
<http://somatosphere.net/2018/10/time-regained.html>

Time, Regained

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By Kevin Karpiak

The following is taken from the forthcoming book, The Police Against Itself: Reassembling French Liberalism “After the Social,” an ethnography of French police administrative reform, the vicissitudes of public life, and the ethical tensions which animate both, especially around questions of violence. This section, an interlude entitled “Time, Regained,” offers a rumination on a particular tapestry of violence and belonging entailed in a central tool of contemporary French policing: the service arm, or handgun.

In French the verb for “to shoot,” as in “to shoot a gun,” is *tirer*. It is perhaps most commonly translated as “to pull,” but shares a more direct etymological root with the English word “to tear”. It can mean “to train,” “to educate,” “to draw,” “to print,” “to design.” It can also mean “to take, to take in, or to extract” and is often sexual in connotation. One “tears” off of a cigarette, a woman’s odor, or various other elements of the male person. This is different, but related to, the other word that could be translated as “tear” in English: *dechirer*, as in “Elle déchire sa race.” This could be translated as “She’s hot!” or “She’s sexy!” but literally means “She tears apart, or away from, her roots (or her race).” The suggestion here is that, in doing so, she—or it, or even sometimes he—has transcended and surpassed the banal context of her milieu into something remarkably transcendent.

I “tore” for the first time in the Police Academy at Saint-Malo, but that happened some time after our story here.

###

On the night of Thursday, September 30th 2004, some young police officers decided to hold a party in their apartment in the 18tharrondissement of Paris. The building, mainly occupied by the 20-something unmarried officers who make up the majority of the police force in the *Île-de-France* region, was located just down the street from the local station. For what it’s worth, it was also not far from where I would one day live, although that was a bit into the future.

The party was still going on, in some form, into the early hours of the morning on Friday. The news reports would later make special mention of

the fact that the company was of mixed sex. Some time before 8am, Fabio, a 26 year-old *gardien de la paix*, shot his colleague Laurent, of the same age, in the chest with his service weapon. This was, by all accounts, a traumatic event. After seeing his friend lying on the ground shot, and most likely dead, Fabio pointed the gun at his own head and killed himself. All the witnesses present agreed that the initial shot was an accident. Including Laurent, who it turns out was not killed by the gunshot as Fabio so fatefully feared. Laurent tried to alert the paramedics as they carried him out of the building. His broken thorax refusing to vibrate the air with sufficient force to make an audible sound, he mouthed the words: "Accident. It was an accident." This fact was also widely reported in the local newspapers; as was the insistence by those present, and the detectives in charge of the case, that, above-all, this was a "private affair" and not a police action

Afterwards, those same newspapers would have very few details of what that night meant for the rest of Laurent's life, Fabio's remaining family, or any of the other people present on scene. The incident did serve as a minor touchstone in a larger debate about the regulation of officer's service arms; about how they should be regulated and surveilled, and above all over whether their possession should be limited to on-duty officers (who should duly check them into locked boxes in the station when going off duty, as per official regulation) or if, as some union representatives argued, that police were police "24/7," with all the dangers and responsibilities the profession brought with it, and should therefore have access to the tools of their trade accordingly. If the particular issue has been resolved administratively, the broader tension remains. It's there at the heart of what "police" means today in France; in negotiations over its role in the larger social fabric and, most especially about the regulation of its tools of violence in constructing that social fabric itself.

###

That same night, or whatever one calls 5 o'clock AM when it's serving as the end and not the beginning of something, Anabella Ruiz showed her friends, who are also her customers, out the door of her bar. This was three hours after she was legally bound to close for the night and less than two before the morning crowd would begin trickling in. Too tired to walk home, she curled up on the floor behind the counter, the only place in her tiny bar invisible through the wall of glass that served as its exterior wall, and slept.

