Quit

Thomas Oles

I called to him, rapidly stating what it was I wanted him to do—namely, to examine a small paper with me. Imagine my surprise, nay, my consternation, when, without moving from his privacy, Bartleby, in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, “I would prefer not to.”

I sat awhile in perfect silence, rallying my stunned faculties. Immediately it occurred to me that my ears had deceived me, or Bartleby had entirely misunderstood my meaning. I repeated my request in the clearest tone I could assume; but in quite as clear a one came the previous reply, “I would prefer not to.”

H. Melville (Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street, 1997, p. 21)

An early evening in late March, several weeks past my forty-eighth birthday. I am seated in the departure lounge of Salt Lake City Airport, wrapped in a Loden coat and staring into a half-empty plastic sushi tray on my lap.

I am on my way home from an academic conference. I chaired a panel on fieldwork with some close colleagues. It all went well. Interest was expressed, much future collaboration promised. It fell to me to sum up. Fieldwork is about chance, I whispered, my voice ravaged by laryngitis, about risk. It is about the learning that comes of being vulnerable, exposed, raw. In the field you can and do get hurt. In the field you are never really in control, never really the master of your fate, and in this it is like life, I said.

We call ourselves a tribe, this group. Who knows how we found each other. We came together this year as we do most years, to affirm friendship, offer support, steel ourselves anew for another year filled with the mundane disappointments and degradations of university jobs. “Academic positions” is too grandiose for us. We are not superstars. We do not write our own tickets. The offices where we toil are small, they look onto loading docks and brick walls. We live all over the world in places we tolerate, barely, for the paycheck. We
dream about someplace better. We spend (or spent, before the Covid year) a
great deal of time in airplanes and even more in airports, waiting for flights
delayed, rerouted, rebooked, cancelled. We have learned to turn those hours
to our advantage. In departure lounges and airport bars, at ticket counters
and security checkpoints and border control, we are always throwing together
our next lecture, trudging through our students’ prose thickets, tending the
ever-unruly email gardens.

I had such high hopes for this hour. But the room is packed: every seat occu-
pied, children splayed at their parents’ feet, young people propped against the
walls. To a one, all are device-entranced. Blue fluorescent light reaches every
corner of the room and leaves only the darkening world beyond the plate glass
as refuge. I lift my eyes, slowly trace the pink ridge of the Wasatch Front. It has
just snowed.

*You must quit,* I think.

Do I say the words aloud? Do I even “think” them at all? They seem at once
more and less than a thought. A conviction, an epiphany? No. This is a state-
ment more like “it is Tuesday,” banal and self-evident. No chain of reasoning
leads up to it. It needs no argument, no explanation. It arrives just so, without
fanfare, from some place far beyond thought, beyond reason or plan or conse-
quence. But it demands utterance.

Now, years later, I know where the words come from. It is the “swamp brain,”
the reptile inside me fed up with the frontal lobe and its chatter, its endless *ifs*
and *however*s and *at the same times.* Fed up—and not fed.

*You must eat,* the reptile orders.

It has my attention now. It is angry. Yes. I suddenly realize I am dizzy, have not
taken a single piece of food all day. I look back down at the pieces of sushi, each
a sad little expression of the industrial food machine. I am about to take one
when the frontal lobe barges back in, yelling.

\[
\begin{align*}
crazy! \\
not so bad— \\
the children— \\
what about money?! \\
she will never accept— \\
things will surely—
\end{align*}
\]
I wait for the words to assemble themselves into sentences, sentences into arguments as they usually do. But the words are sheepish. They sit there, random once shiny objects sticking out of the muck. The ruler of the muck is amused. *Have your fun*, he says to the front brain. *Go ahead with your crystal palaces. They will all sink in the end.*

The reptile is in no hurry. It settles back while the words drag themselves to attention (they have had so much practice). *This institution is toxic,* they recite. *It will never change. They fired you without cause, then tried to cover it up. You hate your colleagues, you hate your students. They are poisoning you. And—final insult!—the pay is lousy, you are going broke.* And then suddenly emerges the sentence I will not forget, the sentence I will bear with me every day from then on, fully-formed, lapidary, like fully grown Athena from the head of Zeus: *I would rather never work in academia again than work in this university another minute.*

As rhetoric, not too bad. Perhaps the words will convince my skeptics. But the problem with words is that they are fickle. Once they get going there is no stopping them. Almost immediately, they turn on me:

> **OK, but what will you do?** *This work is all you know, all you can do. Sure universities have their problems. This one might be a bit worse than others, but how can you be certain you will end up—deserve to end up—with something better? Don’t be so hasty. You are in no mental state to make such a consequential decision. Cool down, tot up the ledger. Wait a month or a year or two or three.*

My spirits sink with each clause, each premise. I am so damn good at this. But I am not the only one paying attention. The reptile is there, too, watching and waiting. It, too, knows a thing or two about words, and it has plans for me. I am just about to add the next proposition when it lunges forward, hisses and strikes:

**Dear Dr Oles,**

I understand that you received a UK Visas and Immigration letter stating that your residence card application has been refused. This letter confirms that you no longer have the right to work in the UK, therefore the University cannot legally continue your employment at this time. Your employment will terminate, as of today, on the grounds of statutory enactment. As this is a summary dismissal no notice or payment in lieu of notice is due to you. This decision has been reached after seeking
legal advice and guidance from the University’s contact within the UKVI Premium Customer Service Team who confirmed that the University can no longer legally employ you.

