



LIMINAL SURVEYS



a voiceHOUSE experience

Ah, that spectral October fog, there it hung under a buckshot holiday of stars- shimmers above the haze- this is the evening of our first hibernial whispers. Cool air descending polar on its descent from the north, vanguard winds barely kissing the ground. Evidenced by cloudy mists, thick. Intimations of February, March- ice capped and frozen, layers of wool and a bucket of salt.

This is also the evening of my three-year-old boy's first nightmare. Can you hear him in the dark? "Don't eat me!" cast forth from a sepulchral distance- across the hall- piercing, as if he knelt upon a final altar, deep in the catacombs, a single votive candle, desperate. He cries out again, "Don't eat me!" My god- if only he knew the teeth of Kali waiting for his flesh, her necklace of skulls, the pools of blood like molasses. Or maybe he does? What if he's seen her with mouth open wide, gnashing bones and entrails? My god. I gasp, now, reflecting on the possibility. There's no telling the depth of his visions. And in fact I suspect his visions do contain archetypal deities, being so young and so close to the unconscious undergrowth of mankind's pneuma, only possessing an incipient ego, a weak architecture of selfness- a little boy who's barely crossed those mighty liminal transitions which distinguish illusory personhood from a frothing sea of indefinite 'being'- of course he yelped in anguish.

Here- he bursts on pajama'd feet in a glide into our room full of terror, tears. At the foot of our bed. I blink. Too tired to sympathize, to acknowledge his suffering heart. Too tired to accept the moment, accept the circumstances that I am his father and caretaker and am rightfully tasked to address his needs, that it is my duty to answer the bell. Too lazy to consider his evolving imagination- to appreciate his blossoming cortical structures which might be developing strange, new nodes- that his newfound psychic powers which tonight (for the first of many foggy midnights to come) have betrayed him. Unsympathetic. Lacking. Unworthy. Lazy. I am called to sainthood yet mired in sin, mortal and selfish dumbstupid, oblivious- here and now, upon reflection, I excoriate myself "You damned fool! You cold little nub of a soul! You are no more mystic than a rusted woodscrew! No more enlightened than a toilet plunger!" In truth, I am nothing but a mortal, a man- worn out by a day's work asleep in bed, vexed by an ephemeral world- my limitations, this nagging inadequacy which hollows my insides out, which lays me bare, naked with my inabilities- my short tempers and my muttered curses and trite pride, my vanity, my allegiance to false prophets, my fatuous contrivances, my adherence to this narrow viewpoint of mine, a viewpoint curated by a wounded animal- there is no hope, save for prayers. Save for grace. Exposed. Utterly exposed.

I pull him into bed- he's wearing a t-shirt and underwear, like his daddy.

"Jesus, what's the matter?"

He doesn't respond.

Kali haunts his bones.

Visions of doom.

Lo, it is only the beginning. My poor boy. A man with a mind that will forever betray him, untethered and swinging monkey tail'd. A mind that will swell with madnesses like storage lockers overfilled with junkpile concepts and judgments and *'Well here's what I think.'*

Begrudgingly I tuck him in next to me. "Close your eyes. Go back to sleep."

I am consumed in an instant, head on pillow- woken up by the idea of tomorrow, of what do next, what box check- obligations like urine bucket latrines to be emptied out as my lifeless arms reach down and dump his little kid toilet bowl full of bright yellow piss into the big kid toilet for flush and for decency- if I forget it will pestiferate all day in the sunlight. Premonitions of work email responses spell checked then SEND then onto the next. A vague fog- the future. Things to do. Reasons to act busy.

My wife, she briefly tosses about and says, "We should have bought him that nightlight," insinuating vaguely it's my fault and my thrifty pettiness has led us to this unforeseen conundrum- this 3AM awakening.

My son rests quietly in between us, under the sheets, he glows warm and radiating his blood pulses on fire- alive. Full of dreams. Full of potency. Present. Terrified.

I inhale, somewhere else- vague- like a rectangular bit of dark chocolate melting between teeth onto tongue as neurons fire olfactory then frontal lobe, sensation to language like a blindfolded donkey tail wandering about to parse out distinct flavors- a hint of leather, an aftertaste of tangerine, coffee bean- bourgeois stupidity while the outlines recede. Tomorrow. The future.

I rotate on my side to face the wall.

My back to my son.

My wife, over there- I can sense the buzzing of her thought patterns- humming vicissitudes- I know them well, they resemble my own embittered stupidities. Her list of grievances arranged and inspected in order: the kids waking up too early, not getting enough sleep; challenged by another long day of cleaning up messes around the kitchen table, our toddler who sprays puréed mangos over chairs and countertops like a geyser; that out-of-date kitchen, too small, too cramped; that last batch of bananas turned rotten too quickly; too much unsaturated fat on the label; how could you forget to leave the silicon plates on the counter to dry after running them through the dishwasher; my damn lazy brother, at home playing video games rooting on a student loan relief bill,

another bum who won't commit to a job like a regular person so he claims disability and now the state will incentivize him to never work again; while I'm glued to a computer in the office the next two days, burdened by meetings and presentations and deliverables; more paperwork to transfer the kids to a new doctor's office because our current doctor is completely non responsive and why is it so hard to find a half-way decent provider; can you hear those mice still scampering in the attic, another exterminator's invoice in the mail; my period is so heavy right now, the last thing I want to do is fuck you; there's a Prop 65 Warning pasted onto the fabric softener box so tomorrow I have to throw it away; the department store ran out of the shorts I wanted; there's hardly any gas in the tank and the prices keep going up.

I unhitch my eyelids.

Instinctively I reach to check my phone. 3:07AM- a squint in the bluelight like a keyhole. Another tunnel forms. Runnels branch. Paranoiac sunken lanes in my brain, my wife's brain- one day, in my son's brain. What an inheritance!

Mighty mankind, civilized and modernized into a neurotic 21st century, a generation birthed into a world with her lid nailed shut- holding cells, entombed from birth- walled off by hegemonic materialistic schemes. Closed in by gamma sterilized cellophane wrap, obsessed with electron orbitals. Busy assembling television antennae to quantify the cosmic microwave background. Fidgeting with calculator batteries and Geiger counters. Authors of complex tomes exalting this body of flesh, this rotting fly ridden bloat of graveyard heap like it's the whole ballgame. Oh this physicalist confusion of ours, imprisoned cranial.

My poor boy, he sighs, his hand rests on my shoulder as if to whisper "I know it can't be avoided, Daddy" because his suffering is imminent his hang ups are coming his complications are growing and there's nothing I can do, he is bound to his cross as I am to my own- this is the world we have created, together.

Terrifying.

Beautiful.

Is it a punishment? Are we paying for the sins of our fathers, back to the beginning of Adam's disobedience and Eve's beauty?

Whatever it is, it's in our head.

It's in my head.

It's in your head.

It only takes a single realization to leave it behind, a shift- it happens, now- my son adjacent to me, joined next to me, my wife next to him- alive- a voice unheard because it is unspoken and doesn't sound like anything, different from the voice in my head- a voice outside of me, but inside of me. *Love him.*

My wife's insanity- *Love her.*

My own idiocy- *Love yourself.*

Kali approaches- "Listen buddy, everything will be alright. You're safe, okay?"

I kiss his cheek.

What else?

Lie, and hush an unsettled heart.

Maybe the lie will turn out true.

Maybe we'll never know.

Either way, in the morning, he'll wake up and pinch my wife's cheek and whisper, "My fingers are kissing you, Mommy." I'll gaze over at her and catch a particularly brilliant sparkle in her eyes- for a moment, both of us will be cured. The breathtaking innocence. The heartbreaking beauty of this mystery. I'll smile, enamored by my son and my wife, creation and creator- the Shroud of Turin laminated between weepy bus station exhaust fumes.

So terrifying.

So beautiful.

So simple.

My son- an innocent confronted by the night, his eyes like his mother's and he's here, he's a being having an experience, experiencing each moment of this like us, with us, he's feeling and witnessing and living a life, a life which I am entrusted to protect so dawning on me with particular immensity I nearly well up in tears, melt into cordate pools.

