

Notes from a Psychiatric Hospital

Me: You've never been forced by your dad to eat a dead cockroach so *shut the fuck up and don't talk to me about—*

Him: Whoa! What the fuck does that have to do with anything?

Me: *You've never been forced by your dad to eat a dead cockroach so shut the fuck up and don't talk to me about—*

Him: Yo, dude, stop. Take a breath. Will you just listen to yourself right now?

Me: *You've never been forced—by your dad—to eat a dead cockroach—so shut the fuck up and don't talk to me about—*

—Private conversation
with the author, 2011

Why do the birds go on singing? / Why do
the stars glow above? / Don't they know it's
the end of the world? / It ended when I lost
your love

—Sylvia Dee,
“The End of the World”

EMOTIONAL DISCHARGES LIGHT up the night sky.

I don't know how to be a good person.

I do, I do. “Simone Weil energy.”

Looking back on this decade: it was all too much—it was all too much, wasn't it? The nihilisms, the narcissisms, we took it too far—we took it too far, didn't we?

We took it to excess.

At the end of every December we tick away the countdown until the sweet relief of sweet release—“*Six—five—four...*”—there I am, in paperboard glasses that spell out the new year—“*Three—two—one...*”—and at the stroke of midnight I laugh, I laugh the laugh of misremembering that this year I'll change, against the backdrop of fireworks, that this year will be the year it all swings toward utopia.

Sweet release comes many months later inside the recognition that I won't, and it doesn't.

I done fucked up again, babe.

At a certain hour of night, all laughter echoes into a sort of paranoia—you'll do anything in the world to keep the ball rolling, lest the joke be on you. It was a decade when, bookended by a global depression and a global pandemic, we lost a sense of the general upward spiral of history. “Am I still loved?” is a natural question to ask yourself as it all trends downhill, as you watch the crew swing out the lifeboats.

Hold my hand now, babe—lace your fingers into mine until our bones touch. No, I don't want to lose you.

The first thing I understood about him was that he was not a participant in the narcissisms of our time—and that understanding, over the course of so many months, grew into a sort of love. Many months later that love would take on the dimensions of a fixation, and still some time after that, a self-eradication, and at last an illness, but I am talking now about a time when even a comet splitting the Pacific in half wouldn't mean a thing to me, so long as he was in the car next to me.

At every party we went to, his was mine and mine was his, and the world was ours to take on together.

Nothing felt safer than being inside of a pair.

Psychiatric hospitals are odd. They bring together people from all walks of life, except from the very top (people at the very top have their own hospitals), and they cycle us in and out

even as our wardens stay the same, our intake physicians and the nurses at the night desk stay the same, words are exchanged but every word feels like a cliché, because the one thing we all know for sure is that they've seen and heard it all.

And inside the gears of this machine we wait, with white gowns on, the sweet relief of a very different kind of release.

In retrospect everything seems incommensurate.

With the distance of time everything seems smaller than it had felt in the moment.

"This just isn't how I had hoped it would go," is the plain Jane sentiment at the bottom of every last emotional discharge, concealed beneath layer after layer of justification ("I don't know, I guess like, I just wish you had done more to defend me"), layer after layer of abstraction ("Am I still loved?"), and sometimes that sentiment would sit there unseen and unheard like a well-behaved child, and sometimes it would spoil and fester. Tunnel-visioned by some sense of loss into some adumbration of catastrophe, and carried forward by the winds of paranoia into an accelerating rotation of subverted hopes and betrayed expectations, I dip the ignitable tip of my rational mind into the hotness that spoils and festers inside me, and set the world on fire.

"Why the fuck are you not listening to me right now? Am I not speaking English? Why the fuck can't you hear me?"

And then—because it's all gone to hell anyway, because the hotness in my chest is all that's left of my mind and my world, so what is there left to lose, and because what scratches every itch is pain, and what scratches every pain is self-pity—I fall to my knees and punch myself in the face repeatedly, with accelerating ferocity, and accelerating self-pity. *"Is this what you want? Is this—what you want? This—this—this—this is what you want, isn't it?"* And sometimes I'll look down at the splotches of blood that now speckle the asphalt, the cars that stop to look at us as they enter the parking lot, and still on my knees I'll scream: "Help me. Help me. I just need somebody to help me, *please, help me.*" Because why this life?

Why this mind?

Why am I trapped forever inside this way of responding to the world?

