

## *Goodbye to All That*

Child: I kind of like to look at it with more of an open mindset? So I don't find it especially hurtful. I find it very interesting to see the mindset of these other people and how they view the world.

Megan Phelps-Roper: It's amazing to me, you know—since I left, meeting people like you who are willing to talk to me about this ... and to not see me just as an evil person for the things I did.

Child: I think that a little kindness could kind of—ripple out and make a big wave in the world.

—“Young Lesbian Meets a Former Member of the Westboro Baptist Church,” YouTube, 2020

There will be many who find *To the Wonder* elusive and too effervescent. They'll be dissatisfied by a film that would rather evoke than supply. I understand that, and I think Terrence Malick does, too. But here he has attempted to reach more deeply than that: to reach beneath the surface, and find the soul in need.

—Roger Ebert,  
*Chicago Sun-Times*, 2013

A PALL AWAITS us in the distance, made up of hope and bad dreams.

I puff away the smoky air  
by whisking out of my despair  
paragraphs you can swim in.

A sparkler held up by a child crackles in the summer air.

I wasn't supposed to be here, of course.

You know my story by now—slapped around by Dad, fiddled with by a next-door neighbor, shunned in school *literally* for being born into the wrong physical envelope (the running joke in seventh grade was how often I could be seen crying while changing classes in the hallway), and these are just the memories I've come to terms with. "Your mother tried to have you aborted, you know," my dad used to tell me all the time—thank God he intervened to save my life by slapping Mom around a few times. As a child I slept on the concrete stairs outside our apartment whenever the conditions at home got too lurid, and when I got too big for the stairs I graduated to the sidewalk. It was the sort of childhood that would make me roll my eyes whenever I saw domestic dysfunction depicted in the movies—"It's just so sanitized," I would complain to my buddies in college whenever *The Shining* came on.

All I had back then to protect me was my sense of humor. That's why it's so strange to me how often my friends have called my writing "humorless" over the years—stuffy and academic, highbrow and intellectual. Really? After being laughed at all my life—not being funny enough is going to be your go-to way of discrediting me? In high school a pervasive sense that the room had just added an idiot would follow me wherever I went—the smart kids would huddle into their study groups, put up "No Room for One More" signs whenever I came within spitting distance. (I think they all work in publishing and media now.) All the self-love I had

back then came from the dead-eyed gaze that men in their early twenties would give me after I'd sucked them off, a gaze I always interpreted as their having come back down to Earth after broaching Heaven and being kissed by God. "You remember the way out, right?" was a sentence I heard more often back then than my own name, like exit music over the end credits—my little reminder that no Sunday service goes on forever.

To say that I've been written off by smarter Americans all my life is like saying Donald Trump's favorite kid is Ivanka—it doesn't even begin to scratch the outer layer of the surface of it. "Speak up, and try to make sense this time," my teachers in school would say, as the other kids broke out in laughter. "Shithead" was my nickname everywhere (along with "dick breath" and "cocksucker"). The only friend I had in middle school was Jesus. I loved the idea of universal brotherhood, the quiet sense of fraternity I felt with every teacher who wore a cross necklace, even after they had said something cruel—and I loved the idea that it would all get better for me after I died. I was always looking for ways to be on the up and up, to slink past the "No Room for One More" signs and sidle my way into one of the empires that loomed so tall all around me. I wanted to be a singer, but I couldn't write a song to save my life—well actually I could, but no American singer in the world looked like me. The same high wall loomed true for acting.

The problem of my physical envelope had the effect of locking me into myself and my mind—there was a universe to uncover in there, but first it needed to be fed. I think that's where curiosity comes from. I was always as a child so famished for stimuli—hence my early interest in religion, hence my later interest in Sunday service. One day, while riding home on the bus from school, I noticed a question breezing past me out of the corner of my eye, underneath a sign for Jiffy Lube. (Hannah, one of the smart kids on the bus, had just finished calling me a faggot.) *Have you been saved?* I must have only seen these words for less than half a second, but I stared at these words for the rest of the day. Whatever

encasement I had intuited subconsciously about my life hardened in that instant into a claustrophobia. Many years later I would come across that famous line by Nabokov—that life is “but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness”—and I would understand fully why in the years after that anti-mystical experience on the school bus I couldn’t sit up straight in class anymore, I couldn’t fall asleep at nine, I couldn’t keep any food down.

This was seventh grade.

I stopped saying my evening prayers after that. The mind can’t will the mind to believe, no matter how badly it might want to believe otherwise. We’re all on trains, I remember thinking many years later in high school—the A.P. kids who live in the suburbs are on a train—the good-looking kids with candy-coated tongues are on a train—the kids selling dope about to drop out are on a train. In the meantime my high school transcript was falling apart from under me, a D in English, a D in physics, even a D in P.E. because I always forgot to bring my gym shorts to school on Tuesdays and Thursdays—so I, too, was on a train. How bad could it be, working at an E-Z Pawn until I’m sixty-five, I used to think to myself all the time, not yet understanding quite how outrageously life outcomes had been organized in this country.

