Shadows In the Sun

Dell Nett*

*Iowa State College

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Abstract

The white autumn sunlight turned Bernard’s study into patches of light and shadow. On the wall, opposite the volumes of theology, hung a portrait of Christ, his head crowned with thorns...
She sleeps fitfully, dreaming of a golden cup which can barely be seen through a dense fog. As she reaches for it, the cup moves away. Now she is running, grasping for the cup, but she is held back by a strange, strong force. Running, groping, grasping, reaching . . . .

She wakes up, tears gleaming on her face. The baby is crying, and she sees her husband warming some milk over the stove. Pulling herself up from the bed, she goes to the dresser, takes a slip from the top drawer and grabs the orange-flowered washdress from the closet.

"Mornin'," her husband mumbles.

**Shadows In the Sun**

*by Dell Nett*

*Education, Grad.*

The white autumn sunlight turned Bernard's study into patches of light and shadow. On the wall, opposite the volumes of theology, hung a portrait of Christ, his head crowned with thorns. Bernard, who sat in the shadows by the bookshelf, felt the suffering Christ appeared blinded by the white light. The observation, however, seemed only faintly amusing, and he swiveled his chair around and got to his feet. Standing before the second story window, Bernard's attention wavered from the lifeless view to a recent letter he had written his sister. Behind him, on the desk, lay a nearly memorized copy of it.

Bernard skipped the tortured opening to remember: *I am sorry to break our long silence, Elaine, just to analyze myself again. It is a habit I cannot even keep from in letters. What I wish to tell you—confused as this may seem—is I have come to a decision. Marilyn has decided we should marry and I should leave the ministry.*

Leaning forward, Bernard put his fist between the glass and his middle-aged face. He stared wearily at the roof below until the shimmering light forced him to close his eyes;
for a moment there was neither words nor light.

Finally, the words came again and he listened with closed eyes. *Presently, I find little enthusiasm for such changes. Yet, I suppose, both have been in my thoughts these last few years. It is not easy to confess, Elaine, that God has been dying in me slowly. It has been such a gradual thing I can hardly realize he is gone.*

Bernard opened his eyes and tried to remember, indeed, when God and he had existed together. There was only the white, listless landscape outside to remind him it had been a long time ago. He removed his head from his fist and straightened up. The afternoon sun rested lazily on his rugged face.

*It is difficult to tell you what a Godless world is really like—except to say—without God’s order and purpose, the world seems a bolder, more awesome place to live now.*

The last point had become a private obsession with him and only recently he had delivered some of his best oratory on the subject. In fact, it pleased him greatly when some of his parishioners had commented that he made a good devil’s advocate. As if to mock him, the landscape beyond the window looked anything but bold and awesome; instead, the houses and backyards had a monotony he could not force himself to watch any longer. Shortly, he returned to the swivel chair by his desk.

He fingered the letter, sadly. His mind tried to hold a picture of his sister’s young face: the small, well-shaped features and the dark hair. He knew she would be thirty-nine now, just a year younger than he. To Bernard, though, her face would always remain darkly innocent and seventeen.

His eyes reluctantly turned to the letter and the swimming words: *But maybe a God of guilt is not a God to endure . . . I suppose, however, this is not the time to reason this problem either. Forgive me for thinking so—it seems our guilt has produced the same bitter silence, in our separate retreats from the world. These are hard words, my sister, but they are so.*

Bernard’s hands folded the letter slowly and his thumbnail creased it over and over. He tried to picture his sister’s surprise when she removed his letter from her mailbox, then followed her carefully as she carried it inside and, after tearing it open with a letter knife, seated herself on her bed to read it. He had rehearsed the details many times, so his
agony was especially acute when she read: *I shall always feel our moment of truth—or sickness as you called it—should have given our lives more than silence.*

Bernard's thumbnail had stopped creasing the white stationery. He leaned back in his chair as he pictured his sister, the letter in her lap, leaning back on the bed. Her eyes were closed in her tense face and he fed the agony around his heart by watching her prone, young body on the bed. Finally, he closed his own eyes and the inertia between them began to relax the tension in his limbs.

