

Long Paddock

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Belief's Threnody

"An important part of understanding Spinoza's excommunication is examining the context. One key factor is the external pressures which the Jewish community faced at the time."

Let's interrupt the lecturer's monologue for a moment, and pause to look at his audience. Tom is the young man in the third row, the one with the tousled blond hair and a gangly frame. At the moment he's resting his head on his hand, doodling on the paper in front of him.

"Historically, this was a community that - "

It's at this point that Barry enters, the door banging behind him. The lecturer glances up, frowning. Barry smiles genially at him as he strides up the side of the lecture hall.

"Ah, perhaps you're late because you didn't need to hear the first part of this lecture. In which case, I'm sure, you'll be happy to give us your understanding of how Spinoza saw the relationship between faith and reason." He smirks, arms folded across his chest.

Barry pauses and turns, angling himself halfway towards the lecturer, but he's also facing the students who are already grinning at the blood in the water. He smiles, a big, white-toothed smile that is so characteristically Barry.

"It's a complex topic. An initial reading might suggest that Spinoza saw the two as independent and irrelevant to each other. However, another plausible argument suggests that Spinoza saw the two as independent pathways to the same conclusion."

Then he turns, and starts squeezing his way down the aisle, apologising as he treads on people's toes. The lecturer nods grudgingly. "Well, at least someone's been doing the reading. Something for the rest of you to aspire to. Now the main threat facing this community was ..."

We'll pause for a moment now, leaving our two protagonists seated side by side in their lecture on Spinoza's epistemology. Instead, let's cast our gaze to a different classroom, a decade or so earlier. This time the two boys aren't seated side by side.

Tom is near the back. At this age the sparseness of his frame isn't as noticeable, although he still has his signature mop of yellow hair. Barry is on the other side of the classroom, his frame holding slight hints (if you look carefully) of that well defined bulk that will come to characterise him in later life.

As Ms. Burke passes by the desks, handing back quizzes, we'll glance quietly over her shoulder (ignoring, perhaps, the odd grey hair and the specks of dandruff) at the marks on each paper. Barry shows that effortless all-round aptitude that allows him to score highly on most tests that he takes, while still excelling at sport and making friends easily.

Tom has also done well, although not because long division comes as

effortlessly to him as it does to Barry. He is at this point in the early stage of a self-reinforcing cycle that will come to dominate much of his education, as he finds that one of the few ways to define himself is through his academic ability.

When the class finishes the children spill out onto the play ground, all the repressed noise of the last hour exploding at once. Barry goes to the grass pitch that serves as football oval. Tom finds his way to the library computer, where he and a few others will spend their lunch time playing a computer game that makes Minesweeper look enthralling.

It would be easy, at this point, to label these boys in terms of stereotypes. But while it's easy to dislike Barry because he is the boy to whom everything comes easily, he is also the boy who, seeing a new kid being bullied, abandons the football game and makes his way over.

"Guys, leave him alone." He turns to the boy.

"I'm Barry. What's your name?"

"Danh."

"Hi Dan."

Then, while the others wander away, Barry talks with the boy, asking him about himself, and telling him about his family and his big sister and his pool in the backyard.

We'll leave them there, and rejoin them two days later. Barry, in one of those inexplicable turns that make sense only to the participants, finds himself in an argument with a classmate named Jared. Although it hasn't yet degenerated to punching, Barry is seconds away from using a word he only learnt last month, but which has already drawn reprimands from both his parents.

It is at this point that Tom intervenes. He points at Jared's head. "Oh yeah? Well your hair looks like a bowl on your head. Did the barber, like, just put a bowl on there and cut around it?" Having picked out the crucial weakness in someone that can cause them to crack, he displays an early aptitude for what will later become a talent, hammering away mercilessly until Jared withdraws, speechless and angry. Later that afternoon, Barry and Tom will discover that they both support Carlton. At that age, it's enough for a firm friendship. School isn't the only place the boys meet. That Sunday morning, both of their families make their way to the local Anglican church. There are dozens of them scattered through the suburbs, little red brick buildings with shiny glass extensions, populated by white-haired pensioners and smatterings of young people and families.

Tom and Barry are in the same Sunday school class. Here Barry, trusting as he is honest, is happy to complete the little story tasks they're given, writing lists and answering questions designed to convey the truth of an omniscient, omnipotent creator to a nine year old boy. Tom has a more inquisitive streak, and regularly drives his poor teenage minders to frustration with broad epistemological questions which he doesn't even wait to have answered before launching off onto other conjectures. "Why does God let bad things happen? Couldn't God just *make* us good? Why is the Bible in English? If God made us, does that mean it's his fault if I hit someone? How do I know it's God and not somebody else listening when I pray?"

