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The Apophenic Diaries

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
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by

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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This is a book of poetry. It is written in prose. Therefore, you may want to read something else. If, it turns out, you do want to read poetry in prose with your very limited time, I can tell you a little about this project. It is a study of apophenia, which is a condition of schizophrenia that entails making undue meaning out of the stimuli that one senses. Under such circumstances, unrelated stimuli are ultimately conflated and associated with each other in patterns of erroneous connection. I wanted to experiment with turning apophenia loose on my Comprehensive Reading list—to create a web between these required readings as they were filtered through my apophenic mind. The product is this manuscript—it is about the American malaise which mirrors psychosis, it is about celibacy, and it is about the quest for enlightenment. Happy reading.

“To such endless impressions
we poets give ourselves absolutely,
making, in silence, omen of mere event,
until the world reflects the deepest needs of the soul.”
—Louise Glück

Diary, dearest—I write in you with the intention to *recover subjectivity*. I have been told it is wise to begin all endeavors with an intention, so I am stating mine here. In you, I document the uncanny synchronicities of the texts I read and the thinking I do, how that which exists independently of my perception (noumenon) becomes something that is filtered through my perceiving apparatuses (phenomenon).¹ The fragments that result are gestures: gestures toward coherence and sense, entirety and meaning, gestures to inspire credibility in the subjective. The project is also to reconcile madness with the everyday—to contain the insane in rationality, in prose. It will be a poetic study, a prosaic poetic study, a lyrical prosaic poetic study, a fragmentary lyrical prosaic poetic study.

¹ “[...] an Avatamsaka doctrine holds that the universe can be observed from the four angles of (1) phenomena, (2) noumenon, (3) the identity of noumenon and phenomena, and (4) the mutual identity of phenomena. Now, whether he was aware of it or not, the poet [Basho] depicted a world in which noumenon and phenomena are identical” (18).

Diary—when I was psychotic, in the turbulent throes of that many-headed hydra schizophrenia, I had fantasies about being a celebrity and a saint. They called this grandiosity, and that was insulting. I find it telling that the two (celebrity and sainthood) were confused in my experience of them. If I symbolize America, this sort of longing for renown reflects the American daydream² evidenced by the tabloids, reality TV, and the Insta-famous hallows of the internet. In my madness, which is America’s madness, the figure of the celebrity was fetishized in unprecedented ways. I know now that a celebrity gives up their life in the same way a saint does by surrendering any sort of anonymity or privacy. This is a terrifying notion.

*

Today, as I read Louise Glück’s *Vita Nova* she asks, “Does it have to happen in the world to be real?” Diary, in a very real way I lived the experience of fame and yet have come out completely unknown by the world. Because my psychosis was so potent, I was adamant that everyone knew who I was, and either loved or hated me. And it was real at the time in my mind. I did live a life of notoriety, even if entirely imagined. Now, I think a saint would have to be a psychotic to practice in the modern world. Or that to be “celebrated” requires a kind of psychosis—a loss of touch with reality.

² Yes, I think I symbolize America, that my experiences somehow translate to larger American themes, that I, by extension, am the nation. Today, I decide I am going to write a treatise on American-ness. I decide that I am uniquely equipped to do so—that somehow, my existence as an American consumer born the daughter of a German immigrant and a Canadian-born upper-middle class American father, makes me specially able to comment on what it is when we say “America.”

Today, I read an introduction to Charles Baudelaire's *Twenty Prose Poems* in which Michael Hamburger writes of Baudelaire's literary ambitions that they were "'To be, *above all else*, a *great man* and a *saint* in one's own eyes,' [...]" Hamburger continues that Baudelaire, a contrarian as always, "[...] did his best not to be a great man or a saint in anybody else's eyes: 'When I have inspired universal horror and disgust,' he also wrote, 'I shall have conquered solitude'" (*Twenty Prose Poems* 5). Baudelaire wanted to be a saint in his own eyes, and yet not in any one else's eyes. Consequently, I would like to aspire toward "universal horror and disgust" like Baudelaire, but I care obsessively about what people think of me. Part of my psychosis is a persecution complex³. I think that all people know of my missteps and therefore judge me. It keeps me from forming meaningful relationships with others though I long for intimacy. My psychosis tells me that I inspire disgust in my peers, that I can never be innocent again. Of course, with that conviction⁴ of my guilt comes a whole slew of inferiority complexes, which, I'm told, are just cleverly disguised superiority complexes.⁵ And, beneath all that, is the conviction that I am a martyr, made to be illustrative and symbolic of the shortcomings and follies of "Modern America." I am told inferiority in fact infers comparison and a hierarchy in which one will always be at the top; as in, by suffering this treatment, this unjust trial, I suppose I am to be made The American Saint.

³ With or without good reason, I am convinced I am on trial—without having been notified of the nature and cause of the accusation, which is something that could only happen in America—despite the sixth amendment—where the constitution is both a living and dying document. Mine is a trial of symbolics, of metaphor in which I my wrongs are so gross, they can't help but become indicative of a national malaise. America, then, by proxy is on trial.

⁴ "The tone of conviction (and even sincerity) is assumed, it seems to me, as much to convince oneself as to convince one's interlocutor, and even more perhaps to replace conviction; to replace, in a sense, the truth missing from the statements made." Francis Ponge (*The Voice of Things* 81).

⁵ A friend said—quite helpfully—to remember that "I am neither the most important person in the world, nor am I the least."

In prose, and perhaps only in prose, can I write objectively of madness. Today, I return to Amy Newman's essay "The Poem in the gray Flannel Suit" in the collection *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry* where she writes,

The argument between Neoclassical and Romantic was [...] about [...] distinctions between the cummerbund of tight heroic couplets and the unbuttoned blouse of blank verse revealing a preference for, respectively, the tidy beauty of a reasoning mind or the anarchic passion of the unruly heart (92).

I think this is the dichotomy that interests me: the reasoning mind versus the unruly heart, couplets versus blank verse, prose versus poetry. My own natural tendency is toward to "unbuttoned blouse of blank verse," "the anarchic passion of the unruly heart." But therapy has taught me the importance of investing in the "reasoning mind" which promises to restore me from my madness. On the spill-over of prosaic rationality into the realm of poetry where "the dreamy haze of our emotions" lives, Newman continues:

[...] in the debate between Neoclassical ideals of reason and restraint and the Romantic counterargument of passion and wildness of heart, we can observe the categories as diametrically opposed: clear communication is rational, whereas the dreamy haze of our emotions is irrational (92).

My madness, it could be said, is resultant of an inability to reckon "the dreamy haze of [my] emotions" with "clear communication"⁶, and results in chaos—results in verse, in the above analogy's terms. Verse comes too uncannily close to god-speak, to insanity. Verse is elevated, it's heightened, and at its most extreme it hovers above the ground, levitates with incandescence, with pure ecstacism. Prose will lead me through the labyrinth of my mind.

⁶ According to T.M. Luhrmann and Jocelyn Marrow, "When psychoanalysis dominated American psychiatry, back before the bio-medical revolution (roughly from World War II until the 1980s), the dominant American psychiatric perspective on schizophrenia held that the condition was the result of the patient's own emotional conflict. Such patients (it was thought) were unable to reconcile intense feelings of longing for intimacy with their fear of closeness" (*Our Most Troubling Madness* 10). My malaise is quite accurately described by this psychoanalytic philosophy which the experts have since considered outdated: "intense feelings of longing for intimacy [coupled] with [a] fear of closeness."

Judgment feeds intuition. Judgements are subjective. This seems paramount. Pascal writes, “For it is to judgement that perception belongs, as science belongs to intellect. Intuition is the part of judgement, mathematics of intellect.” I am judgmental—does that mean I am perceptive? And judgmental not only in the critical sense but also in the discerning sense. I am constantly judging noumenon⁷ for clues that will help me win my case. And though intuition is different from paranoia, it is not totally discrete from apophenia. Wikipedia defines apophenia as:

the tendency to perceive meaningful connections between unrelated things. The term (German: Apophänie) was coined by psychiatrist Klaus Conrad in his 1958 publication on the beginning stages of schizophrenia. He defined it as ‘unmotivated seeing of connections [accompanied by] a specific feeling of *abnormal meaningfulness*’ (my emphasis).

This diary is apophenic. It suffers from, or revels in, apophenia—it looks for connections, makes attempts at meaning, interrogates links between the seemingly disparate—it deals in networks. Here, Diary, I question the term “unrelated.” I question the term “abnormal.” Here, I will make associations, make suggestions of patterns, pull disparately from a cacophony of sources; here I let loose apophenia to make meaning out of meaninglessness, sense out of chaos, in the hope of recovering subjectivity.

⁷ Noumenon: a thing as it is in itself, as distinct from a thing as it is knowable by the senses through phenomenal attributes.

However, my apophenia could make me an unreliable proponent for subjectivity, because apophenia means that certain unrelated stimuli—under the right conditions—“erroneously” mean something, are somehow related. My subjectivity—or perhaps my apophenia—it could be said, is faulty. And though apophenia is usually especially acute in public spaces, and although it is not this exclusively, it usually involves “unsubstantiated” feelings of deviance and guilt. But, I think, my psychotic subjectivity could be considered a *distilled* subjectivity—heightened. Therefore, as a most concentrated strain of subjectivity, it makes for a sound model—the quintessence of subjectivity. If subjectivity is by nature wrong, mine is that to an extreme. I would like to lean into what is supposedly wrong about me.

Apophenia is a tendency toward pattern-finding, linking one thing with the other, attributing effects to causes, finding metaphors where there are none. In that way, my life has become a giant, complex symbol, which is itself riddled with motifs, buffeted by tokens. Today, when a radio newscaster makes the distinction between “symbolic” and “substantial” political change, I wonder if they are perhaps pre-requisites for each other. Can there be either substance or symbol without the other? It is perhaps easiest to assume symbol requires substance, but is the opposite, in some way, also true? Does substance require symbol? Require meaning? Or the stamp of symbolic subjectivity? Is matter only the result of the sense that is made out of it?

