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A Preface

A WRITER'S ONLY job is to characterize things well.

I write to you from landlock.

Landlock is the closest thing I have in mind to characterize this experience that unites us, this experience of being alive, landlocked in ourselves, landlocked in our minds and landlocked in each other. I write to you from landlock. The lives we live we lead as unlit ascents from the soils of our birth into the final expression of what the stars had in store for us, punctured by screams of brilliant recognition—and the words we use we string together out of our initial apprehension of that original and depthless solitude that bonded us together. As a child I used to wonder all the time if I had woken up that morning in somebody else's country, trapped in somebody else's body, locked in somebody else's memories: human differentiation seemed back then such a source of endless wonderment to me. Without language, we would only ever be able to see out of our own eyes. In words we have the sea.

Some two and a half decades ago, my family and I had crossed the sea to land in somebody else's country.

"Over there is the sea, and out there—the stars," are the words that have been emblazoned in my mind ever since I was a child, landlocked in a childhood that held no context for me, no frame of reference to speak of—I had learned of its true contours only by way of being engulfed into the culture around me, replicated by nothing, replicated not in the misfortunes I had read about or in the victories I had seen on T.V., but curious about it all the way all young minds are, sinking into that blanket of words. The lives of other people had a way of swelling over us without ever washing us back into them—we had emerged onto the shores of this country into a curiously tropeless existence. A photograph taken of us back then would have revealed us to be a stubbornly hopeful family, Asiatic in

origin, taken in front of the Komodo dragon exhibit at the Birmingham Zoo, the father in a red polo, the mother in a black skirt, and the child taken in by laughter—buoyant, parched for culture and company, afloat inside the world of other people and oblivious to his family's enclosure: oblivious to our own remoteness, oblivious to our own isolation, so estranged from our surroundings that the other visitors that day at the zoo would in the months and years to come look only like tourists on the continent of our own family photo. There we were, pinned into place by a specificity of non-belonging that was as indefinable as it was total—our lives subverted our tropes as quickly as we fell into them.

In my later attempts to photograph into words the particulars of that solid block of longing against which every day fell into place with a renewed and deepened understanding of our place on the outside of things—words failed me all the time. “Cruelty,” “enclosure,” “a child and a mother terrorized by a father and their country”—they all capture some of it, all come close to that spiraling dust-cloud of memories that had by the twilight of my adolescence left me afloat and astray inside the sense that *some of these things did not have to go this way*, that fathers did not have to beat their families, and terror did not have to be the natural order of things, and suffering built no character at all but only eroded away at the virtues that might have been, because what doesn't kill you only makes you stranger, only makes you coarser, only makes you retreat back into yourself and become the guardian of your own neuroses, your resolve uncertain, your nerves brittle and your gaze cast forever upwards. The innocence of childhood is the innocence of a world parceled out to you in pieces, and you learn to love whatever you have because it is in our instinct to love the inertia of being alive.

Only later does that inertia transform into depletion by the disturbance of comparison, and only later do those depletions transform into injuries by the disturbance of longing, our gaze turned upwards—gentle, throbbing longing, sometimes hopeful and sometimes anguished, pulsing each of

us through a lifelong kinetic passage toward some final settlement with ourselves and our fate, toward some final solace. In fact the disturbances that would arrest me for the rest of my life would have already been oscillating just beneath the placidity of the photograph: in fact the woman in the photograph would have already apprehended what awaited her in her own passage, would have already come to terms with her terminal exclusion from the understandings of her childhood, and learned to ask for only small things in life—and in fact the child, so giant and garish in his love for his parents that day at the zoo, would have already embarked upon his first suicide attempt at the age of seven: a memory that at last defies all explanation save for the solidity of that particular longing, save for the solidity of what had already by then become the sole fixed truth of his childhood—that family was a place where violence happens (the memories that come to mind now are of the patterns that formed from the fissures in the concrete stairs outside our apartment as the hours passed waiting for my mother to stop sobbing, are of severed chairs and shattered plates of food thrown into walls and of blood that dripped from the nose to the floor, all waiting for my mother to clean up), uncoupling himself from the place where violence happens during one of his father’s routine “explosions” outside a Japanese supermarket on a bright spring afternoon (his mother already trembling, the Americans around us already averting their gaze) and hurtling himself into street traffic, and hurling himself into the parking lot and onto the path of an oncoming truck, draping his arms and legs hysterically across the asphalt as if imitating a bird that had at last grown tired of gravity, or else Christ on the cross—his mother on fire, his father livid and victorious and forcibly restraining his wife from hurtling after her son as if to say *look what you’ve done, look what you’ve done to this child,*

and the child,

counting down the seconds in his head until what had begun as the theatrical would dissolve into the irrevocable, and the child’s first true act of rebellion would also become his

last—the gentle murmurs of that bright spring day, not a cloud in the sky save for the voice of his mother, howling and demented and ablaze in her efforts to break free from her husband's grasp, desiccating into gasps of air that some twenty years later would still echo in my memory like the secret of some long concealed murder; and the voice of my father, lucid and patient and in control of everything, goading me on cheerfully from half a block away.

I write to you from landlock.

We all do.

We all come into each other's lives from the poverty of our own perspective, from the humility of our own point of view, arrant and imperious and triumphant in its claim over our understanding of what it is like to be a human in this world, entombed as we are inside the souls that these experiences created, and landlocked as we are inside of memories that can only ever reach each other as language—but that will resound forever in our mind's ear as the sea anchor of everything we have, of everything we are and everything that is. Later that night the child would be beaten by his father and later that year the child would be photographed by a stranger laughing with his parents at the Birmingham Zoo and later that life, a soul would emerge, errant and obscure and entombed inside a point of view that had by the twilight of my adolescence solidified into the first trace whispers of self-understanding—that some wall loomed over us, some vertiginous impasse had enclosed us into a hollow of non-belonging so specific that each attempt to describe it—to put it into words and perhaps, then, to tame it—decayed only into new isolates of misunderstanding somewhere else.

I had by then an understanding of myself as both an illegitimate child within the context of my family and an interloper in this country—an outsider into the world of other people whose life nobody had asked for, a life devoid of any trace of a lineage apart from that of bastard children. I could

tell you about a childhood disfigured by my father's explosions, I could tell you about imploded doors or imploding windows or the implosion on my mother's face as she blundered after a purse my father had hurled onto the freeway the moment she picked up the purse and looked up from the freeway and saw that our car was now speeding off without her, or about the ballet of police lights that bathed our living room in Christmas red and Cherenkov blue as I watched my mother and father sputter panicked and conflicting narratives in fractured English to two police officers from the back of a police car, my thoughts no longer on the police lights or the sirens or the circumstances that had led me to be handcuffed and assisted that night into the back of a police car but on the calculus exam that I, in the best case scenario, would still have to sit for the next morning—but all I can really think about right now are those patterns that form out of the fissures of language, are those isolates of misunderstanding.

We swim in those isolates, you know.

Those isolate lakes.

"Over there is the sea, and out there—the stars," I used to think to myself all the time as I swam inside those lakes, wading through a constellation of impressions I had formed about the world of other people inside the starlit universe of my mind, and gazing up at those walls. To scale those walls was all I ever wanted to do as a child—but how? How does a child scale the segregation of human fates? What I realize now, and what I didn't have the words for then, is that human fates are segregated, quarantined, made impermeable to each other by virtue of the specificity of our memories, the specificity of our longings, the specificity of that life stretched out long and trembling in front of us and our awareness that we alone would be the only ones to walk alongside ourselves into whatever hell or high water awaits us at the end of that glorious passage. From inside the particulars of that original and depthless solitude: we watch, we wander, we wade and we wait—oh, sometimes we wither and sometimes we make our way to each other riding the high water mark of a torrent of words, drawing

from that well of common language and cultural memory, the tropes assigned to us at birth, histories and lineages we had nothing to do with, artifacts of autobiography that can be isolated and reconstituted into evocative images, tumid with symbolic freight—the bedroom that was not a bedroom but a crumple of bedsheets partitioned by curtains out of a living room, the bedsheets that were not in fact bedsheets but three extra-large beach towels elongated over a bed that was not a bed at all, but two dirty sofa cushions strung together into a mattress on the living room floor—oh, but what can I say?

Tropes fail us all the time.

All language that flattens—all language that simplifies—all language that lights the mind afire with the soft flame of flattery and the soothing solace of easy comforts, diffusing truth into isolate flecks of luminance that scatter into untruths somewhere else—fail us all the time, render us both visible and invisible to each other in the same stroke of the pen.

The pure thing of a being.

How do you give that pure thing a name? How do you give that pure thing of anyone's experience of being alive to anyone else without mangling it in translation? Without trampling the paradoxes and ambiguities inherent in all complex inheritances? Without flattening its quilled skin into the intelligible strokes of an artist's brush?

Of course you can't.

Our lives are doomed to be swallowed by grand narratives and other people's interpretations, the way all small animals are defenseless against oceans. The American narrative is an ocean that churns on and on, and the lowly details of any particular human life are the smallest particles of all. Truth is never louder than promotional copy. In fact every detail that I've given you so far can be complicated by some other detail that I haven't given you at all, and this is true for all things at all times. The only truth that can't be complicated any further is that profoundly neutral truth of "everything that ever was," of which only the tiniest particles are made available to our eyes and ears because our lives are small and our senses finite,

and for no other reason than an evolutionary one—to imbue us with emotion. This is how I spent all of my twenties—tumbling from emotion to emotion. Some truth about the world would tumble me into the deepest despair, while some other truth would rollick me all the way up to the top of the universe. (To contemplate that final truth of “everything that ever was” can imbue us with a certain emotion, too, but sadness or anger or joy seems to have nothing to do with it.)

That our emotions can be profoundly useful to our continued survival diverts us from the larger truth that they’re almost invariably not. I want to put it in the record now that I spent two New Year’s Eves in a row, back to back—2014 and 2015—running, physically running, after two different men who wouldn’t take me back. In 2014 Drew and I were in a crowded nightclub, and in 2015 Bill and I were in the deserted parking garage of a high-rise apartment building where a friend of ours was throwing a party. “Bro, can you just leave me the fuck alone?” I can still remember Bill’s voice echoing into the concrete.

My twenties were a disordered time.

In the throes of every emotion we have only the weight of our instincts to go by, and instinct is not a sturdy home. I sometimes think the most insidious consequence American pop culture has had on America is that it misteaches us human behavior. In our movies and in our platitudes alike, human reactions unfold with narrative clarity—our responses are unconcealed, our motivations easy to follow. In fact every human being not trapped in a filmstrip is a collation of aftermaths, and most of our platitudes are in fact promotional copy. Once you start seeing the way pure truths get trampled you’ll start seeing it everywhere—it can be quite hypnotizing, really. The most vilified among us can inflate into creatures of stirring sympathy, while the most celebrated among us deflate into ingenious bummers. Sometimes I look at the successes I’ve had and wonder if I’m just an ingenious bummer, too.

I almost certainly am.

The way modern men can manipulate other people's access to the pure thing of who we are is the stuff of legend—we've come a long way since the horse skins and plumages our ancestors wore. "Reputation," Rhett Butler is said to have told Scarlett O'Hara, "is something that people with courage can do without." (In fact this is a misquote.) If only it were that easy. In fact what we can all intuit with non-negligible unease is that our reputations assail upon the meaning of our lives. Were you, the reader, the only conscious being in the universe, then your life would indeed mean whatever you say it means. The intrusion of a second person, let alone the intrusion of seven billion others, snatches your life from your jealous, ever-tightening fingers and detaches it into a legacy. The fact that Pol Pot existed at all will for the rest of human history mean only one very specific and particular thing, no matter how badly he might have preferred to believe otherwise.

For many of us we discharge these uneasy suspicions into the love our families have for us, and we reward their love with our love. Inside that humble pocket of the universe we have all the legacy we need to imbue our lives with meaning. Some of us, truculent about safeguarding from others and preserving for ourselves the pure thing of our beings, run off into the woods. Others of us, hungry for the love that the humble pockets of the universe never gave us, run off to Hollywood. (What all our public figures have in common: they have all, consciously or unconsciously, mastered the secular religion.)

We make it harder for each other to be alive all the time. Inside all our scrambled and finally very human efforts to imbue our lives with meaning, we've gotten the wires crossed, forgetting that the whole entire point of it all was that seven billion other people exist, too. This is how I always try to demotionalize myself from a childhood and adolescence that was nothing if not emotionally charged: "Everything that exists is natural. Everything that exists is understandable. Error as much as truth. Ugliness as much as beauty." Sometimes I can even hypnotize myself with these pretty words into believing that this is the sort of man I've grown into—the more troubled

you are, the more I want to come closer to you, bring you into the human fold.

In fact this is the sort of man I've grown into: the more troubled you are, the more likely I am to stay as far as I can the fuck away from you.

What finally unsettles me is the very concept of human differentiation itself.

I catch myself doing it all the time: "Oh wow, he's so calm, so laidback, not at all an attention-seeker like I am."

Or else: "She's so strange, so interesting to talk to, there's so much to look up to here."

These thoughts unsettle me, move me away from the equanimity of remembering the neutrality of the human essence, the pure thing of a being that is the ten-billionth replication of something distant and ancient, while everything else—our personal attributes, our fears and loathings, our temperaments and dispositions and tastes in humor—is just window dressing, the unremarkable consequence of what our particular genetics-slash-environment have imprinted onto us.

To admire any single instantiation of that neutral and ancient human essence is a vulgar habit of mine that irks me to no end. What's so wonderful about all of the people I admire—and some of them are so cool, I can't even tell you—surely should bleed into what's so wonderful about the innocence from which we all spawned, "the Mitochondrial Eve," surely should be the pride of our species.

And what's not so wonderful about, well—let's just say, there's no distance between ordinariness and barbarity that a perception of yourself as a victim cannot cross—surely is just a stain on that initial human essence, reproduced and copied into all of us, and suppressed or else obscured by stronger qualities in all of the people who I only imagine to be absent those bad features.

What you love about Human X is the pride of every human being you meet.

What embarrasses us about Human Y is the embarrassment of every member of our species.

We're all just culminations, dust specks in the light beam of the grand scheme of things.

