



THAW

a voiceHOUSE experience

I can't help but grimace.

We possess such brittle mental makeups- her and I. Tonight I am a firsthand witness, watching her disposition crumble in real time- imperceptibly at first, a downcast pair of eyes, a tension in her shoulders and neck- morphing into a petulant child as the grand configuration of things turns against her. A defective doorhandle part, a flat tire, a rainstorm, a broken coat button, a lost key ring, a leaky toilet, a surprise excise tax bill, a text message from her father, a runny nose on one of the kids, a remark from her coworker- any combination of these factors can trigger a meltdown. And despite my efforts to calm her down, to reverse the flow, there is no preventing the ineluctable demise once momentum builds.

A mirror before my face- a shattered mirror. I am victim to the same spirals. I too am besotted with childish notions, with brooding and a short temper.

And we're parents? We're adults?

The fact is we are emotional juveniles, not unlike most people our age. We haven't been fortified against the world. We haven't developed a set of tools to root us in mindfulness, to prevent us from losing our center, to fix our hearts in gratitude. We haven't had to hone such a craft. Why? Because we're members of a spoiled, entitled generation. We've grown up to expect things from the world around us, from life. We've grown up believing we are rightful inheritors. We haven't been taught how to embrace challenges, how to transform failure, how to deal with adversity- we complain, we bemoan, we protest, we call mommy and daddy, we register a service ticket and fill out a rebate survey. We are a generation of oblivious American nobodies with no story to hold on to.

If a culture's cosmology impacts its mood, if our worldview dictates our behaviors and ethics and helps answer the prime question of 'what it means to be a person,' then as 21st Century Americans, what could we ever hope to achieve?

We are a people with no history- with no respect for our elders, with no concern for lineage or story, giddy and oblivious to the past because in truth we are the descendants of marauders and brigands. We are atheistic social Darwinists. We are neurotic consumers. We have replaced the organism with the mechanism. We grew up without God, we grow tired of science's empty promises, but we aren't concerned about where to turn next because our phone's GPS has us locked in to the nearest McDonald's.

We lack fortitude, but we like to believe we're tough.

We're prone to delusion, but we like to believe we have the world figured out.

We like to credit ourselves for perseverance, but we possess no resolve.

Anyways, here we are. Here she is, my wife, crying.

Part of me is sympathetic, and that's a step forward.

A small part of me, at first, can identify with her idiotic sadness.

It's a rare moment, when I can look at her and acknowledge my own reflection- see my own inadequacies, my own stupidity and vanity and self-centeredness. It's a gift. To make a life together with another person, no one prepares you for it. Nobody lays out a roadmap and explains: *As you progress through various interactions with your spouse, depending on how you frame those interactions and outcomes, depending on the stories you tell yourself in the secret voicemind of your head- you will either turn that person into your worst enemy, or your most prized treasure.* The stakes are literally that high, and that important.

As she sulks on her cellphone, I have two vastly opposing viewpoints to consider:

- She is a fool, a leech, a stubborn little princess, a burden on my time and energy, a downer, a short-sighted brat who is unable to contextualize her problems in the grander scale of existence, who is inconsiderate of my mental well-being, who is ill-equipped and insistent on dragging me down into her cold, dark well of sorrow
- She is a human being, exactly like me, who is riddled with character defects and inconsistencies, who is plagued by intransigence, who is trying her best, who is wearing a mask and at her center there is a heart where the light of the universe resides in the most eternal and important sense

And I'll let you guess what position is easier to gravitate towards.

It's a question of proximity, of familiarity. When you live with someone, when you raise children with them, when you spend nearly every meal, every evening, every moment in their company- you become quite adept at identifying the 'unreal' in them. You become hostile towards those inconsistencies, those egoic program loops, their blind spots and weak points and multiform hypocrisies. It can be extremely difficult to embrace them in spite of themselves. You stand back and judge. You shake your head, "This again?"

That's not to say your points aren't valid. They are. But you lose sight of a critical underlying prerequisite: you too are fraught, defective, and fatuous. Every thought in your head is equally untrue and contrived. Your mindset is equally flawed as your partner's. Your approach is equally useless. Your binary constructs are hungry ghosts gnashing their teeth. And losing sight of that, you begin to feel that you are 'right.'

This is where the battle ensues, and blood is shed.

This is the source of all dissonance. This is how you start arguing about light fixtures at 2AM, harumphing under the bed sheets.

It's difficult, a near impossible dream to wake up from.

When you are absorbed by another person's psychic life, when it is externalized and impacts your own mood, your own well-being, your energy- and when their psychic life impacts you in ways unforeseen, in times inopportune- when you are forced to bear the weight of your partner's psychic detritus, yet you don't want to- there is little hope. You automatically shift into the most natural thought pattern. You create an enemy. You create an obstacle. A battle ensues.

Marriage is a battleground, and surrender is the only way to freedom. When there are two equally unreal, equally absurd, equally broken viewpoints competing and interacting- it's twice the nonsense, twice the tangled mess of binding to undo. There is no winner in the end. You have to step outside of the arguments, the positions, the cognitive frameworks, the analyses, the words and the phrases, he-said and she-said. You have to cut the Gordian knot and reside in the heart. You have to locate that place where you have committed to loving a person, where you have committed to accepting a person for whoever he or she is, and open your arms. It's the only way out alive.

All of a sudden I snapped at her, "Will you shut the hell up already!" A swollen, unconscious jolt- there were no preceding thoughts, no intentions or consideration- hindbrain activated, reptilian and vicious- my God, it just happened.

The choice was made.

You might be asking, 'How could he forget Herman Hesse's line from *Siddhartha*, "Their vanities, desires and trivialities no longer seemed absurd to him; they had become understandable, lovable and even worthy of respect. He saw life, vitality, the indestructible and Brahman in all their desires and needs." How could he deny his own wasted hours wandering aimless inside his head, not paying attention, falling down uncapped manholes to drown in sewers of his own conception- so much time spent battling phantoms, in self-inflicted torture?' It would be a legitimate question.

I supposed I've already tried to explain my answer, in preparation for this juncture, but I'll reiterate: it's all in my head.

Every problem I've ever had.

Every pain, every bit of sorrow or suffering.

Every idea, every belief, every concept, every 'truth'- the result is suffering, sorrow, and pain.

Every idea, every belief, every concept, every 'truth'- an invader, a Dostoevskian infection, a hostile microbe bent on colonization and destruction.

An argument ensued. Shouting. Cursing. Vituperations exchanged. Within ten minutes, I felt like a used oyster-shucking rag. What did Jung say about the ego's program, if left unchecked? The final destination, if we follow our desires, if we cling to our

viewpoints, if we assert our independence and do things our way- isolation, loneliness, and despair. Desperate.

Where is the mirror now?

Where is my moment of reflection? If I could only see myself- glaring with the opaque, sinister eyes of a spotted ratfish- behind those eyes a cloudy horror, a distant prehistoric past of violence and mechanistic fury- a blind anger.

I suppose the writing, the confession I make now, to you, this is my act of penance.

I was wrong, and I'm sorry.

We'll argue more, then make up.

We'll begin again.

At least we'll be afforded another opportunity.

Not everyone has that luxury.

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Our legacy- the Algorithm.

