

AN ESSAY ON JIU JITSU
BY MARTIAL ARTIST AND POET
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HOW MUSSELS

PORTRAIT BY
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It is strange, but we are alive. Considering all the first and last reasons which create, conserve, and destroy the cosmos, we can only know the least. We awaken to a living perception of self and ourself without having been consulted about existence at all. Our eyes are blind to the circumstances which manufacture an ever revealing world, our ears are too tiny to hear the songs of vast Gods. And yet we exist. We are, we act, and we speak. We are present, and yet we don't know what this presence might mean: to be. We speak in omen and symbols, and we speak in vain. Each word marks the very loss of what is meant to be said, each wanting-to-speak is altering the ever-nameless into a world of language and form. What is left is an almost mystic notion, a silent closeness, a sound, a fluke, the dark warmth of blood rushed lips. We either engage in what Heidegger called the Chatter, or we verse. The aim of poetry is to confront the mystery, to name the unnameable, and to draw an allegory where we are wordlessly being spoken to. That precise artifice is the likewise holy and scary element residing in the chest of a human being, it's here where we encounter our only freedom, a moment which widens us and all our worlds into an everlasting present: By lightening up our futile path, a path we have no choice but to walk, we place ourselves for a short while in the very centre of the world.

Alongside our poetic endeavor, it's mainly the ⁵ training of martial arts which teaches us our imperfections. It humbles us blinded seekers who are constantly roaming but nowhere arrive. When the Neurobiologist Sam Harris wrote an essay about his experience with Jiu-Jitsu, he named his paper "The Pleasures of Drowning." Four words with which all poetic endeavor could be summoned as well. Among other things, Harris diagnoses a bad awakening as soon as we are confronted with somebody who is a versatile Jiu Jitsu player. The ignorant and uninformed will come face to face with an undeniable truth, shattering everything we dared to think about ourselves. A physical fight is free of illusions. Only facts remain. A fight is a soul crusher because it unveils every wrong notion we held about ourselves. It shows us as we truly are. Harris writes: "Training in BJJ (Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu) offers a powerful lens through which to examine some primary human concerns, truth versus delusion, self-knowledge, ethics and overcoming fear." Truth and delusion. Perhaps a long human life is only lived to be able to separate the one from the other and to speak, to act and to fight where most is learned about our inevitable life.

The first encounter with Jiu-Jitsu is the same for every human being. No other form of martial arts can generate such a powerful lesson in helplessness and humility. After my first sparring sessions, I literally crawled from the mats, not knowing what exactly had just happened to me. How in the world was it possible to not stand a chance at all? And even worse: Why wasn't I able to clearly define just what has happened and how, with which methods and body holds I was beaten? All my strength and my earnest will to survive were to no avail at all. I was severely not standing a chance against guys who physically were a lot weaker than myself, and I was lost for words to describe this experience. All these people, regardless of their size and strength, could control, dominate and choke me unconscious whenever and however they wanted. I was the drowning man from Sam Harris' essay. I was the man who got thrown into the deeper end of the pool without being able to swim. I drowned. This fatal inadequacy became an eye-opener and changed the course of my life. Getting to know the poetry of Octavio Paz, Nelly Sachs, Gottfried Benn, Paul Celan or Christoph Meckel, a new world had presented itself, a new form of being and thinking which offered an endless realm of possibilities, impossible to ignore any longer, and ready to be filled



with my own frames and verses. Jiu-Jitsu offered a similar experience. My downfall turned into an awakening. One thing became as sure as the heavens up above: I needed to learn and master what was so neatly being done to me. I needed to learn how to swim, I needed to be that man being tossed into deep waters again and again. I had to be at ease with being a conscious witness to my own drowning over and over again.

