

# Fiction

## Limbs

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is a writer and academic. His most recent book is *On Drugs*.

Once I could remember my own name, but now I can't. It wasn't always thus. And not just with this. Things didn't always happen in the way they now do, in this order, from these causes, with such consequences. They happened differently, were caused differently, could be recalled.

Or maybe they did and I've forgotten. Memory isn't a recording device, it's a survival machine. That's what the scientists say, anyway. But what would they know?

The scientists, after all, brought us bombs and poison gases and preservatives and flight simulation games. I have nothing against scientists, which sounds like something someone who hates scientists would say. "I have nothing against scientists," they'd say, and then add "but..." But I don't.

I admire them, envy them. I envy them their white coats, sandals and lightning minds, their confidence in speaking about reality. Their sheer volume. I like their equations, which they say, are the skeleton keys used to unlock nature's doors, to see it bare.

I'm a scientist myself, not by training nor by profession, but I share their disillusionment, their libido for unweaving rainbows and saying

that  $x$  is "nothing but"  $y$ . I do this all the time. Or I used to. I believe I did this.

I imagine that's when I understood cause and effect. I'm too old to understand anything now, or remember much – too weathered for clarity. Now things all seem to happen backwards or sideways or perhaps for no reason at all. I used to *believe in order*, you might say.

Did I? Probably I did. In any case, I'm overdramatising matters, like what one believes or doesn't is some great thing. I'm relying on memory now, and we all know what memory is for: it's not a documentary faculty, is it? I've already said as much, I suspect. Memory is a pair of limbs used to cover the face while being hit. Memory is a limb.

My experiments have gotten small, much smaller than they used to be. Now I provoke people and observe results. I line up at the art gallery and when I get to the front and am asked for my ticket, I produce a small piece of paper on it on which I've written "TICKET." I see how the functionary reacts. There is no consistency. Sometimes I am let in, sometimes not.

If they refuse me, I say "thank you"; if they allow entry, I cry. I weep and then ask, "Do I *have* to go in?" I may add, "I have no interest in art." That is true. They usually say "no", refusing me entry, but twice they've said yes, distracted perhaps by other things. I'm not sure what the experiment shows, although I'd guess that someone somewhere would say they know.

"Human nature," they'd start – or even worse, "instinct". "Instinct" is the most useless word in English. It may not be. Maybe "erotic" is more useless. Or maybe redundancy is a property of phrases, not words: "cease and

desist", "each and every", "future plans". But here it's not the phrase, but only one element of it. I have no time to think about these things. I have more animal concerns.

I have limited time left, who knows how long. I'm sure if you did a survey and asked, 100,000 people someone would get it right, would be able to say what the study reveals, but being right is no sign of knowledge. It would be a guess. "Three years and 11 days" someone might say, and neither believe it nor know it. But they might be correct. And what of it?

When I'd got inside the gallery, I'd try to find an area to stick my ticket on the wall, so that I could be exhibited. Both times I've been caught. They watch me more carefully now. It's like a treat for some of them. A service. It gives them something to do. I hyphenate their time. They think I'm trying to be famous; I'm not. I'm just trying to externalise myself, to see if I can look at anything I do as if from an outside perspective. They never let me succeed, so I don't.

If my spirit is high, I might try something else. I might go to the bathroom and write in marker on the mirror: "A man wearing a brown hat is sitting looking at Frederic Leighton's *Cymon and Iphigenia* on Level 2. If you wink at him, he'll raise an eyebrow." I then go to look at the painting, but after a while forget that I have left the note. Thrice someone has come and winked at me, and I've scowled at them. I blame the painting.

The painting is unsigned and undated and I fight the temptation to try to sign and date it myself – as Leighton. One day I will do this and prove to the guards that I am not trying to become famous. If anything, I would be trying to bring recognition to Leighton, who is himself not famous. Nor should he be.

But fame isn't – has never been – a matter of what's deserved.

I went to school with an unpopular boy who decided that he would cut off his own face and hang it on a wall in order to "mock art". For years he talked about this, especially when drunk, but always demurred owing – he said – to his fear that this mockery of art would *itself* become a famous, even canonical, work. Eventually he decided on the less radical action of cutting off a hand. But, on the way to the gallery, he absent-mindedly left the hand on the train and never saw it again.

He, if anyone, deserves to be famous. But I now can't remember his name. ●