NA/YA Short Stories Academic Settings by 20+ Authors

# AESTHETIC: A DARK ACADEMIA ANTHOLOGY



Higher Education by Guy Prevost

It was one of those brilliant days that would fulfill the dream of any Director of Alumni Relations. The two teams, in bright red and orange uniforms, were battling it out on the field against a stunning backdrop of matching colors on the autumnal trees. Students, their parents, and a better than expected turnout of alumni watched - not so much interested in the outcome of the contest but absorbing the lazy pleasures of a fall afternoon. The institution wasn't known for its football prowess, and the home team was being throttled by the visitors, a college of similar size but more prodigious athletic endowment. Beyond the goalposts the new film center, the crown jewel of the cinema department, stood out with its sweeping titanium walls shining with reflected sunlight. Surrounding the field on the other three sides were the brownstone library and classroom buildings, yes, with their *ivy covered walls* shaded by elms turning a blazing crimson.

Paul Townsend took in the scene from a coveted table outside the student union. He munched a hot dog, handed to him with an alluring smile from a current female student, while he occasionally sipped hot apple cider from a paper cup. Splayed on the table was his alumni packet, complete with free tote emblazoned with the college name and the detailed event schedule of the homecoming weekend which, it so happened, coincided with a reunion of graduates from the elite Academy of Letters. It was this reunion that brought Townsend back to his old college, a return that he viewed with a mixture of apprehension and excitement.

The main attraction was P.D. Ladd, his former mentor and teacher. Ladd was to be featured reciting poetry that evening at the Academy Reunion Dinner, accompanied by a jazz combo. He was to be joined in the performance by another graduate of the program, perhaps its most famous alumnus, a TV producer by the name of Richard Kaplan. The prospect of such an incongruous coupling was too hard to resist, on one level of theatrical absurdity. But on another level Townsend was anxious to see Ladd again, to re-connect, if only to let him know that he had actually named a character in a film script after him, that his memory and influence had endured that long.

Ladd had embodied the essence of the Renaissance man – the Academy ideal to which all scholars were meant to aspire. Robust and tall, he had once had ambitions to become an actor. Instead he became a Russian scholar, novelist, a poet, and proponent of union causes. He had worked as a stevedore in his youth and had written a published novel about it. His poetry appeared in *The New Yorker*. He spoke Russian so well that he was Robert Frost's translator on his tour of the Soviet Union and he was the heralded translator of many Russian classics. Townsend had taken his class "Prison Metaphors in Modern Literature," open to Academy scholars only, which had introduced him to such exemplars of the genre as *Darkness At Noon* and Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*.

These pessimistic works appealed to Townsends' sometimes morbid sensibilities and fatal attraction to books that justified or sanctioned in his own suffering. That suffering came from many sources, but *not* from political or economic oppression. In his darker moments Townsend still struggled to keep his personality together with the psychological equivalent of gaffer's tape and chicken wire.

In those days Townsend figured himself a poet and Ladd encouraged him. For his senior thesis he did a chapbook of poems many of which, as he got older, Townsend realized were rather naive expressions of adolescent frustration and yes -suffering. Yet there was something refreshingly honest and up front about his work that Ladd had admired.

Townsend had e-mailed his former mentor several weeks before to see if they might meet for coffee and catch up after all these years. Ladd had returned the e-mail, seemed to remember him fondly, and suggested they connect at the dinner itself. He would be driving down from Vermont for the event, and wouldn't have much time for a private confab. Though disappointed, there was enough positive in Ladd's reply – especially that he even *remembered* him, that Townsend felt an uplift dispelling his nagging doubt about making out the checks for the \$50 attendance fee and the nonrefundable airfare from Los Angeles.

