



Bartleby, the Sessional

Jerris Johns felt almost giddy. Why even go to campus at all?

By TIM BOWLING *Illustrations by* BYRON EGGENSCHWILER

WHEN THE UNIVERSITY he'd been poorly employed at for the past 12 years decided to eliminate three-year sessional teaching contracts, Jerris Johns started sleeping in the clothes he taught in. This behaviour was both practical and psychological; practical because his landlord would never heat the complex sufficiently at night, and psychological because the institution's further attack on the Humanities made him feel as naked as Lear on the heath. Where he could once make a desperate three-year plan of survival, he now would have to make an even more desperate plan every 12 months.

In the most recent department meeting with the Dean of Arts, Jerris had screwed his courage to the sticking place to protest the decision. The Dean, a slick-haired fast-talker whose favourite strategy was to lower his voice and say, "Listen, I taught in the English Department for years. I'm one of you, I get where you're coming from," nodded understandingly and then, grinning like Uriah Heep, discussed the drop in oil prices and therefore provincial post-secondary funding. When Jerris looked around in exasperation for support, he saw that the tenured faculty—which had dwindled to 50 per cent of the department now—mostly stared at their phones, while the other sessionals appeared, like inmates on death row, to be waiting for a pardon that they knew would never come.

That was early September. It was now mid-October, and snowing and sub-freezing already. Too bad for the trick-or-treaters, Jerris thought, though few children went door-to-door on Halloween night anymore. Even the little kids had had the joy sucked out of their lives. Jerris had already stopped counting the number of students he taught who consumed opioids like Skittles to combat what they felt but mostly couldn't recognize or accept as a kind of mirthless servitude. Increasingly, he saw his students as motionless structures of exposed nerve-endings, and himself as a robotic fount of useless knowledge. His area of scholarly research—the first books that famous American writers published after their masterpieces (Herman Melville's *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*; Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* etc.)—had never gained traction, and his efforts to secure a tenure-track position, even in such unhallowed places as Idaho and South Dakota (or was it North? He couldn't remember), had become reflex actions rather than affairs of hope.

Even so, Jerris Johns, approaching 40, was a conscientious and effective teacher. Or at least he always had been. There'd never been any reason for the department to question either his pedagogy or his behaviour. Ordinary looking with a gentle manner, he was popular with students but not too popular. Over the years, sensing that the generations below him would have an even harder time economically than he'd had, he started lowering his grading standards, and that move ensured that his classes of introductory rhetoric and analysis always filled up (every student, regardless of degree program, had to complete six English credits). The more enthusiastic and talented of his students now made him feel both despondent and guilty. He was no longer young enough to sell them illusions.

Jerris woke this particular October day an hour before his alarm went off, and lay on his back, watching the huge Rorschach blot of the blue spruce outside his bedroom window shift

around in the wind. As he pondered the fluid black motion, the stress in his body began to rise. By the time the alarm sounded, he had already reached for his laptop and pulled the duvet over his head. The screen's underwater light was painful, but he felt a great relief as he posted a notice to his students that class was cancelled. Technically, he was supposed to alert the department of his decision, but he just didn't feel obliged at the moment to follow the rules. Besides, what were they going to do? Threaten him with precarious employment? Smiling, but without pleasure, he rolled over in his sweater and jeans and fell asleep.

A few hours later, standing in front of his day's second class (he had been given only three courses for the first term, two Monday/Wednesday/Friday sections, and a Tuesday/Thursday section, and a measly one course for the second term), Jerris noticed that the attendance was very low, about 30 per cent. Perhaps the inclement weather had kept the students home. Jerris couldn't blame them. Rotely, he returned to the matter of identifying thesis statements.

The next morning, with the snow heavier and the thermometer dropping, Jerris cancelled another class, again without alerting the department. This time, he couldn't rally as the day progressed and, his heart racing a little, he nixed his next day's first class too. That evening, when not a single student had emailed him, he realized that the cancellations were probably a relief to them, over-worked and under-slept as most of them were.

