

## *The Realist is a Dreaming Boy*



*'Art is liberty itself, recreating under its guise and for its own glorification, the phenomenalities of things, executing (pardon the word) variations upon the concrete theme of nature.'*  
*Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in J. H. Rubin, Realism and Social Vision*

*'I've met angels / I've touched creations.'*  
*Tracy Chapman, Heaven's Here On Earth*

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In the light of several tastefully placed candles, the Realist lies on her bed, attempting to dream. She is bored.

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When was she last able to make little fancies of her life? She thought of Proudhon and the desire to use art to transform reality by brutally confronting it. She'd always considered

herself an anarchist, but maybe she was just an anxious avoidant. Everyone was so abject since the second millennium; no wonder people were re-running away into the 1990s. They'd overshoot the end of history onto a blank page and people all over were finding it impossible to dream new dreams. Without familiar patterns, what tools did people have to confront reality? The Realist suspected, however, that this page was not blank, but covered in an older script – so faded as to make it invisible to modern eyes.

Written there were the rules of an earlier century, one she roughly identified as corresponding to the so-called Long Nineteenth Century. The Victorians called and they want their obscenity laws back: only this was before the popularization of the telephone, so they wrote a letter instead. The Realist sets about deciphering this message and producing a response, believing that here she might discover the method to transform her reality. If she could leapfrog contemporary fashions and fascisms, and return to the origin of the (real) world, perhaps she could reply to this letter.

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Swaddled in the stench of *BYREDO Ambre Japonais*, everything that had been holding her in time begins to push back, harder. At what point she started to confuse the commodified signifiers – cunty archive corsetry, homesteading TikToks, little women on Hausmannified streets and dupes of Sally Rooney – for the real contours of the world, she can't tell. The Realist lies catatonic, the inverse of a sleepwalker. A storm of images threatens to overtake her and dissolve her material body into pure, dematerialized value. And so, pixelated into an exchangeable symbol, the Realist begins her investigation.

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The Realist started by looking for tools which suggested particularly transformative possibilities. She bought a pen, a paintbrush, a sewing machine, a chisel, a printing press, a soldering iron, a liberal arts education, and some disposable syringes. But nothing, when held in her ghostly fist, was immune to contamination by her insufficiency. Possible worlds slipped through her fingers like sand in an egg-timer, each grain bringing her closer to becoming hard-boiled. So she turned the timer over, reversing the flow and bringing her back to a crackable state.

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In 1855 she made a painting of her room, as delicately fleshed out as she could muster. Still there was something wrong about the description. She'd been faithful, painting the dark corners untouched by candlelight a deep black. But on the canvas these areas surged forwards, the volumetric opposite of her studio's cosy recesses. They didn't fold her body in, like a weighted blanket above a mattresses' familiar divots, but sent her starting – a shadow in the night she was afraid of colliding with, even more than the naked model in the painting's centre.

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In 1921 she tried her hand at sculpture. She went to bed with a young boy who carried *Swann's Way* like a designer purse. When she awoke, she found upon her pillow long curls

ensconcing an admirable female face. The unexpected encounter with an unconscious Galatea terrified her and so she ran away out of the room and back to the streets.

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Between 1845 and 1867 she didn't make much besides profit for others. She dwelt on property she did not own, obliged to grind the phenomenological husk of her life into comestible pieces on the tech-lord Mark Bezos's data mill – a recalcitrant value pump inflating the phallic glass and steel totems of the 1%. To afford her schooling on Marx's political economy, she worked minimum-hour contracts in warehouses in the North of England. They were vast labyrinths, built flat and of less shiny but fundamentally the same stuff as the Big Dicks', around which the hands ran, following the boxes of sold goods. The cardboard burned her eczema and the vibrations from her location-tracking wristband reminded her that she dropped more than skin cells into the open hands of her employer when she'd handed over her passport.

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In 2024 she discovered the power of accessory and resolved to lose herself in phantasmagoria. She plucked from the disinterested gloss of a fashion rag, a clear Perspex bustle – Casey Cadwallader for Thierry Mugler – worn to hold up cut-outs from a scoop waisted hobble skirt. She took small rejuvenating steps across the apartment's parquet floors, enjoying the bash of pelvis against plastic. The fantasy silhouette came with friction and she realised that dreams being born felt very much like nothing at all. It was only when she looked in the mirror that she saw she was in the wrong delusion and in the scramble to disrobe, she tripped and fell, cracking a nail on her clocky hip bone.

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1831 was a year of rest and relaxation, and with more energy she managed to write both a novel and short story, and get them published. Her agent had described them across a wide white table to two executives as 'realism with fantasy elements', which pissed her off because she'd not licensed him to comment in such a way that made her his wild ass, nakedly bucking on carpet tiles. Mercurial was her preferred description, because it was volatile and shapeshifting and you couldn't believe it was real when your teacher told you about it but it was, it was really metal. The meeting ended in a non-verbal outburst, tears stained and nearly ruined her stoic reputation but she managed to re-outfit the whole affair as Byronic. But in stretching her skin across this new frame, she knew that each specimen pin marked her hide with the painful truth that she fell short of society's ideal man. In being Real she'd made herself into someone else's fantasy.

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Twice, once in 1889 and again in 1995, she managed to hold of some black-market dog and guinea pig testicles and tried injecting their jellified insides under her skin. She didn't have the skill or courage to handle the large, subcutaneous needle, and the second time round it took her the length of both *Daydream* and *New Beginnings* and two magic brownies to finally stick the sharp in.

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It was 420 BC or 1909 and the Realist bought a large pair of scissors. All it took was one snip and she was left wondering what to do with the severed portion. Perhaps she should have also bought some glue.

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That night, the Realist has her first dream in a century. Divine visions were always in vogue somewhere, but what makes this one particularly special is the unique couplet of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* with a rollerblading Mariah Carey. Mariah's peige lips and nude eyeshadow produces a handsome escort to *Angelus's* snatched neutral garb. The two see her across the bar and like her vibe, but she resists their invitations. Even dreaming, the Realist is still firm: she doesn't want to exist only with angels and fantasies. She wants to be really here, and that means now too, suddenly she knows this is what she's been searching for all these years.

Mariah puts her pearlescent mouth against the Realist's ear. Two strands of hair attach themselves to the sticky lip paint. Mariah whispers 'often time can be bleak, *dahling*, so why choose to live in it?' Mariah's hair, unlike the Realist's, blows in a soft wind no one else can feel, her tresses flowing across historical eras. 'A storm blows in from paradise', the angel whispers conspiratorially, 'the true picture of the past flits by.' The angel's face is turned toward the Realist, away from the shoreline where she had been heading before being interrupted by these two butterflies. Somehow *Angelus* is being pulled toward that Rosy fingered Dawn, that rainbow horizon, even as neither his/her/their body nor the wind are oriented in that direction.

And the Realist remembered all the time she had spent with her face pushed up against the Real, trying so hard to swallow it. To accept it, and what's more, enjoy the taste. What a fool she had been! Now she knew that imagination didn't mean rejecting real life; fantasies were born when one rendezvoused with reality. She ground her ass against the Real instead, working her angelic fantasy into its suddenly forgiving contours. FUCK reality! Fuck being a fantasy! The Realist really stuck it in there.

And as he fucked, he thought he didn't need the glue after all. His own viscous anatomy had done the job, slapped the final touches. He couldn't fail, he hadn't failed – for there are no failed artworks, only unfinished ones.