

LA COMÉDIATHÈQUE



**LIKE A FISH
in The Air**

JEAN-PIERRE MARTINEZ

**TRAGI-COSMIC
MONOLOGUES**

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Like a fish in the air

Poetic, psychoanalytic, and humorous monologues

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Translation by the author

Without delving into philosophy or reclining on a psychoanalyst's couch, during moments of idleness or sleepless nights, we all contemplate the meaning of life. Well, at least the meaning of our own lives. We ask ourselves small questions without substantial answers. Or even big questions without a tiny hint of an answer. Unless the daily routine suddenly derails, sending us, dizzy, to the edge of the unfathomable abyss of meaning. A troubled depth can then surface, revealing, amidst the waves, like a sea monster, a one-way street... which constitutes the tragi-cosmic essence of our everyday existences. A comical dive into the depths of our superficial lives...

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1 – Untitled

Is there anyone here? No... So you're like me. You also haven't quite managed to become someone. Being the son of nobody is still acceptable. Some have even become very famous. But who remembers the parents of the son of nobody? Nobody does. Since I entered this world, I've always been told: if you want to become someone in life, don't do just anything. And trust me, those who told me this were not just anybody. So I tried to make something of myself. To become someone, like them. But I haven't achieved anything, I know that well. I never knew what to do with myself. I'm quite a character, as they say. A rather odd character, some would argue. I must not have done what was needed. So, I do what I can. I put on a show. I'm a bit of an actor, as they say: "Oh, that one, he's quite an actor!" Can an actor truly become someone? For that, people would have to take him seriously... But even I can't take myself seriously. My doctor, when I visit him for a sick leave, always tells me: "Stop acting!" Not to mention my banker, who thinks I'm a clown. "Would you lend money to a clown?" he asks me that all the time. When you are like a rolling stone, you do not gather moss... That's why actors rarely end up owning their final resting place. I don't have a home either. It even seems like I don't know where I live. If only I had met someone in life. "You should try to meet someone," as they say. But if you think it's easy to form a serious relationship with someone whose short name is Dick. I didn't ask for much. Not necessarily someone... If only I had drawn the right number. But no. I drew some funny characters, believe me. Many wrong numbers. But never the winning number... And now, it's too late, isn't it? I don't have much time left, I know that. And I know that after I'm gone, no one will say: "That guy, he was somebody." Can we even talk about someone's passing when it comes to a person who never managed to become somebody? No, at my funeral, they'll say: "That guy, he was quite an actor." If there's anyone at my funeral, of course. Have you noticed, at the funerals of famous people, there's always a crowd of ordinary folks, as they say in the newspapers? A crowd of ordinary folks... But at the graves of ordinary folks, there's never anyone. Especially not celebrities. Or else, you have to be an undocumented soldier, die in the line of duty, and be very lucky posthumously. No, in times of peace, you shouldn't dream. No one will ever rekindle the flame of all the deceased who never managed to become someone in their lifetime...

2 – Hitchhiking

Where are you headed? You don't know...? Well then, hop in, I'll take you. Is that all you've got for luggage? You're right. When you don't know where you're going, there's no need to burden yourself. Me, I just have a small bag. A toothbrush. Spare socks. A swimsuit, just in case... Don't forget to fasten your seatbelt, there are checks sometimes. I don't really know where I'm going either, to be honest. I've taken a few days off. I'm going to try to find a quiet place to clear my head. I have a vague idea for a novel... With laptops these days, it's convenient. You can write anywhere. Even at home. I have internet with me too! When I leave home, I take the mailbox with me. This place isn't bad, is it? What a shame they're forecasting lousy weather. I enjoy driving like this. Already departed, not yet arrived. I feel like I exist a bit. Maybe that's why I never finish anything. The number of novels I've started! When I was a kid, my favourite part was the journey between home and school. I would savour it by moving as slowly as possible. However... no matter how much time you take, you always end up somewhere. I absolutely need to refuel now. Let me know if you spot a gas station, will you? Yeah... When I was a kid, I was terrified by the certainty that I would die someday. It's everyone's destiny, right? So, I first tried to convince myself that I wasn't like everyone else. Yet, I soon had to accept the reality that I wasn't Jesus Christ. Only elastic time separated me from certain death. Maybe even premature death! Not only was I sure I would die, but I didn't know when. Anyway, it became urgent to slow down to avoid dying prematurely. Why is that guy honking so much? Overtake if you're in such a hurry! What was I saying? Right, so, unable to stop time, I then tried to savour every moment. To make it flow less quickly, you see. With the secret hope that a denser memory would eventually halt the hourglass. To begin with, I randomly selected a moment and arbitrarily decided to cherish it for the rest of my life. And it worked! The first time... An unforgettable moment! Although absolutely meaningless... I've never been able to replicate that feat. Anyway, over time, my perspective on existence has changed, right? We die, of course, but we never completely disappear. Nothing is lost, nothing is created. Unfortunately, as time passes, the certainty of eternal return terrifies me even more than the idea of a definitive end. Will it never stop? And what will become of us when we're dead? True, reincarnation is frightening, if you think about it. Even if you're not completely satisfied with your current life, there's no guarantee that when you're resurrected, you won't end up in the shoes of someone even unhappier than yourself... There's so much misery in the world. Doesn't the thought of this Russian roulette scare you? No, we don't know where we're going. We don't even know where we're coming from! Does a butterfly remember being a caterpillar? Man doesn't even remember being a monkey. Ah, a gas station! I thought we were going to run out of fuel. If you want to stretch your legs. Or use the restroom. Take your time; we're not in a hurry. We don't know where we're going...