By the end of the week, when he also realized that the students weren't contacting the department either, he slowly began to formulate a breathtaking plan to counter the desperate planning he'd have to do at year's end. At first, he laughed at the idea, all of the values of his Protestant-though-secular work ethic immediately going into a kind of immune system overdrive. But as Sunday evening arrived, and with it the unconquerable desire not to prepare for teaching, Jerris felt almost giddy. Why go to campus at all? The

inevitable future of lecturing would be virtual anyway, if not actually done by artificial intelligence, so why not get a head start and even go one step further by not lecturing, period? Of course, he couldn't just vanish entirely; he'd have to maintain some connection with his students, perhaps show up every third class or so. The rest of the time, he could send out twice-daily emails, creating the semblance of responsibility. As for assignments, well, what student would complain if he simply reduced the number of required essays from three to two? Or even from three to one? Under his warm duvet, chuckling as he tapped the keyboard, Jerris felt younger and more exultant than he had since he was a teenager whose love of literature had nothing to do with the draining forces of getting and spending.

By the third week, he knew he was in the clear. And because he wasn't depressed, he began to go out—to art galleries, bookstores, the library, even to matinees. In fact, he could hardly wait to go to bed each night so that he could get up and live the next day. He didn't even care that the weather had grown colder, almost -50 with wind-chill. Indeed, the temperature was his best ally, for each cancelled class had a greater chance of coming as a relief to his students. The stillness and fragility of the air—the sheer uniqueness of such severe cold—only heightened his feeling that he'd escaped from a sick world into a healthy one. Hadn't Mann's main character in *Death in Venice* died from making the reverse journey? Jerris couldn't remember, so he added *Death in Venice* to the growing pile of pleasure reading beside his bed.

When students finally emailed their first assignments, Jerris gave each essay a cursory read and then applied a grade at least two grades higher than deserved. Not surprisingly, when he sent these out, no one complained or requested a meeting. Jerris calculated that his hourly wage had now shot up from about \$40 to \$300. Feeling rich, and almost successful, he bought some new clothes and started making dates with women on Tinder and other dating sites. The subsequent sexual

liaisons only confirmed his sense of regeneration; he took to his new life as naturally as a gander takes to migration.

Then the email arrived. It was from a student in his M/W/F course, a young man whose name didn't conjure up any image in Jerris's mind. Had the student even attended class? Well, at least the note was respectful and composed in complete sentences. Dear Professor, it began, I am a student in your English 103 course and I would like to meet with you to discuss my essay. Also, I would like to ask your opinion about doing a degree in English. What would be a convenient time for me to come to your office?

Jerris's initial reaction was irritation. Things had been coasting along so nicely that he believed he wouldn't have to talk with any students or colleagues—and hardly even see them either—right to the end of the term. As it was, he could barely remember what office he'd been assigned (it changed each semester, and he generally shared it with two other sessionals). Meeting a student was inconvenient enough; maybe he could ask the young man to meet at a café off campus in his neighbourhood. But even then, the request was a nuisance. Once his irritation wore off, however, Jerris read the email again and a feeling of pity nagged at his heart. A degree in English? Now? In a world run entirely by and for STEM, a world in which the Humanities themselves were Inhumane for the illusions they continued to market to impressionable and idealistic youth?

Reluctantly, Jerris replied to the email, suggesting that the young man meet him at a Starbucks just down the block from Jerris's apartment. Then he realized that he'd probably have to show up to the next morning's class, since clearly he now had at least one student who wasn't just taking the course for the required credit.

Of course, the weather had to be just as cold as it had been of late, with the streets empty and the hoarfrost cracking on the Dutch elms all along the

avenue as Jerris walked to the bus stop. Looking down an alley, he saw a mangy coyote sniffing around a garbage can, and the image of desperate privation reminded him of his failing and doomed academic career. Depressed for the first time in over a month, Jerris had to build up his courage just to walk into the classroom.

To his surprise, no one was there. Not a single youth sat behind a laptop gazing at flickering images. Not even the young man who'd sent the email. Well, Jerris decided, it was miserable weather, and he had cancelled two weeks of classes already. Even so, the emptiness of the room was breathtaking—and a little frightening. How quickly the students had adjusted

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to Jerris's new schedule. But surely someone interested in taking an English degree would make an effort to attend class, at least immediately after sending such an email. Then again, Jerris knew only too well that the behaviour of students was rarely anything if not perplexing. Maybe this young man, whatever his name was, intended only to meet with Jerris privately once and then revert to form. Maybe he had a certain scorn for his contemporaries—Jerris remembered having such an attitude himself in his undergraduate years—that made attending class almost embarrassing.