Also that night, I developed a phlegmy cough, most likely owing its origins to the seasonal changes in ambient pollen and spore counts, but no doubt aggravated by the thick cloud of cigarette smoke that served as part of the

furniture in Ana's bar. In any case, the combination led to an uneasy sleep, and I had a nightmare. I was sleeping in a big bed, the type with tall bed posts. Only there were many beds. And they were stacking on top of each other. Not one on top of the other, which would have crushed me, but from below, so that my bed kept rising and rising. I remember being frightened. To look down overwhelmed me with a sense of vertigo. I woke in an aching sweat. I turned on my side to see my open laptop, the iTunes screensaver automatically generating geometric tapestries. I pressed "randomize" on a carefully prepared playlist and settled back to sleep.

###

The next morning I was back in Ana's bar learning about Fabio and Laurent in the pages of *Le Parisien*, the daily rag that sits on every *comptoir* in the city—and thus regularly serves as a crucible of public debate, despite being less well-known overseas than its more highbrow cousins. Mano Chao's multilingual rap-reggae album *Desaparecido* played over the cafe's stereo, soaking into the atmosphere and offering a subtle, though legible, signal to those who entered as to the political commitments the proprietor was likely to foster in such public discussions.

I often used Ana's bar as a kind of staging ground for my ethnographic endeavors—as a way to polish my colloquial French and to foster the kind of chance encounters that serve as the foundation of anthropological fieldwork. But when business was slow, as it was throughout much of the day in the predominantly business-oriented neighborhood around La Madeleine, we would keep each other company over a game of Backgammon set up at a table in the back corner. I was still rather new to the game, but I was a willing student and Ana a committed, if not necessarily nurturing, teacher.

"Double fours! He rolls double fours again! Incredible," she complained to no one in particular, "It's impossible. It's impossible to play against you because of your dumb luck. You have too much luck."

"Not true," I smirked, knowing very well that it was true, "it's all skill and a cunning strategy on my part."

"No, you have all the luck. It's impossible to play like that: when one person has all the luck."

In French, there are two words that could plausibly be translated as "luck". One, the masculine word *hasard*, like its English cousin "hazard" is derived through Arabic from the Persian and Turkish word for "dice". It would thus be a plausible choice in this context. However, Ana chose

another word for her accusations: *la chance*, and with it the connotation of a beneficent and feminine Providence acting on my part in order to thwart her board gaming. This is, of course, beyond the word “to play” itself, *jouer*, which forms the foundation of the word, *jouissance*, “to orgasm.”

“You know, Kevin, we have a saying in French: Lucky in games, unlucky in love” she said out of the corner of her mouth, setting the pieces back onto the board.

“Not me, I have both,” I said, although we both knew that also wasn’t true.

Like the finite dispersion of Luck across the love-game axis, there is another French tradition that holds that you must maintain eye contact while clinging glasses during a toast, or else you will have seven years bad luck in sexual matters. How this happens, what substance connects the two events, remains unanswered. But as there is plenty of empirical evidence to support these claims, we made sure to adhere to Luck’s demands as we toasted each other once more before starting again.

“Another?” she asked, before looking up to greet a walk-in customer.

As she got up from her seat, I returned to the paper. Manu Chao sang over the stereo speakers:

Je ne t’aime plus

Mon amour

Je ne t’aime plus

Tous les jours

Parfois j’aimerais mourir...^[1]

I knew that when business picked up, there would be no time to change the album, leaving it to repeat endlessly for hours. This annoyed me and I grew to hate every song. Re-reading Laurent and Fabio’s story, I imagined the service weapon as a grand instrument in a kind of cosmic game of roulette.

During the rush Richard, an Englishman who worked at one of the banks in the area, came in. He noticed the game board which, with the pieces set up at a table with an empty chair, must have seemed an invitation. I

did not refuse.

“Do you know how to play?” he asked.

“Not really,” I mostly told the truth.

“I used to play a lot. I learned in Greece, when I was there. You can play for money there. The trick is to know the probabilities...” He proceeded to explain the rules of chance to me, as well as how to manipulate them for my own—potentially fiduciary—gain, and I listened. It was my first loss of the day.