'How'd you hear of that band?'

The Algorithm.

'How'd you meet your wife?'

The Algorithm.

'How'd you end up in that line of work?'

The Algorithm.

The exalted Algorithm- that invisible motor behind a rapacious economic engine which guides our destiny, which designs our bedrooms, which curates our desires.

The holy Algorithm- our means to assuage any sense of responsibility for this whole groaning and sordid affair.

The almighty Algorithm- our pudgy fingers flipped the switch to Autopilot, dead reckoning our way along, doomed for leeward coasts of rock and cliff and stove boats.

The ubiquitous Algorithm- we have concocted ourselves a summons for the end of days, and this is our silent acquiescence.

Our philosophers will claim it is a glorious extension of our consciousness, a manifestation of our psychic life onto the physical real- a progression, a form of progress. They will be mistaken.

We'll bequeath our children with an artificial intelligence processor, a daemon born under a black star, a gnostic demiurge with awful intentions- silent, invisible, penetrating. Who programmed it? Who controls it? Who cares! You'll never have to decide anything for yourself- what to do, what to buy, who to talk to, where to go, what to wear.

Sub-contracted, everything we do and think and feel. Happy to oblige. Our children, like us, will reside in a state of post-Faustian bliss: we've abandoned God, have been abandoned by reason, and with nowhere to turn allowed ourselves to be confiscated by

the economic apparatus. Charge it. Ship it. Open it. Break it. Buy another.

This is our legacy.

We preach a gospel of convenience, but something tells me it's a hard way to go. I am filled with black forebodings the more I consider it.

After we're cremated and stuffed into urns, our children will walk into our homes, and shiver- empty. We no longer possess the ability to leave anything beautiful in our wake. We have passed down no traditions. No statues or monuments. No masterful works of art. No recipe books. No prayers. No stories. No questions, fewer answers. All we will leave behind is instant access, instant purchase, personalized advertising schemes. There will be no numinous vestiges- we will not inspire, we will not suggest the Divine- we will not even suggest the human. We pervert that which is sacred- we have turned Notre Dame cathedral into a casino, a meme, a virtual tour. Our ghosts will not roam the hallways or the attics. Our soul will not leave behind tender fibers to vibrate onward, to echo faintly, to warm a cold heart. No- we disconnected entirely from the magic of this world and plugged ourselves into a machine. Who will weep for our innocent babes? Who will weep for us?

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You can read Ashvagosha in a dreamy predawn and exhale with perfect clarity, absorbed in pinks and oranges, a sip of coffee, satisfied then overcome by lines like "We are entangled in the objects of sense, consumed by ignorance and delusion, lost in the ocean of worldly existences- an ocean which throws up sickness as its foam, tosses about with the waves of old age, and rushes ceaseless with the dreadful onflow of death."

His poetry can be equally full of zazen poignancy, with short bursts of wisdom that nick your head like falling acorns:

*Like as the birds that gather
in the trees of the afternoon
Then at nightfall vanish all away
so are the separations of the world*

--

I want to inscribe secret messages on stone tablets for her to find high up in the mountains of her life, to leave markings on hemlock boughs- symbols and etchings for her tired eyes to uncover amidst cloud apparitions and alpine frost. Like Han Shan, a cold mountain poet- if only I could wind up those trails before her and leave small indicators, reminders of who she once was, of who she is today.

Who she is now- to me, a wretch, weary and struggling up his own mountain footpaths. In the darkness of my hours, her light- she is

a beacon of hope, truth, beauty. She is my reason for faith. She is a perfect manifestation of the Divine- my daughter, my angel. If I had one wish, it would be this: when the world turns its back on you, I want to be there for you, and help you remember. One day when mascara is streaming down your cheeks, when your shoe heel snaps, when a man treats you unkindly or when a friend shuts you out, when harsh words are thrown in your direction, when the break doesn't go your way- I pray you remember. I pray you remember who you have been, and always will be- my star, the star that broke through the thunderheads. The sun that warmed the night. You are my glowing solstice moon casting shadows over the snow. My life was incomplete before you entered it- I lived in a cave, hollowed out, haggard by this modern blitz and by my own contrivances. You pushed aside the boulder. You allowed me to enter the space of my own heart by the presence of your grace. You showed me tenderness. You filled my ears with your laughter, and my spirit with joy. Everything I once valued, everything I held onto- I was born again with you, a newborn in my arms.

Up on the cold, muddy path of your future, I wish I could leave these marks.

You are love.

You are beautiful.

You saved my life.

Whatever the rest of them might say or believe, whatever lies you may convince yourself of, whatever trouble you find yourself in, whatever shame oozes out of you, whatever guilt festers inside of you- before all of that, and beyond all of that, you are my angel. You are my angel and your power is transcendent. It cannot be snuffed out. Your light cannot be extinguished. It is eternal, and it comes from a pure source.

This is who you are.

This is who you have always been.

This is who you will always be.

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I peek over at my kids. The couch, a television set, Saturday afternoon, rainclouds- I grow weepy eyed and forlorn.

They are doomed, walled inside this eternity dream like the rest of us. They'll grow up in an ordinary, frustrated, American family. Mom and Dad snapping volleys off at each other, "You're so mean to me!" and "Well I wouldn't be so mean if you weren't such a bitch!" My poor innocents. They are subject to us. Every day. Our neurotic tendencies, our insane schemes, our insistence upon things- our rightness, our righteousness- our bankrupt delusions that constantly teeter on the brink of collapse, one small gust of wind- one tragedy, one unexplainable event, one fatal blow. My poor babes. Reliant on us, Mom and Dad, two ill equipped, overtired, sexless, confused adults making our best of this Kabuki theatre-

pretending we are inheritors to the American dream. The two of us- queuing up the cartoons while we pore over the assembly instructions. Arguing. Bickering, guarding our petty self-interest, cooking up fresh indignations- did all the pieces of the broken toy truck make it into the trash? Money problems. Grocery lists. A Buick commercial that ruins Thanksgiving dinner- heated debates over financing, depreciation. Resentments. "I do more than you" and "No, I do more than you."

The longer we're together, the worse we are at making up. Quicker to anger, slower to forgiveness. It's a Death Star plan, a doomed endeavor, the work of misaligned stars- this marriage business.

A frustrated American family.

All your dreams came true.

Maybe one day I'll boil over, angry enough to hit her. I've been close. Maybe one day she'll be frustrated enough to leave me. She's indicated as much.

Can we last another winter? Stuck inside, tidying up the playroom. Greasy pizza Fridays. Heating bills and gas prices. Dishes after dinner.

We wanted five kids. We made it to two, then quit. Better to limit the scope of our damage. Minimize the casualties. More bittersweet country music, Townes Van Zandt and caustic whisky throat dreams. I don't think either of us envisioned it this way.

And I don't think either of us is to blame.

Her and I are the products of modern world, a middle-class American world in which the only skills we've been endowed with involved the creation of barriers. It's all we're good at doing- constructing obstacles- between our head and heart, between our false reality and the truth. Relative to the last hundred years we enjoy health, prosperity, leisure- yet all we do is construct grand reasons as to why we are unhappy. The hours at work. The schedules to maintain. The car in the garage. The interest rates. The Republican party. Our world is image, mirage. It is mental, it is disconnected- we live inside of our minds. We have no clue what we want, yet all we do is want something different than what's in front of us. We have no clue who we are, yet all we do is insist on asserting our 'rightness', our viewpoint. We have been blessed, yet all we do is curse- curse and demand an ear to listen.