Love him.

He's alive. He's with us. This is it.

We're all each other has.

Love is the only logical response.

The nightmares are over, for now.

--

We are fools pretending to be immortals, gods.

Pretending death will never find us.

Like the birds' pointed beaks will miss their target of our scattered corpses.

And the singular truth of death- that life requires death- is no truth to hide from or deny. It is no truth to fear. It is a deliverance- deliver us from ignorance, from evil. Deliver us from our false conceptions. When we look out from ourselves convinced we see flesh, see bodies, see holes- activated by desire- we lose touch with our death, with the truth of life.

Our bodies are casings for starlight.

Perhaps we dropped down into this plane of reality, slid headfirst from an astral Elysium, and are indentured here to toil in confusion, convinced we aren't born of magic. So here we are. Tricking ourselves. Mucking around. Gods, pretending we are fools. Like there is a beginning and an end. Like this isn't a game. Like we're somebody- a body. Like there are divisions. Like there are

individuals. Like there's nothing deeper, heavier happening all around us- like we have it figured out.

There are moments I can make out a particular quality of light inside that hard chrysalis, winking out from their eyes- there's a connecting force inside of them. A beacon along a rocky coast. A light which attracts my attention- which calls out to me, inviting me. I identify with it. Same as me. Same as everybody. Starlight.

Hiding out.

Having a lark.

--

We, as parents, are to blame.

Even the occasional observer of small children (children in the ages between one and four, to be more specific than 'small') should be able to easily identify the self-interested, self-preserving elements of their behavior. Nature prescribes for selfishness- it predisposes and promotes ego development. Children learn how to draw attention to themselves. Acquire resources. Earn praise. Dabble in condemnation. Attention, in any form, is a prize. And children are dedicated, essentially, to drawing their parents' attention. From an evolutionary perspective, it makes for good business. Children of that age require nearly every resource from their parents- food, safety, shelter, warmth, water, healthcare, etc. They are born to acquire. It is their only chance for survival.

I have observed the manipulative powers of a two-year old, in action, and have fallen prey to such wiles on several occasions. His execution was clinical- narcissistic and exact. He was completely unbound by context, by consideration, by conscience- unfettered, he operated freely from a position of self-interest. And he succeeded, completely. He deployed his stratagem, and connected an unrealized desire to an actualized reality.

And to some extent, it is healthy for this dynamic to proceed along these lines. As parents, we are responsible for our children's well-being and ought to provide those necessary essentials. We ought to do our best. We ought to be attentive and receptive to our children's signals and needs.

However, we also ought to help balance our children's expectations of the world around them.

Specifically: if selfishness is the baseline for every developing human's behavior, and the final aim is to develop into a mature person of character (that is, unselfish, conscientious, community oriented), then what is required is a systematic program aimed at rewiring the inherent tendencies of that early developing brain. Here are the basic steps to maturity, as far as I can tell:

We are born.
We grow into selfish children, with burgeoning egos.
Our egos solidify, shine in our teenage years.
Then we are torn down, deconstructed.
The super-egoic functions of our psyche vie for control.
We continue to grow along those lines.
We are transformed into decent adults.
We care less and less about ourselves.
We become elderly saints.
All is well, tears and flower day.

With that in mind- do we (I include myself, a guilty party), as modern parents, offer our children any tools or lessons or behaviors to model which might at least plant the seeds of rewriting that inherent programming? I will report my findings. We are incessant picture snappers; we are compulsive recorders of videos; we store the documents, the photographs, the clips, on hard drives and cloud infrastructures; and the 'best' ones, those are posted to social media and shared with friends and family. We do this to the point where such activity nearly becomes a full-time occupation, acting as documentarians of our children's lives. And we perform these tasks with ruthless diligence, as if it were a duty, as if there were nothing more valuable than compiling a vast digital archive that records even the most mundane elements of their existence.

Social media- the apotheosis of narcissism (ironically a disease of childhood, like violence or nationalism or war- a neurosis of clear origin).

Social media- where we, ourselves, become the objects of our own interest.

Social media- our age, our culture, our playground.

And our children- our babies, brought up in an environment where image procurement is the priority, who are inculcated with values of "Stop! Smile! I need to take another picture, hold on. Let me see it. It's no good. Stand up straight! Let me fix your collar. We need to get it right, need to make it look good"- what chance could they ever possibly have at decency? We have doomed them from the start. We add fuel to raging egoic fires- or rather, we reinforce egoic architectures (already quite sturdy) with more rebar steel and concrete. More look at me.

Look at me.

Look at me.

Look at me.

Not to mention, amidst this dizzying click snap post, we avoid teaching our children life's most fundamental lesson- to experience the present moment. No, our behavior condones quite the opposite. Instead, we preach of gospel of neglect- forget the

actual living of life, instead commit yourself to procurement of images. Our concerns are solely focused on qualifiers, the elements of the image- how we view ourselves and how others will view us. "Let me see the picture. Jesus. Look at how dumb my smile looks." Our three-year old nearby, listening. Absorbing.

From being to appearing.

And in a twisted way, we forget to even enjoy the company of our children, to cherish the other elements of their nature (warmth, tenderness, naivete, purity) which can transform our own lives away from selfish stupidity.

Do you understand the problem?

Can you see where this is headed?

FaceBook parenting. Likes. Comments.

Has anyone considered the psychic ramifications? Has anyone asked themselves the question of how all this button pushing, scrolling, light filtering, reposting- how it all might impact our children's personalities, their development, their view of the world and their place in it? Are we setting them up for success? Are we successful?

--

FUCK THE ESTABLISHMENT.

DISCONNECT ALL INTERNETS.

QUESTION EVERYTHING.

--

Handshakes. Hello. The weather. The home team.

Melville's "punctilious externals."

Conventions provide a structure for us to glom onto, a place for us to meet- a cabin in a fierce wilderness backcountry.

But we are not meant to stay long.

We are meant to go further.

Together.

Yet here we are.

Stagnating- we refuse to depart. Instead of adventure, we adopt avatars and character limits. Free shipping. Quarterly numbers. More small talk.

Society's once useful norms have been transformed, have enabled us to become casual strangers with our parents, our sons and daughters, our best friends. Attached to cell phones, eyes down- we are losing the skills to make it in the backcountry. Our technology continues to evolve along these lines- a jolt of dopamine, a new post, a ten second video- distracted, unable to chart a course.

If we lose access to the depth of our soul, our mystery- we will lose sight of the mystery contained within all we meet.

This isn't a woman pouring coffee- this is a string of karmic waves, this is the daughter to immigrant parents, this is a survivor of sexual molestation, this is a student of Zen, this is a miracle.

We miss so much.
We don't press on.

--

I dreamt myself inside Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Room, *Love is Calling*. Absorbed in coral neon and polka dots. Mirrors, a view into the eternal. Duplicates of duplicates trailing off along wild mirages of distance. A smile on my face. My children in tow. Kusama's installations are pleasant experiences- whimsical, colorful, soft, inviting, and expansive. Her creations are physical, yet dreamlike. Typically, when confronted by the exponential, we become overwhelmed, afraid. I've peeked down into vast psychic chasms while under the influence of psilocybin only to grimace, paralyzed by fear. Locked in bedroom closets for hours. But Kusama grants us safe passage to approach infinity with a sense of insouciance.

In my dream, a museum usher motioned me outside the exhibition cube. I walked away past the queue of art freaks waiting for their claim: forty-five seconds to encounter the sublime.

Such encounters are often limited to the natural world- to National Parks, to waterfalls and summits, to hoodoo landscapes at dusk. But Kusama's magic is her ability to transcend the man-made fabrications, integral to her process, and create a similar experience, as if you were embedded in an intricate jungle biome south of the Equator. Her work engages her audience beyond pleasantries, however. It's not enough to see a picture of one of her installations. You have to be there, in the room, the clock ticking. Embedded.

But it's more than being physically present which creates the unique atmosphere. It's that element of limitation that enhances the experience. You're allotted a finite quantum of time- usually a minute or less, depending on her instructions. The ephemerality amplifies the experience for each participant- you're more than a viewer, you're part of a story- you're waiting, you're entering, you're an inhabitant in her world, interacting, then exiled.

