

A WORLD ELSEWHERE



WAYNE
JOHNSTON

AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLING

The Colony of Unrequited Dreams



Also by Wayne Johnston

THE STORY OF BOBBY O'MALLEY

THE TIME OF THEIR LIVES

THE DIVINE RYANS

HUMAN AMUSEMENTS

THE COLONY OF UNREQUITED DREAMS

BALTIMORE'S MANSION

THE NAVIGATOR OF NEW YORK

THE CUSTODIAN OF PARADISE

A WORLD
ELSEWHERE



WAYNE
JOHNSTON



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In loving memory of my Mom and Dad:

Jennie Johnston and Arthur Johnston.

Contents

Cover

Other Books by This Author

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Author's Note

Dark Marsh Road

The Attic

The Ship

Vanderland

Author's Endnote

Acknowledgements

About the Author

Author's Note

I WAS INSPIRED TO WRITE *A World Elsewhere* after a series of extended visits to the most fabled palace of the Gilded Age, Biltmore, which took hold of my imagination. The young George Washington Vanderbilt II built his massive house, instantly world famous, not in or near New York or Rhode Island, but in the wilderness of North Carolina in the late 1800s, and I have attempted to recreate its eccentric, enigmatic grandeur in my novel. Many, if not all, of its structural details will be recognized by visitors today. Biltmore still stands essentially as it was originally created by two of the greatest architects of its time, Richard Morris Hunt, who died just months after its completion, and Frederick Law Olmsted, who also designed Central Park in Manhattan. It is now a self-supporting tourist estate run by George Vanderbilt's great-grandson, William Amherst Cecil.

I have drawn on the historical existence of George Vanderbilt, his ancestors, his wife Edith, and their only child, their daughter, Cornelia, but none of them are models for the counterparts in *A World Elsewhere*: the actions, words and thoughts of these counterparts are not those of the Vanderbilts but are fictions. However, since Biltmore would not have existed without George Vanderbilt, I believe it would have been disingenuous of me to wholly alter the family surname of my characters. I have borrowed from a great writer who was also inspired by the Vanderbilts, and called my family "the Vanderluydens," after the Vanderbilts like Van der Luydens of Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence*. Edith Wharton was a friend of George Vanderbilt, as was Henry James. Both of them visited him and appear as characters in *A World Elsewhere* as guests at Vanderland, the Biltmore-like house of my book.

Dark Marsh Road

LANDISH DRUKEN LIVED in the two-room attic of a house near the end of Dark Marsh Road that was in no way remindful of any other place he'd ever lived. A mile away, in a twelve-room house, his father lived alone.

Under the terms of what Landish called the Sartorial Charter, his father had let him keep his clothes but had otherwise disowned him. When he was too hungry and sober to sleep, he walked the edge of the marsh in the dark, smoking the last of his cigars, following the road where it narrowed to a path that led into the woods.

He had gone to Princeton, where father-made men spent father-made fortunes. Now they were back home, learning the modern form of alchemy, the transmutation of sums of money into greater sums of money. He'd told them that this was, at best, all they would ever accomplish. "Whereas," he'd said, "I will write a book that will put in their places everyone who has ever lived. It may take me as long as a month, but I will not falter."

It was five years since he'd made the boast and he'd yet to write a word that he could resist the urge to burn.

He'd had but one real friend at Princeton, Padgett Vanderluyden, who went by Van. They met while Landish was sitting on one of the benches that ran along both sides of the path that led from the centre of the quad to the steps of Nassau Hall, smoking a cigar under a gauntlet of oak trees from which a steady shower of leaves fell despite the lack of wind. Van had sat down beside him.

Landish's first impressions had been vague ones—pale, thin, elegantly dressed. He turned and saw his benchmate in profile: a pale, unblemished face, the sort of vein-marbled temple Landish had always associated with fragility and even weakness in men. Removing a cigarette case from inside his coat, the young man opened it and offered it to Landish until he noticed his cigar. His hands shook so badly he almost dropped the case.

"You've chosen the only occupied bench on the quad," Landish said.

The fellow held his cigarette between his third and fourth fingers, pressing his whole palm against his face as he inhaled. His body shook and his lips trembled though the day was unseasonably warm. Landish wondered if he might be ill.

"I'm Padgett Vanderluyden," he said as he looked away from Landish. "Van, I like to be called. And you are Landish Druken. I hope you don't like to go by 'Lan.' That wouldn't do. Van and Lan." He attempted to laugh but wound up coughing smoke out through his nose and mouth.

Landish, the back-of-beyond who scored unaccountably high grades in all his courses but was not, and was never to be, affiliated with any of the clubs, had been sought out by Vanderluyden. *Vanderluyden*. Landish felt like demanding that the fellow prove it by presenting his credentials.

But then Van made the first of several odd admissions: he had stayed up half the night rehearsing what he would say to Landish.

"I didn't want to come unarmed. But I've forgotten everything that I rehearsed."

"You stayed up all night preparing to meet me?"

“Yes, I did.”

“It was smart of you to choose a battle of wits. If you’d used your hands, you might not be nearly so gracious, or conscious, in defeat.”

“You see? How am I supposed to answer that?”

Van’s voice quavered so badly that Landish felt a tinge of regret for having spoken to him as he had. He extended his hand and Van shook it.

Van next told him that his sister, Vivvie, had died just shy of the age of two. “I had a breakdown over it. I’m thought by everyone, including my father, to be inherently given to breaking down. My father once told me that I would be presumed guilty until I was pronounced dead. Here you are now conspicuously sharing a bench with me in front of witnesses.”

“Guilty of what? Witnesses to what?”

Van told him he was joking.

