

BECOMING THE TENDERLOINADAM
KLEIN

I was not there during his childhood, at the beginning of his illness, or when he died. I did not care for him when he was in hospice, nor love him intimately as his partners did. Nor did I know his real name for nearly six months after meeting him. I knew his pen name—Thomas Avena—and never gave up using it, even when some of his oldest friends, his family, both of his lovers, called him Jeff or Jeffrey. I called him Thomas because I trusted that the persona he constructed was as legitimate as the name he'd been given at birth. I knew legal documents, the law, meant little to him. I did not know all his crimes, though he would tell me that he was in possession of two paintings of great value—works that could save him if he was ever forced into penury. Later, among his papers, I would find copies of two articles on the theft of the paintings. One of them was an Old Master. They never served him except that with them he could imagine remaking himself somewhere where seedy characters wind up in noirs.

The paintings reduced the dread of dire poverty, leaving him to manage other dreads. Daily, he was consumed by a lack of money, consumed by schemes that would avail it to him. I knew which stores I could not enter with him. If I did enter, I knew to leave before him. In those days, I was also a thief, no one to judge. Except that I thought he was a lousy shoplifter, too vigilant and obvious.

I met him having a few months off heroin. I hadn't forgiven myself for the lost time. And lost it was: my twenties. Thomas wanted life and I'd been practicing death. I admired his will to live, the fight in him. Criminality was part of that fight. Stealing wasn't just survival; it was a rebuttal to the indignity of poverty.

He stole from Neiman Marcus, returned items for cash. He dressed impeccably for these forays. He'd sweep up clothes from a dressing room floor and fold them into his Coach backpack. The backpack was stolen. He lifted art books from Borders. He gave these as birthday and holiday gifts. He was twice a bankrupt and still had credit cards. He performed small acts of insurance and mail fraud, and shared the spoils of his excursions, taking me to fine restaurants on his last dollar because it reminded him of how he'd once lived and how a hardworking person, artist or not, should be able to live. His disability benefits required that he remain financially destitute, otherwise he would have made more of himself, or at least more money for himself. If only poetry paid.

How can I explain that he really wanted very little from life? Only a few nice things. He wanted luck, and that was the thing he couldn't steal, the mean little diamond in the alarmed display.

While Thomas lived, everything was urgent and embattled. I remind myself he was a young man, in his thirties. One who knew he would not be old.

I've never met anyone who wanted time the way he did. For him, time and desire were braided together.

We are having a late lunch in a dark banquette in an expensive Union Square bistro where the flowers are so fresh I can smell them over the food. The *maitre d'*, a tall, strong French woman with a gray swoosh in her hair like Sontag's, recognizes us immediately, approaches the table, and hugs us tightly, even though she is very round in her pregnancy.

"Where have you both been?" She seems to have genuinely missed us.

"Nathalie, Adam is back from Bangladesh. He was volunteering there."

Her eyes widen, she puts her hand on my shoulder, then turns her attention to Thomas. "And you?" she asks.

"I've moved to Sausalito," he says. "I rarely come into the city anymore." He's gazing at her stomach as though she were pregnant with angels. He can still touch the magical part of his psychosis, the part in which Thomas Avena defies death through the helpful prayers of infants and the indigent, his guardians. After effusing about the power of her carriage and her glow, he lets her get back to her station.

"She is the best thing about this restaurant," he says, opening the menu, which we both know well. The place is a time capsule, one of the city's old reliables. Only we are no longer reliable.

"Have you seen *The Day of the Locust*, Adam? Schlesinger's film. A masterpiece. Burgess Meredith is a deranged, elfin door-to-door salesman whose laugh drives all the characters crazy. Even his daughter—Karen Black—has to slap him across the face in his sickbed to get him to stop. At one point, Donald Sutherland stomps a child to death. It's gratifying within the logic of the film."

"I do love a discharge of energy," I say.

"The best part, though—Geraldine Page plays Big Sister, a take on Aimee Semple McPherson. You know my mother's heroine was Kathryn Kuhlman."