There are as many reactions as there are kinds of people who walk through one of her installations. I took the following notes after my first encounter (in the physical plane) with Kusama's work:

- *There is an invitation to be present precisely because a timer is set, then expires. You're coerced into it. You try to soak it in. Then the door opens. You step forward with anticipation, excited. But I think Kusama is extending the invitation- for us to be excited, and to remain present outside the room in the moments and spaces afterwards.*
- *Restriction is natural, innate- it hones experience.*
- *The finite and the infinite are indistinguishable. Infinity lives in every finite moment; the boundaries between the two*

are contrived. You can expand in either direction, consciously.

I couldn't help but interpret Kusama's restriction as a kind of admonition- she's nudged us to question our own decisions and discipline, our own boundaries, and limitations. We have instant access, anywhere, anytime, to an infinite world- via our smart phones or computers or tablets or microchip arrays. Infinite content. Infinite inputs. Infinite purchases. Infinite possibilities. At our disposal in front of us, our portals technological- wired together across space, across time, across imaginations- an infinite web. But technology, the internet, modernity- it has stolen away lifetimes. We have wasted millions of years of energy on social media, on mindless celebrity gossip, on sports, on streaming videos- alone- gazing off into the digital infinitude.

But you can't access Kusama's Infinity Rooms at your pleasure.

You can't linger in them any longer than she allows.

She forces you to confront a boundary.

To submit.

There's a poem Kusama wrote called 'Residing in a Castle of Shed Tears' and chose to display outside the installation. The opening lines read, "When the time comes around for people to encounter the end of their life/ having put on years, death seems to be quietly approaching/ It was not supposed to be my style to be frightened of that, but I am."

Death is the final boundary, the outline of life.

Whether we like it or not, we will all submit.

It incites fear, excitement. Kusama made a career out of redefining boundaries- but even *that* boundary remains overwhelming for her.

Its potency allows for transformation.

An oak sapling climbs towards the sun out of a black earth.

Cells fuse zygotic amidst the turmoil of intercourse.

We live in a world where boundaries are being erased. Globalization is erasing the notion of regions, of cultures, of heritage. Capitalism is erasing the notions of individuality. Liberalism is erasing gender, the structures that had previously defined family and community. There is certainly merit in egalitarianism, but if there are no boundaries, if there are no categories, if there are no criteria- a uniform, flat, homogenous, neutered mess.

Real or imagined, boundaries create restriction, and restriction is the essential element required for the creation of art, for the expression of beauty. Restriction is form. It is distillation. It is the process of shifting focus from the infinite to the finite, yet maintaining the essence of infinity. It is a disciplined process of revealing the infinite within the finite- an artist worthy of merit possesses an ability to express the inchoate in a

vivid and real way, to hold the ungraspable. To relate the inexpressible.

Further along in her poem, Kusama asks, "Was the beauty of the end of one's life nothing more than an illusion?"

Substitute the word 'boundary' for 'beauty.'

Boundaries define how we see the world.

When we change how we see boundaries, we change our world.

--

For a young person, swollen like a wave, tidal and rising on the pull of lunar gravitations- when you have so much in front of you, so much possibility yet to be sluiced out into actuality- during those vibrant initial phases of life the concept of *the future* acts to enhance *the present*. The future is the reason why you're doing what you're doing today. *The future* thrusts meaning upon the present- it is an abstraction that allows you to imbue everything around you with importance. Young people are working towards different achievements, approaching then passing thresholds- applying to college, establishing a partnership with another person, honing a skill, developing a career, moving out of the house. Constantly in the process of pointing towards the next step, one step closer towards what can be seen (mistaken) as an outcome. Further. Onward. Results driven. Young people are crapulous with targets, aims, goals- full of quixotic notions and unafraid to chase the dawn, hanging shadows on the darkest of nights musing "Who needs the moon?" Full of moxie, false pride, belief- dedicated to a process and possessing an inherent faith in that process' ability to manifest a more desirable future.

In my experience, and based on what I've observed, the horizon of time appears this way in the early stages of a human life. Maybe it's a cultural norm- maybe it has to do with our 'report card mindset' as it pertains to the education system in America, maybe it has to do with how we occupy our young peoples' energy- sports, hobbies, classrooms- recitals, games, tournaments. It's a Western trip, an American corpocapitalistic market economy trip, a Prosperity Gospel trip, a Puritan Work Ethic trip. It's the kitchen table question trip, "What are you going to do with your degree?" It's the Manhattan happy hour "How much was your bonus this quarter?" trip. There's always something to do- so why not be the person to go do it?

Whatever the cause, the concept of *the future* amplifies the present, it burdens the present with a heightened emotional valence.

The future is going to make everything worth it.

A justification.

A place for optimism.

But as you tack on years, as you move through your life and begin to realize that there is a finitude to your days- you change. Cold

autumn wind shakes the leaves, red sugar maples are denuded. After your aspirations are achieved- you're married, you're promoted, you own a home, you have children- the targets shift, the aims broaden- eat healthy, sleep more regularly, spend more time with family, make more memories worth cherishing, be quiet and still, walk outside. With only the slightest reflection, you understand how the seasons of your life have transitioned, how your personality has shifted and altered and finally calcified- and you are who you consider yourself to be. There aren't any more 'next steps.' There's only variables, luck, and time. The externals matter less and less. You've developed an intuition. You follow an internal guide.

And amidst these adjustments, these insights- your relationship with *the future* necessarily changes. Any conceptions of the future become colored with a different kind of emotional valence.

If the future is no longer a justification of the present, a bountiful harvest out there in distant fields- then what is it?

On the one hand, *the future* becomes an adversary. It represents a real, unavoidable, actual moment and place and reality and truth in which you will no longer be present. You will not be alive. You'll be gone. It is frightening, in many ways. An unconquerable foe.

On the other hand, death can act as a liberator, it can engender a boundless freedom. Because if there is a future without you present and accounted for, then that future will necessarily nullify all your worries, all your health problems, all your hang ups, all your concerns, all your pettiness and drama. The future is a looming leviathan that will eventually, on your last mortal day with your eyelids closing upon a final sunrise, erase any sense of the present.

So a paradox emerges.

As with any paradox, tensions arise. When death is considered, in relation to *the future*, a question becomes critical: if everything will be nullified when the apocalypse strikes, if you disappear as if you never existed, everyone you ever loved everything you ever did- gone- then what is the point? Tears and rainclouds? Why go on with this trifling, this trivial nonsense?

Adulthood, more or less, is the story of working amidst this tension and these questions.

But to craft together a path of integrity, you can no longer resort to old techniques. You can no longer operate from causation, from logic, with teenage dictation like, "*If I am accepted into a US News Report Top 100 University and study electrical engineering and join a fraternity, I'll be able to take over my old man's business and end up with a decent wife who can cook and clean and between the two of us we'll earn enough money to afford three or*

four kids." Conditionals, rationalizations- they crumble in the face of paradox.

Your only move is to shift to the heart.

Undoubtedly, accepting the fact of death is the most complicated issue any one of us will confront. But if carried out with grace, it can germinate a levity that only the saints carry, that only the most centered and beautiful are able to reside within. It's the levity of heart- of embrace.

Embracing the paradox.

It's either everything, or nothing.

Or both.

--

*Old Abram Brown is dead and gone
You'll never see him more
He used to wear a long brown coat
That button'd up before
And on his feet two silver sho'on
And buckles by the score
Old Abram Brown is dead and gone
Never, never, never more.*

--

A handsome couple with an obvious ardor shared between them, gleeful, on public display. I watch this vigorous pair mosey through the rows of Tiger lilies, violent lilacs. Young. Well-dressed. Healthy. Springtime, a Bloom Festival- my children in a stroller, my wife a couple paces ahead.

A subtle grin unhinges across my face. Twenty, thirty years from now. I hear him, in the driver's seat of a car- "I can't smell a thing with all that goddamn perfume you're wearing!" I hear her, a widow, decades after his death from an unexpected infarct, a glass of warm gin in her hand- "Shit. I don't like much anymore, but I do like to cuss."