3 – Couch

Should I lie down or...? Okay... I'm not quite sure where to begin... I found your contact details in the phone book... You know how it is – you can ask a friend if they know a good, not-too-expensive dentist who won't cause too much pain, but... someone like you. So, I consulted the phone book... And then I randomly picked your name from the rather long list... Quite a job paid in cash in these times, isn't it? They say you don't need a degree to do your job. That all it takes is to have been a client to start your own practice... Is that true? So, after this, I can consider myself in training too. But doesn't it bother you a bit that all your clients become potential competitors? Can you imagine? I visit my butcher, buy a calf's head, and as I walk out, I open a butcher shop right across the street... Not likely to happen, mind you; I can't stand meat... I even have trouble with eggs. Well, I eat them occasionally, but... They say birds are descendants of dinosaurs... So, an egg is a bit like a dinosaur foetus, right? In reality, I didn't pick your name entirely by chance. You were the last one on the list... Since your surname starts with a Z... I probably wanted to right a wrong... It's my Zorro side. Yes, I imagine others always choose the first one on the list... Mr. Aa, Mrs. Ab, or Mr. Bb... I can imagine what you must have endured during your studies... If you had any... Always the last one in line for everything... I'm okay with it. I'm in the S... Towards the end of the line, but still... It's funny, my last name is Stone even though my father was Spanish... I don't know why I said "was," because he still is... I mean, alive. Well, I think he is... But can we still say he's Spanish? He was naturalised.. American, I mean... Not stuffed... Or frozen... It's crazy, all those women who put their kids in the freezer, right? Between fish sticks and ice pops... If only kids could do the same with their parents... Preserve them in the freezer until they figure out what to do with them... Why am I telling you all this...? Oh yes, the Z! So, I have to tell you everything from the beginning, right? From A to Z. Or rather, from D to K... Since they call me Dick... I've never liked my short name... Did you notice? The designated idiot is always named Dick... Take, for instance, the show "Bewitched." Are you familiar with it? Well, Samantha's husband is the classic idiot of the story. You won't believe it, but the two actors who successively interpreted the role were both called Dick ! Samantha spends her entire day rescuing him from the embarrassment of being taken for the genuine idiot he truly is. And she has to use all of her magical powers to prevent that. Well, she loves her husband because he's a nice guy. Nice, but an idiot. That's the general idea of Dick, usually. I have a daughter too. I should have named her Tabitha. I don't mean to say my wife is a witch. She's more like a fairy... To put up with me... That's what my mother always tells her: "How do you put up with him?" My mother is from Normandy. Like the cows. So, milk, butter, cream... We've had our fill... I can't digest butter, you see. I must have inherited that from my father. In Spain, it's more about olive oil. He always used to say to her: "Why do you put so much cream in the soup?" He should have asked her why she didn't put more soup in her cream... Apparently, she couldn't help herself... It's in the genes... Eventually, my father found someone else to serve him soup... At home, it's me who cooks now. That way, at least, I know what I'm eating. You're not

saying anything... You're surely wondering why I came to see you. If I knew, I probably wouldn't have come, I guess. Well, there is something, after all. How can I put this? The more time goes by... the closer I feel to minerals. I don't know why. You know the saying: "The more I know people, the more I love my dog"? Well, for me, the more time passes, the more people bore me. Dogs too, actually. It's with stones that I truly feel at ease... A human life... It's too short, isn't it? So, a dog's life... Whereas a stone doesn't age... Even trees don't mean anything to me anymore. Though some are over a thousand years old. But a tree also eventually dies. It can even get diseases. And then it's eaten by worms, just like everything else. It eventually goes back into the food chain. A stone, no. Nobody eats rocks! Except maybe hens, it's true... To make the shells of their eggs. You're right; we can't really say that stones are truly eternal either... Do you think dinosaurs also ate rocks to make their eggs? In that case, what's the point of being a stone? If it's just to end up as empty shells after making an omelette... So why do I like stones, doctor? I mean, Mr. Z. Do you think it has something to do with my name? Dick Stone...

4 – The Small Hours

The small hours, are you familiar with them? One, two, three, four... By five, we'd already be free from trouble. Just a bit of patience, with the radio softly playing in the background. But instead, we wake up and peer out the window. Not a glimmer of light. We strain our ears. Not a bird's song. The diurnal creatures are still asleep, the nocturnal ones are already in bed. No hope of an imminent tomorrow. We are in the deepest darkness, in the land of no man, the night of the wakeful sleepers. Of course, making the effort to rise and move about is an option. But it seems premature. Almost unnatural. To see the night before having seen the daylight... So we must turn back. Cross the border again. Return to where nothing can reach us yet. Where nothing can wait for us. Where no one can hear us. The beyond is on this side of an eternal reversible. I count to a hundred. Backwards. Ninety-nine, ninety-eight... Hoping that before the end of this countdown, I will have stopped counting. On nights of great insomnia, I start at seven billion. Six billion, nine hundred ninety-nine million, nine hundred ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred ninety-nine others before my turn comes in this vast open-air waiting room that is the world of the living. How long to peel away one by one all these existences that are not mine, to recognise myself in this crowd and find my sleep? One night to know who we are. What sets us apart from others. A lifetime to discover everything that is not us. To die. To blend into the indistinct once again. To sleep. To let go. With the fear of waking up as someone else. In a darkness that would be a hopeless nightmare without the prospect of morning. What keeps me alive, what keeps me awake, is the fear of sinking through a bad night into the wrong sleep, eternal fatigue. Insomnia is an unending race against time. A temporary victory. Four, three, two, one... Suspended between the drowsiness of the night and the harshness of awakening, the small hours trickle away the counted time of insomniacs.

