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Clean Up On Aisle Nine

REFLECTION STATEMENT

Reading for leisure has become a hobby of the past, in a world where Netflix and TikTok mindlessly consume our time. Street libraries adorn the corners of neighbourhoods, thrift shops sell best-sellers for a fraction of their original price, and e-books can be read to us courtesy of Audible. So... what is stopping us from reading?

My short fiction 'Clean Up On Aisle Nine' amalgamates the contemporary aversion to reading for leisure into a monster, which postmodern writers try to defeat by resurrecting a hero. I engage on a journey through literature, moving through the works of Eugène Ionesco, Shakespeare, and Homer – as well as their characters Berenger, Ariel and Achilles – in a nine-chapter narrative that explores how appropriations can reshape character identity. Shakespeare, Homer and Ionesco captivated me through the similarities of their aim – to advance to what degree language can explain human lives in each of their respective contexts. I display their voices using the textual imagery of a well, which alludes to the notion of a literary continuum in which the voices of past authors mingle in a constantly overlapping perpetual stew.

Ultimately, my major work rests on the inability of fictional heroes to resurrect their audience's love for reading – the hero we need is you, the reader.

SHORT FICTION

Can you hear that?

Listen...

I'm trying to listen...

There!

We are being read.

Hear what?

It's just us, now

Full fathom five thy father lies

Of his bones

are coral made

If I had a pen

I would write us an army

To rescue us from this well

ssshhh

Those are pearls that were his eyes
Sea nymphs hourly ring his knell

Hark! now I hear them

I hear them too

1. The Writer

The writer despised every element of their mission.

As they crested the rocky hilltop, the writer considered the events which had sent them on this ill-fated goose-chase. For the last week, they had trekked across dangerously perilous terrain, waded through leech-infested knee-high grass and hiked across cliff-tops - not to mention their chance encounter with a wild goat which left them with a bite-sized hole in their breeches - all to reach this remote mountaintop location.

The writer was searching for a hero - one with an ability to fight against unwinnable odds. They must be relatable, charismatic, exude wisdom and crave knowledge. The post-post-modern audience demanded it.

Above all, they must be able to defeat fiction's most unstoppable monster.

The latest iteration of 'The Monster Problem' was causing quite the stir on the Ministry of Writing's two-thousand-and-twenty-third floor. The post-modernists were stumped. Upturning papers, they yelled obscenities at writers in neighbouring cubicles, bickering over which hero they thought would best fit the current situation.

The term 'monster' would have you believe that we're fighting a thing with claws or fangs, perhaps a devilish beast lurking in a dark corner, spying on its prey. You're probably thinking of helpless damsels and fire-breathing creatures guarding unrealistically large amounts of treasure. A typical hero would be able to defeat such a monster, except this monster - categorised '#100392B' - is not like the others.

This is a monster that eats the joy of reading. Do you recall a time when you read for leisure?

Eaten. That time is no more.

This monster ate that book you never started reading. It ate that book you began but never finished. It even ate your memory of wanting to read that book. It is an all-consuming black hole sitting comfortably in the back corner of your bookshelf, causing the mass extinction of your favourite books. This monster didn't intend to threaten literature's fate... except, it very quietly did. It did all this so subtly, so insidiously, without dropping the slightest hint that your love for reading was slipping away.

And so, our writers needed a hero. Fast.

The Ministry of Writing dispatched a singular writer - chosen randomly out of millions - to find the hero who could fight the monster. After weeks of searching, that writer has reached the remote cliff-top described by the mission.

The writer took an expansive look at the mountainous terrain. Airy grasses whistled with a warm breeze, and a lone blackbird darted across the sky. A few metres from the writer, a rocky crag tented the earth, and then the hill depreciated and flattened out to a round caldera. A dilapidated cobble well sat in the centre of the clearing. It was scrawnier than expected, undeserving of the boisterous reputation which preceded it.

Rather than water, this mythical well was rumoured to contain the voices of all the characters ever written. Crafted from black obsidian, forged by Hephaestus, hacked from the ancient walls of Babylon - whatever story you believed, its origin was ancient.

