



**“The End of Education”: John Senior and the Idea of the University**

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**I**

**First Things First**

*In my end is my beginning.* T.S. Eliot

It is a common practice these days for academics to be given a form to fill out identifying “outcomes” of their teaching and scholarship. It is one more example of the debasement of our culture and the view society has of its teachers, at all levels, that the language of the factory floor and board room has been appropriated by the academy. If I am ever asked what “outcomes” my classes have produced, I will respond in this fashion, and quite unapologetically: “You will need to ask the students now and again in ten, 20, 60 years time. God, too, will ask me on the dreadful Day of Judgment. Outcomes? Perhaps one of my students, hearing Robert Frost’s “After Apple Picking”, has experienced the rhythm of a ladder swaying against a buoyant apple bough – and longs to become a

farmer, to feel that rhythm everyday in his limbs, and to have the scent of apples permeate his existence. *That* is an “outcome”. Or perhaps one of the young women in my class has been inspired by the vision of Andromache bringing her baby son (who will not survive the fall of Troy) to “Her sweet scented breast”, and yearns thereby for the joys and consolations of motherhood. Or perhaps a young man or woman reading Dante’s *Inferno* will respond, with a mixture of fear, awe and love, to the demands of Christ’s love, and seek to enter a contemplative order and bury his or her life in the life-giving *humus* of the cloister. These – along with all the other humanizing influences of great literature – are “outcomes”, but you can’t measure them, anymore than you can measure the hush after winter rain, or the depth of the sky in the back window...

It is of course possible to measure some ‘outcomes’ of an education and teachers should be held accountable for these: “Can my students read and write?” is a question all primary school teachers should ask of themselves – but by tertiary level, if a student’s primary and secondary education has been anywhere near adequate, such questions become inappropriate; and if the primary and secondary education has been inadequate then an academic can not be held responsible, on these points at least, if the work of recovery is slow. Adolescence has been extended in both directions, as I myself can testify. Students routinely enter high school knowing everything they shouldn’t know, having intimate and detailed knowledge of graphic violence, sex, popular culture; and come out the other end knowing almost nothing of what they should know: how to read and write well, how to dress appropriately and how to observe basic courtesies, to name a few of their more obvious deficiencies. The students are not to blame, of course, but neither is the scholar-teacher who finds it impossible to make up in one, two or three years for what has been lacking during the previous 12 or so years of the young person’s education, and the 18 or more years of his home life.

“Outcome” surveys, like the other weeds that choke the roots of the academy these days, reveal a view of education that holds (in unconscious veneration of Descartes) that all things can be scientifically measured, missing the point that the most important things – truth, beauty, goodness, love, honour, justice – can not be measured by any human standard, and certainly not by the inhuman and inhumane standards of what the Catholic poet David Jones called our “modern technocracy”, which demand, among other things, that academics in the humanities vomit out largely meaningless “research” (what George Steiner calls the “grey morass” of unreadable criticism) for the sake of data bases in Canberra or Washington or London (and ultimately for the sake of funding), while their students struggle to come to grips with the jargon (which now naturally permeates their teacher’s lectures and tutorials) invented to coat that research with the veneer of sophistication, as if incomprehensibility were synonymous with profundity. It is one of the sure signs that something is of eternal value if, as Gerard Manley Hopkins says in *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, it is “beyond saying sweet, past telling of tongue” – the ineffable is almost always kin to the eternal – but as if to ape this truth in some diabolical way, the ineffable has been replaced in much modern literary criticism by the meaningless, the search for truth by the search for novelty, and the search for wisdom by the search for knowledge understood as a quantifiable and “utile” “resource”. And because that which has true value can not be measured, universities have been forced – in

the Age of Hooper (Evelyn Waugh's well-known description of the modern age) – to measure life by the standard of the only things of value to this age: money and technology. We worship at the altar of mammon and because (in the new dispensation) “time is money”, we worship at the altar of the lesser bad angel technology – which, by making life easier, often makes it facile. To paraphrase Mother Teresa of Calcutta, we are materially the wealthiest age in the history of the West, and spiritually and intellectually the most impoverished.