Yours sincerely,
L R
Senior Human Resources Administrator

I step back and wait for the old sting. I know it well, for I have worried these lines to threads since first reading them. They came attached to a late email from my chair (last task, no doubt, before he headed off for the long weekend). The email was festooned with empathy. I stood at my desk and stared at the screen, words oozing and ramifying before me. My son was eight months old, my daughter three years, mine the only salary. The world was inverted. There was nowhere to turn, no succor to be found. I—we—were in hostile territory.

I walked down to them in the park below, where they were playing with neighbors. The smiles of pity, the polite assurances (all a mistake, will be put right soon enough) enraged me. They—will—regret—this! I said, but thought: You.

Dear L R,

I was surprised and disappointed to receive your correspondence dated 06 April 2015, in which you inform me that I have been fired as of today on grounds of “statutory enactment.”

I would have appreciated the opportunity to discuss my plans for appealing this erroneous decision with you before being summarily dismissed over the Easter holiday on the basis of advice from the “UKVI Premium Customer Service Team.” I have attached to this letter my Home Office appeal and supporting evidence. I have also instructed my solicitor to review the circumstances of my dismissal, and request that you immediately forward him complete transcripts of any and all legal advice obtained from the Home Office in relation to my case.

Naturally I have suspended execution of all duties associated with my position pending resolution of this matter.

Sincerely,
&c

I wait for the venom to hit the skin. And wait. Adrenaline and dopamine ebb away by increments. Still nothing. Finally, I relax. Not only have the words lost their potency, I realize, they actually bore me. How can that be? Have I grown
immune from exposure? Am I just too weary, too worn down by airports and
greasy food and stale conference hotel air? The reptile knows my brain too well
to give me time to answer. As quickly as it deploys its venom it sucks it all back
in again, like a film in reverse. All the words are gone. All, that is, except one.

_Quit_, a verb and a noun and an adjective. The 27-page entry in the _OED_
tells me the word comes from Anglo-Norman and Old French _quiter_, meaning
release, discharge or exonerate. To abandon, relinquish, renounce (an obligation
or a debt). To leave, go away. To pay a penalty, to match or balance or
redress. To rid of something undesirable or troublesome. Like retching.

Before the retching, though, the swoon. That sour certainty of sweat and
bile. I mechanically avert my eyes from the sushi, try to ignore the food-court
fragrance behind me. I look back out the window, where it has grown dark. I
take imaginary gulps of jet fuel-spiked air. Perhaps I can get some work done. I
reach down to the floor to pull out my laptop, then freeze. No. The reptile is not
done with me, not yet. It crouches there, grinning, waiting. It knows.

The old definitions are ambiguous. _To rid of something troublesome_. But who
is troublesome and who is troubled? Who is ridded and who does the ridding?
What is matched, to whom is the penalty paid? Who owes, and who forgives?
“I wolde wel quyte your hyre” Chaucer wrote, but Melville’s Bartleby never says
the word. His boss does.

Who is troublesome? I am troublesome.

I am a bad colleague.

I am not a “team player.”

A team player would not file a grievance and insist on a formal apology—
not when he is reinstated three weeks later and receives hush money in the
bargain. A team player would not go to the press. He would not speak to a
lawyer. He would keep his head and play the long game. He would go meekly
before that tribunal of students convened by his “line manager” (we all work
on the shop floor now), charged with ... what, exactly? Defying the learning
outcomes? Going off-script on assessment? Holding a class meeting at an
open-air museum? (Yes, I was indeed censured for this.)

No matter. Team players “welcome the opportunity to clear the air.” Team
players play ball. They do not tape record every meeting with superiors. Denied
promotion to a rank they have already held in another institution, they do not
protest. They accept the committee’s verdict (“it was decided that you are not
quite ready for promotion at this stage ...”) with grace. They stick it out, try
again next year and all the years after that.

Team players do not prefer not to.
Team players do not fold.
Team players do not quit.
It is not that I do not know the rules of this game. I know I should smile like a good colleague. But I have grown sullen in my privacy. I sit there, immobile. Some words are issuing from the Head of School seated beside me. *Student. Experience. Transparency. Openness. Mutual. Respect.* I turn and notice the straight teeth, the sequined shoes, the open palms, practiced and unquitterly. I remain a study in not smiling. When the floor is mine (“Thomas, is there anything you would like to add at this point?”), I turn and fix an icy gaze on my accusers. *Who called for this meeting?* I bark, deliberately rude. Much general squirming, then two hands slowly rise of the fifty assembled. Do I imagine the awkward laughter? It makes no difference. My sentence arrived on the docket.