Here is something that never landed me in the hospital—in the middle of an internship with a writer for *The New Yorker* seven years ago, texting my internship group chat during our lunch break that I was going to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge now, sorry, the Panera Bread was that awful. I rode the subway home in a daze, and they even sent over a paramedic with a gurney to my apartment later that afternoon, but I told him he had the wrong Colson. That night my best friend Emina took the train up from Philadelphia to see me and we talked for a long time about the guy she'd been seeing, which was important: it was crucial, actually. I needed that night for the world to not be so small as my own problems. I was asked to leave my internship the next day.

Another thing that never landed me in the hospital: that morning in the parking lot with Patrick.

I know what you might be thinking. "Prime candidate."

It's what I would've thought too, once upon a time.

To see a grown man punching himself in the face in broad daylight, and then to see him charge up and scream, "*I'm gonna do it, I'm gonna get hit by a car—I just don't want to be alive anymore,*" as a second man lunges to stop him—is to see a prime candidate for 911, is to see a prime candidate for the psychiatric hospital, but I'm telling you right now it isn't that simple—and I don't even have the words to tell you *why* it isn't that simple, trying to put together this essay is the first time in a long time I've felt not in control of my prose, not in control of my way with words, a way with words that's given me the only semblance of mastery over an internal composition that otherwise veers inexorably toward unreasonableness, that otherwise veers inexorably toward disorder. "How many *more* of these," I once asked myself during the diminuendo phase of what might charitably be called an underdeveloped emotional range (what else could the plot points be? A man I loved told me he didn't love me back, so I told him I was going home that night to kill myself), driving home alone and listening to Gang

of Four sing about the problem of leisure on repeat, “before the sentence finally becomes: ‘I don’t know how to stop being myself.’”

The trouble is back then I was still seventeen, an age when one is still young enough to not know quite who or what one is, to not register the patterns and trends of behavior that all emanate from the same person as “personality,” to not see the storms that come and go as evidence of some larger climate.

All I saw back then was a love-starved child from a love-starved family who wanted nothing more than to love and be loved, who saw love as the meaning of life, I wanted so much to love other people—someday I’ll even have children to discharge all the love I have for other people into.

I hadn’t realized back then that love was not the means by which we actualize ourselves.

Love is the means by which we elevate other people.

It seems a small and simple enough point in retrospect, but of course everything seems small and simple enough in retrospect.

Love for other people isn’t difficult at all, not in the slightest—we either have it or we don’t.

What makes love for other people difficult is the little red dot we inscribe into it, just a little red dot to mark our territory—like a stain or an asterisk, or a blemish that shouldn’t be there on an otherwise perfect white sweater—a little red dot of narcissism.

The little red dot that made love so attractive to us in the first place.

The little red dot that launched fifty billion marriages and twenty-five billion divorces and God only knows how many children into this world.

Once you start seeing that little red dot on things that claim not to have it, you’ll start to see it everywhere: on religious ideologies that make life perfectly miserable for outsiders to that ideology, even as they purport to be perfectly “universal,” and of course on political ideologies as well—retributive social justice, *Animal Farm*-style communism. (I

exclude right-wing ideologies here only because they make no pretense of not being slathered in narcissism—narcissism has its virtues, of course, and for some those virtues are the point.) And of course you'll see it on every last city-bred Gmail-maven launched by the meritocracy into the positions they now hold in politics and media and publishing and academia—that little red dot of narcissism, I agree, has given us the world.

It's just—it has a tendency to inflate, doesn't it?

It has a tendency to metastasize—and it's that metastasis that I'm finally wary of.

The love we have for other people moves us toward responding when something unjust happens to them.

A vital and necessary inner core of self-love moves us toward responding when something unjust happens to us.

Our responses only become excessive when that inner core of self-love metastasizes beyond reason, often as a result of all the years we've had to spend looking out for ourselves—and decays into narcissism. The question that would always stop me dead in my tracks: "Would my response be the same if instead of happening to me, this same set of circumstances were happening to somebody on the other side of the world?"

Which is a hard question to answer in the affirmative when my response is bloodying myself in the face over and over again in a parking lot in New Haven.

In fact it's a hard question to answer in the affirmative about a wide range of responses that stray beyond: trying to have a reasonable conversation with someone, and, in the absence of an equally reasonable and receptive conversation partner, walking away and committing to a more thoughtful resolution some other time. I suppose it depends on the circumstances, of course—but how often does a circumstance feel like an emergency, and how often is it actually?

