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**The “skirls and screams” of “the deserving dead,” Stanley Elkin’s Death-
Defying Maximalism**

Moderation is a fatal thing. Nothing succeeds like excess.
—Oscar Wilde

I teach in the writing program at Washington University, where Stanley Elkin taught for many years, and, as you might expect, there are lots of Stanley stories still circulating here, but my own is a story at a certain remove. It goes like this: when I blindly staggered into my first Stanley Elkin reading experience, “The Making of Ashenden,” which follows the quest of blue-blood paragon Brewster Ashenden as he goes in search of a worthy and suitable wife but ends up instead with a bear of low virtue, I was in graduate school, casting about for a voice (that imaginary grail so desperately sought after by the MFA creative writing student), an aesthetic that didn’t feel like a hair shirt (or, anyway, somebody else’s hair shirt a size too small). I didn’t know it then, but Stanley (I feel like here I can call him by his first name since I wander the same hallways he once walked and share canapés with former colleagues at department functions) was nearing the end of his battle with MS, so I’d never get to meet him, never get to tell him what he’d done for me as a writer.

At the time, Raymond Carver, though dead a few years, still held aesthetic sway in the graduate workshop, and though I read and admired the so-called minimalists (well, okay, some of them), I knew I’d never be one myself no matter how much literary Slim Fast I might force down my starving gullet, but it wasn’t clear to me (having had my own predilections summarily savaged in workshop) what the alternatives were. The strong-arming thuggery of hegemonies (all right already, uncle!) is always so, erm, persuasive.

So happening upon the maximalism of Stanley Elkin was something of a revelation to me, license to indulge the (as I saw it, productively) convoluted syntax, the profligate diction, and the darkly comic situations that came more naturally to me and were much abhorred by many of my classmates, the more staunchly partisan and word-rationed realists among them. Here are some aspects of Stanley Elkin's aesthetic that attract me: first and foremost his attention to language, to the sensual pleasure of how words can so pleasingly fill up the mouth and dizzily stumble off the tongue, a rapturous kind of gluttony, one descriptor never enough; the hazardous over-the-topness and word-besotted overindulgence of his work (an intemperance that can give a reader the spins and necessitate imbibing again the lapidary hair of the dog)—in every book there's a certain Disneyland excess that is money-grubbing, celebrity-seeking, larger-than-death, paradox-embracing America, and it is his confidence-man, beat-the-clock rhetoric that persuades you to spend 300+ pages on holiday there. I'm also smitten in Elkin's work with the absurdity that results from taking the familiar, the commonplace, and canting it just a few degrees north so that the ludicrous shape of everyday life, which can go unremarked beneath the manufactured veneer of the quotidian, is heightened, made all the more discernable. And I identify with his fascination with the compulsive or beautiful or charming freak (in his cosmos center stage rather than in the wings, redefining freakhood), as well as his interest in the failing body, not to mention his sense of the comic, which is so black every laugh, and there are yuks aplenty, exacts an emotional toll from the reader. All this would be the tradition to whatever individual talent I could lay claim to, the literary nation of which I wished to be a citizen, even if it meant being deported from this hostile republic I found myself in those days inhabiting.

Here's an early workshop encounter that became something of a party line, emblematic: once while a story of mine was being discussed, a fellow fiction writer asked me why I thought it necessary to assault the reader with "highly foregrounded language" and exasperate her with improbable situations and absurd characters. I didn't really know, at the time, what highly foregrounded language was, but I could tell by the defensive glower that puckered her puss when she talked about my story that it probably wasn't, to her way of thinking, a virtue. This was, as I said, the era of minimalism, dirty (and otherwise) realism, and a lot of time was spent discussing the merits of letting a simple story tell itself, a story about the workaday travails of everyday people, spoken in a wallflower language that wouldn't draw attention to itself and certainly in a voice free of the falsifying adornment of free-wheeling, swaggering, rococo verbiage. There were two of us linguistic delinquents in that workshop at whom this weekly catechism was aimed and we politely listened to the tutorial, but despite the ongoing efforts of these earnest reformers to rein in our most unforgivable excesses, to purify our polluted aesthetics, we remained recalcitrant heathens to the end, unrepentant apostates. I dutifully noted my peers' many beefs with my work, however, and seriously considered their suggestions—really I did, some of my best friends are realists—but, in the end, their antipathy to the way I spun a story only served to galvanize my sense of what I was doing as it forced me to think very particularly and carefully about why I'd chosen to write the stories as I had (an accounting any dyed-in-the-wool realist in the workshop writing in the “unobtrusive” default style of the day was never pressed to make), an accounting that seemed especially important given how the most fundamental and integral elements of my work seemed *really* to chafe certain readers. I wasn't trying to be a rascalion (I'm a congenital