Max Weber, now he knew the rules of this game as well as anyone. He saw them being written. In 1917 Weber gave a short speech to a group of doctoral students. To my mind it is the truest thing ever said and written on the modern university.

“What is the situation of a graduate student who is intent on an academic career?” he asked (Weber, 2004, p. 4). The first part of the answer concerns the transformation of the university into a capitalist bureaucracy, scholars into wage laborers alienated from the means of production. Their position is “as precarious as that of every other ‘quasi-proletarian’ in existence” (p. 4). But while “the old constitution of the university has become a fiction,” Weber thought, one “feature peculiar to a university career” remained (p. 4). *Luck.*

I personally owe it to a number of purely chance factors that I was appointed to a full professorship while still very young in a discipline in which people of my own age had undoubtedly achieved more [...] I have developed a keen eye for the undeserved fate of the many whom chance has treated, and continues to treat, in the opposite way and who have failed, for all their abilities, to obtain a position that should rightfully be theirs (Weber, 2004, p. 4)

Weber’s luck ran out a year later. In 1918 he was dead of Spanish flu at the age of 53, my age today.

I see now what Weber saw then. But when, exactly, did I see it? *When* did I learn that I might be tolerated, but would never advance? *When* did I know not only not to smile, but that I would not forgive myself if I did? *When* did I learn to tape my conversations with superiors? *When* did I understand that each email, however trivial, was a piece of evidence in a case not yet assembled against me? *When* did I learn that I was a means to others’ ends? *When,* come to think of it, did I even read that Weber essay in the first place? Was it the cause of my knowledge, or its effect?
I search for some watershed between the two selves, ante-quit and post-quit, AQ and PQ. The PQ self sits here now, years later, worrying these words. That self knows. But how exactly did the other self meet its end? No matter. We make stories to forget, not remember. This one will do.

I rise and walk over to the recycling station. I balance the empty tray (somehow I have eaten the remaining pieces) atop a hillock of identical landfill-bound receptacles, then start down the hallway back toward security. Eyes fixed on the psychedelic purple carpet, I walk slowly, gingerly, testing each creaky floorboard so as not to rouse the baby next door. That baby is a light sleeper. Worse, he babbles. Once he gets going there is no putting him down.

The reptile—now he does not like children. He is old and cranky. He wants his peace and quiet, and he wants my undivided attention. Will he follow me a little way? Am I worth his time?

So far so good. I continue down the concourse, lazily contemplating the variegated doughnuts and Brigham Young effigies. I wait for the front brain to awake, the old fighting words to return. But the baby sleeps on. And then I realize it is no accident. The reptile has done more than follow. It is there on my back, black claws digging into my shoulders, long head pivoting slowly back and forth. I feel the stored heat through my coat. It has me now. I stop amid the current of travelers, look without seeing. My muscles go slack, my frame goes heavy and—I float. Thanatosis they call this, tonic immobility. So that’s it. I am playing dead, and the dead are done with words.

I let myself be swept down the hallway tributaries of Salt Lake City International Airport, emerging just enough, at each successive terminus, to swim back up again. An hour, maybe two has passed when I hear the muffled syllables of my name. Last call ... Proceed immediately ... Your baggage will be off-loaded ... I crawl onto the bank, stand up and enter a newspaper stand. Do not exceed two capsules daily, the maximum strength sedative label admonishes. I rip open the box, take six and bear my precious passenger toward the gate.

Later, but not much later, you will run out of the house, down the steps and into the spring night. You will not have a map. Before long you will remember your empty pockets and bad shoes. Not too late to turn around, but you will continue, each step another sunk cost. One mile, two miles past grey houses and gravid rhododendrons. Three miles and you will feel the land slope on your
breath. You will see the mountains, giant black waves frozen mid-crest, and press on, upward, the way choosing you. At no place in particular you will stop, turn, look. The city is a distant yellow galaxy at your feet. You stand there in the rain and blackness, waiting.

So this will be your life now. You will work for universities again, but never again will you be not quit. That fall, you will understand, is absolute. The road back (you will know because you will try to find it) is washed out, gone. A knowing means (you will know because you will try to do it) cannot bend itself back into an unknowing end.

Well, what on earth kind of life will that be, you ask. A life exposed and raw, certainly. A life more resigned and remote, probably. Some will say, a life poisoned by cynicism and darkness. But also, you will come to learn, a life less fearful. A life more fierce, more truly your own. A life—here now is another, much bigger word—more free.

The moment of change is nothing special. You will not see it coming. One day, like Bartleby, like me, you will simply withdraw behind the screen, to your privacy, and remain there. The event is not heroic or grandiose. You cannot give it a name. It is just what happens when the reptile, long mute, finally demands to speak. It is just what happens when you see—in some airport, stuck in traffic, almost too late—you are a means, not an end. It is just what happens when you cut your losses and walk away from the table. It is what happens, what will happen, when you quit.

References