Oh the places you'll go.

It's remarkable that given the course of our lives, the unexpected permutations, the odd directional shifts, the chance happenings, the unplanned interventions- the coincidences- given all the variables we could never hope to account for- how sure of *the future* we become. How convinced we are of our abilities to prognosticate.

We take so much for granted.

Remember the temple of Apollo at Delphi, the inscribed maxims:
Know thyself. Nothing to excess. Certainty brings ruin.

Certainty brings ruin.

It brings insanity.

It brings disappointment.

It brings a reckoning.

I'll live in this town with so and so and have this many kids and work at this job and make this much money and live until I'm ninety or so and have my mind and my body in good shape and leave my kids a decent inheritance and take plenty of vacations and spend plenty of time reading and so on and so on...

For the most part, each of us believes in a narrative which resembles the italicized paragraph above.

And that's only the 'positives.'

When it comes to 'negatives,' we consider ourselves experts at identifying the next hurdle on our metaphorical tracks, the next calamity. We concoct ridiculous scenarios and foresee hypothetical disasters- broken necks from a slip on the ice, swallowed medicine capsules resulting in overdose seizures, choking episodes on breakfast eggs or loose battery packs, cancers and rare blood disorders. We take pleasure in this anxiety over events and situations still unreal- oh how we revel in our imaginary stressors. But the fact is, when disaster hits, whatever it is, wherever the Reaper appears- you won't see him coming down the road. The scythe cuts through the air, silent.

Death, life.

Coming, going.

What do we really know?

There are moments I feel like Neptune in his solar apogee- wandering, lost, an exile. An equinox passed, crossed over, so now darkness prevails.

There are moments I wish to be a widower. I do. I'm ashamed to admit it. But I'd like to be able to work through a line of thought uninterrupted. I prefer to be alone more often than not. I am a lonesome, contented person. I don't effectively communicate my internal world externally. It takes me a long time to clarify my thoughts and emotions. I am scared to offer up my honest appraisals of situations, of people. I'm terrified of being exposed. For whatever reason I have developed like a tortoise, as far as my psychic life is concerned- partly my Irish Catholic upbringing, partly my innate genetic programming- no matter the causes I recognize this is my style of navigating within the social realm, so far as being a human is concerned. Perhaps I'm stunted, emotionally. Perhaps I'm a sociopath. It's who I am, whatever it is. And because of it, I don't thrive in the constant company of others.

Yet here I am, a middle-class upper-management run-of-the-mill father with a family, a wife and two children. Beholden to them. Adhered to them, their emotional swings, their moods, their ideas, their needs and wants and desires. I'm trapped. There are days that haunt me, and I mope around turgid with self-pity. Though they are fewer and further between, they continue to occur.

I try my best to commemorate who I was, where I had been.

Ten years ago, this life of mine was unfathomable.

I lived in a continual state of narcotic buzz. I loathed the American dream, or anyone who believed in it. I hated any kind of adherents to any kind of system, believers and non-believers alike. I was bankrupt- financially, emotionally, morally. I was disgusting. I cursed. I slept on a basement couch. I was lazy. I exhausted lifetimes as a prodigal in front of televisions. I cheated honest citizens out of their money. I took unnecessary risks. I acted upon most every impulse. I was undisciplined. I was tortured. I pounded on typewriters. I pretended to be a musician. I drank in dusty barrooms with gaunt alcoholic women, much older than me, who told stories about their lost, rakish boyfriends. I saw ghosts. I was convinced I'd witness the apocalypse, firsthand. I drifted between concert venues, chasing a feeling, chasing a sound, chasing something to force me out of myself.

Oh the places you'll go.

If there's one thing I've learned, never rule out the possibility of anything. Anything is possible, anyone can change, and until you're dead and gone nothing is final.

--

Morning- a cup of canyonic Kilowatt Coffee **Buzzin' Hard Since '91**, black with no sugar, an earthy, sky mesa blend best enjoyed after unsheathing a blade and running it along a whetstone- forget your floral varietals, forget your hint of plumb, forget your anaerobic Ethiopian preparations, forget your blooms, Leopold, forget your timers and scales- mix in the chicory root of the hickory bark, the red clay dirt, and brew it strong. An honest beginning to the day- you feel tough, dockyard waterfront tough, hands tucked into a pair of faded denim pockets tough. One gulp and straight to a plastic public restroom- pulsing cloacae- instantaneous- then, returning to your campfire, a tin cup warm against your palm, the dew glistens- a sharp thought, camping at Shenandoah Park in November- *I am alive*. Alive like fiddle music foot stomping "Cold mountain air is all around me/ Cold mountain streams twist through my veins" in an Appalachian hollow, arm in arm- alive and a deep breath and another sip. Alive.

--

A grove of eastern hemlocks, seemingly benign, along a northern loop of the trail- they've beaten out the pines, walnuts, for sunlight and water and nutrients- they've survived a plague of woolly adelgids- my initial thought. Typical of a Darwinian ecologist, a Western materialist, a Cartesian dualist, a competition freak vying to win at any cost to conquer markets to saturate indices to earn tax breaks- winners, Americans- that's our dyadic construct, we see the world divided into two categories, winners and losers, desperately obsessed to avoid any

association with the latter- a nation of masochists- root on our home team, bring home the hardware, destroy the bad guys.

An unassuming patch of gymnosperms. You don't hear them conspiring to stab a Norway maple as we pass through the understory- there are no vanities of empire or highway trade on their tongues. They aren't questioning their neighbors' fitness - they're living. Five hundred years. Alive. Present. Content. Content to have grown from bundled cone to sapling, inching apical in one place moment by moment face to face with eternity, sunlight in their eyes. They haven't beaten anyone. They're not concerned with doctoral theses on seed dispersal strategies or chromosomal maps. There's no victory for them to claim, other than their vertical actuality. Perhaps this is the secret to their longevity? Old age brings wisdom.

I stop to admire them, acknowledge them. I reconsider my initial reaction. There is no need for congratulations. A humble 'hello' will suffice.

--

Fungal- caps emerge from the soil, from fallen trees and decaying bark- a feast of death, an exchange, digesting substrate, fruiting bodies- mycelium highways bored through earth, tunnels like marching intruders on the orders of destroying angels- life from death, and back to death.

--

My brother at the altar, his radiant bride beside him.

I glanced over my shoulder back at my mother and in an instant, under the stained-glass windows, alongside the buttresses and elegant stonework, I felt the terminal ephemerality of everyone present. A vision reflected back at me through the light of my mother's eyes, as if through a mystic prism- a finality- a vast, empty space- one day I would lose her, we would lose her and she would be gone and there was no reason to suspect we would ever see her again.

Within this beautiful moment, an echo inside of a cave.

Petals fall to the ground.

The stalks of little flowers sere, then crumble.

Veils- bridal or burial, no difference- before life and behind death.

I looked upon my brothers, my sister- I would lose them too.

My beloved wife, my treasured children- I would be robbed of them, in anguished goodbyes not of my designation, my acquiescence, not according to any plans. My beauties would be stolen from me. Gone. Everyone gathered together here would die- the rich and the haughty, the proud and the strong. The most beautiful, the smartest- boxed up and settled into the earth.

Everyone I'd ever met.

Everyone I'd ever loved.