The eminent sociologist Frank Furedi has linked managerialism and “accountability” with the decline of intellectual life:

To feel and behave like an intellectual requires at least a mental distancing from the conventions and pressures of everyday affairs. Eyerman noted that ‘the more intellectual labour is controlled by external forces, rules and procedures, supervisors and so on, the less of an intellectual one feels oneself to be.’ The aspiration for autonomy is driven by the understanding that ideas cannot be developed in accordance with a schedule or the dictates of a particular institution. It is generally recognized that a degree of detachment is essential for the gaining of perspective and of creativity. Intellectuals can be employed by institutions, but if their imagination and work remains confined to these institutions they will become simply experts and technocrats. (Furedi, 33)

Furedi goes on to quote Edward Said who has noted the “inconsistency between the ethos of professionalism and that of the intellectual”:

By professionalism I mean thinking of your work as an intellectual as something you do for a living, between the hours of nine and five with one eye on the clock, and another cocked at what is considered to be the proper, professional behaviour – not rocking the boat, not straying outside the accepted paradigms or limits, making yourself marketable and above all presentable, hence uncontroversial and unpolitical. (quoted in Furedi, 39)

Josef Pieper, who would have agreed with the conclusions and implication of both Furedi's and Said's assessments, would nonetheless have noted that their own language (when they speak of “intellectual labour” and “work”) is contaminated – as is most of ours – by the very thing they criticize: the language of the market. In *Leisure the Basis of Culture*, Pieper traces the problem all the way back to Kant's identification of the scholar and teacher as an “intellectual worker”, an idea which positions the academic as part of an “economy”, whereas the view that had prevailed in the West from Socrates at least until Descartes emphasized the role of receptive contemplation, borne of leisure, which reflected the natural hierarchy of knowledge, from first to final things (*Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, 36).

*There is an alternative* to the situation in which we find ourselves today, a way to incarnate in teaching, learning and scholarship Pieper's ideal that leisure is the basis of culture, and I want to turn to one example of this.

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In the early 1970s three professors at the University of Kansas, John Senior, Denis Quinn and Frank Nellick, established the Integrated Humanities Program; its influence was far-

reaching, both in education and in the Church. It divided opinion, some parents calling for it to be shut down, others embracing its spirit. The three professors were Catholics, initially of varying degrees of commitment, but they were careful never to proselytize. Nevertheless, over two hundred students in the program sought instruction in the Catholic Faith during the course of their studies, and some of them chose one or other of the professors as godfathers. Some of the parents complained and the program made media headlines, particularly after some of the students became monks at a traditional Benedictine monastery in France. An organization was set up, “The Committee for Academic and Religious Freedom”, with the express aim of closing the program down; sadly, even the Kansas archdiocese weighed in against the program. Naturally enough, the professors were accused of waging a propaganda campaign and, worse, of administering a cult. After an investigation, however, they were found to have done nothing wrong and their students, both Catholic and not, rallied to their defense, arguing that it was the sense of discovery, the radical freedom to think for oneself by interacting with the Great Works and with teachers who clearly loved these books, that made the course so appealing: in other words, the professors, while agreeing on basic principles, had a diverse range of views and interpretations of the Great Books and their significance. Far from being imposed upon them, Roman Catholicism had simply come to represent, for many of the students, the apotheosis of the Good, the Beautiful and the True that they first encountered by reading the great books, from Homer through to Dostoyevsky, neither of whom – needless to say – were Catholics!<sup>1</sup> The brochure promoting the program explains its purpose and the approach of the professors:

To be a student is to be alive to intelligence, and the beginning of such a life is wonder. In our own day wonder has been so cheapened by sensationalism and so crippled by skepticism that the college freshman, instead of being as one newly awakened to the excitement of learning, is often, rather, as one who has never been born. To such a young person learning is so much drudgery and routine, alien to his real interests, remote from reality itself. To revive wonder may be said to summarize the aims of the Pearson Program... What is the Integrated Humanities Program? It is three professors and two hundred students reading the great books of Western Civilization.