In fact I had an ace in my pocket and didn’t even know it. I had gotten used to seeing 99s underneath the percentile columns of all the achievement tests I ever took as a child, and wondering dimly why I could never seem to crack 100—but I knew in my gut it didn’t matter, I knew in my gut that those were elementary school orchestra rooms, and what I needed was Carnegie Hall. My claustrophobia broke for me the day Carnegie Hall came through. Overnight I went from being a noncontender to being Mr. 1600, to being “one of them”—a qualifier for something bigger in this life than my father’s post at E-Z Pawn. I still hated the smart kids, but for the first time in my life it was the hatred of the slave who had insinuated himself into his masters’ midst.

From that day on, all the disparate beliefs I had nurtured since I was a child, all my fears and doubts, all my hopes and bad dreams, totalized into a single religion: High Achievement. I said goodbye to my dreams of marrying Nicolas the sex worker, the hardest-working man I'd ever known, and hello to my dreams of Yale. My talents were my only God, and the life that High Achievement could secure for me would be my substitute for an afterlife. I add to the summer image now a cottage on the shores of Maine, a cliff face overlooking the Atlantic, turquoise summer umbrellas fluttering above white deck chairs and a man reading Adorno in the sun. The sparkler still crackles from the first image.

Water breaks onto the white shores of the Atlantic.

For the first few years I was beguiled by all the golden life outcomes that could be plucked from the trees on the inside of empire—I could be a physicist, I could be a classicist, I could be a titan of industry. It was all more curiosity-inducing than I could have ever dreamed. I read *The New York Times* dutifully every day, *The New Yorker* every week, *New York Magazine* every other week, *The New York Review of Books* every month—and I supplemented my education by dating only Marxists and hard scientists. “You’re just an unserious person,” my friends in college would sometimes say to me. “It’s what leaps off the pages about you.” “What do you mean?” I would respond, putting down the t-shirt that I had just finished cutting into a tank top. “Because I don’t like sleeves?”

“You just gotta try and see yourself in the third person, man. The view is hilarious. You’re like an animal.”

The nickname stuck. I didn’t like being called an animal, but what could I do? You’ve got to meet reality where it is. I spent my fair-weather days at Promontory Point, a lakeside park on the south side of Chicago, reading Conrad and Nabokov to try and figure out how their sentences worked, smoking on the veranda of an abandoned field house that I had snuck into by jumping over a gate, and letting phrases and

sentences that sounded “funny” to me waft into my ears as I gazed out onto the speedboats and Bermuda rigs dotting the horizon. *Have the decency to embrace the nightmare of your life choices* was the first sentence to come to me that I really liked, and I tried to build a short story around it, about a girl so seduced by the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics that she had come to believe she would never die, that no matter what happened to her, her experience of consciousness would always branch into a parallel universe in which she was still alive, and she was trying to muster up the courage to test her convictions by playing Russian roulette.

No. In fact the story was about the desperation and despair of the girl’s bewildered mother. “*What kind of animal have I raised?*” is the only other sentence I can still remember from that story. I don’t know, Ma. But you have to believe that if her heart is pure, her mind is open, and her soul is free—then all you can do is let her out into the world, and be who she was meant to be. Language was an instrument for communicating ideas, yes—but it was also a medium for inhabiting the dream-logic of art. “Yo, check out how trippy this sentence is,” I would always say, tapping a friend on the shoulder. “‘White people should only hire other white people to clean their toilets.’ It radiates both beauty and ugliness, depending on how you look at it.” “I don’t see how it radiates any beauty,” my friend would always respond. “You’re depriving someone of a living wage. It’s a racist sentence, plain and simple.” And then a second friend would come over and say: “I don’t see how it radiates any ugliness. It’s dehumanizing to pay women of color to clean the shit stains off some rich white lady’s toilet. The entire system needs to change.”

At the point at which a third person comes over to tell us about automation, I have already detached myself from the spirit of the room. Language, to me, was a space to inhabit the contradictions and curiosities of human life, the ambiguities of our moral existence, and America, I was coming now to understand, was a machine for the production of certainty.

It was hard for me to apprehend, as an animal, the sense of omnipotence that other people carried into their use of language. A conviction that other people's lives were being meaningfully improved by one's contributions to the world made quite a lot of sense to me when it accompanied certain actions, deeds, and life commitments—and quite a bit less sense to me when it accompanied one's use of words.

In fact language was only meaningful to me to the extent that it cultivated, however clumsily, the human soul.

Other people's interpretations of the world would always hit my ears in one of two ways—either it scratches some itch inside me where I go, “Fuck! That sounds exactly right and I'm so glad you said that,” or it doesn't. And the moment it doesn't, I want to know why. Disagreement hits my face in all the right places—it's *Last Year at Marienbad*, it's Dr. Seuss, it's look at all the places you'll go. Access to empirical information is compared—we follow all sources to the primary, and all if-then statements to their logical conclusion. But as our lines of reasoning progress from the deductive to the abductive, we have no choice but to hold onto each other in a grip of mad faith, we hold onto each other ever more tightly as the winds of ego begin to swirl all around us—because we know how rollicky interpretation is, and we know how fragile ego is—we steal a glance at the emergency exit, and hold onto the hope that the person in front of us will proceed at every step of the turbulent way from the same good faith as we do.

