have put so much pressure on your future to go some specific way that, if you didn't assume you had some hidden but fatal flaw—that is, if you didn't *search* for a fatal flaw, whether or not you assume it exists—you would have to consider yourself irresponsible; for such a constrained future as you have constructed for yourself allows for no fatal flaw, no flaw at all; and if only you can find it and root it out, you can secure for yourself the narrow future to which you have resigned yourself by turning so far inward—by restricting possibility, that is, to that which is *observable* and *auditable*, though in actuality you know that you have far more potential than that, and that, through it all, you retain some belief in forces unobservable, or else you wouldn't give two shits about tarot. That sound about right?"

We had maintained bowstring-taut eye-contact through this summary, and I now broke it and looked around the room. The empty case of beer...the water bottle, once full of vodka...my monologue had to have come from somewhere, but I could pinpoint no source: It drew from me as though wrenched out and woven in one movement by the shimmering lines in the air, which

had burst and restrung at manic speed as I spoke, had thickened, had multiplied over and again. By the end I was certain that, under such mounting pressure, they would have to explode, that some rupturous *response* would shatter them into a million evaporating shards; and we three would find ourselves tangled in a mound of droopy-eyed affection.

“Have you thought about a career as a therapist? A psychic, maybe?” Her stare, half hurt and half loving, deflected my eyes like a like-charged magnet, so I diverted them to Earnest.

He was quiet, looking down at his phone. Feeling my gaze, he met it, surprised, and said, “I’m gonna do another popper.”

I turned back to Claire, “I’ve thought about it.”

She took the bottle from Earnest, huffed her longest yet, and reached out and squeezed my arm until both it and her knuckles blushed electric blue. One of the mirrors shattered at this sudden drop in pressure, but none of us heard or saw it.

Earnest, wordless, laughed hysteric.

5

Zarathustra to the sky before sunrise: “We are friends from the beginning: Our grief and horror and groundwork are shared; even our Sun is shared. We speak not to each other, for we know too much: silent we sit and laugh at our knowledge.”

But where do the snakes’ heads go, once we’ve thrown them away? Earnest once claimed, in a more lucid moment, that he had turned against me because we had become too close. “Friendship shouldn’t be comfort. It should be reciprocal whipping.”

Then we sat a long silence and laughed.

Another time, as Earnest and I walked together, he turned back to a pair of perfect strangers:

“You guys know how easy it is to burn down a building?”

Faced with stunned silence, he laughed and fell in step with them. “All you need is a bottle, a rag, and some foil and gasoline.” He drew diagrams in the air, he waxed poetic, waxed demonic, he lowered his face and arched his brow like a sultry Egon Schiele nude; but, judging his audience distant, he returned to me.

“It *is* easy.” He paused. “I remember almost nothing of childhood.”

He comes, he goes. He probably can’t remember this walk. Time, in the words of Georges Bataille, is “a disembodied cock that only withdraws to reenter.” Hence Friedrich Nietzsche’s insistence that a superhuman must possess, rather than simply a *strong* will, a *long* will—long, turgid, throbbing, ever rising...

These new Brooklyn apartments, all cinderblock—nothing to burn but the inhabitants.

These Brooklyn apartments, all staircase and slant, climb and descent, not a foot flat, scents of incense and infant corgis named after food—no place for the bottle to burn but our laps, no way to sniff out its billows until it rolls down the stairs, which it must, for all must burn from bottom up.

This apartment, its sparking wires bare, live—no resistors but its inhabitants. But these saboteurs are unreliable: I am, in the end, guilty.

Claire said she was tired. She lied. We knew. She'd taken a Vyvanse at sunset. I hugged Earnest long and hard. Apparently only ten percent of schizophrenic cases in men is treatable: I told him I'd see him as soon as I could, but I hugged him again, longer, harder. The most bereaved can never leave the wake. He left.

Claire and I sat on opposite ends of her bed and talked. I don't remember how long, and I don't remember what we said.

By nervous reflex I memorize conversations: We started out cross-legged, facing the wall. She extended her legs toward me and folded her hands in her lap. I leaned my back against the wall and stretched my left arm over the row of pastel pillows between us in mimicry of Michelangelo's Adam. (If God is dead, to whom do I reach?) I tucked my left foot under my extended right knee so that my left knee jutted to within a foot of her feet. The lines of tension thuswise tightened, she crossed her legs again. All this, slowly, two climbing vines and their tropisms, over the course of hours.

"We should sleep. You're driving to work tomorrow?" She hopped down from the bed to put her glasses in their case.

"Yes. Ten hours, and work's at 6:30, so I should leave here by seven to be safe."