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In the failing light of the previous afternoon Townsend arrived at the Hartford airport and rented a car to take him to the campus. After figuring out the keyless entry system, and being more than momentarily confused by the soundless engine of a late model Prius to which he'd been upgraded, he had hurried to a dinner with an old friend and fellow Academician whom he hadn't seen in twenty years, Mathew Edelman. Edelman had navigated the shoals of the Academy of Letters with savvy and brilliance - he went on to be a tenured college teacher and published art critic – and Townsend always felt a little overshadowed by Edelman's practical ambition, diligence, and accomplishment. Townsend himself tended to be a bit lazy, feeling entitled as an artist and a writer and a hedonist (emphasis on the latter) - and these were all qualities further highlighted by the era they went to college, the late sixties – and even further by the Academy itself. For example a key part of the program was a year abroad in Paris to study with some of the Sorbonne's top French critics of the structuralist school. Townsend's French was never fluent enough to fully appreciate or take advantage of this enviable opportunity. Instead he spent most of the time chasing women with more or less success, acting in "experimental" plays, and hanging out with other foreign students. Then the whole country erupted in political upheaval, strikes, government shutdowns, protests. Townsend enjoyed all of this with his mates, but Edelman learned French perfectly while

Townsend, though he had more fun, never mastered the language, and was always embarrassed by Edelman's superiority in this regard.

Townsend had rushed to be on time for the pre-appointed dinner with Edelman. He didn't want to be considered a fuck-up even still, being perennially late, missing deadlines for applications to graduate schools, not learning French well enough, and scoring only *cum laude* instead of *summa cum laude* on the final oral exams. He was especially sensitive since Edelman had also been Ladd's protégé and Ladd had even written a blurb for his published book on weather metaphors in nineteenth century French literature.

It was Edelman who was late at the Chinese restaurant on the gentrified main street of the town. Townsend sat there alone at the table a bit peeved with himself for having rushed, and thinking about the panic he felt when he was unable to get into the trunk of the Prius where he'd hastily tossed his bag containing the directions to the restaurant. The new rental car had some strange features, such as the trunk locking automatically when the engine was running, which led to Townsend's distress on the shoulder of the freeway, commuter traffic rushing by perilously, while he figured it all out.

Finally Edleman charged in with his usual energy, and looking not that different than he did twenty years before. He still had what used to be called an "Afro," bushy curly black hair with grey sideburns and darkly complected skin. He could have been Egyptian. He wore an aviator jacket and had the somewhat drawn but healthy look of someone who worked out at the gym incessantly. Townsend remembered Edelman's send-up of Black House, the Afro-American society on campus. Sometimes they'd pass some of the black students walking by at night who would mistake Edelman for a "brother."

"What's happening, man?" they'd ask.

And Edelman, whose comedy tended to be offensive, would reply contemptuously in his most illiterate sounding dialect: "Nuffin'!" Or they used to goof that Edelman was actually the Prince of Chad, the arid African nation, sent by his dictator father to get a western education.

He and Edelman settled in to the dinner. In the catch-up Townsend trotted out his latest accomplishment, the writing of *Octo-shark*, a suspense film about a hybrid creature, part octopus, part shark, developed as a military weapon by a CIA type organization. Of course the creature escapes its tank, runs amok, etc. etc. Anything actually on television, SyFy Channel in this case, always had some cache, some bite, even though it was not a published critical study of nineteenth century French literature. Townsend presented the case with enough humor and aplomb to hold his end up.

"I wrote Ladd about it. I even named a character after him. The distinguished scientist Dr. P.D. Ladd."

" I love it," said Edelman. "A metaphor for the military-industrial complex. Can I rent it?"

"I'll send you a copy of the DVD."

Edelman meanwhile went on about his latest article in *Art World* in which he featured a critical essay on the work of a new Japanese artist.

"They flew me to Kyoto to meet him and see his studio during the cherry blossom season," he said.

"I'd love to see it."

"And I'll send *you* a copy. Did you see where Mark Kaplan will be here? I didn't know he was an Academy grad," said Edelman.

"Right."

"Do you know him? I thought that since you're in Hollywood?"

"Well, no. It's not that kind of Hollywood, my stomping grounds, unfortunately."

"I'm going to see if he'd be willing to come out to Claremont to give a seminar on narrative structure to my film classics class." And then it struck Townsend that the advertised appearance of the producer probably did wonders for the turnout at the Academy reunion. Kaplan was also part of the draw for himself. He might have a word with the guy and somehow work his way into a writing gig on his hugely successful TV series.

"It's a hoot isn't it?" Edelman continued. "This guy is going to be reciting poetry with Ladd. Whom I can't wait to see by the way. I e-mailed him and we're having coffee tomorrow before the football game."

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This cut Townsend deep.

"Did I tell you I had a dream about you a few weeks ago?"

"No. What was it?" Townsend was almost afraid to ask.