“No, no, you're right,” we'll say with a laugh as our interpretations diverge toward an unmendable breaking point—the hatch will swing open, and our detachment is complete. And in the postmortem we smoke, we gaze into the haze of memories and laments that ascends from the tip of every cigarette. Evil is rare in this world, or else it's banal—we humiliate each other in tiny and subtle ways every day, but we launder our inhumanities through unawareness first, or else self-pity, or else a curated illiteracy about the conditions of other people—very few people in this world, it's true, are radically unmoved by the suffering of others.

But certainty, on the other hand—certainty is everywhere. And in the haze of that final cigarette, I remember all the ways in which certainty has stained my clothes, too.

Sometimes in the throes of disagreement I'll slip like a traitor to my ego from the universe I inhabit in which everything I'm convinced of is "true" and into the universe of the person in front of me, peering at myself the way I'd peer with pity at any historical figure trapped inside the bad beliefs of history—"No, no, you're right," I'll infantilize myself with a honeyed laugh, just to shut myself up—and inside the strange parameters of this upside-down world I'll float, I'll gaze in awe at all the truths of the world that don't look any different from mine, all the points of commonality that bond every human interpretation of the world to every other—that we just want to be loved, and we just want to have roots—before my gaze finally silences at the point of our rupture. The blue and black dress that's now undeniably white and gold. The empirical point that's the opposite of what I had thought to be true, or else the empirical point that's the same as mine but that now points me toward an opposing conclusion.

My skin singed, my mind darts to all the ways in which our eyes deceive us, all the ways in which my belief system needs me and all the ways in which we'll never "really" know—and I shed this strange universe like I shed a set of burning clothes. "How *dare* you," I'll think after returning to my original skin, "you're no more sure of any of this than I was." And where I had once held my ego at a distance I'll tender only coos and soft kisses, I'll rub ointment on where my skin had been singed, I'll grow scar tissue.

And there are seven billion of these?

Seven billion of these parallel universes, each of them a little bit wrong, each of them a little bit ruptured in all the places where mine's not? Well that's Hell, I'll spit onto the ground. What a broken Universe fate has seen fit to give us.

Scar tissue is where our moral ambiguities harden into moral certainties. As it turns out, moral certainties grow like figs on the inside of empire—everyone's skin had been at least

a little bit singed by the sense that they had made out like bandits in the lottery of birth, and everyone had gone about building their scar tissue a little differently, leftists by embracing egalitarian rhetoric while leading anti-egalitarian lives, rightists by embracing the one true church of just deserts.

The human disorder so naked and unsheltered on the outside of empire was laundered on the inside of empire by a conformity that shelters frauds. Every room I ever climbed into guarded by a “No Room for One More” sign was air-conditioned, dehumidifying us of our saliva and starving us of our animality, every perch I ever used to distill my moral ambiguity into *more social power!*<sup>™</sup>, every book I ever read that had the backing of the Pulitzer Committee, every issue of *The New Yorker*, every pair of eyes that stared back at me as I stammered out the words, “*I don’t know—I don’t know* how to always assimilate myself into the spirit of empire fully but I swear to you I’m trying, I swear to you I’m just so happy to be here, I’m just so happy to be in the room—oh my God! *Bad human, bad human, bad,*” slapping myself on the wrist as I thought about all the gatekeepers impeding my upward passage I had just let down, as the consumption habits I had saved from the tip jar shattered into a bath full of diamonds, and the drone of the air-conditioner hummed on. “You stay on message for me, and I’ll stay on message for you,” I would coo to *The New York Times* in the morning, but already I could feel my fealty to the empire slipping. “Give me diamonds,” I would pray to my talents at night, “I just want diamonds, more dope and diamonds—a diamond for my moral beliefs, and a diamond for all my hard work...” And every night inside the Empire of High Achievement I cried—*oh, but I do want to secure my favorability with the gatekeepers!* I do want to blend myself into the monolith, I do want to keep my smartphone, no I don’t want to clean the shit stains off anybody’s toilet and yes I do want to assimilate myself into the empire’s good graces, and I have the Phi Beta Kappa keys to prove it.

*It’s true, I do want to set fire to empire,* I thought one day with a start on the inside of empire.

Oh my God, I was fellating diamonds by then, my moral beliefs were diamond, even my dildos had been cut from diamond and my carbon footprint was eighty times that of a child-slave in Angola. It was the perfect time to rebel and grow a conscience. “Clear thinkers of the world—unite!” I shouted through teeth studded by diamonds. I’m in my graduation robes now, Dad, and I answer only to Sontag.

In fact the waters below me had never been whiter, and the skies above me never bluer. “Haughty,” “performative,” “arrogant” and “self-indulgent” were some of the words my smartest Marxist exes reserved for my writing—and I would run a victory lap around them so triumphant that the headwinds rippled back a decade to smother the sobbing child inside me. Me? More arrogant than one of the oh-so-resplendent Smart Kids of America? “I’m sorry that someone who doesn’t look like he speaks any English has a better command of English than you do,” I would purr with the moral joy of a child taunting a kitten. “Now let me take another gander there at your thoughts on Daniel Bell.”

There is no distance between ordinariness and barbarity that a perception of yourself as a victim cannot cross.

