Ludic Writing: The Real Leeds Part 12 (Once in a Lifetime)

written by Byron Alexander Campbell | November 10, 2018

Ludic Writing is a series of narratives generated through play, exploring the prospect of “Games as Writing Prompt.”

Bartlett’s Memory is an extended work of fiction in three volumes, inspired by a play through Yves Tourigny’s Arkham Noir: Collector Case #1 – The Real Leeds and by the collected fiction of “new weird” author Matthew M. Bartlett. In addition to the story, Part 1 of this series includes an analysis of the Arkham Noir card game, while Part 2 features a review of the two short fiction collections—Gateways to Abomination and Creeping Waves—that inspired many of the details in Tourigny’s card game and, by extension, this work of ludic writing.

Volume I of Bartlett’s Memory traces the investigation of two missing persons, Bill St. Clair and Susan Dimmsler, in the haunted village of Leeds, Massachusetts. It consists of five parts: Part 1 | Part 2 | Part 3 | Part 4 | Part 5

Volume II reopens some old wounds and a cold case: the disappearance of our narrator’s cousin, Rangel Bantam, in the early eighties. It consists of three parts: Part 1 | Part 2 | Part 3

Volume III shepherds a continuance of established patterns, the disappearance of another child, and the return of the prodigal son. It consists of four parts: Part 1 | Part 2 | Part 3 | Part 4

Those seeking information on the apocryphal fourth volume represent a clear and present danger to themselves and others.

This is the final transmission.
Could WXXT truly be considered culpable? Could the FCC and their secret team of psychics, seers and shamans use such an incident to pursue their doomed vendetta?

—Matthew M. Bartlett, “More About WXXT,” Dead Air

I was the only living soul in the Bridge Street Cemetery—though, as you now know, that status is debatable. I stood before my own grave marker, a limestone edifice that bore no date of birth or death, no epitaph, only my name, all capitals, Roman type: GUY STANTON. The stone was stained, pitted,
like a disregarded molar. The earth beneath my feet had grown hard, bleak, and grey; it hadn’t been disturbed for quite some time.

I cast my gaze about fitfully, taking in the moldering grass and withered ivy, the odd clumps of an unfamiliar fungus spreading to envelop the smaller graves in grey, beehive-like structures. This part of the yard wasn’t much tended to these days. I looked at the names, many of them familiar. I chuckled at the puerile innuendos embedded in the epitaphs, cipher messages that boiled down to “Jesus was the Oedipus of the Jews,” our last little blasphemies. Beneath the hard ground, I knew, were many more bodies than those memorialized here, crowded together like puppies in a shoebox. I’d put many of them there myself.

My joints snapped and popped as I stretched. Then, I took up the tools I had brought with me and set to work.

Three hours later, it was done. The grave marker had been reduced to rubble, a pile of irregular crumbles reminiscent of feta cheese. I stood on the verge of a deep pit. I wiped my brow with a napkin I’d swiped from the Bluebonnet Diner.

A broad shadow fell across the scar I’d made in the earth. I didn’t have to turn around; there were no horns on the silhouette, so it must be the other one. “Good evening, Commissioner Poulgrave. Care to help me lift this thing out of the earth?”

The FCC commissioner grunted as he lowered himself into the hole, grave-dirt darkening his white, pleated pants. Together, we raised the coffin, setting it to one side of my former grave. I traded my shovel for a crowbar.

“We heard your broadcast,” the commissioner said as I worked the rusted hinges. I didn’t think I needed to countenance that with a reply. “It wasn’t what Agent Schwaller was expecting.”

“I know,” I replied.

“She’s convinced you’re a good man. She says we can reason with you.”

“She never met the real me,” I told him. I hissed with effort, and the coffin’s lid popped free with a burp of stale air.

“Can you be reasoned with, Mr. Stanton?”

“Look, I’m a free agent now,” I said, shoving the heavy lid to the side. “I have my own agenda.”

“Which might align with ours. Agent Schwaller says you spoke of partnership.”

I didn’t respond. My mind was too busy considering the thing in the coffin, calculating its implications.

Commissioner Poulgrave allowed himself a throaty chuckle. “Now what you were expecting to find, Mr. Stanton?”
I was unable to divert my attention from the horrible thing before me. I plunged my hands into it, among it. It collapsed at my touch with a barely audible sigh.

“What did you suppose would be in there?” the commissioner continued. “A pile of radio equipment? A note declaring your immortality? Or this, perhaps?”