“Well, at least you acknowledge having parents. Most of the fellows here never speak of whatever predecease pool they crawled out of.”

“All night I tried and could not come up with one line as good as that. I am not only not quick-witted—I have no wit at all.”

“You’re very forthright,” Landish said. “Sometimes it takes more nerve to be forthright than to be wittily ironic. I keep people at a distance with my wit and wind up in solitude—that is not always as splendid as it seems.”

Van smiled and blushed.

Noticing his embarrassed expression, Landish was again about to amend his remark when he noticed a man sitting on a bench on the opposite side of the walkway, six benches along perhaps. He sat side on, smoking a cigarette, staring at them. Not even when Landish’s eyes met his did he look away. He wore an overcoat and gloves and his hat lay on the bench beside him. He seemed to squint appraisingly at Landish.

Even now, on Dark Marsh Road, eighteen months since Princeton, Landish found himself looking over his shoulder, especially at night, to see if he was being followed by Van’s bodyguard, Mr. Trull. “I don’t need a bodyguard,” Van had said. “But my father wants people to think I do. Mr. Trull used to be a Pinkerton.”

Mr. Trull, who carried two pistols, stayed out of eavesdropping range but followed Van and Landish everywhere, unselfconsciously conspicuous, a cigarette-smoking sentinel, staring at the ground. Landish imagined him running towards them, a pistol in each hand.

Van had declared himself. How odd. *I want us to be friends*. Landish knew that he would have graduated Princeton without ever having made a friend if such a declaration had had to come from him. For most of his time at Princeton, he had thought he would remember the meeting as one of the great events of his life.

The closest thing to work Van had ever done was ride a horse. He said he was a good rider and asked what sort of rider Landish was. Landish said he would let him know as soon as he found out.

Landish sat alone, in silence, in the taverns of St. John’s, spending the hundred dollars “compensation” that had recently arrived from Van. Other than that word typed on a piece of paper, there had been no note of explanation, nothing but the money. He had thought of—

and then thought better of—sending it back.

He drank and considered the bargain he had made with his father: send me to Princeton for four years and I will return and give you the balance of my life. The real terms of the bargain were: send me to Princeton so that, for four years, I can pretend that I am not the son of a sealing captain, pretend the man who paid my way does not exist, and I will come back and follow in your footsteps, low though my opinion be of where they lead. Four years of hoping against hope that something will come up so that I don't have to do for a living what the father I'm ashamed of did to pay my way through Princeton.

When Landish told his father that he wished to be a novelist instead of the skipper of a sealing ship, his father said that a novel was about people who never lived and all the things they never did.

Captain Druken had first taken his son with him to the hunt when Landish was twelve. Landish had sailed on the *Gilbert* many times by then. Short trips, mostly in the summer. His father began to teach him about the sea long before he stepped on a boat. Landish's maiden voyage was in a dory that the boy rowed out to the *Gilbert*. He still remembered how it felt: an inch or two of wood between the water and his feet. It was like standing on a sea surrounded seesaw.

He'd never been swimming. His father had forbidden it. He said that knowing how to swim would do him no good if he fell into what he called "real water." It would only make him less afraid of it and someday that might lead to carelessness and mean his death.

"The water is your enemy," he said. "It has things you want that you will have to take from it by force. It will give you nothing and no matter how little you take from it, it wants nothing in exchange except your life."

When Landish finished high school, he had come to imagine for himself a life other than the one that he was born to.

"You were born with sea legs," his father said. "You can't go against your nature. You can walk the *Gilbert* in rough weather day or night as well as any sailor. And make your way across the ice as well as any sealer. I didn't teach you that. It can't be taught. I've seen you in a storm of freezing spray, your hands bare so that you could better feel the wheel, your knuckles blood red from the cold. And look at you. The size of you. You could stand eye to eye with any horse. Hands and fists as big as mine. As broad across the shoulders as the doorway of a church. A head so big it should be on a statue. You need a chair for each half of your arse. And you think you were bred for writing books?"

Landish couldn't help but like Van who, minutes after they met, had confessed that he was widely regarded as a "dud."

"My father thinks I'm one," he said.

Who better than the richest man in the world to spy out a dud among his children?

But Van said he was going to surprise everyone by doing something "big" with his life.

Landish had doubted it. He guessed that not every graduate from Princeton would practice the modern form of alchemy. It was true of some that the more generations removed they were from the source of their wealth, the less able and inclined they became to increase or maintain that wealth. Landish called it the Law of Layabout Descendants.

Van said he was going to build, "cause to be built," a great house in North Carolina.

Landish told him that, when he was nine, he had caused a campfire to be built and the caused it to be lit.

Van said, "I discovered the site of the house in 1887. The excavations are completed. I plan to live there, alone if I have to, far enough from Manhattan to forget the place. It may sound morbid, but I have to wait for my inheritance to begin the main work."

It was 1893. Van was building Vanderland now. Landish had read about it in a week-end edition of the *New York Times*. The Carolina Castle, it was called in the article. There had been a picture of Van reclining on the forest floor at the feet of a team of famous architects and engineers. Van, his elder by several years, looking his age at last.

Landish bought drinks for those of his tavern mates who were not afraid to ask him to. They must have thought he was spending Druken money, that his father had relented.

By the time Landish's story had made it back from Princeton to St. John's, there were many versions of it, in all of which he had cheated, not to help a friend but to keep from flunking out.

The full four years at Princeton and he came away with nothing, people said. The Druken who imagined he was born to a better fate than captain of a sealing ship. After so many Drukens went scot-free for greater crimes, their name was ruined because it was proved that the family's first intellectual, the would-be man of letters and refinement, had *cheated on a test*. The shame was that so many Drukens had died of old age in warm beds before the boy that brought them down was even born.