The nature of simile is holding up what is to what it is like. It refers to something prior; speaks to the perpetual, eternal state of being that defines this existence: it speaks to all that which comes before. As Kay Ryan would say, “More of the same has a telltale splice or hitch after the first-of-the-same (which, at the time, didn’t go by that name)” (*Erratic Facts* 52). By referencing the “first-of-the-same” (the tenor)⁸, “more of the same” (the vehicle) reminds us of the ever-present origins to which we relate the subject being simile-ized. It suggests something that existed before, pointing ever-backwards to an omnipresent past: substance for the symbol.

*

Though apophenia’s product can resemble a story, it is mostly a network of connections—synthesized meaning. It is so precarious that it feels like growing over the rim of a canyon. Your feet never leave the ledge, but your legs grow like elastic as you tilt over the edge. You keep getting taller and keep leaning further over the rim. Until finally you find yourself bent at the ankles, fully horizontal over the precipice, gone as far as you will go, looking at the great stomach-drop void over which you are suspended. You’re useless on the ledge and you’re useless in the void. You spend a lot of time like this, feeling as though you’re falling when you’re not.

⁸ *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1937) by rhetorician I.A. Richards describes a metaphor as having two parts: the tenor and the vehicle. The tenor is the subject to which attributes are ascribed. The vehicle is the object whose attributes are borrowed.

I take note today, when reading a translation of Luis Cernuda's prose poetry, of what the translator, Stephen Kessler, has to say about the ambitions in Cernuda's writing. Kessler writes,

[...] we find an unusual combination of lyricism and analysis, subjective vision and objective description—as if the poetic truth of experience could be evoked only through the most rigorous observation⁹ and exact recollection combined with original sentiment and mature reflection (*Written in Water* xiii).

Perhaps my thinking on these pages is heavy in analysis and light on lyricism. Perhaps that is my therapeutic work taking the lead. From here on out, I am devoting myself to “subjective vision and objective description.” I am committing to “rigorous observation and exact recollection combined with original sentiment and mature reflection.” Such mature reflection might be possible only because I have been sheltering at home since May and am stuck with myself and my laptop in Northern Santa Fe. And even though, in terms of maturity, I leave a lot to be desired.

*

Perhaps no conventional poem will result from this long-form gesture, perhaps only something that resembles the making of “The *Potential* Poem.” I am interested in behind-the-scenes poetics, what it truly takes to make a poem, the cogs and wheels behind the poetry machine, which presumes that I am capable of writing poetry. Here, I will illustrate the workings of the mind as it attempts to make a poem. I will map the psyche which gropes for meaning, order, from among chaos.

⁹ This is the nature of the poetic project I have outlined here: “the objective description” of “subjective vision.”

Jonathan Culler says of lyric poetry: “The lyric poet absorbs into himself the external world and stamps it with inner consciousness, and the unity of the poem is provided by this subjectivity” (*Theory of the Lyric* 2). This is something of which I think I am capable, to give the stamp of my inner consciousness, my internal life so heightened by delusion—a hyper-active and idiosyncratic psyche. My subjectivity feels like subjectivity cubed.

*

Suppose I could take my subjectivity—that flawed horseman leading the carriage of my skewed thoughts—for productive means. Suppose I could string together fragments of something for the ends of a whole (*a* whole, not *the* whole). What is the purpose of my apophenia, that element of the schizophrenic’s malaise and an instrument of hyper-active meaning-making, if not to create something—to be constructive? Let this diary speak to the tension between the “reasoning mind” and the “unruly heart.” I have lived exclusively with my heart on my sleeve, and I call it insanity. May this diary document a longing for intimacy and fear of closeness, a longing for meaning and a fear and incredulousness of facts.

Today, I read *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, noting that “As sign, language must resign itself to being calculation and, to know nature, must renounce the claim to resemble it” (13). I think about geometry, how it deals in perfections—right angles and all. Likewise, language is mere “calculation”: something we apply to the domain of the human and the human only, and not the domain of nature; perfect triangles in other words. Of course, we can talk about the larger-than-human, but as Louise Glück states, “We might have made the infinite¹⁰ a topic. But there isn’t, it turns out, much to say about it” (*American Originality* 32).

¹⁰ I wonder about this dichotomy between infinite and finite. This finite life, bookended front and back, beginning and end, with dark immemory, seems to be contained in infiniteness. I speculate that perhaps the most “spiritual” solution is to tend to the finiteness of this life. In an epigraph of Robert Bly’s, *The Morning Glory*, he writes: “There is an old occult saying: whoever wants to see the invisible has to penetrate more deeply into the visible.” I mostly think of this, I suppose, as a defense for my compulsive shopping problem—shoes are visible! So are handbags. Does shopping make me a spiritual giant? But suppose the answer *did* lie in leaning into the finite, to abandon any attempt at piousness, to forget rebirth. My father said that time exists in the past, the present, and the future. When I said that it feels like it merely exists in the present, he said that that is only what it seems like. The infinite, then, is threaded through the three of these, already here, which is nowhere.

TAing for a history professor, I learn about the Calvinist strain of faith in the American Christian tradition. I find it compelling and thus disturbing that those early Calvinists believed in a “Doctrine of Grace” and not a “Doctrine of Works”—that, rather than performing good deeds to get into heaven, one was instead already pre-destined for heaven or hell and no deed could ever change that fate. The professor continues, saying that suicide rates were actually quite high among these Calvinist ur-Americans, ostensibly due to the anxiety that such uncertainty engendered in them.

There is a feeling I get about this concept, which I suppose is my unruly heart speaking in apophenic tongues. It feels substantial and rugged, like my dad saying time exists in the past, the present, and the future simultaneously. It makes me think that no matter what I do, I am condemned—condemned to keep making a fool of myself, condemned to misanthropy, condemned to striving and ambition instead of patience and grace. The professor says that the Calvinists used their accumulation of wealth and prosperity as evidence and measurements of their pre-ordained grace—undergirded though it was, however, by uncertainty; used it as reassurance, in other words. In a similar way, I tell myself that my own wealth is indicative of eligibility for eternal salvation. But ultimately, the possibilities of my damnation and salvation feel equally true and I guess most discomfiting is that they can both feel true simultaneously, no amount of intellectualizing seems to make either any more or less true than the other—each one equally plausible. The not-knowing is enough to drive a person mad.

*

Perhaps salvation and damnation are actually indistinguishable in their form as life on this earth. Irish-born poet and educator David Whyte writes on the price of life on this earth, which he claims is “heartbreak,” saying,

We tend to think of ‘enlightenment’ as an abstract, as being a state above all suffering, but Buddha asked his followers in very intimate terms to follow heartbreak to its very end, to see it as part of any ultimate understanding, in effect

to say the very last goodbye, to be completely present to ‘everything ceasing’, to everything we are constantly being asked to let go of, to the very origin of our pain, and thereby to let it flower into something else (*Essentials* 113).

My schizophrenic flat affect makes heartbreak difficult. The studies say that emotions aren’t something I can readily experience which perhaps complicates this whole lyric poetry thing which I am attempting¹¹. The closest thing I have to an emotion is hope, the optimistic venture that things will be better tomorrow¹². I have read that a symptom of schizophrenia is a loss of empathy. That scares me, as it puts the “psycho” in “psychotic.”

*

Abraham Lincoln said the Civil War was divine justice for the mistreatment of enslaved peoples of color on the sides of both the North and the South. Is my madness divine justice for another American sin? For my own conceitedness as well as the conceitedness of America? In being diagnosed as schizophrenic, am I selected to carry the national burden of the consequences for a history of injustice? Here, the subjective tendency is to generate meaning where perhaps there is none. But if it’s generative, is it also positive?

¹¹ In her *Garments Against Women*, poet Anne Boyer floats the term of “Abstract lyric”—I take this to mean a lyric which trades in the conceptual rather than the sentimental. It seems a profitable alternative for my flat-affected self to pursue here.

¹² Hope has this way of working in two related ways. It obscures what might be disappointment and invests commitment in the future. In that way, it begets suspension and stupidity. Augment this with apophenia and everything is hopefully suspended always, although sometimes a touch paranoid. And though both feel questionable, they are both my modus operandi. A therapist once remarked on my hope, calling it heroic. Mostly, I am just passively optimistic. Am I like my country? Wearing rose-colored glasses? Ever seeing potential? Assigning grandiose symbols to my values, which I may or may not uphold?

Diary dearest—today, I’m reading the City Lights edition of H.D.’s *Notes on Thought and Vision*. On page thirty-six is a print of “The Muse Terpsichore” by the Peleus Painter dated 440 BC. I have been thinking about qualia¹³. I am thinking too, as always, about apophenia while I look at the muse strumming her lyre. The muse sits with her head bent in supplication as she coaxes a melody from the instrument. Her tunic has a wide, scoop neckline. Two fruit-like breasts protrude through the tunic. Sometime in 440 BC, Peleus Painter’s eye had already moved toward a mild type of apophenia. It saw the contours of the body as a whole, instead of as a mess of discrete molecules pummeling against each other, which only vary from the other molecules by the frequency at which they vibrate. At some point, like the Peleus Painter, we transitioned to thinking hegemonically. A consensus was reached about what constitutes a body, a lyre, a muse. These words, at some point, were graced with essence. My brain has been corrected for what has been called “deviance” from such consensus by antipsychotic and poisonous medications.

*

Today, on a walk, I could have sworn that I saw every single pebble and speck on the ground. It was a moment in which the quale was wideness: a wideness of being in which nothing was left out.

¹³ Wikipedia italicizes the qualia (singular: quale) as in “the perceived sensations of *pain* of a headache, the *taste* of wine, as well as the *redness* of an evening sky,” and defines them as: “individual instances of subjective, conscious experience.”

There are some things which translate from person to person. For example, in my second-hand copy of John Ashbery's *Three Poems* is the palimpsest of Anna S.'s marginalia dated July 7, 1987. I study her handwriting, which is not completely unlike mine, yet more artful. I look for the similarities: like how the first "r" that starts out in the word "architecture" begins sturdy and established like a rook, but soon, by the end of the word, with impatience, becomes a mere hurried peak. The graphology suggests a similar impatience to get the word down apparent in Anna as there is in me.