###

[As Ian Hacking has shown](#), “probability” emerged as a key concept—metaphysically, epistemologically, logically, and ethically—over the course of the long 19th century. The process not only profoundly shaped how we think about, feel about, and react to each other but also became the basis for public reason and governance. One central tool in the strategies of governance that emerged during this time was the discovery of a new dimension of lived experience: the Social. This undiscovered dimension seemed to act according to its own regular—if unperceived—regularities, or “laws,” which served as both a material limit on the power of governance and a site for its intervention. No sovereign, no matter how powerful, could outlaw suicide and expect total compliance; but it was discovered that various administrative programs targeted at “social” conditions could modify its relative rate. As a style of governance, this embodied a very different logic. It replaced a canvas of linear Newtonian temporality of cause and effect, emanating from the Sovereign as the ultimate cause, with an under-determined field of enmeshed probabilities. Recognizing that we were social beings, in this sense, implied a metaphysical understanding that we exist in a sea of Chance; a Chance that itself could be the object of administrative intervention into our lives.

Key to this story was, first, the *notion* and, secondly, the *institution*, of police. From the early modern period right up to the 19th century, the word “police” had an expansive meaning. It encompassed a grander scope of activities and was occupied with a wider array of concerns—from the cleanliness of streets to the general state of health to the maintenance of weight and measures to the price of bread—so that to describe a city as “well-policed” meant to say that it was well-administered, or to talk of “the police” in general meant to talk of the general welfare, happiness or even beauty. Throughout the course of the long Social century, that meaning narrowed and shifted towards what we generally think of the term today: “police” meaning a definite institution—or uniformed members of the

organization— with the special warrant to make use of physical violence in the name of the State. That shift in meaning was neither random nor unrelated to the rise of The Social as a domain of governmental intervention. As good, liberal, rightfully-limited government increasingly meant the administration of Social conditions—a practice understood to be less interventionist, more respectful of individual liberties and human nature, and less coercively violent—the “remainder” or “excess,” the unfortunate and more spectacular physical violence still practically necessary for the maintenance of a certain order, became the dirty business of the “police,” now understood as a separate institution. The classic version of the Social under liberal governance was made possible and revolved around this distinction. In this formulation ‘police’ became recognizable only in its negative sense—in a way antithetical to the earlier conception of the term—as an unfortunate, even if sometimes necessary, form of intervention that would ideally be avoided or extinguished altogether.

###

When I finally “tore” at the police academy it was a social event.

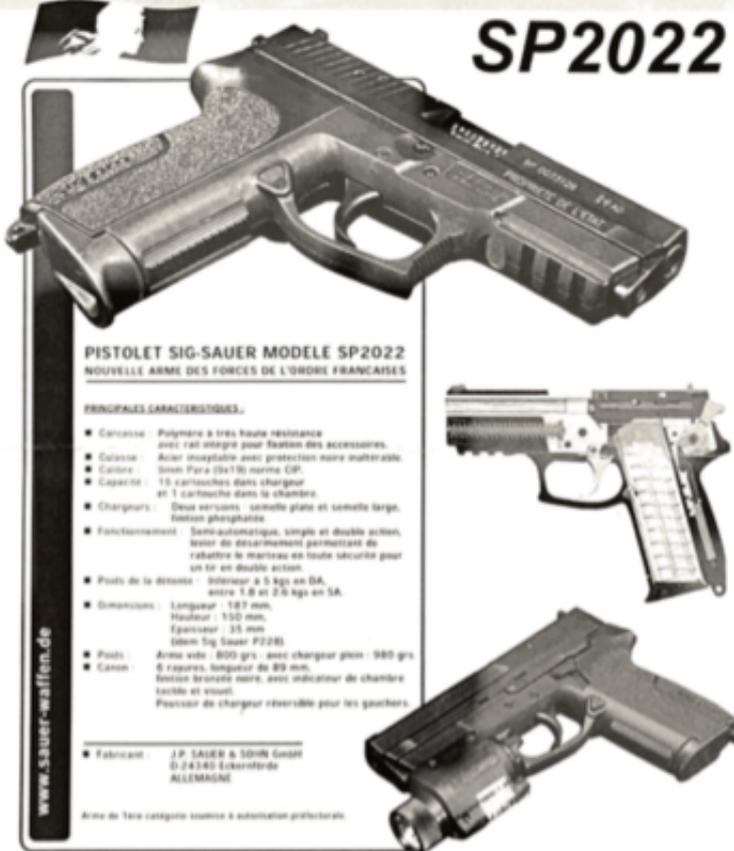
By that time I had been living at the Academy a short while; short enough that my liminal existence, moving back and forth between groups—entry-level cadets, lifelong teachers, even the highest administrators—still caused a mix of anxiety and intrigue; long enough that I, personally, had been deemed harmless. The combination left me everyone’s perfect target for a mostly good-natured form of mockery.

