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Waiting for Beckett a Piece of Monologue

Mark Axelrod Sokolov*
Professor of Comparative Literature, Chapman University, United States

***Corresponding Author:** Mark Axelrod Sokolov, Professor of Comparative Literature, Chapman University, United States.

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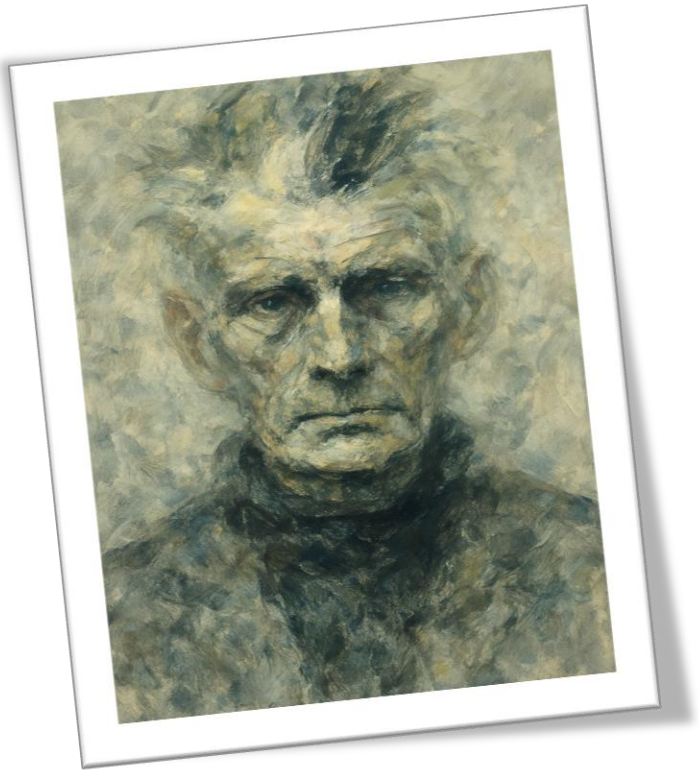
WAITING FOR BECKETT

A PIECE OF MONOLOGUE



by

Mark Axelrod Sokolov

An Homage, of Sorts

Curtain

Writer stands well off-center downstage audience left. Writer aged 75, white bearded, thinning gray hair, granny glasses wearing a tattered blue work shirt, a blue scarf wrapped à la Parisienne, and a stained black linen sport coat with patched elbows. Torn jeans in the knees. Loafers with white socks floppy soles. Next to a metal folding chair is a well-worn leather satchel that has seen as many days as has he. A small table with a flickering lamp. Writer tends to pace back and forth on stage. Faint diffuse light.

Writer

Birth was the death of him. So, it goes. Writer couldn't go on, but went on. Again. Words are few. Fewer. Fewest as time goes on. Again. Recalling. Things that needed to be recalled until the lights go out. It was, then. Thirteen, April. Year of your lord, 2006. Lord of all years. Legend or otherwise. Thirteen, April 2006. It was, as Writer recalls, Beckett's 100th birthday. Though recollection a mélange of memories. Sometimes true. Mostly false. In anticipation of that April, an April of all future Aprils, Writer recalls the first time he ever met him, Beckett, decades ago, billions of seconds ago, the man wearing the baggy greatcoat, the grey-shocked hair, sitting by himself in the lobby of the Hotel PLM-Saint Jacques, reading a copy of an Irish newspaper. Or not. A newspaper, none the less. It all began with his first note, which read,

"Dear Mr. Writer, Sunday next 14th, 11 a.m. Hotel PLM-Saint Jacques,17 Boulevard Saint Jacques, Paris 14. Yours, Samuel Beckett."