When Sunday school finishes, Tom and Barry come out to find their parents in a crowd of other church-goers, drinking instant coffee and eating cheap biscuits as they talk. Tom, bored, finds a pew and sits. As he flips through a Bible, he stops

to read a passage highlighted in red.

And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

He sits there, staring at the page, forehead corrugated in concentration. Eventually he and Barry go their separate ways, driving back to shingled roofs and suburban lawns. Tom is quiet in the back seat, and his mother turns to ask if something's wrong. He shakes his head mutely, and she returns to discussing the kitchen renovations with her husband.

That night, Tom lies in bed, staring up at the darkened ceiling. His thoughts, ill-shaped and unformed even in his own mind, perhaps best resemble the irresistible urge one experiences to scratch a scab. It is mixed with the delicious desire of standing on a high rooftop, the need to do the unthinkable, equal parts temptation and compulsion. Lying there, unburdened by theological sophistication or religious understanding, with nothing more than the fascination of a child told not to push a button, Tom first mouths the words. Then he whispers them, again and again: "I blaspheme against the holy spirit." We'll leave Tom and Barry now, as they pass from the confines of primary school to the larger fish bowl that is a Melbourne grammar school, awkwardly adjusting to the strictures of shirt collars and a double Windsor knot. We won't interrupt them as they sit through a mathematics class, diligently (Tom more than Barry, although both will do well on the exam) copying trigonometric formula. We'll leave them in the classroom, debating with their ninth grade English teacher the relative merits of the book and film version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. We won't draw attention to the times Tom flips open his laptop at the back of class, alternating between looking at the grainy, low resolution pornography that circulates among students, and industriously looking up Britannica Online articles as his teacher glances over his shoulder.

We can, perhaps, allow ourselves the luxury of watching from a distance as they and a group of school friends, travelling like a uniformed herd, encounter a group of girls at the local McDonalds. Barry, here as always, looks comfortable and outgoing. Tom is withdrawn, happy for the most part to listen. They are both nervous and excited, like colts meeting strange horses, nosing interestedly and then throwing back their heads and skittering away at the slightest motion.

We'll spare them the embarrassment of watching at a Saturday morning football game as they and their peers run onto the field. They have the understandable awkwardness of those whose bodies have suddenly outgrown them, leaving them to adjust to unusually sized feet and limbs whose exact measure they are still gauging. Barry adapts confidently, excelling at the rough and tumble, delighting in the precision of an accurate kick and the fierce joy of victory. Tom will suffer quietly for a semester, and then transfer to the third tier basketball team, which enters no competitions, and has a more laid-back approach to the concept of team-practice.

Both will do well academically, Barry with a modicum of effort and more out of a sense of adhering to the appropriate than any innate interest. Tom focuses his efforts on his studies with that fierce determination that surprises those who don't know him, attacking problems as though they presented a personal challenge. Barry will join the debating team, and do well, without exerting himself enough to be brilliant. Tom, supportive friend that he is, will attend some of the debates, watching with a mixture of envy and horrified fear.

It's tempting, throughout this period, to try and pick out the prominent forces and patterns that will influence them, defining who they are as individuals. But without resorting to clichés about entomology and meteorology, it seems safe to say that people are shaped as much by the random occurrences, the serendipities and tragic co-incidences that cross their paths. So we'll join Tom on an afternoon shortly after his fourteenth birthday. He is walking home, having just alighted from a tram which is now ponderously making its own way uphill. Another tram is coming down the hill, embodying perfectly Orwell's description of the 'raucous swan of steel'.

At four thirty-two and forty-five seconds, the tram going up the hill will pause at the next stop, and a small figure will get out the rear door. She will walk to the back of the tram, and turn to cross the street.

At four thirty-three and seven seconds, the tram going down the hill will stop, and all traffic around it freeze. A commuter on the tram desperately dials 000, fighting his intense urge to vomit. Over the crest of the hill, cars unable to see the cause of the delay begin to honk their horns insistently, the noise rising like a threnody over the quiet suburban street.

At four forty-six, paramedics will arrive, and begin to do what little they can. Policemen arrive soon after, and begin diverting traffic. Further up the hill the trams have begun piling up, one behind the other, unable to reroute.