By the time I was invited by the instructor to take target practice, even the entry level cadets had had significant practice with their arms. It was a special day, however. Commandant Batôn, the head of the Academy himself, was in the shooting range testing out the new Sig Sauer SP2022 pistols that were soon to become standard issue. This transition was part of a general reassessment of the policing toolkit happening under then Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy—a process that extended from the physical tools of street policing to bureaucratic tools for assessing and motivating individual officers to new legal objects and motives.

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“The new handgun of the French police” (Personal archive)

The argument for the SP2022 in particular, over the previous revolver-style weapon used by officers, was tied to a re-imagining of the violent police encounter itself. The older, revolver-style weapon, stuck out to some degree off of an officer's hip in order to accommodate the wide carriage of the weapon. In encounters of close proximity, with bodies enmeshed in physical struggle, such weapons could easily be removed from an officer's holster and used against him. One solution to this problem was to introduce metal wires connecting the weapon to the service belt of the officer. This prevented the weapon from being taken away completely, however, it did not completely remove the potential to have the weapon used against the officer. Plus the wires themselves had the unfortunate tendency to get tangled, hindering any graceful use. In contrast the SP2022 had a relatively narrow carriage, causing it to sit much more snugly against an officer's body in a holster designed so as to enable its removal from an angle only possible for someone wearing it.

These might seem like arcane details, but such technical specifics are capable of encapsulating general profundities as well. Gun violence was imagined as a central, if not altogether frequent, component of policing. And the nature of that violence was imagined to be changing: it was newly conceived as intimate, corporeal, proximate. In turn, the changing nature of violence within the social fabric required a change in what it might mean to be and to do police.

All this hung in the air that day—somewhere in the background along with the general mix of sexual tension and boredom one would expect from the highly charged, confined population of teenagers and young adults that made up the student body—when Bisson, the arms instructor, turned to me with a wry smile but eyes fixed on the Commandant.

“Kevin, would you like to tear?” he asked. I followed his eyes to the Commandant, who was offering me his weapon. There had obviously been some discussion.

“Kevin’s going to tear?” perked Eric, a ferret-faced teenager who served as an approximation of the class clown. At this, the class of around 20 cadets transformed their low murmur to an ambient whisper as they gathered around me, forming into a tight circle that also managed to allow a modicum of personal space.

My eyes, having followed Bisson’s, were still on the Commandant. He directed his to me, “If you’d like.”

I had never shot before or, frankly, ever given it much thought either way. Perhaps for this reason, I was suddenly overrun by a strange cocktail of emotions: attraction mixed with revulsion, forming what could only be described as titillation, followed by a swirl of excitement and hesitation as I realized what was going to happen. And everyone knew it was going happen, even before I answered affirmatively.