He dabs his lips with a cloth napkin. After hospitalization, tubes down his throat, he can now compose himself. His face thin as a key.

"My mother took me to see her once during one of her mass healings. Who knows how many people went home that day and died? I just remember her chiffon sleeves from the side of the stage. Meant to resemble flowers blooming. Like you'd

be swept up in an embrace of flowers. Flowers die quickly, a quality the church elevates. They're fragrant then putrid."

I laugh. Primal rage toward his mother has restored some of his depleted energy. His poet's mind, still a shiv. The film, filtered through him, is not an entertainment but a reckoning, a repudiation of his mother and the mothers of evangelicism, their feigned, conditional embrace.

"The characters in the film are so weak and so vile," Thomas says. "They're predatory, unforgivable, maybe. Yet inevitable, exactly what the world demands."

In his last papers (scattered, scribbled notes) I found an entry that appeared connected to nothing, split off from an unfinished sentence:

Last week they found a small mass on—

Then, a thought that had made its way into his mind—a line so clear even his mania did not diminish its force:

What could be more painful than someone, an evangelist, getting a death grip on your spiritual concerns, and wrestling them to the ground (to her submission); what is a greater expression of the Christian ego, to evangelize ... A conviction that one's ideas, opinions, and ways of being in the world are necessarily right, and that it would be a weakness to admit more information.

It exasperated him to know that his experience with illness and loss was glory for her, a sign of God's work. When she spoke of religion and piety and God's will, he felt she'd struck him as she did when he was a child, first with an open palm, then with a cast-iron skillet.

No one recognizes artists once they become *the poor* or *the sick*. But eventually poverty shows, as does sickness, and that was also part of his struggle: to live well and to appear well.

I think about Thomas's film passions, how often he quoted Cronenberg's *The Fly*: "I'm an insect who dreamt he was a man and loved it. But now the dream is over ... and the insect is awake." Transformations, but particularly cruel transformations, fascinated him. He was aware that his own life had been coauthored by illness and by the physical and economic violence of the city. He spoke as though he were a perplexed scientist observing his own life, wondering at how it mutated.

I was introduced to Thomas by a friend who was in the MA writing program at San Francisco State University. Jim was working as an editor for *The Bastard Review* and had passed an early story of mine on to him. Thomas and his partner, Billy, invited us to dinner.

“They have their own catering company,” Jim said in an effort to encourage me to go. “Gorgonzola.”

“Quite a bold name for a business,” I said.

We arrived at Thomas’s and rang the bell. After a while, the door opened. He wore an apron, was polite but preoccupied.

“Please go into the living room. Jim, show Adam where he can put his bag down. Nice to meet you.”

He lived in a noisy fourth-floor apartment that faced the street, but I immediately noticed that his building was in better condition than my own. In mine, the sconces had been picked clean of their fake stones, and the first floors had no lighting. I would later discover that Thomas was tied to his apartment by an unyielding network of social services that included Section 8 Housing, Disability, Medicaid, and a menu of supplemental benefits that required him to appear to be a pauper, at least on paper.

The apartment was something else entirely. It had a long hallway lined floor to ceiling with bookshelves, a large bright kitchen with sparkling glass panes in the original cabinetry, hand-blown glass de Vera vases, one of such magnificent yellow, I was immediately returned to the angel’s trumpets that grew wild by the side of our house when I was a child in Florida.

Off the hallway was an oval bedroom with intricate wainscoting and an enormous four-poster bed. The room resounded like a drum, and years later, when I briefly lived with Thomas in that same room, sleeping on the old Murphy bed that folded down beside his double, I saw to what extent he had to shield himself from the noise of the place. Drunks and transvestite hookers came and went throughout the night, the sound of their boots and heels, their bottles falling on the uncarpeted floor of the apartment above, reverberated as though we were sleeping beneath a stage.