In fact with the right internal composition so many circumstances that we correctly recognize as non-emergencies when they happen to somebody else become emergencies when they happen to us. I'll tell you what it feels like for me whenever anyone I care about abandons me—or whenever

anyone I care about prioritizes other people over me in a way that sings me as abandonment—or whenever I feel misunderstood, misremembered, wrongly accused, wrongfully suspected of being even more terrible than I already am.

It feels like a nuclear meltdown.

The turmoil of self-loathing that washes over me has the physicality of size and shape and temperature—an aeriform mass that begins in the chest and then spreads outward into the soul, no longer a physical substance but in the form of muscle memory, or a phantom limb—in the form of suspicions I've harbored ever since I was a child that I'll never fit in, I'll never be good enough, I'll never be loved by other people, I'll never have what it takes to make it inside the hypercompetition that is America in the twenty-first century (and make no mistake, from the moment our children see what happens to the people America throws away, from the moment our children see what happens to the homeless, the mentally ill, the criminally malformed, the malformed and misshapen of all stripes: the competition to avoid their fates begins)—that I'll never, as Simone Weil writes, be *rooted inside my species*.

Why do I write the way I do?

I write the way I do because I hate myself.

And why do I hold the political beliefs I do?

I hold the political beliefs I do because I know how many people in this country have also learned over the course of their lives to hate themselves, have also been unrooted or starved of love ever since they were born—how many people in America, as Joan Didion said, live “wretchedly and marginally on the underside of where they wanted to be”—how many people in America were either thrown into the gutters at birth or else thrown into the gutters as a matter of due course, because there truly is no depth at which a person thrown away by other people might cease to fall—how easy it is in this world of seven billion people to throw any single one of us away, and sometimes (and routinely, in fact) to throw entire human categories away at a time.

And that is what the suicide ward at a psychiatric hospital in America in the twenty-first century finally is.

It's where we put the people who have already been thrown away for one reason or another, after they "act out," but before they "act out" in such a way so as to merit criminal retribution.

In fact the retributive instinct is alive and well inside these walls. "So why did you do it?" is the impossible question that we are all up against, reducible at all times to the question: "So why are you—you?" This question is easy enough to answer for those of us who happen to be highly introspective and rational and fully in control of that much-ballyhooed distance between the hand and the mind, but I'm telling you now: it's a little more fragile for those of us who are not. "I'm gonna *I*, doc—and you? You gonna *you*. Hive minds gonna hive and America's gonna America. The rich gonna rich, climate's gonna climate, and the universe is gonna universe."

Okay—so if that's true, why am I so sad?

If that's true—*why do I ever, ever get angry?*

But you see, that's the thing, doc—I'm *not*—I'm just alive like you wouldn't *believe*, I'm fully alive in a way that rational mind of yours could never understand, could never compute—and that's why all of us are *here*, doc: we're fully human, fully maxed out in the head, fully in pain the way all animals are, fully in touch with the people we were born to be. Inside the pall of climate change, inside the pall of the disinformation crisis, our narcissisms bloom and our paranoias metastasize—haven't you heard, doc? It's every man for himself out there! Inside the slow-motion decay of America, fireworks everywhere—sometimes I feel so free I want to text no one, speak to no one, all of life's grand provisions are within reach inside me and the last thing on my mind is my reputation.

And when I'm inside this state, it seems I'll stay inside this state forever. Fireworks light up the night sky.

It's a new year, doc, and a new me.

Paranoia sets in when the ashes burn out. From a joy so divine I could swing from the trees, I land on charred ground.

I look at my hand and think—*could I be clutching my phone any tighter?* Why am I so alone all of a sudden? And so undefended? I scour *The Atlantic* for articles to send to friends just to feel more connected to other people, but people aren't buttons you can touch that light up when you press them.

And that's easy to remember in here, isn't it?

It's easy to remember in here—watching the two night nurses laugh and rib one another at the night desk while two dozen patients toss and turn in despair all around them—that one person's life is infinitely large at the scale of that person, and infinitesimally small at the scale of the universe.

And somewhere in between the scale of the universe and the scale of just one person, we make our way to each other with all our little insolvencies, all our little paranoias, all our little complaints of the day. And that's the problem with every last human arrangement that becomes a machine, isn't it? Whether that machine in question is a psychiatric hospital, an economic system, a university, or a country—it doesn't make any sense for that machine to contort its blueprints around the preservation of any one person's life, hope, purpose, or dignity, now does it?

The only blueprints that any machine could sensibly have is for its own self-preservation.