Everything which had blessed my life would abandon me.
The tragic sadness of losing these people we love- it's a wonder we don't cry more than we do. Delayed, lifetimes in bittersweet airport terminals.
I shed a tear, in silence, exhaling laboriously while the lectern announced her way through the First Reading.
Proverbs 31.
It's a terror to sit in the final awful truth of it.
The unknown.
Asphyxiation.
But then, a breath inward. An affirmation. Before the doors are closed, before Last Rites are performed- united, in moments like these, in a chapel present for a ceremonial binding, according to traditions carried on for thousands of years, generation after generation- my kid brother married to the woman of his dreams- my family, together, healthy, smiling- "Cherish it." A voice whispers- my grandmother's or my grandfather's, a chorus of fathers and mothers before them- the whisper grows into a rumble, deepens, reverberates inside the chapel of my heart- "Cherish it."
I wear brown eyes, like my mother, like my grandmother before her. She might still be here with us.
Proverbs 31- the first reading at my grandmother's funeral. The same first reading I was asked to recite, alone at the lectern, that crowd of weeping faces before me.
In tears there is sorrow, but there is happiness too.
I know it's going to be over one day, and I don't know what happens after- whether eternal nothing doornail darkness, or a shimmering cherubic eternity- but that's what makes right now so special.
The space between breathing in and out.
The space where faith is born.
And though it's fleeting, it's all we have. It's all we are. It's what all of this is about- a moment between breaths. Life is the space we the living maintain- it is a space beyond the reach of death, it is a space beyond the shadow of darkness.
It is a space for hope- hope for our children, hope for our story, hope that we're much more beautiful than we afford ourselves credit for. Hope that whatever stuff is inside of me is the same as the stuff inside of you- soul, spirit, love energy, light- whatever it is- if it's in both of us, then there lies a deeper vision than what we're granted access to with our eyes. A unity more perfect, and more complicated, more astounding, than we could possibly imagine. Hope that our light will forever outshine the vast, empty darkness- the light of my daughter's smile, of my brother's hand on my shoulder, of my wife's lips. Hope that this is the light which binds us.
This life is a miracle.
This dream is made of light.

This breath is all of ours, a breath of spirit, breathing together.

--

Tortured in a sleepless pre-dawn. Regrets like bonfires on the shoreline, marauders. Residues like yellow algae bubbling unctuous on the sand. Your sins burn brightest in the dark, they reveal their contours most perfectly in a sooty blackness. Lifetimes of 'forget.' But not forgotten. Ghosts are born, but can never die. Here you are, alone with yourself, confronted by the truth of yourself which is a haunted truth that cannot be erased. Nobody warns you. Old men don't bounce grandchildren on their lap and dole out admonitions like "You'll look back and remember only your worst mistakes"- what beaming youth could believe them? Would want to believe them? Who with their crooked grin, their Hershey's chocolate, soccer practices, mathematics textbooks, which of my children could understand a painting like Jackson Pollock's *The Deep* or Georgia O'Keefe's *The Black Place*? We do not stumble upon the abyss- we pickax into a dry earth, slowly.

O'Keefe wandered the badlands and wrote to her husband that she found the landscape imbued with his presence. If she knew the depths of those unseen voids, those cavernous tunnels and box canyons, and still found worthiness, even beauty- in him- then perhaps there is hope that light will break.

--

Tdough teech tdough teech- second hand clockwork jostling, back from a cigarette break- my right palm divots into a stubbled cheek- my tongue clicks- when's intermission due? Thumb and forefinger, my left hand, pressed into my eyelids, semicircle sweeps- 2022 *DAY OF UNDERSTANDING: DISPELLING THE NOTION OF 'NORMAL'*- sent from the office- absent minded, I had opened the email. I read it. At first glance the invitation appears benign, an 'awareness session' to learn about various neurological and psychological conditions that people struggle with like depression and anxiety and social awkwardness and the Asperger spectra, to appreciate the diversity across the human species with respect to cognitive functioning. Yes, we ought to be considerate, to aim for understanding- peace and love and charity, these beatitudes are built in sacred architectures atop a foundation of understanding. Understanding allows us to walk a mile in another man's shoes, sympathy and compassion- even if it's understanding by acknowledging a gap in understanding, addition by subtraction, defining a concept by contrasting it to another- even if we can't fit into the shoes, we can try to imagine what it might be like. Understanding enhances our capacity to imagine, to simulate, to dream.

Don't most people fight viciously to be understood? Yes sir. The idea seems alright to me.

For a moment.

Until a realization. Because when such an endeavor becomes scripted, falls under executive management's direction, when there's a timeslot assigned, when it takes place inside of a virtual meeting room, when it's part of a wider global initiative, when you're forced to click a button to 'raise your hand'- any exercises intended to build sympathy or compassion are neutered. Turned insidious. Pressure- my eyeballs into my head- a purple, amorphous static, fractal and shifting- the afterpop of fireworks above a darkened horizon- flashbulb lights at 4AM in the attic crawlspace chasing a family of mice- I balk. I withdraw my support. So what happens between the intention and the execution? Why doesn't a *DAY OF UNDERSTANDING* achieve its aim?

Because we're forced into participation. We're trading hours for money- digital signatures, escalation alerts, emergency phone calls, performance reviews- so why pretend? Why pretend like I'm here to do anything other than make money? Why can't you (insert name of your preferred corporate overlord here) pay me to simply work? What gives you the right to think you can help me 'understand' the world any better, because of a PowerPoint slide you've filled with animations and uplifting quotes acquired by a string of Google searches? By trying to 'embrace the human element' you've bastardized my humanity! You've forced me to participate in this farce, a cheap piece of performance art. You've reminded me how trite, how stupid, how useless trying to be 'more understanding' is in a corporate environment! The inherent antagonisms are revealed in this 'pretending'- revealed, and I am respond to the phony charade like a dragon who snorts through a pair of pointed nostrils. So- harumph- instead of trying to be more empathetic, more compassionate, now I'm going to click ACCEPT and curse you in the secret heart of my woes. I'm going to scroll through my phone until I leave for lunch. I'm going to reject any notions of a benevolent Creator. I'm going to curse myself for not choosing English as my undergraduate major, for binge watching television to pass through another February, for selling myself short- for whoring myself out for dollar bills.

Forced to submit. Forced to comply. Forced into pretending, into keeping up the show: this non-stop show of putting on a show of selling and buying fictions, showing off and showing up and showing them who's boss, show and tell carnival games like printing up archival performances on photograph paper to fit into neat rectangular albums and pass around Christmas turkeys as if the show was still going on, as if there's a band leader who whistles out orders under spotlight plumes of smoke deciding wrong from right and good from bad and life from death, it goes to show, the show of keeping the show running the marquee above the dancehall "One More Night! Last Chance! Come See!" the neons the blinking letters, a quicksand show of dermal obsession, of dinner dishes

into sinks and weekend itineraries and used car parking lots littered with advertisements for insurance discounts, a show for people who call themselves adults and taxpayers and breadwinners and retirees who settle for unhappiness, disingenuous posturing, paroxysms on basement stairwells.

Tdough teechee tdough teechee. Blue light. Swiveling on an ergonomic chair. Positioned here. Earning a living. My neighbor has oozed away, ostensibly off to the bathroom. Cracking knuckles.

My god it never ends, this meaningless show of nothing nonsense where you can play the victim in a highway robbery or you can play the brigand, you can play mommy or baby daughter, you can create or destroy, you can redeem or crucify- whatever you choose it's not going to make a difference- Amen Amen I say to you- yada yada, words. It won't matter. Nothing will. There'll be no prophetic fulfillments, no secret recipes, no unified theories, no heaven, no hell. No explanations. Futile emptiness, push broom piles of leaves swept off Orion's front porch to be collected and burned in lost meaninglessness. An office door is shut closed. A private conversation. For show- for a thrill- for a kick- a big giant needle plugged in and injected desperate into our junkie arms- *Isn't this such a big deal? This is really something, isn't it? Wow!*

What is wrong with me? Why can't I log in and pretend and get on with it? Why can't I enjoy a few laughs like back home neighborhood laughs between empty bottles like laughing at the big goddamn joke of it all, a big lark, a granddaddy whoopie party broadcasting live? What does it matter? What a pool of drivel these internal monomaniacal words reeled off an egoic network of neuronal semiconductors, an idiotic language loop of Broca's nightmarish making- what a waste- what stupidity, another struggle another debate another internal dialogue runaround roundabout of noise. Gulping.

Sickened by the hollowness.

Faced with the impasse- the existential crisis- a realization like waking up from a coma, like I'd been here before.

My neighbor returns to her seat.

That chair- even the furniture has become oppressive. Look at her though- she seems to be alright with her position, she doesn't seem perturbed. Is it me? Is it all in my head?