The dining room had a heavy, black marble table, rough along the edges. At the center of the table, Thomas had sunk bright sunflowers in a Meiji urn. Our mutual friend Jim, who had brought me there that evening, had told him I liked sunflowers, so Thomas had selected them and cut them to fit the urn. I liked the plainness of the flowers, though they were not plain, really—seeds intricate as brocade. I’d seen sunflowers in front of houses in Iowa, where I’d briefly attended college. Grown to eye level, they appeared confrontational and resilient, the way they rose to your height and swayed like lazy guards at the perimeter of lawns. I also remember them scorched and drooping and I remember them gone.

At Market and Seventh I saw the rat. It was all big shoulders and hips, having dined at Popeye's it was drunk on chicken skin. Ugly as sin.

In his journals, Thomas's attention is frequently drawn back to the street. He is not above the homeless and afflicted, but sunk into the same Boschian landscape, tramping across its morbid tableau. In 1990, he wrote:

Returning from breakfast: a small crowd is watching the battle between a Filipino hooker and a compact Latino ... she waves a switchblade in the air, stopping traffic on Geary Street ... bending over, she mimes thrusting the switchblade into her ass. "Go get AIDS faggot," she shouts, over and over.

In my apartment, I hear her voice, relentlessly ...
"Go get AIDS, faggot."

Some people commented on the air of guarded artifice about him, though he was not guarded with me. He had a mustache that people talked about. It was clipped and aligned so perfectly it made them uneasy. I suppose they associate extreme grooming with autocratic personalities, and there might have been that in him, too. But there were sacrifices he made to achieve this effect: his platelets were so low, he would often have to lie on his couch, styptic pencil or tissue applied to the slightest nick. The bleeding would go on and on, usually before some event of significance, threatening to make him late, once even to his own reading with Adrienne Rich.

He was fine-boned but muscular, aware of his posture. He carried himself like a gymnast, in fact, imagined himself one, as he imagined himself many things.

I asked Thomas a few questions while he set the table. Which were his prized books?

"Jean Rhys," he said, simply. "Anything by Jean Rhys. And of course, the Ellman biography of Oscar Wilde."

At the time I had read *Voyage in the Dark*, *Quartet*, and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. I also loved Rhys's work and we spoke about her prose. I mentioned its paranoiac qualities.

Thinking my comments critical of her work, Thomas offered a defense:

"She had to depend on men, as most women did at that time. Her husband was in jail, so she had to live on the promises of strangers, people with money. It's a terrible condition, to be so unlucky, to rely on the rich."

"I haven't had the experience, but I have relied on the poor. Not great, either," I said. Thomas smiled and went about his tasks at the table.

He liked a show of strength. He pointed at the chin-up bar mounted between the living room and bathroom.

“That’s where I do my raises,” he said. “I had lymphatic cancer and only just grew my hair back. For months I wore a scarf. Later I bought a Borsalino. I like hats, but I’m glad not to have to wear one now.”

I noticed over dinner that Thomas felt his arms often, seemed to like the tightness of them. They weren’t large arms in that emerging age of top-heavy gay men, in a time when large was everything. In the 1990s, no one trusted thin.

“I have to work hard to regain my strength. I used to be so strong, wasn’t I, Billy?” he asked while his partner maneuvered rustic loaves of bread around the table.

“Yes, Thomas. You’ve always been strong,” Billy said.

Thomas thanked Jim for bringing my story to his attention. I lifted a glass of water and raised it to Jim. I was grateful for whatever he’d done behind my back to get my story read.

Thomas, already drunk, his lips very red, and perhaps meaning to be generous, but striking a chord of condescension, told Jim that he would be named the associate editor of the journal.

“Titles mean everything,” he said. “It’s very important to have your work recognized.” It was a kind of anointing, something Thomas would do without realizing it. Jim had been involved with the journal for the past two years and managed to get James Purdy to contribute. Though unpaid, he was no intern.

“I have so much I’d like to accomplish.” Thomas’s voice carried weak self-admonishment.