Diary, I'm thinking about fragments and sentences. I am writing in sentences, but these thoughts are fragments. The lines of a poem are fragments, I figure. At what point does a poem become a whole? At what point do fragments coalesce into entirety? When does something begin to mean something? I think about all that I leave, will leave, and have left unsaid. In her essays on poetry in *American Originality*, Louise Glück writes on sentences and fragments and their stylistic repercussions:

The sentence suggests variety through its concreteness, its presentness, through meaning (or being); it initiates and organizes fields of associations which (in the manner of the void) may continue to circulate indefinitely, notwithstanding the sentence's definite (and presumably inert) closure. In the fragment, on the other hand, variety is suggested through non-being, through unspecified (because not articulate) meaning, or through deliberate non-meaning. The paradox is that the named generates far more complex and powerful associations than does the unnamed (27).

I am interested in "non-being" which is much like the infinite in the way that Glück has said: "But there isn't, it turns out, much to say about it." But I also have a great amount of faith in "concreteness" in "presentness," especially since Glück conflates "meaning" and "being." Maybe prose poetry enables a fragmentary whole, a composite, just as it allows prosaic poetry or poetic prose.

At the end of *The Year of Blue Water*, Yanyi says in the second-person “You write a poem for your family, the one you do not talk to. In the dream, it’s not a poem, but a process” (68). I like this. Not the fact that Yanyi doesn’t talk to his family, but this putting in opposition “a poem” and “a process.” The prose of my diaries might be illustrative of “a process,” might show the mind in motion as it struggles to reckon with its own machinations, as it struggles to write a poem. It might also *be* a poem—the thing in its entirety, the sum of the fragments. Baudelaire says about the prose poem that it is “flexible yet rugged enough to identify with the lyrical impulses of the soul, the ebbs and flows of reverie and pangs of conscience.” Now, all I need is a world which will reflect these “flows of reverie and pangs of conscience” to me, a world to show me myself.

Today, I go to the optician because I have a prosthetic organ—glasses. The glasses teach me that there is a there there. We correct our vision; we compensate for deficiencies. A norm, a standard, exists. The next step then, some might say, is learning to see what you don't see. What is omitted by your vision? —I don't know how to answer that.

*

And because I don't know what I don't see, I recommit to the possibility of reporting my subjectivity objectively, to saying what I know honestly with the right words. I recommit to this—my vision—selective and fallible though it is. Apophenia is like associational beer goggles, but it's the only way I have.

I am here to recover subjectivity and yet I have said that “there is a there there.” I do not necessarily think that these two sentiments are mutually exclusive—I think a subjectivity can be true, that a subjectivity can be the “there.” Francis Ponge, in my copy of Beth Archer’s translation of *Le parti pris de choses*, or *The Voice of Things*, writes of the world’s objects in prose. And yet rather than be defined by their *objectivity*, I would argue that these descriptions must pass through the subjective writing self and are therefore explorations in mediated *subjectivity*. For example, in the poem “Snails,” Ponge writes,

All alone, obviously the snail is very much alone. He doesn’t have many friends. But he doesn’t need any to be happy. He is so attached to nature, enjoys it so completely and so intimately, he is a friend of the soil he kisses with his whole body, of the leaves, and of the sky toward which he so proudly lifts his head with its sensitive eyeballs; noble, slow, wise, proud, vain, arrogant (44).

The notion that the humble snail’s eyeballs are “proud, vain, arrogant” necessarily implicates the speaking agent behind these words, it tells us just how this speaker feels about snails and their eyeballs—he and his judgments are very much on the page¹⁴ and yet somehow, the sentiment rings true. It is subjective, yet also objective. Archer comments in the introduction to her translation,

[Ponge] states his purpose to be “description-definition-literary art work” which, avoiding the drabness of the dictionary and the inadequacy of poetic description, will lead to a cosmogony, that is, an account—through the successive and cumulative stages of linguistic development—of the totality of *man’s view of the universe and his relationship to it* (5 my emphasis).

So, implicit in Ponge’s prose cosmogony is the ambition to reflect “man’s view of the universe and his relationship to it”—meaning that Ponge writes his humanity into the objective cosmogony. Ponge himself, however, writes that he is looking for “clear” and “impersonal formulas,” but I am not entirely sure this is possible (106). In my case, a cosmogony means starting from oneself in the beginning, with the self. Is it not that way with all?

END PART ONE

¹⁴ “For it is to judgement that perception belongs, as science belongs to intellect. Intuition is the part of judgement, mathematics of intellect.”—Pascal

Beauty, like meaning, is a strange thing. Beauty need not be felicitous; sadness can be beautiful. In fact, most often a sadness is necessary to create beauty. “The shaman wards off a danger with its likeness,” Horkheimer and Adorno say of ritual as I read tonight. “Equivalence is his instrument [...]” (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 12). Perhaps the mirroring of sadness which art uses as its subject can “ward off danger with its likeness”—perhaps imitation of the thing is a talisman, an icon with powers—making idols of us all¹⁵.

¹⁵ John Ashbery says in *Three Poems*, “[...] man was both an idol and the humblest of idolaters, his own redemption or his own damnation, with the rest of the world as a painted backdrop to his own monodrama of becoming of which he was the lone impassioned spectator” (64).

I remember coming to Reno for recruitment weekend, having just been accepted to the MFA program at the University of Nevada, Reno. As part of the mingling process, a group of us went to an Irish pub. Being a lightweight, after one glass of wine that night, I was just ordering glass after glass of virgin Irish coffee—which, to be honest, is just coffee. I was telling everyone there that “I have no idea what I am doing here” and that “I don’t consider myself a writer.” I still don’t. I am a mad woman seeing herself in everything that is taken in through the senses, making cosmogonies via the self.

Diary—today, the UPS truck is hurtling down our street. I can hear the driver talking on his cellphone as he makes the deliveries. He speaks loudly because there are no doors on the UPS trucks and therefore less of a buffer between the engine of the truck and the driver's seat. I ask myself if I would also talk on the phone as I drove if I were the UPS-delivery man. *Of course I would*, I think, *I would be him*: hollering into the cell phone, driving the truck with the squeaky breaks, *I would be him*.

Going uphill on its way back, the UPS truck now has no cause for the brakes to squeal. I sit in the glow of the etiolating November sun and listen as the truck purrs up the road, the engine of wage labor humming along, in this singular moment seemingly immune to the biological war waging on our globe. A moment captured in its suspension.

At first, I am offended when my dad suggests I start a pet-sitting business. *There are a lot of people around here with pets*, he says to me, *and once the virus is over, people will be traveling again.* Tonight, I go to E's virtual reading, where she is talking about ability and ambition—ambition specifically as it relates to capitalism: *Basically*, she says, *a high functioning psychotic person is considered one who can earn a wage.* I was initially incredulous about E's statement: that I will be considered functioning once I can earn a wage, but I realize that I *want* to earn a wage outside of disability checks. I would like to be a writer, it turns out, which is like admitting you still believe in Santa Claus; I would like to be a writer *if*, that is, being a writer can mean being a reader first.

I walk over to D and V's house today to get the rundown for pet sitting. I still don't know their political affiliation, although they fly a small American flag in their driveway which is suggestive. The election has just been called. I am uneasy, but I am wearing my mask, so at least that much is settled. Once again, I have questions about the reality of the pandemic: specifically, is the pandemic real or has it been staged? Garden variety paranoia. D and V's house is fine, with a view that's unreal—a bank of floor-to-ceiling windows that show the Jemez mountains unfurling like a ribbon from end to end of their west-facing breakfast nook which is sprayed with geraniums¹⁶. When I think about it, it seems like their house has been built intelligently, with their pets in mind, but I know this is not true: the house was built well before their pets were even born. I know it's just one of those things: of the unknown becoming known, of the making use of spaces we acquire, of houses following the blueprint of humans. Settling into the substance of the thing. The symbols that arise from the substance.

¹⁶ I love this phrase of mine: “sprayed with geraniums.” It is subjective—there is judgement associated with choosing the word “sprayed.” Yet it is also the appropriate word in this case: an objective reporting of the subjective.

I guess what it comes down to is that I like D and V and pet sitting for them, although there is something foreign about them. And I like the feeling of being of use (as well as the weight of cold, hard cash in my pocket). As D waves to me from the driveway when I leave, as I click shut the gate with the electronic clicker they have just lent to me in service of the job, it feels like something clicks into place. Although, wracked by apophenia, this is not at all an uncommon experience for me: it's an artificial sensation of profundity, of meaningfulness, and it directs my inner landscape.

*

New landscapes quite literally broaden our minds, a very strange expanding of consciousness occurs which is mirrored by the now-known world. With each new sight we become more god-like. The poet Malena Mörling speaks to this convergence of inner and outer worlds in her poem, "Wallpaper": "On one hand, the wallpaper of the world and the wallpaper of the mind are separate layers of what is seen and unseen. On the other hand, they are one and the same seamlessly merging inside the skull" (*Astoria* 31). Sometimes I think if one were to travel the whole world, one would be supernatural in impressions. Yet, I have also thought that the truest way is beginning with the flower, with the eternity in an hour. For Mörling, the wallpaper of the world and the wallpaper of the mind merge in consciousness, which I find utterly terrifying given what goes on in my mind. I note this, Diary, in my marginalia as I read.

I weigh the scenarios in my head. If D and V vote Republican, then what does it mean that—like my dad—D has a uniform of a flannel shirt and Levi’s blue jeans, with socks and sandals (Crocs in D’s case, fishermen’s sandals in my dad’s)? (I am always thinking about purchasing power). What does it mean that they supplement otherwise ennui lives (because, after all, once we get down to it, life is boring) with animals—those burdens we don’t mind carrying? The daily routine that D shows me is so much like the way my mom feeds our cat. D and V have set up a cat-food station, for instance. They even have the same little reusable plastic cat-food-can lid. I guess the similarities might mean less if they voted—and I knew they voted—Democrat. The similarities pop out at me like jack-in-the-boxes, my apophenia trying to create a coherent narrative about politics and pet-owning, as if the two were related. Apophenia takes what it is given, and hums along like a purring profundity machine, assigning meaning where there may be none.