"You have been played for a fool," his father said. "Come back to the world in which you count for something. It doesn't bother *me* that you didn't graduate. It doesn't bother me *why* you didn't. If cheating at school is the worst thing you ever do, you'll be the first saint in the family. I gave you your four years. You said that you would give me the balance of your life."

But Landish told him he would never set foot on a sealing ship again.

"So it doesn't matter that you cheated your own father. It only matters that some rich man cheated you. Because I deserve to be cheated and you don't?" His father was right. That was how Landish had squared it with his conscience. A necessary transgression by a son against his ignoble father to achieve a noble end—which might never be achieved. But he could make amends only by relenting to a life that would destroy him.

Even had he been inclined to look for one, he could not have found a job aboard a ship or on the waterfront. Neither his father's associates nor his enemies would have anything to do with him. His father was the last Druken who could afford not to care what people thought of him.

He applied to every newspaper in the city for a job. He sent in samples of his writing and they sent them back.

He found employment in a beggars-can't-be-choosers kind of school. One day he went there drunk and fell asleep. He woke up to find that all his students had left, his classroom was dark and empty, and a note of dismissal was pinned to the pocket of his coat.

Van had told him of the rhyme which other boys used to chant when they saw him: "Padgy Porgie, pudding and pie/Killed the girl who made him cry/When the boys came out to play/Padgy Porgie ran away."

“Killed?” Landish said.

“One of the rumours is that I so hated my infant sister for supplanting me as the baby of the family that I did away with her and that it was all hushed up by my father. It’s absurd but there you are.”

There you are. The under-built, slender-built Vanderluyden who his father said could not look their lowest servant in the eye, the dud with the long, pale, slender fingers that beat back to touch his wrists, was said to have killed his sister out of spite.

When Van’s father died, he left Van six million dollars, as well as stocks and properties worth about four million. Each of his three older brothers got ten times as much.

Ten million. Henry Vanderluyden’s notion of disownment.

“I get it after I graduate. I will sink all of it into Vanderland if I have to.”

“I should marry for money,” Landish said. “No worries then about making a living as a writer. Matrimoney.”

“My mother married for it.”

“Your grandfather made a name for himself. Your father bought one.”

“As I suppose I shall have to someday.”

In the attic on Dark Marsh Road, Landish calculated that had *he* been thus disowned, he could have given his landlord a seven-hundred-and-fifty-trillion-year advancement on the rent.

Though Van had all his life been mocked and hectored by his father, his death left Van so dejected that Landish thought he might fall ill. One day, as they passed a haberdashery, he pointed and said:

“Full fathom five thy father lies/those are pants that were his size.” He was ridiculous and pleased when Van, finally, could not suppress a smile.

In the middle of his junior year in the spring of 1890, Landish moved out of his dorm room and into Van’s house in town. They were inspired by Tennyson’s poem “The Lotus Eaters” and called the hilltop house and its spacious grounds Lotus Land. Van insisted on paying all the rent for a house that was bigger than the Druken’s.

“You could fit this house into one room at Vanderland,” Van said.

“Is the idea of building this Vanderland all that keeps you going?”

“Isn’t that enough? The greatest house in the world?”

They each had a storey of the three-storey house, Van the upper one, Landish the middle one. Mr. Trull lived in three rooms on the ground floor. He had his own entrance and there was a connecting passage between his rooms and theirs. “He keeps an eye and ear out in case I leave, I suppose,” Van said. “I doubt he ever really sleeps.”

Van chose as his bedroom the one at the opposite end of the house from Landish’s so that he said, he wouldn’t be kept awake all night by the footsteps of “a stomping insomniac who can’t compose a word without roaring it out loud.”

“And then I burn the words,” Landish said. “So far, I haven’t left a single word of my book unburned.”

“You really are writing a book? I thought you were kidding and just reading your assignments out loud. What’s the book about?”

“I can tell you it will be a novel. I know little more than that about it myself.”

“You speak so often of Newfoundland, I’m maddened by your infatuation with the place.”

It's just your childhood you miss, not Newfoundland," he'd say. "Your childhood when everyone was nice to you, when you had no enemies and there was no one who was out to bring you down."

"Perhaps," he'd say, and then start in about Newfoundland again.

He told Van that he remembered the smell of ripening crab-apples borne up by the wind from the street below his house in late September.

The shadow of a cloud moving over the patchwork colours of the mown fields in the fall. The white-capped waves on the harbour before a storm, the water all racing one way like that of a river as if the whole wind-driven harbour were moving on to somewhere else. The stream whose water was so cold and clear that, in defiance of his mother who warned him that he'd catch his death, he took off his clothes and lay in it on his back, all of his face immersed but for his nose as he looked up through the water at the sky. He remembered how good his skin felt when he put his clothes back on. How the air smelled of rain long before the rain began. Lightning so far away it seemed to make no thunder lit up from within the clouds above the Petty Harbour hills.

On Dark Marsh Road, as at Princeton, Landish wrote every night, and every night burned what he wrote because it wasn't good enough.

In the attic, he composed his sentences out loud, drummed out their rhythm on the floor with his boot heels while his neighbours shouted protests from below. At the end of the evening he reread each page before he fed it to the fire. He remembered Van watching him do so, shaking his head in wonderment.

Landish watched as, from the top windows of Lotus Land, Van trained his binoculars on Princeton, a general scanning from a carefully chosen vantage the movements and new developments in the enemy's encampment.

"We have the tactical advantage of high ground," Landish said, "and even though we are greatly outnumbered, we will bring down a great many before they overtake the house." Van ignored him, looking down the slope of Prospect Avenue for hours, sighing loudly without Landish wasn't sure—exasperation, impatience, disapproval.