He pulled a hidebound tome out from under his vest, slapped it against his palm a couple of times, sending up plumes of grey dirt. Gold glinted along the spine, picking out the title: *Libellus Vox Larva*. A growl bubbled up from my chest, unbidden.

“That belongs to me,” I snarled.

“Does it? I was told it was the property of that poor wretch you see before you.” Poulgrave chuckled again.

“It’s mine,” I repeated.

“Its a very rare book, I’m given to understand. Its value to a collector would be...incalculable.”

I pulled my hands free of the dusty rib-cage and swiped at the rotund commissioner. He stepped deftly aside, a glint of amusement in his eyes.

“What you need to understand, Mr. Stanton,” he said, slipping the tome carefully back into his vest, “is that Ben Stockton is not the only force at play in this valley. Not even close.”

I looked up at Poulgrave—his jowly, porcine face, his twinkling little eyes, his too-tight but ludicrously expensive suit—and narrowed my eyes.

“He’s powerful, I’ll grant him that,” Poulgrave continued, oblivious to the rage seething inside me. “He’s bested us on a few occasions. But we have our own resources, our own alliances.

“Golden made you feel that you were special, that you were powerful. But guess what? He lied to you. That’s what he does. That’s what we pay him for. The man’s a weasel, but he knows what motivates people.

“You think you’re a free agent? You’re a worm, Stanton. You’re a morsel of shit.” He bent down, plucked a crumb of grave-dirt from his pant-cuff, rolled it between his thumb and forefinger. “You think you have power? You’re a threat to nobody.” Poulgrave flicked the crumb, and my eye instantly began to water. “But you’d be a useful irritant...if placed correctly. Just as you were tonight. We’d like to continue that partnership.

“You pissed off a lot of powerful people tonight, ‘Stanton.’ On both sides of the battlefield. I don’t think you’re prepared to face the backlash.” He gestured down at the coffin, at the bones held within. They looked so small. “You’ll wind up just like this miserable bastard.”

My right eye still burned, and the other one began to weep in sympathy.
Through the blur of tears, I took note of shadows gathering on the graveyard’s periphery, shadows that took the form of tall, quiet men in animal masks. Crows and snarling dogs and Billy goats. “You’re prepared to offer me protection?” I asked, blinking furiously.

FCC Commissioner Poulgrave smiled, and his teeth were like kernels of sweet yellow corn. “We are. A new name, a new identity. _____ never suited you anyway.” He eyed me appraisingly. “You look more like a Matthew.”

“In exchange for what?”

The FCC commissioner rolled a shoulder in a vague gesture. “Nothing much. Leave your patron. Use your skills as a writer to continue to make life interesting for Stockton and his ilk.

“Do we have a deal, Mr. Bartlett?”

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Epilogue—The Big Picture

Do not be emboldened nor inspired, dear reader. Be mortified. Be repulsed. Shrink away with loathing and revulsion, as a pious man might.
Most men make do with one life. I’ve lived three.

Now you know the truth, or another version of it. I’ve left a few details ambiguous—it’s harder for them to track me that way. I put the rest of it in my books.

If you happen to see me at a reading or a book signing, don’t ask me about this. I’ll deny its existence. I’ll direct you to my website, to my latest release. The terms of my contract are very specific.

But you’ll know the truth, or another version of it. Use that knowledge as a shield.

I know that they’re still looking for me. Every so often, I’ll get a voicemail from my agent, and it will slowly drown in white noise, the plaintive wheeze of an accordion in the background. I’ll turn on my favorite podcast and hear Uncle Red reading the day’s news or Father Zeke preaching bile and cancer. Packages appear at my doorstep, dossiers filled with teeth and hair and greasy Polaroids. Pictures of Rangel and others like her. Now, when I see an envelope on my stoop without a return address, I set fire to it without opening it. If I bring it inside the house, it gives them a way in. The defenses the FCC erected around me are holding, for now.

Once every month or so, I set myself loose upon the Marie Callender’s. I’ve selected an establishment that’s well outside my normal stomping grounds, one where I’m less likely to be recognized. Even so, I take precautions, sitting only in the darkest corners of the restaurant, dealing only with a waitress whom I’ve grown to trust (her name is Diamond). I wear oversized black sunglasses and a broad-brimmed hat. I tip splendidly. It curbs the hunger for a spell.

Read my books. Arm yourself with knowledge. And when you’re driving by yourself through the Pioneer Valley, especially in the fall, especially late at night, and you get close to Northampton, just turn off your radio for a while. Roll up your windows. Do Mad Libs in your head, count mile markers. Insulate yourself against the signal.