5 – Dark Halls

You're probably wondering what I'm doing. Well, I'm much like you. I'm waiting. Waiting for something to happen. What? I couldn't tell you. If I did know... I'm waiting for things to get better. I could get up and take a walk while waiting, as you might suggest... You might do the same, actually... But no... I don't think that would be very prudent... Just in case something interesting happens while we're away... Alright, for the moment, nothing's happening. But it could start up again when we least expect it. Suddenly... You know, it's like when you're at the movies, and the film suddenly stops because the filmstrip melted under the projector's intense heat. The lights come on, and we're all sit there like idiots, temporarily blinded, as if we were abruptly woken from a dream. We gradually regain our composure and settle into another round of waiting. Hoping that the film will start again as soon as possible. That we'll be plunged back into our artificial coma by rewinding the reel. And then we realise that we have absolutely no idea how long the breakdown will last. Maybe it's more serious than that, and the screening will be canceled. In fact, we're not even sure if there's anyone in the projection booth to fix things. What if the projectionist left right after starting the film? After a while, one among us, the bravest, gets up to see what's going on. Drawing the admiring gaze of those who opt to remain in their seats, waiting anxiously for someone to take the lead. But the hero doesn't know where to go to rescue his fellow unfortunate moviegoers. A projection booth is very mysterious. There's no window. Just a small opening for the projector's light to shine through. We don't even know where the hidden entrance to this forbidden citadel is. So the guy leaves the screening room, goes back to the cinema entrance, and asks the cashier on duty what's happening, who obviously has no idea. She doesn't know where the projectionist is either. Apparently, no one has ever seen him. But she says she'll find out. The guy returns to the screening room after this act of bravery, ready to share his report and anticipating applause for his daring initiative, despite the very uncertain outcome of his efforts. However, when he opens the door, he realises that the screening room has once again plunged into darkness. The film has already restarted! Without him! He has been taken in. He thinks he would have been better off patiently waiting with the others for things to sort themselves out. With all this, he missed a part of the film. Just a few seconds, no more. But it might have been a key scene. Imagine missing the sled scene in 'Citizen Kane'! And let's not forget that these missed frames are in addition to those probably sacrificed by the projectionist in his hurried attempt to repair the melted film by welding its two ends together. "Now, I'm going to be permanently lost," thinks the returning moviegoer, as his eyes haven't yet readjusted to the darkness. Fumbling his way back to his seat, he whispers to his neighbour, asking for a summary of what happened during his absence. The girl is about to reluctantly respond, fearing she might miss an essential line while catching him up, when a voice behind them angrily shouts, "Shh!" Relieved, she shoots an apologetic look at the troublemaker before turning her beautiful, fascinated eyes back to the screen, all while luxuriously plunging her hand into her popcorn bag. The show must go on! But the poor zombie, he no longer understands the movie... So I prefer to

wait. Do you know how much a savings account pays these days...? Three percent per year... You put your minimum wage into the savings account, get yourself frozen for five hundred years. They microwave you, and you're a multimillionaire. Now that's worth waiting for, isn't it?

6 – Once upon a final time

You have to expect anything in life. Be prepared. In the morning, you wake up. Like every day. You never know if it might not be the last morning of your life. Well, there are times when you can suspect it a bit, right...? Like when you can't even get out of bed anymore. When you're suffering from a long illness, a long illness that's more towards its end, you see, and the hospital chaplain happened to pass by to ask if you really needed anything. Then, you think that if it's not for today, at least it won't be long. When you're about to jump out of an airplane in mid-flight, looking up at the sky so you don't see what's below, and you imagine what would happen if the parachute didn't open. So, you check one last time that the ring isn't stuck. That the fabric isn't torn. That by mistake, you're not about to leap into the void with your sleeping bag. Even if you're not religious, you make the sign of the cross just in case. It can't do any harm. And then, with all shame aside, you can always decide not to jump. Stay in the plane, ring the flight attendant, and order a whiskey. While waiting for the plane to land smoothly. Or crash. But all together. When you're a matador, and you're about to kill six bulls in a row, from five to seven. And if one of them doesn't see eye to eye on this? Without further ado, the ox that he almost became might revolt. How long will you survive in this open-air slaughter? Since the dawn of time, killing to live is a risky job. In the death row corridor, when you hear footsteps behind the door in the wee hours, and room service brings you a continental breakfast on a tray, served on fine china, instead of the usual dishwater in a tin cup. Then, you know you have to check out of the room before noon, that the bill will arrive soon, and you won't escape it. When you bungee jump, and you know the cord could snap. When you snap and jump without a cord. When you hook up with a condom and it snaps. When you snap and hook up without a condom. When you wake up in the morning, and you no longer know why. When you think that living would be surviving it. When you'd rather die for something than live for nothing. When you're starving, you already weigh nothing, and there's no other way. When you've been told too many times to go hang yourself. Yes. There are times when you can suspect there won't be a next time. And then there are times when you don't see it coming. Times when you leave as you came. By accident. Where you die as you lived. Foolishly. Times when you pass away by chance. Without notice. When you die by mistake. Without an announcement. One day you wake up in the morning, and there won't be any more. And you don't know it. There are times when you die without warning.

7 – The Definition of Love (by Default)

How long have we known each other? At least twenty years, right? By the way, why haven't we ever slept together? We do get along quite well... We could have even ended up getting married! It's funny; I see you a bit like an ex. Even though we never dated... We almost did once, remember? You got me drunk. Unless it was the other way around. We ended up at your place, completely wasted. We laughed our heads off all night, but we forgot to sleep together. Maybe it's because we get along too well, precisely. It might lack a bit of spice. We'd get bored in the long run. It's true, we have a good time together, but... I can't picture myself making love with a girl who's laughing. Well, there's laughing and then there's laughing. I can make a girl laugh to sleep with her. But sleeping with a girl who makes me laugh...! No, if I slept with you, it would feel like sleeping with a buddy. Anyway... I don't like blondes. I know, you're not blonde. But you were when I met you... I had no idea it wasn't your natural colour! What does it matter, right? It's not that I don't like blondes, but... It depends. It must have been the colour. You were a bit too blonde for me. Overly blonde girls, I don't know, it kind of grosses me out a bit. Physically. I don't know why... It must be a skin thing. Now, it's too late. I'll always picture you as a blonde who dyed her hair brunette. And you're not really brunette... It's not chestnut either. I don't know how to describe it... It's neither blonde nor brunette. It's not that I don't find you attractive, okay? In fact, you're a hit with all the guys. Usually, that's pretty motivating... But not in this case. No, I can't quite pinpoint why I've never felt like sleeping with you... That must be what love is... I mean, the 'je ne sais quoi' that makes us want to sleep together or more if we get along. We've managed to figure out what that is, haven't we! By default... Now, why did I marry my wife instead of you or someone else? Well, first of all, she liked me. It was less complicated. If she hadn't liked me, would I have pursued it...? And if I had pursued it, would she have liked it...? We'll never know. Shared love is simpler, but it's less... How should I put it...? To conquer without risk is to triumph with modesty. By the way, I wonder what she could have seen in me? Any idea yourself...? I could ask her, you might say, but... If she turns the question back on me... Sometimes, there are topics better left untouched. A bit of mystery in a relationship can't hurt. Well, let's not overdo it, either. Once, I dated a girl. After a year, she dumped me. I asked her why. She said she was bored in bed with me. One year! There are limits to discretion... So now, why did she go out with me for a year? I didn't even think to ask her... There must have been a reason, right? Or maybe she lied to me. About my sexual performance, I mean... To get back at me... I'm not saying this because it wounded my male pride, you know? It just caught me off guard. It's true; I have a reputation for being good in the sack. And you? No, I mean, and you, you really don't want to tell me why you've never wanted to date me? You don't have to answer, okay?