"I don't think I can tell you, not now." Townsend knew the direction he was headed because he'd been informed by a mutual friend of the strange turn that life had taken for Edelman. It was in a way, a bit of misfortune, or whatever, that may have balanced the books in Townsend's favor in their running unspoken competition. Townsend, upon hearing the news, had tried to be politically correct and understanding.

What happened was that at the age of twenty-five, after starting life as a college professor, getting married, and having two children, Edelman fell in love with a male graduate student. He divorced, moved in with the graduate student with whom he'd started an affair, and had lived with him ever since. The mutual friend had told Townsend that Edelman had revealed this to him over a lunch, replete with details of the realization, the yearning looks across the athletic field at the graduate student, a lithe jogger, the trip to the English Lake District where the matter was consummated and so on. The friend had told Townsend that Edelman provided too much detail and too much information, as if he was seeking, well, he didn't know what exactly, but it made him uncomfortable, not the actual facts but the way they was being "shared."

Of course it had made Townsend think back on the college days. Edelman was never one to have a girlfriend. But he had assumed it was because he had no time for personal life, given his burning ambition.

Still, he had to admire Edelman for not letting it break the stride of his career. He had good relations with the former wife and son and lived now twenty years later with the graduate student. While Townsend, reeling from his second divorce, was hardly on speaking terms with his ex-wives.

"It's almost time for the lecture. Let's go. I'll introduce you to Butterfield. His wife is a post-doc in art criticism. She loves me."

Townsend and Edelman sauntered across the college green to the chapel for the Annual Montaigne Lecture of the Academy of Letters. This was a

featured part of the Academy Reunion, a happy coincidence of the Montaigne Lecture delivered every year and financed by a former alum who had founded the *Weekly Reader*. Tonight the subject was to be "Friendship," inspired by Montaigne's famous (at least to a certain small number of literary wonks) essay on the subject. The lecturer was a dapper Princeton professor of philosophy in a grey herringbone jacket. He loitered around the podium that was set up in front of the altar of the chapel.

There were not more than forty in the audience, all presumably Academy alums. Townsend didn't recognize a soul. Many were graying and undistinguished. It could have been the Rotary meeting of a small town. The un-glamorousness of it all depressed Townsend. Apparently he and Edelman were the only representatives of his class.

Then to Townsend's surprise, Edelman was greeted as returning hero or celebrity. The president of the college, Jim Butterfield, much slicker than most of those present, was milling about with his wife. He was younger than either he or Edelman, a tall animated man who might have once been a fraternity president. His wife, appropriately attractive, waved heartily at Edelman.

"Mathew!"

Townsend followed Edelman over. The wife embraced and cheek-kissed Edelman, a true sport, who introduced Townsend as a writer and Academy graduate.

Townsend suddenly felt reassured. Here he was chatting with the President of the University.

"I loved your piece on the Sajimoto," said the wife to Edelman.

"Have you had a chance to look at her dissertation?" asked Butterfield. "Her comment on the video sculpture "Peeing on the Animals" was especially profound I think."

Townsend overheard this, astonished by the subject matter.

"I'll take a look as soon as I get back to Claremont," said Edelman. Fortunately they did not interrogate Townsend on "what he was doing now." But presently Edelman turned and introduced him to a woman in her early sixties who looked vaguely familiar.

"Monsieur Townsend, tu te souviens de Madame Claray? Il était aussi à Paris avec nous pendant les événements, soixante-huite." Townsend backpedaled. This was Marissa Claray, the French professor and liaison for the abroad program years ago -and apparently still.

*"Bien sûr, comment ça-va, Monsieiur Townsend?"* She rattled off another sentence in rapid fire French that Townsend didn't understand at all. He backed off the way he normally did when people spouted at him like this, especially with the glib and fluent Edelman around. He did his best to reply in kind and welcomed the interruption as Butterfield ascended the podium to introduce the Professor.

Professor Beekman from Princeton presented slide visual aids to support his lecture on friendship. It was the quintessence of the Academy approach, a strange blend of anecdote, allusions to philosophy (Nietzsche always a good bet), modern films, drama, and history. *An inter-disciplinary program centered on a core list of seminal works of western literature further informed by relevant historical and philosophical texts*. Beekman flashed famous paintings on the screen to illustrate the lack of same that represented or portrayed friendship, and pointed to a similar lack in the literary canon except for a few exceptions, notably the Balzac novel *Cousin Pons* and the Henry/Falstaff relationship in the Shakespeare plays.