Well, it didn't matter. Jerris stood stiffly behind the lectern for five more minutes, staring with dread at the open doorway, half-expecting all of the students to burst inside in one mad rush, filling every corner, pressing hard against him until he couldn't breathe or escape, dozens of students, hundreds, thousands, all shouting questions at him about thesis statements, all

demanding to know where he'd been. Finally, after wiping the sweat off his forehead with a trembling hand, he left the classroom.

Walking rapidly along the hallway, he passed a young male student, an ordinary looking kid wearing a ball cap and a punk T-shirt (The Clash, was it? The Ramones?) who hesitated, his eyes locked on Jerris's own, before he grinned as if with pain and continued on. Jerris looked back over his shoulder. Could that have been the emailer? He had a sudden intuition that it was, but before he could decide what to do, the student rounded a corner and disappeared. Jerris wasn't even sure he'd be able to recognize him in the Starbucks the next day.

That night, feeling ill, he cancelled a Tinder rendezvous and spent several hours playing a video game he loved a decade ago. The bright lights and rapid motion, which sometimes made him feel seasick, actually had the opposite effect. Grounded and relaxed, he decided to check his university email before going to bed. The only note in his inbox immediately alarmed him.

Dear Professor,
I'm sorry. I won't be able to make the meeting tomorrow. I suffer from anxiety and I'm having a bad time just now. Can we re-schedule for next week?

To his amazement, Jerris didn't feel relieved. On the contrary, the idea of going through an entire week before meeting the student made him anxious. He had half a mind to reply with a firm no, saying that his time was valuable and that he had other matters to attend to. Instead, without any sensation in his fingertips, he sent a note suggesting the same time and place, and added that he hoped that the student would be feeling better soon.

The temperatures warmed enough during the week for several snowstorms to cover the city. Venturing out only to get coffee, Jerris felt that the snow had muted something inside him too. He skittered through the streets like

a piece of foolscap. Twice, early in the morning before the sun was up, he saw the same mangy coyote under a streetlamp; the animal seemed to stare at him, but with haughty indifference. The other half of Jerris's mind wanted to throw a snowball at the creature. But the coyote's stillness and mockery, so human and familiar, held him back.

By the day of the meeting with the student, Jerris was weak from lack of food. Cooking—or going out to eat—involved too much effort. In the morning, he tried to preoccupy himself by calling up some of his unpublished articles on the computer. Had he really written them? Delivered them at conferences? He couldn't imagine the person who had done such work. Wrenching himself away from the lean, haggard reflection in the computer screen, he plunged into the storm. The ongoing snowfall seemed to fall over all accomplishment, obliterating his past and obscuring his future. Almost staggering, his own breath like toxic clouds, Jerris made it to the Starbucks.

Not surprisingly, the café was almost empty. Two middle-aged women sat talking at a small table in a corner, a giant bald man in a pumpkin-orange sweater grinned foolishly into a laptop at another corner table, while a magenta-haired barista waited at the till to take the next order. Only when he had stepped further inside did Jerris see the shrunken, scarved figure in a black toque slumped at a table against the far wall. Annoyed by the increase in his heart rate, Jerris approached the figure and, clearing his throat, said, "Hi. You must be..."

A violent bout of coughing smothered his words. The student, looking up through watery eyes, the scarf wrapped in python folds around the lower half of his face, apologized faintly.

"It's good of you to come, Professor. This day's not... not exactly... I mean, I wouldn't have blamed you if you didn't show up."

Jerris nodded, and then, almost deafened by the throbbing in his temples, asked the student if he

could get him anything.

"No, no thank you. I mean, there isn't anything that... nothing you can buy at a Starbucks." The watery eyes rippled. "I got a tea already." He moved one mittened hand out from the thick fold of his worn parka, revealing the familiar cup with the mermaid logo.