Midwesterner, reticent Heartlander, yearly field trips to the Agricultural Hall of Fame, descended of an ethos of nose-to-the-grindstone taciturnity, and did in fact sometimes fret about how flamboyant expression would curl the reserved and stoic toes of my family and forbears), so this was always chastening.

Unlike the moment in American literature when Elkin's star was rising, in those later minimalist days, a lapidary style of the first water, polished to a high gloss—the love of a carefully and complexly hewn sentence that is as respectful of sound as sense, an ardent belief in the almost sacramental power of excess, digression, exhaustive qualification, their ability to reflect on the level of the sentence something essential about the experience of being a twentieth-twenty-first century citizen of the developed world trapped inside the hamster wheel, the frenetic tilt-a-whirl of everyday life (form is content, goes that old saw, and why shouldn't it be?)—is likely to earn a writer a reproachful rap on the bean with a smugly smoting, implicitly pejorative cudgel: experimental (smack!), postmodern (bap!), stylistically, er, challenging (whomp!), florid (pop!), pretentiousaffected*poetic* (bambambam!), suggesting literary fraud of the worst sort, the boondoggle of smoke and mirrors style, the guilty writer a snake oil huckster hawking placebo nostrums, goat gland salves. I've repeatedly been asked by critics, reviewers, peers, sometimes even students (those few who arrive with intractable opinions knitting the permanently furrowed cement of their brows) to feel ashamed about the sort of bejeweled prose I find my raven's eye attracted to, the sort of mandarin capering (and I don't use this phrase dismissively—on the contrary) that engages my mind, makes it click and whirl, go pocketa-pocketa-pocketa. *Let the story tell itself*, I've been urged. *Style is an attempt to conceal an absence of substance*, I've been cautioned.

If the writer knew how to tell a story, she wouldn't need to hide behind flashy language, I've been rebuked. Highly foregrounded language calls undue attention to itself, I've been instructed. (Wap! Zing! Thump! Thwack!)

Where did this love of linguistic austerity come from exactly? Dowdily dressed prose leaning diffidently against a shadowed wall (as the others, though outnumbered, giddily jitterbug beneath the diamond light of a mirrored ball)? That seems to be what the detractors of high style are calling for, those arbiters of respectable prose. You may recall an incendiary rant published in *The Atlantic* a few years ago, from the pulpit of a professor of North Korean studies, B.R. Myers, a blustery snarkfest entitled “A Reader’s Manifesto: An Attack on the Growing Pretentiousness of American Literary Prose” and later expanded into a book-length screed. Though Myers doesn’t finger Elkin in the article as an example of the kind of prose that makes him want to spit—and spit he does—I can only imagine that this is because, after frothing at the chops for 13,000 words or so, he runs out of saliva. On the other hand, the group of writers he attacks in this broadside don’t share an obvious aesthetic kinship and make for a peculiar and tenuous taxonomy— Prizewinning Writers B.R. Myers Has Had It Up to His Furrowed Noodle With: Cormac McCarthy, Annie Proulx, Paul Auster, Don DeLillo, David Guterson, et al. That group of literary rabblers who began stirring things up in the sixties, referred to, sometimes sneeringly, as postmodernists, escapes his wrath in this jeremiad but not, as it turns out, in his more recent review of Jonathan Safran Foer’s latest novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, which has him splenetically sputtering anew, though it’s the same grumpity-grumping harrumph.