A night drive into America by a man so full of love uncovers a land made loveless and stagnant by machines. It's the blackest of black nights that's settled over us, doc—I paint America like I paint a miracle. There's electricity everywhere inside these painted houses, inside these blue-hued screens—a paralyzing electricity made up of suppressed screams and suppressed despairs, the lights of this country—lust, envy, hope, and nostalgia—everything around us was peak-arousing, and every last one of us peak-arousable.

At the scale of just one person, I am a man made limp by arousal trying to forget that the world has ended because Patrick is gone. A man inside the bar tells me I look like a kid who could use some adventure, and I could only agree—it's nice to disappear every once in a while. That night he drives

me out of New Haven and to a casino fifty miles away—and I swear to God the moon never rose, the sky stayed pitch black all the way. In the car he plays a Bobby Vinton record and tells me not to worry, that as a last resort I could always just marry him—I laugh and say something along the lines of only for your cigarettes, pal. When we get to the casino he puts three hundred dollars into my pocket and tells me I can spend it all on one round of baccarat for all he cared, just try not to think so much. I won't tell you what I did with the money, but I can tell you this: it's nice to wake up in a hotel room every now and then, underneath white linen sheets and in bed with a stranger, the only place I've ever truly felt at home.

"To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul," Simone Weil said.

Something happened, didn't it, when we stopped living and dying in communities of two hundred—and started living and dying in cities of two hundred thousand, and started seeing ourselves as expendable parts in a machine of two hundred and thirty million, or a world of seven billion.

Our arousals alone help us to forget.

It's easy to forget, at any rate, inside a casino—every last neon light calls out to us, is made fuller by our presence. You close your eyes and let the aura of faint mania wash over you—the lost children, the expendable infants, the quiet sense of being only one of a thousand among the wandering dead inside a canyon called Casino of the Earth. You drift past girls dressed like Dolly Parton taking selfies in front of a neon-colored waterfall, and glassy-eyed grandmothers bobbing cheerfully to the chromatic music emanating from the slot machines, as their shattered husbands gaze vacantly into the lobby. "*That was everything we had!*" I saw one such woman howl on her knees to her husband as I drifted past the nurses at the night desk, as I drifted past the point at which the drawbridge of a miniature castle opened into the queueing lines of three different themed buffets.

I never left the hotel again after that.

Our room was on the thirty-second floor and had a king-sized bed and a floor-to-ceiling window overlooking a river, which looked about as manmade as anything inside the casino, although I am told that the bodies of missing Indigenous men and mutilated young Black women occasionally washed ashore on the point bar. I spend a long time in front of this window, studying the river for faces and trying to put my thoughts in order. "So tell me about those familiar rhythms," I once wrote in a poem to Patrick.

The ping of emails, the drip of black brew
As the morning paints in through your living room
window
The hum of your car in the late afternoon queue
Napoleon on his horse, Jesus on his throne
(Watching over whomever happens to be on top of
your loo)
The click of a tab as it opens a can
Or the click of a tab as it opens YouTube
So tell me about that placid surface
The black marble counter on top of which broods
A mortar and pestle as it waits to be used
Serene and unfettered. Faithful. Well-constructed.
Those are the words I think of when I think about you
What I see in your soul is a sturdy construction
No blustery movements, no quicksilver waves
And what I see in your home is calm self-possession
A heart that's on fire, beneath a still blue gaze.

I want to run home to you, Patrick, but I can't, I can't. They're lowering the lifeboats now. The world is getting stranger and stranger, glaciers are melting in Iceland while every last member of our species wilts smaller and smaller, except for those at the very top, whose laughter looms louder and louder over our screams every day.

Take me home now, I tell my new friend.

And on our drive home I think of Simone Weil, the only thinker of the twentieth century to reject the twentieth-century thinker's transformation of morality into performance art—as outside America slurs past us like a taunt. (Narcissism, I try to remember, has given me the world.) Her commitment to radical solidarity with the casualties of other people's narcissisms led her to defect from the French academy to work in factories, and join the front lines against General Franco during the Spanish Civil War. Her home was never heated, her stomach was never full, she only ate as much as what the poorest soldier or worker could afford—human misery was her enemy, human misery everywhere and anywhere—Weil lived in her life the ideals of her books, the ethos of being a war companion to humankind, and she died in 1943 after refusing to eat a single calorie more than what the French soldiers had been rationed in Vichy France (“a deeply disturbed woman,” the newspapers had called her) at the age of thirty-four. “As for her death,” wrote Richard Rees, Weil's first English-language biographer, in 1966, “whatever explanation one may give of it will amount in the end to saying that she died of love.”