I tell Mom that D and V seem very “American.” She asks me why. I tell her about how they arrived home in their driveway just when I was leaving, that they had a paper bag of food from McDonald’s. She nods knowingly and says “m-hmm.” I go on. They have an array of detergents in their laundry room, their house is filled with purely decorative items. Later, when my mother learns that I have never heard of rinse agent, she reminds me, “See? You’re not so American after all.”

*

I am American-born. I live in America. I am a citizen of America. But I know that given my privilege, my upbringing on one side by an immigrant, that my experience is not the American one. And that, perhaps, is what makes me so quintessentially American.

Diary—today, I open the Bing web browser that came with my computer. *Eliot Page, Juno star, reveals transgender identity; Why we're obsessed with this camper-shaped gingerbread kit; China lands spacecraft on the moon.* I don't click on any of them, though I want to. They strike me as instances of soft porn. John Ashbery writes indirectly of soft porn in the terms of eternal salvation, of the ever-present necessity to edit our actions, saying that:

[...] the whole question of behavior in life has to be rethought each second; that not a breath can be drawn nor a footstep taken without our being forced in some way to reassess the age-old problem of what we are to do here and how did we get here, taking into account our relations with those about us and with ourselves, and the ever-present issue of our eternal salvation, which looms larger at every moment—even when forgotten it seems to grow like the outline of a mountain as one approaches it” (*Three Poems* 61).

I am surprised that John Ashbery wasn't psychotic: this pre-occupation with salvation seems near-paranoid. There is the apophenic way he says, “the whole question of behavior in life as to be rethought each second.” But I suppose the schizophrenics don't have any monopoly on the idea of cause-and-effect, ever-lasting life and the exhaustion that must result: Maggie Nelson calls it Samsara¹⁷ and the thought of it is terrifying. Sometimes my delusions tell me that my experience—America's mishandling of the pandemic, partisan politics, reality TV—has been “implanted” in me by my parents to prepare me for my life beyond, to ready me for resurrection, and to instruct me to become an angel of America—though my dad calls himself an atheist and my mother is a non-practicing Catholic. My apophenia suggests that there is meaning especially for me in these noumenon, which is, of course, delusional. Delusional, that is, unless I, somehow, *am* this America of which I speak, if the noumenon and the phenomenon are not at all distinct from each other.

¹⁷ Wikipedia defines Samsara as “the concept of rebirth and ‘cyclicity of all life, matter, existence,’ a fundamental belief of most Indian religions. In short it is the cycle of death and rebirth. Samsara is sometimes referred to with terms or phrases such as transmigration, karmic cycle, reincarnation, and ‘cycles of aimless drifting, wandering, or mundane existence.’”

I am left with the grieveable world. I cannot return to a world more innocent than the one in which I am. With life, we become more enmired in grief—it is accruing, it's exponential. Grief comes with loss of innocence. Innocence, then, is grieflessness. One can never return from grief unchanged, its alchemical that way. W.S. Merwin says in his poem, "The Sentinel," from his book of prose *The Miner's Pale Children*,

There is no returning to the ungrieved world. Now that it no longer exists it never existed. The knowledge of this truth, and the nostalgia which that knowledge engenders, have become an allegory—crude, imperfect, not to be taken literally—of the yearning for heaven, but at the same time they have consolidated the rule of grief, who by now is lord of this world's past, and of its future (94).

I think the problem with religion is that it has been "taken literally." It says that my virginity is like the ungrieved world: "now that it no longer exists it never existed." Knowledge of the lost past turns into an allegory of the yearning for heaven. Heaven being that which is aspired to only *after* a corruption, a marring of innocence, the eating from the tree of knowledge. Heaven is preempted by corruption. I imagine heaven as that state which promises never to return me to Earth.

Today, I open the Bing browser that came with my computer. *Kourtney Kardashian Leaves Little to the Imagination in Racy Bikini Photo*. Something else to include in you, Diary. Against my better judgement, I would like to click the link to the “racy bikini photo” but my paranoia stops me. Suppose, as part of my trial, someone is tracking my web history? If I represent America, I must be on my best behavior. Later today, I read Francis Ponge, who writes of the gesture of making art in a time of declining consumer judgement:

If it is true that in our day the taste of the majority has descended to the lowest level, to the point of provoking irrepressible nausea and at times even destroying the pleasure of living, there are some who, by way of compensation, have raised themselves to the summit, which involves taking human pleasure—even more than in the works themselves—in the rare and moving qualities they reveal in their maker, and in almost preferring to the masterworks these album leaves¹⁸, these working pages on which are inscribed in all their vividness the ups and downs of the struggle with the angel, in short, those daily communiqués of the holy war (*The Voice of Things* 160).

I suppose, more than these quoted artifacts themselves, I prize the qualities they “reveal in their maker.” There is companionship in the reckoning of this strange world—where “the whole question of behavior in life has to be rethought each second.”

But what does it mean that I would, say, like to watch the match-making reality TV show “Are You the One?” but decline to? Is this my struggle with “the angel”? Will I be blessed? Are these the “communiqués of the holy war”? Is America at war with itself? Are we fighting a “holy war” of declining consumer judgement?

Sometimes, I think that the highest form of art is to become a reality-TV star: that the most genius way of making art is using only your god-given resources to conjure money out of thin air, to exploit so well the demand for sensation à la Warhol. Sometimes, I think all reality-TV stars must be uniquely talented to tap into this phenomenal American hunger so deftly.

¹⁸ “Originally, the term ‘Album leaf’ was used for pieces written in dedication to a friend or admirer, to be inserted into their album or autograph book, and not intended for publication. It later lost any association with a particular dedicatee.”

Other times, I think that to be a reality-TV star, one must be a saint. How else could one so remorselessly abandon their anonymity? To give oneself over so completely to a mere caricature, which will be one's public expression for the foreseeable future, takes a certain loss of ego, a surrender.

If what America experiences is emblematic for what the world experiences, what does it mean that America is at war with itself? If globalization, economically and socially, seems to be the next era in terms of societal infrastructure it threatens everything we assume to be given—locality is being exploded, we are becoming a global species. If local translates to global, are my experiences international, world-wide, *universe-al*? John Ashbery writes: “Certainly even [...] limited understanding can lead to a conception of beauty, insofar as any detail is a microcosm of the whole, as is so often the case” (*Three Poems* 67). I am not after beauty here, unless it is the beauty of accuracy, unless it is the beauty of the aptly-chosen quote, but I think the detail as microcosm rings true to what I am attempting here.

Three months after the election, I am not sure anything is real. The newsletter from the Times which is emailed to me this morning comes from without and is therefore suspect. Post-modernism has taught me not to trust the meta-narratives: I find this terribly unhelpful while reading the newspaper. How does one proceed after meaninglessness? I ask myself this as someone formerly psychotic, marked by a time when I told myself stories, which were obscured with irrationality, a time when meaninglessness was impossible (and still is, thanks to break-through symptoms of apophenia). So, here I am: starting over, whittling life down to the barest, truest essentials, beginning from my senses and working outward—bones in my body seem to mean something like my individuality, my monadism. But when I wipe the dog food scoop out with bare hands under the running water, I am painfully aware that my skin is permeable—utterly porous. Pascal says, “People are generally better persuaded by the reasons which they have themselves discovered than by those which have come into the mind of others” (*Pensées* 68). I take this to an extreme. Do we all have to discover for ourselves “The Way”?

Dear, dear Diary, it took me four years of on-again/off-again therapy and at least nine months of writing around the topic to realize why I am so sympatico with people who consume “fake” news (isn’t it all fake? Or at the very least artificially construed?). My entire interrogation of reality in the face of a “thought disease” mirrors the kind of skepticism conspiracists have about the news. Given the postmodern incredulity toward meta-narratives, it should come as no surprise to us that the narratives being told are approached with such skepticism and distrust. The modern age we are in is marked by both an incredulity toward narratives and, simultaneously, a hunger for patterning similar to my psychosis. I thought my father was the brains behind an American puppet government and I looked for evidence that confirmed this. I was deeply skeptical when others tried to convince me otherwise. Belief is tricky. David Whyte says beliefs are the most mundane thing about you, though. On days like today, I experience break-through symptoms as when, for example, I think that the COVID pandemic was orchestrated by my father (as the puppeteer of the puppet government) to demonstrate the near-sacrosanct duties that come with the job title of Puppeteer in Chief, how a Democrat would honor the position more than his Republican predecessor. Everything has a moral to me. The strange thing about these thoughts is that I know them to be untrue and yet I think them anyway.

After our online instructional session with David Whyte, my parents and I get on a Zoom call with our family friends. M tells us after the insurrection about her brother who subscribes to the beliefs of Q-Anon. She uses the word “irrational” to describe his attitudes. Her husband, R, sums it up by saying, “Sometimes people in your family are crazy and you just have to accept that.” This is a pivotal moment for me in understanding the illogical logic that is behind some of this thinking—after all, I, too, have been told that I subscribe to thoughts that are “irrational.” Yet, no matter how irrational, my delusions have always taught me about myself in a very important way. But, ultimately, I know what it is to be lumped into the unreliable. I am no stranger to the world of the epithets and judgements of normativity. So, when I hear about the “crazy” things Q-Anon

subscribers believe, I experience a strange two-fold response. First of all, as a psychotic person, I am incredulous. Everything traces back to me, so, first and foremost, I feel that Q-Anon sects are a myth that has been invented to teach me something moralistic about my own psychosis/experience/guilt/destiny (you name it) and are therefore an artifice of sorts (surely, these sects can't be real! Surely, they're a specimen of evidence serving in my favor for the trial!). But after that initial response, I kind of shrug my shoulders. Certainly, in this postmodern era in which meta-narratives are made suspect, it is hard to know what is true and what is not true. In fact, in my studies of the subject of English, I feel that the body of knowledge being interrogated is increasingly about the unreliability of information that comes from without: we are taught about the unreliable quality of our sensory impressions, the subjective (and therefore impoverished) nature of our experiences, the insufficiency of words, and the manufactured half-lies that comprise "history." Though I do not think that subscribers of Q-Anon are necessarily engaging with this particular bouquet of concepts in these terms, I do think these concepts have more or less infiltrated the collective consciousness, nonetheless.

