

2002

The Golem

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Recommended Citation

McGrann, Owen (2002) "The Golem," *Exile*: Vol. 48 : No. 1 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol48/iss1/7>

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The Golem

What? Yes, yes I'm fine. Of course I'm okay, thank you very much. Don't look at me that way! I don't want your sympathy. Who the hell do you think I am? Ah yes! I can see from the look in your eyes. Yes, sir, you are indeed a better man than I! Forgive me for speaking to such a distinguished, cultured man such as yourself in this terse tone. I shall never forgive myself.

You think you understand, do you? Well, sir, you don't understand a goddamn thing. Oh, I'm sure you think you do – but that is only proof that you are fooling yourself. Yes, you – you are a master of self deception; you just have that look. I know, I know, I'm not treating you fairly. I should be grateful that you're here... you are a good person because you're here. That's the myth, right? Dress properly, have a firm handshake, come here once a month, go back out into the world and you can do anything. You are a shining beacon of humanity! Convenient, isn't it?

So... let me guess, you want to hear my life story? That would be nice, would it? I told you before: no matter how many words I say, it is impossible for you to have any clue what my life is like, how I feel every morning when I wake up...the pang of anger when people like you stop by. I could tell you all this, but you will take my words and make them mean whatever the hell you want them to mean. Why the hell should I waste my time on you? I know, I know: you're only trying to help. Let me try to make this perfectly clear – I don't care how much you want to help or how much you think you are helping – I don't want it. It's people like you that make this so hard for me; every fucking day you show up and make me relive this horror you like to call life.

Hahah! You're all so predictable! Becoming angry with my so abusive and unfair words, you feel insulted and leave in a fit of rage. That's what you were going to do, wasn't it? Wasn't it?! Yes, nod your head slowly. I thought so. I wanted you to leave? No – I *want* you to leave – in the present tense. But you and I both know that you won't be leaving anytime soon. You feel that you have to prove yourself and your good intentions and you won't leave until I ask you to stay. It always goes like that.

Are you going to start up with those questions again already? Alright, then. My name is Neil. No, my last name doesn't matter; I'm Neil. I'm nineteen years old, I have two parents, one sister, and a dog I haven't seen for over a year. I've been in the hospital for about a year – the walls are an extremely light gray (it is hard to tell due to the terrible lighting), the couch is apparently uncomfortable, the pot of flowers by the window never changes (the flowers cycle in and out, but always the same type, color, and number), the volume up button on the television doesn't work, and the nurse on the day shift has only one eye (which is why, I'm convinced, she's so mean). No, I don't like it here. Would you? I have lung cancer and a five percent chance of surviving the next two months. Two years ago they told me I wouldn't live through the year; a year ago they told me I had a week to live. They could tell me I had five minutes to live and I'd spit in their faces for teasing me like that. Two years ago....

You're too much, man. Heh. The look on your face – it's classic! The slightly bitten lip, the downturned eyebrow and the wide eyes. You *almost* look like you actually

care! But you do? Yes, of course you do – how silly of me! After a while you all look the same, you sound the same, you feel the same. And you all insist you care to the point of looking absurd. Tell me – what does it feel like to be a clown? I always used to be afraid of clowns... now I just feel sorry that they have to wear a mask to face the world. Paint on my smile! I've got my handshake!

Okay, I'll stop "abusing" you, for now anyway. We can come back to your commercial sometime later. You're here for yourself, after all. We may as well talk about you. Or maybe I *have* been talking about you this whole time! Too much to take in at once? Anyway, two years ago I began to have trouble breathing. I ignored it for a month or so, figuring it would just somehow go away. Eventually I told my mother, who had me wait another week or so before finally getting me a doctor's appointment. "Well, Neil, I'm not quite sure what's wrong; how 'bout you give it a week and come back again if it's still bothering you." Three days later my lung collapsed when I was walking back from our mailbox. I crumpled on the sprinkler-wet grass and read, "Today is your lucky day! You could be the winner of millions!" Laughing probably only hurt my lungs more.

I woke up in the hospital. It was like one of those television movies. I came to with about five people standing above me looking down with faces kind of like the one you just had, except... genuine. I could see their mouths move, looking back and forth as though they were all engaged in some coherent conversation. They looked at me and I was going to reply, but as I went to take a breath I half choked (I couldn't really choke) and felt like my eyes were about to burst out of my head. I was on a respirator. For another minute I laid there watching everyone hovering over me, muted and in slow motion, and passed out.

