

The Obituary of Dr. Richard Dabsur

by Matt Gillick

“Life imitates art and art imitates life,
how ridiculous, that’s like saying cats can bark.”
—Anonymous Comment on Oscar Wilde

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Earlier this week the literary world lost an innovator in critical thought. Dr. Richard Dabsur, professor, writer, critic, and bath salts enthusiast died alone and in pain; which aligns his fate with the harsh relativism that perforated his entire narrative. While what Dabsur had done in his career was significant, especially in terms of literary criticism, the Author contrasts his professional fortunes with personal misfortune plaguing his later life as a means of balancing out the universe of his story. In the attempt to reverse the stigma that obituaries only provide glimpses of the deceased’s lives, we shall start at the beginning.

Richard Dabsur was born on February 29 on a leap year, an indication that his character from the start is one separated from convention or normalcy. The boy’s home being a rural district just outside Atlanta where the city acts as a beacon, another symbol of pursuit. His father is a custodial worker, which speaks to the point of Dabsur’s compulsion to meticulously revise his writings later in life, and his mother was a social worker before Richard is born instilling an ideal of service to the community in some way. That desire to serve speaks leaps and bounds in his contributions as a professor. A former student of his recalls Dabsur as “a man who never wanted to give up on any wayward or struggling student. He had to have felt an emptiness if he didn’t reach every student in some way” (Brown, *Professorship*). His childhood is typical of an only child growing up in Georgia. Playing pranks on the elderly neighbors, going off on hikes in

their slightly rural area: like one of those neighborhoods where there are plenty of houses just not as bunched together so as to call the area a suburb. “He’d go off and just run and run as far as he could, the boy couldn’t get enough of the outside” (Mother, *Early Years*). The mundane color descriptions assigned to the houses in his neighborhood imply the boredom of his house-life thus counteracted by the vibrancy in the open, verdant landscape. The “beige houses” with the “grey, concrete front porches” puts Richard in a “sleep of terrible mundanity where even the word ‘mundanity’ [loses] its flair” (*Early Years*). Descriptions such as these display an affectation by contrast favoring nature that befits more the sentiment of the Author rather than Richard himself. The section where young Dabsur calls paramedics to Old Man Jimbo’s house also shows that in the early years there is a capacity for compassion which later years quell (*Early Years*). Later tenure as a professor derails and disillusion him as we will see later. His neighborhood hijinks while not being essential as a whole to the central message, does serve a purpose. The Author inserts these momentary instances of pranks and adventurous bliss to explicate the contrast of his later life. Another factor influencing Dabsur’s later life entails the cultural implications into which he is born.

Growing up in the midst of the Digital Age with all the cellular phones, the internet surfing, and where currency no longer has a physical quality but more of a concept is important to understanding Richard Dabsur. Every commodity is available at the push of a button. Within the space of this narrative, the characters do not even need to go to the grocery store. All they need to do is go online, “In this little neighborhood outside the bustling city of Atlanta, nobody really needed to step outside if they didn’t want to. To answer any beck and call one must simply take out your touchscreen device and press what you want” (*Early Years*). Being brought up in a world full of uncertainty where the concrete, the real, is slowly fading away before his eyes

effects the permeating tone of Richard's voice in the early years: "There needs to be something out there that's real, how can I not find anything real when everything we need is at my fingertips" (*Early Years*). A passage such as this conveys the yearning Richard feels for the truth leading him to immerse himself in nature, a place where he still will not find wholesome reality.

Without trying to justify but rather provide the reason for the protagonist's despicable behavior later in the narrative, the following events are valid causes of such behavior. Callie Low writes that Dr. Dabsur "had this strange drive to always find something new. Like, he would go off on long walks up in Vermont, even when it was raining. Whenever I asked him what he was doing he'd just say he was looking. No clue what that meant. Might've been tripping on bath salts though" (*Things*). This particular sentiment of wanting, and being unable to find a certain reality spawns from the traumatic events of Richard's childhood. Living in a reality that exists behind a plasma screen incites young Dabsur to go off into the natural world when given the opportunity. He believes that amongst the raw uninhibited surroundings of nature he will find the truth, whatever it may be. Our main character, at the age of 12 takes this opportunity when he and his family go on a family vacation to the Chattahoochee River in the summer. Initially, as Richard takes in the sunny-water landscape with dense forest on either side of sun splashed blue water he feels at peace. At the beginning of this venture his restlessness seems to subside, believing he found "that looking glass he desperately needed to see the world through" (*Early Years*). This is the Author's intention to display a false feeling of resolution that will disappoint the reader throughout the narrative. The wool is pulled away Dabsur's eyes once he becomes separated from his family halfway into their trip.