After days and weeks and months and years, full access had now been granted. Granted to him. Writer of little renown. And the thought began to disturb him. What does one say to Samuel Beckett? Where does one begin? "Seen Godot recently?" "How's your endgame?" "Read much Joyce?" The importance of how to begin, or to begin again, again from the beginning, had been preying on him for almost four years, ever since the idea nudged him to attempt a meeting with the man. At first thought, the possibility seemed remote, since who actually visits a man known to embrace privacy the way Verlaine embraced absinthe or Proust his madeleine? Who actually speaks to a man who has discovered that disinterest is the best response to criticism and indifference the best response to solicitation? Who actually meets a man who, upon learning of his Nobel Prize, fled to Tunisia in order to avoid both the onslaught of flashing bulbs and the cacophony of

reporters' catechisms? No one. Generally. Writer had learned about Beckett's penchant for seclusion through a mentor of his, the Irish poet Brian Coffey, with whom writer had corresponded while attending Oxford in 1978. Coffey, Francophile of great renown. Mallarmé. Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hazard. Translator of such. But Coffey confirmed all that Writer had thought or read or read and thought or re-read and thought about concerning Beckett's apparent self-isolation, of his need to be alone. It was no contrivance. No meretricious persiflage. Persiflage alone. Without meretriciousness. Coffey told him if he ever wanted to meet Beckett, just to use his name. Offered Beckett's address. A kind of shibboleth. Writer logged Coffey's observations and his intimate knowledge of the man, his friend, somewhere in his right hemisphere in case an occasion would arise in which it might be, in some small measure, in some small way, a way neither large nor medium, but small, as small as those things can be, beneficial; and, in the summer of 1981, such an opportunity arose.

In July, Writer was notified by the Camargo Foundation, a foundation for artists and French scholars established by the late Jerome Hill, that he had been granted a writing fellowship, which would allow Writer to write at their estate in Cassis in the south of France during the winter of 1982, a winter of little misunderstanding, a winter predicated on the winds of the Mistral, the Masterly maelstrom wind that sucks in the air from the foothills of the Alps and forges itself down the river valleys towards Marseille. It was then that Writer recalled the idea of contacting Beckett. So, with no shibboleth at hand other than Brian Coffey's name and Brian Coffey's insights and Beckett's address, Writer composed a letter to Mr. Beckett indicating that, Writer, a writer of little renown, would be in Paris the following January, that Writer had talked to Brian Coffey, that Writer understood and appreciated why he harbored his privacy, but if he would be so kind as to grant Writer an interview, Writer would be very grateful. Writer's letter was contrived within the parameters of modest literary standards, with minimal allusions to anything noteworthy in the field of belles lettres, and to fall without any excursions into the realm of experimental prose since, Writer thought, there is no need to play games. Literary games. Permutations of, repetitions of, meager of. Persiflage. He did feel that, odds aside, even with Coffey's blessings, he had absolutely little chance of an audience and that the letter, should it ever reach Mr. Beckett through the circumnavigations of the French postal system, would have been promptly discarded as simply another invasion or intrusion or infestation or infection of, into, of the man's time.

Several weeks later, Writer received a response, "Dear Mr. Writer, Thank you for your letter of July 23. If for an "interview," no. Privately, by all means. "f I am in Paris at the time. Sincerely, Samuel Beckett." The response seemed Beckettian enough...no, yes,

maybe; however, paradoxes aside, now it was too late. "If I am in Paris at the time." That is to say, c'est-à-dire, if Paris, as I know it, if there at the same time I am there, there, yes, for something other than an interview, yes, but no, if for an interview. A chat, perhaps, the constitution of which puzzled Writer. A chat. Does that differ from an interview? Are certain chat questions considered interviews? Or vice? Versa? That is, c'est-à-dire, he accepted Writer's invitation to the dance, but Writer had nothing to wear. Absolutely nothing. What does one say to Samuel Beckett? But Writer still had several months to survey his rhetorical wardrobe to find appropriate garb. If garb needed. Garb, from Italian garbo "elegance," of Germanic origin not to be confused with Greta, a Garbo of a different sort. Such as it was. The months passed quickly. Prior to Writer leaving Cassis, for Paris he had written Mr. Beckett indicating his day of arrival and his length of stay before his subsequent departure for Marseille, port city of cardboard castles and gateway to Chateau D'If. Prison for criminals and others. Writers. Poets, in general. As such. Writer had hoped that his letter would have reached him in time for a response, but nothing had arrived before he left; however, when he arrived at his hotel, there was another note awaiting him, "Dear Mr. Writer, Thank you for your letter. January 16 not possible for me. Hope we may meet later in the year. With all fond wishes. Yours sincerely, Samuel Beckett."