In my right lung I had developed large-cell undifferentiated carcinoma. Which basically means I was – sorry: *am* – fucked. The tumor was spreading rapidly and the doctors recommended that they take out the lobe on the right lung where the cancer was growing. I awoke again and felt like I'd just been run over by a tank. In the process of the lobectomy, the surgeon had to cut through several of my ribs to reach the lung; it was as if my entire body was in shock and screamed out in anger as soon as I opened my eyes.

Around this time people stopped telling me things. Everywhere I looked my family and friends and doctors were whispering to each other. Topics of conversation almost always rested on completely flippant things. Do you have any idea how frustrating it is when you just want get up and live and people keep you sedated with things only peripherally related to your life? Of course you don't – you've been sedated your entire life. How do you wake up from a dream when you don't even know you're dreaming? I'm being unfair again? I guess Nuremberg was unfair from some people's perspectives. But I'll try to stop picking on you; it's more fun when you don't realize anyway.

It took me a month or so to recover from the surgery. When the ribs had finally healed and it wasn't terribly painful to breathe anymore, they told me that the cancer had spread beyond the lobe they removed. I was going to have to have some type of invasive treatment again. The type of cancer I had grew and spread extremely quickly and had moved both up into my esophagus and down to the lower lobes of my right lung. They scurried around me for a few days like ants before the doctor finally told me my options. I could have the rest of my right lung removed and have radiation therapy on my esophagus; I could undergo chemotherapy; or I could be subjected to all out radiation therapy.

None of the options had anything higher than a 50% survival rate – and even after the surgery I was told I probably wouldn't live more than five years. After careful consideration and five days of thinking about it, I asked that all treatment be terminated. Of course, this greatly surprised and outraged my doctor. "How am I supposed to help you if you won't even let me do my job? I think we'd better sit down again so I can better help you understand the situation! I don't think you know what you're saying...." I did, naturally, which was why he had to go to my parents after he talked to me again. My parents (my father, mostly) were surprised by my decision, and they disagreed with me. Deeming me unable to come to a rational decision due to my pain, they authorized my treatment for me (I was only seventeen). Do you know what it's like to feel like you lost your father? I kept looking for him, but the father I loved disappeared. Until then I always thought part of freedom was the right to make any choice, even if it was "wrong." Now I know better. You probably can't even conceive what a "wrong" choice is, can you?

For a while I was angry when they decided to remove the rest of my lung. There was a period where I thought about killing people or myself or doing something violent – for an uncreative person violence is often the only recourse to growing madness. I sat in my bed for the days leading to my surgery thinking of ways I could impale my doctor or the nurse or the random guy like you who showed up. Why not, right? What are they going to do, kill me? Ha! Let them try! It was what I wanted anyway! I looked into the dark, inexpressive eyes of my doctor as he stood by my bed and felt only anger until the moment I realized the only difference between he and I was that he was ignorant about himself and I was not. After that I only felt sorry for him.

For the second time in six months I woke up feeling like I had done twelve rounds with Mohammed Ali. My parents beamed with pride that I was "courageous enough to fight through all of this" and not give in to the attractiveness of rejecting the wonderful life they had preserved for me. Everything was naturally going to be wonderful. How could it be otherwise? They talked about going on vacation and going to parks and museums, and me going back to school.

I would have laughed, but laughing hurt too much. There is nothing worse than not being able to laugh.

Was the surgery successful? Do you have any of that grey matter between your ears? No, the surgery was not successful! Why the hell would I still be lying here if the surgery had been successful? Besides, they still had to rip my throat apart with radiation before the cancer was gone. The pneumonectomy only got rid of the cancer that spread down. It took two months for my chest and body to heal enough that the doctors felt safe in starting the radiation therapy. Jesus – and I thought them taking out my lung hurt!

What did it feel like? Have you ever smoked? Yeah? Okay – imagine this: your entire throat lining has been cut up and down with razors. Someone just covered all the open wounds with rock salt and you are inhaling a strange mixture of paint fumes and tiny shards of glass. Whenever you wish to breathe heavily (which is doubly hard because your entire right lung has disappeared) the throat god is angered and makes you wheeze, only making you hurt more. And then you have people all around you telling you how brave you are and how good you look. How much good this radiation is doing for you. One day you decide that you want to move your leg around a little. As you try to move the withered limb you realize that you can't move it. The leg muscles had atrophied.