At four fifty-three, a fire truck will arrive. They use their jack to lift the tram ever so slightly off the ground. Tom still stands there, frozen, unaware of his own existence, his entire consciousness absorbed by the scene acted out in front of him. He will later remember a desire to look away, but feeling so captivated by what was unfolding that it was inconceivable that he not watch.

By four fifty-seven, the young girl has been successfully disentangled from the tram wheels, although as the medics carry her on a stretcher to the ambulance, an untended wound trails blood onto the street, like an umbilical cord yet to be cut between her and the motionless tonne of grey steel.

Tom stands and watches, motionless, until the road has been cleaned by emergency services and traffic has resumed – a veneer of normalcy is restored. Tom walks home and goes straight to his room. All afternoon he lies on his bed, staring at the ceiling, motionless. His mother will stick her head around the corner at seven, asking if he'd like dinner. He shakes his head and she leaves, only to return later, concerned. He shakes his head again when she asks if he's unwell. She pushes, but he refuses to be drawn, until finally she gives up and retreats.

Lying there, he feels heavy, weighted. This is what it is to have a secret, a thing which is possessed and not shared, trapped inside. He lies there, staring at the ceiling, and amidst all the turmoil running through him, knows that he has no desire to discuss what he's seen.

We'll leave Tom there and skip forward again to an evening shortly after his sixteenth birthday. His father is reading the paper, and his mother watches the evening news while Tom sits in his bedroom, his mind wandering from the biology textbook on his lap. It's an unfortunate truism that although the metamorphosis from child to adult is characterised by spurts of growth, one's failings are equally represented, recurring like a track on repeat. So we can safely say that this evening, though ontologically unique, has been and will be replayed multiple times throughout his teens.

As he stares out the window, Tom's mind searches for a comparison, and delivers itself of a crude simile: perhaps his inability to believe is like the loss of a limb, or the malfunction of an internal organ. Not a failure of effort, desire, or understanding, but rather a simple impossibility, in the same way that some shades of orange and green are inaccessible to the colour-blind. This image is one that visits him periodically, against a background of a vague sense of loss.

This sense of loss is so pervasive that it will only leave him once. On a family trip to London, Tom pauses in the centre of St. Paul's cathedral, staring up at the vastness of the dome overhead. For a moment he has a sense of a great emptiness suspended in the sky above him, and will feel as though it might be possible to believe. But by the end of the day that feeling will pass, leaving him again with a sense of vague dislocation, like recalling that the furniture in one's room has been re-arranged.

Barry's life, meanwhile, has come to centre on a buxom young figure who attends the same youth group as he does. We can perhaps accept his protests that his attendance at the church camp is motivated by spiritual concerns, while noting that his attendance form was submitted a few hours after hers.

On the camp, he hears a presentation by a doctor from *Medicine Sans Frontieres*. Sitting in the hall, watching as someone struggles to master the intricacies of Powerpoint and the doctor speaks on, regardless of the technical difficulties, he'll feel a small chill running up and down his spine. The hairs on his arm stand up on end, and he glances around, to see if anyone else has responded similarly, but the others are still slouching in their chairs, texting each other surreptitiously.

Barry makes no announcement on his return. But during the next semester he begins to apply himself with more than his usual calm, jettisoning his extra-curricular activities to spend more time studying biology and chemistry. Tom, as always, notices but says nothing. In fact, the change passes uncommented between the two friends, until shortly before they graduate. During this period they seem like birds cooped in a cage, constantly stretching their wings and buffeting into each other, occasionally testing the wire mesh to find exactly how far it stretches. This particular evening, the two of them are returning from a party, walking to a nearby tram stop. They are not quite inebriated enough to need support, but their footsteps constantly meander and halt, and their bacchanalian laughter carries in the still night air.

"Barry, why are you so ... so ... so *into* the doctor thing, you know?"

"I think ... I think I want to work with MSF."

"MSF?"

"It's like this, doctor group, that helps people in Africa."

"Huh."

They walk on in silence, approaching now the main street, and turn left to ascend the hill towards the tram stop.

"Do you think it makes a difference, though?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like, people are going to die whatever you do; they're just so *many* of them, you know?" Tom waves his hand in an arc. "Why bother, just to help a few people?"

Barry responds without thinking, and afterwards they both stand there, silent,

staring down the road as they wait for the tram. "Because I want to not hate myself."

