GETTING OVER

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"13. After reading Roland Barthes's famous essay on it, watch professional wrestling at least once a month. Reflect on how the spectacle corresponds, profoundly, to the poetry field."

—Kent Johnson, "33 Rules of Poetry for Poets 23 and Under"

On my Facebook wall, friends often upload wrestling-themed articles and memes. These are meant to be humorous; they are meant to make me—a fan of wrestling—laugh. One recent post takes contemporary rappers and matches them with cartoonish, late-'80s/early-'90s WWF talents. Mr. Perfect and Kanye West (both so arrogant!). Big Boss Man and Rick Ross (both husky correctional officers!). Junkyard Dog and DMX (they both like dogs!). I get .jpgs posted to my wall from old grappling magazines like *World of Wrestling* and *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*, each featuring a ludicrous photo of some forgotten tag-team in a homoerotic pose from thirty years back. I dutifully 'like' the image, add an acknowledging quip, but soon feel a churning knot inside me, like I just gossiped about an easily targeted and routinely misunderstood pal.

This isn't just about me or my particular set of friends. Through the glory of the Internet's unflinching memory, YouTube's encyclopedic database of every grainy or attic-locked VHS, our millennial Internet generation—savvy but savage—has been giving pro-wrestling's glory days[1] a thorough send-up: equal parts celebration and takedown. When in need of another caustic, hit-generating meme, content-providers merely have to mine professional wrestling's absurdities and tragedies, and voila—instant buzz. Even wrestling deaths—and there have been so many deaths, each so early and brutal—are now given drenched-in-irony elegies (see *Buzzfeed*'s "GIF Tribute to the Late Paul Bearer," which culminates in a 'hilarious' photo dubbed, "Double Bonus: Inexplicable photo of Paul Bearer and Jonathan Taylor Thomas"). Even notorious Canadian grappler Chris Benoit's heart wrenching double-homicide and suicide[2] have been reduced to

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[1] Commonly interpreted as running from the then-WWF's (World Wrestling Federation's) first syndicated, MTV-aided explosion in the mid-1980s to the New Generation of wrestlers through the early '90s: from the first to the eighth Wrestlemania, say, or from approximately 1985–1992.

[2] An incident most likely caused by traumatic brain damage incurred from countless concussions and blows, and not some cocktail of steroids and drugs.

shareable video parody, to post-post-post-good taste LOLs in the vacuum of earthly ethics.

Let's face it: wrestling is goofy. By even the most ardent fan's standard's, the WWF's storied heyday was indeed clownish, often achingly farcical (and things are only slightly more 'serious' twenty-five years later). Beneath the rock 'n' roll shadow of Hulkamania and the Mega Powers,[3] a legion of live-action cartoon characters[4] and rank cultural stereotypes[5] brought wrestling to the masses. This was the era of career- or ethnicity-based caricatures, guys like Brutus 'The Barber' Beefcake, Jimmy 'Superfly' Snuka, The Honky Tonk Man, Jake 'The Snake' Roberts, 'Rowdy' Roddy Piper, Irwin R. Schyster (or I.R.S., an evil tax agent), and so on, forever, into the Attitude Era of the late-'90s and the brand extensions (and eventual PG'ing) of the 2000s. As such, it's easy to imagine that much of the online nostalgia for the period is all in good fun, created by and for long-time fans of the genre—youngish adults in their late-'20s/early-'30s who ache to reignite some innocent embers of their childhoods.

But to me, these seemingly innocuous lulz go far beyond reminiscence, carrying mean-streaks as deep and yellow as those of all classic wrestling heels.[6] The "love" professed by so many online is one that's firmly tongue-in-cheek—a mocking, ironic appreciation, keeping the performers and athletes of yesteryear safely reduced to their larger-than-life alter-egos, stalwart hero and conniving villain alike. There is no humanizing lens in the ironist's glossy toolbox, and in the ever-sharable Top 10 List or meme (or listsicle), wrestlers remain trapped by their much-cultivated surfaces, their mono-dimensional roles. The awesomely large and hirsute Earthquake, once Hogan's biggest threat, rather than real-life John Tenta, family man and father of three who died

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[3] A world-shaking team-up between Hulk Hogan and the 'Macho Man' Randy Savage, beautiful and fragile Miss Elizabeth in tow, until the men found their combustion and inevitable confrontation.

[4] Sometimes literally: see *Hulk Hogan's Rock 'n' Wrestling* (1985–1986), the dreadful two-season cartoon series that followed the exploits of the WWF's biggest '80s superstars, including Junkyard Dog, Tito Santana, Captain Lou Albano, Hillbilly Jim, Andre the Giant, and of course, Mr. Hulkamania himself.

[5] See: Nikolai Volkoff and The Iron Sheik drawing on real-world tensions between the US and its Cold War enemies, Russia and Iran, for easy heel heat from the crowd. Sgt. Slaughter, that American military paragon, turning sides during the Gulf War to become an Iraqi sympathizer.

[6] To clear up any confusion, 'heel' refers to a villain, and 'face' (or 'babyface') refers to a hero: the classic good guy vs. bad guy roles that determine the genre.

of bladder cancer in his early forties. Where mainstream actors are remembered fondly by popular imagination, often given the 'where are they now' treatment in the soft light of tenderness, wrestlers are plucked from the context of their sport and bathed in the fluorescent, humiliating glare of 2013 ridicule.[7] Clowns. Buffoons. Addicts. Nothing more.[8]

It's not just wrestlers who're targeted. Both casual and die-hard fans of the pseudo-sport get their fair dollop of derision, and this of course predates the Internet. To illustrate the point, simply close your eyes and imagine, if you will, the typical—or perhaps most stereotypical—fan of professional wrestling. After you arrange a complete profile, do a Google Image Search of 'wrestling fans,' and see what appears. How close is your mental image to what's online? Unless you're deeply generous and open-minded, or you've been surrounded by extremely normative, socially adjusted fans of the genre, we are (apparently) as easy to categorize as 'bros,' 'jocks,' 'hippies,' 'wiggers,' 'hipsters,' and other vilified subsets, and equally deserving of scorn and disgust. And while other geeky fanbases—Trekkies or *Star Wars* fans, Dungeons & Dragons gamers or *Buffy/Angel/Firefly*

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[7] Even mostly sincere, good-natured articles on wrestlers today sometimes give me heartache. The recent *Deadspin* article, "Can Diamond Dallas Page Save Wrestling's Walking Dead?" is fine journalism, but the obvious pointing out of Jake Roberts's Crocs (how lame!) or that he's fighting a "Loser Leaves Town match with encroaching baldness" is sad and snarky and just too easy. It's also depressing to see the author contemplate whether Diamond Dallas Page (the article's subject, ex-wrestler and now yoga entrepreneur) is only helping friends and inveterate alcoholics/drug-abusers Scott 'Razor Ramon' Hall and Jake Roberts for money. Why? 'Cause, like, don't all wrestlers deceive people for a living? They do, but fuck—the only opponents these guys are wrestling are themselves (and Death).