A reprieve. Writer had more time. More time to think of something pithy, witty, self-assured, something that wouldn't reveal him as being a literary poseur or, worse, a terminal graduate student counseled in the archives of items-better-not-to-say, to say to Samuel Beckett. Like anything beginning or rhyming with the name Joyce. Or James. Or Ulysses. What rhymes with Ulysses? Writer stuck on it, left for the Côte d'Azur. In mid-March Writer returned to Paris. He had informed Mr. Beckett of his return plans, his length of stay, and the days which would be most convenient to meet; and, in a follow-up letter of unusual honesty, deprived of any fiction, of any persiflage, he wrote, "Dear Mr. Beckett, I am looking forward to our meeting, however, I am rather apprehensive. By nature, I am shy and do not want to be intrusive. My words and letters are generally humorous and effusive since, as you are well aware, the saddest people on this earth are, most often, the clowns. Regards, Writer."

When Writer arrived at his hotel, he was surprised to find no response waiting. He tried and failed, tried again, but failed again, tried harder, but failed harder, to contact an acquaintance in Paris who was acting as an intermediary, a go-between, a liaison, an agent. Of sorts. Such as it was. Suddenly, Writer found himself in an agitated state, a state of accelerated anxiety. He didn't know whether Mr. Beckett had written him or not written him; if he had, had he stated a time to meet, which Writer could not or stated a

time to meet, which Writer could but, or stated to suggest a time to meet, but failed to include Writer, or failed to include Writer, but included someone else, not knowing, could not or stated a time to meet which Writer could, but would Writer be able to contact him and tell him so? On the following day, when Writer finally reached his friend, the latter said, yes, Writer had received a letter, but, no, he didn't have it with him since he was at his office and it was at his home. Writer had to wait until later that afternoon in order to secure its contents and Writer worried the entire afternoon that, due to circumstances out of his hands, in other's, in other's hands, hands not his, but belonged to others, other's hands, Writer had stood up Samuel Beckett.

That somewhere in or near or out of Paris, somewhere north of Paris, or south of Paris, east or west of Paris, Paris as one knows it, Samuel Beckett had given him his time and Writer had, quite simply, rejected it, ignored it, dismissed it as if it were detritus, detritus upon the detritus of the sands of time. The thought made him queasy, sullied, as if he had declined, dismissed a gift, which someone had gone to painful lengths to paint. When Writer finally discovered the contents of the letter his fears were somewhat alleviated, but, at the same time, precipitated the anxiety that was to follow, since he began to have second thoughts about the meeting. Second thoughts that became first thoughts as thoughts go. Such as they were. He had hoped, hoped in some foolish way, some self-defeating way that Beckett would have written, "Dear Mr. Writer, Paris too cold. Have left for holiday. Sincere regrets. Warmly, Samuel Beckett." Which would have enabled him to breathe freely his own regrets and extinguish his personal misgivings; however, such was not his response, and Writer was left without an aide to assist him. What does one say to Samuel Beckett?

On the morning of 14 March, Writer awoke prematurely at 7:30, but, then again, he may not have slept at all. Does lying in bed with closed eyes though not asleep count for a kind of ersatz sleep? A restful non-sleep? Or resting? He ate his usual Parisian breakfast: café crème, a croissant, a half baguette with cherry jam, or was it a croissant, a half-baguette with cherry jam or and café crème or a half-baguette without cherry jam, along with the seventh chapter of Gogol's Dead Souls. Writer was hoping he could glean an irony or two from Gogol, which he could parlay into a beautifully contrived witticism of his own, provided Beckett had never read the seventh chapter of Dead Souls. Unlikely, as events go. Such as they were. However, chapter seven held no answers. So, Writer trashed the idea. Better to appear as ignorant as one is. Such as it was.

After finishing his petit déjeuner, he slipped on his jacket, turned up the collar, and wrapped his scarf around his neck à la parisienne before heading for the Metro stop

Denfert-Rocherau via Chatelet and Montparnasse-Bienvenue. Preoccupied as he was with attempting to recall the words and lines and pages, lines and paragraphs and pages from Murphy to Godot, he, of course, took the wrong train; but having left two hours early, he had planned for such a gaffe, and since no one aboard that underground quiescence, those sullied, graffitied cabins that circumnavigated the labyrinth that was Paris, knew where he was going or how nervous Writer actually was, the blunder became a measure of his nostalgia. Something to remember the day. Such as it was.

