

David McGimpsey

THE HIGH ROAD

When somebody says they took “the high road”
what they usually mean is they took on
a course of passive-aggressive silence
so cruel you might start to think yourself
as someone simply unworthy of love.
Are you the “tall and flawlessly beautiful
boy” strolling the market in a Cavafy poem?
No? I must take the high road now
and never speak to your pig-face again.
Are you the kind of person who giggles
when you hear somebody say “poetry
is like peeling an onion”? Yes? Really?
I’m afraid I must take the high road now
and while I stroll along its bejewelled path
I will think of porto and consider you
as trivial as Kingsley Amis’s backlist.
The high road is the coward’s autobahn—
its GPS in Kelsey Grammar’s voice—
all high-performance away from your life
off-ramp in Offrampville, where you belong.
There is your life with the coffee-stained pants,
paint-stained pants and oxy-contin-stained pants.
O, your unfinished novel’s hero years—
he’s been sleeping on an army cot
in a Wendy’s basement in Los Robles.
Your novel that quotes Vachel Lindsay’s “I,
the unloving, say life should be lovely”
even if it doesn’t use those exact words.
Do you think you are worth still talking to?
Do you think your friends walk away from you
saying “That sexbot has it figured out!”?

Really? True, *you* don't sleep in a Wendy's
(you have an office where that can be done),
and conspiring against you is as pointless
as crabs getting together to whisper
"let's try this backwards!" It will get done.
You are not an important person's enemy.
Nobody winces when you order yogurt
as if you wore Crocs to a cotillion.
Unread books pile up on desk corners—
from Randall Jarrell to Sara Teasdale—
but you never said you looked for salvation
in books. That would be gross to even think,
an insult to salvation's hard purpose,
an insult to salvation as in a job
where you are recycling others' trash.
You learned, early on, literary friends
are just regular friends who wish you were dead.
And none of this is troubling or pitiful.
You can hang with your literary friend,
you can depend on that friend when that friend
is sharing sweet maple cream pie with you—
that friend could be noting the sweet balance
of cream, maple, walnut, vanilla and lard,
and they could be thinking 'I'll never speak
to you again, old chappie' while saying
"Yummy yum-yum yummmity yummy yum!"
You once were so sentimental you thought
you could never silent-treat an old friend
to oblivion. No, not you! But now,
that's easy as working a ziploc bag
and reminding rows of college freshmen
that *memmortigo* is esperanto

for *suicide*. The high road calls out for you!
Somewhere in the fold of Sacramento
there's a small room where you can watch TV
until you die. Just as God intended.
You can say goodbye to your paisley ties
and imagine old colleagues calling you
saying "Please come back to Ole Buford U!"
and you laughing, saying "Can't help you son,
the new *Celebrity Apprentice* is on
Yummy yum-yum yummmity yummy yoo!"
As long as there's TV, you won't fear death.
You won't fear death, as long as there's TV.
There's no higher road than television,
no better working truth than the assurance
you should look upon all confrontation
as if you were a guest on *Ellen*.
There's no way you can be more likeable
than Ellen so just try to hold your own,
(1) be pleasant, open, and (2) take your leave
knowing if Ellen ever invited
you back your only answer could be yes.
It's quite easy. Ellen is progressive
but not a Cultural Revolutionary.
Not a person who thinks you should die
because you paid to see a Led Zeppelin
cover band. She is not Doctor Zaius
nor was she meant to be. Doctor Zaius,
Minister of Science for Ape City,
in a world where human beings are mute,
eons away from comparing poems
to onions. Chief Defender of the Faith,
Dr. Zaius is a modern college prof,

a *bête noire* to Bright Eyes, a “Bah!” sayer
whenever you talk of your home planet,
whenever you talk of *Ellen*, *Frasier*
or Gatorade. Campus Dr. Zaius
always brags about taking the high road,
while judging you on how well you hide
an accent not known for apt comparisons
between poetic layers and onion skin.
Campus Dr. Zaius calls you by your
last name only, as if to emphasize
your resemblance to a recruit. “Salute
the Ape City Flag” he says and you do.
What, in the great history of lies, is that
compared to saying you liked a friend’s play?
What is that compared to saying “I loved
your play *An Unleavening of New Bread*
where you played the parts of Wheat, Germ and Yeast!”
Campus Dr. Zaius calls you by your
last name only and then, to show he cares,
calls you a nickname of his own devising.
Campus Dr. Zaius calls you “Dead Eyes”
and Campus Dr. Zaius calls you out,
clearing his throat to say “Tell me, Dead Eyes,
what is the most beautiful thing you have
ever seen?” And you think seriously,
hoping to lead with a quote from Celan,
because you know it would be really wrong
to talk about how you once saw this picture
of a double Filet-O-Fish beside
a glass of Dr. Pepper. So alluring
you still can’t be sure it wasn’t a dream.
A double Filet-O-Fish, not a regular

Filet-O-Fish. A Dr. Pepper, not a Coke.
It was like staring into the face of God.
You know that would be the wrong thing to say
so you say "The most beautiful thing I saw,
Campus Dr. Zaius, were the last frames
of Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*
where the grouchy old professor dreams
of Swedish heaven. There were so many layers
it was like peeling an onion." At the time,
that was the high road, a cheap zipline
to the hand-sewn leather elbow patches
of the ministry. Why bother with the truth
the most beautiful thing you ever saw
was a food poster in Plattsburgh, New York?
Peel a poem, they say, and you will find
the real meaning, so you sat there peeling
and peeling and all you ever were told
was "*real poems* are by Robert Upshaw;
real poems are by Stevington Ward III,
it's not really for you Fiddler McGee."
For not heeding that advice, for holding on,
thinking you could earn sincere respect,
you are as absurd as the phrase "Let's Rock
with PBS" or "Ingmar Bergman presents
The Life of Henry the VIII." Who on earth
writes a poem about a McLobster
and expects to be taken seriously?
That's stupid—even if that McLobster
wrote a "poetry of witness" and saw
the best McLobsters of its generation
all mayonnaised and celery salted.
It's not like you didn't change. At least once,

at least anecdotally, if someone took the time to explain what “syllabub punch” or “eggnog punch” or “summer punch” was, all you really wanted to do is go to the punch bowl, put your face in the bowl and blow. But, you’re not so bold anymore and your best advice to young writers is: “Get your foot in the door first and worry about the active polo wear you’ll need later. Keep the jokes at a minimum.” We all have to adapt. Yakov Smirnoff, who became famous in America for telling jokes about how horrible life in the Soviet Union was, must feel terrible that Russia became one more bullshit autocracy; not for Russia’s sake but for the demise of his entire act, depriving us a new skein of jokes: “In Soviet Union, Applebees just means flavour of bees. In Soviet Union, candy crushes you. In Soviet Union, if you turn on thermostat thermostat kills you for being a wuss.” What a country. So long, Old Offrampville, no more Sprite in your glass of Pinot Greege, so long Kelly Ripa. So long sweet Reege. As your novel’s protagonist gets sick or builds his “Merrie England” lecture, as you endure un-Ellen like rebuke, do not lose heart and pause and consider your failures as a family member and friend. Just say you are taking the high road.