8 – The Pleasure of Boredom

I'm bored, aren't you? No, but I'm not particularly bored with you. I'm bored in general. With or without you. I've always been quite bored, actually, ever since I was little. I don't know why... At first, it bothered me a bit. But then I got used to it. My wife, on the other hand, is never bored. She's lucky. She says she always has something to do. And when she truly has nothing else to do, she sleeps. As for me, I struggle with sleep. I wake up at three in the morning and can't fall back asleep. So, I'm bored. Even at night. While my wife sleeps soundly. Well, during the day, I could work, you might say. Maybe that would help me sleep better at night. But if you think working is much more fun than being bored... Work is just good for keeping busy during the day. It's like watching TV at night, doing crossword puzzles on Sundays, or playing cards on vacation. It only allows temporarily forgetting that we don't know what to do with ourselves. No, I'm bored full time... and the worst part is, I wonder if I don't derive a certain satisfaction from it. Because there is a pleasure in being bored, right? Just as there is pleasure in being sad. A kind of nobility even. For one thing, to be bored, you need to have the leisure for it. And be able to afford it. It's a luxury not everyone can manage. Boredom is a fundamental freedom unrestricted by any hobby. Besides, I wonder if I don't prefer being bored to having fun, after all. It's true, having fun gets boring in the long run. You always end up doing the same things. Seeing the same people. Doing the same things with the same people. Whereas... there are a thousand ways to be bored... And then, having fun, between us, it's a bit vulgar, isn't it? It's noisier, for starters. Have you ever heard people having fun? The bursts of laughter, the bursts of voices... It's like bursts of shells. Personally, it hurts my ears. People who get bored, at least, they don't disturb anyone. I mean, people who can experience boredom quietly in their own space and have the decency to keep it to themselves. Not those who announce every five minutes that they don't know what to do. Like some children. Mine, for example... You know, it's true. Just because we've had children doesn't automatically qualify us to be recreation leaders. Otherwise, we'd have to mandate that everyone getting married and planning to have kids obtain an entertainer qualification. No, the beauty of enjoying boredom is that you can experience it anywhere. And you don't need anyone. I can find ways to be bored in any setting, even at the theatre. And with anyone – yes, even with my wife. In fact, especially with my wife. Truth be told, I still prefer to be bored in her company. Because, believe it or not, you can't share a pleasant bout of boredom with just anyone! You really have to come across someone discreet enough... And the best part is, my wife finds it entertaining when I share that with her. I'm bored, and she's having fun... Well, it's not that I don't get bored with you, but please forgive me. I have something to do right now. Something very boring, actually. So, you see, you can also be bored while doing something... Well then, enjoy your boredom...

9 – On a knife-edge

You're going to laugh, but I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing here... And you? No, I mean, do you know what I'm supposed to be doing? What I'm supposed to say? If you do, feel free to let me know, alright? I'm completely in the dark. I'm standing here like a computer abruptly unplugged, only to be replaced by a vacuum cleaner. Or maybe it's a sudden power outage. A blackout. I should have created a backup. But who could have predicted they'd disconnect my power? Maybe I forgot to pay the bill... I'm not talking about a momentary lapse of memory, okay? In that case, I'd improvise. Keep going until it comes back to me. Until I find the thread again. Or I'd ask the prompter, right? Oh, there's no prompter anymore, that's true... There's no script either, and no author. Staff downsizing. You'll see that soon, they'll also remove the safety nets for tightrope walkers, and the words to say. When they remove the nets for fishermen, and the webs for spiders, then we really need to worry... They're leading us up the garden path, and we're the ones still hacking through the underbrush. Tightrope walkers with bats in the belfry... Aren't we all a bit like that, in some way? As long as we maintain our balance and walk confidently on the tightrope, everything seems fine. However, once we lose our way... When words escape us, we might blurt out anything. We might utter things we shouldn't. And later on, all we can offer is an apologetic, "Excuse me, it slipped out." It's far from what I intended to express; in fact, it's precisely what I had hoped to keep silent about. The thought struck me, and the words spilled out involuntarily. After all, one feels compelled to say something, doesn't one? The need to break the silence takes over. Silence is more unbearable than anything, you see. Especially when people have made the effort to come hear you speak, and they've purchased their tickets. When I mention silence, I'm not limiting it to mere verbal communication, you know? A mime can be more eloquent than anyone. And I'm not sure if you've ever ridden the bus with a group of deaf-mutes, but the hustle and bustle are quite a sight. No, being present without uttering a word is far more challenging than engaging in meaningless chatter, trust me. However, engaging in idle talk, well, that carries its own weight. A lapse of memory is akin to a slide. Like a black hole. We know we'll eventually land on our backsides, but we're uncertain about the destination. The only certainty is that once we initiate the slide, there's no turning back. Therefore, feeling a bit uneasy before taking the plunge is only natural, isn't it? Why am I sharing all this? Where is this leading? You're not saying anything, are you? You're not helping me much... But then, I'm used to it. I just came from my psychoanalyst's office. He never says anything either. You'd say it saves him from taking crap. Strangely, all the therapists who said something to me seemed more disturbed than I am. Still. Him, I've never heard the sound of his voice. In ten years. So I just told him that we'd better leave it at that, actually. No, it really cost me too much to try every week to find something to say to him. Especially with the switch to the euro... Hence, when it went to twice a week... I won't even go there. Moreover, I don't really need to lie down anymore, now that I'm here, right? Here, I'm a bit like on the couch. With several rows of therapists listening to me in silence. And at least here, it's you who shells out the bills at each session...