And now we are responsible for life. We are tasked with the greatest challenge a person can face, and we are unequivocally unprepared. We are woefully overmatched.

I look back over at my kids, their eyes magnetic and drawn into the screen. Lobotomized. I want to apologize to them, to explain to them the extent of my inadequacies, to ask for their forgiveness. I want to make things right. I want to promise them things will get better, that I'll get better, that we'll get better as parents and as partners.

But that promise would be a lie.
There's little hope for us.
In the end, it's their own resilience that might be the only hope.
Their inherent goodness which we cannot tarnish. Their inherent
purity that we cannot besmirch.
For us, her and I- maybe on our deathbeds we will gain a moment of
insight- I hope that we shudder and finally see through the insane
warbled idiocy of our conceptions.

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A mantra fills my consciousness: Hold onto this present moment,
because one day it will be your most precious possession.
It is easy to embrace, to repeat, to refrain and hold steady with
my daughter in her floral backpack, ringlets of blonde hair
dangling across her forehead, her blue eyes resplendent, melting
me- "Wish me a good trip, daddy!" Her laughter echoes in the walls
of my heart. She turns and runs through the kitchen, into the
dining room- her precious gait, following her brother. The two of
them on the move, pretending- headed to Chicago, to Dunkin Donuts,
to Grandma's house- I lift my leg onto the counter, they pass
underneath. They pay the toll. Two dollars- a slap on my hand, a
grin.
My daughter intended to wear her boots for the big adventure, but
my son explains, "It's not Christmas anymore. We have to wear our
gym shoes."
Hold onto the present moment.
One day this will be your most precious possession.

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The most important obstacle in any addict's or alcoholic's sobriety
is that first "perfect opportunity" to sneak a drink. It's a matter
of being confronted with the ideal circumstances- the power out
from the storm and your wife down the Cape with the kids, nothing
to do all afternoon, no accountability, no problem. It's a matter
of hearing that voice in your head bargaining 'Just one! Come on,
it won't hurt you! Don't worry! Nobody has to know.' Sooner or
later such an opportunity comes under the nose of any newly dry
alcoholic. A seminal decision is made. To drink, or not to drink.
And before a decision is made, the alcoholic mind careens topsy
towards a kind of gimbal lock- excuse after excuse- all the reasons
why you can get away with it. Why this time, it will be different.
Why this time, it'll be alright.
But, you don't drink.
You twitch and sweat, but you don't drink.
You don't drink.
You gut your way through it. Toothy. You don't take that furtive
back alley. You keep the lights on in the kitchen. You watch a
movie. You claw yourself out, minute by minute. Time passes, and

it's over. You're still sober. You're clean. You live to die another day.

You display fortitude.

And that series of events cannot be understated in terms of their importance. It is the biggest step for any newly sober person in recovery.

Because if you didn't drink that time, when it made sense to drink, when the conditions were ripe- well, then there's no excuse this time.

And that triumph, it can be the catalyst for a new life. An entire node of possibilities might open up- posterity, salvation, health, wealth- all on account of making it through that *one time*. "Remember that one time, when you were really close to quitting, but you didn't?"

"That's right, I didn't."

What gives us our reserves in those moments?

What sabotages our efforts?

--

A Tuesday in April with Bob Marley's *Legend* spinning and my two-year-old daughter bounces in my arms and she smiles and laughs as we swerve and dip and dance together and I can't help but think of her wedding day way off in a future unknown so I make a mental note to myself to write down some words and capture *this* moment, *this* feeling- an impossible task, for how can words trace over the spirit, how can they enumerate on the designs and pulsings in my heart, the fullness, the awe, the grace? What words could describe her tidal blue eyes, her golden curls, the dimples in her cheeks? The essence of the moment is beyond capturing, as is the truth of what she means to me. My soul can make a proclamation, but it will be inadequate. So many of the rich details will be missed. I'll be dumbfounded with a microphone in my hand the night of her nuptials, maybe I'll even find this reflection and recite a portion of it to her, but in my heart I'll be in mourning because I will no longer have access to this magic place, to the moment this note was born from. An April evening with Mommy at a work event and Daddy at home after dinner, Joe upstairs in his room shuttling Hot Wheels back and forth laughing to himself- where will this moment go? Where will the man inside of it end up? Is he dead with time, as all things go? Will a part of him be there, in front of the flower arrangements and the crystal glasses, tonight, reading these lines? I want to believe that. He might be hard to make out, hiding almost, but I'll look out for him. I'll conjure him forward and shake his hand and listen to his smile. He might whisper, "It was all a miracle, wasn't it?" I'll shed a tear. The years he hasn't seen, the laughter and the joy, the pain and the frustration- that little girl, growing up. He won't know it. He'll only know her as a two-year-old with a predilection for pink. But I will. I will

have seen those years, and standing here before you- all I'll be able to choke out is that he has his place, and tonight I'm here and I have mine. We are the same man, but different. And she is that same beautiful angel, but different. Her eyes still sparkle. Her hair still bounces when she dances. The innocence, the tender beauty, her tiny fingernails, her expressive glances- they might be difficult to identify, but it is all still there, inside of her. And now, as a gorgeous woman, as a radiant bride- tonight, I know that all is perfect in this life of ours. Tenuous, fragile, fleeting- but solid, infinite, deep beyond measure. We're here together. I couldn't have asked for anything more. That's the wish I made that April night, writing these words- that I could be here tonight with her. That I never would lose her, my angel. And I haven't.

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It's been almost a year since I've set foot in a Roman Catholic Church. I expected a typical feeling to settle in- boredom, ensnared by a loop of punctilious gestures. Mundane worship. Uninspired. But the scene is anything but typical. A heightened sense of presence, of gravitas, overcomes me and remains with me through the service. A brutal solemnity presses upon me. It's not anything like childhood Sunday mornings of pancake syrup and coloring books. It's not rote memorization on notecards. It's not obligatory. I take notice of the statues of Mary and Joseph, at the right and left hand of the altar, covered in purple shrouds. The cross above the tabernacle has been removed from its ominous position. There are no decorations, no flowers. The lights are dimmed.

The priest enters with two altar servers down the central aisle, silent. A woman behind me coughs. Pews creak.

Good Friday.

After a perfunctory sequence, two lecterns approach for the Gospel reading. "The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Saint Luke." We, the congregation, play the role of the mob. Uneducated. Importunate. Hasty. Blood thirsty. We recite the parts, together, ashamed, muttering "Crucify him! Crucify him!" With disgusted tongues, we are relieved to be through with the reenactment. How could these people be so foolish? So brutal? These ancient Jews and their penchant for violence, for murder- aren't you glad to be born in a civilized era, in a civilized part of town, here in this air-conditioned church?

Nobody makes eye contact with anyone else.

We are all guilty.

We are all hypocrites.