The Ministry needed a hero. They needed one post-haste, pre-made, capable of kicking the ass of this monster in showdown style. But this mythical well - and whatever heroes it could conjure - would never be enough to stop a monster that ate reading.

The writer cautiously approached the well. They clutched an empty wooden pail in their right hand. It was a pain to carry with them, but the writer could envision the slush of voices filling its contents like a milky stew. Their mission was to fill up their pail and examine the contents for a hero's voice to appropriate.

The writer stopped before the well-edge. Carefully bracing themselves, they leaned over the scrabbly wall and peered into the abyss. It was a bottomless black void, betraying no voices which lurked below. It dawned on them that it was inevitable that they might join these writers. Such was the saying at the Ministry '*the death of the author is the birth of the reader*'.

The writer stepped backwards from the edge. There was a thick rope attached to the wellhead; they fastened this firmly around the bucket's handle. They heard a faint groan which seemed to echo from the well.

With a deep breath, the writer relaxed the rope.

2. The Well

As I am rudely awakened by the coppery of the very peculiar trait of humans to somebody else's problem. Nowadays, One can benefit greatly from a bit oesophagus is filled with it. That was a will assume you have not seen this process it to you, as it is not often that I get visitors it to say. Down we go, following the haphazardly off my slippery walls. My millennia of human storytellers – as well slosh, interlacing and resonating, melding meaning and fresh ideas. This stew is the might assume they were rotting; but no, life. Contrary to popular belief, writers next generation of writers sprout from the material grows. It is a beautiful process, not for the foul stench. The bucket drops looking for someone specific. A hero. One me rummage around and see what I have you plunge into my melodious waters. tempted by the song of others. Let us

What interests me above all is the deep-rooted identity of people. Precisely because of my need to establish contact with all men everywhere.

taste of a belaying bucket, I am reminded delegate their dirty work to become humans avoid getting their hands dirty. – of dirt – I would know – my stone-carved joke, but seeing as you did not laugh, I happen before. Do not fret – I will explain who are interested in hearing what I have bucket's journey as it rebounds belly contains all the voices of five as their characters. These mingle and and merging into a perpetual stew of popular source for appropriations. One this is a very common end to a writer's *do not* die. Instead, they compost. The old and from decomposing bodies new one might describe it as magnificent, if deeper. I sense that this human is looking who can resurrect a love for reading. Let in stock. One last thing, reader, before Follow the single voice – do not get descend.

Then the men who lived in Buprasion, brilliant Elis...

All the realm as far as Myrmine and Myrsinus, frontier towns...

Then men who lived in Aspledon,

Orchomenos of the Minyans...

Fighters led by Ascalaphus

and Ialmenus, sons of Ares...

Lo?
thus, by day my limbs,
by night my mind,
For thee and for myself no quiet find.

Now the great array of Gods, ^{kept all night long}
But the peaceful grip of sleep
could not hold Zeus

I believe that the writer must
possess
spontaneity of mixture

of whatever the spontaneous imagination may give birth to
firebrand is which lucidity of and impulses subconscious of

Calling out to a vision,
Zeus winged it on,

Why is my verse so barren of new pride,
So far from variation or quick change?

Why, with the time, do I not glance aside
To new found

BERENGER: Solitude seems to oppress me.
And so does the company of other people.
I sometimes wonder if I exist myself.

to were one though as is

methods and to
compounds strange?

dam

sluice-gates the

The waters must be allowed

to come flooding out

LOGICAN: [to the Old Gentleman]:
Another syllogism. All cats die.
Socrates is dead. Therefore Socrates
is a cat.

JEAN: You don't exist, my dear Berenger,
because you don't think. Start thinking,
then you will.

sorting the comes afterwards but
the controlling,

the understanding,

the selecting.

JEAN: [to Berenger]: Fundamentally
you're just a bluffer. And a liar. You
say that life doesn't interest you. And
yet there's somebody who does.

BERENGER: Who?

I've found something.

If the hero our writer seeks does exist, then they inhabit the mind of playwright Eugène Ionesco.
Focus on this voice – I will tell the story of Ionesco.