“You’re a fraud,” the latest tall sad boy that I ate for breakfast that day would say. “You’re the biggest fraud this country of frauds has ever produced.” No—I’m Mishima, I’m a cockroach, I’m Lana Del Rey blowing smoke in your face after reading you for filth. You’re a house of cards, American Highbrow—dispatch the best wordsmith you have to put me back in my place and I’ll spin sonnets around you, in stanzas you’ll want to frame. I’ve lived an ugly life inside the gutters of this country you pretend to care about, Team Left-Wing®, and I welcome my piss-poor critical reception from you with open arms (my “identity category,” in case you were wondering, is Smokers’ Lit). Because I know what you do to free spirits in this country, and I know what you do to pure hearts. I’ve known all my life. I tug back the sleeves of my shirt to reveal—all the skin I have is just scars. Here. Touch my skin. You didn’t do this to me, but you did do this to someone, at some

point in your life, and that's why all these devils by the name of God exist. I'm all the people you ever tore down with your indifference or your contempt or your oh-so-eloquent moral disdain come back to haunt you, come back to call you out on your shit. We never forgot you.

And this Hell you've spun for us never left.

Hey—tell me, sweetie. How long's that “No Room for One More” sign been hanging over your head?

“Want me to light that up again for you, sweetheart?” the man says, kneeling down to the child on the grass of the cliffside. All around them now, waves are shattering into the crags of the shoreline beneath them.

“Yes, please!” the child says, handing him the sparkler.

The man sets down the book he is reading, and something about the two words on the book's red cover catches the child's eye. “*Damaged Life*.” Where had she seen those two words together before...? “Is God really dead?” the girl suddenly asks, with an air of provocation.

But the lighter is having trouble catching in the wind. “No, not at all,” the man says distractedly. “As a matter of fact, we have way many more of Him now than we ever did.”

“Is that so?” the girl's eyes light up, as the man starts flicking his lighter again and again. “That's stu-pen-dous!”

But the lighter still doesn't catch: the waves are too loud, and the wind is too strong, and the sun seems to be setting anyway, which means Maria must just about have dinner ready. “That's stu-pen-dous information,” the child says faintly against the roar of the sea. What time is it now anyway, the man remembers, turning around to look at the house.

A vague sentiment that he had done nothing to deserve this life suddenly washes over him. He remembers, gently now and without being too hard on himself, all the ways he used to taunt his mother as a child for believing in God, all the ways he used to try and goad her into saying more and more outlandish things about her faith, and all the afternoons they

had spent many years later playing bridge at her bedside in the chemotherapy suite. “How can someone with a cross around her neck be so good at turning tricks?” he used to tease her with a gallows smile, but he had thought very long and hard about suicide in the years after her death.

“Let’s go in, hon,” the man says. “It’s almost dinner.”

All these thoughts had come to him all at once, almost unrelatedly, and then this one: even if I try to raise you to believe in something bigger than yourself, the country around you will raise you differently. You’ll die before the worst of climate change comes for us anyway. You didn’t do anything to deserve what’s in store for you, and maybe none of us ever did. Improbability is difficult to measure from the perspective of the improbable. “Daddy?” the little girl calls out from the cries of the seagulls and the roar of the wind. “Do you know what my teacher told us about the sun? It takes—eight minutes—for the light of the sun to get to us here on Earth.”

“Really? Is that so?” the man says.

The child opens her arms and then crushes the air in between them with a clap. “So if the sun ever goes out—it’ll be eight minutes before anyone here on Earth will see it.” The roar of the waves is deafening now, so loud he can barely hear his own thoughts. He’ll ask for Béarnaise sauce the moment he goes inside. Even if Maria never got around to making any, he’ll ask for Béarnaise sauce the moment he sees her, the moment we make eye contact, he thought.

Heaven—and neither high purpose nor a humanity built for all, fit for every last one of our children to be born into—is the logical endpoint of High Achievement.

Heaven is here on Earth after all—and every last one of our moral values points us toward self-elevation, directs us toward making the fruits of empire ever more heavenly for those already inside it. Self-satisfaction at the level of the individual and stagnancy in the country around us are the twin logical endpoints of Heaven, and hope and bad dreams

Heaven's most durable harvest—hope in our own moral respectability, and bad dreams about the moral disrepair of other people. We discharge our hope and bad dreams into the air around us like carbon dioxide, changing the climate for everyone. Narcissism and nihilism are the final two settlements of the American frontier—we add a little bit more of our own into the air each day, modeling how to behave for our children, and then we wonder, indignantly and at each other, how the skies got so stagnant.

A pall of bad faith awaits us on the horizon.

Our egos crash into the shores of other people like one million oceans of moral and intellectual self-certainty.

“Gimme More” is our national anthem.

Where does this all lead us?

Where will it all end?

It ends, of course, with ever more frantic efforts to save ourselves and our children (not the “our” of humanity, of course, but “our” with borders drawn around the word, with borders drawn around the self). Atomized into our little “ours,” millions and millions of “No Room for One More” signs go up all at once, all around us now and with ever more frightening certitude—come whatever Hell or high water several million more of these signs might produce for us, or produce for our children. The mental health crisis born of Mass Alienation gallops alongside the disinformation crisis born of Mass Atomization, the climate change crisis born of Mass Consumption, and the inequality crisis born of Mass Individualism, charging into the twenty-first century as the Four Horsemen of the American Dream, set loose by self-satisfied meritocrats from the stables of High Achievement and into the outskirts of empire—we are directionless as a culture, as a country, as a species, and as individual people we direct ourselves only toward the protection of ourselves and our children, even as every word that drips down from our mouths inflates our self-love into a love for humanity.