So where did this apotheosis of a Jack Sprat aesthetic come from? It certainly didn't come from those writers at the center of the American canon. It didn't come from the glitteringly circumlocutory musings of Emerson. It didn't come from Melville or James or Fitzgerald or even Hemingway (simple machine-gun syntax sure, but whose prose calls more attention to itself, whose prose could be more mannered, more carefully calibrated for cadence, effect?), didn't come from Faulkner, to name but a few of the antecedents of *The Contemporary American Stylist*. It's as though this "prose of sackcloth and ashes," as Jaimy Gordon has described it, was reared, as I was, on the longsuffering plains where, in the absence of a showy landscape to goad you into aspiration, Christian humility is one of the highest values ("Great I" 33). The more anonymous, the more invisible you are, the more admirable goes the paradox (*Highly foregrounded language calls undue attention to itself—cover your ankles, harlot!*). And the woman writer whose aesthetic is, well, eye-catching can expect to be doubly damned, doubly marginalized, cheeky trollop! But that's another essay.

I liked to think that had Stanley Elkin also been in that workshop, he would have been similarly upbraided, and I sometimes consoled myself by thinking we could have been infidels together, lawless unrealists. In the essay "What Birds See," Nathalie Sarraute argues that one person's realism is another's sclerotic convention, a matter of habit, a "matrix of preconceived ideas and ready-made images," and she suggests that simply imposing a sense of order on experience from these "prepared moulds," however reassuring, doesn't necessarily make it so (*Tropisms* 120-136). The preface to the Thunder's Mouth Press edition of Elkin's collection of short fiction *Criers & Kibitzers*, *Kibitzers & Criers*, says this:

There's something comforting, almost soothing about realism, and it's nothing to do with the shocks of recognition—well it wouldn't, would it, since shocks never console—or even with the familiarity that breeds content, so much as with the fact that the realistic world, in literature, at least, is one that, from a certain perspective, always makes sense, even its bum deals and tragedies, inasmuch as it plays—even showboats and grandstands—to our passion for reason. The realistic tradition presumes to deal, I mean, with cause and effect, with some deep need in readers—in all of us—for justice, with the demand for the explicable reap/sow benefits (or punishments), with the law of just desserts—with all God's and Nature's organic bookkeeping. And since form fits and follows function, style is instructed not to make waves but merely to tag along, easy as pie, taking in everything that can be seen along the way but not much more and nothing at all of what isn't immediately available to the naked eye. (*C.K.* xii)

This idea, that realism is a soothing if illusory palliative, is itself a subject Elkin explores in his novel *The Magic Kingdom*, whose ironic refrain reverberates like a gong throughout the novel: “Because everything has a reasonable explanation.” Not! *The Magic Kingdom* is, simply, an impossible novel, a novel that can't possibly have been written, much less published and lauded, a relentlessly, darkly comic novel about the broken bodies, guarded yearnings, and doomed futures of dying children, children whose final, disease-weakened hurrah is spent, absurdly, in the death-denying glare and delusional glitz of Disney World (Mickey Mouse the cheerfully big-eared Hyperion to Moloch's insatiable satyr), children whose proximity to death helps them to see beneath the blinding simulacrum though they remain nevertheless vulnerable to hope and longing, urges, curiosity, those things only truly (if temporarily) available to the (for the moment) hale and hearty. It is a weirdly moving but utterly unsentimental novel. Who can explain how a child's physiology can become so corrupt, the child's genetics so errant, so adversarial, that she is born with lungs that will eventually drown her or that he has a biological clock that ticks at such a clip he's a doddering, liver-spotted tot? There are no explanations for such inconceivable afflictions (which are real if here exaggerated), for

the contradiction of the terminally ill child, and that's what it is to be human, to live with the knowledge not only of death but also of cosmic injustice and inexplicable suffering. And why shouldn't the prose itself reflect this reality, become unruly, ungovernable, incurable, unreasonable, flying apart at the syntactical seams? Clearly Elkin, never a cheap-seats, tag-along stylist, isn't interested in giving his readers false comfort or the illusion of an orderly, seemingly recognizable universe, that shared hallucination realism sometimes dishes up. What he does give his readers, however, those fearless enough to confront the most discomfiting of truths, is the make-hay enjoyment of a maximalist aesthetic that both mimics and defies the reality, mimics insofar as it impersonates the chaos we cannot, in the end, control and are loath to acknowledge, and defies insofar as its rollicking exuberance can be said to be a bargaining with and then a raging against the inevitable.