After ordering his coffee and waiting at the counter to receive it, Jerris joined the student at the table. For a painful moment, neither of them spoke, just mechanically lifted their cups to their lips as some dead crooner—Sinatra or Tony Bennett—smoothly filled the heated air.

"I just read *Moby Dick*," the student suddenly started, his voice so raspy and weak that Jerris had to lean towards him to catch the words. "You know the character Pip? The boy who jumps out of the whale boat and gets left behind for a whole day? Just floating in the ocean, thinking, not knowing if anyone is going to come back for him." The student tightened the scarf at his throat. "That's just how I feel. Like Pip. Before he goes mad, I mean. Or as he's going mad, maybe. Floating there. Just floating. Except heavy too. Kind of like a statue of a person. If it could float." He coughed so that the whole oversized parka shook. Recovering, he said, "But I guess I'm supposed to think about Ahab. Or the whale. Not some lost boy. I mean, it's not exactly *Peter Pan*."

Did he smile beneath the scarf? Was there mocking laughter in his words? Jerris couldn't tell. The student's voice was so weak, barely audible enough to possess a tone. Besides, the café was so hot that Jerris found himself sweating heavily, even though he'd removed his thick coat and the first layer beneath it. The student, however, not only kept all of his winter protection on, he looked frozen, as if he truly was treading water in the middle of an ocean at night. His forehead, unfurrowed, gleamed like polished marble.

At a loss for an appropriate response, Jerris merely repeated, "No, it's not *Peter Pan*." Then, in the painful echoing silence that followed, he tried to rally. "But J.M. Barrie must have read Melville. I mean, the crocodile that pursues Captain Hook. That's really just the whale and Ahab, isn't it? Except Hook tries to get away from the crocodile, of course. He doesn't go looking for it."

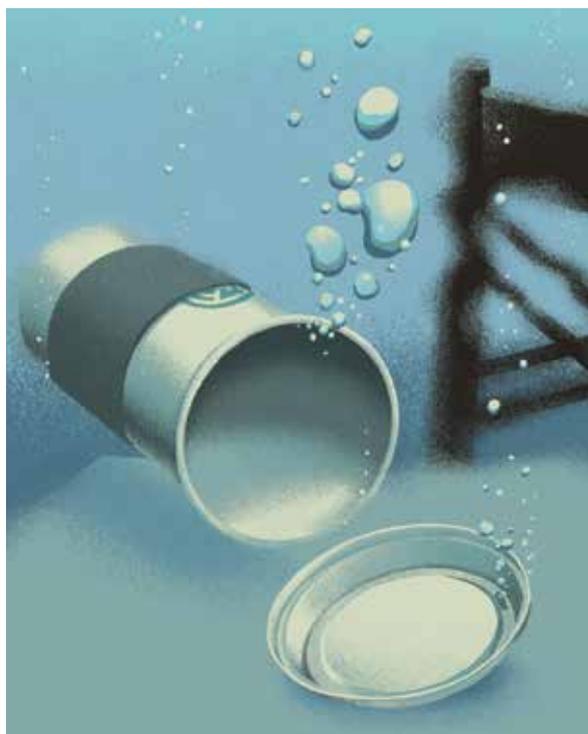
Jerris's voice trailed off. Why did his words seem so completely pointless? The student didn't want to talk about *Peter Pan*. He obviously didn't even want to talk about Melville or Pip either. So what did he want to talk about?

Jerris took a sip of coffee and let the silence close around them both. Even the grinding of the espresso machine sounded miles distant. The student, meanwhile, held his tea-filled cup like a small wounded animal inside his parka. He didn't bother to lift his head when he spoke again.

"The truth is... I think I'm dying. And when I read, everything I read tells me that I might as well."

"What?" Jerris looked around wildly, but neither the conversing women, the giant bald man or the barista noticed that he'd almost shouted. "What do you mean you're dying? What's wrong with you? Have you been to a doctor? You... you..."

"I don't have any energy. I could hardly make it here. And wherever I go, I'm just so



heavy. But I float. Like Pip. It's only a matter of time."

"Time?" Jerris had to put his cup down because his hands trembled so much. "What do you mean?"

"Before I sink. Or before they find me and I've already gone mad."