"What are you hoping to see, Van?" Landish said, but Van ignored him. He looked like a child who was pretending to disdain a group that had arbitrarily excluded him, turned his back away with derisive taunts and mockery.

"You can be part of it all any time you like," Landish said, "whereas I came here *expecting* to be shunned."

Van smiled. "I like to watch it from afar," he said. "The laughable vanity fair of the world. All that frantic toing-and-froing on the quad."

Van hadn't liked it when Landish brought back to the house women whom he referred to as "fair ladies." He required Landish to give him advance notice of his intentions to bring them home and vacated the house, staying away hours longer than he needed to and afterwards brooding in silence for days. There was also a middle-aged wealthy woman known among the students as the "trolling trollop" whose carriage with its tinted windows made the rounds of Princeton once a week. Landish was one of many sheepish-looking undergraduates who hastily climbed into it. "Methinks she doth divest too much," he said to Van.

Van said that, as a Vanderluyden, he could not take the chance of “availing” himself and thereby bringing upon America’s most famous family who knew what sort of infamy.

They took English literature together, and upon going to class one day their professor told them he was glad to see that “the infamous twosome had come out from the cozy confines of their tryst.”

His words were much quoted, their meaning lost on no one.

It came to seem that the real purpose of their coming to Princeton was to establish Lotus Land, to live there and entice visitors from the university. They made it known that there would be salons at Lotus Land on Thursday nights.

The president of Princeton had just declared that alcohol was the prime evil of the day. At the first Thursday salon, Landish raised a glass of cognac to the room at Lotus Land and said, “Leave us not without libation, and de-liver us, prime evil.”

Looking about his two-room, marsh-overlooking attic, Landish could not help but long for the days when, once a week, four discreetly armed men who rode in the backs of coaches that drove up to Lotus Land wordlessly delivered cases of wine, cognac, cheese, grapefruit, smoked meats, bread, caviar, cigarettes, cigars—the Bare Excessities, he called them.

The men and the goods arrived by a Vanderluyden train from Manhattan. The men were Norwegian—the Four Norsemen of the Metropolis. The most exclusive eating club in Princeton was The Ivy, referred to simply as “Ivy.” Landish called it “Scurvy.”

“Not my best,” he said, “but I just can’t stop myself.”

Now, in the darkness of his attic, he could not credit that there were such things as “eating clubs” anywhere on earth. Eighteen months and two thousand miles away from Princeton, “Hunger Clubs” seemed less far-fetched.

He had called Lotus Land the Gobble and Guzzle Club. If someone had admonished him not to take it all for granted because, unlike those of his fellow students, his days of ease were numbered, he would not have listened. He’d known he had to think of the future and to himself he would, he *would*, but not just yet.

Even now, it suited him to leave unasked, “What next?”

When they heard of the board that was being served nightly at Lotus Land, ever more students came by, some of them deserters from the eating clubs. They were fledgling writers who proved, Landish said, that “the art of drivelry” was not dead. Landish asked that a vote be taken as to which of two names the new group should go by: The Knights of the Round Table; or The Knights Who, in Full Armour, Jostling Noisily for Room, Sit Side by Side on the Very Long Sofa. He named one student Sir Mountable, another one Sir Osis and another one Sir Vile.

Van didn’t drink at the salons. He ate very little. He had no work to read aloud, not having written anything in his life but school assignments. He merely watched and smiled while Landish held court, and he only drank with Landish. No one said they minded that Van didn’t drink with them, even as they refused to abstain.

“I’m a plodder,” he had often said. “I envy you. The words come pouring out just when you need them.”

“You’re fair to middling,” Landish told him. “But you could be middling if you applied yourself.”

“I’m so damn mediocre. I have no talent, Landish. None. I inherited a lot of money from

my father but not much in the way of a mind.”

“Imagine,” Landish said, “if you could acquire the minds of geniuses and leave them to your sons. You would still have been shortchanged. “To my oldest son, I leave the mind of Shakespeare. To my second oldest, I leave the mind of Milton. To my third, the mind of Tennyson. To my youngest son, I leave the mind of Sir John Suckling.”

After the others left, Landish and Van would sit side by side, slumped in their chairs in the living hall at Lotus Land, puffing on cigars, blowing plumes of smoke towards the ceiling, glasses of cognac warming in their hands, while Landish made anagrams of their last names.

So it had been for Landish not so long ago—cognac sipped in front of roaring fires, night-long engorgement on the finest of foods, wit-appreciating dinner guests, the unstinting friendship and generosity of a wealthy young man who worshipped him.

In St. John’s, he glanced at his reflection in windows, his moss-like mass of hair, what was left of the clothes that had been made by Van’s tailor who came to Princeton from Manhattan, and pronounced Landish “unimprovable” but, at Van’s insistence, did his best.

Whenever Landish saw a woman pushing an infant in a pram along the streets of St. John’s, he thought of Van’s sister, Vivvie, who had drowned at the Vanderluyden country estate when she was eighteen months old.

Her nurse had been walking on the dock with Vivvie in her arms. Van happened to be the only other person there. Nurse stumbled. When Vivvie fell into the water, Nurse was still holding the blanket that she had been wrapped in. The child went under very fast. Van dove in to save her, but the water was so dark that he mistook a sunken piece of wood for his sister and was clutching it against his chest when he shot up to the surface.

His family, his father especially, blamed him for her death.