I can hear Bob Dylan's voice in my head, "I offered up my innocence and got repaid with scorn." I picture the agony in the garden. I smell incense. Nails, driven between metacarpals by a brutish

hammer. One blow, then another. The scourge, the flesh- grunting, breathing heavy. Peter, furtive, his hands in his pockets, sweat under his arms- denying three times any affiliation with the condemned man now in Pilate's control. Judas' kiss. Forsaken- a blade piercing a haggard corpse, blood and water spewing out from its side.

A God who suffered for us, like us, a suffering mankind.

A suffering mankind who inflicted their scorn and frustrations and self-hate and pent-up rage and base instincts upon a God who came to love them.

A suffering that cannot be avoided.

A suffering without prescription.

A God we killed.

A God we traded for Barabbas.

But Christ doesn't want our guilty sentiments, or our sympathy. During the homily, our presider explains Christ didn't subject himself to a horrifying crucifixion to generate pathos. There's no need for tears. There's no reason to beat our breasts as He passes by on the road to Golgotha. The only reaction He's aiming to stir inside of us is one of perfect zazen diamond clarity- wake up to the truth.

"This world is exactly what you've made of it."

Every district in the slums of Haiti. Every junkyard shelter in East Africa. Every child beaten by his father. Every victim of sexual abuse. Every dead junkie with a needle in his arm. Every bullet. Every tortured midnight.

"This world is exactly what you've made of it."

The internal condition of our souls, of our hearts, of our spirit- it reflects externally. It cannot be hidden. We cannot avoid confronting the fruits of our inner life.

He came to show us a way out, the chorus of voices taunting, "He saved others, let him save himself!" He came to wake us up to the fact that our lives, our cities, our families, our schools, our communities, our churches- they are a product of how near or far we are from the center of our being. The further we move from the heart- well, look around.

I glance about.

Why did I come here tonight?

Why are any of us here?

I certainly never took much time for intense reflection, despite all the eucharistic processions, despite all the offertory hymnals- I didn't have a clue, other than I knew I was forced into participation. I had to show up. Mother's orders.

But tonight, I have no mother to report to. I have no father to fear.

What brought me here?

A man looks down at this cell phone. An old woman adjusts a clot of jewelry on her wrist. Reverent cannibals. Make believe martyrs. Loads of my friends, kids I grew up with and ran with- the academic types, the punk rock types, the lysergic freewheel types- though we believed in very little and held on to only what our scattered minds could claw together in any given moment, we always seemed to agree in the superstitious idiocy of religion. We always seemed to converge on a common disdain for churchgoing folks. Supercilious grins, backhanded remarks- I myself stopped going to church once I left home for college. I never returned. And I never regretted it. Worry beads and tickets to heaven. Blood pressure medicine and total absolution.

When my father was released from prison, he quickly informed me he had returned to the faith. He wrote it in a letter. "I've returned to the faith."

I wanted to punch him in the mouth.

I wanted a scene out of Jeff Nichol's *Shotgun Stories*.

Enjoy your race to the empty tomb, you fool. There's nobody in there now, and there was nobody in there to begin with. That's the big secret- is that it's all a lie. It's all made up. An opiate. A prescription for anxiety and restlessness. A simple ploy aimed at taking advantage of our most basic human fear- the dread of death. What could be a more obvious ploy? Eternal life. Resurrection of the body. Surrounded by loved ones. A heaven devoid of suffering, of worry. Step right up, we have it all!

Put on your best running shoes.

I'll be at home when the gun sounds off.

I'll be at home...

My feet on the couch...

Eating popcorn...

Watching television...

On my drive home from the service, I notice a faint blue glow, house after house- living rooms lit up, one after another. I can't help but wonder- who are the real fools? Is it the thirty-seven people in attendance at the 7PM Good Friday service? Or is it the hundreds of thousands tuned in, rooting on the home team, cracking open another beer? Lamenting, "What a tough week. I earned this one." Flip the channel. Slug down another throatful.

My one and only rule I never break, no matter what- *never play a public horse*.

I'm forced to reconcile some uncomfortable, obvious facts. I sit up for most of the night, alone. A record on the turntable. I refuse to flip ON the television. I notice the moon in the southeast sky, rising. My four-year old wakes up from a nightmare, and I walk upstairs to tuck him back into bed. The ice machine dispenses a midnight serving.

I can't sleep.

A blank television screen.

There's something more to all of this than I've cared to admit or confront. Something important happened two thousand years ago in a Roman province. A poor, homeless, wandering prophet did something that hasn't happened before or since. An outcast. Someone on the fringes. Someone who refused to turn ON his television. Someone who never played a public horse.

His message reverberates between my ears, in Bob Dylan's voice, "This world is exactly what you've made of it."

A penetrating image, the crucifix. A death for the lowest of the low- a form of torture for rebellious slaves, put on public display, for humiliation, to be made a lesson of. A sign of complete weakness. Of submission to the Empire. The cross, the nails- the crows overhead, awaiting their carrion feast. An image of complete desecration- inverted, into a symbol of perfect hope. The last- now the first.

Neurotic counterpoints, wavering- a list of reasons, a rational dialogue, a logical defense against the miraculous- I come back to my senses. There's no possible way it happened. A man cannot rise from the dead. It defies the laws of physics. It has neither precedent, nor antecedent. Paul and James and Peter, Thomas and Mary Magdalene- overexcited, subject to hallucinations. It's reported that one in eight people, after the death of a loved one (a close family member or friend), will report seeing that loved one in a vision, in an 'appearance' experience, after the casket is closed and the dirt is piled high. It was all in their head- in our head. A fairy tale last stand defense against an impossible nemesis- death.

Why did Christianity spread?

Because people are fools, they'll believe anything.

Turn on your television, relax.

But then I shift. If the disciples did experience a common phenomenon, an 'appearance' of a recently deceased loved one- why all the commotion? Wouldn't you suppose that if such phenomena are common today, they would have been equally common two thousand years ago? Wouldn't the disciples and the public at large been able to repudiate these claims by saying, "Sure, you probably had a vision of Jesus. It's fairly common. My uncle had one after my aunt passed away. That doesn't prove anything." Has the human psyche changed that much? Are such visions limited to our modern psyches? We are prone to believe our modern psyches are somehow more sophisticated than our ancient predecessors- I suspect we are overinflating our position, similarly to how each new generation of young people tends to swell up in their own superiority. I don't think that our minds today are all too dissimilar from Paul's.

I suspect what happened was more than a 'vision of a loved one.'

I suspect what happened was more than a sect of Apocalyptic Jews insisting that such 'appearances' necessarily required a dead man to have risen back to life- because in their cultural system, the body and soul were mutually dependent on each other. There was no separation of body and soul. And Christ's disciples, upon having received a vision of Jesus, made the only conclusion available to them as Apocalyptically inclined Jews- that Jesus had risen from the dead. Their sightings were of a risen body- an erroneous conclusion determined by their worldview.

Again- my suspicion is that experiencing visions of recently deceased loved ones were as common then as they are now. And if that is the case, then countless resurrected bodies would have been reported all over Jerusalem by worldview constrained Jews. Every 'vision' reported by grieving mother or father would have been erroneously assigned as a risen body, and there would be widespread accounts in ancient writings. There would be evidence of this specific cultural phenomenon somewhere in the record, at least a faint echo. But there isn't.

