

## **This Needs Work**

Orin was the greatest writer in the world. Though he'd never had anything published, or indeed read by anyone else, he was certain of this. Certain because all that he'd read was dreck and though he hadn't read much after this realization, he could reasonably assume that what he hadn't and wouldn't read was also rubbish: the same story told over and again; predictable plot lines and trite twists.

So, Orin wrote words of his own. He was writing a novel. A Work to challenge our understanding of the written word. A story, a tale, a poetic treatise that rhymed in imaginative and technically incorrect ways. He wrote on sheaves and scraps and bits of pages salvaged from other stories written by other authors. He wrote on the backs of unpaid utility bills and insistent requests for remittance. These records of Orin's genius were kept in boxes and binders and affixed with thumbtacks to the walls of his windowless basement room.

Once, Orin had even typed a chapter on an old clacking typewriter: on fresh, white pages, on the night before folding it twice and sealing it and sending it to Mr. Harold J. Oppenberg, III, executive editor of MacMillan's Monthly Musings, a self-proclaimed highbrow literary rag of which Orin thought not highly. For consideration, he submitted a profound essay on the meaning of meaning. Orin considered this a mediocre piece of his greater Work but submitted it nonetheless as he believed the world was not yet ready for his best efforts. This, in fact, was also the subject of much of Orin's grand Work, his favorite topic of conversation and a theme that haunted his dreams nightly.

The submittal was rejected and returned with a short letter signed by Harold himself: "This needs work," the letter stated, but Orin read: "Dear Orin, I am an uneducated dolt who wouldn't know good writing if it slapped me in the face (which was Orin's least favorite expression used by the small-minded who thought in terms of unimaginative metaphors). Thank you for your time."

Though only the third Hal Oppenberg had read any of these stories, Orin wasn't shy about telling the world. "My Work," he called the nascent novel, capitalization audible in his voice. "Can I read it?" he was asked by acquaintances. Not by friends as he had none, had met no one he considered worthy, had time only for this Work. Just acquaintances: coworkers and baristas and mailmen and grocers and tellers at the bank. Anyone who chanced to ask "What do you do?" either in earnest or simply to pass the time politely in talking small. They asked. He scoffed. "You?" Orin would sneer. "You no doubt think highly of Proust and Shakespeare and Dickens and Wolfe?" A nod, a protest, a bit of confusion. No matter to Orin. "Rubbish!" he would shout, finger wagging importantly. "Cookie cutter copy cats!" That same finger swinging through the air in emphasis. "Garbage unfit for anal cleansing." Calming he continued: "Whereas my Work is clean and true and new as the world on its first hump-day. But the world is not yet ready. Oh,

no. Perhaps when I am dead and gone and rotted through, perhaps my Work will then be read and appreciated and accepted. But not yet.”

For years Orin myopically labored over his Work. Revising and editing and appending endlessly. He lost jobs and pets and social contacts to neglect. He grew pale and wan and gray as he sat at his desk, squinting in poor light, hastily scribbling on paper oddments with the nub of a broken pencil, a leaky pen, a stub of charcoal.

Then: he died.

It took weeks for anyone to notice. Baristas wondered; grocers mused; but none thought to find out.

When notice was taken it was done so with force by an odor so rank it frightened children and offended mothers miles and weeks away. The ambulance was summoned, the leftovers removed, the room scrubbed and cleaned and polished. Hundreds of garbage bags stuffed with odds, ends and crumpled palimpsests were removed. Orin's story was disposed of without notice by a peeved landlord, bothered by the knuckle-skinning clean up, glad to be rid of an eccentric tenant.

The next day, with floors fresh-swept; walls hastily patched and painted; and burnished light fixtures now free of tightly curled winged things, a slightly disheveled though polite prospect said:

“I'll take it.”