10 – House Cleaning

House cleaning is not exactly my idea of fun. Don't misunderstand me; I'm not one of those meticulous old bachelors who, in the privacy of their homes, take pleasure in waxing and polishing hardwood floors. Nevertheless, I believe there's a certain discreet grandeur in putting your own house in order. By firmly gripping the broom handle, you stay firmly grounded in reality. Remember, from dust we came, and to dust we shall return, sweeping ourselves away. Cleaning your own toilet bowl requires a certain humility. A certain modesty, I dare say. Furthermore, I would assert that doing your own cleaning is a sign of good mental hygiene and serves as a safeguard against numerous follies. I'm not referring to personal quirks. No, I'm talking about defending democracy. The mop represents the ultimate bulwark against tyranny. Would Hitler have invaded Poland if he had to wield a vacuum first? Would Pol Pot have enthusiastically exterminated his own people if he could have spent his time chasing dust bunnies at home? No, we've never seen a dictator doing housework. Hiring a maid is already daydreaming of becoming a domestic tyrant. It's the first step towards megalomania. It's the symbolic annexation of Poland! Genius, on the other hand, isn't an enemy of housekeeping. One can easily envision Archimedes formulating his theorem while standing at his sink, adorned with rubber gloves: every hand immersed in water experiences a vertical upward force equal to the weight of the displaced dishwater. And if museums abound with still lifes showcasing fruit bowls, vegetable peelings, and bleeding steaks, it's because the great masters of painting devoted significant time to their kitchens. Engaging a house cleaner, mark my words, is a form of intellectual laziness. No, let me retract that: it's the original sin! The first abandonment of one's responsibilities as a person, ushering in a cascade of subsequent abdications. The small compromise with your conscience that allows for all future compromises. It's the origin of capitalism! The beginning of the exploitation of man by man. More precisely, the exploitation of the house cleaner by man, or by the executive woman, who, as you will agree, is no longer quite a woman. Because you must at least have the honesty to face the truth: the major cleaning that you refuse to do at your own place, for fear of getting your hands dirty, will have to be done by someone else on your behalf. The pumice stone you hesitate to wield, fearing skin damage, will need another Pilate to handle it for you. Another person whom you'll despise for their servility, or at least look down on to make them pay for your own cowardice. Ever wonder why people often pay their house cleaners off the books, and without a shred of guilt, no less? It's because we can't genuinely perceive doing someone else's cleaning as a legitimate job. Even less so work deserving a wage and granting social rights. Thus, we seek an excuse. We assert that if we didn't have more important tasks, we would undoubtedly handle it ourselves—tasks like washing the dining room windows and scrubbing the toilet seat. We contend that our preference to delegate is not born out of laziness; quite the contrary, it stems from a sense of dedication. Almost self-denial! To avoid depriving the rest of humanity of the many benefits we couldn't provide if we were forced to do the cleaning ourselves. Do you see where I'm going with this when I talked about humility... Okay, we can't

go against nature either. It's obvious that a normally constituted man isn't genetically equipped to handle a steam iron. But still... That's why society invented marriage. Sharing household chores, indeed. However, everyone retains their dignity. So, in this noble shared domestic servitude, the couple can become what it should never have stopped being: a household. Didn't Voltaire say that we must cultivate our garden? He didn't find it necessary to add that we should also peel our vegetables, serve ourselves soup, and clean the bowls afterward, but it was implied. Truly I tell you, the house cleaner is not at all the future of mankind. And when the world's leaders are constitutionally obligated to attend to their own little laundry, the fragrance of lavender will envelop all of humanity.

11 – As Before

Do you remember? Ah, the good old days... or so they say. It's what we've come to believe. Was it really as good as they say it was before? Anyway, it was the beginning. The start of it all. The first of the Mohicans. Religion is the ritualisation of an imaginary memory. We begin by daydreaming in front of the windows of fancy restaurants, the places forbidden to those under eighteen, and when we finally get the chance to go there, it's the hunger of the beginning that we miss. The good old days when we still had an appetite. When curiosity wasn't yet a nasty flaw. Ataraxia is not a childhood disease; it's the excuse that helps the elderly come to terms with things. To escape this fate, we would need to reverse the order of the courses that history serves us. Sit at the table with empty pockets. Let the appetite come while eating. And stay hungry. Unfortunately, here and there, it's the small streams that make the big rivers. The small vessels, the big arteries. We spend our entire lives waiting for the fortuitous twist that will change our trajectory. And when this event happens, the heart is no longer in it. When it's not a heart attack... Old age is a shipwreck that doesn't always end well. Save our souls. Or find them a deserted island to wash up on the beach. And start all over again from the beginning. Where did we go wrong? Even today, I ask myself this question: is this gigantic mess the result of a distant misunderstanding that a frank explanation, even belated, might have clarified, or is it ultimately just the logical consequence of an endless dialogue of the deaf? Come on, upon closer reflection, if we're a bit clever, maybe we can remember being a monkey. Or even a vine. Sometimes, in this jungle, I remember the time when I was as flexible as a vine. When that sheer exultation was enough to turn my desire into fulfilment.