This sense of false revolution the young boy feels is heartwarming and touching but ultimately just an illusion that offers no sense of resolution:

The almost still-flowing blue river from clearness of the summer sky filled him with an elation he had been unaware he was even capable of. How the verdant forest with the trees on either side of the river seemed to reach across for each other like separated lovers. As the family walked on the dirt path, even the dirt going under Dabsur's little toenails was more enjoyable to him than any sidewalk stroll or angry streetlights that direct and govern. But as the day continued onward the currents moved with more urgency, Dabsur's father pointed out the luminous qualities of the moon to explain the coming high tide. And Richard got lost in the shadow of a sequoia. How gorgeous. The family moved on until the canopying shadows of Chattahoochee darkened their departure, only their bright city-clothes one could make out. Dabsur was lost, and he screamed for his mother and father and no one came to help him. The verdant green turned myopic black where he could not get out no matter how hard he screamed. A random hiker found him a few hours later hiding under a fallen log picking at the tear-dropped moss. The uncharacteristically cold wind and mist from the river water had forced his weak countenance into an even weaker state. He didn't speak for two weeks. (*Early Years*).

The Author gives just as much as he takes because the Author writes in a way where certainty in the narrative's universe is vital to the structure of the story or else creating such a world would be arbitrary. His wife, who survived him, in an interview (it might be that she still feels a sort of grudge toward the great critic so her testimony must be taken, as we colloquially say, 'with a grain of salt') says that it took him many years through their marriage for him to tell her this story. This classic inciting incident (or road block) toward the protagonist's goal of finding the truth, sets up the rest of the narrative. Ironically in his quest, many of his actions are unreal to begin with. So an unreal person whose own actions lack authenticity goes out to find the real which make this a doomed endeavor from the onset. This is what justifies the story. He cannot find the real in the physical so while in the hospital our itinerant seeker of reality discovers the wonders of literature in the hospital library. The "Chattahoochee River Valley Hospital had many long standing patients that would either die or not, it all depended how they were feeling at the given moment, it was all like a pendulum. So books were a way to entertain when a television screen could not" (*Early Years*). But the plot is served by the epiphany that follows.

His discovery of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* is a monumental meta-fictional moment in Dabsur's narrative because it propels him to his profession setting the rest of his life in motion. Firstly the irony of a child lying, nearly dying, from pneumonia while reading a copy of the sweeping novel is hilarious and while it might not be intentional, that does not matter because

the Author had multiple meanings and interpretations in mind as is stated, “In trying to find meaning Richard was left open to his own interpretation with the possibilities potentially changing as many as three times over the course of the day” (*Early Years* “Hospital”). The same can be said for Dabsur’s life itself. Even though our classically tragic hero falls in love with the darkly comic novel, he does object to one passage that must be addressed because it is important to the plot’s ebbing and flowing: “I could remember how my father used to say that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead for a long time” (Faulkner). At this moment, the Author compels Richard Dabsur into contradicting his life with the philosophy of this passage. At this moment, he cannot accept the transitory nature of life which is why he elects to fall in love but he does not know how, yet.

The family moving to the Outer Banks, a couple miles from Point Set Beach, is the Author conveying this searching mentality not resting solely with Richard but also with everyone trying to find a home narrative whether that be physical or metaphysical. Richard goes throughout the narrative with that Faulkner passage emanating through his mind: “Dabsur would walk through the day with the Faulkner in his head echoing echoing echoing *there has to be more please let there be more*” (*Adolescence*). When the father cracks his head on a fluorescent light causing a lawsuit, being unable to work, the loss of the father’s mind, while still having moments of clarity that provide foreshadowing wisdom to Dabsur and to the readers themselves to which the protagonist does not heed:

Richard, Richard, Richard, Richard, Richard, Richard you think alexandrine, an elementary thought, but it be iambic. You have way too much to offer to be stuck here so you must leave and keep searching. I hear you quote Faulkner in your sleep. Get that redneck out your head. You—Miss Rosa would spit in that drunk’s face. Oh I know Faulkner, you didn’t think I knew Faulkner, but I know him I do. This search you know not it a search search sea—where’s your mother? Where is she! (*Early Years*).