3. The Playwright

Rue de la Huchette, Paris, 1956

At half past noon on a Sunny Paris morning, Eugène Ionesco spotted his latest Berenger. Berenger-spotting was Ionesco's favourite activity. He sat, pen-in-hand, out on the terrace of his champ du bon, which had a crafty vantage over the local bookstore across the street. It was a popular store, with white-washed walls and circular tables out the front – a primary source for overhearing platitudes and phrases spoken by customers.

His task was simple. Looking out at the everyday chaos that consumed the populace, Ionesco imagined the many conversations taking place. There would be interactions between family, glances between enemies, and people crossing the street to avoid someone they'd rather not speak to. Ionesco was fascinated by the words which perforated ordinary conversations. He heard them saying such menial things as 'The children have drunk English water', 'Terrible weather' and 'Yoghurt is excellent for the stomach'.

The part of this activity which intrigued him the most was the finding of the everyman, whom he had named Berenger. Berenger could indeed be any man. Usually, one could look at a man and tell at once that his name was Berenger. He would have an air of solitude and be out of place in life and among people. His clothing would be slightly out of order; his collar would be undone, or his hair scruffy. His eyes carried baggage; he was neglecting sleep.

Berenger was a recurring protagonist within Ionesco's plays. In *Rhinoceros* and *The Killer*, he was an ordinary man who seemed to question his place in life. In *Exit the King*, he was a royal in denial over death. In *A Stroll in the Air*, Ionesco gave Berenger control over gravity. The common link to Berenger's plight is how he responded to the absurdity of his situation. Faced with an impossible reality, Berenger always turned inwards, delivering a monologue of his innermost thoughts.

A man emerged from the bookstore, looking left and right down the street. His suit was creased, and his tie loosened. He looked young, yet weary. He was in a hurry, checking his wrist for a watch that wasn't there.

At last, thought Ionesco, that is today's Berenger.

The playwright put down his pen. Berenger was undoubtedly no hero – he merely found himself in the wrong scenario at precisely the right time. Language seemed to betray him right when he needed it most. He had no evident heroic qualities - except perhaps, in the most profound sense, as he could relate to the plights of every other human in existence.

4. Berenger

This was the crux of Ionesco's Berenger-spotting; the fact that he could be anyone is what Ionesco saw as the most heroic quality of all. As that Berenger ran off, Ionesco flipped to a new sheet of paper and began to write the story of this Berenger.

[An empty stage. Enter BERENGER]

I'm sorry. Have you been waiting long? I was held up by a slow reader.

Please remind me, which play is this? It should say on the script – you don't have a script? I have a spare... in my back pocket... or I did a minute ago. Someone's gone and taken it. Well then, just say your next line and I'll try to remember mine.

You don't remember your lines?

That's quite all right. I know Ionesco's plays very well. We will just guess which one it is from the stage décor.

Let's see. We are seated outside a café, you opposite me, around a terrace table. The shop is up-stage; visible above it a church steeple. It looks like a provincial French town. Up-stage, there is a house composed of a ground floor and one story. Blue sky, harsh light, very white walls. Between the shop and left of the stage there is a little street in perspective- yes! We are doing *Rhinoceros*. And, since you are opposite me, you must be Jean.

You say you are not Jean?

Oh dear.

You must be thoroughly confused. Forgive me – I must introduce myself. My name is Berenger.

[at this moment a noise is heard, far off, but swiftly approaching, of a beast panting in its headlong course, and of a long trumpeting]

A monster? The script never mentioned a monster. You have the wrong guy, or perhaps the wrong play altogether. If you are looking for a hero, then look to Homer, or Shakespeare. I am not the fighting type. My journey is more... well, individualised, I would say. I am *an homme revolte, a metaphysical insurgent*, at least according to the critics. I'm not one for the monster fighting business, that seems rather physical. My battles – although I really am stretching to call them that – are the mental kind. If I had battled a monster, it would be language itself..

[the noise becomes very loud]

My lord, it shall be done.