And all I know is that sometimes the irrational thoughts *feel* very true. I get a feeling in my gut about them, a feeling of astute solidity, a sensation wildly bodily. I can attest to a corporeal experience of irrational thoughts which cannot quite be explained. Sure, my physician says that it's the result, in my case, of too much dopamine flooding my brain's neurotransmitters, but that doesn't explain the patterns of thoughts that my brain selects to orbit around. Why are these thoughts, in particular—rather than others—being selected for? I suppose what all I can say of the matter is that irrational thoughts are not, and cannot be, just reasoned away. They are especially powerful in that way. I experience them frequently and consider them a component of my reality, which is, I think, no more subjective than anyone else's, just subjective in another direction.

I return to this issue of “substance versus symbolism:” essentially, *are politics substantial or are they symbolic?* This strikes me as a profoundly topical dichotomy. I have been, for a while, trying to name what it is about politics that irks me so much and now I think I know that it is politics’ symbolism. Politics seem to function as language does (and certainly they depend heavily if not solely on language): mere constructs to manage castles in the air, ungrounded in the concrete, mere rhetoric. But as a lover of symbols is it right of me to resent politics for its reliance on symbolism? Am I doing anything different here?

*

I think of my mom, who led a campaign back in California attempting to ban leaf-blowers from the neighborhood. Her appeal was widely unpopular and derided by some of the neighbors. Though she was not—as some of the neighbors claimed she was—trying to strip gardeners of their livelihoods, she was nevertheless shot down. This seems to embody the paradigm of engagement to me: it leaves one vulnerable to rancor and vitriol. Visibility comes at a great cost. I think about Galway Kinnell who says he wishes he had waited until he was eighty to make any of his poems public. I think of the quarrelling between lovers: to be seen means to be made vulnerable to attack.

END PART TWO

Was it my reason (intellect) or my senses (judgement) that planted this idea in my head that nothing is real—that my consciousness alone gave rise to the world as I (we?) know it? The way everything seems to reflect me? I also understand this might be the case for everyone: each consciousness giving body to a dimension of the multiverse. It seems to me the more I read, the more this idea appeals to me—or perhaps I have evolved it, perhaps I have extracted it from my senses? (And when do reason and sensation converge, anyway?) In contrast to this grandiosity, Galway Kinnell, whom I'll call a staunch “physicalist,”¹⁹ writes,

That we last only for a time, that we know this, radiates a thrilling, tragic light on all our loves, all our relationships, even on those moments when the world, through its poetry, becomes almost capable of spurning time and death” (*Collected Poems* xxiii).

I am not sure I believe this. I suppose that it is, *in effect*, like this—that practically speaking we are all just a single life span petering out into oblivion. Additionally, if we are, indeed, wiped clean at death of our former lives then this life would essentially be it. But I am convinced²⁰ that we are trapped in the elixir of existence ad infinitum, that we will return Samsara-style in a completely strange reimagining of “ourselves”—but one which is nevertheless completely unrecognizable to us and who has no attachments to our past. I have no recollection of my past lives, but energy is neither created nor destroyed and I am unconvinced that I will escape rebirth.

¹⁹ Someone who invests a large amount of faith in the physical world, rather than, say, the world of cogitations.

²⁰ Again—conviction: “The tone of conviction (and even sincerity) is assumed, it seems to me, as much to convince oneself as to convince one’s interlocutor, and even more perhaps to replace conviction; to replace, in a sense, the truth missing from the statements made.”—Francis Ponge (*The Voice of Things* 81).

Diary, sometimes, when I think of my parents' relatively laissez faire parenting, I wonder whether they are preparing me for a life on earth: "The Way," I think. "They are showing me The Way," by letting me come to my own conclusions²¹. Are there as many "Ways" as there are potential beings? Is the multiverse just the manifestation of all the individual consciousnesses—from that of the blade of grass to that of the megalomaniacal dictator? Does the universe expand at the blooming of each one of our newly found, freshly-minted ways of being? Are we all at the centers of all of our worlds? Psychosis can feel that way.

²¹ "People are generally better persuaded by the reasons which they have themselves discovered than by those which have come into the mind of others." –Pascal (*Pensées* 68).

My parents' family friends, H and S, are pulling out of the driveway on their way to the airport. I am in the casita washing dishes from our sunny Friday afternoon lunch—something that would have been impossible when people didn't work from home. Ever since hearing H talk about being a social being, I've seen the promise—the necessity—of existing socially. Up until this point, isolation has been my default—something my therapists attribute to my fear of judgment, which, in turn, they attribute to my own judgmental tendencies. I assume that in the pandemic age, sheltering at home reflects/mimics my defensive mechanisms of isolation. Today, it seems that if I keep exposing myself to people, I will learn about myself. But it also seems that if I keep to my hermitage then I will learn more about god. This seems like a precarious dichotomy. I find myself caught between fates.

About a year ago, I started experimenting with celibacy. No masturbation, a mantra commanding myself to “feel nothing” when a sexy scene came on the TV. My celibacy clarifies things—makes things sharper. Not only the frequent pangs of desire—yes, those too—but also the feelings that I am getting closer to the quick of life, getting down to the wick, wax warm around it²². Of course, apparent to me is the sensuality of this incendiary choice of diction and also that my own repression is undeniable (though it is also utterly comfortable). This experiment seems quintessentially rooted in American-ness—a venture that is young and new, a disruption of the status quo, a tertiary possibility to an answer to a question that is posed as a binary.

*

My celibacy grows day by day: an accumulation of charge, sure, but also a reservoir of endurance, something on which to draw, succor for when things are down to the wire. It keeps me feeling holy, like I am miraculous. I think I would very much like to be a nun, if weren't for the question: *do you believe the lord Jesus to be your savior?*

*

Maggie Nelson writes,

When I imagine a celibate man—especially one who doesn't even jerk off—I wonder how he relates to his dick: what else he does with it, how he handles it, how he *regards* it. At first glance, this same question for a woman might appear more ‘tucked away’ (pussy-as-absence, pussy-as-lack: out of sight, out of mind). But I am inclined to think that anyone who thinks or talks this way has simply never felt the pulsing of a pussy in serious need of fucking—a pulsing that communicates nothing less than the suckings and ejaculations of the heart (72).

Now that, thanks to my use of antipsychotic medication, I have been advised to not have children, sex has become problematic. But I do still have “suckings and ejaculations” of the heart, as I learn

²² “Meanwhile, the candle, by the flickering of its rays on the book in the sudden release of its own smoke, encourages the reader—then leans over on its stand and *drowns in its own aliment*”. —Francis Ponge (*The Voice of Things* 35 my emphasis).

the ways that love can exist independently of sex. I am falling in love with my parents' cat, with poetry, with sunshine—and it's physical.

Of love and lust, John Ashbery writes,

Thus you find people whose perfect understanding of love is deduced from lust, as the description of a flower can generate an idea of what it looks like” (*Three Poems* 67).

This confuses me. On one hand, Ashbery calls the hypothetical understanding of love deduced from lust as “perfect.” On the other hand, what description of a flower ever comes close to what a flower looks like, or more importantly the *reality* of a flower?

One way I am unrepresentative of America is that that I love poetry. I wonder what would happen if America decided to love poetry. I can't say anything for certain except that I write this hoping America will love it. Does that mean I want to become a celebrity? Perhaps it's just as well that America doesn't love poetry.

Today, Diary, I am reading Pascal's *Pensées*. Pascal writes of our smallness, which I have little belief in, because the world revolves me and all²³. I jest, but really, seriously, we *are* the worlds which spring up in the pearl of our newly born consciousness. Sometimes I think that the universe expands only with the generation of new consciousnesses as they are born. Pascal says of our relation to the world:

The whole visible world is only an imperceptible atom in the ample bosom of nature. No idea approaches it. We may enlarge our conceptions beyond an imaginable space; we only produce atoms in comparison with the reality of things (*Pensées* 228).

I imagine babies the size of atoms out in the universe waiting to be born to me. I imagine that within me is a reservoir of atoms of potential—comprising ova carrying half of all they need to recreate, to spontaneously exist. Out there with the worm holes and the star dust, there are people whom I cannot usher into the world through this body which still thickens and sheds its uterine lining monthly, that still dreams about babies even though this head knows it's impossible due to the pharmaceutical poisons I consume nightly, and which return my thoughts to an acceptable baseline. I imagine that I have truncated my own realization, that I have amputated the full expression of myself, cut myself short. I suppose I find comfort that “The whole visible world is only an imperceptible atom in the bosom of nature” just like I find comfort in the texts I read, as I highlight one thing and post-it note another, as words come to me laden with truths. But my grief feels as large as that damn “bosom of nature.” Grief runs the worlds.

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Perhaps I have ceased sexual relations out of necessity. Though I am coming to terms with the notion that I may never bear children, it's something I don't think I'll ever fully accept. Sex was interesting in my youth, but in my apophenic mind, I assume there is a reason I am not having it

²³ John Ashbery writes, “Who am I after all, you say despairingly once again, to have merited so much attention on the part of the universe [...]” (*Three Poems* 94).

anymore. I equate the Corona virus with, among other things, the time I caught chlamydia from a sexual partner. Does the spread of COVID somehow mimic the spread of chlamydia? (Unlikely, as one is spread venereally and the other through aerosols—one is bacterial, the other viral—but still: symbols). The world, I am so sure, revolves around me, at least that is what my thoughts tell me. My thoughts are so adamant about assigning meaning where there is none. A pandemic is too terrible to be true, and therefore *must* be about my own sexual promiscuity—the divide between the left and the right, my delusions tell me, is not something that can't be fixed by my new-found piousness (read: celibacy). My celibacy, I assume, is symbolized in the world at large by social distancing, and therefore the entire planet is experiencing my celibacy by proxy. It is keeping us safe from the virus, it is a necessary measure.