It was here that Townsend was reminded of his problems with the Academy, though he had stuck with it for the three years and actually graduated *cum laude*. Especially in retrospect much of it seemed pretentious and out of touch – this was why, at least he told himself, Townsend could never sink his teeth fully into all the obscure works they were supposed to read. Even *Ulysses* was a tough one, though a special Joyce expert had been hired to help them fathom its mysteries.

Beekman continued with his sometimes interesting and trenchant observations, but he missed some obvious points about his topic.

As Townsend discussed with him after the lecture at a small gathering around *hors d'oeuvres*. Edelman was deep in conversation with the new Chair of the program, another surprisingly young fellow wearing one

earring. The subject was a "new hire" for the Academy, a Spanish literary post-doc who had conducted a wonderful seminar earlier in the day on a picaresque novel that pre-dated Cervantes, the *Lazarillo de Tormes*.

"I enjoyed your lecture," said Townsend. "And particularly your comment on how difficult it is to form new friendships as you get older." This was something Townsend could relate to. "But you left out a critical point."

"Oh, and what was that?"

"Well, in my experience," said Townsend, "A critical element as you get older is how well a friend or acquaintance gets along with your spouse. Because if one doesn't like the other, for any particular reason, you can write off the friendship."

"Of course that's true, old boy. But I couldn't possibly have mentioned it. My wife was in the audience. Excuse me, "and he sallied off to find the aforementioned spouse.

The new Chair of the Program was holding forth with Edelman and some others.

"I was in the Lounge this morning, perusing the Senior Theses lined up in those black binders. You know we keep them all in chronological order, since 1964. There are over five hundred of them. I was in awe really, as I thought about how much work, research, blood, sweat, tears and talent all those binders represented."

Townsend shuddered. The last thing he wanted to do was take a look at some of his old poetry. He told Edelman he'd see him tomorrow and asked him to say hi to Ladd.

Townsend had deliberately chosen an out of the way B and B to stay for the weekend. He could have booked one of the motelish places nearer the campus but he reckoned to treat himself to Donegan B and B right on the Connecticut River. He had thought, and now he knew he made the right decision, that it would be a welcome respite.

Townsend slept surprisingly well in the lesser-priced Thoreau suite that was actually one room with a four-poster bed on the second floor with a

shared bath. When he descended that morning he found the garrulous B and B owner Straethern, a hulking New Jersey native who was putting out the fresh preserves in the dining room over a table decorated with lace. Other guests had already departed leaving Townsend to Straethern's gab, something which Townsend always knew was a downside, or sometimes was, of the B and B experience. The proprietors' need to talk bespoke people who were slowly going out of their minds.

But Straethern wasn't too bad. In fact he was impressed that Townsend was a graduate of the college, even of the Academy, of which he'd vaguely heard. Before serving breakfast he insisted on showing Townsend the special remodeled Emerson cottage with a view of the river – views were advertised but not necessarily delivered from each unit. The river was actually a quarter mile from the bluff separated by a swath of railroad thoroughfare and swamp - a feature conveniently omitted from the B and B website. Still Townsend admired the tile, the custom fireplace, the natural oak shelves etc. that Straethern had installed in the cottage. Home remodeling of any kind was anathema to Townsend and he had to admire those with the taste or talent or energy to do it. He promised to keep it in mind for future visits.

Straethern's wife eventually made an appearance and doted over Townsend back in the dining room. He started to relax and congratulate himself on an excellent choice of accommodation. Despite Townsend's skeptical view of his own education, this couple saw him as a Rhodes scholar and averred that another Academy alumnus would be checking in that evening, a woman. Townsend perked at this. He could give his fantasy life free rein, thinking of the possibilities.

Relishing the homemade French toast and preserves he was glad he was missing the special alumni breakfast at the old school cafeteria. Straethern explained that he retired from his former business as a "seal salesman," before buying this former residence of a semi-famous writer and turning it into a B and B. Townsend wondered what a "seal salesman" was.