After telling him of Vivvie, Van stood, his face in his hands. Landish stood as well, uncertain what to say or do. Van threw his arms around Landish and pressed his head against his chest. He held on to him as if to keep *himself* from drowning, his fingers clawing Landish back. Landish hugged him, patted him. He tried to ease himself away, but Van clung tight to him, sobbing, his fingers digging into his back. Their embrace lasted until the tears stopped, and Van, his breathing back to normal, clapped Landish on both shoulders, stepped away, and turned to face the fire.

“I’m sorry,” said Landish. “But *you’ve* nothing to be sorry for. Absolutely nothing.”

“Now you will think that I’m—that way. Others think I am.”

“I don’t,” Landish said, unable to summon up a less perfunctory denial.

“Really,” Van said. “I’m not. It’s Vivvie that makes me seem to be many things I’m not. Don’t put any store by what other people say about me. When you belong to a certain kind of family, people like to think the worst about you. You of all people should understand. The only difference between the Vanderluydens and the Drukens is one of scale.”

“Perhaps.”

“You, with all your women—you’re an exoneration of what many people think to be my nature.”

There were nights, still, when Landish lay sleepless on his bunk in the silent house on Darby Marsh Road, picturing Vivvie sinking, drifting slowly down, her dress buoyed up around her face, her arms above her head. Nothing so made him wish that he and Van had never parted.

as the image of that little girl in the mud-darkened water, her brother just inches away flailing about in panic.

They *had* been friends. How their friendship ended did not change that. Thick and Thin Landish had called them. Prince Ton and Prince Ounce.

“I would never do such things,” his father told him when Landish repeated to him what he had overheard boys say at school. “Never mind what people say. They need someone of lesser rank than God to blame. Nothing short of my death could satisfy them that I did everything I could to save my crew. I won’t die just to keep up appearances. All survivors are suspected of surviving at the expense of the dead, of forever keeping to themselves some awful secret.”

He believed his father until he acquired enough knowledge from him to see for himself the truth behind his father’s reputation. He challenged his father then, who acted as if Landish hadn’t spoken, as if each “mishap” at sea or on the ice had been unforeseeable, inscrutable, caused, the doings of some whimsy of the elements, against which Landish was too green to know it was pointless to bemoan or rail.

Eventually he realized one day, by his father’s manner, his expression and his tone of voice, that he was waiting for it to dawn on him that things would remain the same with or without the blessing of Landish Druken. Later that night, he looked at his father, at his face that, even as he slept, seemed to register every second of the life that he had led, every accusation, spoken or unspoken, made against him, every spit or slur that had followed the mention of his name.

He would not be the first idealist to learn the knack of squaring his conscience with a way of life that in his youth he thought could be reformed. There was an intricate set of necessarily imperfect rules that were followed the world over except by fools who, in the course of their foredoomed and lonely insurrections, were destroyed.

His father was the first sealing skipper in the world to bring back one million seals from the hunt. *Million*. The word was everywhere in Newfoundland. The Board of Trade threw a dinner for Captain Abram Druken. One thousand flipper pies were served.

“Million Abram” received the award of the Blue Ensign from the Governor. A gold medal from a prominent merchant. The OBE—the Order of the British Empire from Buckingham Palace. A “white-coat hat,” which his father called “the laurel wreath of sealers.”

As a child, crouching down by his parents’ bed, Landish had reached underneath, taken hold of the small wooden trunk, and as gingerly as if it held explosives, eased it out.

“The lock is just for decoration,” his father had said. He held the sides of the top of the chest with his fingers and slowly, ceremoniously, much as the Governor must have done at the official presentation, raised the lid.

The first thing he noticed was the red velvet lining the inside of the chest, then the hat that was supposedly made from the very fur of the millionth seal. A baby seal. The purest white that he had ever seen.

The first to bring home one million seals. *Bring home*. It made it sound as if the seals were dead when his father found them and all he did was bring them back.

Every night, even if there was not so much as a breeze by day, the wind came up like something brought on by the darkness. It blew in through one side of the attic on Dark Mars

Road and out the other with a screeching whistle. Landish heard what he called the droning in the wires several streets away.

He stood at the attic's porthole, its only window, and looked out past the marsh, across the rooftops and chimneys of the city, to the Narrows. It was mid-October. He thought about the words "the fall." No others would do for how things seemed, for the tantalizing transformation that was taking place, the slow, sad fall of all things into winter. It seemed to him that "the fall" was shot through *with* the fall and in part made it what it was and caused him to feel about it as he did.

Everything was falling, failing. Night was falling faster, the light fading faster from the fields. Time by day passed faster and by night seemed not to pass at all. He turned the attic lights on sooner, but not before something like a dusky silence filled the two rooms. It was as if some old regime of time was falling and a new regime was near.

It had been this "feeling" of the fall that first made him want to write.

He wrote more than he ever had at Princeton.

It was so bad he wished that he could burn it twice.

In his and Van's final year at Princeton, more and more students began to vie for an invitation to the Lotus Land literary salons. Van was the gatekeeper. He chose not only the outcasts, the previously unpopular, the "unaffiliates," but also young men whose fathers were almost as rich as his, some of them deserters from the usual eating clubs, The Ivy as well as The Cottage and The Cap and Gown.

Landish assigned more nicknames:

There were three brothers who were known as Pliny the Elder, Pliny the Younger and Pliny the Tiny. There were the Duke of Unwellington, Le Marquis de Malarkey, the Duke of Buxomberg and Sorethumberland.

Landish's authority was sometimes challenged, most often by way of allusions to his having no "name." He would pretend to take it in good humour. When he felt most wounded, he deferred the taking of revenge, storing up witticisms until he was able to give far worse than he'd got, so destroying his would-be rival that the fellow either dropped out of the Druke circle or hung on as a sullen, silent member, a chastising sight to others with a mind to challenge Landish. And he sang along when they started up "What shall we do with a Druke sealer?" which they usually did late at night when all were drunk.