As the Metro thumped its way from one port to another, among the solace of those flickering tunnels, the darkened darkness of the metro walls, all he could think of, in rhythm to the meter of the wheels upon the tracks, was, "What does one say to Beckett?" The line even crowded his mind in fledgling French, "Que dit-on à Beckett?" Nine months had expired and he was still stumped for an answer; then, for no apparent reason, at the stop Chevaleret, Writer began to think of their correspondence. Each letter/note he had received was equally as short as or shorter than the one before it, which seemed to be an attempt at creating something which took as long to read as write; which seemed to be no different than some of his own work; shorter plays, Footfalls if you wish, Rockaby, What Where, which seemed to be a reflection of a moribund perception that there was no time to write anything much longer; which seemed to depress Writer to think that, in time, and time and time alone, his words were marked in time, marked time, and time was much too short in time, which might augur for something mortal. That is to say, c'est-à-dire, eventually, the time would come when he would write no more words, written words having a quota, a quota of written words, a written word quota after which all that remained was silence and a vacant page. Fuck. Such as it was.

When the Metro stopped at Nationale, the thought came to Writer that his visitation was not decided upon unilaterally. That is, c'est-à-dire, it was not his decision alone. That at any time in their correspondence Beckett could have written, "Dear Mr. Writer, thank you for your interest, but I only meet with good writers. Sincerely, Samuel Beckett." Writer would have understood. Would have known the reason. Would not have been hurt. Much. So, why would he be interested in meeting him, just another wordsmith? Of so many wordsmiths capable of applying pen to paper. Such as it was. Could it have been, as one friend suggested, that since Beckett's first novel was allegedly refused by forty-two publishers and Writer's was holding even at eighteen, perhaps, he would suggest a few more names to extend the agenda of rejection? Writer politely smiled at the suggestion.

At the Place D'Italie, Writer decided to get off the Metro and walk to their meeting place. The morning was cloudless, warm for Paris in March, quiet. Turning a corner, he noticed

on the opposite side of the Metro tracks, Beckett's place of choice. The PLM-Saint Jacques, which struck him as an odd place to meet-- concrete and glass, brass and custom carpeting, loud walls, loud languages, an onslaught of Parisian tourists, a torrent of Parisian tourists, seemingly stuffed together like scallops cramped in their shells. Perhaps, scallops Coquilles St. Jacques. Perhaps, not. Writer's initial feeling was that Beckett could not have lived there, though, perhaps, he did. He didn't say he didn't, he didn't say he did. Perhaps he wanted to meet there in order not to direct Writer to his home, if, in fact, it were not his home. If it were an uncompromised meeting place, a place he only frequented, a place unlike his own, then it was only a further indication of the lengths to which the man would go in order to protect the sanctity of his space. Perhaps, a kind of second home, second homes for writers often being a place to write, a writerly retreat close enough to be far enough away from home, a place to distance oneself from ringing phones or doorbells or knocks on doors. Or from writes such as Writer. Such as it was.

Writer nursed a café crème from ten to ten-fifty-five thinking from the top of the cup to the bottom of it about his opening lines, of how their talk might unfold, of the questions to be asked and answered; then, Writer walked to the registration desk, cleared his throat and asked in a fragile, decisive tone, "La chambre pour Monsieur Beckett, s'il vous plait," and the words, seemingly stuttered from lips in the most insipid of French accents, grammatically incorrect, were answered with, "There is no Samuel Beckett here." At first, Writer thought it was another bit of irony. A Beckettian maneuver of being there and not being there. Writer quickly abandoned the notion. "There must be some mistake," he asked, but the computer told no lies. At that time, or shortly thereafter, it struck him that Beckett must have meant what he said. How odd. To mean what one says. No symbols where none intended. To meet there, read the note, to meet. Any assumptions on Writer's part were purely fictional. To meet didn't suggest to live, but to meet as in the act of getting together, to connect, converge. As in company. Excusing himself for the error, Writer glanced at a clock, which read three past eleven, then turned and looked over his shoulder. Sitting in a corner of the lobby, at the base of a concrete pillar of no notable distinction, wearing a trench coat with fur collar and crew-neck burgundy sweater, sat Samuel Beckett.