12 – The Replacement

Hello! I'm the replacement. So let me introduce myself, because I'm not sure everyone knows me. I'm God. No, but please, remain seated. No need to stand, seriously. I know, at first, it's a bit intimidating, but you'll see, you'll quickly get used to my presence. Soon you won't even see me, and you'll act as if I don't exist. Just like with my predecessor. Now, of course, you're probably wondering how one becomes God, it's only natural. You might be thinking, 'Okay, he's escaped from the asylum, along with his buddy who believes he's Napoleon.' No, but I don't think of myself as Jesus Christ, alright? Everyone knows that Jesus Christ died 2,000 years ago. And I didn't have the look for Jesus, you know? It wouldn't fly. It wouldn't be believable. And truth be told, it wouldn't be accurate! But now, God – that's a whole different story. God doesn't have a specific look. He's this omnipresent force, everywhere yet nowhere to be seen. When you talk to Him, He remains silent. And let's be honest, He hasn't exactly been making waves lately, has He? I mean, just look at the Church's struggles to greenlight a couple of posthumous miracles... And even when they manage to approve one, it's not exactly leaving the audience awestruck. I mean, it's not like I misplaced the keys to my 4x4, watched the Pope on TV, and poof! Miraculously, they reappeared in the lining of my jacket. Or dealt with colon cancer, endured 23 rounds of chemo, had my entire intestine removed, and took a pilgrimage to Lourdes, only to miraculously emerge with a stomach tube and an artificial anus. It's a far cry from the Red Sea parting or water skiing barefoot on the Sea of Galilee without a speedboat, isn't it? Well, between us, that did have some bloody style. It's understandable that back then, it might have inspired vocations. Sure, God created the world. The Big Bang, Adam and Eve, the dinosaurs, all in just one little week. It's true; at the beginning, He did quite a job. But since then...? Nowadays, God is more of an honorary title. Almighty, you say... He has about as much power as the Queen of England, really. So I thought to myself, Bernard, there's a vacancy. Yes, I probably shouldn't spill the beans, but before becoming God, my name was Bernard... Alright, it's an unpaid gig, but you know... The Pope isn't in it for the dosh either. But to become Pope, you've still got to hit the books. You've got to put in your application, go through the elections... To be God, you don't bother with all that hassle. Well, starting to be God is like quitting smoking. Initially, it's not a piece of cake... After that, you just have to stick with it, that's all... It's a matter of willpower, you see. You just have to believe in yourself. If you don't believe in yourself... So, I know why you're here, right. Not for the small collection at the end. What you're hoping for when you turn to me is that I'll bring you the good word. For instance, you're hoping I'll discreetly reveal the jackpot numbers for the next sports lottery, complete with the bonus ball. Well, that's not quite how it works. I'm not here to make you plead, but, you know... If it were as simple as asking, everyone would know. No, I won't do more than my predecessor, but I assure you, I'll be on top of things. You won't see me either, but I'll always be by your side, just like Him. So, just give me a heads up—be it a sick child, looming layoffs, or a family tragedy. A swift phone call, and I'll be on the scene. Day or night, rain or shine. I'll leave my mobile

number at the front desk. You'll have to foot the bill for the call, but, you know... If I don't pick up, leave a message on my voicemail... (*Looking at his watch*) Oh, there... It's not that I'm bored, but duty calls elsewhere. I can be everywhere, alright, but not all at once. Take my word for it: give it a week or two, you won't even notice the difference from the previous guy.

13 – Talking About the Weather

Isn't this weather a bit peculiar? Dressing up has become a daily puzzle. Are we on the upswing or in for a downward spiral? Does bothering with outfits even make sense anymore? They call it "seasonal weather," but does it warrant a chat? Regardless, we've got places to be, conversations to have, come rain or shine. If only we'd trust our instincts more often. We'd prefer lounging at home, snuggled up in bed, daydreaming about sunshine and rainfall. Yet, they claim we spend a good thirty years of our lives asleep. So just imagine. If we slept in. In any case, in life, we spend quite a few years talking to ourselves. And talking to oneself. When we're children, we talk to people who should have existed. When we're old, we talk to people who no longer exist. In between, as adults, we'd rather listen to ourselves talk. The other person is only there to echo back. We talk to walls that have no ears. We talk to dogs that can't speak. We shout at the deaf, and we talk to the blind in sign language. Everyone talks at the same time. And when there's nothing left to say, everyone listens to themselves at the same time. We talk to ourselves because we're afraid of the dark. We also talk into the void, trying to fill it. If we're lucky enough to have something to say to ourselves, we can talk to ourselves. Lend a sympathetic ear to ourselves. Listening to what we have to say is just as important as listening to what others have to say. So we talk to ourselves, and we listen to ourselves talk. But we don't tell ourselves everything; we lie to ourselves. And when we're very convincing, we even end up believing we're someone... Thirty years sleeping. Life is a dream, at least half of it. The other half is a lie. With a few moments of truth that aren't always good to tell. It looks like it's clearing up, doesn't it? It's going to be a beautiful night. Look, we can see the stars. It's like they're talking to us. I'm sure there's someone up there. People who talk to each other. People who talk to themselves. People who tell stories to themselves and end up believing them. People who also talk into the void. At night, sometimes, I listen to these celestial inhabitants. Do you think that one day we'll be able to talk to them? Talk about the weather and talk about the rain?

14 – Our Father Who Art Within Us

If we were to meet on the street as we will be in thirty years, do you think we'd recognise one another? It's hard to say... Well, I don't mean you and me in particular. We hardly know each other. There's little chance I'd remember you. Especially since in thirty years, you'll have aged quite a bit. You'll be unrecognisable if you're still around... No, what I'm trying to express is, suppose I unexpectedly encountered my future self, thirty years down the line. Would my own face seem familiar? Back then, three decades ago, I sported long hair, rode a motorcycle, and immersed myself in *Rolling Stone*. If, in the present, I spotted myself in the subway, with a receding hairline, engrossed in *The Financial Times*, would I recognize the connection? Would I, at the very least, ponder: 'Well, that's peculiar – that older gentleman looks somewhat familiar. He resembles my father a bit.' In that case, I might not be eager to engage in a conversation with my future self anymore. Over the course of thirty years, we undergo considerable changes, often not for the better. Are we truly unchanged, or do we inevitably evolve into versions of our own fathers? The fear of dying one day is a common concern, but our worry may be misplaced. We don't experience death in a single day—except, perhaps, by accident. When we succumb to old age, we gradually fade away with each passing day. Eventually, we forget who we once were. We're all destined to become unknown soldiers. If you have the chance to live for another thirty years, it won't be you they lay to rest; it'll be someone else. Someone unfamiliar, someone you've never crossed paths with and will never encounter. A stranger who may not even be someone you'd find agreeable. Because let's face it: we don't tend to improve with age. Keep in mind that if you don't particularly appreciate yourself now, thirty years from today, you might find it hard to tolerate the person you've evolved into. Maybe you'll even wish for their death. Don't we all, more or less, desire our father's death? You'll blame him for not cherishing you like a son. And he'll resent you for not fulfilling his dreams. To understand our father, we would need to have known him as a child. But even then... When I gaze into the mirror each morning, I struggle to recognize myself, and I can't find anything interesting to say to myself. So if I were to face a guy like me with thirty more years on him... A guy who might never exist, by the way. If we knew our date of death at birth, we'd know when we've lived half our life... No, intergenerational communication, even with oneself, is not easy. But here's a piece of advice: if you meet yourself tomorrow as you'll be in thirty, forty, fifty years, offer this prayer: Our Father who art within us, may our name remain familiar to you, may your reign's end be peaceful, may your lack of will not condemn our dreams, give us each day a reason to live to your age, forgive our wanderings as we must also forgive your resignation, let us succumb to temptation, and free yourself from remorse.