[8] Notwithstanding its flaws, Darren Aronofski's *The Wrestler* (2008) got this element of role-inescapability spot-on—although impoverished wrestler Randy 'The Ram' Robinson desperately tries to escape the business and rebuild his life, and even though he's offered a chance at love and companionship, he's pulled back into the one role that defined his existence—even to his (presumable) death. Indeed, Randy feels the kind of workplace esteem any performer craves only when working and bleeding in the squared circle. Outside the ring, he's mocked and belittled by his employer—when asking for more shifts at the grocery store, his boss laughs, "All I got is weekends. Isn't that when you sit on other dudes' faces?" The barb is both classist and homophobic, a total takedown; we pity Randy all the more and root for his bid to make something of his botched life. But when he's planning matches backstage with 'the boys,' or when the occasional fan finds him in some decrepit gymnasium to sign a handbill, Randy gets his carefully measured modicum of respect. He's a wrestler, after all, and honoured as such by wrestling's fans. For the outside world—and for the ironists of 2013—being a wrestler means he's exactly (and only) what Bruce Springsteen croaks about in the film's title song, "The Wrestler:" a "one-trick pony," ruining the only life he'll ever know.

nerds—have been more neatly rehabilitated into our post-guilty-pleasure world,[9] it's not so with us rasslin' fans—we seem on par with Twi-hards and Furries, with Canadian Republicans and Alabaman socialists, the weirdoes who can't be rehabbed, the creeps who *somehow still exist.*[10]

It seems that the most irksome element about us is that we supposedly believe that the outcomes and blows of the sport are unscripted, delivered with full force. That we believe the three-hundred-pound man can stomp on the face of the one hundred and seventy pound man and see that smaller man shake it off, no problem. For some reason,[11] this misperception seems to really blow up the message boards and comment sections of various articles and blogs in the IWC (Internet Wrestling Community)[12]—there's always some anonymous user butting in to a conversation to thankfully remind everyone that "it's all fake." In standard and condescending form, a 2012 *VICE* UK article, titled "Telling Wrestling Fans that Wrestling Isn't Real," basically involves a two-bit writer taking pictures of people he calls "idiots" (including younger kids) outside a live show in London and snorting in droll disdain at everything they say. And much to my horror and amazement, countless videos can be found online of fans, both young and old, absolutely losing their shit when some unfortunate event befalls their chosen star at a high-stakes pay-per-view or on *Raw* (the WWE's now three-hour-long, Monday night institution).[13]

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[9] Not completely, but try talking openly about D&D adventure modules in North American high schools throughout the '80s or '90s, or even mid-2000s, and you'll notice the changes in cultural sensibility, the recent acceptance of the heretofore swirly-worthy. Today's Internet landscape is post-guilty pleasure, a realm that insists that geek equals chic.

[10] At a literary reading this year, I was speaking about Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson's return to the WWE with a friend, and an eavesdropping woman gasped. "What? Is wrestling still … a *thing*?" she asked, shocked. "A what?" I asked. "Like, still *on*?" she replied.

[11] My suspicions for why this is such an issue have a lot to do with the way boys are taught about competition as early as we're able to swing a bat, or fist. Something being staged is akin to saying the competition doesn't matter, and that's enough to destroy a whole pocket of our male psyches that obsesses over wins and losses, sports gods and UFC champions bathed in hard-won gore. To men raised on competition, wrestling ridicules the scaffolding of authentic combat, and is thus a threat to stability when so much conscious thinking is devoted to it.

[12] I know how silly that sounds.

[13] A recent, likely staged example: Google the "Angry Fat CM Punk Fan." A young man reacts to Internet (and indie wrestling) darling CM Punk dropping the WWE Championship (which he held for 434 days, a modern-era record) to The Rock at the 2013 Royal Rumble pay-per-view.

Perhaps most famous of all freaker-outers is David Wills, otherwise known as "The Crying Wrestling Fan," who's been featured on *The Jimmy Kimmel Show*, *The Howard Stern Show*, *Tosh.0* and other comedy forums on radio and TV for a short, viral video shot in 2005. The clip depicts Wills—a southern, bespectacled, and somewhat fetal-looking man—sitting in the bleachers of a depleted gymnasium for a Q&A with a group of retired wrestlers.[14] Microphone in hand, Wills weepily thanks the wrestlers for the sacrifices they've made to their bodies. Unable to control a sudden A-bomb of emotion, he then bellows: "It's still real to me, damnit!," thereby launching seven straight years of online insults—to both southern Americans and to wrestling fans worldwide.[15,16]

Strangely, despite decades of abuse, the whole issue of real vs. fake has never bothered anybody who doesn't wear a helmet in Wal-Mart—everybody knows it's staged, and nobody's complaining. In fact, aside from what the outside world may charitably cede to be wrestling's

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[14] Including hardcore legend Terry Funk and manager/commentator/booker Jim Cornette.

[15] After watching the clip, Howard Stern sagely proffered: "I guess the fans of that wrestling shit are as unstable as the wrestlers themselves."

[16] To make matters worse, many wrestlers themselves also slander and abuse their fanbase, and sometimes more vociferously than the non-involved bullies. Traditionally, a fan of wrestling is referred to as a 'mark;' in other words, a sucker from whom cash and emotional involvement are withdrawn (watch any shoot video of New Jack, notorious sadomasochist, or even of WWE/WCW superstar Kevin Nash, and you'll see some colourful uses of the word *mark* to describe both fans and stupid people involved in the industry). In the days when protecting the secret of wrestling was essential—at all times promoting the notion that what went on in the ring was real-life violence, with real stakes and championships*—the relationship between wrestler and mark was that of charlatan to chump, or illusionist to awed spectator. Protecting this secret was (and is) called keeping 'kayfabe,' and old-school promoters would go to great lengths to maintain this illusion (by keeping faces and heels apart before and after shows, by encouraging workers to 'get colour' or 'juice' by cutting open their foreheads, and by firing anyone who broke the illusion). This still goes on—some degree of kayfabe, of suspending disbelief, is essential to the entire spectacle—but the industry has dramatically changed, as now most rational beings understand the nature of the genre (and the WWE is smart to this double-knowledge, as I'll touch on later). Nevertheless, the fundamental sell-and-buy relationship endures. Worse (at least traditionally) in the wrestlers' minds are the 'smart marks,' or 'smarks:' fans who are wise to the ins-and-outs of the business, the way matches are structured and choreographed (or worked, to use more terminology), and who hunger for behind-the-scenes scoops and real information about their favourite stars, scanning dirt sheets and blogs for whatever scrap of truth they can find. A good fan is a fan who follows the plot, who buys the product but leaves the wrestlers alone. As I'll later describe, this type of fan is quickly dying out.

*Not that they aren't important, or coveted, both for respect and financial security.

charms—the drama of a properly promoted bout, its tension and anxiety escalated by months of careful build-up, and its final dance executed with dexterous and jaw-dropping athleticism—it's the very play between real and fake that makes things so captivating for authentic, enduring fans. All contemporary disciples of the WWE or its minor alternatives will say the same thing: it's the balance between choreography and spontaneity, between the sudden swerve and long-term booking that makes wrestling enjoyable, addictive, even exciting.

Maybe I've been fumbling about trying to say this one simple thing: One cannot like, let alone *love*, professional wrestling ironically. And an increase in genuine interest always entails a decline in jaded lulz. Despite whatever attempts at meme-ified nostalgia exist, they exist as the nostalgia for a forgotten train set—and a radically gaudy train set, at that. Something evocative of fading memory, and youth, and our collective bad tastes, but that's all. No (apparently) rational adult wants to pull out the tracks and resume the game, and this is one reason why the people who *do* still indulge are mocked so mercilessly—they're seen as mentally inferior, unable to let childish things go.

Wrestling fandom exists, even at its apex—or is it nadir?—of zaniness, in a field of sincerity that outsiders naturally interpret as threatening, irrational, insular, childish, and often insane. Thus even more preposterous to outsiders than the sweaty, swarming mass of fans are the wrestlers themselves: legions of huge men and women who wear spandex tights and exotic makeup and take on ludicrous gimmicks and hurl and annihilate their bodies for whatever spot on whatever card they can manage, and who seem to all die so tragically, so young, in pain, having lost everything.