Throughout that crowded lobby, pent with parables being spoken in foreign tongues and faces stained with oddly shaped cheekbones, cheekbones of various shapes and sizes, Beckett's presence seemed much louder than the cacophony of words swirling around him. Yet, he sat alone: cropped shock of silver hair, pointed ears, creases in his cheeks. It seemed no one, in that agitated lobby, other than Writer noticed who he was. Doubtlessly, a blessing for Beckett. But how could that have been? Writer adjusted his shoulder bag,

cleared his throat once again, and walked up to him. Looking down, Writer held out his hand. "Mister Beckett," Writer said, with only a partial fibrillation to the voice within his chest. A beating, a buffeting, which Beckett must have heard pounding from his chest. Looking up from his paper, through spectacles fashioned with squint-eyed lenses, he extended a hand crippled at several joints and answered in a voice dulcet with a seemingly odd mélange of French and Irish accents, "Mister Axelrod. Shall we have a coffee?" "By all means," Writer replied, looking into a pair of soft blue eyes.

All Writer planned to say or thought he should say was suddenly forgotten. Or rehearsed it before as a rehearsal of what to say. Or not. Such as it was. Lost within the confines of some remembrance of things past. Past things, like past time, like an essay on Proust, a Proustian essay, written by Beckett. We sat in the café PLM, in a booth away from the fray in the foyer, in a booth in which Beckett seemingly sat before as the waiter nodded to him as a gesture of recognition before he took an order and for the next hour or so they chatted about nothing in particular, everything in general, nothing in general, and everything in particular. It was clear to Writer after no more than fifteen minutes that all the preconceived notions he had had or had heard of Samuel Beckett were fictional accounts of his own, or others. Perhaps, confabulated prose poems. That as they talked, he saw or felt, what seemed to him, a profound sadness in his eyes, though, of course, Beckett was not without humor, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes attested to that, as did the accent of a childlike pucker on his left cheek which pronounced itself each time one of us said something worthy of a grin.

About his work he said very little, about himself he said even less, other than he considered himself a "last ditch writer" who knew that he was unable to be a teacher or a scholar or a pedant of modern stuff, and were it not for writing, he was uncertain as to what his life would have been. Or why. Why it had been. Or was. Writer suggested that things seemed to have worked out well for him. He grinned. His eyes shifted from Writer's to the table, as his arthritic fingers tinkered with a plastic lighter. No, he said, he hadn't read his biography nor was he interested in doing so, hadn't wanted one written, but there was "no copyright on Samuel Beckett's life." Though, he hesitated, his friends were not too pleased with it. Too dramatic, they said and the writer of the book now had her "nails imbedded in Simone De Beauvoir." He was returning to some older writings, he admitted. "Fiction?" Writer asked. "Is that what you call them?" he answered with a tobacco-stained smile, "Just prose," was all he added, then looked again at the lighter. Writer wasn't sure which of them was the more nervous or less interested. He, the Master, or he, the apprentice. What Writer did feel, after the coffee was served and cooled, was that he knew something of him by not knowing anything at all, by recognizing that he

avoided talking about himself, by observing that his countenance was gentle and demure.

Their conversation was like a chess match. Writer attempting to maneuver Master to speak about himself, Master attempting to maneuver Writer not to, guarding himself from checkmate. Master, declaring his life to be uninteresting, and Writer, knowing fully well that he had nothing of much substance, of much value, to offer. They maneuvered themselves, first, like pawns, forward, but, on occasion, diagonally, then like rooks, forward, backward, left or right at any time or knights, forward, backward, left or right two squares that must then move one square in either perpendicular direction with each one seeking to know something of the other, while revealing nothing of themselves, and only resting in between brief periods of silence, silences, which were barely broken by Writer's erratic breathing or their choreographed sips of café noir. Café au lait.