*"Wax* seals, to put on locks, to make sure they haven't been tampered with. For shipments of cash, or goods on trucks or whatever." He went on to

tell a joke, the point of which revolved around Lancelot and Guinevere and King Arthur. The King leaves Guinevere with Lancelot, going in search of the Grail, but Lancelot is a young buck. So the King puts a chastity belt on his beautiful younger wife Guinevere to insure her fidelity. Trouble is, he left the wrong key." In the telling Townsend lost the punch line but gleaned this was a joke Straethern often told his potential buyers as it dramatized the need for a wax seal. If only the King had the use of the wonderful invention? Townsend tried to remember the story, recalling that the assigned reading in the Academy had been Wolfram Von Eschenbach's Parisfal, the greatest of all German epic poems, a variation on the more vivid Arthurian legends featuring some of the same characters. There had been a great fuss over which version of the Parsifal story to use in the "core" list: the Eschenbach version or the one by Chretien de Troyes. Rumor had it that Academy faculty had almost come to blows on the matter, as the German philosophy professor Harold Stassen had prevailed.

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It was only a few hours later when Townsend continued to watch the football game from his table by the student union. No one was surprised when the home team finally lost. As the young players dispersed, he saw Edelman coming toward him with a hurried pace and good-natured grin.

"The Saracens have done it again." The final score 45 -3 was announced on the loudspeaker. The two teams ambled off the field to light applause from the appreciative crowd.

"This is not a place where we worry much about the score," said Edelman in a jocular tone. "In our day, we saw the Grateful Dead from the same hill. Had a nice day?"

"I don't think I even knew we had a football team when I was here. I know I never watched a game. But I enjoyed parts of this one."

"Just came from a seminar on green energy, and there's a reading by the novelist Amelia Simpson in ten minutes."

"Did she go here?"

"Apparently."

"How's the B and B?"

"I had a refresher on the Arthurian Legend. Which is your favorite, I forget, the Von Eschenbach or Chretien de Troyes?"

Edelman grimaced.

"So how is Ladd?"

"He cancelled. Too busy getting ready for the reading. I'll see him tonight."

Townsend was not unhappy with this revelation and they went off to the Simpson reading.

They were back in the chapel and now it was SRO, not the meager attendance of the Friendship lecture. To hear a writer read from her book and talk about her craft. To Townsend it was not so interesting but he sidled in the back pew and looked about him. The writer was reciting from her text, which was an experience always mind-numbing for Townsend, as he loved to read but not to be read *to*. His mind drifted, savoring the news of the mild snub Edelman had received from Ladd, thinking about the poor guy in the B and B and happily keeping his worry from his own dubious circumstances. He had passed the new film complex earlier, the gift from and named after a ruthless movie agent. The fact that an agent's name would be engraved forever on a campus building was surreal.

Townsend looked up at the balcony, a horseshoe shaped tier of seats that overlooked the main chapel floor. There were just a few spectators up there, but he noticed a tall grey haired man moving with painful slowness toward the front. He used an aluminum walker, appeared frail, but had an erect posture. Townsend watched as the man sat down, he must have been in his late seventies. A younger woman, perhaps fifties, was helping him. The couple sat down near the front and listened with respectful attention.

And then it dawned on Townsend. The man was Ladd. P.D. Ladd. Somehow he couldn't think of him as older. He remembered only the robust athletic guy of 32. And here he was, barely able to walk, and now listening

with obvious awe and adoration to someone he, Townsend, considered second rate.

The elaborate and fantastic nature of his own pre-conceptions hit him like Parsifal's sword. He was not that naïve, but *yes*, he was that naïve. He tapped Edelman and motioned toward the second balcony.

"Ladd, " he said. "It's Ladd."

The reception in the vast atrium preceded a formal dinner to be held in a banquet hall of the new student union. Townsend had spent most of the time talking to a woman who had graduated from the Academy some ten years ago and was now teaching poetry to inner city kids.

"I'm hoping to speak to Mark Kaplan about my program," she said. " I think maybe he'd invest some money."

"Good luck," said Townsend and moved on. He felt a tap on his shoulder.

"So glad you came back." This was a dimly remembered eminence, Paul Schwaber. Unlike Ladd, he looked completely the same. He must have dyed his hair. They talked for a while and then Townsend said, "We should remember some of those we've lost." He meant a classmate, Richard Jordan who had been a friend who died prematurely at age 50.

"Yes," said Schwaber.

"I was stunned when I heard about Richard Jordan."

"Who?"

"My class, Richard Jordan. He died of cancer."