There was a long time before there was a need for words. *Marriage is something that has always remained appealing to me. Even at forty I find the young girls of my parish more of a temptation than they should be. Marilyn, though she is older than I am, is a handsome woman and very attractive to me.*

The deception of the words lay with a heavy weariness on Bernard's flesh, and he clenched his teeth in disgust. He had wanted his last statement to be as simple and honest as words could make it; but hard as he tried, he had not been able to keep the lie from creeping in and marking the whole design with suspicion. His sensuality had been quietly ignored in his attraction to a piece of statuary. He felt her personality—like her face—had the effortless balance of good art. In fact, in his own mind, he often caught himself admiring her like he would an object of artwork. This is why the following seemed so doubly honest and ironic: *But where the flesh has always been strong, the spirit somehow remained stronger. Except for one precious but confused hour, our spirits have ruled our bodies like iron-fisted kings. The body, unfortunately, is a blind thing, when it has no will. And ours have remained so blind throughout all our years.*

It seemed so needless, Bernard thought, to have lived his life only half a man. By keeping his body youthful and hard, he had deceived his parishioners, as he had everybody else. Bernard recalled with pride how he was once introduced as one who “looked like a Greek and talked like a Hebrew.” His attention shifted to the Hebrew on the wall. Bernard wondered again if the thin body had really contained all the needs of man and had not sinned. The riddle caused Bernard to study the portrait carefully. The light from the window, however, only gave the Hebrew's face a
painful but questioning look. When his attention returned to the letter, he read the following in a bitter, embarrassed voice: *I have come to believe a world without God, without hope, without meaning, is a futile place. It closes around me like an airless cell.*

Accusing God—even though God was just a name—always seemed like an unnatural act to Bernard. He wondered if Nietzsche felt much the same way, in talking to his dead God. He wondered, too, whether the German's insanity was of his flesh or his mind. The poet's madness had long fascinated Bernard—something he had used against him in many of his sermons.

*I once thought,* Bernard read without embarrassment, *that taking one's life was a cowardly thing. Maybe I still do. Yet, hidden in us all, I feel is the need to grasp the final moment with passion.*

Bernard had often thought of death and its different agonies. He envied the Hebrew his death—those long hours under wracking pain. He studied the ugly thorns cutting into the Hebrew's head and wondered if it didn't touch the spirit with a special madness. He concluded, with a bitter smile, the need to live one's final hours so violently was common both to man and God.

*Do not be distressed at my vision,* he read from the stationery. *To expire before the mystery is to become—for one brief second—the total man. I can't explain why, but my life right now cries for a moment of passion, a moment of truth.*

Bernard's right hand carried a small bottle to his face, where he counted its contents of twelve white pills. He rattled the bottle, watching the pills jump inside. Phantasizing about his death was something Bernard had done many times—the speeding cars, the slashed wrists, the bullet in the temple. He had chosen sleeping pills for what he considered the poetry in the method; meeting death in a dream-like cloud had an Eastern quality he admired.

He had lived through the details often. He would first burn the letter, pour the grape juice in a glass and, one by one, down the small white pills. He would next go into the garden and sit on the bench among the leaves; then after the languid clouds began to fill his head, he would curl up on the bench and sleep. He had not wanted to die in a room, like a cornered animal. He wanted his death to be an open thing
—full of sun and trees and the smell of earth. He had especially phantasized the way in which he would greet the knowledge of his dying. To know the final moments were upon him made him wonder whether he would have the courage to live them without regret. In spite of his determination, he could never be sure.

He spun his chair around and walked to the window. Below him, among the trees and leaves, sat the garden bench. It was wrought-iron and of Baroque design. His eyes lingered on it a long time before the gentle sun, slanting through the trees, made him remember the final lines of the letter: *Strange, how that afternoon was so like this one. It had been early autumn, too, and the hot sun seemed fixed forever in the trees. We had been especially conscious of the silence, hadn't we? You had remarked how our steps made so little noise along the mossy floor. And together we laughed to shatter the temple-like quiet under the bare trees.*

*Why did we let the magic of one afternoon destroy so much of our lives? Why, my sister? Can we ever tell ourselves why?*

The sun burned without warmth or intensity through the trees, and the leaves below him looked cold in the late sun. Bernard did not want his body to be found stiff from the evening cold; rather, he thought, if he performed the rite in the morning or early afternoon, he would be discovered with his flesh still warm. This unnecessary gesture of self-concern forced him to smile. He mused about what an interesting but fatal thing a man's vanity really was. As he stood in the fading light, Bernard began to speculate about tomorrow's sun. He could see it hanging like a jeweled sword above the trees, while far below it, among the brown leaves . . . .

**Upon Reading Sartre's *La Nausée***

*by Neil Nelson, History, Soph.*

i believe  
God breathed into me the breath of life.  
i question  
does God have halitosis?