Beckett asked Writer about his own writing, what he was working on, how Writer could work on more than one novel at a time. His eyes widened when Writer said he would just attenuate one sense and augment another. Beckett put a finger to his lips. Writer felt as if he had impressed him, but the thought quickly vanished. Another fiction of his own. Why would he be impressed? Writer asked if he'd care to read anything of his. Master said, certainly, but added, not too long, as he could no longer read very well because of the damage that cataracts had done to his eyes, eyes needed to write, eyes needed to read, to see what had been written and re-written and re-written and re-written yet again; revisions like blackened redactions leaving very little white space on the page for the white to breathe. His method of composition. Composing. Such as it was. Writer changed the topic. He didn't travel much, only once to America, had given up directing, and, no, had never seen his plays performed. Only rehearsed. He couldn't "tolerate the pain." Proust, yes, Baudelaire, yes, 19th century French fiction, they liked both, both liked them, before Master suggested Writer should play more chess, a game for which Writer was poorly suited.

He talked of the Second World War, its isolation, betrayals within the Resistance, Vichy France, a novel he wrote called Watt, which kept him sane for three years and which some people thought very funny, funny enough to become the core of Writer's own dissertation. Eventually, the conversation turned, as each one must, whether intentionally or not, to Joyce, on Joyce, of Joyce, upon whose name he only raised one eyebrow and reached for another of his Dutch cigars, the small ones, the ones in the yellow pack. In that gesture, that simple motion, Writer thought Beckett said all he ever wanted to say about the man. The other man. Writer understood and did not pursue it, since there were other topics to pursue, but when Beckett finally looked at the table and fidgeted with his

glasses, Writer knew it was time for him to leave. He had to see to something else. Groceries, perhaps. Mundane things. Pedestrian things. Things that take up time in between writing and turning off the lights. Writer initiated the closure by saying he didn't want to take any more of his time, and after Beckett paid for their coffees they walked outside and shook hands: this self-effacing Master of the word and Writer of little renown.

Standing face to face, eye to eye, they agreed to meet again, perhaps, another winter, perhaps, a spring. In Paris. Instinctively, Writer put one hand upon Beckett's shoulder, shook his hand again, and told him to take care of himself in much the same way he said those things to his father, Beckett of whom reminded Writer of the same. Such as it was. He smiled, then, after wishing Writer a safe trip home, he walked away. As Writer started in the opposite direction, he felt an unmitigated urge to crush someone or something, but he didn't know who or what. In retrospect, maybe it was his own arrogance he was after, his regard for the words he wrote, which, against other words, were insignificant. Indeed. Such as it was. Then again, maybe it was a personification of death. Something palpable, around whose throat he could stretch his fingers and with one deft and simple snap, break its immortal neck. As Writer turned, he saw Beckett walking down the street, moving from the sunlight into the shadows, shadows into the sunlight and back again.

With his hands stuffed into his pockets, the shock of hair bristling in the wind as distinguishable to him as the ceaseless arms of winter crushing the breast of spring; his tall, narrow frame walked briskly down the Boulevard Saint Jacques, turned a corner and disappeared. What does one say to Samuel Beckett? One needs to say nothing, Writer thought, one only needs to feel him, c'est-à-dire, to read him. In that there was all that was meant to be said and all in that nothing was left to say. Writer had met with Beckett and he had the good fortune, the privilege to meet with him again; however, Writer shall always cherish that first meeting, a meeting of the arrogance of passing youth, pleading with the graces of aged humility for the ageless answers to the written word.

(Writer sips some water)

After their first meeting, they had carried on a correspondence for several years if one could call prose written on a postcard, correspondence. A three-by-five card was appropriate for all he wanted or had to say. To write. The briefer, the better. Better to be brief than nothing at all. Which was. It had been three years since their first meeting at the café in the Hotel PLM. At eleven. Eleven being the time he had suggested. The suggested time. At the time, there was the usual feeling one gets upon meeting one's hero. Heroes coming in all sizes. Genres. Modes of discourse. Their first meeting was all

that he hadn't expected it to be: chatty, informal, with an air of melodious, yet melancholy, music to it. Yet, in its own way, it was sacrosanct. And so he looked forward to their next meeting, their last meeting. At the café of his choice, the PLM; at the time of his choice, eleven. Writer had primed himself by watching En Attendant Godot several nights earlier in case one needed priming for such a meeting since his anxieties were much less pronounced than they were three years earlier. By then they had corresponded, almost called each other by first names, knew where each other lived. Beckett had even consented to reading more blather Writer had written although he couldn't read much by then. Eyes had worsened since the prior offer, the offer before, before his eyes worsened. Blather is all it was. Writer can't remember what Writer had sent him. Blather. Prattle. Babble. Of one sort or another. Such as it was.