This book is called *The Pure Products of America* because for a long time now I've nurtured a conviction that the disorders that distend across this country today are the products of opaque inheritances, some quite talked about but some less altogether known. We are all the fruits of seeds already sown—troubled people with troubled motivations and troubled convictions have produced troubling consequences for the world, and what we all seem to have in common is that our troubles can be traced back to some narcissistic discharge, some deficit of epistemic humility, some variation of forgetting that seven billion other people exist, too.

To trace these lineages back one step further would be to come across the world's most stifling and voluptuous garden, intoxicating for its moral ambiguity. Mass media and pop culture ionize the sky—it is the sun and air we breathe, although some of the plants have built shelters. The platitudes and habits passed down from parent to child are the soil each seed grows in—often well-meaning but the sun is strong, and there is also the matter of each seedling's built-in resistance to sainthood: all but a scattered few of us will consume the products of people trapped in slave-like conditions on the other side of the world.

To look without jumping to conclusions.

To judge our moral lesser-thans with only the aim of incentivizing future good deliberations and preventing future harms, and to pass at last from being the main character of our lives to being the supporting character of seven billion other lives, because our lives are lived for other people—this is the final passage that I myself have yet to cross. For now the only love I really have is tribal love, familial love, love for my favorite people in the world and love only in the abstract for my countrymen, let alone for my speciesmen, let alone for the animals I eat.

For now I still write to you from landlock.

“Over there is the sea, and out there—the stars.”

It’s a pretty little image, isn’t it? But it isn’t true. All we have is inside here, inside these misunderstandings, inside these walls, inside our scrambled and finally very human efforts to forge some meaning out of our lives inside the everything that ever was of the universe, because the years are long and every minute was a saga unto itself. The last thing I’ll tell you is that everything in this book I learned from other people. “Smoking at Night in Rio” was the first thing I wrote where I felt like I had a handle on what I was doing, and “Goodbye to All That” was the last.

To the people I have loved in this life: the deepest peace derives from the fact that you are, and were, and will continue to be. The fact of your existence has given me a little subdivision within human achievement to love and call home, and I don’t even have to force it: the comfort is in the knowledge you exist. And if this book can communicate love, if these pages can offer the reader that very quiet witness of bondage and affection we have for certain things in this life we did nothing to deserve, but that life, over the course of billions and billions of years, saw fit to grant us anyway—well.

I’ll stay inside that upside for as long as I can.

In every strong person there was an absence of compassion for the blind man and people frightened her with the vigor they possessed.... She had pacified life so well, taken such care for it not to explode. She had kept it all in serene comprehension, separated each person from the rest, clothes were clearly made to be worn and you could choose the evening movie from the newspaper—everything wrought in such a way that one day followed another. And a blind man chewing gum was shattering it all to pieces.

CLARICE LISPECTOR

America churns. It does not cultivate.

WILLIAM MACHAUT

On the Morning After the Election

1

A HOMELESS WOMAN sleeps outside my apartment, in between the Ionic columns that belong to what I understand used to be the Connecticut Savings Bank, and I don't know what to do. Adulthood is like that. It catches up to you in waves. She's been out there "a couple of years now," a neighbor tries to tell me, or else she's been out there "at least a decade," the plumber in my building once told me, or else she's been out there since May—this she herself had told me, shortly after I first moved into the building across the street from the Connecticut Savings Bank, a comfortable five-story brownstone ("*Romanesque Revival*," the listing had read, "*open floor plans—stainless steel appliances—exposed brick walls*") and found myself alone and adrift on most nights, tired but unable to sleep, smoking outside, watching white headlights go past and nursing green American Spirits in the blue dark, gazing into the polite embarrassment of a city made rudderless and soft-spoken by the pandemic.

Adulthood is like that.

It catches up to you in waves.

I remember how the streets used to come alive at night, before the great flood, before the pandemic—and they'll do so again, our economy depends on it—streets that first and foremost seemed to belong, forever and ever, to the young. Oh Dad—you remember the young, don't you? You who have at last arrived at the downward slope of your life—you're seventy-two years old now, aren't you? (A shoe drops in March. An axe falls in November.) I remember the way the city used to divide itself into tribes, the way like particles attract and like minds always find like minds, and the way those isolated pockets of man used to invariably close ranks

around their own—the young standing guard against the old, the joyous standing guard against the despondent, the clothed standing guard against the unclothed.

Nonchalance in particular had a way of blanketing over everything, like virgin snow.

White headlights in those days (and how long has it been now? Is this the way it was for you too, Dad—that one day you look up and the adulthood you were waiting for your whole life is just a receding memory?)—white headlights in those days always reminded me, the receding pedestrian, reflected back to some driver in some rearview mirror only if she or he happened to see me, of my place in some larger scheme. What that scheme is I still can't say, but it comes to me in flashes, or else it comes to me in waves—it comes to me as the profound camaraderie taken for granted by each pedestrian as his or her silhouette drifts unthinkingly past a pair of still and luminous headlights. It comes to me as the stainless steel appliances inside the apartment blocks and brownstones that loom so tall and stately over the bodies of the homeless, and it comes to me most acutely—I the unspoiled, I the forever young—as the sound of the city's laughter, the laughter of city mice, the laughter of indifference. The indifference of the young.

I am part of the brownstones now, Dad.

I am a member of the strong part of the world where you always wanted me to be, Dad.

From the separation of high altitude, I can gaze serenely now at the ordinary rhythms and peaceful arrangements that separate the fates of man. I lay on L.L. Bean sheets, fall asleep in a comfortable bed. My liberal values safeguard me from the awareness that lives are collapsing all around me, and a comforting nonchalance blankets over me at night, watches over me in my sleep—the nonchalance I've inherited from my years and years of looking out for number one, of tending to my own tenuous place in the arrangement of my species. Whatever guilts I have I discharge into “ideology”: my sense of moral and political high purpose, my love of my own

righteousness. This love embraces me like yours never did, Dad.

And in my waking hours? I try to find joy and light in the smaller pockets of the grander scheme of things. I read articles in *The New York Times* telling me that impoverished people in impoverished countries actually have it the happiest of all, and smile approvingly. If not quite longingly. I hear from a conservative friend that small business owners exist in fact in bondage to the unreasonable demands of their minimum-wage overlords, or from a liberal friend that if only the brown-skinned paparazzo could spend a day in the life of the celebrity princess he terrorizes, he'd know how badly she had it—and nod amiably. If not quite viscerally. The seventeen words I'll never say: "I know whose fate I'd more prefer to trade places with, and whose I wouldn't, and why."

In fact the arrangements that separated the fates of man always seemed to me as a child so intuitive and straightforward: you get what you're born into.

How did I become so alienated from this simple observation? Is this what adulthood did to you too, Dad—alienate you from your childhood observations? I used to wonder all the time how you and I would have gotten along had we encountered each other at the same age, as peers. Would you still have looked down on me? Would you still have seen in me only something to be conquered, subdued, tamed and remolded to your specification? Or would we have been friends? Looked candidly at each other's differences, and with patience at each other's humility?

"We get what we deserve in this life," was one of the first lessons you ever taught me, Dad. I have trouble remembering when or where or how I came around to your way of understanding the world—but it, too, must have come to me in waves. Life inside those upwardly mobile parts of this country, and in particular those parts that tend unerringly toward power and brownstones and the city's bright lights, toward an intuitive admiration of beauty, laughter, fortune, and influence in all their many guises and avatars (Hollywood,

Harvard, the Hill)—has a way of washing over our childhood instincts and writing over them with its own, tugging us ever so gently into upwardly mobile ways of understanding the world, that we get what we create for ourselves in this life, we reap what we sow, we win what we put into it, *we get what we deserve*.

As an adult I don't think I lingered for too long inside the idolization and mythification of fate's winners that distend all around me, but what I did linger in for too long was a denial of fate's losers. There I was: spreading myself across the brightly lit avenues that dead men built and into other people's memories, people I wanted to impress, people I wanted to befriend—soaking in those bright city lights and play-acting those Hollywood dreams (“Be forever young,” I remember singing along to all of our century's most heartrending pop songs—“Forever in love / And forever at play”) and on some dazzling nights I'd see nothing but the seeds of forever-love, forever-youth, and forever-play bear fruit—nothing but young hope, nothing but young girls in love and young boys at play.

The strobe lights never stopped flashing for me back then, and the laughter never died down—I dressed to impress, the less the better (“*I don't do sleeves!*”) and saw the most beautiful faces, surrendered myself to the most beautiful fates. I tended to my needs. I practiced self-care by aligning myself once and for all with the strong part of the world where my true countrymen resided—the young and the radiant, my true brothers and sisters, my one true tribe—where beauty and fortune magnified each other and the meaning of life could be found on a dancefloor. Those were the days when nothing in the world could be taken away from me that Rihanna couldn't give back, and every now and then, on my way to a girlfriend's car, a homeless man would come up to me with the ghost-bass of “Get Lucky” still pounding in my ears—“I don't have anywhere to go, man; can you please, please, *please* spare some change?”—and I would hand him a dollar just to feel better about myself and be on my merry way, and it was all I could do not to put my hands over my ears and close my eyes and sing

in his face: “But no I won’t let you live with me—live with me—live with me—no I won’t let you live with me, not tonight and not *ever, ever, ever, ever...*”

And all along I saw myself as a man of such deep love—of such deep laughter, and such deep joy.

2

Childhood was a country from which I had fled.

I have trouble remembering when or where or how exactly all my childhood expectations from the world receded into the distance for me, only that at some point in my late teens or early twenties I began to notice that so many people I encountered in the world outside were unlike anything I had known them to be as a child: they were kind. Mundanely kind. Banally kind. A revelation of such sweet tenderness that from time to time I would actually wonder if I hadn’t in fact passed away as a teenager, and the banality of kindness in the world post-childhood wasn’t just a hallucination of the afterlife. For a long time in my early twenties every gentle face, every benevolent smile from a woman in the line at Trader Joe’s—“Oops! Sorry hon, am I blocking you?” as she stepped out of the way—would fill me with apology, feel like too much kindness to bear. This, of course, was many years before my later metamorphosis, before I understood that the expectations I had nurtured as a child from the world outside outed me in unflattering ways, and that being acclimated to other people’s kindness was in fact a source of social power, and I took my place in the world as a social butterfly.

So much of my original understanding of the world came to me, Dad, by way of the sunset in our living room. You and Mom and I would sit at our rickety little table next to the bathroom and eat what Mom made—you would be silent, Mom would be silent, and I would keep gaze over the winding path of a cockroach as it skittered underneath and then out from behind the oil print of Beethoven you had put up on the

wall, gently ushering it up, up, up and away from our food. I was terrified of cockroaches, Dad, but of course you know that. They came in so many sizes: there were the marquise-shaped ones that seemed to function as the rank and file of the species, there were the fat, stubby ones that looked like they had already been squashed and flattened once and now blundered about in search of vengeance, there were the little baby ones, literal babies that I would find in the morning next to an egg that had burst inside the towels that I used as bedsheets, and then of course there were the majestic ones—palmetto bugs, aristocrats with swooping antennae that'd send me screaming and shrinking into the corner of the room because all I knew about them as a child was that they flew, they flew, look at one for too long and they'll fly right at you.

Sunset in those days used to fill me with the deepest nostalgia—a nostalgia for the kind of life that I myself had never lived but nonetheless felt a part of every time I watched the girl next door say something pointed and witty to her comely friends on T.V., or listened to a comely musician sing about running away from it all on pop radio. Their joys multiplied my joys. Their sorrows multiplied my sorrows. Their experiences didn't so much mirror as they did magnify my experience of being alive: those were the years when the only people I knew who spoke any English—apart from the teachers and classmates in school who largely left me to my own devices—were fictional characters and larger-than-life celebrities: the pure products of Warner Bros. writer's rooms and Atlantic Records A&R memos, the public-facing side of this country's trillion-dollar entertainment-industrial complex. Daylight to me *was* those honeyed voices, those open floor plans and stainless steel appliances and exposed brick walls where lives out of reach to me unfolded—and I was there for all of it, every last lover's quarrel, every last postcoital cigarette, every last engagement and funeral. I learned to speak English this way. I wrote my first short story at the age of seven after watching an episode of *Sister, Sister*.

Enlarged and magnified many times over by the lives I lived through pop culture, I tottered inside the dynamism and vigor and tumult of being a red-blooded American: of being fully integrated into my society, of being fully confirmed inside my species. Only in the hour just before sunset when the afternoon light first began to fade would I have the first trace whispers of some dawning apprehension that “daylight,” of course, *was just a T.V. screen*—that my home was my home, my place in the world was my place in the world, and the life I lived, here, eating colorless soup in front of Beethoven with you and Mom, would be the only life I’d ever have.

Inside the dying paste of that golden light, I would try to expel the sunset from our window every bit as urgently as I tried to usher the cockroach away from our food—for come nighttime the sunset would be gone, and the double life I lived would merge, as in a camera lens, back into the only life that held any focus or clarity to me: I was Raymond’s little brother, Lucy and Ricky’s second child, Rachel’s best friend, Jerry’s downstairs neighbor sitting with him in the booth at Monk’s. Only in the hour just before sunset would the sameness of those days reveal itself to me as an acute enclosure that I could feel in my bowels—the sameness of the day I’d led, the sameness of the night that laid in wait ahead of me and the sameness of all the mornings after.

3

You were the sort of man for whom other people’s desires, other people’s benevolence, other people’s wants and needs and even the truths of the world itself, fabricated to your command—the “captain of the ship,” that’s how you used to put it all the time, the maestro of the world around you, and the composer of vivid and terrifying symphonies that lasted all the way up until the day I left for college, and will likely reverberate in my ears for the rest of my adult life: terrifying intervals of silence that lingered in the air for days as my

mother and I tiptoed around any one of the countless “errors” that could set you off—if I didn’t do the dishes to your deranged specification (I was to conserve the dish soap with religious zeal and use no more than a single squeeze while making sure every dish came out of the sink perfectly spotless), if I spoke too positively about Mom while you were in earshot (my mother was a materialistic anti-intellectual hellbent on leading her child astray because she didn’t share your interest in art and literature, and she was willing to let me watch too much T.V.: her low-income job also often singlehandedly supported our household)—

punctuated by the most harrowing crescendos.