The program was taught in what the professors described as the “poetic mode”, a phrase deriving from Aquinas. In the *Restoration of Christian Culture*, a classic of its kind, Senior situates “poetic knowledge” within an ancient hierarchy of knowledge:

The ancients distinguished four degrees of knowledge: the poetic, where truths are grasped intuitively as when you trust another’s love; the rhetorical, when we are persuaded by evidence, but without conclusive proof that we might be wrong, as when we vote for a political candidate; next the dialectical mode in which we conclude to one of two opposing arguments beyond a reasonable doubt, with the kind of evidence sufficient for conviction in a laboratory testing to certify a drug for human use; and, finally, in the scientific mode – science in the ancient and not the modern sense which is dialectical and rhetorical, but science as *epistemai* – we reach to absolute certitude as when we know the whole is greater than the part, that motion presupposes agency. (*Restoration of Christian Culture*, 194-5).

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<sup>1</sup> For a history of the Program, see Robert Carlson, *Truth on Trial: Liberal Education be Hanged*. Dumb Ox, 1995. I am indebted to this work for my brief outline of the program above.

In *Poetic Knowledge: The Recovery of Education*, James Taylor, a student of Senior's, describes the first branch of knowledge (called by Aquinas *poetica scientia*), as

not necessarily a knowledge of poetry but rather a poetic (sensory-emotional) experience of reality... What must be understood at the beginning... is the phenomenon of *poetic experience*. Poetic experience indicated an encounter with reality that is nonanalytical, something that is perceived as beautiful, awful (awefull), spontaneous, mysterious. It is true that poetic experience has the same surprise of metaphor found in poetry, but also found in common experience, when the mind, through the senses and emotions, *sees* in delight, or even in terror, the significance of what is really there.... Poetic experience and knowledge is essentially passive, and listening is above all the gateway, along with looking, to the poetic mode (5-6, 10).

Taylor's description echoes Pieper's distinction between observation (with its scientific connotations) and contemplation: "Observation is a tense activity... To contemplate, on the other hand, to 'look' in this sense, means to open one's eyes receptively to whatever offers itself to one's vision, and the things enter into us, so to speak, without calling for any effort or strain on our part to possess them. There can hardly be any doubt that that, or something like it, is the way we become sensorially aware of a thing" (Pieper, 31). The emphasis here is on docility and receptivity. It is a far cry from the alternate view that the acquisition of knowledge is first and foremost the result of work. "The statement that 'knowledge is work', Pieper argues,

has two aspects: it expresses a claim on man and a claim by man. If you want to know something then you must work; in philosophy 'the law is that reason acquires its possession through work' that is the claim on man. But there is another, a subtler claim, not perhaps immediately visible, in that statement, the claim made by man: if to know is to work, then knowledge is the fruit of our own unaided effort and activity; then knowledge includes nothing which is not due to the effort of man, and there is nothing gratuitous about it, nothing 'in-spired', nothing 'given' about it. (36)

The implications of such a position are obvious: the view of the philosopher or academic as "intellectual worker", a cog-in-the-wheel, stands in relation to true education as Pelagianism stands in relation to orthodox Christianity, and a Catholic or Christian college that absorbs such a principal on the practical level of pedagogy needs to understand that it will soon do so at the level of theology.

Taylor argues, convincingly, that the seed of the change from the perennial view to the modern view of the "intellectual worker" which privileges quantifiable and measurable "knowledge" over the "mysterious, intuitive way of knowing reality" – that necessarily precedes it and upon which it builds – is traceable in the first instance to Descartes. Descartes doubted the reliability of the senses, thereby overturning the Thomistic understanding that knowledge begins in the senses. For Descartes, knowledge does not begin in the senses' apprehension of external reality, but in the self. Whereas in the ancient view we abstract knowledge from the experience of our senses, Descartes abstracted the 'self' from the reality external to it; the self becomes, therefore, the first object of knowledge:

It was a major decision for Descartes to rely solely on his own reason and not on the tradition and authority of the philosophical legacy embraced by the Roman Catholic Church, which included those parts of ancient Idealist and Realist insights that admitted the validity of different modes of

knowledge. He also believed that once this one method was discovered it would lead the inquirer to new truths. This being the case, a break with the past, he felt, was necessary, along with a new method to demonstrate truth in an exclusively rationalistic and systematic way... Taking up this position led him to establish a method that would avoid what he considered the vague notions of the Scholastics and leave only place for certain knowledge. He would accept only clear and distinct ideas as valid. (*Poetic Knowledge*, 88-89)

One can see then that the final mode of knowledge identified by Senior, the Scientific, which in the ancient tradition is arrived at in harmony with the other three, is deformed by its isolation from these three. From Descartes onwards, in the history of ideas, the poetic mode becomes an object of suspicion, because the truths it reveals about reality can not be explained in rationalistic terms and are thus confined to the realm of subjectivism; ironically, given that “these four modes spoken of by Senior were all informed by self-evident truth, first principles founded on objective reality impossible to be ‘proved’ by argument because they exist as givens” (8).