*Good. My charms are all now o'erthrown.
Toodle-doo!*

[exit PROSPERO]

[ARIEL takes centre stage, whilst BERENGER peers out from behind the rock]

I would sir, were I human. I would, I promise sir – if I knew who I was... if I knew *what* I was... I am Ariel, but who is Ariel? I am not human, nor monster. I am no hero, nor am I a villain. I am a servant, yes, I am a spirit and apparition. But who am I now? Prospero says I must slay a monster... I am not one for battles.

I have been played by all genders. Just yesterday I was a boy on stilts painted entirely blue. The day before, I was a young woman in her home-made feather costume. Next week I will be an old man in dust-white chalk. I am a projection of a 3D gif on a digital screen. I am a synthesised voice in an online musical. I am a blue sheet held up by a tent pole glued to a remote-controlled Roomba. I am infinitely appropriable, infinitely transtextual, meaning I am without any identity to define myself. But I am no hero.

[Enter BERENGER from behind the rock]

You feel out of place in life, among people-

AHH! Who are you? What is this?

[ARIEL flees behind the rock, and BERENGER follows after.]

5. The Ministry of Writing

Floor 1616, Hexagon 13B

William Shakespeare sat slumped at his desk, staring blankly at the dim glow of his desktop computer. In light of the recent emergency, he was swamped with emails from the higher-ups. The entire building was in disarray, frantically overturning papers and sifting through literature in searching for a hero.

This William Shakespeare was *not* dressed in tightly-fitted garments with frilly lace cuffs; instead, he wore a plain grey suit with a creased red tie. His hair revealed a slight bald patch towards the front, very minor, yet enough to be cemented as a defining trait of his persona. His quill was nowhere to be found – confiscated by the higher-ups due to ‘*a shortage of black ink*’- the real reason, he knew, was to phase out the old writing methods. Instead, he quickly learnt the high charms of the keyboard.

He kept a small diary of sonnets – without notifying the higher-ups – which he periodically wrote in a ball-point pen he pocketed from reception, engraved with the slogan ‘*the pen was mightier*’. The post-modernists on the topmost floor may have outlawed the publication of any fresh writing – but that did not mean Shakespeare could not write privately.

The Ministry of Writing was dedicated to the preservation of literature and reimagining works to be appropriated for modern contexts. The industry’s magic was that it could all be contained within a single office complex. The complex was divided neatly into floors, with each floor containing several million hexagons and each hexagon containing a writer.

William was not sure what floor the building was at now, but he remembered when they made a great fuss a few years ago about inviting him to celebrate the opening of floor 2016. They even had a cake with his face on it. To his surprise, the floor was significantly larger and contained even more hexagons than William’s floor. After some photographs were taken, William was ushered to the elevator and deposited safely at his level. The higher-ups did not like writers straying far from their floors – it disrupted the order of things.

William’s job was the management of his works. He was allocated a small hexagon with enough room for a desk. In the corner of his desk were a wilting plant, a gift from his wife Anne, and a pencil drawing of faerie by his son Hamnet, his inspiration for the character Ariel. It had been many years since he’d seen his family. He’d heard via email that Floor 2016 had done an excellent job recreating them for the sitcom *Upstart*

Crow. They even attached a photograph – which did not surprise William to see that they looked nothing like his original family.

This monster problem only concerned William for the inordinate paperwork it produced. However, he was on good terms with Prospero and decided the wizard's schemes would be best for trapping the monster.

Dear Prospero,
I hope this reaches you pleasantly. You are needed for an appropriation, and the defeating of a monster. I pritheer your attendance.
W. Shakespeare

Send email. Shakespeare sighed. He took out his small diary.

Do thy worst, old Time, - he wrote - despite thy wrong, my love shall in my verse live ever young.

Elevator 20W, Going Down

“Are we sure he even exists?” asked Madeline Miller, author of *The Song of Achilles*, to the man standing beside her in the elevator. They had a significantly long trip down the Basement, which was hundreds of floors underground. Neither had been below the surface before, which was off-limits except for extraordinary situations. The situation with the Monster was that extraordinary situation.