Looking around the room, I wondered how they’d acquired so many beautiful glass and ceramic pieces. I could not have guessed that Thomas, a decade after my first meeting him, would write of the yellow glass vase I’d admired:

When I look up from the bed there is the yellow vase on the windowsill, its amphora shape lit by morning light. A tripod of curved iron supports it.

This pure yellow with the cast of green where the vase widens and grows translucent. I raise my head from the pillow, and there ... the yellow vase on the windowsill. I see it filled with soft gray matter. The breakable container for my ashes.

But there is something inside the vase. Something roaring.

Nor could I have imagined that six years later, the Meiji urn that held the sunflowers would come to hold Billy’s ashes and that Thomas would write of it in an unpublished poem, “The Daisy”:

She is talking into the phone
and as she declaims

the sienna-orange daisy
bows down over the lip of its vase

a Meiji bronze
with its gilt abraded
that was still dusted over
with the ashes of my lover

Who can know what matters? We're privy to small fragments, bright instances that, like tiles, may one day suggest a larger fresco, ruined, or discernible even with areas missing.

They brought out dish after dish, each arrayed carefully, contrasting their vivid colors.

"I forage my own watercress. I try to have everything as fresh as possible. It's part of my regimen. Earlier this year I was given six months to live. All the men in my lymphoma protocol—well, all except for one—are dead."

I sensed a mounting fear that I couldn't assuage with appreciation for the soup or the rigors of his diet. Billy's head fell forward and I saw Kaposi's sarcoma just above his collar, lightened by makeup that was now mostly eroded by sweat. I looked at his nose, a drunkard's nose, though it could have been the sign of a developing keloid, that soft purpling, impossible to tell.

"Have some wine," Thomas encouraged. I explained I wasn't drinking.

"Then Jim and Billy and I will have to drink alone."

"No," I corrected him. "I will have to abstain alone."

Thomas said of the journal he was editing: "I want it long, flat, and black, like an embossed tomb."

"It's both late and over budget." Billy turned to me and began to talk about how poorly Thomas managed his time.

"Yes," Thomas said, "Billy is always watching my time and my purse."

I noticed then the long, thin glass doors that led to the small balcony fire escape on which there was just enough room for a plant and two or three people standing close. The glass of one door had a small, jagged hole in it—a gunshot.

"The thing is, you have to read the work. You have to form relationships. You have to find ways to turn away work from artists you admire. And from all of this work—coming in when it does, which is rarely on time—you have to find its proper place, so that it speaks to the other works. But you're right, Billy. I'm too slow. My own work suffers for it."

Thomas changed the topic and began to talk about his father, who had owned a laundromat in Chicago. Someone stabbed him in the eye. “For coins,” he said, almost wistfully, raising his glass to his already very red lips.

“Now that you’ve told him about your father, why don’t you tell Adam about your mother?” Billy asked, the napkin haphazardly stuffed into his collar.

“She was born again with the temper of a fury,” he said. By the time he was fifteen, she had thrown him out of the house because of an affair he’d carried on with a male neighbor. An affair he later said had gone on for years, from the time he was twelve.

His mother, he said, would still call once a month to tell him she prayed for his soul. And he would warn her, “You can pray for my health, but don’t dare pray for my soul.”

In the poem “Evangel,” his mother threatens him with mutual forgetting:

if you continue on your wicked way—
and I know you will—

in heaven I’ll have my memory
erased of you
I won’t know you at all—

and you—

you’ll forget my voice
you’ll forget my flesh

in hell your memory
will be erased of me

you won’t know me at all

Thomas invited me out on the fire escape to move us momentarily away from Billy, who was now talking to the wine bottles.

He took a small key from a finger bowl on a table by the glass doors. “These are Billy’s Japanese netsuke,” he said, pointing to several small, intricately carved erotic figures. They were laid out on the tabletop near a delicate red blown-glass horn. Thomas opened the padlock and walked onto the fire escape.

"Come outside, Adam," he called. By now he was making his way up the steps. It was our first time alone that evening.

"I have a fear of heights," I told him.

Holding on to the stairwell railing with one arm, he swung out freely over the street to demonstrate his daring.

