Kevin Prufer

When I was twenty years old and desperate and broke,
I worked part-time in a used bookstore in Middletown, CT.
I hated my job, hated the cramped store,
hated the paperbacks that came there as if to die

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and more than anything,
I wanted to write something lasting,
a novel I scrawled in notebooks called “Black Wing”
about a dark-haired girl, prized during the day for her beauty and intellect, who by night killed off poseurs, the ill-read, the clumsy-of-mind, the bombastic, thick-fingered, and mean.

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Somehow, through incompetence or charity, the young woman who owned the store never quite fired me

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though one morning, I found an old man at my place at the cash register.

Chandler Brossard
He wore a tight leather jacket, a turtleneck, a thick moustache, and when he saw me, he took off his glasses and set his book on the dust-speckled counter.

*This is Chandler Brossard,*
the owner told me.

*You’ll work with him now.*

He looked pale and sick.

+ It was meant to transcend mystery, it was meant to live in contradictions, to be existential and enigmatic—the dark-haired girl destroying what was not beautiful and the ugly, one-legged detective who pursued her, but could never apprehend her—

+ Chandler Brossard, thin-faced and coughing, Chandler Brossard tilted back in his chair, reading a book in the sun-lit dust motes, *What are you writing?* he asked me one day, and I closed my notebook. *Nothing,* I said, looking at what age had done to his hands—

+ He was, the owner told me, a famous writer once, but now he was dying. Chandler Brossard’s *We Walk In Darkness* grew yellow on the shelf.

    And he smelled like an old man, sweet
and thick,
    Vicks VapoRub and snuff
and mint—

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How the knife comes down, I thought,
typing away that night
    while one of my roommates
burned his fingers on a joint
    and the other
practiced his guitar—
    the knife comes down
in the flesh of the critic,
    in the sycophant, the vulgar,
and the room grew colder
because no one paid our bills—

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    and I wanted Chandler Brossard
to say something wise
    but he was just an old man.
And when I finally told him about “Black Wing”
the plot seemed suddenly
    contrived,
ugly truth pursuing beauty, beauty
making our foibles
    clear, the dark-haired girl
who posed the horrible bodies
    for the one-legged detective to discover—

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By then, I’d read one of Brossard’s novels
and found it full of squalor,
    familiar—
And he’d grown sicker, pale and unsteady, though he still walked from the hospital each morning and sat behind the counter selling paperbacks.

My boss didn’t know I’d been kicked out of my apartment, that when I couldn’t find a friend to put me up, I unrolled a sleeping bag in the bookstore

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and what I remember most about those sad days is lying on the floor among stacks of dying books, the sense of them rising above me in darkness. So many minds at work, so much captured thinking,

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while at his apartment, Chandler Brossard had a few months to live

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and I slipped into sleep, dreamed of dark-haired angels, angels of squalor, angels of anger and forgetfulness and strange mercy in the black air above my head, angels descending to smother me with beauty and ambition and paper wings—

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and even if the detective caught her, what then? Would he know something more about immortal beauty?
He would still be nothing,
a dying, childless old man
who had preserved a bit of himself in a book—

Immortality figured as the workings of a mind
caught in the sunlit trap
of prose—
how I wanted that to be true—

that sense of eternal light streaming
through store windows,
its fingers playing over my
face,
warm and gentle, the scent of books and dust—
how lovely to lie there without meaning or ambition,
how deathless—
and Chandler Brossard
standing over me,
kicking me gently awake
with his boot.