Most of my friends over the years have heard the stories so many times. The time you punched Mom within an hour of her telling you she had just lost her job, misunderstanding the explanation she had given you (she had been sexually assaulted). The time Mom got into a car accident and you—in a stunning assertion of interspousal eminent domain—requisitioned half the settlement money she had gotten from State Farm and used the other half to take her “car-shopping” via the used car listings in *The Greensheet*. “Your mother seems like a lovely lady,” the woman in Katy selling her Mitsubishi had told me, twenty minutes after meeting you and listening to you berate her in broken English for trying to cheat you out of fifty dollars. “I don’t know how she can put up with a man like that. Day in and day out? You two deserve better.” “Help us. Please,” I remember wanting to say to her, before remembering again how terrified I was back then of foster care.

I was twelve years old.

Foster care in those days would be dangled before me again and again as the elixir that would solve everything, pinning me as a child in between the symphony I knew and a hinterland shrouded in fog and innuendo—I still remember being nine or ten years old and sitting in the social worker’s office at my elementary school, listening to her explain how it all would go; and feeling asphyxiated by dread and vertigo at the prospect of losing my family. At the point at which a bond

has been formed between parent and child, it is already too late for all parties involved—this much is clear to me in retrospect. For a culture that claims to love children as much as we do we've certainly voted with our feet, haven't we? You need a license to fish. You need a license to hunt. You need a license for almost every activity in the world that could conceivably impose upon the well-being of others—except for the act of bringing children into this world. In that single domain the freedom of the adult to sow his seed wherever he chooses outstrips the interests of the child every time—and with a certitude that's absurd to question, unthinkable to ever contest. We do do a good job of looking out for ourselves in this world, don't we? And we do it with such flair—“*Our children mean everything to us!*” we'll shout from the rooftops in the very next breath, while dangling before the little boy and girl next door trapped in a bad childhood the elixir of foster care, and then sleep soundly at night.

No help was coming. This much was clear. Sometimes in the afternoon I'd watch Oprah on T.V. and fantasize about sitting on her couch and telling her everything—telling the world everything—about what you were doing to Mom and me behind closed doors, but the point was rhetorical, since even as a child I already understood that the brutalities of the world were selectively seen, selectively remembered, and selectively considered by people who had their own needs to care for, their own gardens to tend to—I still remember sitting alone at lunch at T.H. Rogers Middle School and trying to drown out the sounds of forever-laughter, forever-youth, and forever-play as they distended in the courtyard all around me. At any rate I would eventually hear the sound of footsteps in the hallway and then your keys jangling in the front door, and if I didn't turn off Oprah quickly enough, my composer would be home, and the crescendo would begin again.

“What are you doing?”

“Reading.”

That was the response you always wanted to hear. “Reading what?” you would then ask, and I'd better have the

right answer in front of me. Mark Twain would win me your swift approval. Tolstoy—please bear in mind, *I was a child*—even better. Dostoevsky? Yes—heavens to Betsy. It was deranged. I was in middle school and still trying to make sense of *Saturday Night Live* and all of the words in “The Real Slim Shady.” Nothing could be further from my life as a child trying to navigate America in the twenty-first century than what the Red Room looked like at Gateshead, or whether Elizabeth did or didn’t feel excessively diverted by the overtures of Mr. Darcy.

What I am trying to tell you, Dad, is that it was *lost* on me—all of it, every last word of the books you made me read by pinning them to my self-worth, my feelings of safety and stability and human-adequacy. I was destabilized by the very gifts I should have been elated to receive—books you’d bring home with a spark of joy in your eyes, those garage-sale finds, Eyewitness Science, anything that bore the name of an obscure philosopher (nothing reverts me back to the unease of childhood more instantly than the green-hued cover of *When Nietzsche Wept*), or, one time, the entire 1989 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica missing only the S—they all became homework assignments for me, along with the art you made me draw and the composers you made me listen to. (I hate Bach.) Year after year in the lead-up to my birthday, you’d have me produce a “year in review” accounting for all the writers I’d read, all the composers I’d listened to, all the artists I’d become acquainted with, all the facts I’d acquired about economics or history or the natural sciences since my previous birthday, ostensibly to salute my progress but always, Dad—I think without a single exception—to scream at me, to terrorize me. I think I might be the only child in the world ever beaten on his birthday for failing to produce an adequate account of what the eyeglasses meant in *The Great Gatsby*.

Why do we do this to our children?

What was the purpose of all those years we spent in school if not to sabotage our natural curiosities?

If not to extinguish the light that used to glint in our eyes every time we came across a feature of the world we wanted to get closer to—and redirect that light toward our feelings of self-worth, toward the acquisition of social rewards and reputational capital?

Facts disembodied from facts—that was my entire experience of education, from the time I was a child crafting dioramas about Lewis and Clark all the way up through high school, where information was lobbed at us the way a marksman might fire a shotgun into the forest: the Byzantine Empire, the cradle of civilization (what even *is* civilization? is it always identical to the emergence of clay pots?), differential calculus, Bohr diagrams (to this day I can diagram the electrons of vanadium but I don't know how a refrigerator works), and, my god, *The Great Fucking Gatsby*. A.P. Literature annihilated any interest I might have had in literature. This acquisitive frenzy for information mirrored in every way the acquisitive frenzy that careened all around us—the hypercompetition that is America in the twenty-first century, the hydraulic-cylinder ethos that has transformed America from a shamefully stratified country of haves and have-nots into a shamelessly gamified meritocracy of *prizes to be reaped* (Harvard, Hollywood, the Hill, or else: likes, follows, shares and clapbacks—all the pats on the back that can be won from appealing to the right people and denouncing the right others)—delicately deforming, implicitly if not explicitly, the psyche of almost every American I know.

I never asked to be born into a video game, Dad. I was a curious child with an early interest in inequality, human disorder, and moral philosophy, why we were born into the lives we're born into and the why's and how's of the universe, what bonded human beings to each other and what bonded gas giants into a universe. Almost every child I've met in the years since, if they're young enough, seems to have analogous interests—but an early tumult over my showing on the Stanford-Binet grafted me into gifted education, and then gifted me into your line of sight as a “creature of resources.”

One by one my curiosities were crushed, my naïve interests smoothed out until at last all the interest I had left in “lifting other people up” were the words dripping down from my mouth (“inequality” was all I could talk about in college, and all I could talk about in my college applications). In fact what I understood intuitively as a child and later explicitly as an adult was this: that the purpose of education was to assimilate ourselves into the halls of power, and the more stridently we denied this purpose, the more powerful we’d become.

That there were some very real problems in this world we had just been thrust into as newborns—problems of human misery, problems of sweatshop labor and children trapped in slave-like conditions on the other side of the world where our baby shoes had been made, problems of technological advancements that have enabled human consumption to magnify so exponentially in the past century that it’s now perfectly ambiguous whether we’ll still have a species in two hundred years—was just salt on the wound. *Why weren’t we, as a generation, being galvanized?* Why did we spend so many years in elementary school reciting bad poetry and being gaslit into believing that Santa Claus was real while the world out there burned? Seriously, Dad—what the fuck was that childhood?

And why are we so surprised, as a culture, as a country, when the very children we bestow these childhoods onto—years later, years after the fact—*age into “forever-children” as adults?*

4

Bad childhoods are everywhere in America—they are, in the era of globalization, perhaps the single most reliable product our country can still be counted on to produce.

The pure products of America: upbringings that have something to show for.

Poverty, neglect, abuse—emotional if not physical or sexual, and from other children if not from the family unit itself—are mundane enough to be assumed.

Post-trauma is everywhere, its manifestations so general that they now singlehandedly prop up an otherwise dying news industry—explicit in our multiplying addictions and multiplying divisions, and implicit in our multiplying narcissisms—implicit in who our leaders and movers and shakers are, and implicit in who the very people who denounce our leaders and movers and shakers are.

The narcissisms that post-trauma create are everywhere, magnify all around us—the logical consequence of years and years of looking out for ourselves inside this country’s every-man-for-himself hellscape, years and years of tending to our own gardens.

I include myself in this analysis.

I am an American narcissist, Dad. I had to be. I had to start looking out for myself at some point.

Hypercompetition distends everywhere. Exclude yourself from the hypercompetition of New York and D.C. and Twitter and you’ll find yourself in the hypercompetition of Los Angeles and YouTube and Instagram, of social charm and physical attractiveness.

We train for this hypercompetition from the moment we inherit our first unsolicited D.M. from a popular classmate in school and feel that head-rush of social recognition—or else our first Great Novel to put on display at the fore of the bookshelf—and choose where to sit in the cafeteria.

We go to the gym. We whiten our teeth. We hit the books and get what we deserve in America.

What does it mean to be a “forever-child”?

I think some absence of context, some terror at remembering our smallness in the universe must have something to do with it, this species that rambles on and on, those headlights and brownstones and civilizations that dead women built and that we inherit as temporary guardians, trusted custodians of a proud and awesome species that stretches out thousands of years into the past and untold millennia into the future—we are visitors to this life, visitors to our families and visitors to each other.

To be forever a child is to restrict our curiosities forever to the face-value of things.

To linger our attention forever on our own apprehensions of the world.

To forget that each and every one of us is a pure thing of a being—trapped inside the crosshairs of other people’s interpretations.

To forget that misremembered lives float all around us in this species—leftover lives shed as flotsam.

Why were so many of us born, only to be crushed and trampled, while so many others of us laugh and play in an endless winter’s night as our own gardens blossom?

I think poor information conveyance might have something to do with it—those decontextualized particles of snow, this information overload, twenty-four-hour news cycles that now reach us in second-by-second intervals, this fearsome winter’s snow that blankets over three hundred and thirty million isolated people from isolated tribes with ever-increasing ferocity, and ever-increasing mortification at the audacity of all our many failures to “get with the program,” all our many logical disconnects, all our many distending stupidities. All the

particles of truth that seem no longer to attach to the pure thing of a being, that the being simply sloughs off—and all the particles of untruth that do.

Visibility is low tonight.

The loss of Arctic sea ice has weakened the northern polar jet stream, allowing Arctic cold air masses to make their way south with greater frequency, and to stay for longer periods of time. All I can see outside my window tonight is blizzard. The homeless woman is not there. I know she is not there because I can apprehend her absence sensuously, empirically, with my own eyes—and I know that the snow falling in my window tonight is a blizzard because apart from seeing it with my own eyes I have seen it before, I know from experience that snow that falls on a dark winter's night so violently that it blots out the horizon will not abate the moment I turn away from it, and that humanity has seen fit to give this phenomenon a name, and that name is blizzard. My apprehension is logical, definitional, built into the meaning of the word—one plus one equals two for no other reason than “one and one” is the meaning of two.

Empirical perceptions and logical analyses—from these twin faculties our entire apprehension of the world kindles into waking life, and “interpretation” is that enigmatic process by which we select, intuitively if not subliminally,

which particles to attach to as “truth.”

The snow is a nuisance tonight.

The snow is a menace tonight.

How many perceptions can I attach onto the world out there before I start drifting further and further away from the truth? *The snow is apocalyptic tonight.* The people who invaded the Capitol were disgruntled agitators, or else the people who invaded the Capitol were disorganized far-right insurrectionists, or else the people who invaded the Capitol were disaffected forever-children playing out their schoolyard fantasies of sticking it to the man.

How do any of these perceptions of the world “attach” to us in the first place?

One answer might be: we look around to get a handle on what other people believe.

This, in fact, turns out to be the barest definition of what an “education” amounts to—I believe that I have a pancreas even though I have never seen or touched a pancreas simply because, well: why would all those surgeons and coroners have lied? I have never seen the existence of Macedonia with my own eyes and yet I “know” that it exists—as an ancient kingdom, as the former name of a landmass now known as North Macedonia, as a region of disputed boundaries both surrounding and inside of Greece—as confidently as I know anything I’ve ever seen with my own eyes, simply because people and institutions I trust—the world atlas, the World Book, the world of other people—have told me so.

Oh, but I’m playing with fire now, I know, I know.

Because the moment a piece of information becomes politicized (do cloth face masks hinder the spread of respiratory viruses? does the depiction of a Heavenly Father in Leviticus or else the Vedic texts correspond to some feature of the natural world? did the coronavirus leak from a lab?) is the moment it becomes tribalized, religiosized, a counter in some larger game, imbued with its own extraordinary electricity. A certain understanding of Macedonia attaches to me because I lack the static cling of having been born near the Mediterranean—I have no skin in the game. A different understanding of Macedonia would have attached to me had I been born in Bulgaria, and a different one still had I been born in Greece.

It occurs to me now that this general phenomenon of static cling is applicable to far many more understandings of the world than the political status of Macedonia.

“Facts” are words that correspond to some feature of the world, past or present, without either flattening or enlarging it—and “truth” is a camera pulled so far back that *all pertinent facts have been accommodated*.

The perpetual trouble with this arrangement: the “pertinence” of any single fact to some larger set of facts is always a matter of subjective appraisal.

In fact I have not seen with my own eyes that the loss of Arctic sea ice has “weakened the northern polar jet stream, allowing Arctic cold air masses to make their way south with greater frequency, and to stay for longer periods of time.” A user named Erica Ackerman wrote those words—on the question-and-answer site Quora, in response to the question: “Why is climate change making North America colder?”—and her explanation attaches to me as “truth” in part because her explanation conforms with what I have learned from atmospheric scientists about the greenhouse effect and how the jet stream works, with newspaper accounts about the loss of Arctic sea ice over the years (since 1979, the summer Arctic has lost forty percent of its area and up to seventy percent of its volume, *The Guardian* reported last summer), and with what pop culture has told me about how the North Pole is supposed to be cold—and in part because, well: I have an emotional attachment to not seeing myself as a “science-denier.” A mindless absorber of scientific misinformation. An uncooperative member of my liberal millennial tribe.

A particle of information becomes “electrically charged” the moment its truthfulness or falsity becomes necessary to sustain, consciously or unconsciously, a person’s emotional demands—sometimes the demand for a good afterlife. Sometimes the demand to see oneself as a “good person.” And more often than not the demand for control: social control. Moral control. Reputational control. Existential control.