"Don't do that. It makes me dizzy." I could barely bring myself to look down at the traffic below.

"It's fine," he said with a laugh. "I have one foot on the rail and I'm holding on." He did this often in my presence. He was tempting fate, even though he continually referred to himself as unlucky.

"Jim's very handsome, isn't he? He's a handsome boy."

Then suddenly he asked, "What do you think of crime?"

"It's wonderful if you're ambitious and smart and you don't get caught. But, you know, I worked with ex-offenders. Most aren't very good at what they do."

"They should never confess to anything. Never."

"My clients don't admit anything willingly. It's generally evidence that gives them away."

His expression was rueful, his eyes fixed on the Domino's Pizza sign. "I watch people become the Tenderloin," he said, "just by living here too long."

He'd trapped me there with him and I had no idea who he was.

"You're very lucky," he said to me. "You can write. If you don't kill yourself, you'll do very well."

"It's not me who's going to kill himself. You're the one hanging from the railing."

"Yes," he answered. "I've learned to hang on."

When we stepped back into the apartment, Billy was belligerent, incoherent.

"Thomas has no sense of the big picture. He knows nothing about money."

"They killed my father for coins."

Billy stood up.

"You should sit down, Billy." Thomas didn't look at him, but at the stereo. Nina Simone was singing "Pirate Jenny."

"Am I embarrassing you around your friend?" Billy asked. "Maybe you can hide me away in the kitchen."

"Go into the kitchen," Thomas bellowed. "And have another bottle of wine."

"I think Jim and I should go," I said. Jim looked alarmed but gathered the manuscripts he'd removed from his briefcase, put them back in, and snapped the case shut.

“But we’re just getting to know you. And we have something else for you,” Thomas said. “Billy’s made a dessert. A lemon tart.”

“I think you and Billy need some time alone,” I said. I stepped away from the table and began to gather my things. I had never called out hosts on their bad behavior before. It felt awful. It felt like the end but it was the beginning.

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There is a Jean Rhys story, “Vienne,” that I read only just before he died. The story is quintessential Rhys: Two lovers, Francine and Pierre, grifters, are riding a wave of luck, but Francine is dogged by foreboding. If they move quickly, they can escape their debts and the law, but their profligacy has caught up with them. It is the advent of the First World War and the couple are running with all manner of the demimonde in the finest hotels in Vienna. The women are not called prostitutes (they are merely “expensive”). The men are French and Japanese officers, the women *femmes sacrées*. The sun is going down on Bohemia.

The story begins forlornly: “Funny how it’s slipped away, Vienna. Nothing left but a few snapshots.”

They are staying at the Hotel Sacher, then the Radetsky, then the Imperial. Summer 1921.

One day, Francine has “a presentiment.”

The math doesn’t add up. All they’re spending, it frightens her.

But Pierre silences her. Just mentioning the money might spoil their luck. And after all, in no time, they’ll be rich. That will be that. He takes her to dinner, but Francine’s confidence is troubled.

At the same table a few days before we came, a Russian girl twenty-four years of age had shot herself.

With her last money she had a decent meal and then bang!

Out—

And I made up my mind that if it ever came to it I should do it too.

Not to be poor again. No and No and No.

Salut to you, little Russian girl, who had pluck enough and knowledge of the world enough, to finish when your good time was over.

The story is not quite as bleak as it sounds. Not quite so dire. The lovers commit to run, to dodging their debts. King Karl returns to Hungary, providing them momentary cover from the law. They manage to get to Prague, then purchase train

tickets to London for the price of their car. The war will seed the map with lead, but they're free. Temporarily free, and fleeing, and *rum*.

Four years after that first meeting, when our lives were closely bound, Thomas called and told me to come right over. The FBI had finally caught up with Billy. Two agents had apprehended him in the doorway of the apartment. They'd called Billy by his real name, William Shelton, and told them what they were there for.

The law's long memory.

Over a million dollars had been embezzled from an Alabama bank. Almost a decade later, the bank wanted its money back.