"Oh, your classmate. I was referring to some of our faculty who have died, like Johan Boynton, I'm sorry. Here we are teaching the great masterpieces, and even we are immune to the fact that in real life the young can die early. This is my wife, Priscilla."

Priscilla presented herself, in her mid-fifties, with streaky blond hair.

"This is Paul Townsend, one of our former fellows. He was in one of the first classes with Jan Miel."

Schwaber left Townsend with Priscilla who proceeded to tell him about her four years in analysis and how this made her feel she was worthy as a

person. Schwaber himself was an analyst and had applied the principles of psychoanalysis to historical figures and fictional characters. That kind of "inter-disciplinary" fusion was greatly touted by the Academy.

In the banquet hall there were 25 tables with six to eight places at each. Townsend was relieved not to be assigned the same table as Edelman. Instead he was seated with six strangers and the Schwabers. Ladd was at the front of the room on a raised platform standing behind a microphone with a pianist and clarinetist nearby. Townsend saw him more clearly now, the reassuring features of his old friend/mentor, the movie star good looks still slightly in evidence, but he was still struck by Ladd's frailty. And he noticed the walker was hidden out of sight. Ladd took the microphone.

"Hello everyone, and welcome back." His voice was still vibrant and he had a wry smile. "I regret to announce that I will be on my own here, except for these very talented musicians. No Mark Kaplan. He sends his regrets but he's been called away to do a publicity tour in Australia for his latest series, so...MONEY triumphs once again."

There was an almost audible gasp of disappointment from the former scholars.

As the student waiters brought out the hors d'oeuvres the guests were understandably eager to talk with each other, gossip, boast, find out dirt and so on. All of which made Ladd's imminent performance, *sans* Kaplan, very poorly scheduled. There was a buzz of chatter. People wanted to talk, not listen to poetry, even with jazz accompaniment, or *especially not* with jazz accompaniment.

"OK, I will do without Kaplan and begin with my new sequence of Blue Parrot poems," said Ladd, leafing through his binder of collected works.

Alert the media. *The Blue Parrot* was a book of poems Ladd had published years ago. The Parrot was a running character in the sequence, kind of a Greek chorus from the avian world. Piano and clarinet began and Ladd recited over the din of voices.

"...through the slurry rain the Parrot squawked, WUAC!!! WUAC!!!!/ his footprints falling like leaves on the roof/ the C-150 Ford...the OIL seeping onto the tarmac."

The clarinet punctuated the verse with jazzy riffs as the piano came in atonally. The theme was Big Oil and the blue parrot's feathers were eventually fouled by oil spilled from the BP disaster.

The audience quieted down and listened with annoyed silence. Ladd commanded enough respect, and the former scholars were polite enough, to suffer his presentation. It was kind of fifties beat style, though Ladd eschewed a.) bongos and b.) beret. But his persona had never been beatnik. It was preppier.

Townsend felt bad for him. He knew his tin ear for this kind of material was shared by his fellow alumni. Everyone sat in forced silence picking casually at the wilting Caesar salad.

Twenty minutes later Ladd and his jazz duo finished to a smattering of applause. The former scholars then dove into their chicken entrees and the conversations blossomed after everyone had been so tongue-tied. Townsend was seated by Priscilla, who informed him that the Academy was actually on the cutting block in the eyes of the President. Her husband Paul was worried – not for his job – because he had tenure. But because if the program was axed he could no longer enjoy the autonomy and the loose seminar style of the Academy. Translate, Townsend thought, this incredible free ride! There were no grades given in the Academy (hence no bothersome tests to score) – instead personal evaluations written by each professor. Ok, he was being hard on them. Did he have to be so negative all the time, he thought to himself?

"Paul will be upset that Kaplan's not here. He was hoping he might endow a chair and that would help with keeping the President on board with the Academy."

On Priscilla's right was a stunning woman about twenty-five wearing a tight fitting black turtleneck under a scarlet cashmere jacket. She had just

graduated from the program a year ago, and was doing graduate work at the University of Chicago.

"When I first came to the college, I wanted to be in neuro-science," she said. "All my high school study was in physics, chemistry, and biology. Early in my freshman year I was just passing by the Academy Lounge one day, and saw all these black binders, these senior theses, lined up on the walnut shelves. And a bunch of cool people in a heated discussion about the meaning of life and language and talking about someone named Martin Heidegger, and making all these wonderful connections. It was fascinating. I found out I could join this program and I could read all these wonderful books. So I gave up my neuro-science major and joined the Academy."