*

If I am fated not to reproduce, does a sexual future exist for me? I am not sure that it does. I grieve my last chlamydic sexual encounter, not knowing at the time that it may be my last sexual encounter. I don't know if I can enjoy sex that is not reproductive, or if I am meant to.

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If I am indicative of America, and America indicative of the world, does my inability to carry children because my blood is poisoned by psychotropic drugs imply a necessity for a halt of reproduction? Apophenia asks: is our globe even habitable anymore? What does it *mean* that I am not to procreate? You see, I must explain it the only way I can, inferring meaning where there may be none.

*

Madness, in an apophenic way, is the (heightened) attempt to make meaning. By leaning into meaning, I may be merging with madness. Therefore, irrationality is sanity. That seems to be the

new world order. Which just makes the whole thing quite messy and doesn't benefit my advocacy for the subjective at all.

Diary, I've noticed that I drink sloppily. I am always gulping down big swigs of water as I move from one place in the casita to the next. I drink as I walk, and I drink as I open the door to the refrigerator. Water is always dribbling down my chin (okay, some hyperbole here). I spill it as I pour it from the filter jug into the glass. I think about what this says about me, about what the ramifications of this habit mean for me down the road. Is my sloppiness a karmic determinant (Samsara) of the good or bad things that come my way? I erroneously try to make connections between this phenomenon of sloppiness and my ultimate fate—apophenia firing on all cylinders. I'd like to believe there is a simple cause-and-effect logic to the way that I am and the way I will be, but if there is, it's never clear to me.

I go to Trader Joe's where I do my best thinking. There's a male cashier I've had my eye on, despite the celibacy. He is dark, medium-height, impeccably groomed. I am aware of his raw sexuality, but I am not convinced that I haven't imagined it into existence myself. Does his perceived heightened sexuality actually infer my own sexual rapacity? (Robert Creeley says, "I point to me to look out at the world"). I sense this cashier walking behind me as I slowly amble down the produce aisle. He surpasses me and heads toward the staff room. Then I see bananas, and I feel self-conscious desiring to buy them when I have just had lewd thoughts and they (the bananas) are so obviously phallic-shaped. My intrigue of this cashier coupled with the shameless bananas is almost too overpowering to handle. A similar thing happens another time when I try to buy eggplants.

I learn about the Heisenberg Principle. I do not claim any understanding of quantum mechanics, but I look for metaphors in the jargon, nonetheless. “A quantity is determined only up to some uncertainty.” Ok, yes—things are determined only to an extent, even uncertainty. “Thus at the moment when the position of the particle is accurately known [...] its momentum cannot be accurately known.” Try as we might, we can’t pin down the butterfly and know its flight pattern, too—momentum sloughs away with positionality. We kill the other things by knowing the single thing²⁴. To know a position is to deny momentum. To know momentum is to deny position. It reminds me of what my calculus teacher said about initial velocity—the miracle of going from inertia to movement—the utter god-speak of it, of the burst into motion.

²⁴ Anne Boyer writes, “that noticing one thing can make the other things disappear” (*Garments Against Women* 4).

My therapists come and go in my life. Some have “graduated” me—telling me I have gone as far as they can take me, that it is time to move on. Or I move to Santa Fe and they are located in Reno, as was the case with C, and their licenses are no longer valid across state lines. Sometimes therapy feels good. Sometimes feeling that good is unpredictable—like you’re super nova-ing and threaten everything in your path with the fire that that burns in “recovery.” You make resolutions and keep them. You become the person you want to be—and that begins to be precarious because there is no end to the persons you want to become. When things go well, you just keep blasting through ceiling after ceiling of what was possible for the person you had been. But this is just when things are going well. Things have been going well. I am waiting for things to go not well again, for something to devastate me again. Devastate, as in: “lay waste, ravage, make desolate.” Grief that ravages. I have lived an illusioned life—so much so that I believe in things like Hegelian progress, that we are on an upward trajectory as a society. Our path, then, seems knowable, progress feasible. From where I stand, things look this way, but is this me knowing positionality and denying momentum? Or knowing momentum and denying positionality?

I don't know how to live a life of disillusionment—which is a life of truth, I have been taught to believe. My faith, theory says, is really stupidity. My own subjectivity, theory tells me, is illusion—a false conclusion. My subjectivity does not represent reality it says.

Diary, I try to think of how the insane and the divine often get confused, but the authors of the book of case studies titled *Our Most Troubling Madness* disavow such aspirational thinking for sufferers of schizophrenia. They write: “Patients sometimes reach out to this idea of shamanism to make sense of their own sensory experiences or to repair an identity spoiled by the diagnosis [...] In general, these claims are wrong” (9). *Well*.

*

It’s true I don’t like who I was psychotic—except that she was kind of gutsy, didn’t care about how she looked: shaved her head, burned her clothes, stopped plucking her eyebrows—for a while she knew the politics of paucity. It was her approximation of sainthood. This is something I’ve since moved on from, using my stipend from school to buy clothes online made of linen, cotton, Tencel, and modal; to buy creams and salves; shoes and bags. John Ashbery writes on feigned spirituality (a topic quite familiar to me):

[...] a kind of panic develops, which for many becomes a permanent state of being, with all the appearances of a calm, purposeful, reflective life. These people are awaiting the sign of their felicity without hope; its *nearness* is there, tingeing the air around them, in suspension, in escrow as it were, but they cannot get at it. Yet so great is their eagerness that they believe that they have already absorbed it, that they have attained that plane of final realization that we are all striving for, that they have achieved a state of permanent grace. Hence the air of joyful resignation, the beatific upturned eyelids, the paralyzed stance of these castaways of the eternal voyage, who imagine they have reached the promised land when in reality the ship is sinking under them. The great fright has turned their gaze upward, to the stars, to the heavens; they see nothing of the disarray around them, their ears are closed to the cries of their fellow passengers; they can think only of themselves when all the time they believe that they are thinking of nothing but God (*Three Poems* 73-74).

How familiar is this sentiment: that we strive for god falsely, that our upturned eyes and joyful resignation are aped gestures at piety, that we think only of ourselves when we suppose we are thinking only of god; the fear that drives us to religion. Was forfeiting worldly possessions the equivalent of “imagin[ing I had] reached the promised land when in reality the ship is sinking under [me]”? This quote speaks to the failings of religious institutions such as—I’d like to believe—self-

imposed poverty. The old established ways, the easy answer of propertylessness, written about by Ashbery in his spiritual history that is *Three Poems*, are mere apings of the truer, harder way, which he writes so elegantly around, which he circulates—a truth so sacred, its perimeters can only be skirted. I am thinking always about purchasing power.

I go to Trader Joe's again this Tuesday. Of course, the well-groomed cashier is there, and each employee seems to be suggestive of my own deviant sexuality—that strange force that corrupts my dreams and shames me. I say this because one male shelf-stocker has a rotund and robust butt, “juicy” like mine, and apophenic-type things kind of start to snowball from there. Anyway, I am overly-alert to the signs which come in droves: chocolate and gourmet cheese for intimacy, fruit for childbearing, bread and wine for the Christ child. The cans of beans and the packages of spaghetti seem alive with messages. The music speaks to me: Sheryl Crow singing “The first cut is the deepest.” I feel ashamed for having to resist moving my body to the tune—ashamed that I am embodying this pop song against my will, that it reduces my life to its lyrics. I should say that I secretly love pop music. It's kind of like watching a car crash.

But then I feel something. Something like H.D.'s over-mind, which I read about tonight. And suddenly the shame and fear sloughs away. I stand in the produce aisle and feel at home with the other human beings. I am a whole among wholes—it is a fleeting instant: loving, open, and free. WHAT PRICE BANANAS?!? as Ginsberg demands in his poem celebrating the spiritual and erotic throes found in a mundane supermarket aptly titled “A Supermarket in California.” It strikes me that I am knowing something that cannot be forgotten. This is what progress looks like.

Looking back, I wish I had learned earlier how meaningful sex could be. That sharing a very intimate, internal experience might *mean something* in a truer way than in the apophenic sense. And I know this sounds like something from Christian sleep-away camp, but I think if I share this revelation, American readers might begin to have more responsible and respectful sex: that my sexual regrets are America's sexual regrets—that American sex seems to be *a* crux of our national malaise, and of the feminine malaise. Although many might dispute it, I think toxic sexuality underlies the more substantive issues we face.²⁵ The hook-up culture is toxic, and the hypersexuality of entertainment and news media violent.

²⁵ Netflix offers a show whose copy reads: "He's a waiter with stage fright. She's a grad student with issues. Together, they're the perfect BDSM power couple."

Of the word, “fuck,” Galway Kinnell says, “An ancient word, formed perhaps before sacred and profane had split apart when the tongue, like a flame in the mouth, lighted each word as it was spoken, to remind it to remember” (*Three Books* 192). I’d like to go back to the time “before sacred and profane had split apart,” when I wouldn’t have to choose between creature comforts and sanctity. I think of artist Sanford Diggers who spoke, in his conversation with academic Leigh Raiford, about the usefulness—spiritual and mundane—of objects. Specifically, he credited objects with having their own spiritual autonomy. I have been learning that clothes are power objects—they project a certain authority, a testament to the wearer’s character, they speak to the wearer’s subjectivity. I would like to embrace my earthliness, my corporeality, my profanity. I would like to not feel guilty at the sweat-shop garments I drape over this body, which contain more use-value to me than as mere garments—but instead contain use-value in service of that excessive, supplemental end: *style*. I would like to not feel ashamed of being pruriently interested in Ariana Grande’s documentary on Netflix, despite (*I know, I know*) having just complained about the hypersexuality of the entertainment industry.

Of post-enlightenment mores, Horkheimer and Adorno state in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

The blessing that the market does not ask about birth is paid for in the exchange society by the fact that the possibilities conferred by birth are molded to fit the production of goods that can be bought on the market (9).