So let's return to David Wills. The years[17] leading up to his public humiliation saw the early demise of some of the giants of the industry, including Road Warrior Hawk, Miss Elizabeth, 'Mr. Perfect' Curt Hennig, Hercules Hernandez, The Big Boss Man, and Eddie Guerrero (Eddie perhaps saddest of all, a phenomenal athlete cut down in the midst of an incredible run). To imagine these men and women as simple actors, and the unfortunate Wills as a simple movie or television fan, is to misinterpret wrestling's unique classification. If we consider a *Star Trek* parallel, we'd first have to imagine the entire cast of every series steadily being wiped out (by drugs or by injury) in their primes. Even then, the differences between a long-time Trekkie meeting William Shatner or Patrick Stewart and an age-old WWE fan finally meeting The Undertaker or

[17] Specifically, 2003–2005.

Bret Hart—or Wills meeting Terry Funk, in the shadow of so much death—should now be obvious. We aren't dealing with the same category of parasocial entertainment. We're dealing with a sincere encounter in a hermetic world—an irony-free zone, one might say—that colours all those who inhabit it. An insular universe with its own terrible mythos of heroes and villains and demi-gods, full of unsharable highs and publicly ridiculed tragedies. No rehabilitation. No understanding.

And here's my personal investment: it's Wills's claim that it's all "still real to [him]" that captivates me, both as a fan of professional wrestling and as a writer. Doesn't all that talk about train sets for adults remind you of poetry? Of those who compose their lives of poetry and marginal fictions—thereby accepting the cultural relevance of a gnat, and no monetary capital to speak of—are they not perceived as unable to let the nursery rhymes and outrageous games of childhood go? Aren't they often shook, perhaps violently, and told that all those squiggles on paper aren't real, aren't substantial, aren't a part of the *real world*? If I were to Google Image Search 'poet,' what would I find?

For Wills, it isn't about whether the matches are staged or not; he knows the obvious truth to this supposed barrier to enjoyment. Instead, he's giving voice to the *realness* of being a fan in a marginalized community, and one that casts a protective shadow over what I can only imagine is his precarious and difficult existence. The profound, powerful love he has and receives from participating in the culture is undeniably real, lasting, and moving, despite—and indeed, intensified by—the losses that ravage it. Wills is an excellent example of a man stranded by his love, and when under the strain of the loss of his heroes, after a lifetime of encounters with those who would stand superior to the 'sport,' and when finally face-to-face with those he idolizes—in the most sincere way possible—he breaks down; the emotions prove too overwhelming. It is too real.

From his perch in those bleachers, he passes from belief to disbelief, from innocent sincerity to ironic knowingness, and—importantly—right back again. Into what? Childhood? Innocence? Something like magic? Finally, after years of negotiating the most 'tasteless' of entertainments, he is once again (un)comfortably a mark, *believing* in the artifice, despite knowing its emptiness, its rock-bottom status, all because he trusts the violence it inflicts on his heart.

And this is all I want to do with art. I want to be a mark for literature; I want to believe in its magic, to be David Wills for books. So why do I find that so hard? Why does it require such a leap of faith?

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On some lost Saturday morning in the late 1980s, some miniature version of me is still anxiously awaiting a 'decent' time—i.e., not 5:30 in the morning—to charge into my parents' bedroom and squeal in exhilaration over our imminent viewing of *WWF Superstars of Wrestling*. Previously known as *WWF Championship Wrestling*, *Superstars* was an-hour long wrestling show with a more kid-and-family-friendly vibe than its nighttime productions, selling the brand to a younger demographic that would propel the company's antics to global heights. Lasting from 1986 to 2001, it was finally discontinued after nearly a decade's dearth of compelling material,[18] but in its heyday, it was the twin star of a weekend galaxy of WWF material, sharing every Saturday with *Saturday Night's Main Event*.[19] Both shows passed the torch to *Monday Night Raw*[20] by 1993, but for a number of delirious years, my weekends were ensnared in the tragic special-f/x of early WWF television. Forget other Saturday morning offerings—*Sesame Street* or *Thundercats*, *Mr. Dressup* or *Fred Penner's Place*—wrestling ruled my weekends, proving the most vital of my moral and mental developers.

Though my dad would soon re-adjust my interest in glory and failure to *actual* professional sports—the pennant-nabbing Toronto Blue Jays, or an unending list of NHL teams and megastars,[21] wrestling set the tone for what masculine competition was all about. In other words, *everything*. There was no other point to saying your prayers, eating your vitamins, or being a good citizen, as Hogan would remind me to do and be on a multi-weekly basis—these things were only important insofar as they allowed me to triumph over my adversaries. It was pragmatic, utilitarian. In the WWF, the Championship was all that mattered; losing it was akin to death.[22]

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[18] By 1998 it had stopped featuring bouts and interviews of any consequence and was then serving only as a summary of events occurring on *Monday Night Raw* and later on *SmackDown!*. *Raw* debuted in 1993, replacing *Superstars* as the must-see show to stay up-to-date with storylines; it remains as the WWE's main vehicle for syndicated television and pay-per-view promotion. *SmackDown!* debuted in 1999 and often serves as the WWE's ancillary program.

[19] A 90-minute extravaganza airing on NBC, then Fox, with a brief, unsuccessful resurrection from 2006–2008.

[20] Now the longest running syndicated television series of all time.

[21] The Gretzkys and Roys I'd soon learn to revere and emulate in our leaf-strewn driveways, firing orange puck after orange puck against a wall or holey net.

[22] As with many athletes, often the last time we would see a favourite wrestler would be after a loss. They would just slip out of existence after another pin or disqualification and never be seen again. This is how the business works when a contract is not renewed. If a title is involved, it's dropped

Aside from not yet following *real* sports, other elements of my wrestling fixation seemed to trouble my parents. They would insist, when something dark happened on TV—like when The Ultimate Warrior was locked in one of The Undertaker's caskets, say—that it was all safe and fake. *Don't worry*, they'd say. *He's not actually in trouble*.[23] During this era, I had a friend named Danny. He had blond hair, I had brown, and so we naturally formed our home-brew version of one of the most popular tag-teams at the time, The Rockers, made up of a brunet Marty Jannetty and blond Shawn Michaels. We'd take off our T-shirts to wrestle in our basements, using an inflatable punching bag as our slowly deflating opponent. I later overheard my parents worrying over our antics. *I'm not* too *concerned about them taking their shirts off to wrestle*, my mom said. *But it's maybe strange to* other *parents … those two boys grappling down there …* Sweaty, shirtless wrestling soon seemed a bit strange to me. A bit perverse, but without the words to explain it.

Such were the cartoon highs of my confusing, primary-coloured childhood, spent taping Hogan posters to my bedroom walls, smashing poorly sculpted action figures together in my home-made ring, and dreaming of the day I'd get a pair of Bret 'The Hitman' Hart's reflective shades. The appeal was pure hero worship, the clear delineation of good guy from bad—good vs. evil, light vs. dark, happy vs. sad: the tumultuous black-and-whites of childhood. As all children, I was not a creature of subtlety, and thus the perfect illustration of Roland Barthes's "The World of Wrestling" (1957), which describes the appeal of wrestling in terms of primitive, collective, and buried emotional wants. Yet as time passed, my innocent mythic fantasies began slipping to a ribald adolescence. I was too young to truly appreciate just how radically different wrestling was to become by the mid-to-late-1990s, but I was watching all along, becoming as mean and dirty as the dramas on TV. So much history between 1995 and 2000! How to summarize succinctly?