Whither are we going on this eternal night?

Whither are we falling—forwards, backwards, sideways and in all directions? Are we not straying now as though through an infinite night? Where are our twenty-first-century Simone Weils? And why do they all seem to languish down there, unseen and unheard, at the bottom of the world?

I have no Simone Weil energy, not even a whit of it.

“She was psychopathically compassionate,” my friend Javi once told me, and I myself have only my frantic efforts to find my way into one of the lifeboats before *bad fate comes for me, too*—the bad fates of the small, the also-rans, the never-seen and never-heard. There's dental and vision inside some of those lifeboats, I hear, and all the Panera Bread I can eat, room for upward advancement, personal assistants who'll handle the onslaught of emails because I'll be a “somebody” now, and I need to be a “somebody” for the machine to care about what happens to its investment, for the machine to care about what

happens to me—and if I rise high enough, I might even be able to afford mental health care, because the one thing we all know for sure is that daybreak's not coming for any last one of us.

I submit to you, gods of the meritocracy.

I sink down to you, nibble on your tender perineum.

I live my life at the scale of myself and the people I love—narcissism is my lifeboat, the little red dot that's deepened into the only color I have, and I slather it in all the paint I can get my hands on, I slather it in goodwill and compassion and love for my children, all the boundless love I have for other people.

I'm full of love again, doc.

When we are asking to be loved we are asking to be prioritized by other people. "Individuate me again. Don't just treat me like you would any stranger on the street, or some person on the other side of the world."

Because I've seen what happens to people on the other side of the world, and I don't like it—I don't like it one bit.

It's bad out there inside the seven billion.

It's morasses out there inside the seven billion.

Inside the warm-white hues of individuation, the hospital isn't even so bad. I individuate myself to three other patients who I find funny and well-composed and who I want to be friends with, and at night the four of us band together to play Never Have I Ever and strip poker. I individuate myself to the nurses at the night desk and they're all so patient and kind—one of them even lets me sneak a peek at my phone so I can send a text to Patrick. And on my last day at the hospital I individuate myself to the doctor, I present myself as highly rational and highly introspective and in total control of my way with words—I mirror his social position and his social class with every humble sentence I meekly deliver, and he signs my discharge papers with a pat on the back.

And then I exit the casino and step out into the suppressed screams and suppressed despairs of a bigger casino.

Paranoias light up the night sky.

How many more people are we going to throw away?

How many more indignities are we going to invent to remind each other that our humanities are small, our lives expendable, none of us matter, no one can hear us?

The expendability of our lives is naked and unsheltered out here, just like it was inside the casino and just like it was inside the psychiatric hospital.

We intuit our expendability viscerally, and so we individuate ourselves to make the case to other people that we ourselves should be one of the exceptions. Because unless an individual has “distinguished” themselves in some significant way, unless an individual is famous or beloved or has shown themselves to “matter” in the eyes of even *one more person*—what matters out here is never at the scale of any one person, or any one human life, is never the hope or despair or dignity or well-being of any last one of us.

What matters out here is not having any of our suicides or overdoses or deaths of despair be recorded in an end-of-the-year summary under anyone’s watch.

You were my one more person, Patrick.

I want to run home to you now but I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.

Instead you pick me up from the hospital and take me back to your apartment, and we talk for a long time about why I was there, about the messages of despair I had sent to a well-meaning stranger who didn’t know what to do with them, or with me. When you tell me you had thrown up all night and couldn’t sleep the night I was admitted to the hospital, I don’t know what to say—so I stare for a long time at the floor. For the first time I notice how empty your apartment looks without my things. How many nights did we spend on that floor, going over one by one all my many grievances, all my many paranoidias, all my many private despairs. I wonder why a single one of them ever felt so big. You still keep the Christ the Redeemer statuette I had bought for you in Brazil on top of the toilet, I notice with a smile when I go to the bathroom—and the poem I had written for you on the door of your fridge. When I come back into the living room you’re playing “Cortez the Killer” by Neil Young, and we hug for a long time on your

couch as I finally see your steel surface break, and try not to cry as you sob into my shoulders. You had lost your one more person, too. Well, that's what all our emotional discharges finally do for us, I guess, at the end of the day. All they do is make us lose each other, and leave behind charred ground. It was a good thing we had, babe—but then I came, I saw, I did violence to.

And all that's left to ripen on the vine is a recognition that our souls must part here.

2021