“We better hope he does” answered Stephen Fry, author of *TROY*. They had been tasked with interrogating subject H1003 for the hero ‘*AC107*’s location. “Or else we might have to make something up”.

“No harm in that”, spoke Miller.

The elevator let out a ding. They had arrived.

Basement 800BC

“Who goes there? Hades, have you come to finish me off?” a struggling Homer asked the two pairs of hands that pressed him into the seat of a metal chair. Moments ago, he had been in deep slumber, dreaming of the endless catalogue of fighters who attended the Trojan War, and now he was woken with a canvas bag shoved over his head. He felt an iron chain become clasped around his leg. It had been centuries since anyone had thought to speak to him.

“How old was Achilles at the end of the Trojan War?” questioned a female voice.

Homer was disgruntled. Being crammed in the dark for so long had bestowed ungodly pain upon his back, and he no longer recalled how to speak Greek. They pulled the bag from his head, and a divine light flooded his vision. He was in an interrogation room, the floor walls patterned with white tiles. He had been kept in the dark for so long that the bright light made him delusional with visions of Gods.

Two silhouettes stood before him. They held an English translation of *The Iliad* and were pointing at parts on the page.

“You mention it being a ten-year war”, spoke Stephen Fry, “which would put his age at 25. However, when he dies, his son Pyrrhus arrives to fight in his place.”

“Which would place Pyrrhus’s age at twelve”, continued Madeline Miller, “And Achilles’ age of fatherhood at thirteen. However, you also claim he did not leave the protection of Chiron until age sixteen, which altogether makes sense except for the-”

Homer was perplexed. Starry-eyed, he gazed unhearing at the two authors. They continued their debate over menial issues, yet Homer was personally relieved to know he existed. He’d heard many debates concerning his identity, questioning whether he was a single individual or a collective group of poets from the Homeric age. Looking down at his cascading white beard and sandaled feet, he realised he must exist.

“Homer? Are you listening?”

Homer remembered Achilles. Now he was a hero. He was valiant, handsome, iconic, and loyal to his speculated-love Patroclus. He could take down a monster, a cyclops perhaps, even the one that’s threatening the art of reading.

Homer looked between the two authors standing before him. He raised a gnarly grin, missing several teeth, then let out a small chuckle.

“Achilles... Let me tell you the tale of Achilles”

6. Achilles

The tale of swift-footed Achilles, son of Peleus, descendent of Zeus, greatest of the Myrmidons, is not often told right. We find our hero blood-drenched in the slaughter of Trojans before the towering walls of their impenetrable city. An unknown assailant launches a spear in the direction of our flawless hero’s torso, a direct hit to the heart, yet it brushes cleanly off his unpierceable bronze-plated armour, a divine gift from his sea-nymph mother, Thetis. Beneath the straps of his plumed feather helmet, his blonde hair flourishes-

“Sorry, but that’s factually incorrect.” interjected
Madeline Miller.

“It’s what?” asked Homer.

“You said *plumed feather helmet*, when really,
Bronze age helmets were made from boar tusks.”

“Boar-tusk. Yes, you are right. I will restart.”

This is the tale of the bronze-plated Achilles, a tale often told incorrectly. We find our hero battled-hardened, golden hair gleaming under his *boar-tusk* helmet. Cutting his way through the battlefield, Achilles fights with a rage to avenge the slaughter of his companion, Patroclus, to the Trojan Hector –

“Companion? What do you mean by companion?” asked Fry.

“Did you mean to say lover?” asked Miller. “It was common
for males to take on male lovers-”

“Stop interrupting me!” yelled Homer.

Both Miller and Fry were silenced.

Homer looked between the two of them. “Mythology is myth. It’s a story. Portray Achilles, or his armour, or his sexuality however you want. Just let me tell *my* story. Now, I will restart.”