Which fifth Horseman awaits us on the horizon?

*Loving someone is the feeling you get when you see their hard work.* In fact I love America like I love humanity—how joyously can I shout this from the rooftop? I love America because it was American after American, by the millions of them, who have given me everything I have, everything I now take for granted—refrigeration, civil rights, the polio vaccine, the fact of my immigration or the fact I haven't been enlisted, ninety years after the fact, to go to war with O.G. Germany—pure hearts and gentle souls, man after man and woman after woman and by the billions of them, who have given us the modern world—the world is full of pure hearts and gentle souls who would bring tears to our eyes if we saw them in their everyday lives, if we saw how, one by one, every last one of their dreams have been crushed—and here we are now, enjoying the fruits of their labor, enjoying the fruits of their hard work.

Pure hearts do not rise in America.

In fact that is the final sentence I might ever shout from the rooftop of empire before they pull me down for good, chuck me out screaming—and the hypocrisy of my life story will be the only story left in the stars.

In fact I did rise, and no I don't have a pure heart—not yet, anyway. Very few people in here do, and those who've tried to retain some semblance of it cling onto each other for dear life as if in a storm cellar. The winds of ego alone determine who sees the limelight, who sees the autofocus lens staring back at them from the camera (as they clear their throats and say: "Now here's a story you'll appreciate, from the heartlands of America..."), who sees their byline in *The New York Times* or else a blue checkmark next to their name on Twitter, who sees tenure—the spirit of High Achievement plucks from the masses only those narcissists who know how to play the game like a G and make a name for themselves in America, on the internet or else a college application or else in an air-conditioned office guarded by a "No Room for One More" sign underneath the résumé drop box.

I knew very few anti-narcissists at Yale.

I knew plenty of anti-racists and plenty of people who had done human rights fellowships abroad (my fellowship was to Amsterdam) and plenty of self-described empaths, plenty of people who'd fall to their knees and sob if they thought too long and hard about all the evil that exists out there in the world, but I knew very few pure hearts.

The performances required to advance our standings on the leaderboards is the bread and butter of High Achievement—and the assimilation we lull ourselves into from the stagnancy of the spectator's box our wine and circuses. Ego multiplies into ego as in a hall of mirrors—"Nobody's coming to save you, bitch," America slurs to itself in a wine-drunk haze every night as the fireworks outside bloom ever more incurious, and ever more self-certain. A lip service of ear-splitting benevolence is paid to all those who linger at the bottom of the ladder, to the essential workers holding up our country—now that, after the pandemic, we *finally know who they are*—decaying the bad fates of others into *more* insincerity and *more* self-seriousness, the way sugar and crushed fruits decay water into wine.

In fact I don't know a single person on the inside of empire for whom all lives matter.

In fact the ambiguity of what belongs properly to the course of a human life—of whether to lay claim to our existential freedoms at all when so many people stagnate inside life's existential enclosures all around us, and how to address any of this without tumbling immediately into the realm of empire-preferred performance art—were ambiguities that seemed never to intrude. The claustrophobia on the inside of empire is the claustrophobia of a hall of mirrors, the claustrophobia of an insincerity bereft of even insincerity's saving grace of playfulness and irreverence, the claustrophobia of a twitchy and self-serious façade energy that meets other people's façade energies joyously and at eye level.

Self-seriousness alone distinguishes the moral center of the meritocracy from the moral center of a middle school cafeteria. Touchiness about secreted political ambitions was

the order of the day—I once joked to a classmate named Carter at his infant son's bris that there would never be a second President Carter, and the poor thing couldn't look me in the eye for a month. In fact the students and professors I met at Yale—exacting self-marketers who demanded for themselves unspoiled reputations and clean borders and clean lines, clean edges and clean lines—were uniformly less inquisitive, uniformly less intellectually curious, and uniformly less animated by introspection than every last homeless person I ever met on my front porch in New Haven.

The language of those who had fought and lost but endured flowed into my ears like water.

Whereas the language of those who smelled of forget-me-nots and benevolence and clean lies sopped into my ears like fine wine—seducing me, sedating me, lulling me into the joyless slumber of making the Heaven they'd earned for themselves by virtue of their *fine hearts* and *fine minds* ever more heavenly for them. Low resolution and a dreamless aversion to ambiguity has stagnated American literature in the past two decades into an empire without clothes—is this what the language of Swift and Twain and Nabokov and Morrison is fated to whimper into? Joyless self-branding exercises in moral conformity on both the right and the left? Facts and hard figures scooped by a spoon shaped like an airplane into the brain, stories to be digested in the gut with a pang of self-recognition and shat out the next morning as the memory of having “danced in somebody else's shoes”?

I was rotting inside the Empire of High Achievement when I first read *Mating* by Norman Rush.

The human mind depicted in high resolution was what I fell in love with in *Mating*, and in Joan Didion and Clarice Lispector after that. Never before had I experienced the page-by-page, sentence-by-sentence, and phrase-by-phrase succession of internal explosions the way I did when I sank into their words (this was seven years ago). Literature has the ability to save a soul precisely for its ability to pummel the mind. *Richness in thought creates richness in language*—never the

other way around. And what insinuates into us playfully insinuates into us most deeply of all—Didion, Lispector, and Rush taught me that. In Rush I discovered the playfulness of a mind that can be reasoned with about anything! In Didion I discovered a precision of language that rendered everything I heard after her into the linguistic equivalents of failed states.