And because these demands are more often than not *imperceptible to the demander*, submerged beneath many layers of self-understanding more conducive to self-admiration (“I am a truth-seeker,” “I am an empath,” “I’m taking my virtues all the way up to my Big Daddy in Heaven”)—we rarely recognize the degree to which we ourselves have become electrically charged.

I include myself in this analysis.

Traumatized by you, Dad, I am electrically charged against elitism and authority—nothing makes me sadder than seeing a doorman treat a rich man with courtesy and respect—and this electrical charge broadly inhibits my access to all statements about the world that cast in a favorable light the perpetuation of elite authority in America. (“Have you ever read *Beyond Self-Interest?*” I would say all the time, waving away any information I preferred not to hear.) Moreover: this electrical charge broadly inhibits any information that could implicate me, too—I the unspoiled, I the forever young—as an elitist or an authoritarian.

Narcissism is like that.

It is first and foremost a way of rendering the disorders of the self imperceptible to the self.

7

A diseased system for information conveyance now threatens to blot out our body-politic.

We are all Macedonians now.

One by one, particles of information no one would have imagined in a million years would have been anything other than perfectly neutral have become electrically charged, akin to a society-wide autoimmune disorder.

The internet is frequently miscited as the source of the disease itself—but of course it is only the bloodstream.

The disease is in fact a disease of the cells—a disease of how we fail to cultivate our children through American education, and how we fail to cultivate each other through American culture—the disordered means by which individual members of the body-politic, those individual cells, now “attach” to information: emotionally, nihilistically, devoid of both epistemological humility and existential context. “We might actually be the greatest generation,” I’ve had more than one friend explain to me after I gave them a synopsis of this essay, “because we’re actually doing something to save the

world." And it's true: we weren't responsible for the snow that on this mid-February night falls and falls.

And young people today are indeed the savviest self-marketers this country has ever known.

"The year 1911 will long be remembered for the violence of its weather," observed Francis Molena in "Remarkable Weather of 1911," published more than a century ago in *Popular Mechanics*, underestimating the extent to which societies steeped in late-stage narcissism will one day fail to remember anything at all.

"It may well be that the enormous present-day combustion of coal is producing carbon dioxide so fast that it will have important climactic effects."

A caption above the article clarifies: Carbon dioxide "tends to make the air a more effective blanket for the earth and to raise its temperatures. The effect may be considerable in a few centuries."

A shoe drops in 1911.

An axe falls in 2111.

While we the forever young continue to be traumatized.

So we the forever young live for ourselves.

8

On the morning after the election, I thought a lot about you, Dad. I'm angry, I know. Adulthood was supposed to be a light at the end of the tunnel—instead the tunnel just goes on and on. The results didn't come in on the night of. Wisconsin was still too close to call, and Nevada, Arizona, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, even Georgia, too, so Patrick, Javi, and I spent the night on the floor of my living room with a fifth of bourbon and the board game *Modern Art* to try and distract ourselves from the news.

I remember, Dad, at some point during the night, looking around to take stock of the adulthood I had aged into. I have friends now, Dad—best friends, brothers and sisters whose

joys multiply my joys, whose sorrows multiply my sorrows, and really, Dad—this is all the life I need. I could carry this life, with Mom and this hard-won family, with this particular set of people, all the way into old age and death and not feel like I've missed a thing.

It was hard not to think about old age or death during the pandemic. “Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies” is the line from Edna St. Vincent Millay that people cite all the time whenever bad fate looms, although it was always the caveat in the next sentence that struck me as revelatory, suggestive of the actual fissures that separate the pastures of childhood from the forests of adulthood: “Nobody that matters, that is.” In the later months of the pandemic I called Mom and promised her that no matter what happened, no matter what bad fate came our way and no matter what bathing and feeding rituals I would have to learn, I would never let her live in a nursing home.

Family stays with each other to the bitter end.

Where did you go, Dad? Where are you in the world these days?

Or just: are you in the world these days.

I think a lot these days about love: the difference between the “forever-love” of childhood—the forever-love of Instagram, the forever-love of American platitudes—and love as I know it to be now as an adult.

All my favorite memories of childhood, Dad, are of when you and Mom were friends, the nights you and Mom would take turns playing Tetris in front of the Pentium, gently ribbing each other in a parody of the actual fights you'd have until the wee hours of the night, and I would listen to your joy and love and sweet laughter seep into my bedroom—separated from my family only by a pair of velvet curtains—and fall asleep on a cloud.

That those nights existed at all made the nights in between all the more harrowing, all the more claustrophobic. You had built into your understanding of the world so many “therefores.” The life that Mom and I maintained outside your

supervision, per your appraisal, was too chaotic, too prone to disorder—“therefore,” every Sunday night you would write out for Mom and me a calendar of tasks and activities to be finished during the week—“therefore,” all our afternoons and evenings would be optimized for perfect efficiency. America’s titans of industry didn’t get to where they were by being frivolous sons of bitches like I was turning into—“therefore,” you would watch *The Apprentice* with me every Thursday. “This is the sort of man I want you to grow up to be,” you once told me, pointing to a copy of *The Art of the Deal* you had purchased for twenty-five cents at a used bookstore.

“A thinker. Not a follower.”

You were the sort of man whose mind swelled with truths you had acquired about the world, so many facts, so many particles of information—and every last one of them was charged, every last one of them was electrified by your moral or intellectual ego, counters in a larger game. The childhood you had spent in rural Shaanxi (I would hear all the time as a child about the blood you had sold in your late twenties to pay for your brother’s hospital expenses). The lifelong injuries you had sustained from years and years of backbreaking labor. Mom’s refusal when I was in middle school to send a part of her paycheck home to support your mentally ill little brother while he was dying in a hospital, forcing you to take on odd jobs that further atrophied your back and shoulder—these were all facts about the world that had “therefore” Mom into the role of forever-oppressor, and you, forever-victim.

And that’s what happens when facts about the world become electrically charged, isn’t it?

Bill Clinton had slept with an intern half his age—“therefore,” he was a sexual predator—“therefore,” I was forbidden from finishing the letter to the president that my teacher had assigned at school. You read on the internet one day that the removal of fatty cream from skim milk also entailed the removal of fat-soluble vitamins—“therefore,” skim milk was unsuitable for a fifteen-year-old boy—“therefore,” skim milk was non grata in our household. Your discovery in

a shopping bag of the skim milk I had planned to hide that weekend in my room (milk goes bad at room temperature—“therefore,” your fifteen-year-old son was also an idiot) led to an outburst so flamboyant that the police had to be called to our home.

What was your terminal “therefore,” Dad?

Where were you trying to go with all that flamboyant energy—all those flamboyant outbursts—all those flamboyant discharges?

“See an emotion, follow an emotion”—was that the entire game plan, old man?

How’s this for a “therefore,” Dad?

Your emotional discharges did away with my childhood.

Therefore: you no longer have a child.

9

Four days after the election, on a Saturday morning so blue that sometimes I still swim in it, I woke up to the following news alert on my phone: “Joe Biden to become the 46th president of the United States, the A.P. projects.”

So there it was.

The blizzard had passed. The world could move on. Our crisis of adulthood was over. The quick-tempered man-child in the White House was gone.

I’m not sure, exactly, how all these facts about the world attached to me so quickly that morning as “truth”—or what it was about the wording of that push alert that made me so electrically charged by what had been, even by the Thursday after the election, an all but assured outcome. I think I might have burst out laughing in an empty room. Within minutes a flurry of messages began lighting up my phone: group chats that were orgasming, videos of people banging pots from their rooftops in Brooklyn, screenshots of push alerts from friends I hadn’t spoken to in months, which in turn gave me the confidence to send screenshots of push alerts to friends I

hadn't spoken to in years: "Love and miss you!" "Love and miss you too," I remember writing back again and again, and sometimes I meant it, and sometimes I only meant "I miss you." Human self-interest is an immovable condition, as immovable as gravity. Where there is mass, there is gravity—and where there is man, there will be self-interest.

What I understand about love now is this.

You bleed and blur the borders of your self-interest until the self-interest of another person is consumed into your self-interest entirely. What they dream for themselves becomes all you want to see etched into the sky and rendered into life in the real world, the world that all of us inhabit, and anything shy of that isn't love at all but the play-acting of love—the love of another being's presence, the love of another being's company, or the love of one's own love. To be honest, I deeply wanted this outcome not because I had any attachment to the prospect of Biden's loss or victory one way or the other.

I deeply wanted this outcome only because it would bring solace and comfort to the people I happened to love most in the world.

And that's privilege, right?

"Oh *shit*—yes it is!" I remember thinking, running frantically into the kitchen to grab a pot and spoon to bang inside my window, the way I had done to celebrate essential workers at the beginning of the pandemic.

Aside from a few cars stopped at the light, Crown Street that morning was almost entirely empty, but the homeless woman who slept in between the Ionic columns of the Connecticut Savings Bank was back, and I remember registering her presence with a faint trace of annoyance. Where were the people who would understand and *care*, feel charged by the news? "Did you hear?" I shouted to the woman as I started clinking my spoon into the cast-iron. "*Joe Biden is going to be our next president!*" "That's great!" she shouted back, and the small talk that followed couldn't have lasted for more than ten seconds before a well-dressed couple in their early

twenties walking past spotted me in the window, threw up their hands and arms, and started to shimmy.

10

The Arctic cold air mass that passed through Connecticut last week passed through my childhood home of Houston first—and power outages that will not, as it were, “long be remembered,” except by those whose lives they’ve bankrupted, radiated throughout the state: a boy in a Houston mobile home shared with four others woke up on Monday morning huddled next to the body of his dead brother, who had succumbed in the night to hypothermia, while elsewhere in Houston, a sixty-year-old homeless man was found dead under an overpass.

Bad fates befall pure hearts in America.

And yet elsewhere in the country, the joys and bright lights of all that America has to offer churn on.

That there are only so many ways to account for this disconnect poses a problem of ever more potent radioactivity.

To those who preferred to look: the explanation that “We’re all born with similar freedoms and, therefore, we’re all similarly culpable for our failings” flared out early on under the weight of broad economic despair (although as applied to other people’s moral failings, the flame burns brighter than ever). More and more, the problem seems to have found its most graceful resolution inside two coordinate self-understandings: self-aggrandizement (“*Well, at least I’m doing more than ‘so-and-so’ to make the world a better place*”) and self-pity (“*Wait a minute—you don’t think I’ve suffered too?*”).

America is now, broadly speaking, divided between those who have come across the graceful resolution, and those who preferred not to look.

Happily for the former category, the permanence of the latter category provides an ever-renewable moral resource that the former can ignite to generate ever-expanding moral license

to keep their own joys coming and their own lights shining on. Sustained by a cacophony of “therefores,” the purported identity of “so-and-so” has dilated now to include, depending on whom you ask, unreasonable liberals on the internet, unreasonable white women, unreasonable political opponents of all stripes, and most recently, the entire category of adults over thirty (“boomers”).

With the true culprits identified, the moral protagonist will now perform the tell-tale sign that a hat trick is underway: like a tourist in sunglasses, he will flit ever so briefly into the category of “those who prefer not to look”—after all, there’s always one more Hinge date to impress, one more Hulu show to binge, one more career challenge to dive into.

The ability to pass without consequence between two polar self-understandings—spiteful and spite-worthy—might be dismissed as yet another instance of that peculiarly American tendency to have one’s cake and eat it too, but something deeper is at work. Mine is a generation of such deep love, of such deep laughter and such deep joy—we *need* our moral lesser-thans to exist to sustain our own privileges. (Imagine having to spend every Friday night donating your time to the homeless because everyone else is! Nobody wants to live in Gilead.) The truth is, we prefer not to look for as long as we can. We live in a world where not only our consumption habits and our circle of friends but our *moral reputations can be custom-ordered*. To discharge our uneasy suspicion that we, too, might be overstaying our time in la-la land, we spend our date nights watching Netflix documentaries about injustice, situating ourselves inside an ever-broadening cacophony of “therefores” that always ends with a salutary index finger pointed at somebody else. We know our visit to la-la land is over when, galvanized by a commentator spitting truth on the internet, we can all but see a tangible thumbs up pointed approvingly in our direction, “*We are the ones we’ve been waiting for,*” and think—“Damn right, sister.”

Visibility is low tonight.

America tonight is a country in which the nihilisms and narcissisms of forever-children run forever wild—the men who create our culture and the men who report on it, the men who run our Capitol and the men who storm into it—forever-children who intuit, even if they'll never say it out loud, that God is dead and we only have one life to live so we might as well *live*, we might as well make the most of life's grand adventure, we might as well live for ourselves.

That a superabundance of moral protagonists who each have an index finger pointed at somebody else has functioned not to reduce but only to amplify the miseries we already have is forever a negotiable point—after all, there's always one more unreasonable ideology to denounce, one more privileged idiot to put in his place.

This is what we talk about when we talk about privilege. *Privilege is the freedom to custom-order your life.* Seventeen and have your heart set on Yale? Done. Forty-two and itching to publish a book? Done. Air kisses from the maître d' at the Water Club, deference from strangers in Kuala Lumpur—care to pass through life being envied and admired wherever you go? Done, done, and done. Assembly-line lives are given at birth the right to inhale and expel air and very little else—very little else in this world isn't touched, in some way, by scarcity. Social status is scarce. Opportunity, by definition, is scarce. Access to privileged people—the ability to meet them, marry them, woo them and fuck them—scarce, scarce, all so brilliantly and happily scarce. Assembly-line lives compete in gladiatorial contests to determine who has the right to custom-order their children's lives. When we talk about privilege we are talking about freedom, for they are one and the same.

I myself haven't eaten a cockroach in years.

Emotional discharges now light up the night sky, emanating from all directions, sustained by a cacophony of "therefores" and electrified into the world's greatest fireworks display by a popular culture whose race-to-the-bottom ethos functions as a society-wide I.V. drip of low-dosage narcissism, setting the tone for our children. *How is this all supposed to pan*

out? The people who can't be reasoned with will see the error of their ways after I snatch this one last fact about the world away from them, or else the people who can't be reasoned with will get their comeuppance when the next election comes, or else the people who can't be reasoned with will start a new country in Greenland after the glaciers melt—we're always one firework away from the terminal "therefore."