15 – The Substitute

You can stay seated! I am... your new philosophy teacher. I know, up until now, you mostly knew me as the physical education instructor... But, as you may be aware, Mrs. Weird, I mean Mrs. Weir, tragically took her own life last night by setting herself on fire in her bathtub filled with unleaded petrol... Oh, you weren't aware? I apologize. Regardless, due to a current shortage of philosophy teachers in the National Education system... for some reason, philosophers are going through a crisis of vocation, much like priests... The Director requested that I fill in for Mrs. Weird. Mrs. Weir. You know, in our profession these days, you have to be versatile... You need to adapt. When you have a job, if you manage to find one, they'll expect you to adapt. They call it employability. Well, that's what the Director told me. I understand, you'll be getting your high school diploma at the end of the year, but... it was either me or nothing... So, you might as well learn to adapt right away. Well, if you don't have any questions, let's get started. So, in the end, what is philosophy? It's not that complicated, is it? It's about asking the fundamental questions. I mean, the pointless questions. Like... I don't know... What's this mess around us? How did this chaos start? Will this craziness ever end? Wherever Mrs. Weird is now, she might finally hold the answers to these questions. Unfortunately, she can't return to share whether there's life after death, as she's now completely charred. So, for your exams, it seems we'll have to figure things out on our own, right? Anyway, philosophers have been asking these kinds of absurd questions for millennia, without managing to find an explanation that makes any sense. Well, believe it or not, even though I've never studied philosophy, I think I've found the answer. Well... a beginning of an answer... The key is to go back to basics. If you look carefully, you'll realize the answer lies within yourself. No need to wade through the unreadable books Mrs. Weird distributed in the bibliography at the start of the year. I can't say for certain whether she had read all those books herself, but look where it got her... Well, trust me, it's better for each of you to draw from your own experiences and tap into your own memories. I'm confident that at some point in your life, you've encountered the truth without even realising it. For me, it happened during a pilgrimage to Mont Saint-Michel, where I experienced what you might call a revelation... Initially, I wasn't overly excited about the prospect of visiting Mont Saint-Michel. I mean, my wife was more enthusiastic about it. But let's be honest, Mont Saint-Michel is one of those places you should experience at least once in your life, right? Plus, the bus trip was sponsored by the town hall. Anyway, my wife and I arrived at the parking lot around noon after a three-hour drive in dense fog, not even able to make a pit stop at a gas station. There was no time to waste because we had to return to Paris that evening, so it was kind of a commando operation, you know? So everyone swiftly disembarked from the bus and started making their way briskly toward the basilica. Even though we don't really believe in God, here's a meditative atmosphere that envelops the place. We were approximately halfway there when my wife remarked, "Isn't it unbelievable? Mont Saint-Michel is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and if we don't take action, it might not even be an island in a few years." At that moment, I must

confess I didn't quite grasp where she was leading the conversation. With the low tide, Mont Saint-Michel, shrouded in fog, appeared more like a massive mound on the beach. Nevertheless, it triggered some contemplation within me, and I found myself pondering. Why Mont Saint-Michel instead of nothing? Why my wife instead of someone else? Why the prospect of an island during high tide, but not during low tide? Meanwhile, we were nearing the basilica. The cold was biting! It was December, just a few days before Christmas. Maybe that had something to do with it too. As I ascended the hill, an unusual sensation stirred within me. I held a firm belief that in this sacred place, I would uncover answers to questions I had never even considered before. However, being a bit out of breath, chilled to the bone, and having promised my mother-in-law a souvenir from Mont Saint-Michel, I decided to step into a nearby souvenir shop. Well, souvenirs were certainly not in short supply there. Anyway, I scanned the shop, hoping to find something budget-friendly for my mother-in-law. Then, almost miraculously, I came across one of those small glass domes filled with water and featuring Mont Saint-Michel inside. You know the ones, right? They do a similar thing in Paris with the Eiffel Tower. Absentmindedly, I picked up the item and, as if guided by a force other than my own, started shaking it. You won't believe what happened next – snow began to fall! I mean, initially, in the crystal ball, of course. But then, I casually glanced towards the door, and what do you know? It had started snowing outside too! That's when it dawned on me in an epiphany of cosmic proportions. This crystal ball wasn't just a trinket; it was a miniature universe! The world was literally in the palm of my hands. I stood there, basking in the glow of this newfound revelation. I stared at the ball, then looked outside. The more I shook the ball, the more it snowed on Mont Saint-Michel. I was all-powerful. I was the Almighty! Well, after a while, since the shopkeeper was starting to shoot me odd glances, I reluctantly had to set the ball down. Slowly but surely, all the snow gracefully settled back down, and I snapped back to reality. Yet, since that whimsical moment, I've been enlightened: the world is basically a snow globe where you can decipher both the past and the future. You give it a shake, and it's akin to the Big Bang. The snowflakes never land in the same place, in the same sequence, or at the same pace, but eventually, every flake finds its way to the ground. Then, with another shake, it all starts anew. It's perpetually different, yet fundamentally the same. No two snowflakes are identical; they each chart their unique course, but in the grand scheme, there's always the same volume of snow, and, inevitably, everything descends downward, you catch my drift? Well, I haven't figured out yet who's shaking the thing, and why, but... I have my little theory. Why do you think all the fools who enter a souvenir shop at Mont Saint-Michel feel an irresistible urge to shake the thing I'm talking about? It's all for the sheer joy of watching the snow fall! So, if God exists, why wouldn't He want to do the same? And hold on tight because it's not over... And brace yourselves because it's not over... What if, in the end, God was me? I mean, all of you too, if you want. Well, the sum of all the idiots of our species, right? Admit it, it's mind-boggling, isn't it? That's precisely why when the Director asked me if I had some knowledge of philosophy to replace Mrs. Weird, I said yes right away. I believe it was a sign from destiny, you know? An opportunity for me to generously share the knowledge I have modestly

acquired about the mysteries of the world that surrounds us with as many people as possible...