The Magic Kingdom begins with a loss, the death of Liam, the son of the novel's protagonist, Eddy Bale, organizer of the Disney World pilgrimage, and it seems a foregone conclusion (as death always is) that the novel will necessarily end with a casualty, but between this extinction and that, the rhetoric, if you've the *joie de parler* to follow it, might hoodwink you into believing in the sustaining, immortalizing power of language. In this novel, as in others, Elkin writes like a person condemned, a Scheherazade of the sentence, like someone trying to forestall the inevitable with one fancifully-turned phrase after another and a virtuosic circus-train syntax, parenthetically digressive and often grammatically tangled, and it's a novel about, among other things, a man struggling to come to terms with the death of his son, a man who "gets this mad idea that no other children must die" (Bailey 24). For Elkin, the affirmation of life exists in

the high-velocity sentence, in breathless rhetoric, but it lasts only as long as the sentence, the paragraph, the extended trope does. Or is it, rather, an angry affirmation of death, a fist-in-the-air sort of god-goad, a repudiation of the Job-like fate we all eventually, more or less, succumb to (though some clearly endure more corporal trials than others, the body, however long it may have remained in the pink, betrays everyone in the end)?

At the very beginning of the novel, Eddy Bale thinks this about dying children: “They died in pain, language torn from their throats or, what little language they had left, turned into an almost gangster argot, uncivilized, barbaric as the skirls and screams of bayed prey” (4). The narrative voice that describes this wounded-animal braying the dying are reduced to is itself an unbridled yawp, but it’s a still vital and linguistically ravenous voice delivering incantatory spruiks so *lively* they read as if they’re meant to resuscitate the dead and prop up the dying for another day, another page, briefly rescue them, delay their congenital destiny. And that’s how long the novel lasts, until the first child falls, the talismanic voice necessarily fails. If terminal illness results in a loss of language in these dying children, the loss of the ability to express the profound torment and heartache and injustice of disease and premature death, then this narrator is the proxy spokesperson for the children, the ombudsman of the beleaguered body, trying to negotiate with death, dazzle it, distract it, outpace it rhetorically.

A striking example of the narrative voice’s high-stepping gambol is the initial description of Janet Order, one of the dying children chosen to travel to Disney World. The chapter begins bluntly: “The kid with Chédiak-Higashi disease was dead” (41). In fact he dies from a paper cut that results in a fatal infection. He was opening the letter that would inform him he’d been chosen for the trip, suggesting just how high-risk any

anticipatory enthusiasm can be for those on the brink of dying, anticipation a luxury the soon-to-be-dead can ill afford. And with this, Bale's implicit mission to save dying children is off to a questionable start. The paragraph is short, the prose relatively restrained. And so, as if to compensate for the loss and insure that the next child will survive the news of her good fortune, the description of Janet Order gallops anxiously, gaining momentum as it unfolds:

Janet Order also saw the letter before her parents did, and though she had a pretty good idea about its contents—like many of the diseased children, like Liam himself, she was exceptionally bright; she would, if she lived, be a teenager on her next birthday; her body had begun to fill out months before and already she'd had to abandon her training bra for the real thing; this didn't particularly embarrass her and, indeed, she quite accepted the idea of becoming a young lady, taking an interest in her puberty, rather proud of it actually, attending her monthlies with a modest though becoming interest, enjoying, if not the discomfort of her periods, at least the opportunity to minister to them, to care for herself, dressing in the queer new tampons and flushing herself with scentless, lightly medicated douches, evaluating not only the different painkillers on the market but their most effective dosages as well, taking an almost ecological interest in the crop of sparse, light brown hair which dusted her mons veneris, and generally presiding over and servicing the new blockbuster secretions of her glands with a solicitude she had a few years earlier shown for her dolls—she did not open it, preferring to wait for her parents, meanwhile practicing the new biofeedback techniques, stretching, and deep-breathing exercises her physical therapist had shown her. In a few minutes her pulse had returned to normal and her pressure, which she had been taught to take by herself, was not, for her, especially elevated. (41-42)