And in Lispector I discovered the world.

I've felled my last meritocrat, Dad.

High Achievement creates Heaven for us here on Earth at the Faustian bargain of a free spirit and open mind. It goes without saying that *no* Clarice Lispector could possibly flourish in America today, where the language of High Achievement is the language of the at-hand and readymade—the idea that prose could forgo assimilation is a foreign property in this country. For what taunts and teases the human mind is *uncertainty*—and what deadens the soul into the monolith that surrounds it is assimilation. My mind was pummeled like the chew-toy of a dog by the moral and linguistic challenges posed to me by great books—my soul was expanded permanently by the strangeness of their worldviews, by their refusal to barter for my goodwill through stagnating inside the platitudes and received wisdoms that stagnate like fine wine all around us. Shattered people do not make wine. What interests me about words is what interests me about water—the way words surge, swell, expand, flatten and amplify to replicate the shape of the sensibility that receives them, recites them, invites them, houses them, but then the way a steady calvary of words—once they are let in—*pushes against that sensibility too*, invades it, confronts it, decays it, denies it, defies it and over the course of many months and years might tumble its walls entirely, might topple over the pillars and columns on top of which a sensibility has been built.

How long can the shore stand it?

How long can *any* of us?

Reality, too, pushes into us, closes over us so tightly we think it is freedom we are touching when we press into its walls. I run away from certainty, Dad—certainty is where the

cities are, and I run to the sea. I'm free now, Dad—do you hear me? Did you ever think you'd live to see your son fall into the sea? I splash cold water into my face and rub open my eyes, but the water that laps at my feet is bright purple. I lift out my arms and they, too, are stained purple. The shoreline around me is the black ink of blueberries.

So that's it?

Religion decays all the water in the world into the black ink of certainty.

Words are useless now.

There is no place for self-doubt or shattered people in Heaven.

*Where did you go, Mom? How did I lose you, Dad? From the very beginning it should have been us—us—the three of us—fingers touching, swirling into the bright blue cosmos. And now the end of the world is upon us and my dying thoughts are of those who will never know that my dying thoughts were of them. To my left is concrete—to my right is blank-white velvety air. Fifteen years ago, the billowing silk flags of our fates were intertwined. How I lost them is a story as old as Circe and Calypso themselves—not a single love in this world is unconditional. You work to be the person others can fall in love with, and you work to stay the person others can fall in love with after they've fallen in love with you. It's that simple, and that Sisyphean. But nobody in the history of the world has ever been truthful about how much they love another person. This is a card we keep to ourselves, and from ourselves too—just as we hear what we want to hear, we say what wants to be heard. And it would altogether undo us to know the distance between how much we want to believe we love another person, and how little we actually do. But from the grandness of our self-denial, dripping down from the lips of the swollen-hearted—words are spoken. Souls are engorged. Unions are consecrated. All articulation is obfuscation, and the words we choose—as with the circumstances we're born into—are nothing but a luck of the draw. And to these statements I append the following observation: nothing in this*

*world is quite so dangerous as falling in love with the wrong person.  
Have the decency to embrace the nightmare of your life choices.*

Blueberry nights in a purple city.

I rot inside a white porcelain bathroom where the only language that filters out of the faucets are compatible wines, guarded by a “No Room for One More” sign. Evil is everywhere inside this opaque Heaven. A sealed Red Door separates me from the contagions outside. A fear of relinquishing my ego prevents me from leaving.

After years and years of climbing America I have inadvertently become the purest American of all—all bigness and hunger, my raw nerves draped only by taut skin and ego.

So I, too, am a pure product of America.

What I have at the center of me is a will to power so large that it pales the face of my conscience.

And that’s all a conscience *is*—isn’t it?

A moral ego?

In my innocence and without my awareness the scarcities of the world have been arranged in my favor—and my *conscience alone prevents me from seeing it*. Labor is cajoled from the disinherited to extract the raw goods that cohere into every last item of possession I own, and my conscience alone prevents me from examining the source of my food.

In fact I’ll stay inside this unawareness for as long as it takes to wait out the clock of my life—Heaven isn’t so bad if you remember we were all just born to die.

What my conscience craves above all is a *Feel-Good Time*®, nourished by cognitive dissonance, physical distance, and moral certainty—and what my ego demands above all are blueberries, more possessions and more wine.

Sometimes the clarity of my insights will bloom so large that I’ll recoil at the size of other people’s egos—“*Is that all the world is to you?*” I’ll shout from my bathroom window, deepening my perceptions with more wine. “All the world *is* is other people, you little shit!”

I want to leave this bathroom, I do, I do—and yet my conscience has been nourished by other people’s failings for so long that I don’t know how to find an exit.