By 1995, the most iconic wrestlers of the '80s were beginning to take on mature roles in other companies, or retire, or burn out and die, leaving room for a burgeoning segment of the industry to take the top spots. As every proper Canadian fan, I was a total mark for Bret Hart, a second-generation character who stood for all the classic varieties of good-guy virtue: honesty, hard

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and passed on, but either way, the departing character vanishes from televisual memory. The associations between losing and dying would soon be exacerbated by one of the industry greats, The Undertaker, who, in his initial heel run, would zip-up jobbers (guys who would lose, consistently—that was their 'job') into black body bags and carry them from the arena.

[23] I knew this anyway; you could see him breathing!

work, discipline, respect. Bret was old-school; he represented technical prowess and a safe work ethic, embodying a link[24] between the younger generations and the old territories. But by the mid-'90s, Bret was butting heads with both McMahon and a group of younger wrestlers who, by comparing salaries and wages for live shows (heretofore unseen in the industry) and generally conspiring to have each other's backs, instigated real animosity outside the ring. This group called itself The Kliq, and was made up of Kevin Nash, Shawn Michaels, Scott Hall, Paul Levesque (Triple-H), and Shawn Waldman (X-Pac).

I can't get into all the seedy particulars of The Kliq's feuds with the older guard,[25] but a number of Kliq-related moments would change wrestling—and my relationship with it—forever. First, in May 1996, four out of five Kliq members did the unthinkable and intentionally broke kayfabe before thousands of fans; despite being split between heels and faces, Nash, Hall, Michaels, and Levesque shared a four-way embrace at Madison Square Gardens after a match, if only to say that the Kliq no longer had to protect kayfabe—that they owned the business. While enraging many workers and WWF brass, this embrace was also a farewell to Nash and Hall, who had already agreed to leave the WWF and join the WCW (or World Championship Wrestling, owned by Ted Turner and managed by Eric Bischoff) for more pay. The second major event in our chronology: in the same month, Hall and Nash would appear on live television—WCW's Monday night program, *Nitro*—and begin an 'invasion' angle that would a) involve some of the biggest names in the industry, including Hulk Hogan, Randy Savage, Sting, Lex Luger, Ric Flair, The Giant, and so forth; b) form the most popular faction in the history of wrestling—a group called the nWo, or New World Order; and c) send *Nitro*'s ratings sky-high and ensure that for the next two years, WCW would either match the WWF's product or surpass it. This clash between the companies was soon dubbed the Monday Night Wars—the coolest time to be watching professional wrestling, maybe ever.

Meanwhile, the WWF was forced to amp up its game to match its red-hot competition.

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[24] His father Stu Hart's Stampede Wrestling was by then long sold to Vince McMahon, but it's where so many WWF superstars got their start, and was definitely part of that fading world of kayfabe, its life or death commitments.

[25] A thorough and lively summary (albeit one-sided) can be read in Bret Hart's essential autobiography, *Hitman: My Real Life in the Cartoon World of Wrestling* (Random House, 2007), or to a lesser degree, and similarly biased, in Shawn Michaels's *Heartbreak & Triumph: The Shawn Michaels Story* (Simon and Schuster, 2010).

Sensing a sea change in sensibilities, McMahon began to embrace an increasingly risqué variety of sports-entertainment—basically, more blood, more cursing, more overt sexuality, more middle-fingers and violent angles, more familial/dysfunctional dramas that skirted the line between staged and legit. Stone Cold Steve Austin beating the holy hell out of an aging Jake the Snake (then performing a born-again gimmick) and re-writing John 3:16's promise of eternal salvation by barking "Austin 3:16 says I just whooped your ass," thus beginning the Austin era. A feud between Austin and the late-Brian Pillman that was spiked with the revolutionary episode, "Pillman's Got a Gun," featuring an injured Pillman at home with a handgun, surrounded by family and friends, as Austin breaks in and tries to kill him (the episode went off the air with uncensored profanity and police cruisers). Shawn Michaels and Triple-H forming Degeneration-X, a frat-boy inspired crew that made sexual jokes and aggravated (or pretended to aggravate, as this was all a work) the administration by pushing the censors and flouting tradition. The WWF purchasing the hardcore-centric ECW (Extreme Championship Wrestling), which infused a blood-soaked, barbed wire aesthetic. Sunny and Sable, Marlena and Chyna, the bleached-blonde valets and managers (or, with Chyna, the dark, steroidal, 'freak-show'-themed femme) who injected a voyeuristic, porn aesthetic into programming and set the stage for even more provocative sexuality (bra and panties matches, full-on stripteases, etc.). *Monday Night Raw* was thus for a time redubbed *Raw Is War*, and things would never be the same—much to my adolescent delight, and dismay.

To get back to Bret Hart, McMahon was able to translate out-of-ring contentions between Hart and the Kliq to live-TV storytelling, giving Hart a stable of his own, called The Hart Foundation, made up of brother Owen, brother-in-law Davey Boy Smith (The British Bulldog), brother-in-law Jim 'The Anvil' Niedhart, and WCW-jumping Brian Pillman. This coincided with the entirety of the Hart Foundation turning heel (to my great sadness, because bad guys rarely win cleanly and invariably lose in whatever climax is scheduled) and adopting an anti-American, pro-Canadian/global culture stance; this meant Bret would (hypocritically) rail against the injustices and savagery of contemporary US programming and its anti-hero stars (namely, Steve Austin, Shawn Michaels, and Goldust), and get booed out of the buildings by American fans. Up in Canada, and to the rest of the world, the Hart Foundation stayed face, giving us a stalwart team of rational-thinking, traditional heroes who endured the abuse and indignities of U.S. ire. As a young Canadian fan, this brand of nationalism and truth-telling (Bret's tirades about American evils, their preposterous crime rates, their death penalty, their lack of public health care, and so forth) cut closer to the bone than many American fans could realize. To them, they'd simply witnessed another babyface turn heel; if

the rest of the world still cheered him, it only made him a tweener. To us, our hero seemed all the more heroic by refusing to compromise his values. Bret stayed the same—it was the *world* that had changed against him!

According to wrestling canon, rising star Shawn Michaels and Bret actually hated one another, becoming involved in genuine fights backstage (again, many of which are recounted in his autobiography). As a boy, swapping between WCW and WWF every Monday night, I couldn't know this; I wasn't 'smart' to the business, didn't know about dirt sheets or shoot interviews or *The Wrestling Observer*. I was confident that everything was, as my parents insisted, *fake*; I thought it was *all* a work, and the very idea of real animosities and power gambits broiling beneath the televised façade was unthinkable. Eventually, Bret's contract approached an end, and it was clear that Vince wanted Bret's title dropped to Shawn. Instead of lingering in a company he felt no longer wanted him, Bret signed a contract with WCW and planned to abandon ship. Controversy arose as to how Bret would relinquish the title; normally, a performer will lose in whatever fashion the bookers design, but this was a special situation, involving years of trust and hatred, genuine conflict and friendship. Apparently, Bret agreed with Vince to have his last match with the next-in-line, Shawn Michaels—at the 1997 pay-per-view Survivor Series, in Montreal—end in a disqualification. On the next night on *Raw*, Bret would willingly relinquish the championship and retire, riding out into the sunset and easing his final WWF era of heel/anti-American tension. The rest of the Hart Foundation would soon follow.

Unfortunately for Hart, things would in reality proceed much differently. To ostensibly (and perhaps logically[26]) avoid Bret no-showing future WWF events, or appear on WCW television with the title (or even simply to demonstrate that nobody has creative control but one man), McMahon and Michaels performed the now-infamous Montreal 'screw-job:' instead of a disqualification, the bell was rung prematurely—and much to Hart's legitimate surprise[27]—while Michaels had Hart in Hart's own submission move, The Sharpshooter. Announced the winner and new champion, Michaels then ran from the ring with the title, while Hart, surrounded (and held back) by his family,

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[26] Most commentators now seem unanimous in viewing Bret Hart as the architect of his own demise, or even as a mark himself, taking his character too seriously, believing in the artifice without an ear to the business. As Shawn Michaels once put it once (hypocritically) in a promo, "Shawn Michaels, when he goes home, he's not the Heartbreak Kid … he's just plain ol' Shawn. Bret, you're the Hitman 24 hours a day! … Bret Hart cannot separate all this from his real life."