This passage begins typically with an action that is quickly interrupted by a digressive description, the digression itself eased into by way of complete thoughts conjoined by semi-colons, until the prose pops the cork and gushes forth unhindered, a broken water main of an interpolation stoppered by dashes. So that by the time the reader gets to the other side of this insertion, she can scarcely recall what preceded it. It's an almost German sort of grammar, the reader waiting for the delayed completion of the initial thought, anticipation built into the very syntax of the sentence and serving as evidence

that, however ill Janet Order may be, she is still, at this moment, very much alive. And this digression is of course all about her body, as though the body were an aside, beside the point, and yet this tangent exceeds in length the thought it interrupts, suggesting perhaps that important things occur between dashes, in parenthesis, that the things we believe to be noteworthy are themselves diversions, distractions that keep us from looking at the unsettling and alarming things we relegate to the periphery. In this aside, we get an accounting of Janet's body, which has recently entered puberty, and what we learn is that those things that would be a source of embarrassment or aggravation to most girls, healthy girls, are things Janet Order, someone not long for this world, is fascinated by and delights in. She won't be around long enough to fully enjoy her body, to take advantage of a budding sexuality, so she has to find her pleasure where and while she can, and the discomfort of menstrual cramps is, after all, a sign that she's alive, that her body is developing according to a normal calendar, and is therefore reassuring. Outside the dashes, the world lurches along reasonably, recognizably, calmly. Janet Order performs her biofeedback techniques, and her body responds as it should. The befuddling and discomfiting contradiction exists in that lawless space inside the dashes, where a child's doomed, blue body develops in just the same manner as that of a child who will live to adulthood, whose body will be able to make good on its burgeoning promise. Despite the realist impulse to construct, for the sake of a reassuring fiction, a Cartesian world that ticks along like a complicated but comprehensible clock whose cogs click and springs sproing predictably, whose effects always issue from explicable causalities, the really interesting conundrums, the ones worth plumbing, Elkin seems here to say, are those that will surely frustrate and frighten you by being unsolvable riddles.

But at least there's language to aid us while we reckon with, as best we can, those mysteries for which there are no reasonable explanations no matter how we might try to domesticate them. In the introduction to *The Best American Short Stories 1980*, Elkin says that the losses and hard knocks and rude awakenings of the stories he's chosen are "reconciled...underwritten by their authors with the beautiful cool comfort of a language that makes it all better, the soiled history, the rotten luck." But Elkin knows "what the characters can't, what probably even the writers don't believe—that it won't work, that it can't last, that inversion and magic and series and transcendence and saying something twice aren't enough, that in real life they would have to print a retraction" (xix). And in *Magic Kingdom*, Elkin performs his rhetorical prestidigitation well aware that it's sleight-of-hand, hoodoo inadequate to the task. It is this that any stylistically subdued realist fiction wishes to conceal. It is this inadequacy that belies the very notion of realism.

This is a novel that seeks to reverse orders, tilt the world as we understand it off its axis. And in a book that's interested in investigating things for which there are no reasonable explanations, a book about unfathomable lives and suffering and deaths, some mention of the Holocaust would seem obligatory. Mr. Moorhead, the physician, decides who among the prospective children would be likely to hold up the best, weather the trip, who would be least likely to hop the twig on their dream holiday, and then he accompanies Eddy Bale and his declining charges to Disney World. Mr. Moorhead is a peripheral but important character (functioning somewhat like an aside himself), and it is with him that the subject of the Holocaust is taken up, for it is photographs of the survivors of the camps that cause to capsize his commonplace attraction to "the body filled to its sunny, f-stop conditions of solstitial, absolute ripeness like a ship floating in

water precisely between its measured load lines” (63). The photographs of “Not men but devastated, stick-figured blueprints for men” catalyzes for him a revelation: “Disease, not health, was at the core of things” (64). Disease is the rule to which full-blooming, radiant health is the exception. It is not the ravaged body that is noteworthy; it’s the body that somehow manages, for a little while at least, to escape ravaging that’s the real headline. It is illness, not fitness, that we should take as a given, a more sobering truth perhaps than even our own mortality, which we all sidestep for a time. In this way, terminally ill children and the skeletal Holocaust survivors, victims both of the inexplicable, are kindred and throw into relief the dismal reality of the human condition this novel defiantly confronts. We may not see ourselves in the wrecked flesh of dying children and starving, brutalized Jews, may not see their plight as emblematic of our own, but Elkin insists that we should, “because the *Book of Job* is the only book” (*Pieces of Soap* 169). It is suffering, not freedom from it, that distinguishes the human condition.