How was the poetic mode put into practice at KU? William Wisner, another student of the program, describes the approach of the lecturers:

The lectures were not lectures at all. Students did not take notes nor ask questions. The three professors, sitting in front of the class, conducted an extended “conversation” among themselves, to which the students – perhaps 200 in number – were asked to *listen* deeply and meditatively. The conversations among the three professors were, moreover, deliberately unplanned and unrehearsed and therefore never the same from semester to semester. Their comments were guided, rather, by some aspect or nuance of the book being read which struck the professors in their own rereading or contemplation of the text; or which may have been suggested by a student in the frequently intense discussions after class. Details of the text could well turn out to be significant – the thong which latched a door in *The Odyssey*; the use of the word “jocund” in a poem by Thomas Gray and its etymological implications; a discussion of a seemingly minor character, like Palinurus in *The Aeniad*, which, we discovered, provoked from Virgil some of the most profound lines of poetry in the entire epic... Within a few weeks, the entire class was welded to this new vision of education, one that none of us had ever experienced before. One in which delight and laughter were enthroned as an ideal, in which merriment could suddenly turn into the deeply profound; a vision of things where sadness and joy lay down together in meaning. Young people are inherently idealistic – they want romance, they want idealism, they want honor, purpose, meaning, continuity, the ability to trust adults above all... [T]his was the secret of the Pearson Program: its assumption was not simply that all men desire to know. The program demonstrated convincingly that their desire to know comes from the delight encountered in the knowing and this is what propels education at every level” (65-66).

The two year program also included a spring waltz, poetry memorization, stargazing, calligraphy classes, rhetoric classes and a program in oral Latin. Each class was begun with a song, usually an Irish Ballad (63). “The program”, Wisner recalled, “asked questions. Are we bounded merely by our own desires? What is the nature of the good life? What is the meaning of a person’s daily labor? What is journeying? What is home? Such questions lay at the heart of the poetic, and therefore highly suggestive, mode of knowledge which the professors were seeking” (64). Delight, wonder, the immediate apprehension of the senses, integrated with the intellect – this mode of knowledge comes before all else and will always continue, as Wisner says, to “propel” education at every level. But if this is the beginning of education – the drawing out of the self into the wider

world of experience of the real – the next question to ask is: what is the end of education? For the three professors in the IHP, this question was paramount, and it formed the subject of one of Senior’s best poems.

## II

### The Last Things

Senior’s whole approach to education was permeated by the Benedictine Spirit. In his essay “The Spirit of the Rule”, he explores the relationship between the Rule of St. Benedict and the vocation of the teacher. “According to the Benedictine view,” he writes, “against the prevalent establishment, and exactly consonant with that of Socrates, St. Thomas, and Cardinal Newman, the purpose of a university is not – I say it sweetly, with reverent reserve – the purpose of the university is not research but friendship... The student must not only receive the knowledge, counsel and correction of the teacher, he must fulfill them, which means that he must understand, not just parrot or comply; and by learning, become assimilated to the spiritual, intellectual and moral model of the teacher”. “Humility”, Senior says earlier in the same essay, “is a necessary condition of learning” and it is in this context that friendship makes sense: it is not yet the friendship of equals, although the student may one day reach or even surpass his teacher’s knowledge, it is rather “the relation of disciple to master of which docility is an analogue of the love of man and God, from whom all paternity in Heaven and on earth derives.” The “love of man and God”, then, is the end of education. Lose sight of this and your vision becomes jaundiced. “Even the best colleges,” Senior writes elsewhere, “such as the last survivors of the Great Books Movement where they read ‘the best that had been thought and said’, in Matthew Arnold’s phrase, suffer from a failure in finality, opting for what amounts to the position of the philosopher in Lessing’s myth who, when the gods offered him either truth or the search for truth, chose the search! Good as reading the Great Books is, even the best Great Books will fail without a certain rule of truth by which the conflicting ideas in the books can be judged true or false” (185-6, RCC). Truth and humility, then, need to be intimately connected, a theme Senior addressed in a fine short lyric.