Writer arrived early. Always early. One waits for Beckett if one respects time. If one respected Beckett. It was also a kindness afforded to greatness. Writer's time seemed expendable. Writer started to smooth his hair, tapped his fingers on the marble tabletop, would have smoked had he allowed himself to do so. In between still another hair stroke, still another tapping finger, Writer saw him walk into the cafe and begin to look around. Gone were the grey greatcoat and the blue sweater now replaced with a knee-length, navy blue coat and an orange stocking cap. Tennies. Writer walked across the cafe and tapped his shoulder. "Mr. Beckett." "Mr. Axelrod," he said as he turned. Beckett had chosen a booth, in a corner of the café, away from the window, beneath a coat rack, the same booth they had sat in years before, away from the fray of the foyer. He removed a small, yellow cigarillo box, the Dutch cigars, and placed it on the table. Weathered hands, bent from the fabric of so many rigid pens. What Writer noticed this time, were the deepened lines in his face. The creases, deeper, curvilinear, like furrows that had swallowed certain secrets and kept them irretrievably harbored. "The weather's been so bad," Writer said, "How do you manage? Morocco?" A place he said he visited, at times, when Paris got too cold. "My cottage," he said, some miles outside Paris. His reclusive habitat, no doubt needed for reclusion. We ordered coffees: a café noir for him, a café crème for Writer. He appeared much thinner. Not a sickly thin, but an aged one, one that seemed to brook the onset of deliquescence. Deathlike, it seemed to him. Writer quickly discounted the idea as if the spine had said enough. "How's the writing going?" Writer asked. A legitimate question of one writer to another regardless of the legitimate disparity in their talents. Talents notwithstanding. Having no equal standing. Such as it was.

"Not well," he said, as he fiddled with his yellow box of stogies. "Writer's block," Writer said in jest, but Beckett answered that it had never lasted so long. Then he looked at Writer with a smile that masqueraded nothing. A realization that the Muse had finally

eluded him and said, “All things come to an end.” And Writer realized that anything he said or did after that comment would never alter the fabric of that day, nor Writer’s life, nor Beckett’s, nor any other life that had been or is or will be touched by his prose, by the supple salience of his prose, by the supple salience of his prose, which exhales across the page, sometimes in repetition, sometimes not, sometimes in permutations, sometimes not, other times not, such as it is. Writer had often thought of himself as fairly facile in conversation. Able to pick up and move in any direction. Take the lead if need be. To fill the void of silence. But he suddenly found himself unable to think of anything to say that would vanquish the vacuum of the moment. Fortunately, the coffees came. A caffeinated reprieve.

Writer remembered reading, that morning, on the metro, an article in the now defunct Paris magazine, Passion, titled "Les l00 Poids Lourds Des Lettres" with a picture of a certain Regine Deforges, a writer unknown to Writer, on the cover. The blurb beneath the title read, "Un hit-parade des l00 personnes-editeurs, écrivains, et poètes-qui constituent le Tout-Paris des lettres." The article certainly piqued Writer’s interest since he wondered in what category they had ensconced Beckett since such natives as Michel Butor and Maurice Blanchot and Claude Simon and Nathalie Sarraute were included as were exiles such as Milan Kundera. But though Writer looked and looked and looked again, Beckett was missing. Some poseurs were there, but some Beckett, was not. And so Writer said to him, you've been living in Paris for all these many years and yet they haven't included you among their “dinosaures des lettres Francaises.” “Though you live in France, you speak and write in French, yet they didn't include you. Why do you think they did that?” At first, he looked puzzled by the exclusion, but then, with another smile, merely said, “It's okay, I forgive them.” Maybe it was because he still thought of himself as Irish even after living fifty years in France or maybe it was because the redacteur en chef hadn't edited the copy or perhaps the staff had thought him dead. Beckett dead. But not dead. Not yet. Not yet dead. Beckett, such as he was. Writer didn't forgive them, but changed the subject. "But when were you last in Ireland?" he asked. “Sixty-eight,” he said, for a funeral. And then in a transition that wouldn't have been a stain upon his craft, he said his mother was dead, and his brother was dead, and Blin was dead and so was Jack Yeats. And one could see the furrowed frown in his forehead as he held his hand to his head, thinking, perhaps repeating thoughts, or losing them, within the confines of time, time in the Vaucluse, Rousillon, with his wife, with others, time with Watt. The furrowed frown. Through some set of verbal perambulations he came to talk of his early work, how he couldn't make it as a teacher since he felt he knew less than his students. “A last-ditch writer,” he called himself, a reprise of years before. No one accepted his work, no one even looked at it. No one till Lindon, till Jerôme Lindon took his work. Without reservations. How fortunate he was, he said, to have found him, and how lucky he was to have found Roger Blin. And