I suspect the disciples knew the difference between a common occurrence and the deepest mystery ever revealed to mankind. They weren't motivated by an echo chamber escalation of "Hey, I saw Him too!" To possess the gall to defy the Roman Empire, to sacrifice their lives at the cost of providing testimony and witness, to catalyze a revolution across the planet, across our collective consciousness- I cannot believe a common occurrence can account for such an uncommon chain of events.

Something radical and profound happened to them.

Their experience cannot be accounted for by a common phenomenon.

They witnessed a miracle.

And as I bask here with the midnight shadows, my eyes closed, my mind exploring the possibilities, I can't help but hear the words in my own voice- *I believe.*

It isn't a belief in doctrine or dogma, in the transubstantiation, in Purgatory or Last Rites, in Creationism- I don't agree with every tenet of the Nicene Creed, and I didn't join in with the rest of the congregation during that portion of the mass. I'm not concerned with the chemical reactions required to turn water to wine, the physics of pigs running off cliffs, cripples descending from the rooftops, tax collectors in trees. I don't believe in theological discourses. I don't believe in human systems claiming to have possession of the truth. Even Thomas Aquinas quit toiling over his pens and papers, eventually residing in his own silence, horrified that his life's work amounted to little more than a pile of straw.

But I do believe in love.

In the power of love to transcend.

In the message of Christ's love hanging up on the cross, "This world is exactly what you've made of it."

In the message of Christ's love risen from the dead, "But there's hope that you can change it for the better, because anything is possible."

--

A snow-covered January evening, out on the patio, faint- my eyes pointed towards the Southern sky above the silhouette of a giant willow tree who resides at the edge of our property, blacks and blues and shimmering crystals of white light, Orion the Archer- aiming his bow- what should I be pointed towards?

Success? Sobriety? Wealth? A renovation project, a good home for my family? A top tier education for my children? A new car? Everything I've supposedly done, everything I've supposedly acquired- I feel empty. I feel incomplete.

I am a resident of the world.

I occupy a mental space, rational- images, objects, ideas, designs. None of it has filled my spirit.

Now, exhaling the steamy insides of my breath, I've realized that my aim should be towards the heart, towards God- not God in the seminarian sense of the word, not like a theological exposition of casuistry and argument, not from the point of view of the intellect- but to know God as an internal reality, as a shared experience, the bond of love with other people, into action.

In the final judgment I want to be able to show that I had served my common man to the greatest of my abilities. To possess that peace- it's not likely I'll ever make it. Too many sins, for too many years- somewhere that past lives on, and I can't deny it. Ghosts are born, they never die. But if I can move towards the heart- there might be a story worth telling, a life worth living. A life that will end.

Because one day I'll die.

And I won't live the day before that fatal day as a retired man with his golf clubs in the garage squawking over the market's performance, stressing over his multitudinous accounts, engaged in fiscal endgames like how to beat the tax man- I refuse. I refuse to let my life pass by indifferently. I won't be content with a dumbluck comfortability. I won't be resigned to happiness. Because being comfortable is being happy- at least how we've been trained to evaluate whether or not we are happy. Being happy equates to a secure position, a bank account, assets, the kids moved out of the house, Christmas turkeys and international travel, a quiet comfortable little home. Well, that happy home is connected to every other home on the face of the earth. Homes that are shattered and broken, homes built out of trash and rubble, built from cardboard walls, that have no clean water, homes of dying children, homes where sexual abuse is being carried out- all those homes are

real, and I'm a part of that system, I'm a member of that community, and I am granting permission for those homes to exist. With that knowledge, how can I justify my comfort? To what ends will it bear, other than my own selfish ones? I have to release the tension in my bow, set the arrow back in its quiver, and turn in the other direction.

Mine has become a quest to return to the heart.

To be uncomfortable.

It's as simple as that.

--

When you look around, what would you say our culture is rooted in? I have made several observations, become familiar with many different types of people (people being the products of culture). Social media curators. Career obsessives. Anxiety junkies. Convenience freaks. Cell phone shoppers. Furtive pornographers. Microwave programmers. Garbage hoarders. On paper we're a diverse group, but upon further inspection it becomes rather glaring what our common denominator amounts to- selfishness. There is no shortage of ways we manifest our selfishness, our self-centeredness, our vanity. It's what we do, it's who we are.

And our sense of who we are is inextricably tied to what we deserve. Americans. The Good Guys. We earned it. How could there be any question with respect to our entitlement? Ours is a culture founded in the primacy of the individual, and the individual's desires reign supreme.

Now consider the implications. What if these multifarious aspects of selfishness have become so ingrained in our cultural psyche as acceptable behavior patterns- pervasive, and perverted- that we no longer have the ability to process them in either our individual or our collective consciences? This is my estimation. Selfishness masquerades in so many different costumes, with so many different features- it pretends to be a wounded animal, a lofty ambition, a charitable organization, a public announcement- we can no longer isolate it for moral evaluation. Moral evaluation of selfishness, creating a balance between self and community- this is the glue of any decent society. It is our only means to exist in a state of relative comity. And I fear that we may have reached a critical mass. We may no longer represent a society capable of balancing between the selfish needs of the individual, and those of the collective.

A society that cannot react to the climate crisis in any meaningful way.

A society that will demurely condone any set of behaviors or values so long as it is profitable, so long as the shareholders prosper. A society inconsiderate and blind to its naked, trembling babies entombed within urban hellscapes.

We claim to be sympathetic and compassionate, civilized, modern- but how can we consider ourselves sympathetic and compassionate beyond the faint emotional registering of such feelings? And what lurks underneath the emotional tones of sympathy and compassion other than self-interest? We see a news report of a family, murdered in cold blood, and we tell our spouses, "That's awful. I feel terrible for them." But what's actually happening inside our minds? We're afraid of the same outcome for ourselves. We're scared of that fact that this happened to 'normal' people like us. This could happen to me. That's what is "terrible"- the capacity for such an event to occur is present in our own lives. Our odds are the same as the victims being eulogized. This is a perfidious form of self-interest. We feel sorry- but in reality, we feel scared. In the end, we do not act. We feel, but we do not move.

We claim to be good- how can a 'good' person justify a \$200,000.00 home renovation project in a world where children die from starvation? How can we be compassionate if we don't do anything about the plight of our fellows, about the poorest of the poor, the sick, the homeless? How is it possible?

It's impossible, in my opinion.

We are selfish, self-absorbed, self-centered in the extreme. If I can employ a Kantian term- we operate in a state of "radical evil" in which the individual installs himself/herself at the center of his/her moral universe. Our own interests and desires dictate what we do. This struggle, between our desires and the desires of others, the desires of a greater contingent- this is the battle between good and evil. Kant's claim is that we have to commit to willing moral progress in ourselves, and in each other. We have to expend energy to confront our selfishness. And this struggle is integral to our human experience- in Kant's view, our moral capacities as they pertain to being unselfish are central to our dignity as human beings. When we act selfishly, we can fail to live up to our full potential as humans- we fail to separate ourselves from animals. It's a question of *teleos*. When I allow my selfish impulses to overtake my will, I choose to forgo what I am capable of becoming. I hand over the reins to whatever desire grips me in the moment. And in doing this, I fail to live up to my moral capacities- I fail to act with dignity.

I digress.