Thomas was sitting at the dining room table, a stack of white pages and address books set out before him.

"Help me find the numbers," he said. "It's time to call on everyone we've ever had to dinner or bought a drink for."

He paced around the living room, carrying the phone with him, attempting to sound genuinely happy to speak to the people who'd been part of his and Billy's past when the money flowed, before I came into their orbit.

"It's been a long time. I hate to have to call with a favor to ask, but it's critical ..."

On call after call he confessed. Billy had only to acknowledge his identity to the FBI agents. Thomas had to apologize for the ruse, as though the crime were his own.

The days had been rum, but all gone now...

I wrote a letter to the judge. The owners of the Clift Hotel wrote a letter, gallery owners, an opera singer, an attorney, an executive chef wrote letters. Having watched Thomas make those calls to get people lined up behind Billy, I knew he felt he'd dropped in their estimation. It wasn't just the crime, but the near abandonment of his cool, the distress revealed in his voice. Like a con man closing a deal, he used every method: guilt, the promise of Billy's best interests, his own. It was love—at least loyalty—that drove him, and he used both to make sure those letters reached the judge.

His favorite film of the time was *The Grifters*. Which of the women did he identify with: Anjelica Huston or Annette Bening? The seasoned hustler or the young upstart working a long con? Bening stages a fake FBI bust. Perhaps wishful thinking on Thomas's part: imagining his and Billy's fates as merely part of a larger hoax they'd orchestrated. But it's Huston who prevails after attempting to seduce and being rebuffed by her son.

Motherhood itself is for her the long con.

At least Huston, unlike Thomas's mother, was in it for something.

Billy spent about a week in jail before his arraignment. Thomas greeted everyone outside the courtroom. “Don’t let Billy see that you’re shocked by his appearance.”

Led in like a hostage.

He had evaded the law for years, the prosecution said. He had lived too well on other people’s money.

What an amazing crime, to steal from the rich in order to live among them! The real crime was to rise in class, to momentarily enter the club and lie about how you got there.

The way Thomas saw it, Billy was speculating with the bank’s money. Speculating on him. That was mostly how he’d financed *The Bastard Review*, his collection of poems *Dream of Order*, and the collection of essays and interviews, *Life Sentences: Writers, Artists, and AIDS*. The anthology had earned him an American Book Award.

Surely it was a contribution to the literary life of San Francisco.

The judge read the letters the defense provided and announced house arrest, then set bail.

But what that really meant was another round of calls, this time to raise the bail money.

Billy returned home with an ankle monitor and went straight back to drinking. What else was there to return to? Dying?

We watch *Nosferatu* on television, the scene where Isabel Adjani, as Mina, walks through the mad square of Amsterdam, amid the rats, the plague-infested townspeople, citizens dancing. A man whirls, grabbing at her gray-blue cape; she pushes him off. Another man mounts a sheep. There is a long table surmounted by rats. A party of friends dines at an adjacent table on mutton and cheese and wine.

“Join us,” one woman requests. The scene ends.

At night, Bill again soaks the sheets with sweat, and I layer the towels under and over the sheets, again and again. I am haggard from changing him.

He says, “A man just told me I must ... undergo a ritual of transformation.”

Later I am awakened as Bill turns and attempts to raise himself on his elbows, with “I thought you died.”

Everything was urgent and embattled.

A few weeks after Billy died, we stood out on his balcony and he effused over Rhys’s story “Sleep It Off Lady.”

“It’s a masterpiece, Adam. An old lady, Miss Verney, is menaced by a large rat in her shed. Of course, no one believes her. She’s drunk most of the time, just another dying nuisance.”

Across Geary Boulevard, a rat scurried beside the Domino's Pizza dumpster, dragging a crust the length of its body.

"He's the big winner tonight," Thomas said. "You know the newspapers are proclaiming that the cities are being overrun with 'super-rats.' That's probably what they'll call us in our next lives. That's why we've got to steal whatever we can. We need a big crime, Adam. A real con. And we have to do it now before the luck or the money runs out." ◻