What this means to me is that the class we are born into is reinforced by what we can or cannot afford to pay for. Is, then, paying for what you can't afford a way of bucking this oppressive reinforcement loop? By taking out loans they can't afford are Americans subversive? Ariana Grande can "want it" and "g[et] it"—does that mean she was born with the exchange value of a celebrity? Do the circumstances of her "birth" confer a life of gratification for her? To whom was she born? In America, I guess that's the great thing—it doesn't matter—birth can be transcended by innate sexuality. "The possibilities conferred by birth" are the right dimples and the right hair: you reflect the grossness of what "can be bought on the market" by your personal asset of sexuality. In America, we do not reflect our value, our value reflects us.

Is beauty a violence of its own? The girl I see at Trader Joe's who is supermodel skinny and dressed like a punk poses a threat. I have trouble integrating her body's perfection into the delicate scales of my own self-confidence. The ego is a fragile animal. Do I imagine that the cashier who calls me "hun," does so because she sees my eyes track this punk-girl's presence? Does she, too, become obsessive and neurotic when she sees a conventionally attractive person?

What is all this I am saying? “[W]e shall be prompted,” writes Mark Strand, “to say that language is error, and all said things are wronged by representation. The self, we shall say, can never be seen with a disguise, and never be seen without one” (*The Story of Our Lives* 24). Is this me with a disguise or without one? Am I merely my disguise? (That might be so). I can’t tell the difference anymore. This is not an autobiography, because these are not moments of a life. This is autobiography gone rogue.

*

Strand says of subjectivity:

To have the whole sunset again, moment by moment, as it occurred, in a correct and detailed account, only darkens what happened [...] Better to hope for the merest reminder, a spectral glimpse—there but not there, something not quite seen, poised only to be dissolved, so, when it goes as it must, no sense of loss springs in its wake (*TSOL* 26).

A fragment, a glimpse is all we can hope for. I do not want to darken the moments we shared. I don’t want to “embalm” the moments we had by recounting them here in language, and I must not “kill [things] with the word.” But damn it, I want the sunset again.

END PART THREE

Diary, I need to have qualia that are certain, even if they're only certain to me. If there is no thing that is true, my return to sanity means nothing²⁶.

*

When I was recovering from my last hospitalization, I was enrolled in a social service called PREP or Prevention and Recovery in Early Psychosis. They helped me get a job, enroll me in a community college, and provided me with a therapist. They taught me there was a there there, to trade in the concrete, to put my eggs in the basket of rationality. I am not so sure I can still do this, though it worked for a time—maybe I *am* graduating to verse. Today my mother tells me of a period during which she fell mysteriously ill while remodeling our house in California. Later, she found out that during that time, her mother in Germany had broken both of her arms. She says it was just coincidence, but this is no longer mere coincidence for me, because I am trying to learn to be more wonderous, more credulous for the world's innate godliness which is its meaningfulness. To be incredulous is to discount the unspeakable presence of something where there should be nothing. Credulity, do you like how it rolls off the tongue? How easy it is, after all, to lay down the arms of incredulity!

²⁶ “It becomes plain that we cannot interpret everything, we must be selective, and so the tale we are telling begins little by little to leave reality behind. It is no longer so much our description of the way things happen to us as our private song, sung in the wilderness, nor can we leave off singing, for that would be to retreat into the death of childhood, to the mere acceptance and dull living of all that is thrust upon us, a living death in a word.” –John Ashbery (*Three Poems* 109). I must sing this song, sing it to the wilderness.

Last night we watched *I am Woman*, a movie about Australian pop-singer Helen Reddy. In one of her songs, Reddy sings of a woman who fails to grow up: “She’s forty-one and her daddy still calls her ‘Baby’ / All the folks around Brownsville say she’s crazy / ‘Cause she walks downtown with a suitcase in her hand / Looking for a mysterious dark-haired man.” I thought the song had been written about me, as is often the case. The thing is, one sees oneself in the world—do I distrust this impulse just because my disease takes it to an extreme? And do I reject the narrative and symbolic bents that are so integral to myself?²⁷

²⁷Edward Hirsch writes, “[Galway] Kinnell spoke of a poetry in which ‘the poet seeks an inner liberation by going so deeply into himself—into the worst as well as the best—that he suddenly finds he is everywhere’” (*Collected Poems xxx*).

In the book, *Ethics After Poststructuralism*, Mari Ruti contributes an essay called “Is Autonomy Unethical?” In it, she tells the story of Susan Brison, a Dartmouth philosopher and author of the book *Aftermath*, which tells of Brison’s experience of rape and near-murder. Ruti writes in favor of subjectivity:

Brison’s overall vision of subjectivity and self-narrativization thus agrees with the one that Judith Butler has advocated in the context of the ethics of precarity that she has developed during the last decade: *because there is no coherent self, there is no way to give a coherent account of oneself*. Yet Brison repeatedly stresses what Butler would find difficult to integrate into her approach, namely *that being able to recover a sense of autonomy is an essential part of surviving trauma*. This autonomy will always be incomplete, will always encounter various obstacles, but it is also life-preserving (55 my emphasis).

An argument for subjective autonomy, one that complicates the conviction that “there is no way to give a coherent account of oneself.” And after all, aren’t we all traumatized anyway? Don’t we all need to express our will to preserve ourselves and our lives?²⁸ Perhaps it is true that “there is no way to give a coherent account of oneself,” yes, but these fragments I’m writing for you don’t become any less true for being incomplete (or incoherent). I think the problem is that we expect wholes when all there are are fragments, glimpses.

²⁸ Francis Ponge: “Like the development of crystals: a will to formation, and the impossibility of forming any other way” (*The Voice of Things* 65).

I'll say it again a different way: My story (and I know, I sound like I've been in twelve-step groups and I have) humanizes me, as does my ability to tell it. When I read Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, I note the instance when Nadia takes a shower for the first time in a long while. From her point of view, Hamid writes,

What she was doing, what she had just done, was for her not about frivolity, it was about the essential, about being human, living as a human being, reminding oneself of what one was, and so it mattered, and if necessary was worth a fight (126).

To me, the subjective is the equivalent of Nadia's shower. But, today, when a crop top reveals the small of the back of a young woman a different race than me, with differently hued skin, I remember that the world continues without me, that it demands my attention to others and their other worlds. I have dignified my own story, and it is now time to receive the stories of others.

My disease is partly genetic, but it exists in my family as a sort of black sheep. No one knows exactly how to talk about it, not even I. I think of the quote from Albus Dumbledore: “Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean it is not real?”²⁹

I ask myself what the best way to describe my family is: perhaps the most expedient way to depict my family is to detail the home we live in since I am always thinking about purchasing power. But I can start, perhaps, with the backyard, which is where I am right now. The back is composed of a portale that faces North. To the East are the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. To the West are the Jemez. We can see them both from our house. At around 4:00pm on a February day, the chiaroscuro of the mountains is especially dramatic.³⁰ The light during this time is heavy with melancholy. Can you see it yet? I’ll keep going. The portale, as one moves north on the property, gives way to a flagstone patio. This is bound on its North end by some skilled rock work, where big stone blocks flank the curving contour of the patio. Beyond the flagstone, there is the canyon land. Here, grow mostly Ponderosa and Juniper Pines, as well as Pinyon³¹. I am still learning to tell them apart. It’s easier when they’re grown up, but when they are small, it’s harder. The mountain ranges, which orient us in terms of East and West, converge as you look North in the horizon. Which is not dissimilar to what I am trying to do here: convergence. There is some sage, but mostly it’s rock and sand out there. The mountains in the North are pink closer up, but the shadows are blue, and, far enough

²⁹ The world, when pliant, reveals small revelations to me: symbols that are instructive, but—I must admit—also distracting. It is I who impose meaning onto the symbols—the qualia are filtered through this faulty wiring of mine. Like today, looking for the tea in our new kitchen, I open a cupboard where my mother keeps the spare coffee pot and her favorite vase beside a book whose spine reads: “Mind&Body Health Handbook” and a compact disc titled “Stress Management for Medical Conditions.” They seem weighted with significance, although most likely this sentiment is my apophenia talking. I open the next cupboard over, still looking for the tea, and see my parents’ liquor collection: the Beefeater gin that kept us wet during the summer, the Tawny for the winter days. Apophenia tells me that this means alcohol is tonic, suggested by the marriage in time and space of the health-related literature I found earlier and the liquor. And, to an extent, this is true. My parents have simple remedies, which I have adopted. I have learned that a simple glass of wine is a good a medicine as any. Pascal says: “Too much and too little wine. Give him none, he cannot find the truth; give him too much, the same” (219).

³⁰ As I said once in a poem, “mountains incant themselves blue.”

³¹ If I could write well, I would write the Ponderosa and the Juniper: each needle, each cone.

away, the mountains themselves are blue, too. This change happens gradually. There are two garden paths leading from the stone patio. One on the East side and one on the West Side. The path on the East side wraps around my parent's house and leads to the casita, where I live. Language is limited, I realize now: it is not photographic. I think it is the dialect of consciousness in motion.

*

My choices today, here, in this moment only reveal the lies I am telling about my circumstances. "Lie" is not the right word, but in a way, it is because it is the antonym of "being honest." It is impossible to be honest with words, and yet here I am, trying to tell the truth. Perhaps any attempt at mimesis is impossible, but the story we tell (even if it is a lie) tells us *something*. And if the story can tell something, that something is itself a kind of truth. It tells the lie honestly, and in that way is truthful. I am going to try to tell more lies honestly.

My delusions tell me that my father has a teleological plan for me. Such thinking keeps me from asking myself what I want and where I am headed. It keeps me in stasis, suspension. These purported plans change from day to day. Today, it is about the culture war between Democrats and Republicans—my father says the Republicans have co-opted the value of “The Family” for their own uses. Am I an instrument to return the value of The Family back to Democrats? A late twenties “girl” who lives in the casita on her parents’ property, celibate and happy? Can my celibacy be somehow harnessed? It feels like it could save nations. But maybe that’s just the extra “pent-up” energy talking.