At the end of it all, I'm just as guilty as you. I've been a member of the diligent middle-class for as long as I can remember. I've bought my cars. I've watched my television shows. I've complained about the drafty windows. I've hoarded my money away. I've had food delivered to my door. I've done it all. I'm not reporting from lofty heights- I am no saint. I'm one of those aloof transients, thumbing over his cell phone, puttering in line at a fast-food chain.

I'm somebody who has convinced himself that life is about aggregating experiences, about curating images and memories of sports events and vacation destinations and fancy restaurants- I am the product of comfortable, middle class of America. This is our agenda- individual desire.

And our agenda has led to a deplorable state of existence. No one is fulfilled. No one is satisfied. Anxiety and stress descend like plagues- then we call our doctors and medicate. As if our modern problems can be solved by modernity- we are like men and women on fire consulting our phones for a weather report on when the next rainstorm is due. We experience a deep, unconscious form of emptiness. Our children are equally disturbed- beneath the surface of memes and jokes and ironic cynicism, pointing fingers and making fun- there is an awful and profound sense of hopelessness in their hearts. A hopeless child- could it be worse? And we all try to fill that void, that dread, that hopelessness with myriad distractions in the name of self-interest. We do what we want, when we want to. It's our birthright, remember? But we never find peace.

Why?

I sense that part of the answer lies in the gang-controlled streets of Haiti. The slums of Delhi. The garbage dumps of Uganda. The refugee camp of Kutupalong. The first aid tents of the West Bank. A mother can only be as happy as her unhappiest child. And that Divine Mother, God, the universe, the collective unconscious, the vast interconnectedness, the human spirit- whichever name you elect- there is an energy node present in each one of us that binds us together. We feel that pain in the garbage dumps and the slums! No matter how good our immediate life appears, the arrangements of furniture and the hangers of designer clothes in our wardrobes- none of it bears the fruit of happiness. The fact is the program we ascribe to, the set of values, the culture, the practices and beliefs- the system which has led to our prosperity, which justifies our entitlement, is killing others. It is disenfranchising others. It is ruining families. It has created a world where 71% of the population still survive in \$10 a day conditions. We are the winners, and they are the losers.

A truth I have uncovered and am convinced of: our sins have led to state of this world.

And I don't mean sin in the religious, Catholic, 'guilty until proven innocent' sense of the world. I harken back to the ancient Greeks, where the concept of sin originated. Their notions of sin didn't involve doctrines or commandments, divine ledgers or Sunday school- no, sin was 'missing the mark.' An arrow gone astray. Those ancients believed each person was imbued with a certain quality of *teleos*, a path of progression, a future state of development which was inherent and natural. Each one of us was destined to become

something 'better' or 'greater' than we currently were. Life wasn't about living, it was about striving. The *teleos* within a seed destined it to become an oak tree. The *teleos* within an individual person destined him/her to become more perfected, more harmonious with society, with family, with the world at large. Our *teleos* brought with it a sense of duty- each individual was expected to contribute to the development of the domains he/she inhabited (family, society, cosmos). Programmed into our souls- to be discovered, to be strived for- an incipient story of beauty and perfection. And when a person sins, he/she contradicts their *teleos*- they fail to live up to his/her potential. And our sins, individually, have led to this state of affairs, collectively.

Another way of thinking about it: our outer world is a reflection of our inner world.

We all have to take accountability for the world we live in. We have to own it. We have to acknowledge the importance of our participation, and we have to accept and learn from our many failures.

Yet we avoid accountability and acknowledgement. We limit our engagement to silent auctions and charity galas. Our dinner table conversations are palavering, polite. Our attention is fixed on our own pointless micro dramas, geared towards achieving our own selfish excess, constrained by our own pitiful emptiness.

This is my first essential question for you: do you want to accept responsibility? Do you want to accept the fact that you, as an individual, can choose what to make of this world? Do you want to accept that the suffering and misery part of this world are directly linked to your actions, your mindset, your spirit? Are you willing to admit your failure?

When I first asked myself this question, my frivolous activity was immediately laid bare- my Super Bowl parties, my afternoons in the art museum, my steak dinners, my record collection. In the face of those dying children, that suffering- what am I doing? What right do I have to do it?

I didn't have an answer- instead, I was confined to a state of extreme discomfort.

I hated myself. I hated the world I'd created for myself. I hated my priorities. I hated my conversations. I hated the pettiness. I hated the selfishness. I hated the trips to the grocery store. I hated the fuel reading on my dashboard. I hated my Large Number Four with extra ketchup. What was the point, of any of it? Trifles. Idiotic trifles.

I can no longer close my eyes, but I am too horrified to open them. Is there any hope for us in the hell of this world?

--

My sun is in the 8th house.

From the perspective of Vedic astrology, it forebodes an early death.

I'm thirty-five years old, and there are sleepless nights in which I acutely feel like the time I have is nearing an end.

I'm scared to die, but because my sun is in the 8th house, I have a difficult time expressing that feeling, or helping others relate to me emotionally.

Because my sun is in the 8th house, I have a predisposition to concern myself with death, transformation. I've already been reborn several times in this life. When I skipped the fourth grade. When my father left. When I was granted sobriety. When my children were born. But death is the final transformation. Imminent.

I'm terrified to die.

But I'm doomed to die.

The 8th house is a domain of intensity. Paradox. Unconscious struggle. I'm a middle-class American father who refuses to dissolve into the mundane- pizza deliveries and bank receipts. It is a place of antagonisms and tension- friction gives birth to an illuminating fire. I am a man full of secrets, who, because of his secrets, understands the climate of the psyche.

The 8th house is a water house.

Drowning in fear.

I have so much to lose. I have so much I love. I've watched angels emerge from my wife's body. But those angels will fall. Those angels will vanish. Time will conquer them- death will conquer them too.

There is pain, and death, ahead for me.

For everyone I love.

I hope my intuitions are wrong.

--

I am reminded of Sal Paradise's words in *On the Road*, "I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion." Chasing falling stars, winded, one thing to the next- one thought to the next- unending.

What do I know for certain?

In this vast, oscillating dreamscape of vibrations- who knows anything? We're tuned into certain frequencies, designed to ascertain particular markers amidst the spectrum, filtered and condensed- we pick our spots, as humans, and are forced to do so as a function of our biology. Our eyes are built to distinguish red from blue, light from shadow. Our ears are built to decipher language, to pluck out consonants and vowels. But there exists an infinite number of interactions, of configurations, outside of those pre-selected areas which we are privy to 'understanding' via our senses. What's happening in those spaces, in those regions? How do they influence us?

I suppose my point is- anything is possible.

No truth can be nullified, yet no truth is real.
But everything that happens to us is...
Our life is real, and the living is real and it is all we have.
Life, and confusion.

--

My son's eyes are thousands of miles away. I have no chance of making contact with whatever person is inside of there. It's not that there isn't anybody home; he is there, but he exists in a distant realm, so far away from me. The world of childhood, imagination- the world he is creating, the person he is creating- he's fast at work.

I had grand illusions leading up to fatherhood. He would be mine. My son. Now, after a few years, I concede that he does not belong to me. He is of the universe; he belongs to the cosmos. He doesn't have to account for me. And he doesn't. He doesn't even pretend to. There is no sense of fealty towards me. He has set course on the path of his life. And those waters are for his sailing, alone. On the other hand, when I look at my daughter, I am fully hers and she is mine. Our eyes connect. We are united. There is no question or doubt. She belongs to me, and I belong completely to her.