[27] Or so the story goes; some claim against all evidence that even the screw-job was a work. As a fan, it was a sad interjection of reality into something beloved for its pantomime, as I'll touch on soon.

proceeded to spit on McMahon's face and tear up the announce table. All of this in shocked Montreal, our home turf, where Bret was hero, and wrestling still made sense. It was the ultimate disappointment in conventional narrative—the final build between hometown face and abusive heel, wrestling's essential oppositions, so flippantly squandered. It sent a resounding message to both Canadian fans and to fans of the sport in general: wrestling was now realer than it had ever been. And as a result, I could no longer watch with the same kind of innocence. For Bret, this meant the start of his botched run in the WCW—itself beginning to decline in ratings and quality programming, with confusing storylines and jump-the-shark antics and the inability to handle the hottest prospect in professional wrestling—culminating in his career-ending injury at the hands of a green Bill Goldberg, the WCW's top guy.

The screw-job was my first real heartbreak with professional wrestling. I say this sincerely, without cheek or false simplicity. Watching Shawn Michaels hump the Canadian flag, watching my heroes devolve into losers, and watching that sacred line between real and unreal begin to blur shattered much of the fun of wrestling's childhood allures (i.e., the reliable binaries of good vs. evil, hero vs. villain—how could I cheer for a redneck Austin, or the gang-like Nation of Domination, or the cross-dressing Goldust, or a *Playgirl*-posing Shawn Michaels and his crotch-chopping buddy, Triple-H?). I was unconsciously old school, committed to the principles of narrative convention and kayfabe protection. Inching toward the millennium, things only got worse for my geriatric sensibilities. Owen Hart, relegated to playing a moronic superhero called 'The Blue Blazer,' would fall seventy-eight feet to his death at a pay-per-view due to a malfunctioning harness. Brian Pillman had already succumbed to a fatal heart condition, and by 2002 'British Bulldog' Davey Boy Smith would die of heart failure brought upon by years of drugs and hormonal injections. And with Bret's stroke and career-ending injury, a final fizzling into bitterness like nothing imaginable—the end of comprehensible plotlines, the end of the *excellence of execution*.

But the late-'90s weren't all doom and gloom for me. Something about the relative blank slate of WCW (I had never watched it before it exploded with *Nitro*) meant that cheering for the bad guys—the unstoppable, über-cool New World Order in particular—was somehow transgressively appealing. WCW was anarchic and wild, the WWF's dark, rebellious brother, and for a time, it held a kind of diamond-like sparkle that *Raw* could only dream of reproducing. And yet any sense of transgression from cheering for the wrong side was entirely delusional—soon every arena was heel-centric, every male spectator wearing an nWo T-shirt and pelting the ring with garbage. The rise and dominion of the nWo also overlapped with the eighth grade—a nasty period

in my personal history. My cohort and I were ultimate shits, bullies and villains, and we emulated the violent and lawless nWo on our middle-school playground by rounding up outsiders and attempting to throw them into the nearby creek. I remember my friend David having an entirely nWo-themed birthday party, with a crooked nWo cookie cake, the nWo-themed pay-per-view *Souled Out*, and a 10-boy basement brawl. While my heart secretly ached for the WWF, for the awful things that had happened to kayfabe and to Bret, I reveled in the WCW's evil orgy, amoral and ignorant.

Nothing so anarchic can last forever. By late 1998, the WCW was stinking to high heaven. Bad booking, poor organization, astronomically inflated salaries, and a general lack of care from the top talent (coupled with intensifying drug and alcohol addictions) meant that WCW was facing a slow and putrid death. Vince's WWF was now fully committed to its Attitude Era shenanigans, and the rise to super-stardom of Steve Austin, Chris Jericho, The Rock, Triple-H, Kane, The Undertaker, and other talents helped the company edge out its competition and once again take the top slot for Monday night wrestling. Taking advantage of kayfabe's demise at the Montreal screw-job, McMahon began to play the role of evil corporate boss—the now infamous *Mr. McMahon* character, fully embracing his public persona of crooked businessman—who would feud with (and screw over) crude, blue-collar wrestlers (like Austin) and drive the largely-working class audience into paroxysms of class-violating delight.

This period of wrestling history saw me transition from a bold middle-school punk, happy in academic overachieving, social rebelliousness, and relative popularity, to a gawky, awkward monad of a boy in grade nine. Most of my friends departed for other high schools, and all the old cliques and rules were banished. Swelling with sensitivity and hormones, loneliness and angst and a lack of direction, I pinioned between my old friends, marijuana, bad music, solitary lunches, and general life hating. In my new high school environment, the guys who liked wrestling were no longer diverse and intelligent; they were the lower-end spectrum jocks and mechanics, guys who wore tear-away pants to every class[28] and who saw this new Attitude Era as the greatest innovation in the history of the industry—not that they ever thought in terms of history, or industry; for them it was a constant floating present.

Hearing these guys chanting the now ubiquitous catchphrases of the WWF: The Rock's "if ya smell …" or Austin's enraging "What?!" chants (which still interrupt wrestlers to this day) irreparably soured the sport for me. All the hyper-dysfunctional McMahon-family plotlines (a vortex

[28] And look at me, stereotyping the typical fan.

of *Jerry Springer*-esque melodrama that sucked in Vince's children, Shane and Stephanie, and wife, Linda), all the new ECW-inspired hardcore matches, all the sex games and eyebrow raising bravado meant wrestling had turned toward the dull, the vapid, the killer of sensitivity. And while arenas sold out and merchandise flew off the shelves—indeed, making Rock and Austin et al. the biggest superstars the industry had ever seen—I withdrew, abandoned my watching, and turned to other depressive outlets for my anxieties. It was a slow, tapering burnout. No big goodbyes—just a sad drifting away.

Seen in another light, the end of my viewing—and my growing sense that wrestling was bad for you, lowbrow and infantile—coincided with simple maturity, the dawn of adulthood and its greater cultural awareness. Perhaps 'rasslin had always been this stupid, this poisoning, and I was simply too young and immature to recognize it. Or I suddenly found the anxieties of embracing what was known as a white trash, garbage-culture pastime were simply too much—I was more acutely aware of my place in the striving, bewildered middle-class, but totally uncritical of its assumptions. For whatever reason, I let the world of wrestling go (fairly happily) by 2000, and without much thinking. And my time in high school soon transformed, the way springs take so achingly long to swap winters for summers, for the cold to finally snap and let all that lushness return. I grew more confident, happier, fell more naturally into new friends, new worlds, my own body. What would carry me from suburbia into a city and its undergraduate life is a long story, but it's one almost entirely without wrestling's absurd thunder.

For seven years, I hardly watched. And when I did catch some glimmer of televised grappling—always by mistake, when someone turned the channel in a rare, TV-endowed apartment, or when visiting home—it was like watching some alien, disturbing deviation from the past. Suddenly a flash of pyro and smoky lights, an unrecognizable performer, the voices of a new generation of commentators. Like dipping into the lives of past lovers, with new children, new spouses, new homes. The separation of talent into *Raw* and *SmackDown!* brands barely registered. The new and famous names of the mid-2000s—Kurt Angle, Jeff and Matt Hardy, RVD, Brock Lesnar, Hornswaggle, Edge, Mr. Kennedy, John Cena, Batista—blurred into the more eye-catching media headlines that dominated the decade: the murders and suicides, the overdoses, the early deaths. Death after death after death.