"And Heidegger?" asked Priscilla.

"Yes, I really understand him now. I did my whole senior thesis on *Being* and *Time*."

"I thought that was Sartre," said Priscilla.

"No, he wrote *Being and <u>Nothingness</u>*," Townsend chimed in, as he recalled this thousand page tome which he used to keep prominently displayed on his college bookshelf to impress women such as this one.

"I was always partial to books with "Being" in the title," he went on. As Townsend hoped, the younger woman seemed suddenly interested in what he had to say. They began a conversation during which Townsend was tempted to point out that Heidegger had recently been shown to be a Nazi sympathizer. But she was so passionate about philosophy, so wonderfully naïve or perhaps just so amazingly smart and full of life – that Townsend refrained. Instead he regaled with some sure-fire tales of his year abroad during "*les événements*" in Paris – riding reconnaissance on his Vespa and reporting valuable intel to the protesting students, edited versions of amusing encounters with French prostitutes, descriptions of rollicking parties during the running of the Bulls in Pamplona.

The conversation came around to the infamous language requirement. Students had always been encouraged to read the works in the original language, instead of in translation, if they could. And the purpose of study abroad of course, was to learn at least one language other than English.

Katherine, that was the Heidegger woman's name, turned to Edgar Vann, the still active professor of history. Vann was thin and seemed ageless, wearing a bow tie, as always, speaking with a glimmer in his eye and a sense of amusement. Though his accent was American, he seemed English in his very bearing. Townsend could imagine him smoking a pipe and reading Gibbon at an English Gentleman's Club. In fact Vann was an expert on Gibbon and considered his autobiography required reading for the program, as opposed to the more famous *Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire*.

Townsend remembered reading the autobiography. It was one of the few works he recalled in any detail, mainly because Gibbon, some kind of English aristocrat, was married at age 16 to a beautiful woman of 21. The famous historian credits this with making his early years free of sexual frustration, so that he could devote his time to his studies. If only the Academy made the same arrangements for the scholars, Townsend used to think, as he recalled his own angst during this period. The university was not co-ed in his day.

"We still have the language requirement, but the bar for passing is not set very high, never has been," said Vann. Townsend did not say what he was thinking, that he himself was a case in point. "And even among our own faculty we cover a range of abilities in this area. We have Harold Stassen, who speaks 16 languages fluently, and we have Paul Scwhaber who speaks one – that is English – passably well."

Priscilla and the rest laughed.

After the dessert and endless testimonials, Townsend stepped out into the chilly air on the balcony. He'd had too much to drink and could feel himself descending into a kind of rabbit hole of despond. He stared through the window at his fellow alumni, the outsider looking in, as he always seemed to see himself. He toasted them with a mixture of cynicism and admiration. He felt like those protagonists in Ladd's prison lit, except it was the prison of his own fragile personality, never quite finding solid ground...

He took another swill of his drink. "Assume a virtue if you have it not," the Hamlet line chimed in from some distant corner of his reading list. Time to see Ladd, face the master with all his faults.

Back inside Townsend saw him holding court with various other students in the back of the room. Nearby was his younger wife who said nothing.

"She's deaf," he heard Edelman say, approaching with a drink in his hand. "I've already talked to him. He's in good form. That's his wife and she's deaf...but I was embarrassed for the poetry, *toi aussi*?"

"I see you were at the President's table."

"Mon vieux, bien  $s\hat{u}r$ . The program's on the block, as I guess you've heard. We have to give it our support."

Townsend wasn't sure he wanted to support it, but he ambled over to the Ladd receiving line. When his turn came, Ladd greeted him warmly.

"So, the author of *Octoshark*." Townsend was shocked he knew about the film. Though proud of the script, Townsend was disappointed by the finished product mutilated by the sleazy director and second rate production values.

"I'm certainly glad you didn't see it. But I did name a character after you. The eminent marine biologist Dr. P.D. Ladd. He was played by the old character actor who himself is fairly well known."

"Well, I'm honored."

His wife hung back and remain stone-faced. Townsend saw the walker behind him.

"Are you still skiing?" The question blurted out of Townsend. A terrible gaffe. Of course he wasn't skiing. Townsend immediately was ashamed.