John Calder. "How lucky I was," he repeated. How lucky he was. How lucky they were Writer thought, but he would have never said that. Never.

It's somewhat difficult to reconstruct that scene, now so many years ago, decades on after his centenary. Writer often thinks of how that meeting ended. Of what things he took away with him the last time he met Beckett. And he vividly remembers two moments: first, was his response to the simple-minded question: "What are you planning to write next?" acknowledged by the sublimely succinct answer, "All things come to an end." With that statement there was nothing more to be said, nothing less. No symbols where none intended. It was over. One needed no redacteur to understand that and yet hearing the words come from him rendered Writer depressed and sullen, rendered the hour depressed and sullen, rendered the remainder of the day depressed and sullen if not the years to follow. At the end of that chat, Writer suggested that, perhaps, Beckett needed to go, to leave, to do whatever he needed to do since, as before, he didn't want to take up any more of his time. He nodded, picked up his glasses, paid for the coffees and they both headed for the door. The second moment was more sanguine. Writer recalled from their first meeting the Dutch cigars he smoked. The small ones. The small ones that came in a yellow cardboard pack. The Dutch stogies. The ones he placed on the table when he arrived. As it was in April, the month of his birthday, Writer had bought several boxes of those cigars, those same cigars, the ones in the yellow pack, to gift him as a present, as a birthday present, belated or otherwise, and before he left the café, Writer told him he had something for him and he removed the crudely wrapped cigars from his leather satchel, crudely wrapped as only he could crudely wrap them and handed them to Beckett.

Beckett unwrapped the paper and when he saw they were the same cigars he smoked he looked at Writer with a look that was both perplexing and grateful, a look that would have suggested what Writer had given him was a gift beyond all measure, a gift that was speechlessly invaluable. He asked Writer how he knew; Writer said he merely remembered. And so they stayed a bit longer, un peu plus longtemps, Mr. Beckett and Mr. Axelrod looking at each other with Mr. Beckett's hand on Mr. Axelrod's shoulder, looking straight before him, at nothing in particular, and then Mr. Beckett thanked Mr. Axelrod, stuffed the packs in his coat, bid Mr. Axelrod a safe journey home, shook his hand and left. A left turn, a right turn and he was gone, perhaps, to a seventh-floor flat in an apartment block at 38, Boulevard Saint-Jacques, perhaps, somewhere else. The sky, falling on the buildings on the Boulevard St. Jacques made as memorable a picture, in the afternoon light, as a man could imagine on a waning day in April. No third meeting was suggested, proposed, anticipated, as if both knew nothing would come of that. But the

day wasn't over for Writer. What he could not fathom was the line "All things come to an end." Depressed and sullen discourse. One fathoms such a line from a dictionary of well-worn phrases, hackneyed ones, perhaps, but not in the context of someone of Beckett's station. Writer recalls he left the café, ambled, turning down aleatory allies, ruelles, boulevards, such as they were, until he eventually found himself walking aimlessly somewhere along the Seine, somewhere aimlessly along the Seine, perhaps near the Hotel Lauzun, perhaps not, it didn't really matter, repeating the line Beckett had spoken not that long ago, not those many seconds ago, "All things come to an end." The wind picked up. Writer couldn't light his Dutch cigar, the small one from the yellow pack. "No symbols where none intended." How prescient he was. Fewer than two years later he was gone. Two billion, four hundred thousand seconds later. And gone. Birth was the death of him. Of him as it is for us all. To you audience, thank you for listening to the ramblings of an old man. Such as they are.

Writer lights up a small cigar and ambles off the stage into the darkness of the wings. The lamp flickers, then goes out.

Lights off.
Curtain.