"Before who finds you? What are you talking about? You're not in the ocean."

The student lifted his head as if by an invisible winch. His eyes, which really did look full of sea water, floated in his marble skin. "You know? They. The ones who leave you all alone. Who don't know. So that you have to become one of them to survive."

Jerris clutched his hands together to stop them from shaking. Hot and sweating, he removed another shirt until he was down to just one thin layer. When he had pulled his head through the shirt's small opening, and looked across the table, the student seemed to have drifted away by several feet. Jerris heard the raucous shrieking of gulls out of the café speakers. His temples throbbed like surf pounding the shore. Salt spray stung his eyes. The student's scarf unwound and his mouth opened in a tiny O. Jerris's arms swung like oars as the student's chair drifted farther away, his upper body slumped on the table, the cup sliding from his grip and blood spilling out of it across the intervening air. By the time Jerris had struggled to his feet, the student was crying inside the gull-cry, pleading for help. When Jerris ran forward, when he grabbed the student around his midsection, a searing pain flashed across his own ribcage as the flesh of the young man dissolved and Jerris found himself sinking under the lights and the sounds and the unending snow until he was heavy and floating and the crying of his voice couldn't make consciousness turn back to recover him.

Several minutes later, after he had been helped to his feet by the giant bald man, after he had told the two middle-aged women that he didn't need an ambulance, after he had gratefully accepted a new americano from the

barista and assured everyone that he was fine, that he sometimes suffered from dizzy spells and that the cold, fresh air would perk him right up, Jerris slowly made his way home and crawled, fully clothed, into bed. Shivering, unable to stop his teeth from chattering, he lay in the foetal position and tried to quiet the shrieking of the gulls and the desperate crying of the student as

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the near bedroom wall widened into a blank, inanimate horizon. At long last he either passed out or fell asleep.

When he came to, he still had almost no warmth in his body, and remained in bed as the last threads of twilight turned into a solid block of dark that destroyed the terrible white sky of the room. But slowly the nightmare passed, the student's scarved face with the submarine eyes faded, and Jerris didn't even worry about why the young man had left in such a hurry—after all, Jerris realized that he wasn't being paid enough to do social and psychiatric work in addition to correcting comma splices.

In fact, the Starbucks encounter, unsettling as it had been, finally freed Jerris to make a last bold move. He emailed his three classes, told the students to send him their second assignments (which would be their last), and then didn't even bother to cancel the remaining three weeks of the term. He just didn't show up, nor did he check his email again until he knew that the students' assignments would be in his inbox. Indulging himself by ordering through Skip the Dishes every night, by deleting all of his academic writing and by donating several boxes of scholarly journals, textbooks and reference works to Goodwill, Jerris

understood that his floating idyll was both reckless and doomed, that the world, like a blood-filled whale boat, would eventually return for him, just as the pathetic student had said it would.

And yet, when he decided finally to submit his final grades (after randomly assigning generous marks) and saw the email from the chair of the department requesting a meeting in her office, he was both saddened and anxious. At first, he considered quitting, and then letting the consequences of that decision play out, even to the point of suicide, for he understood that his life had come right to that edge where the horizon would always be a lifeless sliding wall. But then he decided not to give the institution an easy way out.

Let them do their own dirty work, he thought. Let them use the axe for once instead of the thousand little knife nicks.

The chair smiled as she gestured for him to sit. She brought out a sheaf of papers from her desk. Her smile widened as she complimented Jerris on his term—the student evaluations were over-the-top positive, and the department had received dozens of requests from students wanting to enroll in his classes for next term. The dean, she said, wanted to reward him. Though it was no longer institutional policy, he recognized the value of Jerris's pedagogy and wanted to offer him a full-time three-year contract at a higher wage. In addition, the chair went on, the department would like to honour him with a certificate of undergraduate teaching excellence.

Jerris smiled back. The walls of the office receded. He signed the contract, shook the chair's hand, and walked out like a pardoned man into the crowded arterial pathways of the young.

Five years later, he was earning a six-figure salary in administration and building a fine collection of vintage jazz on vinyl. ■

Tim Bowling's poetry collections include The Witness Ghost, a finalist for the 2003 Governor General's Award for poetry.