The novel ends with a *cri de corps* that brings to mind, with its repeated exhortation, Molly Bloom’s ending soliloquy. Mary Cottle (no mollycoddler she!) is one of the adult chaperones who travels to Florida with the children on their dream holiday, and we are told, by way of introduction, that she sports “a poisoned womb, a terrible necklace of tainted genes that could destroy any child, boy or girl, to whom she might give birth” (33). She is “a carrier,” hers a genetic bequest that seals the doom of her offspring *in vitro*, and insofar as every mother gives birth to a mortal being of corruptible flesh fated to suffer and die, she is merely a heightened reminder of the risks and consequences of reproduction, the heartache implicit in procreation, the latent suffering, a landmine we all eventually trip. But rather than leaving the reader with a hymn of

affirmation, we get instead from Mary Cottle the mantra that, like the fading flesh itself, denies perpetuity: “Now, now, now, now, now, now, now” (317). This is a novel that means to disabuse us all, even the momentarily robust among us, of the illusion of a healthy and happy tomorrow. A child has died, the narrative voice’s sorcery has failed, awakening them all from the suspended stupor that this dream vacation has, in part, been, and Mary Cottle, who has not risked sex in years, finds herself alone with the grieving organizer of this trip, Eddy Bale, and the prose explodes into a rapturous canticle celebrating with a defiant music the torment that cannot be dodged as Mary Cottle accepts the catalyzing seed, the inseminating strychnine that will father the misery:

Now, she thinks, now! And positions herself to take Bale’s semen, to mix it with her own ruined and injured eggs and juices to make a troll, a goblin, broken imps and lurching oafs, felons of a nightmare blood, fallen pediatric angels, lemures, gorgons, cyclopes, Calibans, God’s ugly, punished customers, his obscene and frail and lubberly, his gargoyle, flyblown hideosities and blemished, poky mutants, all his throwbacks, all his scurf, his doomed, disfigured invalids, his human slums and eldritch seconds, the poor relation and the second-best, watered, bungled being, flied ointment, weak link, chipped rift, crack and fault and snag and flaw, his maimed, his handicapped, his disabled, his crippled, his afflicted, delicate cachexies with their provisional, fragile, makeshift tolerances....Thinking, Now, now, goddamn it, *now!* And accepting infection from him, contagion, the septic climate of their noxious genes. Dreaming of complications down the road, of bad bouts and thick medical histories, of wasting neurological diseases, of blood and pulmonary scourges, of blows to the glands and organs, of pathogens climbing the digestive track, invading the heart and bone marrow, erupting the skin and clouding the cough. (317)

This passage takes no prisoners, spares no one, though those of us enjoying, temporarily, the deceptive blush of vigor might be tempted not to see ourselves implicated in its doomsaying. “What happens at the end,” says Elkin, “suggests that every time you fuck, you create a monster” (Bailey 24). We are all of us grotesques, all of us monsters of corruptible flesh, just transitory bodies waiting to break, all with a ticking biological clock counting down to that zero hour. This narrative voice tried and failed to outwit

death with dazzling rhetoric, so now it's left to accept what it cannot, despite its best, most baroque effort, change. Nevertheless, it refuses to surrender and goes out with the bravado it began with. There are those readers who might take exception to what they construe here as an unseemly delight in disease and disability, a delight in our time-bomb monstrosity, but that objection would necessarily be predicated upon the idea that "health, not disease, [sits] at the core of life," and so, like Mr. Moorhead, attracted to perfect physical specimens in his early schooling, such readers would be missing the point entirely (145). Truth be told, facts be faced, a celebration of disease *is* a celebration of life, like it or not.

In the preface to *Criers & Kibitzers*, Elkin describes the difference between the more accessible or realistic stories in the collection and the story "Poetics for Bullies" as a stylistic movement from "the sedate and almost passive" to the "much more aggressive and confrontational" (*C.K.* xiv). The turn came for Elkin, he says, when bad things began to happen, the loss of loved ones, the loss of health. "Because," he says, "as the old saying *should* go, as long as you've got your health you've got your naïveté. I lost the one, I lost the other, and maybe that's what led me toward revenge—a writer's revenge, anyway; the revenge, I mean, of style" (*C.K.* xiv-xv). In the absence of eternal good health and fortune, we have, at least, language, which, if properly relished, can be used to avenge the daily injustices and senseless tragedies a life, any life, is beset by. In the absence of a reasonable explanation, there is at least style, words whose startling combinations and sentences whose complicated constructions can engage, entertain, enlighten, even comfort, and perhaps distract us while we wait for the inevitable.

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