And eventually, wrestling meant nothing.

* * *

Despite what I love about wrestling, I'm well aware of what's genuinely repugnant about it, and about the WWE in particular. Anyone interested in the evils of the 'sport' should pick up a copy of *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Duke U.P., 2005), a collection of academic and popular essays selected by Nicholas Sammond. While it offers a fascinating validation of some of wrestling's redemptive qualities, it also shines a quartz-halogen beam on a host of its disgusting practices. A thorough tour of all the industry's wrongs would take us forever, so let's be brief—the second-class treatment of Latino performers, the degradation of African American wrestlers, the stereotyping of Asian characters, the utter objectification and sexualization of female stars, and the vilification of male homosexuality are some of the WWE's worst cultural offenses (notwithstanding the spectacle of violence, which has been conservative America's routine target since the '80s). Much like wrestling in general, these racial and sexual slights cannot be rehabilitated into polite (or sane) society, and I can grant them zero defenses. Indeed, they're part of what makes the WWE utterly unwatchable for so many (and I don't blame you for thinking so, especially on these grounds).

Moreover, while the extreme racism of yesterday is *very slowly* being phased out,[29] gay- and slut-shaming continues to pervade WWE programming. One of *Steel Chair*'s best essays involves a young man reflecting on his lifetime of watching the 'sport,' and witnessing an early-'90s, arena-deafening chant of "faggot;" even then, he recalls getting queasy with revulsion. Fast forward to 2012, and things are hardly better. Some of John Cena's most zinging barbs against his adversaries still involve calling their orientation into question, and Cena's recent ordeal with duplicitous diva Eve Torres involved arenas chanting "hoe-ski" at her (a Zack Ryder-affected way of calling her a whore—don't ask). As John Cena is the WWE's top star, and perhaps the biggest McMahon has ever developed, this is terrible news for the company's attitudes. There is no end to the examples of reactionary, war-lovin' politics I could summon from the last five years (or even six months) of *Raw*, and I mean to bring this up as a caveat to all I say here on out.

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[29] Extremely slowly. One of the most iconic moments of xenophobia in the 2000s was the furor over wrestler Muhammad Hassan, an Arab-American (actually Italian-American, simply dark skinned) portrayed as the leader of a kind of havoc-wreaking, all-in-black terrorist cell. Hassan and his minions would symbolically cut the throats of their opponents, in the middle of red-state America, receiving some of the hottest heel heat imaginable. Though the angle was killed before the end of the year with Hassan's death at the hands of The Undertaker—you know, this could fuel another 10,000 words, so I'll stop there.

Anyway. Back to me! As a university student in my smug, elitist, generally shitheaded early-to-mid-'20s, any bad news from the world of wrestling was easily accepted. I studied philosophy and political science and—most emphatically—poetry. Wrestling and UFC and most other bloodying sports were seen as the grunting emissions of the rabble, the gorilla-browed. It was fare for the crowds of boys we'd see hitting the clubs with upturned polo collars and seashell necklaces—the bros I'd call MENSA reps, in the most biting way possible. This was another gross period of my life; I didn't know what to do with myself, other than go to school and learn and attack whatever was threatening to my precarious existence.

The only thing I *did* know was that I loved the fiction and poetry I was reading, both for class and for my own pleasure; I was writing my own awful work in the subterranean glow of my ancient, clicking PC, and wanted to write some books of my own. This all sounds so pithy, so simple, but there's nothing more sincere: I dreamed and schemed with an industrial ambition, reading and writing in evening-and-weekend-annihilating swaths of passion. I was totally ignorant of practical concerns, but the steady routine of the productive author seemed the best possible life. And since my last years of high school and through my undergraduate routine, I imagined that the production of books was a smooth, conveyor belt ride of happiness: from holy Muse to receptive instrument, from lunch-date editorial exchanges to slick packaging, from international book tours to reviews and laurels, from my basement apartment to immortality. No wonder my reclusive writer-heroes hated press or media attention; I figured it was all so easy, so invasive, and the *real* writers simply wanted to sit before their typewriters or notebooks and call out, "I'm listening!" to whatever inspiring daemons floated in the ether. In my imagination, writers rose to meet a calling; they spent every day in joy, fashioning art from base materials. The mechanics of networking, marketing, distributing, and financing would never penetrate their orbits. All they had to do, it seemed, was send the little manuscripts along—and wait for the tuxedo dinners and television appearances to follow.

Poetry and fiction were saving my life, making me a better person, expanding my understanding of ethics and emotion, spirituality and labour. I saw an unfolding life of silence, practicing these private pursuits in perpetual longing, a burnt satisfaction. All at once I determined to jumpstart this process, so I fearfully began participating in Ottawa's miniscule literary scene. My friend and I began a fiction journal with no experience and a knack for making terrible mistakes, but due to a host of circumstantial, fortuitous events, it suddenly thrust us into Canada Council-funded galas where we were able to dine and yammer with some of CanLit's most endowed

writers and publishers. The magazine limped on despite its blemishes, and before we knew it, we were going to all the readings, launches, fairs, and general drink-a-thons we could, finding an entirely new social circle (away from the school, shudder) wherein we could make new acquaintances and enemies. And I began to write with serious intent, lobbing out my little emissions and hoping against luck that something might stick.

I spent most of this period basking in the Illusions of Art; it was a thrilling time, even as it was unearned. And indeed, my initial exposure to literary institutions isn't a very unique or interesting tale. But what was instantly fascinating—and somewhat shocking—upon first impression was how strictly regimented the literary community was (from the near-empty press-fair gymnasiums, the eight-person-attended readings, all the way up to the GG Awards at Rideau Hall, the Scotiabank black-ties), how each mini-galaxy within the whole followed a medievalist hierarchy, supremely obsessed with power and politics, with consecrating certain actors and burying others, with championing one set of literary constellations at the expense of another, simply depending on where you stopped and conversed, sold or drank.

Big shocker, right? Imagine my romantic fantasies of the writing life beginning to evaporate, replaced with a growing (and natural) sense of cynicism. Just as wrestling had irrevocably changed during my adolescence, I again perceived a shattering of my simple illusions—my belief in an essential sort of art, totally removed from kayfabe. All of this would soon be explained and reiterated to me in striking detail by Pierre Bourdieau's *The Field of Cultural Production*, which I carried with me like a secular bible. And none of what I'm saying now is unfamiliar to anyone who inhabits a large company, organization or industry. Competition and consecration and upward mobility rely upon such systems. We are who we are in opposition to whatever/whoever threatens us; our antipathies and animosities are generated by our self-situated positions on whichever field we occupy—whether avant-gardist or Giller-winner, chapbook-peddler or *Fifty Shades of Gray*'er. Half of being nice or mean, successful or a failure, reviewed or ignored, powerful or powerless, has nothing to do with *who* we are, or actually how *good* we are at our craft. Truth with a capital T is easy to dismiss in your undergrad philosophy, but witnessing each coterie on the literary landscape inventing its own truths, its own standards of quality, can be both freeing and infuriating. Ideally, once you realize this (in all its Bourdieau-ian significance), you can turn all the critical power you've been using to eviscerate your opposition on the only person you can meaningfully chastise: yourself.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Bourdieau's 'field' can be as sportive as a football field, demarcated by goal posts, edges of play, Lines That Shall Not Be Crossed. This metaphor also

emphasizes competition, striving, but without a final victory; the game goes on indefinitely. For me, the closest thing to a 'sport' I could really understand was wrestling—my occasional viewing of hockey and baseball barely count, because I never really cared. And so weighing my experiences with CanLit and Bourdieau naturally summoned analogies to the WWE, at this point seven years forgotten.