Landish defended Van when the others mocked him for writing "Vanderbilge." Landish called him "VanPun" and wrote puns for him which Van passed off at the salons as his own. He continued to do his best to be seen as something of an *enfant terrible* and Van managed to look as though he wrote the lines that Landish merely delivered, standing at his shoulder, not smiling, impassively savouring what his mouthpiece said. They put many a nose out of joint. Landish noting that Van could do so without much regard for the consequences.

One night, even as he was laughing at his own cleverness, Landish was told that he and Van were being called sodomites by their professors.

Landish sometimes took out of his attic closet his box of Princeton compositions, the only writing of his he had not burned. They—mainly Landish—wrote a *roman à clef* musical under the pseudonyms Filbert and Mulligan, which they called *Nutstewyou*. It was a great hit among

those who were not the models for their characters. Among the ragged sheets and scrolls of paper, he found the main creation of the Umbrage Players, which had been called *Well-fed Lard Consumed Keats?*

It began with a corpulent character named Stilton who was at work on an “epicurean poem” called “Parodies Lost.” Stilton, around whom everyone holds their nose, tells the audience that his purpose is to justify “the weight of man to God.” The characters were a major English poets and were all portrayed as corpulent with enormous bellies and backsides. Alfred Lord Tennyson became Well-fed Lard Venison. Coleridge and Wordsworth were the hybrid Cramyouwell Curdsworth. Shelley, groaning and clutching his belly, spent the entire play writing “Ode to the Worst Wind.” A rotund, burstinglily buxom Mary Shelley was carried onstage by Frankenstein. A caricature of Rudyard Kipling, Rhubarb Nibbling, nibbled on shoots of rhubarb and every so often roared, “My gun comes up like thunder/On the beach where ’Manda lays.” Ne’er Hard Unmanly Hopkins danced about, lisp/singing “It seems I’ve sprung rhythm.”

The play stirred most of the audience to protest, especially the professors who shouted “ENOUGH” and “TOO MUCH.”

Soon nailed to trees on the quad were copies of an unsigned rhyme called “The Ballad of Lotus Land.”

Van can't well
Or moderately well.
In the Vanderluyden Bordello
They say the poor fellow
Can't even manage at all.
Can it be that poor Van
Is in need of a man?
They conferred in the hall:
“I've seen this quite oft,
We'll get him aloft.”
“Just wait till it rises
They come in all sizes,
Though not many come when they're soft.”
“Begging your pardon
They're bringing the Bard in.
He's saying, 'This time he won't fail.'
He's in the Garden
Trying to harden
And make of Van's Moby a whale.”

“It seems that I’ve started rumours by trying not to,” Van said. “It seems that one presumed to be that way unless one consorts with prostitutes.”

“Never mind,” Landish said. “I’ll write and plaster all over Princeton a rhyme called ‘The Enormous Endowments of the Vanderluydens.’ ”

“It would only make things worse,” Van said, “no matter how clever it was. I should never have come to Princeton. I should have kept on with my tutors in New York, where I was

dogged by so many rumours I hardly took notice when a new one came along.” Van paused. “Do you think it odd to grieve for one’s sister, Landish, even if one’s grief goes on for years?”

“No,” Landish said. “But Vanderland will not bring your sister back.”

“It is not in the lunatic hope of resurrecting the dead—”

“I’m sorry,” Landish said, “but it seems to me that you are suffering more from guilt than grief, guilt due to the unwarranted accusations of your family.”

“You don’t understand. And it will be years before Vanderland is completed in Carolina. I shall have to live in New York until then. At least in the winter. I despise New York.”

Van put his hands on Landish’s shoulders.

“Don’t go home, Landish. Come to New York and then to Vanderland with me. I won’t be able to measure up without you. I will fail just as all the people in my life expect me to.”

There had been tears in his eyes. It was Landish’s turn to feel guilty. His wit had merely emboldened their enemies to attack the one of them who was defenceless. But, unsure of how to answer, he told Van that he would think about his invitation.

He began to think about graduating from Princeton, the end of the reign of the Umbrage Players, the end of Druken and his Circle, his leadership of both, the dismantlement and abandonment of Lotus Land. He wondered if he might somehow be able to linger on in the town of Princeton, perhaps convince other members of the Players and the Circle to do so, and cull the most interesting of the new students for their Thursday salons. But without Lotus Land, without Van’s seemingly self-replenishing board of food and drink and cognac and cigars and the settees and sofas on which they lounged about—without all of this, none of it would work.

Yet, though Van many times repeated his entreaty that Landish come to Vanderland, Landish said no.

“I’ve been dreading the end of Lotus Land as much as you have,” Van said. “The two of us going our separate ways, you to as remote and wild a place as Newfoundland. At my invitation, famous writers and other artists will be staying at Vanderland for months, perhaps years. You could be the presiding wit of Vanderland. We could still have our salons.”

“Me? Me, the presiding wit of a room full of world-famous writers. What do you plan to do, make it a condition of their stay at Vanderland that they pretend to take me seriously? I can just imagine what a figure of fun I would come to be among the artists of Vanderland. The ascots’ mascot. The writer who burns his every word. I would have no *credentials*, Van. All of this—Lotus Land, the Umbrage Players, Druken and his Circle—it can’t just be relocated to Vanderland. Not even the Vanderluyden fortune can prolong this time in our lives.”

“You don’t understand what sort of place Vanderland will be. I’ll invite whomever I want to stay there, whomever *you* want. I’ll consult with you. If you don’t feel at ease among our group, we can simply find another.”