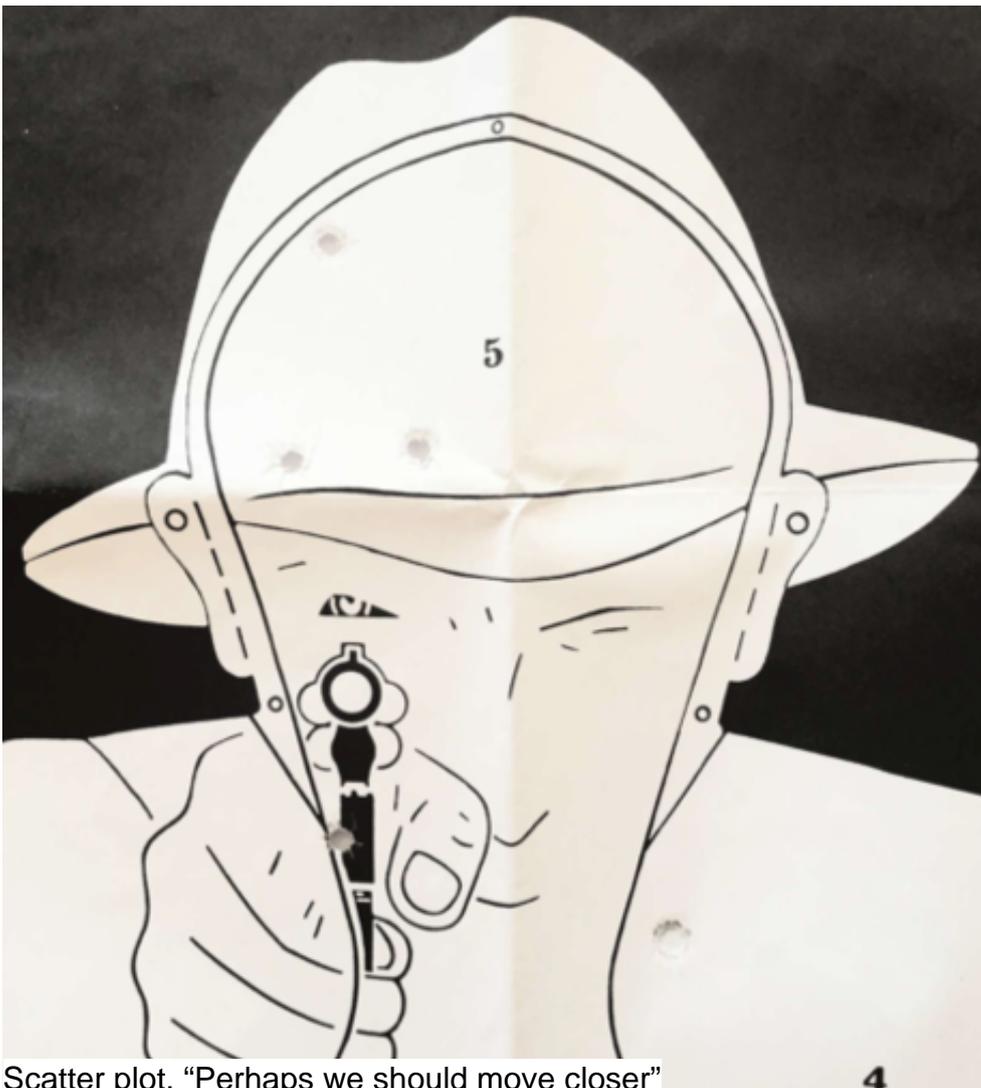
When I did, the Field Instructor and Commandant set into motion. Moving not overly quickly, but directly and with practice. Batôn set to reloading the gun while Bisson retrieved a bullet proof vest that was hanging on the wall. As he placed it over my head I could feel its weight offering a reassuring comfort around my torso, like a firm friendly hug.

“We wear the vests for habit,” Bisson spoke into my ear, “That’s the goal of tearing: to create some habits and eliminate others, through repetition. We always wear the vests because we should always have them on in a real situation, but we don’t always shoot from the same row because our location will be different. We try to repeat what we did well, what had good results, and avoid what will not. Some things are to repeat,

other things are not to repeat. Repetition creates an ideal; non-repetition means it goes away.”

One would imagine his discourse would make me feel very much like a Pavlovian dog. It did not. Instead, I felt like a transparency sheet. Or rather, a stack of transparency sheets layered on top of each other, each individually consisting of a random scatter shot of plot points; together illuminating an otherwise hidden tendency finding meaning not in depth but in form given shape through simultaneous co-existence. The goal here was to shape those tendencies, to emphasize and select for specific elements of that hidden reality. Learning to police was, in part, learning oneself to be a social being.

The Commandant handed the gun to Bisson, who placed it into my hands. Its solid weight, again, offering surprising reassurance. Bisson placed his strong hands around mine. He may have been looking in my eyes, but I was looking at our hands.



Scatter plot, “Perhaps we should move closer”

“No, don’t hold it like that,” he said calmly, “if your second hand is too high it will force the barrel down. Even before, before you take it out, be in position. Don’t lose time getting into position afterward, *gain* time.”