In “The Other Window”, taken from his only published collection *Pale Horse, Easy Rider*, Senior contemplates the contents of two letters he has received in the morning post:

Two letters in the morning post  
dressed in blue and white.  
Who can tell which smiler most  
envelopes the day or night?

It is one of Senior’s – who seems to have been influenced above all by the seventeenth-century poet Robert Herrick – most elusive beginnings to a poem, despite the accessibility of its language, the elegance of its form (quatrains in a regular rhyming pattern but alternating and irregular meter) and the immediate appeal to emotion (the

colours of the envelopes, the mystery of their contents, the sense of anticipation in their being opened). There is the clever pun on “envelopes”, as the verb suggests the noun, a pun which as it does its work *in* the mind also does its work *on* the body, altering the rhythm as the emphasis slips from the second to the third syllable, and the deeper mystery suggested by “day or night” (as if these were two symbolic alternatives, the two possibilities offered respectively by the two letters, the two “windows” evoked by the poem’s title) starts to insinuate itself into our thinking about the everyday occurrence of receiving the morning mail.

The poem continues with a quotation from the first of the two letters:

“Dear Alum: The College needs etc.”  
and then the fiscal operative clause.  
This Dean sees, looking out his front *fenetre*,  
“Fighters for the Christian cause!”

Brave young leaders of tomorrow  
in business, medicine and law.”  
Conquistadors of sorrow  
building all that golden prophecies foresaw.

Notice the beautiful – and highly original – rhyme: “etc” and “fenetre”. *Fenetre* is of course the French for window, so the line returns us to a contemplation of the title, “The Other Window”. The deliberateness – the choiceness – of that word “fenetre” (why not “window”? we ask), plays off against the casual off-handedness of “etc” (“the usual spiel”, in other words). Here – I can hear myself saying to my students – is a perfect example of form *in-form*-ing content, as it does in all great poetry.

The poet is dismissive of the contents of this first letter – that is the least we can say about these lines. The choice of the French word for “window” suggests one or both of two things: that the Dean of Studies of the particular Catholic college asking for money is actually looking out a French-style window, or that he is pretentious, with as grandiose a vision of himself as he has of his college and what he claims it represents and produces – “brave young leaders of tomorrow / in business, medicine and law”.

The second and third stanzas, as such, give the poet’s impressions of one “window”, that through which the Dean of Studies looks, where Christian education has been reduced to its by-products, attractive and desirable as they may be, but by-products nonetheless. In all of this, the poet suggests, the “end” of education is being forgotten. “Fighters for the Christian cause, brave young leaders in business, medicine and law” – these are all noble things, the poet would no doubt agree, but are they the ultimate reasons for a Christian college? This is the as-yet implicit question the poet asks, although it is made explicit later.

Something essential is missing in all of this flighty optimism, the poet implies – and that something is revealed in the second part of the poem, which concerns, not the “fenetre”, but another very different – and we may deduce – humbler “window”, the *other* window of the poem’s title. After putting down the first letter, he picks up the second:

...just a note that said,  
“So sad, I hesitate to bother,  
but Margaret, my fiancée, is dead  
and I shall not recover.

I don't expect your consolation.  
All I want is that you know how hard  
it is to live without sensation,  
crawling towards my broken God.”