This is the tale of the gold-haired Achilles, son of Peleus, descendent of Zeus. He cleaves through ranks of Trojans, pushing back their force to the banks of the river Scamander-

“Can you ask him to fight for us?” spoke Miller. “There
is a monster and it’s a matter of urgency-”

[Enter ACHILLES, *Greatest of the Myrmidons*]

I am Achilles! Son of Peleus! Descendent of the great Sky Father Zeus, overthrower of Kronos, master of lightning and storms! I bend to no mortal! You squabble like a pantheon of vain and jealous Gods! To be forced to this fate is worse than Prometheus; I am chained to Mount Ida, like vultures you pick out my guts for new content!

“Is he... talking to us?”

“Maybe we should try Odysseus...”

I am spent. Fight this war yourself, Agamemnon, or whoever you are. I am taking the Myrmidons with me.

With that, the swift-footed Achilles ran from the battle, far north past the Achaean boats beached on the Anatolian shoreline. He found a nice beachside boulder, where he sat and brooded.

“Oh why, Thetis, am I subjected to such ridicule by these modern authors?” he wallowed to the Ocean “I will not fight for them, by Zeus I will not.”

Achilles was brooding in his melancholic solitude until he heard strange noises behind the rock. It sounded like the voice of one singing and the other listing reasons why they should not fight a monster.

Berenger and Ariel hid behind the rock hoping that the Ministry writers might forget about their existence. Achilles was the perfect choice for fighting a monster, after all. They were not battle-trained, or strong enough to fight a beast.

They were both startled as Achilles rounded the corner.

“What have we here? A man... and a fish?”

Berenger and Ariel introduced themselves to Achilles, then explained the monster situation. They spoke of the Ministry of Writing’s mission and how a hero was desperately needed.

Achilles thought for a moment, then came to a conclusion. “We fight together.”

“Together?” echoed Ariel.

“I’ve never been part of a team before...” spoke Berenger.

Achilles looked between the mismatched group and was satisfied with his solution. “Three heroes are always better than one. Where is our battleground?”

7. The Bookstore

Ariel, Berenger, and Achilles, quarrelled over their defensive positions in the back aisle of the bookstore. Achilles argued that he should challenge the monster in single combat, while the other two respectfully cheered him on from behind. Ariel suggested they dress up as harpies and barrage curses upon their foe. Berenger, who was still struggling to remember his lines for this scene, argued that they should each begin ten-minute monologues on the failure of humans to communicate meaning through language.

None of them could come to a consensus on how to fight.

Equally, they were still determining exactly what they were fighting.

All digital screens in the Ministry of Writing now showed live footage from a hacked security camera positioned at the back corner of the bookstore. Shakespeare watched the scene from his hexagon, with his hope vested in Ariel.

Eugène Ionesco avidly watched the bookstore across the street from his *champ du bon*, pen in hand, with the feeling that some interesting dialogue may come of this.

A jingle of bells heralded a challenger’s entry through the bookstore’s front door. Though they could not see the opening, the three heroes instantly spun into action. Achilles stood posed with a bronze spear, Berenger adopted an unpractised fighting stance, and Ariel shuffled backstage for a costume change.

Meanwhile, at the countertop, the customer who had just entered the store was trapped in an endless dialogue with the shop-owner.

“-personally, and although I’ve never read it, a colleague from the book club I’m attending is obsessed with the author, who I’ve always found a bit indigestible, except I have the feeling that it would be just right for you, let me see, yes we have it, right at the back, yes, on aisle nine-”

Ariel had re-emerged with both hands outstretched, dressed in a terrifying beak mask and home-made feathered wings.

“You three are men of sin, whom destiny-”

“Shh!” hushed both Achilles and Berenger, turning around to face the sprite.

Ariel was disappointed at the ceasing of their favourite monologue.

Unbeknownst to our heroes, an invisible tentacle silently curved its way out of a bookshelf and curled around the heel of Achilles. It hoisted him off the ground with unmatched strength, forcing him to drop his spear. Both Ariel and Berenger watched in shock as Achilles was thrashed between bookshelves, knocking whole catalogues from their place, and filling the air with a cacophony of paper.

“Always the heel!”

The store owner heard a large crash from the back of the store. They ceased their dialogue and craned their neck in puzzlement.

The monster grabbed Ariel, holding them aloft and smashing them between books. Berenger could not get a good look at the form of such a monster – with loose sheets of paper crowding the air like a snowstorm. The events occurred so quickly that Berenger had no time to process what was happening.