Stepping back, he called out for me to retake the position, “Do it again.”

I did. And again. And again. All the while, eyes upon me. More quiet.

“Look straight ahead, not down. Repeat!”

I did.

“Listen,” he said to me, returning physically closer, “part of this is learning to be honest with yourself; to know when you’ve fucked up or when all is not right. If you’re stressed. If you’re tired. If your hands are shaking. Take your hands down. No problem.”

He pointed to me hands, “...As long as your finger is off the trigger. Again!”

I still hadn’t torn. But I was feeling very ready. He moved in closer to me still, his hands on my arms.

“I surprise myself, still, when I tear,” he confessed. “You never know the exact moment it’s coming. Here, hold your wrist like a firm handshake.” He grabbed my wrists in his hands, demonstrating the necessary force, then moved my arms up. His close shaven face moved closer to my own, aligning our perspective as close as possible. His cologne, understated but present, offered a slight pique to the air around us. I could feel, but not smell, his warm breath. When he was comfortable with what he saw he backed away, still continuing the lesson, “Squeeze, like it’s an orange or a raw egg. Your finger should move in a constant, smooth motion.”

I tore. Then I tore again. And then again a third time. I knew because I felt it throughout my body. I certainly didn’t control it. One could barely say I guided it. I smelled it. I don’t remember thinking anything.

I put the gun down and Bisson inspected the distribution of holes that had appeared in the paper target silhouette. I’d like to be able to say that he poured over the results as if they were tea leaves, but the prognosis was much more immediate. “Perhaps we should move up a bit,” he suggested.

###

Later that day I found myself in the academy's bar, writing notes into my notebook during Happy Hour. While the school itself was a converted military base, the bar had been a later addition. Modeled to look like any neighborhood *bistro du coin*, its purpose was to keep the cadets on campus during off hours—and away from the more public nightlife of the tourists down the road in the old town area. It became a de facto social hub—cheap shots of espresso passing over the counter throughout the day and subsidy-priced Amstel after 5pm.

It was after 5, and I was consuming appropriately as I re-wrote my field notes for the day. Or I was mostly writing, at least. When I got stuck, or needed a pause, or got bored, or just wanted to stop, I would scan aimlessly over the crowd. I would take in that ambiance as much as any other ethnographic data, making notes both mental and actual on the small interactions I saw: the bodily demeanor of those around me, their topics of conversation, the gendered divisions of space and the mechanisms of their traversal.

That's why I saw her coming slowly but deliberately across the room towards me well before she got there. "What are you writing, Kevin?" asked Laëtitia, a young cadet I had met briefly a few days before.

"Nothing. My observations for the day. I like to write them down as best I can before I forget."

"Do you write down everything?"

"I try."

"Even when you're in meetings with the officers?" she asked, turning her big dark eyes to me.

"Well, yes... And when I'm with the cadets. And just in general. I'm trying to get a sense of life here..."

"Do they ever say anything about me?"

"Excuse me?" I stumbled, then recovered, "No. No I haven't heard them talk about you at all."

"Would you tell me if they did?" her eyes narrowed.

I paused again, before offering the truth. "No."

"Then what do they talk about?"

“Boring things mostly. Today there were assessment meetings to schedule...”

Thankfully several other cadets wandered over to our table.

“Laëtitia, are you hitting on Kevin?” teased Eric. I’m sure my face went from a solid red to a glowing scarlet.

“Stop, it’s not like that. We’re just having interesting conversation. We don’t often get visitors, you know, and a foreigner on top of it!” The crowd was not convinced and, after a few more rounds of ribbing, Laëtitia made as quick an exit as decorum would allow.

“If you’re really doing research, Kevin, you should look into why they bust our asses so much,” joked Sara, one of the older cadets. Like many cadets, Sara had left her small town in order to join the police. The national system had taken her from her hometown in the North of France and deposited her here on the banks of the English Channel. In a few months, when she would receive her first post, that same system would deposit her who-knows-where from who-knows-how-long. Most likely somewhere in the less ideal peripheries of Paris, where most open posts were located.