But wait; the WWE can't work as a comparison to the literary field because the WWE is staged competition. It's not Real Life, as people don't actually win or lose. While thinking about this, I conducted an interview with Toronto writer and editor Nathaniel G. Moore; sensing a fellow wrestling fan, I asked him about how sports entertainment had influenced his work:

> Like any industry, pro-wrestling is a desperate money-grabbing bog of shallow fakes who have made façades and go out of their way to portray themselves in certain realities or perceptions that are completely false. And Canadian publishing is no different. The only difference is these fakers are fighting over a five-dollar bill and a blog mention instead of a seven-figure pay-off and a blog mention (*The Puritan*, Issue 5: Winter 2008).

Somebody else was (smartly) acknowledging CanLit's divorce from 'reality:' people *play* (or perform) more than they authentically *embody* roles on any field. While chewing on this, my fellow magazine editor and I would later arrange with Moore a worked (i.e., staged) program that pitted him against Ottawa poet rob mclennan. The "Throwdown in O-Town," culminated in 'real' wrestling-style violence after a lengthy night of standard readings from various authors. We called the Throwdown "the only literary competition in Canada that isn't staged." By throwing the only *obviously* staged literary 'competition,' we thought we were saying something about literary prize and competition culture in general. In other words, our version of kayfabe would shine a satirical light on how actually unfair and partisan and *rigged*-seeming the industry can be.

People bemoan how conventional and safe literary events are. I thought our little experiment would be the anathema to the stale reading. Surprisingly, it drew much less interest than we'd hoped, and even generated some hostility from some spectators. But then again, according to custom, anything that calls into question the unconscious allegiances and mythmaking of literary culture is rewarded with silence—unless, of course, it's coming from the mouth of a safely consecrated critic of some large prize, who doesn't so much ridicule the institution as he/she does the judges, the shortlists, the selection processes. Cultural criticism coming from unknown punks is seen as more

marginalized rioting—the ignorable looting on the borders of the empire.

But by holding this event, and befriending Moore, I started to watch wrestling again. Not for the sincere love of the sport—unthinkable!—but to see it in a new, politicized light; in other words, to see its parallels in my own life, in my own innumerable failures.

First, I'd get lost down YouTube rabbit holes that would suck up entire evenings and weekends. I had a lot of catching up to do, after all. The ability to see any promo, any match, any back-stage interview, and then any shoot[30] interview with *any* wrestler was positively electrifying. Most of what I watched I hadn't seen in twenty years, if at all. In early 2008, I began watching *Raw* and *SmackDown!* and the odd pay-per-view again. I started to recall and spout wrestling trivia and curiosities to anyone who'd listen (hardly anyone, unless I coated everything in biting irony, which was easy). And by that fall, I moved to Toronto to pursue an MA in creative writing, carrying my renewed yet detached interest in wrestling with me. To fast forward slightly: in the fall of 2012, I published a book of short stories with Coach House Books, whom I love and to whom I am forever grateful. By then I had published a bunch of poems and stories and articles, sucked up a fair share of grant money, got shortlisted for things, and published and reviewed and interviewed a whole bunch of other people. In other words, you could call me a young, small fry writer (in wrestling terms, a low-to-mid carder, in the indies) who was paying his dues—yet a writer nonetheless.[31]

And yet, here's the sad truth: despite whatever miniscule successes I eked out, I was mostly depressed about my work and its reception. I was largely bitter and ironic; my life from 2008–2012 was mostly cynical, and often angry. I thought that my encounters with Bourdieau and my renewed involvement with wrestling storylines would allow me to forgive the unfairness and absurdity of "the literary community," which I considered one of the falsest titles in the world. In my ironic discontent, I decided to push the parallels between CanLit and wrestling, and soon saw everything as a *work*—if only to cradle my sanity, my self-perceived isolation, my feeling of being perpetually overlooked and ignored at the expense of works I despised, which were somehow fêted as capital-A Art. If things were a work (fake, rigged), then how could I complain? To me, a writer played one of three roles: either she was a jobber (a 'nobody' who'd lose forever, or until a major change), a mid-carder who'd strive to stay relevant or work her way up the ranks, or a top dog who'd hog the title reigns and championship runs, international tours and major agents—she was the kind who was 'pushed' by creative (in reality, the media, the reviewers, the bigger publishers—the writer's friends,

[30] I.e., shooting from the hip, speaking truth—"real life."
[31] Cue "Pomp and Circumstance," the triumphal march!

connected and protective). Just like in wrestling, writers got 'over' by having other writers 'job' for them; in other words, when you favourably reviewed, published, defended, or interviewed another—or when you opened for other writers at a reading, or hosted them, or even shared their posts—you were putting that writer *over* because that's how the goddamned business works. You job and put over because one day you'll get *your* push. You pay your dues so that those dues come back. Or that's how the thinking goes, much like in the wrestling industry. And so I swallowed my continual impressions of being buried and continued to work hard and push other people. I was working and jobbing for a purpose, I thought—it wasn't for its own sake!

This rarely works in real life. Those you suck up to don't all return the favour, don't need or bother to reciprocate one ounce of the goodwill you send their way. Many of your peers don't give a damn about your work and would rather eat you alive for your spot than celebrate your success. As in wrestling, sometimes the top names don't want to step down, or share their limited spotlight, and you get buried. You become a jabroni. Deal with it, kid, or you'll get stretched. Sometimes a faction steps in and starts running the show—a group of friends, like The Kliq, who decide to have each other's backs and ensure that the top spots and deals and reviews get shared amongst each other. Remember, excellence only makes you a good *worker*, a good performer. It doesn't grant you success or respect. You can be, like Bret Hart, the self-proclaimed best there is, best there was, best there ever will be—or, like CM Punk, call yourself the Best in the World—but without the right mechanisms of publicity and opportunity to show and put over your product, you're just another jobber, laid out on the mat.

Or, like Bret, you're screwed, pushed out, dismissed.

I turned to wrestling in bitterness because it commiserated with me over that particular, political sorrow of the writing world, now so different than I imagined it to be. But I say these things not to convince you that this is the way things *are*—or if they are, that they're especially unique to literature and wrestling; I reveal my feelings to admit my own shortsightedness, jealousy, and depression. The irony was: I was cynically (even stoically) accepting the elevation of bad work as part of the rigged nature of publishing, but in my heart, I was getting more and more emotionally involved. Despite claiming to be superior, or *in the know*—to be *smart* to the business, receiving a smart fan's consolation of the spectacle—I was the biggest sucker, the biggest *mark*, of all. Call it what you want—hatin', marking out, gettin' jelly—I was doing all of those things, and I was often a shallow and immature monster because of it.

I believed in literature, but being involved in books made me both as cynical as the Kliq and

as mournful as any Hart. There was a conspiracy! What had happened to my beautiful dreams, my fantasies of art? For me, at my lowest point, I identified intensely with the man and character that was *Bret Hart*; I felt like the classic geriatric, screwed-over and buried, but I failed to realize that part of Bret's problem was that he, too, was a mark, failing to understand that characters are characters, that the business is built upon charlatans and fakery, that taking it too seriously engenders its own punishments.

At my lowest point, I interpreted David Wills' cry as one of rage. It's still *real* to me, I screamed—how dare you make it false, a work? How dare you make me hate it?

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Despite what's wrong with wrestling, I still believe there's enough magic left in the old, brutal routine to be at least somewhat watchable. If you give it a try—and if you can overlook some of the ills and evils I mentioned in the last section—you may be surprised by how far the genre's developed. Hey, who knows? A second summer with the pseudo-sport might not look bad on you. And perhaps, if you're reading this magazine, your interest in narrative may be your route back into enjoyment.