*

I am aware of my own tarnished virginity, of my history of what appears to be base promiscuity. I think promiscuity is a corruption of the soul. I use my celibacy and my burgeoning happiness as evidence.

*

The possibility to love widely is apparent to me now. I think we are entering a new age of the family and that is exciting to me³². I think of this as we watch our daily dose of internet-streamed TV. We are watching *Gavin and Stacey* written by James Corden and Ruth Jones. In it, twenty-something year-olds Gavin and Stacey are navigating their shared romance, and comedy and heart-warmth ensue. I notice that Gavin and Stacey, while each gainfully employed, both live in their respective family’s homes. I am not unaware of the prevalence of this practice in Europe, where adult children often live in their family home well into adulthood before marriage. I tell myself that I am to commit to a life of spinsterhood, and this doesn’t seem all that bad to me. Could this choice save the nation?

³² Several of my students this semester signed on virtually to class from their childhood bedrooms.

Sex and politics—I can't seem to escape either one. I am best suited for domestic work—little stimulation and relative solitude. In that way, I would make a good stay-at-home mother.

*

In the book of case studies, *Our Most Troubling Madness*, T.M. Luhrmann discusses why the prognosis for schizophrenics is better in India than it is in the United States:

In India, unlike in America, ascribed family roles are important to one's social status and sense of self; patients do not have to be primary breadwinners or primary caretakers to be considered valuable members of the household.

Also that,

In India, unskilled and semi-skilled work, such as agriculture and home-based artisan piece-work, may be less demanding than entry-level jobs in America, which are often in fast-paced, high-social-contact settings like McDonald's (23).

In the casita my parents have bought for me, my duties are negligible. I am being taught to make fires in the wood stove. My fire is clumsy, perhaps even pitiful. Fire does not follow logic, or perhaps it follows a logic to which I am not privy. Blow, for instance, to re-ignite it; and blow, too, the candle to put it out. Fire is learned, my father understands its language much better than I do; I don't understand the physics behind combustion or how to tell the direction of the wind. I lick my finger and stick it in the air, but all I feel is the wet saliva on my digit. I am rash. Fire does not reward the rash. It rewards the methodical and studious. With what does this rashness reward me?

The hundred-year yucca blooms once in a century and then begins to die. Once a century occurred not too long ago for the one down the street, as the desiccated bloom on the top of the shoot that shot up attests. It seemed auspicious: arriving here in Santa Fe, the centennial yucca heeding its internal clock to flare into extravagance. It saw a century, which is likely more than I ought to hope to see. Galway Kinnell says in "The Poetics of the Physical World," "The subject of the poem is the thing which dies" (xxi).

I could write sentimentally about the yucca and the way the flower was imbued with melancholy yellow light, write romantically about how tragically proud it stands in death, but would that convey the truth? Would it, in that lyrical way, be a comment on myself? I could say that I am happy, seeing the March afternoon sun impart the landscape with glow, but what is that happiness? Is it my mood-enhancers? It is more a feeling of comfortableness—a falling into place with a job, a certain intellectual stimulation, a bodily wellness that I have not known for a while. This settling in, into a life I have always had but have not always lived, occurs with the current world pandemic (perhaps *because* of the current world pandemic) and with widening political divides, and they therefore are related; I can no longer care about sounding crazy. To understand the global, one must look to the local; to understand the universal one must see the personal.

My father is in the kitchen, conducting. In the first movement, the greens wilt in a pan of oil and salt; Dad slides the bacon into the oven. I ask him particularities; we trade in the concrete. What kind of greens? —*collard*. How much sea bass did you buy? —*1.2 pounds*. I am thinking always about purchasing power. In the second movement, pepper and paprika on the bass, chopping scallions and thinly slicing lemons: quietly taught life lessons. Again, the concrete: I think I saw lighting on the way back from pet-sitting at the neighbors; I think I just heard the roll of thunder. —*My weather app said there might be precipitation*.

The actions of my father seem more real now than ever before. Again, apophenia. Or maybe it's the light cast from the vent hood above the kitchen island. Maybe it's the soft purr of the heater while outside it finally darkens—the days growing longer this time of year. We are living comfortably. A crescendo as Dad flips the sea bass so its scaly side is up, fat streaming from it—drowning in its own aliment; a crescendo as he transitions the greens into a bowl and tosses in the minced bacon. A slow adagio as he arranges the fresh bread in a basket.

Prose poetry is the place where “both” and “and” can comfortably coexist. It holds excess in the palm of its hand. It is abundant in compassion, especially compassion for ideas, even those that contradict one another.

*

Today, I drive to the grocery store with my dad. I feel different. Relaxed. And no, I haven’t gotten laid. I am celibate as ever, but I have been dreaming incessantly about sex. So, in all the ways that I may resemble a virgin, I do not have the appropriate virginal³³ conscience. There is no returning to the ungrieved world.³⁴ I am determined though, to re-attain a state of virginity, to acquit myself. It might save this country. It seems also important to my own spirituality, which has most likely, admittedly, been corrupted by Judeo-Christian ideals—those which my impoverished theological curiosities have clung to and adopted. Is the fixation with virginity, then, a psychotic obsession, or is it more legitimate? Why discount the psychotic as illegitimate? After all, if meaningfulness is madness and sanity is the opposite—well, then, what?

*

I am divining my own theology as I go, which I don’t recommend. By all means, start with a model! Begin with commandments! Don’t go about it by yourself.

*

My past required a *tapas*. “*Tapas* is based on the root *Tap* (तप) meaning ‘to heat, to give out warmth, to shine, to burn’. The term evolves to also mean ‘to suffer, to mortify the body, undergo

³³ “This demand, however, the demand that the lyric word be virginal, is itself social in nature. It implies a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive. And this situation is imprinted in reverse on the poetic work: the more heavily the situation weighs upon it, the more firmly the work resists it by refusing to submit to anything heteronomous and constituting itself solely in accordance with its own laws.”—Theodor W. Adorno, “On Lyric Poetry and Society.”

³⁴ “There is no returning to the ungrieved world. Now that it no longer exists it never existed.”

penance' in order to 'burn away past karma' and liberate oneself. The term *Tapas* means 'warmth, heat, fire'".

I begin to understand thermodynamics. Fire begets fire. I watch my dad while he tends to the nascent conflagration in the kiva. First, he establishes a draft up the chimney using a torch of twisted butcher paper which he holds upright in the flue, drawing the air toward the heat and up the chimney. Once that's established, he watches the fire burn—steps away from it for a while to collect more firewood. Once the fire's going, he—I think—notices a log that's not quite catching. So, he takes a piece of kindling and sticks it beneath the log, in between the log and the fire's newspaper foundation. I see that he is trying to guide the fire to the bottom of the log by lighting kindling beneath it.

That we die and drink from the River Lethe to forget our earthly lives seems as plausible as any other possibility. Forget, and then go about life again—Samsara. Any possible way, then, to divine the energies that pulse in this world seem as legitimate as the next. Any possible way to prevent rebirth. After reading Yanyi's *The Year of Blue Water*, I no longer disparage Tarot. It no longer strikes me as impossible that the answers may come in the form of a deck of illustrated cards; that all the answers have been formulated in one- or two-word names for the figures on the cards; that if you really need it bad enough, an answer may come to you in the form of a trope, a symbol, a metaphor.

Diary, before I was diagnosed with and treated for schizophrenia, I had hardly any tolerance for synchronicity. Things were so uncanny that the pattern-making part of my brain thought it was dealing in miracle, hence the saintliness complex. So, now when I read, for example, the following line from one of David Whyte's poem, "We love the movement in a seeming stillness, the breath in the body of a loved one sleeping [...]" as I am listening to my father's dozing breath expand and contract, I am still a little unsettled by the strange coincidence. In psychosis there have been strange, uncanny occurrences. For example, the time I flew to La Jolla during finals to propose to a stranger, I was in the university library trying to listen to music. But I didn't have any headphones. Something told me to go to one of the armchairs and slip my hand in the crevice between the chair's arm and its cushion. I did and I found a pair of headphones.

Today, when I lose my AirPods, my first thought is that god took them from me, that this is proof god is punitive and wrathful. When I meditate, I remember what I was doing when I last saw them: cooking. I remember what I was wearing and slipping the pods into a pocket of the garment. I don't know what to make of the headphones in La Jolla—it could make for a great anecdote, if anyone would believe me, but I am not sure, like Kinnell, that I want to inform anyone about it.

Leigh Raiford said in her talk with artist Sanford Diggers that, in the digital age, belief can be difficult to attain; instead, we seem more inclined these days toward *disbelief*. A *People Magazine* article was just published online about whether North West, daughter to Kanye West and Kim Kardashian, actually painted the oil painting she claims to have made. The article reads, “[...] social media users quickly began questioning whether or not North had actually painted the artwork, which was done in a style similar to the works of Bob Ross” (Gabrielle Chung for *People*). America is Disbelieving. America is Incredulity. This, Diary, hopes you’ll believe instead. And though I have lied truthfully, although these fragments contain the wrong words at the wrong time, I think you’ll find the whole is an object of fidelity to a certain person in a particular time.

Afterword

Suppose that
in being born
we have already died

and our lives
as we know them
are just the afterthoughts

of a bright stellar body
that had to detonate
to let our Illusions of Being
unspool into iteration—

existences which spindle
out in front of our eyes
like the image from a reel
on a projector.

Suppose our lives
are just the flames
that erupted

from the star
which extinguished
so that we might

imitate living,

the flames from the star
which surrendered
its pulse and its energy

that it might stream
through the dark soup
of space-time in the form

of each one of our
orphaned breaths.

Suppose that our lives
as we know them

are just the comet-tail
unfurling from the death
of the great cosmic mass

that erupted to give us
the exhale needed
to fuel our half-lives.

Are we just riding
that echo of galactic death,
like a surfer catching a wave?

Is this life just the ghost-light
of the star that died
billions of light-years ago?

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