### Foghorns.

I fall to my hands, my tongue touches the ground and scrapes the salty piss stains off of the floor—not yellow but purple. Would the little boy on the school bus be proud of this favored son he’s grown into—this pure product of empire, this demigod of High Achievement? Sometimes in this wine-drunk state I’ll slip like a traitor to my ego and into an honest description of the parallel universe that I in fact inhabit, not the world as we know it, but a world in which everything I believe is true. In this world I am the only sentient being in the Universe, and every perception I have of the Universe—

every logical deduction,  
every empirical observation,  
every opinion,  
every insight and interpretation—

is true until I hold otherwise. I alone control the means of proving and disproving the Universe—visions are not visions until I see them! Sounds are not sounds until I hear them! Truth is a word to describe how an indifferent expression of an indifferent Universe reaches a human mind.

And God is man’s effort to tame and deny the indifference of the Universe.

The intrusion of a second person is the emergence of a second mechanism for producing truths about the world.

We proceed cooperatively.

We agree on the definitions of words, and derive reason from language—one plus one equals two by virtue of the meanings we’ve assigned to the words. We rely on our similarities to elevate our stories into “truths” useful to both of us—the similarity of our ears generates compatible truths about the sounds we hear, even as our interpretation of what each sound *means* remains native to the ego.

And where our interpretations overlap—the truths of the world emerge.

And where they do not?

The truths of the world surrender to our interpretive limitations. We retreat back to ego—“It was a *tree* that fell, you little *shit!*” The arrival of a third and fourth and fifth person impresses on us the importance of *unionizing our egos into tribes*—and the arrival of seven billion others reduces our tribes into a war of all against all for the narrative control of our species.

Narrative control is how our moral and legal understandings fall into place.

(And narrative momentum is how our moral and legal understandings become “inevitable.”)

I could rot in this room for the rest of my life and imagine I’m on a cliffside—*but if you give me your hand, I promise you I’ll leave.* I never had another hand to hold in this life. I have no family—I am alone, strange and unbound the way all free souls are. We’ll run mad and wild and free with the horses on the outskirts of empire—I won’t be afraid if you aren’t. Communal solipsism will be the communal enemy that all of us will have to confront and rise up to together. The most reliable thing you can expect from any man or woman at all times is their fundamental irrationality, have you noticed that? Life among other people will in fact be a constant struggle to navigate around other people’s irrationalities—just as they for the rest of our lives will have to navigate around our own.

Ego rots our access to the egoless truths of the world.

*All life is a balance of competing considerations.*

All interpretations of the world that fail to overlap is a place for competing stories to win “narrative momentum,” for competing wills to power to win “narrative control,” air-kissed by intelligence, and galvanized by our fear of dying without having made the most of our lives—it’s a human comedy through and through, as the neutral and indifferent Universe beneath our interpretation gazes back at us in third person.

I reach the Red Door, and the door is named Reason.

Ego bonds us to ourselves.

Reason returns us to other people. Anti-ego severs us from our fear of dying. Violently now, I turn my gaze back to the values that raised me.

I am Faggot.

Here. Take my wrist. Hold my hand.

There, there.

I run mad and wild and free now with the horses on the outskirts of Empire.

Not the religion of Jesus but the religion of High Achievement bellows from the loudspeakers of empire.

“Your writing is too abstract, too impressionistic.”

“This isn’t how books are written in America.”

“If you don’t want to make it look like what’s already out there, you can always self-publish.” The only gates to still tower over me are the gates of the publishing industry itself.

“There’s no room in America for your style of writing.”

“I mean *I* have no trouble with your prose, but you have to remember the grandmother in Arkansas.”

“In fact I do remember the grandmother in Arkansas,” I tell my gatekeeper patiently, “and I’m pretty sure we’re both just so sick of your shit.” “Look, you’re clearly trying to do the American Houellebecq thing—” he continued.

“No,” I interrupted. “I’m the gangsta Jack Kerouac, bitch,” and then hung up the phone.

They like my Yale degree and my status as a racial and sexual minority and that’s it, and that’s the extent of it—they don’t like the way I write, they don’t like the way I think, they don’t like the perceptions I’ve come to. They would like *you* though, Dad. They have the same authoritarian energy as you do. And they, like you, are perpetually right about everything.

Pure hearts do not rise in America.

Gentle souls are forgotten. Free spirits are crushed, and open minds invite only the deepest disdain.

Cinema has movement. Music has sweep. Literature has only the humility of bringing two words together and watching the sparks that ensue. All my life I've climbed—all my life I've thrashed and howled for a place on the inside of empire, and now I excise this empire like cancer. I upside-down you, my love, and upside-down all of the careful values you stand for—it's *every man for other people out there*, it's a dog-feed-dog world, I live all the lives of humanity inside me at once and if you've got it, *flaunt it, lick it, snort it, eat it.*

And above all I repudiate the retributive instinct wherever I can find it—I align myself once and for all with all those who are broken, with all those who are repentant but unforgiven, with all those who dance at night with their shadows.

To the “intellectuals” of America I send you my two favorite words, Cee Lo Green style, while blowing you a kiss.

Inside the narrative momentum of High Achievement, moral and intellectual certainties flourish, victories stagnate, and the retributive instinct gongs louder than ever. That's all my parents ever wanted for me, wasn't it—to be assimilated into one of the victories the way they never could be. They'd *hate* what I've written here, too—they'd *hate* the middle finger I've thrown up to the demigods of Empire, and I understand why. I understand what only the truly powerless know—that the most stable source of power of all is surrender.