“To be a police officer you need to do *this*. To be a police officer you need to do *that*,” she continued in a mocking voice. “Always. Even the weekends. I have a kid, you know” she continued, running her hands through her short cropped blond hair, “and a husband. I left them back home, for this. So I could get a good job. But here all they do is bust our ass.”

Then, offering her own addition to the laundry list of commands, “To be a police officer you should love no one.”

###

Love, Chance, and their meaning were something of great concern to many people I met during my years in Paris. Perhaps I should be more specific than to say “concern.” These were things that felt like they should—needed—to go together. But the nature of their connection was an open question.

One lazy summer day, many months after I tore, when I had in fact moved much closer to Fabio’s old apartment, I happened onto the subject over a round of crisp beer with Laurent, one of the artists who frequented the neighborhood. In a particularly love-bitter mood, I had been mocking the idea of a grand fate-ordained chivalric romance.

"Listen, Kevin, I understand. That stuff is nuts. But still, when you truly love, you'll know. I learned when I had my daughter."

"What does she have to do with it?" I asked, feeling a shift in the conversation.

"Have you ever heard of synchronicity, Kevin?"

"Like the song by The Police?"

"Yes," a brief look of confusion, or shock, shifted into a gentle smile, "like The Police."

"I don't believe in Chance, or Hazard, but I do believe in Synchronicity," he offered. Then, taking in my skeptical eyebrow, he tried again.

"When my daughter was born I was young. I was stupid. I didn't love anybody. But when you hold someone like that, in your arms, you learn. One day you'll understand."

I did not, yet. "Chance, Destiny, Fate, Synchronicity. What's the difference?"

"I don't know," he paused, "When she was born, I held her and felt something like I've never felt. Afterwards, I went to the supermarket, to get some things for her mother, and a song came on over the speakers with her name. She had just been born, I had just held her, and here was her name. It's a stupid thing, but I felt it, and now I know. I'll never love anyone else like that. Not her mother, not my girlfriend."

"But isn't that just a coincidence?" I argued, putting my drink down dramatically on the countertop. "To make it *mean* something... That's too convenient. It's too wrapped up tight, too static. That isn't Love. That Isn't Life. Life is chaotic. That's Death." Then, creating a pregnant pause, I punctuated it with my best Existentialist smirk, "I prefer to Live."

Overhearing my soliloquy was Khalid, another artist who worked in the area, and a mutual friend. "Death is not static, Kevin. Death is a nomad, like my grandfather. I've been painting him." At this he pulled out a sketch he had been working on, as he would from time to time. The portrait consisted of a dark blue circle on a sepia background.

###

In her apologia, [On Beauty and Being Just](#), Elaine Scarry returns often to Proust. Among these turns, she finds a new wrinkle of wisdom in his fable

of a learned man who yawns at the mention of a new “good book” precisely because he has read too many of them. The term has come to stand—in a composite, abstract way—for all the “good books” he has read before; the memories of each layering upon each other and fading together. In so doing they lose for him any sense of their beauty, which only exists, argues Proust, in the particular. This loss, Scarry asserts, is not merely aesthetic but moral: it removes us from the world, from life, and from our ability to desire that what is Just be found there.

###

On the night of Sunday, Oct 17th, 2004, a police officer shot one of his friends in the mouth, killing him, at a local police station.

They had been on duty together that day at the Rennes-Paris St. Germain soccer match and had gone back to the commissariat to eat dinner together. They had, of course, had some drinks with this repose, a practice frowned upon but likely not uncommon.

Everyone concerned agreed that it had been an unfortunate accident, a fact I read about in the daily paper while leaning against the *comptoir*.

[Kevin Karpiak](#) is an Associate Professor in the Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminology Department of Eastern Michigan University. His research and teaching interests lie at the broad intersection between the social science of knowledge practices within political institutions and the anthropology of ethics. Specifically, he is interested in how changing strategies of policing and security are informed by practices of sociality. He founded and maintains a group blog on the anthropology of policing, called [Anthropoliteia](#) and serves as co-editor for the Cornell University Press monograph series [Police/Worlds: Studies in Security, Crime and Governance](#).

[1] I don't love you anymore / My Love / I don't love you anymore / Every Day / Sometimes I would like to die...

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