Their friendship throughout this period is not a prominent constant but more of a loose association that waxes and wanes with the seasons. We won't invade their privacy any longer; instead we'll rejoin them at university, where both have gone to the same institution; one to study the workings of financial markets, the other to specialise in the intricacies of the human body. By now their lecture is long finished, and the two have gone their separate ways. Fortunately university is nothing if not repetitive, so we can rejoin them a week later in the same lecture hall. The lecturer is just concluding, gathering his notes on the lectern.

"And that's why atomism was such a crucial departure from the belief systems that preceded it. Now remember, come prepared next week to discuss Gewirth's understanding of the relationship between reason and morality, and its implications for meta-ethics."

There is the explosion of noise that accompanies the end of any lecture, and the two figures exit the hall, making for one of the nearby coffee shops that spring up like mushrooms on any campus.

They take their coffee to a table in the centre of the cafe, pushing aside the day's *Age*.

"How come you asked for the Fairtrade stuff?"

Barry shifts in his chair. "To see if they had it."

"But you drank the regular one."

"But if they had it, I would have gotten it."

Tom leans back. "Is this one of those, 'what would Jesus do' things? Like, would Jesus drink Fairtrade?"

Barry laughs. "No, just trying to do my bit."

Tom, however, has a way of picking at something, of being unable to let it go. "But it must be a weird concept, 'what would Jesus do'. I mean, do you think about it when you're taking a piss? Or when you're beating the bishop? Chafing the weasel? Giving yourself a low five?" He laughs, pleased with himself.

Barry chuckles, unperturbed by his friend's particular brand of humour and unwilling to be baited. "I went to an information session on private practice the other night."

"Yeah?"

"It was good. Interesting, actually. I've been thinking it might be worth doing that for a while, after I graduate."

"Really? How come?"

"Good experience, I think, and it might provide a bit of financial stability for later."

Tom puts down his cup, and glances at the newspaper. "Huh - it says Wednesday. I thought today was Tuesday."

Barry laughs. "For the last ten weeks, we've had our Philosophy lecture on a Wednesday. Bit thick-headed today?"

Those last few words, as they travel across the intervening space between the two friends, will be subtly distorted. It's impossible to say whether it's the concurrent opening of the cafe door and the wash of air and outside noise it brings, the hum of the coffee grinder and adjacent hiss of the milk being steamed, or the background groaning of the air conditioner; but Tom will hear these words:

“ ... Bit of a dick-head today?”

“What’s up your ass, Barry?”

Barry looks at Tom curiously.

“Well fuck you, mate. I’m fine - you feeling alright?”

And from there it cascades, the way a rock falling down a hill can suddenly avalanche into an entire wave of dirt and debris. And like every fight, it changes, because a fight is never *about* its catalyst - the flame always leaps from kindling to firewood.

“Well fuck you, Barry. You sure *you’re* feeling okay? You’ve just sold out on your dream, done a Judas, swapped your African orphans for private practice. Do you get your thirty pieces of silver right away, or do you have to wait until they actually collect your soul?”

“Tom, what...?” Barry stares at him in confusion. “It’s just something I’m thinking about. Besides, what the fuck do you care? You’re always taking the piss anyway; why would you give a shit?” Customers in the cafe are turning to watch, mixing their eager voyeurism with their ingrained regard for the proprieties, not wanting to gawk too openly.

Tom leans forward, and his voice is low and quiet, so that a customer sitting at the edge of the cafe will rise up out of his chair, straining to hear the latest line in this free to air drama. “You fucking bastard. All this time you’ve been up on your fucking high horse, with that condescending attitude, and now you’re selling out. Well, fuck you!”

Then he stands and walks, the plastic strips in the door of the cafe flapping ineffectually behind him. Barry rises and hurries after him, leaving a disappointed audience behind him to turn back to their neighbours, eager to share their theories about the conflict they’ve just witnessed.

“Tom! Tom!” Barry calls after him and sprints to catch up, while Tom maintains a steady pace, the fury in his face matching his relentless stride. “I thought you never believed in this stuff because you ... because ...” He waves his hands, as though combing the air for the appropriate words. “I didn’t think you were even interested!”

“Of course I fucking was. Every single day I wanted to believe. You kept saying that it makes sense, that it makes everything fit! But that’s bullshit!” He stops and turns on his heel, bringing him face to face with Barry.

“It caught her, Barry. This little girl; like, thirteen, or something. She didn’t look one way for a second, and the tram caught her and dragged her under the wheels. Her *arm* came off! It tore the skin off her shoulder, half her face!” He turns and walks off, leaving Barry staring speechlessly.