Come on old boy, look at the rest of the players! Look at the rest of the winners! There's plenty for everyone! Plenty of real estate, plenty of stock market tips, plenty of tailored blazers. The feast of plenty. The land of plenty. Plenty of everything, except one thing. The only thing we all run out of.

Tdough teechee tdough teechee.

--

Where is the average person?

Who is he, she?

Each one of us is the rarest, most complex, oddest, romantic piece of matter in the universe- if the universe really is a world made of electron clouds and quarky neutrons. And if the pulsars and bosons are illusory, then surely we are the most beautiful thought in the mind of Brahman, a dream in the heart of a sleeping eternity, One without Two. Rarer than a field of Ghost pipe (*monotropia uniflora*) blossoms- her tenuous week of debutante presentations, her spooky white bloom before the carriage turns pumpkin, before her Emily Dickinson retreat, withering black. Even though she's resigned to fate- not a single chlorophyll stack within her cell walls- but for those seven days... how can you help but gawk?

Each one of us is worthy of being gawked at.

Each one of us ought to find someone to gawk over.

--

We like to believe we evolve along the lines of our lifetime, that our personalities change, we mature, we 'grow up.' We like to believe the indignant teenager protesting over his curfew is no longer a part of our essential being. We have cast off the chaff. It is gone. We gradually improve.

In third grade, I returned home from school with a note in my backpack. The note was sealed, addressed to my parents. Because there was no alternative, and because I had little appetite for conspiracy at eight years old, I turned the envelope over to my mother's possession. She read the piece of paper, and her face slowly contorted. Barely audible, she murmured, "Wait until your father gets home."

I don't think I've been more terrified in my life.

I don't remember the interval of waiting. I don't remember my father's arrival. I don't remember his face while silently reading my teacher's words. What I remember next is crashing into a sharp edge where two walls met, hitting that edge with my temple, then blacking out. My last vision is being on the floor in tears. I have no other memories of the situation.

For the next twenty-five years, I held onto that incident as evidence of my father's abuse, as evidence that I had a 'terrible parent' and that the man responsible for half of my genome was nothing short of a monster. He certainly proved monstrous in other domains, for other reasons, but in terms of how I would describe my childhood upbringing, I relied on that memory as evidence that I had been victimized by a tyrant.

But as I've become a father, as I've been forced to reckon with my own inadequacies performing my duties as a father, I've reconsidered the event. I don't look at the man who hit me that evening, a man in his thirties, balding, overweight, tall and imposing- I don't see him as an adult. He was in no position of authority. He was a person at a point in time along a continuum of

life, with various habits and experiences and personality developments occurring before that event which surely informed his actions within it. I focus on the people behind him- the adolescent who was beaten for a poor report card, the twenty-one year old on his birthday punching a wall, the loser in a barroom brawl, the angry law school student broke and sexless and mired in books trying to work the night shift at a cheap motel, a father of four young children eroded by tantrums by tears by diapers by sleepless nights by sexless mornings by bills by obligations- there are so many wounded animals, hurt children, tortured souls who trudge along that trail into my father's past. I don't know all the details, but I can make a rough estimate.

What I've realized is that we never move beyond anything. We carry ourselves through our entire life- each version, each person, each thought and emotion. We accumulate baggage- the cast which comprises the production of A Person only grows. Any hatreds or frustrations we feel or act on are never relinquished- they are never killed, those upset teenagers, those drunken bullies- they lie in wait with the other snakes of winter. Huddled together, lifeless but alive. Patient in their dens waiting for spring to arrive. Dreaming for the opportunity to emerge.

I used to believe that I had 'evolved' as a person. I had performed my sadhanas, purified elements of my being- I was different than before. I had changed.

Then I had children of my own.

Then one day I felt compelled to unleash a brutal blow against my own son.

My own son, who brings home art projects from preschool with reckless excitement, who named his stuffed animal duck 'Mr. Goosey,' who asked me in an orchard "Can we pick grapes off the apple tree?"

Some days, I'm convinced we are nothing but piles of snakes.

--

My wife has claim over everything I love- my children, their dream begins and ends with her. They grew inside her and entered this world through her womb. I am a benefactor. Nothing more. Is this subtle inadequacy the primary cause which drives the men of mankind to war? Can this account for the ugliness of our world? A word run by dour old curs with their collars pulled high against November winds, whose own fathers fought in great wars, who with their hoary locks and hefty paunches have failed to measure up to those fathers, who will never be crowned heroes though nevertheless keep fighting?

Life is a burden of women.

Eros.

Death is a burden of men.

Thanatos.

--

People want desperately for life to mean something. They find a special reservoir of meaning, ironically, through death. Specifically, in the details surrounding what happens to them after they die. These exotic constructions of what the afterlife will look like are drawn up by every major religion, across almost every human culture. People want to be seated at the right hand of the father on the right side of the aisle on the final day of Judgement. They want eternal life. They want to come back with an army of four hundred thousand proselytes to face the barbarian Huns at the high plains of Armageddon. They want to spend blissful afterlives in ashram fortresses riverside against a nautical twilight with common loons yodeling.

To me, it's simply more desire. An extension of their cravings in life- their hopeless strain, their inability to accept life on life's terms, their unending litany of wants and needs. To be rich, to have beautiful wives, to put an addition on the house. More. More striving. More holding on. Grand designs on heaven and hell all originate from the same thought patterns.

To stack your life up against your death- to say "It's only meaningful if I can keep some element of this" or "There needs to be some thread of 'me' that persists on after this life"- well, more ego. More grasping. More greed. In fact, one of the most extreme forms of avarice.

It's more to overcome. Another barrier within the matrices of your clinging, your wanting, your desiring.

Desire- the root of all suffering.

Desire- rooted in fear.

Before going any further- consider what that would really entail, to possess an eternal soul? We cannot begin to comprehend the implications. To persevere, to go on in a fixed form, forever. Infinity is an impossibility- it is static. We know nothing other than change, process, dynamism. There are serious questions underlying the construction of a system where life transpired within the confines of sixty or seventy years on a watery planet in the Milky Way and then transitioned into an eternal state of paradise or damnation. There might be drawbacks.

Either way- whether the great beyond is run by Christian or Buddhist or Hindu or Muslim deities- it's a red herring. We're missing the whole point by focusing on any notion of the afterlife. We're here.

We're alive.

The fact is you exist in a moment of life. And that's the miracle- against all the odds, all the death and darkness and inanimate clutter of the cosmos- you're breathing, right now.

Why do we need anything more?

The celebration of this life ought to operate as our driving force, as opposed to the fear of death. Though the primary impulse for so many human systems, schools of philosophy, modes of thought, religious disciplines- fear based.

It's the being alive that counts.

That's the ballgame.

All the other talk- conjecture, at best.

My own personal opinion: it's not you that's eternal, rather it's the process you are a part of. And you have no idea what your connection is to the process, in a rational or scientific way. We are clueless, and will remain clueless so long as we are humans. But that's alright. It's not meant to be understood on our terms. It's meant to be lived on its terms.

There's not much to figure out.

Celebrate life.

Live.

I used to believe people who never thought about their death, who never stacked things up against the final note on the sheet of music, that they were fools. They were missing the point. But now, I'm not so sure those people haven't figured out the secret.

Life is for the living and death is for the dead. Langston Hughes might have said everything that ever needed to be said about it.

--

Sybaritic idiot hearts, everywhere- am I one of them? I can't be. No. Quick. List your reasons why. Of course not- you can't be one of them. Look at them.

Well look then. Really look.

There's nothing there.

Exactly. And now, to the mirror.

Oh my.

Begrudge them not; remember sympathy.

--

Each of us are trapped in maya, the illusion, the unreality of our individual viewpoints- chins on the ledge of a steamship portico. Locked in our cabins. It's amazing we can connect at all, that we can find a common language between our windows to point out black-eyed seabirds and whipping spindrift, flotsam and jetsam, spume. From the landscape we identify and agree upon certain features so as to make conversation in a crowded dining room.

But with our napkins folded lapwise, we avoid murmuring any utterances with regards to the depth beneath the waves.

The indefinite infinite.

Leviathan, hemmed out of sight.