To have the father being so disjointed also parallels the psyche of the protagonist haunted by the search he suspects may have no end. Even at an older age Professor Dabsur channels these thoughts in an inhibited, reserved form to students veiled by lecture or curriculum. But the most well-known instance of his insecurity takes place while he is on bender of bourbon and bath salts where he thinks he is being interviewed by *60 Minutes* but was actually talking to a barista in a coffee shop soliloquizing like a lunatic:

Everyone says to me Richard Richard Richard why do you write about what other people writing and make something of your own you can borrow thisthatandtheother right? Right!? Other writers borrow and other writers innovate but writers remembered make a stamp of their own making yes of the their own making yes yes yes. But no I cannot will not should not be not what not is this that makes us not and how we are not in the process of being not not a question to ask right now back to the matter at hand yes. I search for something that has substance there needs to be substance in everything or else it is not a thing but there has to be meaning you know you know it cannot be just there there has to be a reason see a reason. But I may be going on—

Hey? HEY! DUDE?

I was in the middle of getting to the very crux of my argument sir and if you would let me finish—

I was only asking if you wanted cream or sugar. Jesus. (*Adulthood*).

In the end, he echoes the ramblings of his father where little snippets of knowledge can be found within the muddled transcript of his dialogue. In a dark sort of terms, these two elements have the air of comedic flavor. Comedy plays a deep role in this story because, as the writer of this paper attests, within a tragic story there must be reliefs of comedic situations in order to endear the writer to their audience. It is this writer's argument that people in terms of art want to be entertained. With that said, we shall move on to Richard's days in high school where he endeavors to find love in his own life. Dabsur throughout his high school experience is what the narration states as "a period of awkward earnestness plagued by sweaty palms and N.A.R.Es or 'No apparent reason erections'" (*Adolescence*). These comedic instances go with the whole theme of balance in finding the real. Nasalan Brown writes that when the subject of love was brought up in his literary criticism classes at Lower Vermont University Dabsur "took the idea of

love and tried to make it a practical notion or an act of utility, he would talk about how he sought out love to give himself meaning and not necessarily giving meaning to the other person” (*Professorship*). Such notions began in his high school days as a nervous, erection-plagued schoolboy. This all ties in to the Author balancing out these miniature tragedies of failed love by putting them in comedic situations. When the protagonist’s father dies of early onset dementia, there is a vacancy that must desperately be filled and Tsu Piedmonte answers the call in the narrative’s timely manner.

Tsu Piedmonte is one of those malleable characters in that she does not allow herself to be put in a box by outside sources but puts herself in that box similar to anti-suffragette women in the Progressive Era. Almost as if she is a willingly submissive, she states in her memoir *My Life with Richard Dabsur* her initial love for our protagonist “had so captivated [her] she would be willing to walk through fire if only to gain his attention for as long as a glance” (Piedmonte). This is one of those examples where the elusive beloved entices the lover to do anything to garner any semblance of attention. Such examples exist in Sir Thomas Wyatt’s poetry, Bloom’s proposal to Molly, and Romeo and Juliet if only to name a few. Dabsur’s initial ignorance of her love only goes to show his complete lack of direction in his search for reality existing within true love. Some critics have even pointed out, himself included, Dabsur resembles more of the distorted innocence of Thomas Sutpen in another Faulkner classic, *Absalom! Absalom!* minus the racism of course. But, the moment in which Tsu is described through the perspective of our hero is one of those passages that can stand on their own as an achievement in which high school and other petty things are arbitrary where the Author drags on. However, this passage sets itself apart from the rest of the narrative as, again, one of those illusory realities leading Richard down a deeper rabbit hole of delusion:

Her hair, no matter what color it was, had the smoothness of marble and the softness of wool. Her dark skin but slightly thin eyes contrasted her beauty to make her more beautiful in the sense of illuminating contrast and not cultural beauty. One feature contrasted the attributes of another but at the same time they complimented each other. Her somewhat thin looking eyes complimented thick fullness of her face that complimented the definition of her cheekbones and olive skin (*Adolescence*).

The author's description shows a contrast but also a balance Dabsur has been looking for all along. Unfortunately for him this is just another case of false hope because she eventually leaves due to his own undoing. This description is the set-up to justify the disintegrating events of his own worldly outlook. With their impending marriage and their deciding not to have children ever (whether it was due to impotence the Author leaves ambiguous) he moves to the University of Northeastern Reading and Writing where she, being slightly younger follows him a year later.