With each passing year I realize that what I'm most invested in of all is the continued existence and flourishing of a certain type of person who seems ever and ever more absent from pop culture: the pure at heart.

That is my terminal "therefore."

The pure at heart are in fact everywhere in this country, of all backgrounds and ideologies and political stripes—they are our country's last great silent majority—but they are, almost by definition, ill-equipped to make the climb. Bad fates routinely befall the pure-hearted of this species, and what rises inevitably out of the ashes is the strong part of the world—those steel beams who have gone on to forge our culture and country. In all places where it is currently used the word "privilege" can be replaced by the word "complicity" and the sentence would breathe a little freer, ring a little truer. I am not just privileged.

I am complicit.

On the morning after the election lives were collapsing all around me, just like they had on the morning before the election and just like they will on all the mornings after.

How we tame and discipline this intuition into a purposeful life is the project of anti-nihilism.

That we refuse to transform this project into performance art is the project of anti-narcissism.

To remember that our lives are lived for other people.

To remember that we are all the products of a pattern of inheritances that stretches out for millennia.

To remember that each and every one of us are trapped inside the faculties we have.

You'll never go wrong if you remember that we were all just that: born. You won't have gone wrong in ancient times when people were trading slaves left and right and screaming eye for an eye, and you won't go wrong as you examine the bad fates that befall living beings today. The recognition that we were all just that, born, is singularly timeless.

You, too, were just that, born—weren't you, Dad?

Sometimes at night this hint of a thought would stir alive inside me, sit with me for a while as a truth I prefer not to integrate. I still remember, Dad, the spark of joy in your eyes every time you'd come home on the weekend and greet me at the door with a new book. Your back was failing, but you'd take whatever odd jobs you could find to keep me on that steady diet of Jack London and Dostoevsky and graphite pencils, everything you thought I needed to build me into the man you hoped I could be. You wanted me to never stop cultivating myself. To live for more than just the instant gratifications I was so addicted to as a child. To have at all times an "intention" for what I was trying to do, whether I was writing a story or penciling in the crosshatches of a cast shadow. You were the one who had painted that oil print of Beethoven. I still remember that, Dad. The lessons that you taught me have in fact reverberated into my adulthood inside everything I do, because adulthood is like that.

It catches up to you in waves.

At the height of the pandemic, many years after we had finally fallen out of touch over even email, I typed your email address into Google and found the only trace of you, Dad, I could find on the internet. A single question you had posted to a Chinese-language message board ten years ago—you were sixty-two. This is how Google translated it.

I used to work in Texas and retired with low income. If I live in California, can I get subsidies according to California standards? If so, how to apply?

It got no replies.

What we all have in common is the profound misery of coming to an end. What we do not in fact all have in common is the profound fear of any single individual's coming to an end—that fear is reserved for the individual themselves, and the people who love them. Sometimes at night these hints of a thought would stir awake in me as the opening salvo of a truth I prefer not to integrate, but I would suppress them before they could bloom into life, keep them in dreams, keep them in bed.

Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.

And in my waking life: white headlights still stop for me. I walk past my homeless brothers and sisters in the city, say hello, bump fists, offer a cigarette, and take my place inside the grander scheme of the world. And from the window of my brownstone I smoke, watching white headlights go past and nursing green American spirits in the blue dark.

I am still such a child.

Eminem: A Love Song

My words are like a dagger with a jagged edge
/ That'll stab you in the head whether you're
a fag or les / Or a homosex, hermaph, or a
trans-a-vest / Pants or dress, hate fags? The
answer's yes

—Eminem, "Criminal"

HERE IS WHAT it meant to be a man if you were a certain type of boy in the United States. If you were, as I suppose I was, a child of the '90s—an accidental legatee of America's late-century traumas and shibboleths, moral panics and incidental neuroses. If you were, as I suppose I was, a son of the South—a student of flash floods and late afternoon cloud formations, whose happiness could be most intelligibly derived in the censored light of the sun, in the postdrome of a thunderstorm, in front of a rain puddle, wading an empty two-liter bottle with the Coca-Cola label scratched off, fishing for tadpoles. And if you were, as I suppose I was, a boy for whom melancholy could be said to "come easily"—a boy for whom softness and tenderness were not aspirational conditions but the general alignment, or what they now euphemize on MTV as a "creature of sensitivity."

Here is what it meant to be a man if you were a certain type of boy in the United States and MTV had not yet incorporated into its Viacom production notes a habit of euphemizing you as a "creature of sensitivity."

It meant: a debt to be paid, to be settled at a later date.

It was the last summer of the Clinton administration, and to a child whose understanding of the world had come almost entirely by way of comparison to a past pockmarked by absence—the absence of T.V., the absence of refrigeration, the absence of civil rights—modernity seemed like it had more or less “worked out,” that humanity could stall here, and it would more or less be the same. Any disappointment we might have about how the world turned out—well, we would just have to get used to. My family and I had just moved from Alabama, where we had grown familiarly adjusted to the rhythms and contours of living in a small city, the gambol of church bells on Sunday morning. Houston had the unwieldiness of a casino floor at the Venetian at 11 p.m. on New Year’s Eve, with the added qualification that nobody ever seemed happy to be there, wherever they were, at any given time. I watched them from the bus window (it was always a bus window) on Old Spanish Trail, coming out of the tattoo parlors, the secondhand furniture shops, the Fiesta Marts, the heat baking our skin into a uniform shade of umber. I waited for the day I would become an adult and trade places with them.

Accompanying me on those long afternoon bus rides would be a silver portable C.D. player, and a white C.D. emblazoned with a long rambling copyright notice, a pixelated image of a white man in a white t-shirt and dark baseball cap, and the letter E, printed in bold, large-point, Helvetica-family type, upside down. With some effort I can also recall that these two items had been purchased for me by my mother at Wal-Mart for a grand total of fifty dollars, or one-eighth her weekly salary. It occurs to me now how little of what we retain from childhood are the so-called “important things,” are the appropriate highlights and annotations, is the so-called point—that the substance of nostalgia tends to have as its preeminent constituent mundane details, the way the sun bounces off the face of a clock in the living room as your father beats your mother in the bedroom, trivialities. For instance, a

triviality: The man in the pixelated image on the front of the C.D. was holding in his hands what appeared to be a dark suitcase and a white plastic bag. Another triviality: “This is another public service announcement brought to you in part by Slim Shady,” was how the first track began. “Slim Shady does not give a fuck what you think. If you don’t like it, you can suck his fucking cock. Little did you know, upon purchasing this album, you have just kissed his ass. Slim Shady is fed up with your shit. And he’s going to kill you.”

The details are familiar. “Slim Shady” was born Marshall Bruce Mathers III in 1972 to a seventeen-year-old single mother named Deborah Rae Nelson, would shuttle between working-class homes in Missouri and Michigan before spending the bulk of his adolescence at 19946 Dresden Street, three blocks south of East 8 Mile Road, in a predominantly Black neighborhood on the east side of Detroit. The details are familiar to us not only because “Marshall Mathers” is the name on the titles of two of his eight solo albums and “19946 Dresden Street” is the address of the house featured on the covers of both of those albums and “Deborah Rae Nelson,” as opioid-addicted mother, is among the leitmotifs that feature most prominently in his discography, with a starring role in one hit single (“You selfish bitch, I hope you fucking burn in hell for this shit”) and direct shout-outs in at least two others (“I just found out my mom does more dope than I do”; “I just settled all my lawsuits—fuck you, Debbie!”).

The details are familiar to us because in his music and in his album covers and in his public persona and in even the title of a 2002 semi-biographical film—and with a self-preoccupation that would strike us today as distinctly if not archetypically millennial—the details of Eminem’s life have been reconfigured into art, and his art, for the past two decades, has enjoyed a reverence and esteem within the notoriously prudish confines of American pop culture that in many ways has been miraculous, even singular. His 2000

album *The Marshall Mathers LP* is one of only four albums since 2000 to sell over thirty million copies (the other three are: Adele's *21*, a compilation album by the Beatles, and Eminem's own follow-up to *The Marshall Mathers LP*, 2002's *The Eminem Show*). He is, at the time of this writing, the bestselling male artist of the fledgling century.

I was first introduced to Eminem at the age of ten by—although this term strikes me now as fundamentally dubious as any other impression I might have formed about the world at the age of ten—my first friend in Houston, a half-British, half-Japanese boy named Chris. Chris challenged me, had a way with words that would take me a few more years to recognize as a way with words which had the consequence of coarsening certain defenses, while seducing certain others into softening. “Stop being such a little *puh*-ssy, Colson,” was a sentence I'd hear all the time in my head, in Chris's voice, whether he was around me or not.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, Chris's voice carried enough of a British inflection to render faintly ridiculous his near-constant boasts about being “gangsta,” about “living in the ghetto,” about “sleeping with a Colt Mustang underneath his pillow.” In fact Chris did not live in the ghetto but in a two-story townhouse about a mile or two from where I lived, in a lower middle class, predominantly Spanish-speaking neighborhood whose class and racial composition more or less mirrored that of my own apartment complex—I remember distinctly that his mother drove a Subaru. I mention this not to suggest that there's anything indecorous or unbecoming or even all that unusual about a sixth-grader engaged in the art of persona-building. On the contrary, self-presentation—the manipulation of other people's access to the truth of who we are—is and will remain, I think, the guiding ethical impulse of our time.

But what bewildered me then, and what strikes me as relevant now, is how little Chris's *Ready to Die* persona earned

him in the way of social advancement—is how inelegantly Chris’s tastes aligned with the prevailing social character of our gifted and talented middle school, the majority of whom lived in suburbs that were not predominantly Spanish-speaking, whose fathers took them to Little League on Sundays and whose mothers drove them to school in Land Rovers, not Subarus. It did not occur to me back then that being “gangsta” or that “living in the ghetto” or that “sleeping with a Colt Mustang underneath one’s pillow” could have as its starting point a presumption of insolvency in any contest in which wealth or whiteness or conversancy with upper middle class virtues would be the determining factors, could have as its ambition something more vital and elemental than social success as a sixth-grader at T.H. Rogers Middle School.

I have here one annotation I seem to have retained from childhood—that ten is the age by which most of us, if we are injured enough, will have “come awake,” will have begun to look outside ourselves and at each other in earnest to figure out what would be celebrated in this life, and what would not. We will understand with some clarity, for instance, by the age of ten, who the pretty girls are in our classrooms, and why that matters. We will understand with some clarity, for instance, by the age of ten, what sort of boy will be picked first and last for kickball, and why that matters. It occurs to me now that so much of what I want to talk about here is what Chris had already figured out by the age of ten would be “the long game,” is the apprehension of some looming contest that will inevitably cast a shadow, however obscurely, over each and every American male’s experience of boyhood, so long as he knows, from the images we diffuse of the prizes certain men will reap, precisely to what degree masculinity will be rewarded in this society—and so long as he knows, from the images we diffuse of the trials certain men will suffer,

precisely to what degree its absence will be punished.

I was eleven years old when they first started calling me a faggot, when both the physical artifact of the word—two syllables, spat rapid-fire, followed usually by laughter—and the stain of malformation it transmitted became part of the donnée, not an unsettling gust of wind but simply the given of my social experience. I was a quiet child, reclusive in temperament but with an interest in long, ambulatory conversations, like the kind I would have with my pastor in Alabama before I secretly lost my religion. Her name was Hannah—not the pastor but the eleven-year-old girl who first called me a faggot, in a pique of anger or annoyance, something about my unwillingness to evacuate a bus seat. I had been called other names before—some of them unpleasant, some of them merely descriptive—but the word “faggot,” I remember, struck me as particularly strange-sounding and exotic, tropical in origin. “What does that mean?” I asked her, and I remember Hannah, as the boy sitting next to her on the bus that morning giggled flamboyantly, looking down at her lap, rolling her eyes and saying: “A bundle of sticks, Colson. That’s what you are. Are you happy now? You’re a bundle of sticks.”

It was the melody of nursery rhymes, lollipops and children’s clapping games—akin to “one a-penny, two a-penny / hot cross buns”—that I found myself sinking into on the bus after the flush on my face had disappeared, and Hannah and the boy next to her had settled into a conversation about who wore what and went where and with whom, the coterie of childhood. I wore over-the-ear headphones and tried to hold the silver C.D. player steady in my lap, anxious that any of the ridges on the pavement of Holcombe Boulevard would be the one to cripple my C.D. player for good. Most of the words I absorbed I understood dimly were not “age-appropriate” and could make out as individual phonemes, but could not cohere into discrete thoughts or intelligible sentences. Had I been able to, they would have cohered into this: “And whether you like to admit it, I just shit it better than ninety percent of you rappers out can, then you wonder how can kids eat up these albums like Valiums, it’s funny, ’cause at the rate I’m going

when I'm thirty, I'll be the only person in the nursing home flirting, pinching nurses' asses while I'm jacking off with Jergens, and I'm jerking but this whole bag of Viagra isn't working, and every single person is a Slim Shady lurking, he could be working at Burger King, spitting on your onion rings, or in the parking lot circling, screaming 'I don't give a fuck' with his windows down and his system up."

All I remember today is loving every single minute of it.

You will recognize an irony here, perhaps categorize it into one of the many ironies that make up that so-called tapestry of life's hard-earned wisdom, or that private hell which every American adult clandestinely remembers as the absurdity of adolescence. I do not. I remember as a child being preoccupied by the question of whether God had any special insight into our intentions. It struck me, even at the age of ten, but especially by the age of eleven, that there was a distinction to be made between the atrocities born of anguish and the atrocities born of ambition, between Mr. Freeze and the Joker. (It strikes me only in retrospect, as a twenty-six-year-old adult, that this is a distinction that can in all cases be dissolved entirely.) Track fourteen of *The Slim Shady LP*. Track seven of *The Marshall Mathers LP*. The line in track five that said, "How much easier would life be if nineteen million motherfuckers grew to be just like me?" These were sentences that could penetrate all but the most impermeable of age and language barriers. It struck me, in other words, even at the age of ten, but especially by the age of eleven, that what little I could discern from Eminem's words in the way of discrete thoughts and sentences, were discrete thoughts and sentences that had been born, unambiguously, unashamedly, and with the neurasthenic exhilaration of a lifelong outcast suddenly flying too close to the sun—
out of sadness.