“Another group. Made up of lesser minds whose presiding wit I could be.”

“You’ve made such a promising beginning, Landish. Please don’t squander it. Don’t tell me that, after making your escape from it, you are going to return to some back-of-beyond place where no one has ever done or ever will do anything worth remembering, anything that will endure. I’m offering you what every writer dreams of, freedom from the nuisance of some body-and-soul-draining, penny-earning occupation. Even Shakespeare needed a patron who

praises he sang in sycophantic sonnets.”

“I’m not Shakespeare. Though they called me the Bard in that broadsheet.”

“Forget that. Forget them. Vanderland will not be some hermit’s hut. Those of us who live there will want for nothing. But it will be so self-sufficient there will simply be no need to go elsewhere. It will be a sanctuary, but a vast one. Think of it as being enclosed by a mesh that will admit only what little there is of true value in the world and filter out the rest.”

“I would never be at home in some Carolina mansion.”

Van had begun to suffer a decline. He had always struggled to get even passing grades, but he was soon unable to put pen to paper.

“Vanderluyden or not, I have to at least *seem* to be a student, if only to guarantee that I get my inheritance.”

So Landish wrote Van’s essays, mimicking his style. That is, he underwrote them, for he knew it wouldn’t do for a C student to suddenly start getting A grades. Landish wrote them, and Van copied them out in his handwriting and submitted them.

Van returned to Lotus Land frantic one afternoon, saying that he had made a dreadful mistake, submitting the wrong essay, one that bore his name but was, as his professors noticed, in the handwriting of Landish.

So they were caught, Van and Landish.

But Van would be allowed to graduate and his cheating would be kept a secret—whereas Landish, for whose comeuppance his professors had long hoped and prayed, would be expelled.

“Come to Vanderland with me, Landish,” Van said. “You need never go home. You can be my lifelong guest. A couple of years in New York and then you can help me finish overseeing the building of Vanderland. You can write your books and we’ll raise our families there. No one will know what took place at Princeton. Anyone who does know won’t dare say a word. This house, this world that I’m constructing, could be yours as much as mine. As soon as you set eyes on it, you’ll understand.”

But Landish told him that he couldn’t conceive of living anywhere but among the only people he knew well enough to write about.

Landish walked the length of Dark Marsh Road. He didn’t turn back where the path met the woods. He ran until the path so narrowed that branches lashed his face and brought to his eyes tears that wouldn’t stop. He looked up at the sky in which there was so bright a moon he couldn’t see the stars.

Landish had only to gather his things from Vanderland and catch the Vanderluyden-owned train to New York, from which he would sail on a Vanderluyden ship to Newfoundland.

He lingered for a few days, throughout which Van apologized and refused to go to class. Van said it was unfair that Landish be expelled. “But I must warn you not to publicize the truth, or you and yours will be sued penniless, or worse, by my brothers.”

“It had never crossed my mind to ask you to do anything but stay silent on the matter,” Landish said.

“Isn’t it better that one of us survives than that both of us be destroyed?” Van said.

"I don't think of myself as having been destroyed."

"I didn't mean destroyed," Van said. "Of course you haven't been destroyed. It's just that you have nothing to return to. Unless you agree to captain the *Gilbert* for the rest of your life. Which I know how loath you are to do."

"What would you do in my circumstances?" Landish said.

"I would go with my friend to Vanderland. Please reconsider."

"I can't simply enlist in someone else's dreams and discard my own. Nor can I put in words how much I will miss you."

"I refuse to say goodbye to you. I will write to you every day asking you, begging you to change your mind. It will never be too late for you to change it. We will one day be reunited at Vanderland. I am certain of it."

"You make Vanderland sound like some sort of afterlife."

"As you know," Van said, "I as yet have no real money of my own. But I will see to it soon that you are fully compensated should you incur any losses because of your expulsion from Princeton from now until you accept my invitation, which I predict you will do once you are back in Newfoundland and see what not accepting it would mean."

Landish told him he needed no compensation for helping a friend, but Van insisted.

"I'll never forget, Landish," he said. "Never, as long as I live, will I forget the sacrifice that you made for me."

"I'll never forget you, either," Landish told him. "Nor the day we met, the day that you approached me on the quad."

On the day before Landish left Princeton, he met on the street a student who had applied for admission to Lotus Land and been rejected.

"You have Vanderluyden to thank for what's been done to you," the fellow said. "He approached some professors about devising a scheme to get you expelled. I don't know why."

At first Landish took it to be nothing but a spiteful lie. But he walked about the streets of the town, trying to convince himself that the fellow was foolhardy enough to tell such a lie about a Vanderluyden.

He ran back to Lotus Land. Van was in the front room, standing, arms folded, in front of the fire.

"Why did you *do* this?" Landish said, advancing on Van, who backed away and began to cry.

"How else could I keep you in my life?"

"You ruined me so that I would have no choice but to go with you?"

"I had to try *something* or else I would never have set eyes on you again."

"Nor *will* you," Landish said. "Nor hear from me again."

"You're no better. You've known for years that you'd betray your father."

"Yes. For which I deserve to be disowned. As I will be."

Mr. Trull walked into the room as casually as if he always had the freedom of the whole house. Dressed for the outdoors in an overcoat and hat, he slowly withdrew a pistol from the pocket of his coat and pointed it at Landish.

"We'll be leaving now, you and me," Mr. Trull said. "I'll take you to the station and you won't say a word or give me any trouble while we're waiting for the train."

Van began to make his way from the room. He stopped in the doorway and rubbed his nose.

with his sleeve. "It would have worked, Landish," he said. "If only you'd said yes."