"No, not doing that anymore. You see I have this contraption over there. I'm a little vain, I confess, so I don't have it out in the open." Townsend was grateful he let him off the hook.

"So you've found a niche in Hollywood."

"Not really Hollywood. Let's say Hollywood Adjacent. For now. *Octoshark*. Last year, *Dinoshark*. Next year *DinoCrock*. A long way from Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*. But come to think of it, there is a beheading in *Octoshark*." "I see you haven't lost your sense of humor."

"I enjoyed the Blue Parrot reincarnated."

"Thank you, and what about your poetry? *Echoes from the Soul*. It's still in the Academy Thesis Library. I hope you haven't given up."

Townsend's shame deepened. He was silent. He hadn't written poetry for years, though he yearned to do it. He had some ideas roiling in his head, but he was swamped by insecurity and a sense of futility. For so long he'd been toiling in the lower depths of "B" movies. He couldn't answer.

"Paul?" Townsend stared at the floor. The vortex of his disappointments and failings opened like Poe's maelstrom. He couldn't speak and if he was alone he would have wept. In the face of the master now, with so many achievements. Still...

"Who would read it?"

"Read what?

"Who would read the poetry? What people want are creatures stalking beaches, "kills" every ten pages, hot girls in bikinis. Who will read it?"

"I will. It would be my pleasure. But only if you will do me a favor."

Ladd reached down into his tote and removed a DVD of *Octoshark*. The cover featured a lurid rendering of the underwater menace stalking a beautiful female swimmer on the ocean surface: the upteenth rip-off of the *Jaws* artwork from years ago.

"Would you sign this for me?"

Townsend's shock rendered him speechless.

"Yes, I did see it but you didn't give me a chance to tell you. I watched it with my grandson...Not bad, not bad at all. He was tickled that I knew the writer. And a lot more people saw this than read the Blue Parrot poems."

He took the magic marker offered by Ladd.

"Make it to Jonathan, that's my grandson's name...oh, and here's my address, just my name and the village in Vermont. Send me anything you've written that doesn't involve hybrid creatures stalking girls in bikinis."

After midnight, Townsend and Edelman sat on a bench by the football field in the cold but bracing evening.

"The new Chair of the program is pretty damn cute, isn't he," said Edelman. Townsend found this off-putting, and wondered if it were some kind of "pass." He let it go.

"I prefer the recent graduate, Katherine," said Townsend. "She liked my riff on Sartre."

"Ah well, *chacun à son goût*. How did it go with Ladd? Did you talk to him?"

"Yes, and he offered to take a look at some new poems. And he's a fan of *Octoshark*."

"Damn!" he said theatrically. "Now I *have* to see it. Really, that's quite something. Congratulations."

They were silent for a moment.

"I wonder if the Academy will survive," said Edelman. "I mean I should talk, teaching the arcane subject of nineteenth century French literature. But I do change out the syllabus once in a while. And I give grades."

"Of course it will survive. It must. We both have to send letters to your pal, the President, giving it our endorsement." Of this, Townsend was absolutely sure.

Later Townsend finally pulled into the Donegan's parking lot in his Prius. There was a light on above the front door and he noticed a new car, an obvious rental, parked just outside the circular gravel driveway. Otherwise it seemed everyone was asleep so he gingerly shut the car door and tried not to make too much noise as his feet crunched on the gravel driveway.

Still on a high from the evening, he entered the vestibule and started upstairs when he noticed another light on in the rear of the main floor, coming from the porch. He decided to hang out there for a while. He had no desire to go to bed.

When he crossed to the porch he saw a young woman, seated comfortably on the sofa. She had taken off the cashmere, was down to the pure black turtleneck, and had her shoes off. Beside her was a bottle of white wine and she was sipping from a glass.

"Oh, it's you," she said.

"What?"

"The proprietor told me there was another Academy person here... he's a character isn't he?"

"Did he tell you about the wax seals?"

"As a matter of fact he did. So that Academy background really comes in handy, doesn't it? I mean the Parsifal legend and so on...Drink?"

Townsend tried to be cool and suave.

"I mean I was wondering if it was you... here," he said. "After we spoke at the reception I figured you for someone who might not want to be at the Days Inn."

She got up and took an empty glass from the table used for the wine reception earlier. She poured Townsend a glass.

"Thanks, cheers..."

The night is young, Townsend thought, and getting younger.