There are a few hollow orisons we've all memorized, but that's about as close as we're willing to allow ourselves. Terrified.

The rudder is broken, we're none the wiser.

More coal in the engine room.

--

The metaphor of God as a parent and us, her children- how useful. How apt. We are hostile, we ignore remonstrances, we pout and shout back "Quit bothering me!" as the waters churn around us, as the walls cave in and she insists for us to take hold of her hand. We curse her. We disobey her, ignoring our consciences, ignoring our sense of right and wrong. We are selfish. We are stupid. Yet God still loves us. We are indignant, annoyed, importunate, demanding, impudent, obstreperous. Yet God's love cannot be exhausted. Inexhaustible. Exhausting- without reprieve, on and on through the ages- from the Fall to the moon landings- our hubris, our limited perspective, our gay sciences and particle accelerators- we chew food with our mouths open to boast of our accomplishments, and God sweeps up the crumbs from under our chairs. God refills our glasses of milk. She wipes the corners of our mouths. She softly kisses our cheeks. Unbuckles our highchair straps, points us towards safety, towards the living room sofa or the playroom mat, imperceptibly- though we prefer sharp corners, basement steps, cutlery drawers, convinced we will be kept safe by the winsomeness of our faculties.

Now, you might ask for proof of God's love.

You might wonder, 'Is there a loving Creator behind this creation? How can you, the author, audaciously claim that God loves us?'

To me, love is allowing somebody to be entirely himself/herself/itself.

Are you not entirely who you are?

Alive, right now?

And are you doing it on your own account?

Or has it been afforded to you?

--

There are transcendent moments we ought to celebrate, moments when a shoal forms and the abyss can be forded, when the impenetrable distance between us as individuals is overcome. When a fissure cracks open the outer walls of a singular mind, and those ramparts which hold an arsenal of thoughts and images and words and sensory impressions are knocked down. When the drawbridge is opened, and others can enter. Or maybe when we call upon a particular courage and leave our own castles, to roam into a soft autumnal countryside. Ragnar Kjartansson's *The Strangers*, a multiscreen video installation which has been wending between museums of the world since 2012, explores such a moment of transcendence.

I first experienced Kjartansson's work at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC as part of a retrospective celebration. I had never encountered Kjartansson before and had absolutely no preconceived notions before walking into a dark room which contained nine large screens, each of which portrayed a different musician playing a different instrument. I stood, disarmed for a moment. A song. A

chord. There was an immediate feeling of tenderness, the sound of a tenuous note- my wife and I remained through the entire video loop, nearly an hour. We left the installation energized, hoping to encounter his work again.

In *The Strangers*, Kjartansson recruited various friends from the Icelandic music scene to journey with him to New York and to record a composition in separate rooms of the Rokeby house. The Hudson Valley jewel, purchased by the renowned Astor family, is a 19th century estate home with Palladian windows, a gothic revival library, and a winding sun porch. It was also home to the Astor orphans, the ten children of John Winthrop Chanler and Margaret Astor Ward who occupied the residence after both parents died of pneumonia.

As an audience member within the installation, you are immediately a participant in *The Strangers*. Not with respect to the musical production, but you occupy a critical interstice, the space between the musicians- the space where communication happens. Each member of Kjartansson's ensemble occupies his/her own particular screen, and each of them wear headphones to ostensibly listen in to the others during the session. You are privy to each of the instruments, the interplay between singers, and can hear the entire mix of the recording. It's almost as if you are 'inside' the headphones which each of the musicians wear- you, as an audience member, are experiencing the mechanism within the wiring, the connection, the process of a 'gap' being bridged.

With respect to the headphones, to me it feels like Kjartansson tacitly acknowledges that yes, technology can overcome some of the distance between us in a wider, larger, stranger world. But technology inherently creates that distance, it is the cause of both the separation and the strangeness. Technology allows for each musician to be in an isolated room, and to play as if they were together. There is an underlying antagonism here, and an essential question is implied: why doesn't everyone simply cart their instruments and amplifiers into the same room? Why did Kjartansson choose to deploy the members of his ensemble into different rooms, to ensconce them in kitchens and hallways and libraries?

Do we prefer to be alone?

Do we prefer that technology mediates our 'togetherness'?

The Strangers explores that relationship between both halves of our nature, the solitary and the social, the monastic and the collaborative. I didn't sense that Kjartansson's work aimed to make any claims about which aspect is more important, but rather he asks us to consider why both are necessary, and why a balance between the two is crucial, especially in our winnowing digital age where avatars, work from home, FaceTime, DoorDash, and other 'advances' conspire to isolate us.

I jotted down a note while in the room: the social creature that is man, when he is with his fellows, is antithetical to the haunted creature that is man, when he is isolated by himself in the shadows. Social relations enable complex structures to enter the picture- morality and ethics suddenly become relevant, sympathy and compassion, art and beauty. We didn't paint on cave walls to amuse ourselves- we did it to tell our children stories. Relationships pull us out of our reptilian brains. We have evolved to this point (if you are an optimist and choose to interpret the word 'evolve' in a progressive sense), as a species, purely on the basis that we are driven by social interactions. And perhaps music, the art created by musicians, represents a sort of apotheosis with respect to that 'evolution.'

Music distinguishes itself from other classical artforms because it is typically one that's performed with a spirit of collaboration. There's an added element of vulnerability. The audience is present in the process- by virtue of playing with another musician. As a writer, you can lock yourself in the catacombs to pound away on a typewriter without consideration for anyone or anything for days or hours on end. An author may never have to answer to anyone if the work remains unpublished. And the same can be true of a painter, of a sculptor, etc. But for a musician working within the structure of a band or in conjunction with another musician, the experience of feedback, of conversation, is immediate. There is somebody else who 'knows' about the art, who experiences it, and by way of dialogue can alter it.

So is music special? Kjartansson seems to allude to that, given his body of work, and predilection for incorporating music into his installations. I tend to agree. Special for both musicians, and for listeners. Because even though I was not a part of Kjartansson's ensemble, while I sat and listened, I was swept up in their conversation. An emotional part of my being identified with it. I sensed the musicians' vulnerability. And the vulnerability was amplified by the refrain of the piece, "Once again/ I fall into/ my feminine ways."

Kjartansson is challenging us- to be more vulnerable.

To enter the song.

To confront our identity, where and when we identify as a 'stranger.'

Which begs another question: who are 'the strangers?'

Are we, the audience, strangers to the work, entering it from the outside, familiarizing ourselves with the musicians and Kjartansson's installation? Are we strangers to our fellow audience members? Strangers even to our partners and friends we enter with? Are the musicians strangers, in the sense they are separated in different rooms, in an unfamiliar location? Are we

all strangers, even to ourselves, to our unconscious habits and tendencies, to the infinite psychic processes which occur outside of our awareness? Are we strangers to this planet, to other species, with our programs of disenfranchising industrialization and rapacious globalization?

As much as we are strangers, separated, unfamiliar- in whatever domain- the overarching message of the Icelanders' installation is one of hope. Kjartansson is convinced we can overcome our 'strangeness.' We can become sympathetic. We can become 'familiar.' Music, and art, can bridge that gap between the alien and the accustomed. And as part of that process, we encounter beauty. Music fills the air.

However it happens, there seems to be an energy available to us which supports us, which allows us to meet, to open up- a creative spirit, a steward. Such notions challenge our typical views of a chaotic, harsh universe. Maybe we ought to reconsider how we perceive the underlying mechanisms which hold together the structure of reality?

I remember wandering between screens, and at one point I chose to pause at a man strumming an acoustic guitar, naked and in a bathtub (incidentally, this was Kjartansson himself). In that instant a bible passage rehearsed itself in my mind- "For where two or more are gathered together in my name, I am there among them." I wasn't concerned about whether Christ was present in the Hirschhorn, but something dawned on me about the relationship between artists, especially musicians. When two or more people interact towards an artistic purpose, it's almost as if a separate entity enters the conversation, or is perhaps created by the conversation and simultaneously becomes a participant. Brion Gysin and William Burroughs explained such phenomena in their work *The Third Mind*, as it applied to the writing of Burroughs' cut-up novels.