Landish might never have known he'd been betrayed if he'd said yes after "they" were caught. Would their friendship have been a sham even if Landish didn't know what Van had done and Van believed that he had done no wrong?

He thought so.

But he would not be living in an attic now, counting what remained of his "compensation" with no clue what he would do when it ran out.

The Attic

LANDISH WOKE AND SAT on the edge of the bed in the darkness, trying to decide, his feet on the floor, his hands on the mattress. He could make his way to Cluding Deacon through the snow, demand to be let in no matter the time, go from room to room, bed to bed if need be, looking for her baby boy, reading her letters aloud if he had to, though he doubted it would come to that, it being unlikely that they would say no to the first person of *any* name who had gone there with what he had in mind.

He sat on the edge of the bed for hours, then lay down again. He tried to reason it out. With whom would the boy be better off, him or them? He couldn't name a child who had prospered because of or in spite of the place called Cluding Deacon. But what chance of prospering would a charge of his have? They knew better than he did how to care for a child's most basic needs. With them, the boy would at least have comradeship, even if it was no more than company in misery.

He would be alone with Landish, and Landish himself had every reason to expect to be alone. But there was Cluding Deacon's reputation. Better the boy suffer who knew what a number of lesser torments than the ones that were rampant at that place.

He mulled it over night after night in this manner and found that he could make as good an argument for taking the boy from the orphanage as for ignoring the letters the boy's mother had written to him demanding that Landish take responsibility for him. And then there was the matter of what Landish wanted. He thought first of his book. He didn't even know yet what it would be about, but the "feeling" of fall, which he could summon up in any season, convinced him that the book would follow on the writing of an acceptable first page, the subject of which would only announce itself as he was in the act of putting pen to paper. The boy would surely be an impediment to the book's completion, given that without the boy he had yet to write even a sentence that he could stand. So he obsessively argued both sides of the question but came no closer to an answer.

She said that she was halfway gone herself, as good as lost, so she was writing to him while she was still able to. She said Landish would bring upon himself God's eternal shame if he didn't take Deacon from the orphanage and raise him as his own. She said her husband had made a lot of money for Landish's father that should be spent on *her* baby, not just on Landish, whose father was to blame for her husband's death two years before. Landish wrote back to her that it was only to satisfy his father's wishes that he was still the skipper of his own clothes.

She replied that she would soon be "in the place from which no one knows the way back home." He was astonished by the eloquence of her letters.

I am only sorry that I let him live, have let him think for so long that he would go unpunished for his crimes. I should have gone to his house with my husband's gun the day the Gilbert came back without him.

I am guilty, but only of every breath I could have prevented him from drawing, every moment I let him live after I heard on the street that, far from bringing my husband safely home, he had not even brought his body back to me. He never spoke a word of consolation or regret to me.

For some time now, I have been silent in a silent world, often spoken to but never speaking. I “hear” but nothing touches me. Things that once made sound have for some time made none, though I have never stopped expecting this to change, never stopped anticipating sounds that never came, sounds of collisions, voices, vehicles, the striking of hammers and the blowing of whistles, the sounds of footsteps and the galloping of horses, the shrill pitch of the wind.

It has for long seemed that the world was buried deep in snow or lay submerged beneath the fathoms of a sea that muffled every sound. Perhaps because I have been for so long not quite fully alive I have no fear of death, no feelings at all about it in fact. I will do nothing to hurry near the day of my death but will merely await it with my customary patience.

An inscrutable universe had, by foisting the riddle upon him, offered him the chance to change two lives. The boy knew nothing about it and likely never would if Landish declined him. So Landish decided it was no one’s choice but his.

Birth is a bundle of joy.

Death is a dwindle of joy.

He heard the answer. No impetus, no volition inclined his will towards the boy except the word which, though it woke him, was beyond recall.

He went there early in the morning and brought the boy back to the attic. The boy went to sleep in a place he would never see again and woke up in one he had never seen before.

“Welcome to the attic,” Landish said to the face that peered out at him from a bundle of blankets. “It is ever a hovel and no place like home.”

There were two rooms, a kitchen to which the stairs led and a bedroom you could only reach by way of the kitchen; no windows except for a kind of wooden-shuttered porthole in the bedroom. It always seemed like nighttime in the attic, especially in the kitchen, where the lamps were lit at noon the same as they were long after sunset. There was a black iron stove with a single damper so Landish could heat only one pot at a time; a wooden table that wobbled no matter what you put beneath its legs; two wooden chairs whose legs were wrapped with reams of twine; a sink with a long faucet that at one end looped like a can. Ice-cold water dripped unceasingly from it and barely reached a trickle when you turned the tap.

The attic in the summer was so hot you couldn’t breathe, and the wind in the winter blew right through the walls. The candles flickered when it gusted and guttered when it roared and you could catch your death unless you slept with your head beneath the blankets.

The boy’s name was Deacon. They had told him so at the orphanage and said they couldn’t account for the coincidence, the boy having the same name as their institution. Deacon’s father was known in St. John’s as “Carson of the *Gilbert*,” legendary for his heroism and the manner of his death.

Landish had known Carson but not well. They had never had a conversation. First mate of the *Gilbert*, and the only man who knew the ice as well as Captain Abram Druken did. Francis Carson, who would not under any circumstances abandon the men and boys of his watch. Captain Druken had sent them out from the *Gilbert* when all hands could tell that a blizzard was imminent. They lost their way in the storm and, despite Carson’s advice to return and his ministrations, lay down to die. Had he left them to their lonely deaths, he would almost certainly have saved himself because he was stronger than them and had twice before survived a night outside on the ice. He’d have seen his wife again and seen their baby born.

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