Jiu-Jitsu is a magic trick. For the untrained eye, it's absolutely impossible to retrace and comprehend the detailed work of power, the finesse and the thorough pressure on display. The smallest angles and the tiniest change of position can have a (literally) deadly effect. To know Jiu-Jitsu, you have to get in there yourself. There is just no other way. There is an undeniable fascination in the explosivity and athleticism of wrestlers, the fancy throw of a judoka, or the spectacular strike-and-kick combinations of Thai boxers who move as smoothly as leopards. Here, the art and skill are immediately recognisable. Even if you have never seen a boxing match, you are likely to be thrilled by the mere footwork of the likes of Vasyl Lomachenko – and if not thrilled, then surely astonished by that dance-like rhythm at the very least. Nothing of the sort exists in the Jiu-Jitsu cosmos. It lacks all the spectacle and the thrill. It isn't advisable to go to YouTube for inspiration, either. If you search for "Best (No-gi) Jiu-Jitsu Fights," you will witness two men or women tightly knotted into each other, sweating and robbing and rolling over the mats like in some kind of weird love-making. It lacks all the excitement and objective thrill of any of the other martial arts, and most of its movements and techniques fail to be evident or applaudable. If you don't know those techniques and invisible tricks, you are lost. And you have lost the fight before it even began. Defeat will become a reoccurring certainty, quitting a neverending fact. Every time before your arm, shoulder, or leg is broken, or you are choked unconscious, you are forced to acknowledge your defeat by tapping out. The Tap is the moment when the fight is over, and you start again. Every beginner will understand quickly: It will take a year or two just to learn the very rudimentary offensive and defensive techniques. All one has to focus on during that period is to drown a little slower and to be defeated less badly. Well, is there any better teaching for a vain being than to consciously expose itself to this

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terrible situation again and again? And to face all the demons which pop up into the bright day of your waking consciousness, demons one was happily unaware of? It took months before my post-training headaches and dreams subsided. Soon, I understood where they originated from. Something dramatic was happening. I experienced something which is eradicated in our safe, modern life: I experienced being killed by another living being.

Imagine being hunted down by another animal. And this animal succeeds. You got a gorilla on your back. A bear grabbing your neck. A boa constrictor wrapped around your legs and chest. Jiu-Jitsu has often been described as simulated murder, and it is exactly this. That's why the errant dreams haunted my mind, and I was grinding down my teeth. An unnameable panic: Millions of years of "fight or flight" ascended onto the surface of the mind, each cell of my body remembered this archaic haunting experience. I was going through a state of fear, and eventually the knowledge of death, a destiny that is to this day the destiny of all animals, including primates. The knowledge of that kind of death is rooted deep into our being, in all our bones, in a collective memory shared by all things bound to birth and death. In the 21st century, it resides within us, muted and calmed. Until it is woken. But soon, the headache subsided, the dreams recovered their normal patterns, the breath flowed softer again. The body lost the fear of dying. Or rather got comfortable with dying. It simply got used to being killed over and over again.

To consciously die is the greatest achievement of a human's lifetime. Whether in a fight, in writing, or our spiritual exercise: The voluntary act of letting oneself be killed, and thus humbled, transcends us into the unknown realms of our mind and existence, it fraternizes us intensely with the light of the world instead of the little glimpses of the self. It is here – and here only – that any true art can be established. Only in the union with the higher self can we find the peace which marks the end of all our longing and living.

Fear, half-heartedness, egoism, a lack of discipline, laziness, delusions. The desk and the gym-mats force us to overcome those elements of life. We will always be beginners. Nothing is truly known to us, especially those phenomena which we think we already know and know so well. Simply

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because we believe in words and memory, we orchestrated a familiar world which is never the world itself, the a priori world in its initial wonders. That's the difference between truth and delusion. All poems are endless meditations along a single theme and a solitary truth. There will be no end to this effort. Everything worth saying must remain unspeakable – otherwise, there would be no reason to write poems. Tomorrow I have to repeat what was impossible to achieve today. Likewise, Jiu-Jitsu offers a thousand techniques that lead to one goal beyond reach: To master the art in its entirety. To never be beaten by anyone. To never be shown anything you didn't already know. This is the divine futility to which we bow each second of our long and short lives, a task the eastern philosophies named dharma. We need to do our work, regardless. It's never about the result of our dedication, but the dedication itself. The meaning of life is life itself, the purpose of existence is the mere fact of existing. There is no goal, no end, no final IT, no arrival, nor a start. It is strange, but we are alive. Now we need to master this very life. To paraphrase Martin Heidegger: The proximity to our final god is an act of concealment.