A creative energy.

A nurturing energy.

In a way, the audience acts as a third mind between the installation and the artist. Then the onus falls on us, as audience members, to bring the energy from our experience back out to the world.

We spend so many hours alone in our lives. We weave multitudinous thoughts which are rooted in notions of being misunderstood, being an 'other', being strangers- in our cars, in front of screens- but we have the ability to become unstrange, both to ourselves and to others. We can occupy that space, as the audience does to Kjartansson's work, in our real lives- if we choose to be vulnerable, to open ourselves up to another, to be honest, to be uniquely who we are- but first, to be listeners. Then, we can become familiar. We can become friends. Lovers. Family.

There is hope.

There is celebration.

The piece ends with the band members arm in arm, a bottle of champagne, a carnivalesque parade off into the vespertine meadows. A Bacchanalia to conclude the proceedings. Compare this to an alternative ending, with the musicians remaining in their segregated rooms, the song ending, the lights cut. Kjartansson's decision to continue recording, to capture the naked man in the bathtub tying his robe and joining his bandmates- while the camera remains fixed in the bathroom, an empty space, a static recording- is crucial. His genius is in this decision. He offers up a tangible experience, in these last moments of viewing his work, for the audience to merge with the very message of his work. Because by now, everyone in the installation has congregated in front of one screen, the final perspective- a focal experience, a group of people, alive. We have left our empty rooms- our contrivances and judgments and nonsense- to smile together.

All that was really required of us: to be silent, listen, and enjoy the music.

--

Ivan Ilyich remembered his childhood in those final hours- three days of screaming.

"Only those who come to Me as little children will enter the kingdom."

--

Revelation horsemen *en route* to Armageddon, their blades reflecting an ominous torchlight- a cold room, a flicker, an anesthetized chair- motionless aside from a stranger's hand, extending, fingers sterile and clutched to an envelope, a notice served- that envelope delivered into my hands- anxious and sweaty- clinging on to each *teech* of the clock, desperate to preserve it, to suspend it- it, the currency of our days- time- in a mode to bargain, like a handcuffed Defendant dragged in front of a gavel- I'll do anything, anything, please- deliberately opening the seal, but I know the verdict- a sunken anchor descends past moaning Cetacea down through my chest down beyond crustacean sea floors down further past mantles and iron dynamos down and down into the core of the Earth- into the pit of my soul, the message revealed an emptiness, a desert between stars- in plan lettering, **THESE ARE YOUR FINAL BREATHS**- confronted by a rush of fear, of breathlessness, of death and goodbye forever so long- dithering sideways between mental frameworks, Hindu and Buddhist and Christian paradigms, with most of my energy focused on inferno hellfires and demonic torture chambers imagining eternity locked inside broiling cellars with Theresa of Avila's irises upon my charred astral flesh in woeful pity- my final breaths- suddenly a priest arrives, a small green book, a muffled reading of New Testament chapters and verse, guilt, discomfort, I strain at the

final moment- a moment of terror- a moment of betrayal- everything I had held onto, held true, held near, held for dear life- a struggle, then my eyes close.

Dreaming of death.

Dreaming of dying- asleep in one world, awake in the next.

A perfect nightmare without any ghouls or imaginative artifice- a nightmarish reality that will in fact happen to me- a dream more real than reality and more definite- a dream of my dying moments- and all I'll ever do is die. Cold truth death. No tomorrow death. No sunrise purples death. No blue eye'd daughter death.

Then suddenly awoken.

4AM.

Awake from a sleep after a goldenrod day of perfect memories, a day spent along Walden Pond trails, at Heywood Meadow, on Emerson cliffs, my daughter's tiny fingers curled up and swallowed by my palm, up the hills to gaze over eastern pine groves, pausing to feel the bark of an oak tree. A day of sunshine and pileated woodpeckers. A night of cheeseburgers and bathtub toys.

My God, this life will be over.

Where will my darling go when I am gone? Even if I'm not around to know I've lost her- she will be lost. My world will lose her beauty. And that loss, the impact of that loss...

My God.

I eek out from the bedsheets to the bathroom sink, water onto my face and then my lips. I sip quietly. I don't dare to face the mirror.

Back into bed. My eyes fixed on a ceiling fan. Goodnight and sleep tight. A head full of questions- I shudder, disarmed by the inescapable. What will happen to me when I die? What will become of my memories, of my children, of my wife, my family? My own soul, my own body, my consciousness? Extinguished? Snuffed out, spluttering then smoke? Questions without answers. How can you pretend to be a courageous advocate of mindfulness, of the present moment as the only moment as an eternal moment, knowing full well that the present is anything but eternal, is contingent and limited and doomed to disappear? How can you pretend to be alright with the transient nature of our world? If I am reduced to nothing- eliminated from this plane of reality- then what? Eternal goodbye-gone? What happens at the point of death, and thereafter? Deep nothing blankness, open sky emptiness?

But then a boon emerges, waiting for me in the warm sheets. A feeling overcomes me, pushes aside my dread- a luminous sweetness, it washes over me. My mind in transition, listless and no longer the dominant actor- my heart intercedes. Tender. Relieved. Returning from the deepest sad forests and awful crooked highways- a simple message: *you came back*. Even tonight- from my nightmare of choke- I've come back. Into my body. Into my life. Into

existence. A matter of fact- as we do every morning from our oneiric journeys: *we came back*. Between the abysmal darkness of sleep there is continuity. Somehow, the light persists. Between the days of my years and iterations of my past- newborn, baby, toddler, child, adolescent, teenager, man- continuity. The light of consciousness is never extinguished. Perhaps there are vast oceans of darkness to cross, infinitudes of emptiness, so harsh and fearsome the lotus of Siddhartha wilts at their approach. Perhaps there are more impossible gaps to bridge, after this life. But surely then our birth was an arrival, a resolution, an emerging from such an ocean. Out from a desert.

My heart whispers: *You came back before, and you will do it again*. Though we sometimes proudly declare 'We are born alone and we die alone,' nothing could be further from the truth, at least with respect to our arrival. Our umbilical transitions from solitary cells to complex organ systems to first cries of life- each act is sponsored, guided by a maternal hand. Our mothers- our first taste of love, providing for us in uterine safe havens. Interconnected- each moment, from conception to birth, we are accounted for by another. This is the case for every person that has ever lived- our beginnings, our story, our mystery. So- who is alone? Are we not all looked after, safely brought home from an inconceivable darkness?

And with that in mind- why shouldn't we be cared for on our journey back? Back to the source. Back beyond further than we could ever imagine while alive- beyond time, beyond space- I see no reason or evidence against the possibility that further assistance will be made available. I suppose this may be a matter of faith, but when a hypothesis must be utilized, it is best to understand related conditions or cases. What could be more related to our death than our birth?

Comforted by another fact, my heart captains the whims of my mind towards another parallel example- a point of relevance I hadn't considered until this midnight confrontation of mine. Big Bang bursts. Reality itself, scientifically proven cosmological models- explosive inflations from a horrendous vacuum void, every atom in your body and in everybody from the most remote crab nebulae to the nearest planets everything everywhere packed into an infinitely small singularity- an incomprehensibly dense and hot 'nothing' which erupted forth, from which 'something' emerged- formless to form, emergent. Out from a darkness of non-existence, sprung to activity- a liminal threshold crossed. Isn't this birth of the cosmos similar to our own as human beings, aren't the dramatic elements nearly identical?

And while physicists and philosophers the like tend to downplay this miraculous birth of ours into existence, an immaculate conception- even the most adherent atheists require this one

miracle. To which I ask- why limit ourselves to one? Have we forgotten Whitman? Why shouldn't extraordinary phenomena be the norm, rather than the exception? What makes our logical rational proof summaries and our data analyses and our statistical odds- nice and neat and deductive- worthy of reverence? Why is it so difficult for us to concede reality (i.e. the universe, her cosmic radiation afterglow persisting under our noses) might be nothing but miraculous? Or, at least beyond our conception? And if I am made of that selfsame starstuff- miraculous- then what could there ever be to worry about, death or life or otherwise? Back to sleep.
Back to dream.