Just as the first letter is described in the space of two stanzas, so is the second, but what a difference! “Just a note” compared to the glories of the promotional letter... Less is certainly more, in this case. This other window includes, rather than “conquers”, sorrow, for it opens to reveal a field of vision – a vision of life – that incorporates the most acute awareness of human suffering and shows it to be essential to the Christian life rather than something *we* seek to “conquer” by our own efforts. It turns out, therefore, that “Conquistadors” is charged with irony. Rather than conquering sorrow through the end/less activity described (I choose the word deliberately), this end/less activity (albeit undertaken in the name of God and country), may actually prevent us from finding the true meaning of life. The second letter, it seems – an expression of pure, honest, heartfelt grief – contains something that the Dean of Studies, in his zeal for money and his triumphalist rhetoric has lost sight of: an awareness that Christianity is the religion of the defeated and the broken-hearted, a religion of the Cross and of the “broken God”. Without the Cross there is no Resurrection. Without the Cross there are only the placebo “joys” of endless human activity, the secondary triumphs of “business, medicine and law”; and the middle-class *frisson* of being a “fighter for the Christian cause” rather than actually living the Christian life, which is something infinitely more difficult and only possible because of the graces poured out on the Cross. So the lines contain an accusation – does the college that produces these supposed “leaders of tomorrow in business, medicine and law”, also produce an honest man like the writer of the second letter who, overwhelmed by grief, “crawls towards [his] broken God”?

This poem encapsulates Senior's view of education, scholarship and religion. He had no illusions about the state of the world or the modern Church – and, like all great Catholic souls, he suffered at the hands of both. Suffering and a truly Christian joy borne out of suffering inspired all that he did in the classroom. By all accounts he always kept the “end” of education – and the end of life – before his eyes. It is a curious phrase, “the end of life” – for “end” suggests both the final *point* and the *purpose*, that which animates – or should animate – all we do. Here is how *this* poem ends:

What is the end of education?  
What really is the seed we teachers sow?  
A crop of leaders for the Church and Nation,  
or the one outside the back window?

What is that “crop” outside the back window? It is left unstated, obviously, but I suspect that, advancing the theme of humility and suffering, the poet is here alluding to the Gospel of John, verses 12:20-36. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls

into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” This seems to be in keeping with the poem up to this point, contrasting as it has false optimism and triumphalism, on the one hand, with the genuine emotion of grief on the other. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies” – this, not pseudo “fighters for the Christian cause”, not “leaders in business, medicine and law”, is what produces much fruit. “A humble and contrite heart the Lord will not despise”. Something humble, unnoticed, so small and so terrible that we “hesitate to bother”, fearing our inability to communicate the mystery of grief, life and death.

In the early 1980s Senior his colleagues watched the dismantling of the Integrated Humanities program which had been in its own way (to use an ironic phrase made famous by a French archbishop) an “experiment in tradition”. Of course, this educational experiment was nothing other than the continuation of a tried-and-true approach to education: love beginning in wonder and – to paraphrase Robert Frost – ending in Wisdom. Over the ten years of the program a few hundred of the students sought instruction in the Catholic faith, inspired by the example of their professors; and, as stated earlier, some of these became contemplative monks at an ancient and renowned French abbey, Notre Dame de Fongombault, thereby bringing the program full circle: for in exposing students to the Great Books, the Program passed on to them works which had, in many cases, been saved and preserved in the Middle Ages – as had Europe itself – by contemplative monks.

Towards the end of his discussion of the Integrated Humanities Program, William Wisner gives a poignant example of the intimate connection between his education and his life. The work is haunted by the figure of his dead fiancée, which is highly suggestive in light of Senior’s poem. It is an appropriate point on which to end this paper. “I have noted”, Wisner writes,

that poetry can be an abyss, a sheer cliff of fall, refining and making exquisite the unbearable. Not so that it might be born, but that it might be named. So that when my parents confronted me on October 17, 1986, with news that my fiancée Barbara Erickson had died suddenly of bulimia in Ashland, Oregon, I knew that there was only one possible text equal to the unacceptable, unspeakable news. With that strange, invincible imperiousness I always had with my parents, I motioned them to sit down, and, tears staining my cheeks, went to the library there in our Seattle home. I read out to them then, from my copy of the Pelican Shakespeare, the entire final act of King Lear, in which the great King carries the body of his beloved daughter onstage, questions the possibility that she could be gone, and dies himself of a broken heart. The numbers of Shakespeare’s most fearful work – in which the great chain of being finally snaps – recounted my own bewilderment, which I have never lost; his attempt to encompass and reconcile the unendurable.

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What really is the seed we teachers sow?  
A crop of leaders for the Church and Nation,  
or the one outside the back window?*

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