University life for Dabsur is not ideal partially because Tsu and he conduct an on and off relationship and the protagonist can barely handle such instability. Such behavior lines up perfectly with such a character always trying to find stability. In her somewhat trashy memoir *Things I Said to a Cancer Victim*, Callie Low (his mistress) recalls what Dr. Dabsur thought of college life: "He one time said to me in bed what he thought of the college lifestyle and I stared at him intently pretending to listen when I only wanted him to get under the sheets again, guy was wicked good in bed. He said, 'Bahh the college way to live is such an overrated period in a person's life. You have no sense of the ground under you. It's all partying and reading partying and reading'" (*Things*). This point of view comes from his college days at Northeastern University of Reading and Writing where, in a fit of depression develops a proclivity for bath salts in which the imbalance of his life garners an all-time-high, pun intended (*Adulthood and Death*). During this period he is arrested for causing a disturbance at the university fountain and the passages of his incoherency is displayed perfectly to parallel the idiocy of his quest for balance through the use of narcotics. The fragmental language in the following quotation display

the futility that, in an altered state of mind Dabsur temporarily realizes, the true reality he searches for is unattainable: “Th—gghe—no—feelthe way in which the world works does not have me in findindnign any no it’s all not for naught can’t believe the real the real, no no no peace no peace no peace” (*Adulthood*). But the wisdom of his high goes into the obscure back of his mind with approaching sobriety. With this he begs Tsu to take him back which she does but mistakenly thinks she marries the man she remembers and not a drug addled narcissist.

His senior thesis on *As I Lay Dying* wins several awards after a brief stint in a rehabilitation clinic. This garners much praise but looking from an outside perspective the whole situation lies in the realm of the absurd. Dr. Dabsur’s literary theories which he has become so widely touted for are ridiculous to any critic who might have even skimmed Faulkner. But, as this narrative clearly indicates, truth is only relative to the protagonist’s perception. The theories while they are incomprehensibly preposterous must be mentioned to give the man his fair shake but no matter how respected he was in his universe, he cannot be taken seriously in this one. “Addie, is actually a sexually frustrated transgender with no real sense of identity because her old age has since robbed her of any sexual discovery because age neuters us all” or “The reason why the father has such a distinct view of death is due to his impotence debasing his manhood” (Lectures from *Adulthood*).

Absurd? Yes. Theses such as these receive several awards from the literary community earning him a grant and eventually a professorship at the University of Lower Vermont. After graduate school and many happy years of marriage where once again the illusion of true reality deludes his perception, Dabsur’s own undoing spawns from his own need to shed oncoming complacency. Sadly, Tsu Piedmonte endures such hardship. By the time he is 40 he is at the

height of his powers as an academic as well as a person but the quest is muddled by the Author's utilization of Dr. Richard Dabsur's hubris; to not settle into his self-constructed existence.

At the age of 40 he begins an affair with his teaching assistant, Callie Low. Possibly in the future people will suspect the reason for this affair is the strife happening between Tsu and Richard or maybe the affair is an attempt to find that reality he could not find in his youth. The Author once again makes these explanations unclear and possibly nonexistent so the readers may interpret for themselves. In any case, the affair dismantled his marriage after the six month venture is discovered. She immediately goes to Georgia and divorces him. While this is a low point in the protagonist's life it is also a period where he must acknowledge his own limitations. But before he is able to come to such a conclusion, he comes down with stage-four lung cancer.

A horrible illness meant to destroy our hero is the Author establishing the final balance so the world within the Author's creation may continue without Dabsur. Callie Low leaves him and writes a memoir about it that reaches #20 on the bestseller's list. A trashy piece of work that mostly exhibits sexual exploits and the endowment of such partners. This is her recollection of their last conversation.

He said he wanted me to stay so that he wouldn't be alone and I couldn't do that. It's not in my nature and I'm not sorry. I cannot indulge someone being an invalid with me being their nurse. With me getting nothing in return except kind glances as I wheel him in and out of chemo. No thanks. That's not my place. When we were first seeing each other, we had a great sex life. While he was older, he had more vitality than anyone I had ever been with before. Men of stature or prestige in the public eye seem to have some type of short *coming* when it comes to sex but not Richard. When I told him I was leaving him he almost half-heartedly fought for me to stay only a little longer.

Please, Please. It won't be long. I just don't want to be alone.

You can't give me anything anymore, you can't even get it up for me and when we sleep together you smell like death and puke. We've had a good run and your run is up.

He cried after that but we needed a clean break, I thought it would be healthy for both of us. After that I dragged my bags past his front door and I never saw him again. I found out later he went to hospice and lasted as long as he could. Richard was a great man when he was capable and I was unable to spare myself to even be there in consolation (*Things*).

The language of this paper cannot fully explicate the process of Richard wasting away and will not put the reader through such hardship. So, we allow this piece to end with the last words provided by the Author:

With his hair growing back on his discolored, thin-tight head almost as if it did not belong there anymore Dr. Richard Dabsur laid in the hospice room looking at the cracked ceiling and smiled. The morphine drip was doing its job and he slowly was losing reality whether that be from the drugs or the approach of his own mortality it did not matter anymore. His life had been a search and that search hopefully would continue but he couldn't be certain. He was alone and hurting. The drip was not frequent enough. He died in his sleep (*Adulthood*).

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