They are two children, raised in the same house, by the same parents, who share very similar genetic predispositions- yet, what is activated by a simple glance in their eyes- could they be more different?

There are lessons in both eyes.

My daughter's lesson is simple: allow yourself to love, and, to be loved. Enjoy love. Relish in it.

My son's lesson is more difficult: we are more often than not complete strangers to others, and ourselves. We are deluded by externals, scaffolded by ingrained norms and programmed interactions. We are relieved that the peculiar joltiness of life is smoothed clean by work, family, social structures. The integrated personality which binds a man into a certain kind of man, a man that can be categorized, predictable- this is not the truth of the individual. There is an unfathomable abyss lurking in all men, at the bottom of all people, an indefinite energy, a force, a spirit- the stuff of white whales.

My son reminds me how little we know. How much we assume. How wide the waters run. His focused glare reminds me to be humble, to be grateful when a connection is made.

He forces me to protect and revere the places where we truly 'meet' one another. Such a meeting requires a certain act of faith, a vulnerability; it requires us to let our hold on the anchors go free, to clear away the surface appearances and the constructions- the roles we play, the social games, the established norms and programs that allow us to 'live' in the world. To meet another is to abandon any identification with those markers. We must press

further, dive deeper, go beyond the beyond- and in those depths, I must accept the awful darkness inside of you, and you must accept the awful darkness inside of me. We must encounter that which was previously unknowable and inconceivable, we must abide in a raging sea that is strange and mystic and primordial. In that place, in that darkness- only there can we encounter the light. Only when we acknowledge and embrace the mystery within each other- then, a true 'meeting' can occur. It is a rare occurrence. It is the Divine recognizing itself. Any connection requires us to allow one another to be the mystery which we are. He reminds me to never take a connection for granted, and to continue seeking that connection no matter how fraught it might seem.

Both of their eyes- teachers, for an unworthy student.

--

What if the Buddha-consciousness is the body of Christ is the Divine locus is the soul is the eternal light is the heart is the transcendent quality inside all of us? Every religion, every culture has their own particular identification and expression of a central, mystical truth that underlies our humanness:

Who we are one day disappears.

What we are lives on forever.

--

So much of what I see and read and listen to, in terms of contemporary art, is authored by complicated victims. A generation born online. A generation whose oppression, whose depression, whose subjugation cannot be understated- according to them. Their identity precedes and validates anything they express. The creator is deemed worthy before the content. To me, it feels like an inversion of priorities, and ultimately it is leading to a diminished appreciation for aesthetics and form in the arts.

This is the opinion of a white, hetero-normative male who sets aside money from each of his paycheck for his children's college education.

I may be disqualified from the outset.

But beginning any dialogue with a disqualifier like "You won't be able to understand it because of your background" belies our fundamental ability as humans to connect. Isn't such criticism itself an attack on our collective dignity? At a minimum, I perceive such an approach to be the least effective way to collaborate, to drive towards unity and togetherness.

I don't deny history, and I don't deny anyone's voice or perspective.

Everyone deserves a chance to create art, especially the misrepresented and the marginalized, the obscure.

Everyone deserves to have a voice, but that doesn't mean what everyone says with that voice is beyond critique.

I do not believe every thought or feeling that is expressed through art is laden with intrinsic value. I believe in an objective examination of the end product. I believe in the ability to discern 'good' art from 'not so good' art. And the trend I've noticed is that the content has become secondary to the profile. The brand has become more important than the message itself. And when the brand becomes the focus of our scrutiny, and not the essential artistic product, what we are doing as a culture is validating people who want to be seen, and occluding people who have something to say worth hearing. And with so many voices in today's modern age, we should be evaluating things that much more closely.

The fact that it has emanated from somebody with a certain set of characteristics doesn't make it worthy of reverence and exposure; it doesn't mean we should hang it in a museum. Your identity does not make you an artist. Your art does.

You might be reading this with a supercilious grin, musing, "Now he knows how it feels to be on the wrong side of the divide."

I assure you, I feel nothing.

This isn't about division.

I applaud anyone for expressing their truth, for embracing their identity.

But I cannot be forced to applaud music or literature or paintings that, in my estimation, have not been subjected to fundamental critical requirements which every artist in history has been subjected to up until now.

--

My mother mutters to herself in the kitchen, a broom shelved back into a pantry closet, "Well, we're in good shape."

I catch her from across the room, and I realize *that's where I got it from*.

It wasn't from a television program.

It wasn't from social media.

It was from her.

"We're in good shape." A phrase I repeat over and over- a swept floor, a load of laundry, a lawn mowed, a bill paid, a diaper changed, a meeting finished.

My life, on loan, from her.

The same woman who told me, "Don't be a protestor, be an activist. You understand? It's easy to throw eggs at somebody, but to solve a problem- now that takes something. You don't want abortions? Well, start taking orphans and foster kids into your home. Put your money where your mouth is."

The same woman who told me, "It's not about where you are right now. It's about where you end up."

I wish I had more of her in me.

I wish I had less of my father.

Sometimes I can feel his blood pumping through my veins, and I curse it. When I scoff at somebody's sentimentality, when I play tough and I puff up my chest and tell a raunchy joke or belittle a passerby, sooner or later I cringe- confronted by the truth. He's inside me. A part of him will always be there. In this postmodern wasteland, in a word that desperately needs more sentiment, less cynicism (*n. a sneering disbelief in sincerity or integrity*)- a snide remark, a proud grin- he's there.

My alter.

My specter.

Activated from within, he takes over my personality, my body, my mind. Once it ends, once I return to myself- I feel abducted. Taken advantage of. Ashamed.

I wish I had more control.

It makes me wonder- what are we comprised of?

What is a person?

A personality?

A soul?

There exists a feeling of an 'I', navigating the day-to-day, waking up in the morning and brushing his teeth, off to work, back home to the kids. An 'I' like a sphere of influence, of control- an integrated unit, cohesive. But that 'I' doesn't represent the entire psychic picture. There are more entities in the landscape. Alters. Doubles. Neurotic tendencies. And sometimes they make their way to the stage. Security is called, they are repelled- but not before they utter their "Sic Semper Tyrannis!" Not before a shot is fired.

And upon further inspection, the 'I' of cohesion and consistency becomes more disparate and inconsistent. There are a cast of characters who share the spotlight, who come out from behind the curtains and perform for a scene or an act. Archetypes we have been handed down, have built on our own, that have been booed and been applauded. There are major players and minor players, varying roles of importance. And though the players on stage may change with the season, every player remains backstage- ready, whispering lines, adjusting the lights, coughing at an inopportune moment.

The players of my past.

The cast of my childhood.

The cast of my teenage years.

The cast of my alcoholic decline.

What is a person?

An individual, emerging from the vast sea of pneuma as single a mind, a unitary field of focus, an entity able to distinguish and be distinguished- compared to a victim of a traumatic brain injury, compared by a child with severe autism, a young woman with globalized epilepsy, a man with a brain tumor pressing on his

frontal lobe- what holds us together? What holds this 'I' in place?
What keeps us from disappearing?