He was the poet laureate of teenage insubordination, an astonishing late-'90s prefigure of white male resentment, and—assuming you choose not to close your eyes to the degree to which his childhood and adolescence were informed by a succession of circumstances borne disproportionately by Americans not of his race—the white prince of Black anguish, and the problem was that “nineteen million motherfuckers” were growing up to be, if not just like him exactly, then encouraged by the cultural miasma of which he was a vital constituent to take for granted that *this is what American malehood is*. The last thing I would like to say is that this is not what American malehood is. There has been some confusion, it seems, in some corners of the internet, and presumably in some corners of the real world that all people on the internet will inevitably retreat into, about what exactly anger is.

Anger is sadness.

Barring a handful of his radio singles and a smaller percentage of his album tracks, it strikes me as improbable that anyone should listen to Eminem's discography today and not be struck by what is above all, first and foremost, one of pop music's most prolonged and interminable expressions of uninterrupted—which is to say, resistant to fame, fortune, and the friendship of Elton John—sadness. That sadness slides all too quickly into despair, slides all too quickly into self-victimization and finally all too quickly into the nihilism that despair and self-victimization together enable, is a phenomenon understood by many people intuitively, but that not many people have identified as operative in a wide array of cultural artifacts—of which Eminem's music is one—that seem to suggest some recombinant of victimhood, insubordination, and transgressive reprisal constitutes what it means to be a man, and that what it means to be a man should furthermore occupy a place of high repute in our culture.

It does not, and it shouldn't.

Victimhood—at the hands of his mother, at the hands of his critics, at the hands of his ex-wife, at the hands of his culture, at the hands of a childhood tormenter (who in 1999

told *Rolling Stone*, “We flipped him right on his head at recess. When we didn’t see him moving, we took off running. We lied and said he slipped on the ice,” and who two years later sued Eminem for defamation after being named in a 1999 song about a similar incident)—lies at the black heart of Eminem’s music, functions as the *mise en scène* against which the brutality of Slim Shady’s descent into narcissism and nihilism might be fathomable, and even forgivable—culminating most garishly in the transgressive glee with which Eminem mimics his then-wife’s dying sobs and asphyxiated pleas (“Go ahead, yell! Here, I’ll scream with you! Somebody help! Don’t you get it, bitch? No one can hear you.... Now bleed, bitch! Bleed!”) on “Kim,” the third-to-last track of *The Marshall Mathers LP*.

“I had asked him before the show if he was going to play that song, and he said no, because I know you’re going to be there and I wouldn’t do that to you,” Kim Mathers told *20/20* in February 2007, recalling the night her husband performed “Kim” in front of 17,000 people at the Palace of Auburn Hills in Auburn Hills, Michigan, on July 7, 2000. “He was using a blow-up doll to reenact like, me being choked.... Like for him to do that in front of thousands upon thousands of people, knowing I’m out there and just watching everybody else singing the words and laughing and jumping around in like, approval of—just, I couldn’t take it. I immediately left after that, you know. I got into a car accident on the way home, I was so upset. And uh, I made it home and I just, I could not gather my senses, I just. I went upstairs to my bathroom and I slit my wrists.” Mathers was treated that evening at a hospital near the couple’s home in Sterling Heights, Michigan, before being transferred to a psychiatric ward, according to a BBC News report published at the time, “for observation.”

A month later, Eminem filed for divorce.

“Everything he did for, you know, me and the kids, he had to be praised for,” Mathers said, reflecting on their marriage. “He’s so used to getting so much attention, people praising him for his work, that he expects that when he comes home and it’s just—I don’t look at him like that, you know? I’m not putting

you up on a pedestal. You're not that person to me." Soon after his ex-wife's appearance on 20/20, Eminem filed a motion with Michigan's Macomb County Circuit Court to prohibit his ex-wife from making "derogatory, disparaging, inflammatory and otherwise negative comments" about him. "We're happy the court was able to bring this matter to a just and equitable resolution," Eminem's attorney told reporters outside the courthouse on March 26, 2007.

That a presumption of victimhood has come to underlie the self-understanding of a minority class of men who will go on to profess, as an article of faith, an allegiance to the principles of self-reliance, self-ascension, and the heroic rejection of all ideals which did not originate from one's own (presumably transgressive) account of *what it means to be a man* is a phenomenon in which you might have once again deduced an irony. I do not. Antibiotics are widely understood to remove only certain sensitive strains, leaving behind a minority class of drug-resistant variants that become, predictably, the dominant subject of all medical literature on bacteria. It occurred to me in the course of writing this piece that an analogous principle has been operative, at a cultural level, on ideologies as well.

Ideologies are culturally diffused, are culturally suppressed. In fact the most insidious myth about ideological freedom in the Western world today is the misapprehension that its greatest barriers are somehow formal in character. They are not. The greatest barriers to ideological freedom in the Western world today are the disincentives mediated by our informal institutions, by our private connections, by the company we keep. The cultural suppression of racism or misogyny or religious extremism of all stripes can, in each instance, only do so much—which is to say, what remains will inevitably *retreat, reconstitute, evolve structural defenses*. And here is where the transgression comes in. By far the most reliable appeal of any ideology whose time has otherwise passed is the secret thrill of "transgression," is the shiny lacquer

of “ideological independence” (often but not always varnished by a sense of one’s own victimhood), is the fundamental seduction of playing David to modernity’s Goliath.

I did not see in my lifetime, having come along in the aftermath of feminism’s unfolding triumph across the Western world, the remarkable docility with which the masculine ideal is reputed to have evolved from the urbane chauvinism of Rick Blaine to the urbane liberalism of Ryan Reynolds. But I have seen in my lifetime the emergence of a resistance to that evolution, an aspirational reclamation of the old order. And to the extent that this reclamation embraces a resistance to cultural instructions that unnecessarily hamper human freedom, I might even be all for it. Edward Snowden is transgressive. So, too, is Chelsea Manning. So, too, is Laverne Cox. But to the extent that this reclamation embraces a *sociopathic indifference to the consequences of one’s life*—under the brave white banner of self-ascension, under some sentimental vision of malehood—well then. We are no longer in the territory of men, but of a certain breed of teenage boy.

We are in the territory of Slim Shady.

An indifference to the consequences of one’s life, while by no means exclusive to the male gender, is the hallmark of narcissistic masculinity, and here I will admit an irony—is the antithesis, too, of any sane and unsentimental account of what it means to be a man. And yet this condition is observable in such a wide array of delinquencies perpetrated so disproportionately by a single gender—from terrorism to mass shootings to violent crime overall to the rate at which fathers in this country are known to abandon their offspring—that one finds it bewildering that a society which has otherwise demonstrated an intuitive flair for pattern recognition when it comes to identifying antisocial patterns within certain religious or ethnic minorities has yet to arrive at the conclusion that, with regard to violence, what might merit further study is not

so much the state of society more generally, but the state of masculinity in particular.

To draw this point more finely: suppose that on the one hand we have a religious sect homogenized by both in-group and out-group shaming (“*A bundle of sticks, Colson. That’s what you are*”), whose principal derivatives of social capital are physical and sexual ascendancy, in-group and out-group dominance, and on the other, data suggesting that members of this sect are, by a factor of at least two and in the case of rape, eighty-eight, more likely to engage in all thirty transgressions identified by the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting bulletin as criminal offenses with the exception of larceny-theft, forgery, fraud, embezzlement, and prostitution—and a society that is having trouble putting two and two together. What I am trying to tell you is that what we shame and do not shame in this culture matters. What I am trying to tell you is that we cannot celebrate certain qualities in man and not expect to produce a certain number of men who are instinctively inwardly-directed, and instinctively indifferent to the consequences of his life, so long as his own life points upwards, *so long as he himself is ascendant.*

The evil that men do are the consequences that self-certain men have had on the world.

It occurs to me in the final analysis that narcissistic masculinity is in all cases identical to the ethos of the permanent adolescent—an abandonment of the responsibility to do right by other people, to do right by the world which seven billion people are at the same time trying to share and inhabit. Of course you and I can argue until we’re blue in the face about what it means to do right by other people, but that is exactly my point. I am talking here about a strain of people to whom it no longer occurs that there might be a difference.

Masculinity, as opposed to man, has at its center not a soul but an ego. This is not to say that biology doesn’t have a role, not to deny the diversity of traits and instincts and predilections

that can trace their turbulent headwaters to some common or uncommon variant in the human genome. It is simply to say that whatever the environment incentivizes on top of that, it does so by appealing to some common vision of what it means to be a man—it does so by appealing to ego. It is not man's soul but his ego that deadens his sensitivity, unnaturally handicapping his capacity for self-knowledge, his ability to tame or subdue or even draw distinctions between the viscera of his disintegration. It is not man's soul but his ego that veers him inexorably toward violence, toward aggression, toward a fulfillment of the death instinct.

In fact the older I get the more acutely I am aware of living in a country that seems no longer to know what to do with its men. To be no longer a child is to understand that every feature of the world is provisional, that all arrangements are open to reconsideration, that there is nothing unconditional about how the world of human beings has settled, for better or for worse, which can't be evicted from its bearings. I remember as a child acquiring—from MTV in particular and from America more generally, which is to say from Hollywood, that cultural miasma manufactured in California and administered to the rest of the world by an economy of scale, or else by sheer force of will—an intuitive understanding of femininity in men as something to be mocked, ridiculed, debased, discarded.

MTV, I hear, now drapes its logo in rainbow swatches at the stroke of midnight on the first of every June.

Chris now lives in Austin, and if his self-presentation on the internet is any indication, has heard the cues of the twenty-first century, has become a man mindful of the proscriptions binding the urban millennial male—gay marriage is a no-brainer, the Trump candidacy a non-starter. Eminem, too, has heard the clarion call, telling *Rolling Stone* thirteen years after *The Marshall Mathers LP's* release: "The real me sitting here right now talking to you has no issues with gay, straight, transgender, at all. I'm glad we live in a time where it's really starting to feel like people can live their lives and express themselves."

I wonder if these evolutions taken together amount to anything more than the observation that adolescent boys—in our herculean efforts to make sense of the aridity of living inside other people's interpretations—do in fact grow up. And then I wonder if I have. What does it mean to love Eminem anyway, if my most vivid memory of him is not of any particular song or lyric, but of coming across one night on the internet, at the age of twelve, a gallery of images taken from the set of his latest music video, including two or three in which he is completely naked, closing the door, and masturbating furiously? It means, I think, nothing more or less than this: that I am thankful to have found him when I did, and I am equally thankful, but with a melancholy that makes it right now difficult to speak,
that his time has passed.

2015

In Sable and Black Robes

You're gonna light up the skies, I can see it /
You're God's favorite child, boy, believe it

—Lana Del Rey, “You and Me”

1

ONE OF THE most striking features of the modern public ritual initiated when a candidate is named by the president to the Supreme Court is the celerity with which all of the relevant actors snap into place. A general spirit of merriment and free-wheeling parlor speculation shifts one day into an aperient tremor across the Beltway papers that the vetting is now “closed,” that a decision “has been made,” that a nomination is “imminent,” culminating finally in a colorless statement issued by the White House establishing a time and date for the coming-out ceremony—: *fumata bianca*. The White House press corps, having for weeks recited the names, ages, judicial temperaments, and alma maters of those they have generally come to regard as the top contenders, converse with each other in code (temperament being a stand-in for ideology, etc.), arrive thirty minutes early to snap pictures of the Speaker of the House coming in with the Secretary of State. The cable news stations will have already cut into their regularly scheduled programming, legal experts will be called into the studio, pundits with J.D.s will be in hair and makeup. Finally, as the clock strikes the hour of coronation, through Cross Hall and into the East Room will walk the president and the triangulated product of what has for weeks been referred to by the national media as a “tricky political calculus,” often

alongside a beaming spouse or mother. “Thank you, Mr. President,” the nominee will say in a set of prepared remarks that typically last no longer than ten minutes. And so will begin the nominee’s elevation out of obscurity, at least briefly, into the highest reaches of celebrity that our political media has to offer.

We call this showering of attention the “Supreme Court nomination process,” and it is perhaps,
with the exception of our presidential elections,
our democracy’s single most elaborate exercise in self-deception.

2

The modern Supreme Court has as its given an institutional composition (a certain number of justices appointed by the president with the advice and consent of the Senate, as specified by our Constitution) and an ideological one. It is the fantastic residue of our democracy’s boundless capacity for magical thinking that we are to speak in certain settings as if this second composition did not exist. It is magical thinking that leads us to believe, for instance, that the application of reasonable and yet mutually incompatible interpretations of the Constitution with respect to divisive public policies takes place inside some cleanroom of the mind, immaculate of the preferences for certain policies over others that even Americans who have not spent their entire lives preparing for careers in public service tend to have. It is magical thinking that leads us to believe, for instance, that the sort of maturation of intellectual instincts that inevitably accompanies a young thinker’s rise from law student to Supreme Court nominee culminates in a sort of *tabula rasa*—a disinterest in, or even ignorance of, the relevant ideological alternatives, and their respective virtues and foibles, that have directed various members of Supreme Courts past toward opposing commitments, and opposing conclusions.

But this is the United States Congress we are talking about, and the entertainment of magical thinking is their business here. To observe the hearings that culminated in the recent elevation to the Supreme Court of Neil Gorsuch, the conservative jurist nominated by Donald Trump to replace Antonin Scalia, is to remember the extent to which nominees from either party have gone to uphold that particularly American delusion—that the border separating the values one must rely upon to adjudicate jurisprudential controversies, and the values that one must rely upon to adjudicate *all other controversies*, including the controversies at the heart of our nation’s contentious social fabric, is somehow clear enough to erect on top of which an impermeable wall.