The lights off, we instantly entwined our drooping tendrils. She twirled my chest hairs in her fingers. "The tension is so thick it's tangible." It descended on us, danced, lit our faces lightly, lightly pressed, caressed our careful fingers... "But your relationship's not open 'til you go to Germany, huh?"

"Right."

She turned away and formed her back to fit my front. On her shoulder, our hands mocked our aborted futures: They grasped and tangled, pushed away; they squeezed and interwove and broke apart, returned with trepidation, fingers feather-light their tips on palm or backhand fuzz alighted, traced triangles alongside shapes unnamable, only to depart again, to retreat to ribs or shoulders, in search of more hospitable anatomy. Finding none, our hands returned, grasped and tangled, pushed away...

These movements proclaim my guilt in all directions. We slept.

7

To sacrifice: Literally, “to make sacred.” And so the highest teasing treason against sacredness is to gather all the necessary materials and then leave them, preserved, at the altar.

If Jesus’ crucifixion renders humanity sacred *en masse*, the most heinous criminal is the centurion who drops his nail and hammer and walks away from the cross: He has robbed all humanity of its salvation.

And so I, as I refused to nail...

Or! I did exactly what I told her: “I’m going to be gone long and often: We have to allow ourselves to be slow.”

Slowness: The ritual is not some quick, violent burst, but rather a prolonged burn: All of life magnetized into the field of the periodic, slow sacrifice: It begins as a death sentence is pronounced, and each of the rituals surrounding that sentence—the months and years of waiting

on death row, the last rites, the last meal, the Green Mile promenade—forms a part of its nuanced whole, so that, when the sacrifice finally *ends*, it has burned into frenzy: Rather than a fast eruption, in which the beginning and the end are the same moment, a slow stream of magma punctuated by bursts of ash and steam, by which, in the end, whether or not more is stacked on the altar, more *time* is wrapped up in the sacrificial dance.

Thus Adam has waited, arm outstretched, for the past half century, not simply to touch God's hand, but to *shove him off the cloud*.

Ha! So the tarot lied: I betrayed nothing. If the highest criminal is the centurion who drops his hammer and nail, I am practically a god for having *prolonged* the death of Christ, so that its deliciousness could be tasted in a range of contexts, in all the ins and outs of life over a long wait: The Stations of the Cross come to number in the dozens, hundreds, there are encyclopedias, heavy indexes, fields of study whose task is only to categorize them; and no Station has lost an iota of holiness for all that; and the only Station missing is the *death* itself, with its earthquake and rolling stones; and yet no Station has lost an iota of holiness for that, either.

Ah, but in the end, I awoke and left, and she rolled to her side and reached out sleepily to squeeze my hand, and she said, "Fuck you," and she dropped out of school and left New York three days later.

My first night in Germany, splayed, mostly sleepless, across a sheetless bed in an overnight room above a Thai massage parlor, I had a dream:

Claire and I sat in a boat. It had sprung a leak, and we were sinking slowly into five-foot-high-and-rising floodwaters inside some sort of warehouse. Sharks, octopi, and enormous moray eels drifted under and around our boat, and I grabbed a cooler from a nearby stack and tried to press it hard enough into the water that we would stay afloat.

Meanwhile, Earnest waded through the flood, calmly pulling the boat through the warehouse's halls and atria. The animals parted around his chest. Orange octopi brushed against his legs and flinched away, turning bashful-blue.

The menaces circling beneath us must have been harmless: I could have jumped out, and Claire with me, and foregone the harrowing task of keeping us afloat.

But then, to be harrowed, to reach such heights of exhaustion, to share such a lethal game—Claire, for her part, did nothing to rebuke my efforts. And Earnest, for his part, only laughed.

And I awoke laughing. On the street outside my window a stern-faced man stood in traffic and moved slowly through a procession of tai-chi poses. Across from him, on the sidewalk, a neo-Nazi clad head to toe in black leather shouted, "Heil Hitler! Just try to arrest me!" And I shut the curtains and rolled in fits of laughter. The model boat on the bedside table capsized. The lamp beside it flickered and extinguished. And I laughed the explosive, ecstatic laugh of the innocent.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *"Amor Fati" is Gonzo philosophy: The characters are all real people, the first person narrator is me. The title and Zarathustra interludes are taken from Friedrich Nietzsche, and the narration proceeds through a range of nihilist themes, some of which were developed by Earnest himself (who is a far better writer than I). Style-wise, I took the seven-part structure from Milan Kundera, Czech god of architecture, and the rest of the style draws from László Krasznahorkai and the advice of Souli Boutis and Helen Hill, two writers based in North Carolina.*

BIO: *Jonah Howell lives in central Germany. His recent work has appeared in Expat Press, Surfaces, and Waxing & Waning, and his debut collection of poetry and essays, Empathology, is forthcoming from BHN Books.*