Well, I think that'll do for today. Let's not set the bar too high for our first session, after all. Alright, now everyone get down on your stomachs! We're going to do some push-ups together to wrap it up. A sound mind in a sound body, as Madam Director likes to say.

16 – Half-Wishes to the Nation

Dear fellow citizens, my wishes will be half as long as usual because on this 31st of December at 8 PM, we're in a state of emergency, and time is running out. To begin with, I have a turkey waiting for me at home, and it's quite a tough one. I might have gone a tad overboard: I'm not even sure it'll squeeze in my oven in one piece. With the cooking time at an hour per kilo, I'm looking at a potential turkey-eating marathon that might extend well into mid-January. Now, let's put that hefty turkey aside and circle back to the main issue—you, my dear fellow citizens. As the Head of State, my responsibility is to bring your attention to the dire state of our country as I address you. When this year kicked off, we had a full 365 days ahead of us. Now, there's just one left. That stark reality highlights how our nation's deficit persistently expands, inching wider day by day, year after year. Rest assured, I have just sent up a prayer to God, asking for a divine extension on our credit line for a few more months starting tomorrow. But I must warn you: our nation cannot continue to spend its time recklessly. Henceforth, as of January 1st, my decision is to replace only one day out of every two. The coming year will therefore only have six months. It will begin on the 1st of January and end on the 30th of June. On that date, I'll stand before you once again to extend my heartfelt New Year wishes. I get that these necessary changes for our nation might demand some adjustments on your part. However, take comfort in the fact that, thanks to the overall warming of the planet, soon you won't discern much difference between the seasons, and every year will blend seamlessly into the next. Those without a summer will just be slightly more off-kilter than the rest. In perfect alignment with this reform, set to double the efficiency of our annual tax collection, I have also decided on a strong measure: the abolition of the transition from daylight saving time to standard time, which has divided the nation for years. From now on, there will only be one time, but only for six months a year! My dear fellow citizens, I wish you an excellent half-year. I believe in the bright side of the force, and I won't leave you. Long live the Republic, and half-long live our country.

17 – Slide Night

Sharing one's life story feels akin to flipping through slides. The snapshots might not captivate others as much as the vivid memories we cherish. But in this era of selfies, who still remembers the narcoleptic charm of slide nights from the past? For the younger generation, let me provide some context. Back in the days when an initiatory journey could lead you to Morocco, Greece, or the southern coast of Corsica, a couple of adventurers enjoying paid vacations, would assemble their most devoted friends. Together, they would indulge in a buffet adorned with flavours from the exotic destination, marking the culmination of their adventures. As a delightful post-coffee ritual, they would project vacation photos onto the white living room wall. Before this enchanting moment, these intrepid travellers meticulously organized their extensive collection of slides into various trays based on themes, carefully arranging the order of photos to enhance the overall narrative. Mastering not only the art of photography but also the skill of thoughtful editing was imperative. As the master of ceremonies smoothly navigated the transition from one slide to another with a wired remote, the projector emitted a sound reminiscent of a photocopier: click-clack. Naturally, incidents were not uncommon. Whether it was a tray mistakenly mounted upside down or a slide featuring an inverted image, the projection would occasionally be halted. This interruption was essential to swiftly rectify the situation, ensuring that not a single moment of the show was missed and that the message remained undistorted. The never-ending, slow-motion cinematic experience, accompanied by live commentary from the projectionist for each film frame, naturally prolonged the duration. To endure this ordeal with a smile, one needed genuine friends who could pretend to be truly amazed by the abundance of exoticism. What an adventure it turned out to be! Next year, it would be their turn to reciprocate, subjecting their friends to the cinematic saga of their own life's vacation. To witness and be witnessed, right in the comfort of home. To carve out a small space for existence, at least once in a lifetime. To step into the spotlight, each taking a turn, yet always surrounded by friends. Blessed are those who, like them, embarked on a splendid journey. In today's era of real-time, we narrate our lives simultaneously as we live them, rather than just experiencing them. The existence of the image precedes the essence of the journey. The concept of exoticism has vanished in the age of globalization. Travel has been reduced to mere relocation. The notion of "elsewhere" no longer exists. Only diverse locations. Memories and, by extension, futures have faded away, leaving only an eternal present. Awaiting a time when holograms and artificial intelligence enable us to exist everywhere at once forever. Like God. But for what purpose? I come from a bygone era where holograms were merely reflections in the hallway mirror, and where both intelligence and foolishness were still entirely natural.

About the author

Born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise (France), Jean-Pierre Martinez was first a drummer for several rock bands before becoming a semiologist in advertising. He then began a career writing television scripts before turning to theatre and writing plays. He has written close to a hundred scripts for television and as many plays, some of which have already become classics (*Friday the 13th*, *Strip Poker*). He is one of the most produced contemporary playwrights in France and in other francophone countries. Several of his plays are also available in Spanish and English, and are regularly produced in the United States and Latin America.

Amateur and professional theatre groups looking for plays to perform can download Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays for free from his website La Comédiathèque (<https://comediatheque.net/>). However, public productions are subject to SACD filing.

For those who prefer reading or working from books, printed versions of his plays can be purchased from Amazon for a price similar to that of photocopying this document.

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

A brief moment of eternity
A Cuckoo's nest
A Hell of a Night
A simple business dinner
All's well that starts badly
An innocent little murder
Back in the spotlight
Bed and Breakfast
Casket for two
Cheaters
Check to the Kings
Crash Zone
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but stable
Eurostar
Four stars
Fragile, handle with care
Friday the 13th
Gay friendly
Heads or Tails
Him and Her
In lieu of flowers
Is there a pilot in the audience?
Is there an author in the audience?
Just a moment before the end of the world
Just like a Christmas movie
Last chance encounter
Lost Time Chronicles
Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall
Miracle at Saint Mary Juana Abbey
Neighbours 'Day
New Year's Eve at the Morgue
One marriage out of two
Open letters
Preliminaries
Quarantine
Running on Empty
Sidewalk Chronicles
Special Dedication
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The Ideal Son-in-Law
The Jackpot
The Joker
The perfect Son-in-Law
The Performance is not cancelled
The Smell of Money
The Window across the courtyard
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!

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