“I’m not quite sure how I would characterize my politics, but one thing I do know is that my politics would be, must be, have to be, completely separate from my judgment.” This was Elena Kagan, President Obama’s second appointment to the Supreme Court, during her confirmation hearings in 2010. “I prove my fidelity to the law, the fact that I do not permit personal views, sympathies, or prejudices to influence the outcome of cases.” This was Sonia Sotomayor, Obama’s first appointment to the Court, in 2009—suggesting, presumably, that a preference for one of several viable interpretations of the law, the existence of which would provide the sole basis whereby a case in controversy would percolate to the attention of the Supreme Court, is not in fact a “personal view.” It is a premise that has become so deeply embedded into the accepted narrative of our political life that a belief in its essential veracity transcends party lines: the belief in an “apolitical judiciary.” When confronted about a statement of qualifications he had submitted to the Reagan administration in 1985 endorsing the view that “racial and ethnic quotas should not be allowed,” and that “the Constitution does not protect a right to an abortion,” Samuel Alito is reported to have assuaged senators wary of his confirmation to the Supreme Court by assuring them: “I don’t give heed to my personal views. What I do is interpret the law.” (“I believe he

was very sincere in what he said," Dianne Feinstein, the pro-life Democratic senator from California, told reporters after the meeting.)

This astonishing suggestion that "personal views" are somehow distinct from "interpretations" implies a construction of interpretation as something clean-edged, objective, impartial in character. And yet each interpretation we settle on inevitably derives from the same wellspring of values that gives rise also to our sympathies and prejudices—in other words, our "personal views." Interpretations are necessarily subjective, are necessarily constructed by our preferences and biases and the life experiences that inform them, are necessarily constricted by what we intuitively do and do not see. In the cracks of every ambiguity of text—whether the text in question is the Constitution, a judicial precedent, or *Finnegans Wake*—there exists space for multiple interpretations to flourish, and the degree to which any plausible interpretation is more or less viable than any other depends entirely on where the interpreter initially stands—depends entirely, that is, on the interpreter's "personal views."

These statements should not be controversial, and yet they stand in marked opposition to the segregation of "judicial opinion" from "ordinary opinion," and the implied elision of any legitimate textual ambiguity that might exist in either the Constitution or our written laws, counseled by the fabulists of our political institutions. To comb through the transcripts of the past three decades of Supreme Court nomination hearings is to encounter again and again a studied recital of this sentiment—articulated here with a touch of pathos by John Roberts during his Senate confirmation hearings in 2005:

The ideal in the American justice system is epitomized by the fact that judges, justices, do wear the black robes—and that is meant to symbolize the fact that they're not individuals promoting their own particular views, but they are supposed to be doing their best to interpret the law, to interpret the Constitution

according to the rule of law, not their own preferences,
not their own personal beliefs.

In other words we *need* these black robes to sustain a more fundamental fiction: that the pronouncements of the Supreme Court emanate from a wisdom uncontaminated by mere “opinion,” proceed from a provenance that is in some way “enlightened,” that is in some enigmatic sense “pure,” that can hold the burden of being the final word on subjects of disputed legality and constitutionality, on matters of life and death, on issues that will change the course of this country and the private fates of its three hundred and thirty million inhabitants enduringly if not irrevocably—and so what a wonderful providence it has been to find again and again a group of impartial observers so ruthlessly disinterested in the attainment of any particular outcome.

3

“There is no such thing as a Republican judge or a Democratic judge. We just have judges in this country.” With this extraordinary pronouncement Neil Gorsuch opened his first day of public testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee on March 20, 2017, inaugurating the four-day hearings that would determine whether or not he would replace Antonin Scalia, who had died thirteen months earlier, on the Supreme Court.

It is an extraordinary pronouncement for several reasons.

For one, it appeared to signal on the part of Gorsuch a flair for affectation that must have put to rest any fears the White House might have had that their new nominee was simply too earnest or forthcoming to perform the theatrical functions necessary to advance to the nation’s highest court. After all a theater had been built around him, draped in the costume of court proceedings—aside from Gorsuch himself, an astonishing twenty-eight witnesses would be called to testify

either in support of or against the nominee, as if the week had begun with a discussion of the nominee in question and not a dizzying volley of accusations and recriminations about the fate of the previous nominee appointed by the previous president to replace Antonin Scalia on the Supreme Court. As if it mattered to anyone in the room that Jamil Jaffer, a former law clerk of Gorsuch's, thought of his old boss as "the kind of judge that Mrs. Phillips," the woman who had spoken before him, a self-described Republican who had lost her daughter to a 2012 shooting massacre and was now in D.C. to testify against Gorsuch's confirmation, "would want on the bench." As if the hearings themselves were not an event with an outcome computable via an even cursory assessment of the partisan composition of the United States Senate.

The pronouncement would be remarkable even if the context that had enabled its utterance—a judicial nomination by a president whose inauguration earlier that year had triggered the largest single-day protest in American history—had not itself been a brazenly partisan do-over of a failed nomination by the previous president in which the partisan affiliations had been scrambled, the relevant actors misaligned, the celestial line connecting the Supreme Court nominee's political party with the president's and the Senate majority leader's not there.

The story begins, as do so many of its kind that have at its center the question of noble succession, with the death of a favored child—in this case the death of Antonin Scalia, a Republican-appointed Supreme Court justice, in the absence of a Republican president to replace him. "I am not happy about the intrusion of politics into the judicial appointment process in my country," Scalia was fond of saying, this being the third-to-last sentence of "Mullahs of the West: Judges as Moral Arbiters," a speech the late justice began presenting in 2005 as "the staple of his 'Dead Constitution Tour,'" writes biographer Bruce Allen Murphy, "following his failure to be named chief justice," and which Scalia resurrected sporadically—first in Warsaw in 2009 and then at various

state bar conventions (Utah, North Carolina) over the last ten years of his life. “But frankly, I prefer it to the alternative, which is government by judicial aristocracy.”

I found myself thinking a lot about these words—“judicial aristocracy”—as I began contemplating the celestial line connecting Antonin Scalia’s place in the stars with that of his now-successor, Neil Gorsuch, and that of all the other favored sons and daughters that had come before them (four daughters, to be exact, and 107 sons). “Raised in the psychological security and academic rationality of a bourgeois Roman Catholic family during the 1940s and 1950s, [Scalia] had the life of an exceptional child of the East Coast Roman Catholic intelligentsia,” writes political scientist Richard Brisbin in *Justice Antonin Scalia and the Conservative Revival*.

Whatever his political leanings during his formative years, he was exposed to a world in which merit derived from adherence to formal rules of behavior.... His early life isolated him from the economic uncertainty facing working-class America throughout the post-World War II cycles of boom and recession. His education in elite urban Roman Catholic institutions distanced him from confrontations with nativist hostility to Italian-American Catholics.... These patterns of elite contacts would mark much of his life, and they would contribute in subtle ways to his perception of law and politics as he moved from success to success as lawyer, professor, federal official, and academic pundit.

This blue-toned characterization of Scalia’s early life, standing in stark contrast to the suggestive *America America* intimations hinted at by Scalia’s Wikipedia page and elsewhere (the word “immigrant” appears two times in the opening paragraph of Scalia’s profile on Oyez, his delivery at Mercer Hospital in New Jersey to two U.S. citizen parents notwithstanding), offers a potent counterpoint to the

positioning of Scalia's life by the dominant narrative into the two great engines of American social mobility that have prevailed over America's self-conception ever since its founding: the American immigration system and the American meritocracy. (An instructive example: "Because of Scalia's dismal record on secrecy and surveillance as a federal appellate judge, the libertarian *New York Times* columnist William Safire attacked him in 1985 as 'the worst enemy of free speech in America today,'" Jeffrey Rosen wrote in *The New York Times* in 2009. "Yet when Scalia was nominated to the Supreme Court a year later, the Senate, giddy at his heartwarming ethnic rags-to-meritocracy story, voted to confirm him 98-0.")

It is within the dislocation suggested by these words ("in which merit derived," "isolated," "distanced," "patterns of elite contacts," "from success to success") that one begins to discern the foundations of some larger psychic dreamscape, distinctively hierarchal, distinctively upward-facing, and against which the trajectory of someone whose demonstrably superior accomplishments—valedictorian at Saint Francis Xavier Military Academy, valedictorian at Georgetown, an LL.B. from Harvard Law School, *magna cum laude*, topped off by a professorship at the University of Chicago Law School and then the various court appointments that followed—might come to be fathomable as the end result of a particular set of circumstances interplayed against a particular set of aptitudes that might or might not be independently remarkable, but at any rate not the end result of those aptitudes themselves.

Now. A word about those aptitudes, since our fascination with them as isolable entities sets the tone for everything else, and the lineages of things can be the hardest to uncover. The only child of a meticulous mother who "made a conscious effort to join the right clubs" and whose high school classmates predicted would have a future "writing theme essays," and a cerebral father whose erudite passions involved amassing "a great collection of Italian lyrics and sheet music" (this per Joan

Biskupic's 2009 biography *American Original*), the young Scalia appears to have been a midcentury proof of concept of what today would be recognized by any reader familiar with the child-rearing habits of the upper middle class as "helicopter parenting," telling C-SPAN's Brian Lamb in 2008: "[My mother] devoted her life to making sure I did the right things, hung out with the right people, joined the right organizations.... She made it her job to know who I was hanging out with." (Scalia's own son, a graduate of the University of Chicago Law School and a former United States Solicitor of Labor, puts it more bluntly: "They made him an education project," he told Biskupic in 2007.)

The meritocracy as a feature of American life is perhaps best understood as a machine for self-replication, never mind its presentation to the American public as an immigration system.

The bill of goods sold to us is this: cream rises.

We take for granted the dual premises that cream is everywhere, locatable at any point within what is by all accounts a deeply disordered distribution of social circumstances across the population span of a single country (I recall a recent afternoon in downtown New Haven when a woman approached me as I was smoking on the front porch, asking for my help in reclaiming a coffee table that my neighbors had discarded onto the curbside, only to understand moments later that what she had intended to reclaim was not the coffee table at all but the contents of the recycling bin next to it: "Why would anybody throw this *out*?" she had said, holding up a half-empty bottle of Lysol), and that the distance between these circumstances is traversable, amenable to the contours of one's own aptitude, or else the brightness of one's own star. We are told that the borders separating the classes are permeable (after all, we all go to the same schools as children—or else we all go to school as children—or else we all once were children), and that the visas and entry cards required to emigrate to a higher class can be strung together out of a series of travel documents ("class rankings" to illustrate

our industry, “standardized test scores” to illustrate our aptitude, “application essays” to illustrate our resourcefulness), forged and lovingly crafted over the course of two decades, beginning no later than age five.

As with all delusions, much ado is made of the exceptions.

Much ado is made of the colors within the gray, as with any psychic register that sustains itself through nourishment by way of its most top-heavy characters (the children of the poor who are permitted to rise if they work hard enough, the children of the rich who are permitted to fall if they do not)—we are at bottom hopeful creatures, responsive first and foremost to pinkish hues. Never mind the backdrop against which these exceptions become evident. Never mind that what is billed to us as openings are in fact pores—the backdrop of scarcity that abundance requires in order merely to be discerned, the preponderance of low-lying land masses (low-lying neighborhoods, low-lying opportunities, low-lying labor) that demand, by virtue of how we have carved out the topography, to be filled. To encounter this argument on its own preferred terms—its preferred terms being totalization—is to encounter a vision of the world in which absorption is everywhere: the absorption of dominant values, the absorption of dominant wisdom, the absorption of underclass neighborhoods into the new and the niche, and the underclass who once lived there into one of several relegated states, often the criminal justice system; the absorption of smaller fish into bigger ones and bigger fish into celestial ones (celestial ledger sheets, celestial value systems, celestial reputations, celestial personalities), and the absorption, finally, of aptitude into money and power as aptitude’s only lawful end state, rendered immediately upon absorption into evidence for itself.

It is this totalization that I remember when I think back to my own experience at Yale Law School, a life outcome attributable to my full and unthinking acquiescence to the terms of the argument as a swaggering and demonic twenty-two-year-old—the totalization of a psyche that demanded first and foremost its own self-elevation into every last sphere

of public life—: public entanglements, public virtues, public opinion, public service. Bourgeois sociopathy was the mode de rigueur there. We all wanted the world to change, and we all wanted to be the ones to do it, but of course what we all had in common was our own remoteness from a world that was less decisively on the up and up.

This fundamental cognitive dissonance seemed to warm the waters for everything else. “Congratulations—you’re off the treadmill now,” are the six words that can most reliably be counted upon to appear in the dean of Yale Law School’s opening address to incoming students when we first show up at Yale, although a more truthful description of what we were in fact to look forward to at Yale might have involved an evocation of Lilly Pulitzer sundresses and Baltic blue blazers, ambling up the steps of a sheltered walkway, a very different kind of treadmill; of unassuming smiles and unassertive small talk, mediated by a quiet fixation on each participant’s social capital (or “what one brings to the table,” ancestrally, professionally, intellectually, ethically, with decreasing capacity to inspire), and all the attendant paroxysms that such preoccupations with signals pitched beyond the range of human hearing tend to arouse—it was the ethos of a particle accelerator melded into the ethos of a regatta.

The clock bells of self-ascension were everywhere.

“*Let your own extraordinariness ring*” seemed to capture the prevailing register of the place—paths were smoothed out for us, bureaucratic ironies understood to be the given of all ordinary confrontations with American life (at the department of motor vehicles, for instance, or else at state schools) ironed out. To call the proceedings decadent would be to miss the point entirely—of course it was. The achievement of the proceedings, and its sole remarkable attribute, was to cloak the proceedings inside an envelope that could be deemed respectable by the liberal-minded meritocrats who populated the estate. Unenviable mental health outcomes were the norm there, although anxieties tended to fixate on stakes that were unrelatable to an extreme (the paper that if not finished would

consign the writer to a lifetime of alcoholism and menial labor as an associate at DLA Piper, but that once completed could elicit a recommendation letter to clerk for Ruth Bader Ginsburg).

Presiding over the estate, of course, were the victors of self-ascension themselves. Prominent faculty members formed centers of gravity around whom rotated minor moons referred to as, with minimal irony, “groupies.” In its idealized form—which is to say in its public-facing form—this alchemy of luminance and ambition was thought to generate a hyper-radiant superstructure that in many ways could be said to be a microcosm of the meritocracy itself. Cream rises, but toward the service of others. Cream rises, but toward the betterment of all, toward the reduction of human suffering and alienation, toward the advancement of the mean and the low, those bright lights plucked out to shine for all of our country’s vast stretches of dark—“a rising tide lifts all boats,” the victors of self-ascension appear to believe, in practice if not in theory, and whether they identified with the Austrians or not (in fact they almost certainly did not, “respectability” being the most valuable token in the game).