Once you dig into the issue, once you start looking for a central locus, a director- it's humbling, how threadbare and tenuous the whole business is. The fact that a show goes on, keeps going- it's a miracle. Even if no one is in charge, even if nobody is in control, even if subject-object is an illusion, we still are able to wake up and brush our teeth and go to work and love our children. I can't help but think of the patients, the victims- who is inside those bodies in the hospital? At the dementia ward? What is left of them? Who remains?

Have their souls departed?

What is our sense of the integrated person but an illusion, a myth, a falsehood we all must tacitly accept, but deep down, upon even the frailest of inspection...

It all falls apart.

It's a miracle what we do, how we create each other.

Moment by moment- it takes so much.

People miss it, they take it for granted.

Even if I am part my father, I'm still part my mother.

And I'm entirely myself.

I hope.

--

For years I have been mesmerized by Van Gogh's *The Ravine* at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Van Gogh painted the scene, oil on canvas, while attempting to recover at an asylum in southern France. It was only a year before he committed suicide. I have made a point to finish each visit at the MFA up on the second floor, Room 255, and spend a few minutes with Van Gogh's work.

I enjoy *Postman Joseph Roulin*, I am fascinated by *Lullaby: Madame Augustine Roulin Rocking a Cradle*, but *The Ravine* allows me a place to wander. Those frenetic, scuddy brushstrokes which paradoxically work in coordination to produce a flowing, almost soothing vision of harmony; the mauve dampness of his color palette that somehow burns electric- the painting draws me inward, yet simultaneously encourages me to engage with the innerworkings of Van Gogh's own psyche. A horrible beauty. A sadness without end, but shared between everyone.

It must have been unconscious.

I must have sensed there was something more, hiding, waiting for me.

That's what must have kept drawing me back.

Because after a dozen times, I found them. The overture transitioned. Two latent figures, hardly recognizable, shadows from a twilight realm- there they were on the trail, coming towards the painter, navigating a ledge halfway up the ravine wall.

A story emerged.

A furtive, conspiratorial energy.

Two women, on the run.

A mother and a daughter.

A man, miles behind them, drunk and angry.

A story always emerges, if you're patient. If you can stand the proximity...

After I noticed the figures, I couldn't help myself- I glanced down at the painting's description. Now, I typically ignore the placards stationed by the museum curators and resident art historians. My refusal stems from a stubborn perseverance to 'experience' the art on my own terms. To let it be mine, without anyone telling me it should be. And from a broader perspective, in our culture, despite all the stimulation, stimuli- we don't allow ourselves the autonomy or freedom to have an unfiltered experience i.e. we research what our reaction to a film or an album ought to be, before we see it or listen to it i.e. we have become so feeble minded that we require someone or something to dictate not only what we consume, but how we consume it.

The description on the placard explained that Paul Gauguin had written to Van Gogh asking about the work, if he could trade one of his own for it, the "mountain landscape" with the "two travelers, very small, seem to be climbing there in search of the unknown."

I can't wait to return.

A fellow pilgrim, on the trail.

--

Our species is rooted in a sacred impulse: to dance around the fire, to be part of a story, to feel our heart beat in rhythm with the drum, to hold hands amidst the presence of a looming, chaotic darkness, to ultimately defy the magnitude of that presence and live. This is being human. Communal. Defiant. Life affirming. This is where we have come from, this is where we must return.

Forget saving your life, saving your money- save your soul.

--

Who said you should get everything you want? Who said it should all turn out your way? Who said you ought to be afforded a choice? Who guaranteed anything?

These questions run in diametric opposition to the cultural program we have all been inculcated by.

Our cultural program is rooted in choice, in preference, in our right to be an individual and assert our desires. We have fought for and won our freedoms, our liberty- the right to like what we want, buy what we want, to have what we want when we want it. Let the market decide!

It is the non-negotiable *everything* rests upon.

And that cultural program resembles, under close inspection, the ego developmental stage of a two-year-old child. We possess the

psychological attributes, and are limited to the psychological capabilities, of two-year-old children.

Capitalism is a disease of childhood, a toddler's malady.

Tantrums.

Give that to me.

No, I want that one.

No, the other one.

Choice is the enemy. When I ask my children "Do you want peanut butter and jelly, or a cheese quesadilla?" I have made a terrible miscalculation. I have blundered. Instead of setting down a plate with the sandwich cut into pieces, I have granted a riotous egoic program permission to operate.

"I want pizza!"

When I offer them a choice, it implies that they are entitled to make a choice.

And choice is the antithesis of acceptance.

Choice is the sickness of our age.

We refuse to accept what is in front of us. And in that refusal, we are unable to be grateful. And without gratitude, the connection between our mind and our heart becomes severed. Occluded from our own hearts...

Here's the difference: "Thanks for picking up dinner on the way home, that was so nice of you" versus "Why didn't you call me so I could download the menu and tell you what I want?"

Two-year-old children.

Disharmony.

Contrast our cultural values against those of the ancient Egyptians. The Egyptians valued the concept of *maat*- a state of balance, harmony, and responsibility to your duties as a parent, as a citizen, as a worker, and, as an entity amidst the cosmos. Their ideal was multidimensional, and it dictated an individual's behaviors across each dimension- at home, in the empire, as souls in the stream of becoming. It proved to be an effective concept, given the lifespan of and the advancements seen within ancient Egypt's history. *Maat* emerged from a fundamental, germinal idea which drove Egyptian culture forward and was ultimately responsible for its longevity and expressivity: chaos needs to be balanced by order. The idea penetrated Egyptian mythology, Egyptian law. It penetrated the origin story, the legend of Osiris and Horus. And an important caveat about the harmony, and the balance of order against chaos, was that the order was not simply a pathological prescription- it was a dynamic energy, a law that changed with the times, a government that evolved with its people, a pharaoh who improved upon the policies and decisions of his progenitors.

Within the concept of *maat*, the Egyptians displayed a nuanced understanding of sacrifice of the individual in the face of the greater collective.

Hundreds of other cultures, rooted in similar ideals, have blossomed across the planet.

Dharma.

Pietas.

But our culture contains no element of such an ideal. Our culture is obsessed with preserving the rights of the self-obsessed individual. And it is only a matter of time before we are completely unhinged.

Total chaos.

In the final analysis, freedom of choice will be revealed to be a radical form of slavery- we have become entirely beholden to sensations, to the products and commodities and lifestyle appurtenances which provide those sensations. We are wirelessly fed shots of dopamine in our Bluetooth Skinner boxes with every LIKE, every COMMENT. We find ourselves mindlessly clicking and selecting NEXT DAY SHIPPING. We take out loans and make out forms for additional credit cards and brag to our friends about the deal we found on an offsite storage unit to house all of our STUFF. Blind servants, happy to be in the ballroom of this dermal masquerade.

To not choose, this is where freedom begins.

To say no.

Asceticism is the only logical form of counterculture.

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After thirty-five years of being in my own head, of thinking, of being a "rational" person with a frontal cortex and priding myself on my ability to "figure things out," what I've come to realize is that prayer is the final, singular mental activity worth partaking in. It is by far the most productive action that can happen between my ears. It is the only worthy endeavor in terms of what I can orient my thoughts towards. Full stop.