“I drink the air before me, and return!”

“Tartarus! You will not claim me!”

Suddenly, both Ariel, Achilles and the monster disappeared, and Berenger was left alone in a pile of upturned books, with particles of dust floating about the air. Looking around, he contemplated the tendency of any plot to leave him alone in a mess.

Berenger stood up. “I’ve only myself to blame; I should have gone with them while there was still time. Now it’s too late. Now I’m a monster, just a monster.” He paused, then a wave of determination overcame him “Oh well, too bad! I’ll take on the whole lot of them! I’m the last man left, and I’m not capitulating-”.

The owner of the bookstore was aghast to find the books in aisle nine overturned, strewn recklessly over the floor, with a strange man in the middle of it seemingly mid-monologue. Their customer stood behind them, took one judging look at the pile of books, regretted coming to the bookstore in the first place, then bid the shop owner a good day.

The postmodernists in the Ministry of Writing were confused at the failure of the hero’s journey archetype, which had a foolproof success rate in millions of stories. In every other situation, that reader who entered the bookstore was meant to buy a book. New plans were being drawn on the two-thousand-and-twenty-third floor to test a ‘*rags to riches*’ plotline instead.

Shakespeare stared longingly at his son’s drawing of a faerie, thinking about how Prospero frees Ariel at the end of *The Tempest*. With their newfound freedom, where would Ariel go? He realised he’d forgotten to tell Ariel that they could be who they wanted to be. They would figure it out.

Shakespeare opened his book of sonnets. Capitulated by the premise of freedom, he began to write.

8. The Writer

As they looked at their distorted reflection in the wooden pail's water, the writer realised their mistake. They had spent the last half-hour hauling the bucket up from an unfathomable depth. Further back from the well-edge, a warm wind whisked around spiny mountaintop shrubs, to rest among rocky outcrops.

When they looked in the pail, they did not find voices; instead, it was filled with ordinary water. From this revelation, the writer thought long about the nature of appropriations, of heroes, of taking voices from the past - and this is when they realised the truth.

There was no monster.

The sun was setting over the hilltop; a molten glow was cast on the sky. It was foreshadowed that a conventional hero could have never defeated this monster - that was because this monster *was not* a conventional monster. It didn't exist at all. There was nothing stopping a reader from going into a bookstore and taking a book from the shelf.

It wasn't the responsibility of a mythical well to conjure up the perfect characters. Neither was it the responsibility of a ministry filled with dead authors. It definitely wasn't the role of the book to grow legs and quest out to find the reader.

The writer realised the true hero this story needed.

They poured the contents of the bucket back into the well, then ran off to go write a story.

The monster watched the writer retreat down the hill with a smile. They hid camouflaged behind a rock, clutching a wooden bucket of their own. The writer knew who the real hero was, meaning the monster's job was finished.

When the sky gave way to nightfall, the monster stepped out, gently carrying the voices of both Ariel and Achilles, then tipped them back into the well. Saying nothing else, the monster skipped off into the night.

9. Hero

If you asked me, I would say I was there to purchase a postcard, although, in reality, I had been tempted by the sign which read "Sale on Aisle Nine: 25% off all books" splayed across the store's front windows. I had been neglecting my reading. In the past, I read voraciously, but now I was always too busy.

Pushing open the fogged glass door, I was greeted by a familiar jingle of bells. The interior of the store was warm and homely compared to the periodic smattering of rain outside.

A chain of overhead pendant lights beckoned me like breadcrumbs into the forest of shelves. I soon found myself in the back aisle of the store. The shelves looked freshly reassembled, like everything had been emptied and now put back in its place. I spotted Margret Atwood's *Hag-Seed*; a copy of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros and Other Plays*; a stack containing Stephen Fry's *TROY* and Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*. None of these tempted my fancy.

Wedge between the other books, the spine of an ordinary hardback seized my gaze. It was bound in red, blending in neatly with its neighbours on the shelf, yet by some premonition I knew that it was waiting just for me.

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