In particular, meta-play and participation, based on a post-kayfabe (or at least now a *pseudo*-kayfabe) universe, allows for much more fluid, mercurial plotlines. Let's take an example. At Wrestlemania XXVIII, technical master—and Internet-and-indie-beloved—Daniel Bryan (aka Bryan Danielson) put his championship on the line against challenger Sheamus. Although Bryan was then heel, the Wrestlemania crowd was still excited to see him put on a thorough, exciting match. When the bell rang, Sheamus was able to catch Bryan unaware and nail him with his finisher. Bryan was pinned, losing the title in eighteen seconds. And although the good guy won, no one was happy. So the next night on *Raw*, the live audience chanted Daniel Bryan's name and catchphrase ("Yes!") relentlessly, disrupting other matches and throwing off commentary. To appease the crowd, Bryan finally appeared at the end of the episode to a roar of goodwill—he had gotten screwed, and fans weren't going to let someone of his talent-level get buried. Within a short period of time, Bryan turned face. Fast forward to 2013, he's now challenger for the WWE Championship, and maybe the hottest wrestler in the company.

This is just one very small example in a sea of sweeping interaction, the kind of stuff that couldn't happen a decade ago (and never happens on other kinds of TV). While WWE characters

are *written* to be nefarious, audiences can make them heroes overnight, disrupting long-term booking and the best of creative intentions. Super-heel Dolph Ziggler recently turned face in similar circumstances—viewers simply refused to accept him as 'evil' because of his charisma and acrobatics. On the other side of the heel/face binary, John Cena has been babyface for as long as many can remember, sells truckloads of merchandise and generally commands the most power in the company. And yet for the last few years, he's been booed without pause by the largely older, male, and often *smart* audience members, thereby drenching everything Cena does or says in ambiguity, tension. For both heel-Ziggler and face-Cena, the audience reforms the scripts, the way plotlines are formed and money is made. Meanwhile, handmade signs voice transgressive messages despite security's attempts to circumvent them. Indulgent, arena-based, and censor-flouting chants catch on and change the pace of each encounter. Wrestlers are lost and made on the basis of the public's opinion. What other syndicated television drama or comedy can boast the same level of interaction, participation, instant relevance? Case study: the loud-mouthed manager 'A.W.' (managing the Prime Time Players) was fired last year for making a veiled, on-air joke about Kobe Bryant's rape charges (definitely not kayfabe, and definitely not acceptable). But what other TV show (forget sporting event) is so bizarre and downright *meta* that its live audience will begin resoundingly chanting "Ko-be Bry-ant" during the next Prime Time Players' match, if only to show the WWE that what happens behind doors is public domain? Such unscripted outbursts keep professional wrestling married to anarchy, despite the dull predictability of some matches, keeping it politically (and perhaps dangerously) volatile

In 2011, the angry and directionless CM Punk gave a promo that (some believe) ushered in a new era in the sport. Punk's rant was supposed to be a farewell to the WWE, as his contract was soon to expire and he'd be leaving the company (all a work, no doubt, but still compelling). But because of how *incensed* the crowd and IWC became after Punk broke "the fourth wall"—and began citing his real-life conflicts with the company, with getting a proper push and finally getting over—things exploded. Suddenly Punk became, at the ostensible end of his mediocre run, the hottest commodity in the world of wrestling. Storylines changed, contracts were renewed (apparently), and Punk walked away from the historic 2011 *Money in the Bank* pay-per-view (in his hometown of Chicago, which was so outrageously loud it sounded like a Tyson fight) with the WWE Championship. And it was like zapping back to the late-'80s, watching *Superstars of Wrestling* all over again—renewed surprise, genuine excitement. I marked out. I was a fan.

Weird. It was a strange sensation, having such simple fun. How did I get back there? How

was I watching wrestling for enjoyment, for its own sake, in 2011? As a moody adult, wrestling was my bitter mirror, a great and debilitating metaphor for my cynicism. I reveled in its parallels to my life in writing, sought out its worst examples of nepotism and politicking, its most ludicrous, cringe-worthy stereotypes. My life was full of politicking and ludicrous stereotypes, I thought—at least wrestling didn't put on the pretentions of authenticity, or nobility. I was still bitter about losing my faith, way back in 1997, to that historic screw-job of an ending. *Life* was the screw-job, I thought. Wrestling was just being honest. But here I am now, at the sad end of my 20s, reeling from that bitter belief. That once-sustaining mask of irony has finally worn me out—like holding a winking smile, but one stretched to a rictus grin, now warped to a grimace of pain. Something self-inflicted and something I need to remove.

I placed Kent Johnson's words at the beginning of this piece to foreground my ongoing struggles with wrestling and art, with competition and masculinity and achievement, but also to work against them. Yes, as the quotation suggests: professional wrestling corresponds eerily to any artistic field. If you can't see this, you've never been for a moment cynical or suspicious, or you aren't part of any network of artists, or you've (more likely) never seen any wrestling. But what does that knowledge give us? Does it prepare us for failure or jealousy, competition or retirement? Does it prepare us for poverty or injury, public shame or the meanness of others? Does it prep us for our own depths, our own shallowness? It might smarten us up, but it's not a sustaining intelligence. Knowing your world is fake doesn't make a feud or a loss any easier. And it won't let you compose one single, lovely sentence.

There's no manifesto here, you'll be happy to note, but at least some resolutions. In wrestling, as in art, sometimes it pays to maintain a sense of character. I don't want to become the writerly equivalent of a meme-ist, or Top Ten-filler. I don't want to write captions for retro, early-'90s .jpgs, or sneeringly eulogize my youth or its fading stars. Why do we ridicule, ironize our childhoods? Is there something so desperately embarrassing about them? How far along do we slouch before the irony loses its edge, becomes an epitaph for something hollow and dead? I have no use for slaying some lame-ass book, or blowing a gasket about what I feel to be some unfair allotment of attention. In my fiction, I don't want to create characters as a voyeur, distant in my white, male, middle-class comfort, and watch them squirm in theirs. I want the distance between my imaginary people and my mind to be as close as the breath in my mouth, the oxygen in my belly. And I don't want to be *smart* to anything. I want to close my eyes and believe in our little structures, our sad towers of influence. I want to be a fan, a mark. I want to say there is no conspiracy. There is

no mendacity. All is well.

To be happy means to be writing, freely and without outside pressure or deadline, and writing whatever the hell I want. Some people see this as work, as timely investment, as cultural capital. It is, but it isn't; it's also escape, fantasy. It's a trainset or Lego pack found in an attic; it's throwing on *Superstars*, dancing in our pajamas. It's a return to magic, all the demons and angels of childhood on fire.

Back in January of this year, in a moment of boredom, I posted David Wills' famous video clip to Facebook. It was one of my few acts of wrestling sharing (but probably not the last). Beneath the clip, I wrote, "This video perfectly sums up everything that I feel about art, entertainment, and the literary communities across this country. You just have to translate gymnasium to shitty bar/coffee shop." And I meant it, and mean it (even if it comes with a laugh). Wills's outburst has been variously interpreted as the emissions of the ultra-lame, as a geyser of insane super-fandom, as rage against the forces that banish childhood magic. I take it now as affirmation, enthusiasm for those banished forces; I take it as something close to joy. Along with the "Crying Wrestling Fan," my surest link to sanity and self-preservation is through touching and meditating on what is *real* in a world of falsehood, fakery. To step into cynicism is maturity; to traverse it is wisdom. On the other side of irony—the side that allows David Wills his outburst, the realm of sincerity that says celebrate what you love—there exists all the best things.

And that is still real to me, for what it's worth in confessing.