Soon you start believing people who say that life isn't worth it. That life has no meaning, God is impossible, and, naturally, that your life is ultimately a waste of your time and precious energy. Why do you believe this? Because you live it and are allowed to see nothing but this never ending cycle of pain, disappointment, unfairness, and paternalism. How was I in a paternalistic situation? Because I simply wanted to die in peace and I was forced to become what *they* thought was best for me.

Shortly after the radiation therapy was completed I turned eighteen. I couldn't talk. They came to me and told me that the cancer had spread again. While I was recovering from the pneumonectomy the tumor in my esophagus had spread down into my left lung. Despite my deteriorating condition, they said, the best course of action would be to start me on chemotherapy right away. I took a piece of paper and in my now atrocious handwriting scribbled: **I AM GOING HOME NOW!**

My doctor tried to fight me again. He had a psychologist come in to test my mental sanity – I was perfectly sane, of course. After waiting a few weeks for my throat to recover, I signed myself out of the hospital. My parents, who were now much more understanding of my decision, and I headed to Lake George in upstate New York for a month. It was September and just starting to cool down. I had almost forgotten what trees looked like...I barely even remembered the sky. The sky is always *becoming* – that is what is so beautiful about it. A rock, a building – they *are*; the sky – you never see the same sky twice! I watched as the leaves on the trees just started turning color; I watched the people running around and felt no envy any longer. Mostly, I finally lived again.

But you – you can't have any idea what I'm talking about, can you? I'm just wasting my (hard-fought) breath on you, aren't I? You've sat there and listened to me for the last few minutes, and your expression hasn't changed once. It's still that stupid, pensive, sad look that doesn't mean anything. For christ's sake man, don't be sad for me! (I know you're not, and you're just pretending to be to further your own concept of your beneficence – but I'll play along!) Oh how fun this all isn't....

Being out by the lake was the most *real* experience I've ever had. I sat in my wheelchair, unable to do what everyone around me was doing (a constant reminder of my illness) and yet I have never been happier in my entire life. I was once again, like the sky, constantly becoming myself, gratefully forging my life. How liberating it was to be free of the unmoving and eternal creature I was forced to be in the hospital! Even if I died in a minute, that genuine freedom (which I knew was genuine because I finally knew what freedom was) was enough to fill my soul for eternity. I don't need inhalants that will coat my lungs (well – what's left of them) with a layer of tar, I don't need a rusty piece of metal thrust into my skin to load me up on chemicals, I don't need constant pleasure. All I have to do is think back and remember the sky – the pink-orange sky at dusk that lazily fades into the blackness of night, *becoming*. And that is enough.

Keep nodding your head, man. Keep thinking you understand, that you have even an inkling of what I feel. It will make you feel better, and, whether you realize it or not, that's all I'm worried about right now anyway. So tell me: do you always look people in the eyes like you look in mine? That inspires confidence, you know? Well, not in me, anyway, but you are perfectly aware of what it is supposed to do. I bet when you walk your head is always held proudly up above your shoulders as you march along, rank and file? Yes, of course it is. Of course it is.... And he tries to explain himself once again! I

thought you brighter than that. You disappoint, me Mr.? Adam Nemo? Nemo, Adam Nemo. Yes. That's not your real name is it? Haha! Beware of the sirens! They will get you yet! Hah! And the sirens are here constantly, coming in and out. You are a brave man... or very dumb.

It's really inconsequential anyway. Shall we get this over with? I think you want to leave as badly as I want you to leave. But first! – first you must have your moment of truth, your epiphany! So, kind sir – Mr. Nemo! – shall we move along? Indeed, I shall guide you through the rocks!

The last week up at the lake I again became very ill. I had a very difficult time getting enough oxygen into my body. My family rushed me home to Pittsburgh and immediately took me to the hospital. The doctors were able to get my body stabilized and let me go to an assisted living home instead of staying in this wretched place. I stayed there for the remainder of the winter and got along adequately, I guess. But how well could I really expect to do?

That spring I began having heart pains. The cancer had spread – by now this was no shock – down into my left lung and the tumor was pressing against my heart. This time, no operation or radiation or chemotherapy was going to save me. The doctors didn't even try to convince me to undergo treatment. And so here I am, months later waiting to pass away. If it weren't for the pain and the need for pain medication I wouldn't be here now – I'd be up at the lake or out in the woods or somewhere that recognizes that change is the fundamental reality of life...not this eternal, stale room where the volume up button never works and my lungs will never get better. But it's okay; I still have my happiness; I still have my sky.

No, you don't know what it's like, and if you think you do, you have no idea, man... no idea. Oh... really?.... I didn't know....

--Owen McGrann '03