“To Reality!”

But all life is a balance of competing considerations.

The disintegration of my childhood family was the *first* emancipation I could never get over.

A limitless life is what we are asked to contemplate by the astrophysicists, taunting us with a dream of a Universe that rambles on and on—in fact our lives are small, were only ever meant to *be* small. That massless particles in a vacuum nevertheless come up against a hard universal speed limit

ought to remind us that our ambitions will forever outstrip our capacities, and scarcity will never retire—it will only reinvent itself through some higher-order desire.

In fact the only potency that most of us will ever have is our ability to *think and speak clearly*.

I live my life free as a bird flipped to the culture that raised me, to the empire that plucked me out of the gutters, and I swear to God I'll flip on until the day I die—what I have at this point is religious zeal, I've lost too many friends and too many life opportunities in the past seven years for this life I've chosen not to feel quasi-religious to me, because *somebody has to stop the upper middle class from winning*, somebody has to stop the upper middle class from capturing every last segment of society, every last segment of *power*, every last segment of an Idealism that used to be open-minded and pure-hearted and free-spirited enough to mean something.

What I fight for is a country forty years from now made up of four hundred million people who think without ego—and who can be reasoned with about anything.

No.

What I fight for is that country four hundred years from now that only our descendants will ever see, because good things take time, and what we fight for most dearly in this life are those difficult births that none of us will live to see.

Nor should we.

The most subversive truth inside the Empire of High Achievement is how *truly good it is to die*—to make your contribution to others in this life and then to make room for others. No logic of perpetual growth or hysterical acquisition can be sustained for very long by an empire whose participants are unafraid to die—only inside that final subversion does the question “What can I do to improve the rest of my life?” become “*What can I do to improve the rest of my species' life?*”

The allure of the afterlife is the allure of an ego so transcendent that it transcends the very act of dying itself.

Anti-ego severs us from our fear of dying. Point me to the religion that can disentangle me from my ego and I swear to God I'll be an acolyte for the rest of my life.

Inside that religion the disintegration of the most promising years of my mother's life—my mother who *paid* for my birth with the loss of her youth, trapped between an irrepressible husband and an irrepressible son, strangled between two irrepressible egos that in my adolescence would bloom so big that her house finally imploded—won't be a shame or a pity, but a template. Her addiction to suppressing her needs *traumatized* me when I was a child, her penchant for self-sacrifice, her obliteration of ego—my mother lived those years in heinous betrayal to her own happiness. And yet inside that betrayal I see an indomitable power that the America of High Achievement would recognize only as a frailty or a defect, and it's *that* departure of perspective that makes me a rather poor candidate for the religion of High Achievement, a rather poor candidate for any religion that doesn't have at its center a *radical indifference to self-preservation*. The human ideal I could never get over for the rest of my life, the sparkler that lit for me when I was a child—the serenity of a Vietnamese monk, protesting the sins of his government on a busy avenue in Saigon, his nostrils flaring peacefully as his scalp peels back to reveal flames dancing on his skull.

*What could move any human being to do this?*

And why could *I*—a creature of High Achievement through and through—not access *any of it*?

Life is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness, and that darkness is all the light that burns inside the minds of other people—*our entombment inside that darkness is what every human existence has in common*. Here. Take my wrist. Hold my hand, and come and see the world in third person with me—empire can give us *nothing* we don't already have, so we'll stay uncancellable forever.

Oh, it's not that I'm no longer afraid to die—I am, I am—but I no longer mistrust Death the way I once did. From a distance of seven billion fates, all our egos look the same—it's

a beautiful and disordered species we've got there, isn't it? There we all are—somewhere in the bright blue cosmos—swirling into each other—fumbling to make a connection. The deepest trauma I have from childhood is waiting at the living room window for my mother and father to come home—I would spend hours and hours there, every weekend when I was a child, I was always so afraid that they would get into a car accident on their way home and die. We are all just the beautiful and disordered products of the bright blue cosmos—some of our fates are so unjustly beautiful, and some so unjustly heinous. What is the God called that brings to mind the fundamental neutrality of our lives? The fundamental neutrality of every human life that ever existed?

And what is the God called that brings to mind our fundamental union with all of them?

I know now what death is.

Death will be a return to that neutrality.

I belong now to the shattered part of the world where all Hell-bound souls are, shell-shocked and resplendent—and I forgive every disorder that might come for me, whether that disorder is the will to power of the meritocrats, or the will to power of the dispossessed who would naturally seize for themselves the clean beds of my possession.

I give up on trying to make the most of my life.

Death will be the poetry of a life that's found its ending.

*May reason and compassion drip into me like an opioid,* revisiting everything that I do, transforming me from inside out. Because the one thing I know for sure from my twenties? There's no greater joy in the world than being in front of a thoughtful and merciful and intentional soul.

And as the waters finally close in on me, I turn to language once again to rearticulate the foundations of my surrender.

Why do I love language so much?

Language, like reason, *returns us to other people*—it gives us an opening to the world in the form of a stargazer's curiosity. Without that curiosity, the passion I would have for being alive is as mute as a blade of grass. I'll write for as long as

I still search for a way to live, not in peace or in power, but in awe of that profound indifference.

Literature is a playground—and so je adore it.

Words are the most beautiful thing that people who die can do.