That this superstructure tended to generate only confirmations of its own luminance—luminance that could be isolated and reintegrated into “curricula vitae,” into “academic homepages,” and, for a certain category of aspirants, into “candidate bios,” to be submitted for elevation to a higher and higher rung of the meritocracy, higher and higher rungs of American status, power, and influence—seldom attracted any attention to itself, so much attention the superstructure tended to pay, by way of its reflexive fixation on more winning narratives, to the causes it was supporting and to the people it was helping, held up like shields.

The concealment of dubious preoccupations behind the rhetoric of praiseworthy ones is hardly a recent innovation, and yet the totality with which the victors of self-ascension could have their cake and eat it too had a tendency to take the breath away. Colorful ironies abounded. Lamentations about

the plight of refugees at the Southern border melded into and out of easily lamentations about an upcoming nor'easter's "implications" for a ski trip to Vermont, while a professor famous for his work on inequality could throw a house party for his law students interested in his work on inequality where the waiters served Comté and Rioja in bowties. If mendacity could be said to be a type of poetry, then nowhere was the poetry of self-ascension more persuasive as a controlling idea during my first two years at Yale than in the deformation of the psychic landscape around a single psychic center: a professor turned author of a bestselling parenting memoir whose diamond Rolodex was understood to extend equally into the worlds of *Fortune 500* companies, the elite media, and judges at every point of the political spectrum ("All she has to do is make one phone call for you," a classmate noted to me during my first week of orientation, "and you're in"), and whose outsized social power at the law school seemed to obtain as much from the thrill she derived in dangling it above avid snouts as it did from her skillful ascension of her favored sons and daughters into careers at the highest rungs of the federal judiciary—or, in the case of one former student, as the author of his own bestselling memoir about his childhood in Ohio.

Her preferred milieu, ex-sorority girls and virile young men of a certain build who had served in the military, was supplemented and thereby shielded behind a richly avowed interest in the "disinherited." This avowed interest, the favored attire of early twenty-first century meritocrats throughout the upper perches of the American estate (these being the years, you see, when those Viennese chickens have come home to roost), had the curious effect of rendering the unfathomable unspeakable, and the unspeakable unimpeachable. An atmosphere of silence and suppression blanketed over the demonstrable irregularities of a place that seemed to draw its cues aspirationally from Nicholas D. Kristof's columns in *The New York Times*, and operationally from the wedding announcements three sections later, obscuring the degree to which a well-connected and well-appointed professor who

outwardly had made the elevation of “marginalized voices” the project of her life could insinuate herself into the drinking lives of her students, could indulge with her favored charges (on those drinking nights, behind closed doors) in gossip that idled dispiritingly on the dating lives and sexual feasibility of students not in attendance, and could throw, as a show of unity, lavish house parties at her Gatsbyesque estate for the student body at large before pruning, as a show of strength, the most physically promising of whom to “stay for the afterparty.” Concealed power, after all, is the precondition of indefinite power, and it was concealed power that pulsed just beneath the sultry and subtropical rhetoric of the place—here’s was a psychic landscape pitched to the accrual of social capital, attuned most acutely toward each participant’s own self-elevation, and only nominally so to the elevation of those ideals that would become each successful participant’s *pièce de résistance*, brand identity, *raison d’ascension* and calling card.

It all seemed with the distance of high altitude to be such a fitting terminus—power that has evolved structural defenses, elaborate immunities to the scorn that power (the shiny side of the coin, the other side being subordination) inevitably invites—freshen the young aspirants with gold scents, infuse the air we breathe with rosewater and send us off to take our places in the world. How do the ideals of childhood chip away? They chip away like this: with blood-red geraniums that sway and flutter unobtrusively in a courtyard, with oil paintings of movers and shakers that line the walls of the classrooms and visions of bounty that loom tall and unimpeded against an otherwise barren horizon, lauded and canonized and forever in full bloom. The tears we point to are the tears we cry for the downtrodden. The sweat we point to is the sweat of year after year of letting our own extraordinariness ring, against a backdrop of neverending bells. “*Keep up the good work,*” the stridency of those bells seem intended to say. “*Now isn’t the time to let your guard down—there’s still plenty of room up here at the top,*” implying either the perpetual inflation of the

utopian class or else appreciable downward trends from utopia to dystopia, neither of which appears to be in evidence.

What is instead in evidence is the rhetoric of goodwill.

In a country of winners and losers in which the losers are in perpetual thrall to the goodwill of the winners, goodwill, it seems, is suddenly everywhere. Goodwill drips down from the lips of the powerful, coating the tempered iron of power's chassis with the restraint and self-mastery of a politician's platitudes. Goodwill, that sweet nectar, is taught to our children. What is cream, after all, if not first and foremost a substance that is crafted, churned by a father who has integrated all of the fashionable ways of understanding the world, and molded to specification by a mother who knows where good schools are? The objective markers that the spirit of the meritocracy demands are provided for, most reliably, not by spontaneous emergence but by *replication*—: aptitude, ancestral capital, an excess of ambition, an ability to take all that is disjointed and paradoxical about one's own experience of life and extract, ruthlessly and mechanically, for "narrative potency" (an instinct, in other words, to see a spotlight shining onto the ground and running over to it), and finally, meritocracy's latest favorite child, an excess of *compassion*, an excess of *goodwill*, an excess of caring about others: these are all ingredients that can be cultivated and distilled and rejoined into preferred quantities—each ingredient a byproduct of parents who look after their children, or else friends in high places who look after each other.

Goodwill, in this light, has now become a substance hostile to hierarchy that can be called upon to vindicate hierarchy itself, a counter in a larger game, a substance that floats and floats, lightening the density of cream and inducing it to rise—secured, with a wink and a nod, into cream's "personal views." From this initial mendacity all subsequent mendacities breed—that river swell of good intentions and self-effacing smiles that have no other place to go but *flow*, unrelentingly, toward the suppression of cognitive dissonance and the recital of doublespeak, toward a hallucination of

America in which demonstrable misfortunes can be held perpetually at arm's length, in subordination to more useful ones—the daughter of a Harvard-educated corporate executive and a governor of the Federal Reserve who graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Stanford before becoming a Rhodes Scholar, the son of a prominent Colorado attorney and the first female head of the E.P.A. who attended prep school at Georgetown before becoming a Supreme Court nominee, the contents of the Harvard and Yale student facebook's bursting open into page after page of the best and brightest of what the bourgeoisie has to offer.

A meritocracy is an aristocracy sans aristocracy's self-suspicion.

This is what I've been trying to tell you.

There is no such thing as a Republican judge or a Democratic judge. We just have people who care about others in this country.

4

In the torrent of what passed for self-examination by the national media in the aftermath of Donald Trump's electoral victory on November 8, 2016, two factors quickly gained ascendancy in the national media's scramble to explain how a 71-year-old reality T.V. vulgarian could win the White House: a higher-than-expected turnout by white working-class voters, and James Comey's announcement ten days before the election that the FBI had reopened its investigation into Hillary Clinton's private email server.

What did not capture the media's attention was the Supreme Court seat that had by then been vacant for 237 days.

Yet in the weeks and months before Election Day, Antonin Scalia's Supreme Court seat had become an issue invoked by both candidates at nearly every campaign stop (Trump: "Even if you dislike Donald Trump, I'm going to put great conservative justices on"; Clinton: "I want a Supreme

Court that will not reverse marriage equality, that will not reverse *Roe v. Wade*, that will stand up against *Citizens United*”), and the sentiment that “perhaps no single presidential decision is as consequential as choosing Supreme Court justices” was already reverberating across every newspaper and every cable news channel and into every echo chamber of the political internet. When I think back to my own experience speaking with friends in the days and weeks leading up to the 2016 election, days and weeks in which the disintegration of self-respect seemed to be the only stable attribute of our democratic process, I remember hearing a lot about Trump’s boorishness and nativism and misogyny, about Clinton’s foreign policy record and her ties to Wall Street, but the phrase I kept hearing again and again was “the Supreme Court.”

That open seat.

That waiting justice.

On the night of November 7, 2016, three separate exit polls by ABC, CNN, and Fox News each found that Supreme Court appointments were “the most important factor” for 21 percent of voters. Those voters broke for Trump over Clinton by an average of 16 percent. I can still remember watching T.V. as the results came in—Trump had just won Florida and he was poised to win Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, and a shell-shocked Chris Matthews was telling Rachel Maddow on MSNBC: “I heard another source today that the people out there on the Republican side have a real problem, they hold their nose on Trump, but they do care about the Supreme Court.” “I heard that from John Boehner a week ago,” Nicolle Wallace chimed in, “I said what’s your message, he’s out there obviously as a private citizen now giving speeches, and he said my message is exactly as you articulated, in the same words: hold your nose and vote for him for the sake of the Supreme Court. It obviously resonated.” I can still remember the moment it dawned on me that not only Trump’s candidacy but the Senate Republican majority would prevail, that some recombinant of nativism and nausea with the status quo had

ushered in a conservative deluge, looking at the boyfriend who I might or might not marry in the spring but at any rate enjoyed having the right to do so, and thinking, thinking and perhaps even saying out loud: *And there it goes.*

There what goes?

There goes the Supreme Court.

5

What we have witnessed in the past half century are the fireworks of the American meritocracy exploding all around us in full bloom, and the country that those soaring streams of gallant light have left for us in their aftermath. They begin as charcoal and sulfur, mined from the depths of the upper middle class, and they can go their whole entire lives waiting for the moment a fuse is finally lit, a hand reaches down from above, and a shoulder is tapped behind closed doors—those ladies and gentlemen-in-waiting who have spent the most formative years of their lives saying the right things and doing the right people and staying on for the afterparty. On January 3, 2017, fifty-six days after Donald Trump was elected president of the United States and 294 days after President Obama had emerged into the White House Rose Garden with his new nominee, Merrick Garland, and a warning to Senate Republicans that a failure to convene hearings for his new nominee would suggest “a process for nominating and confirming judges that is beyond repair,” Merrick Garland’s nomination to the Supreme Court officially expired.

Twenty-eight days later, Donald Trump nominated Neil Gorsuch to Antonin Scalia’s seat on the Supreme Court.

Neil Gorsuch of Colorado, like Merrick Garland of Illinois, had graduated Phi Beta Kappa from an Ivy League college (in Gorsuch’s case, Columbia; in Garland’s case, Harvard) and had gone on to Harvard Law, finishing in the same graduating class as Barack Obama before going on to clerk for the Supreme Court, for Byron White and then

Anthony Kennedy, had done a stint at George W. Bush's Department of Justice and had been named, in 2006, by George W. Bush to serve as a judge for the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals. He had, in other words, moved in his passage through life from accomplishment to accomplishment, or success to success—cobbling together, as a former employer of Merrick Garland's once put it to *The New York Times*, “a résumé that makes you want to cry.”

Now look.

It is worth pausing to consider here the degree of restraint and self-mastery that the sort of person with a “résumé that makes you want to cry” must inevitably harbor: the sort of person who could inspire in his friends compliments like, “If anybody was going to be the president, it was going to be Neil Gorsuch” (or, in the case of Merrick Garland, “Look at his record. Every choice is virtually perfect”), the sort of person who could, after being handpicked by Donald Trump from a list of twenty-one names supplied to him by the Heritage Foundation and the Federalist Society—it is worth pausing to consider here the degree of restraint and self-mastery that such a person must inevitably harbor to look the Senate Judiciary Committee in the eyes, and say with a straight face:

“There is no such thing as a Republican judge or a Democratic judge. We just have judges in this country.”

Restraint and self-mastery, polished with a coat of affability, saturated every aspect of Neil Gorsuch's Senate testimony on March 21 and 22, 2017, revealing a man whose commitment to evasion and equivocation extended all the way to his inability to name his favorite fishing stream in Colorado—a throwaway lobbed to him by the Republican senator from Idaho (“Do I have to answer this question, Mr. Chairman?” Gorsuch asked to polite laughter from the gallery. “I'd be happy to share with you privately my views on this subject—my experience is though that once the word gets out, then it's not my favorite spot anymore.”). Here was a man affable enough to correct himself when the phrase “undocumented alien” spontaneously tumbled out of his

mouth (“—immigrant, sorry”), a man who would cite several times at the hearings a case in which he had found in favor of a petitioner who happened to be an undocumented immigrant, a case whose ruling in fact demonstrated an interest in curtailing the power of federal agencies, as somehow dispositive of his concern for the ordinary American, “and sometimes the non-American.” A man who would go on to suggest that merely sitting on a panel that had replaced a judge for “perhaps” using language that “might” bear on a man’s ethnicity (“arguably”), without explaining what position he himself had taken on the panel, could somehow function as a character-revealing detail.

On *D.C. v. Heller*: “Senator, I’d respectfully respond that it is a precedent of the United States Supreme Court.”

On *Shelby County v. Holder*: “I’m happy to say *Shelby* is a precedent of the United States Supreme Court. It’s a recent one, it’s a controversial one, I understand that.”

On *Gideon v. Wainwright*: “Mr. Chairman, it’s certainly a seminal decision of the United States Supreme Court, there’s no doubt about it. It’s a very old decision of the Supreme Court now. It’s been reaffirmed many times. There’s a lot of reliance interest built around it.”

On *Griswold v. Connecticut*: “Senator, it’s a precedent that’s now fifty years old. *Griswold* involved the right of married couples to use contraceptive devices in the privacy of their own home and it’s fifty years old. The reliance interests are obvious. It’s been repeatedly reaffirmed. All very important factors, again, in analyzing precedent.”

On *Roe v. Wade*: “Senator, again, I would tell you that *Roe v. Wade*, decided in 1973, is a precedent of the United States Supreme Court. It has been reaffirmed. The reliance interest considerations are important there and all the other factors that go into analyzing precedent have to be considered.”

On *Bush v. Gore* (a decision which notoriously limited its holding to “present circumstances”): “It’s a precedent of the United States Supreme Court and it deserves the same respect as other precedents of the United States Supreme Court.”

Not the intransigence of his refusal to offer any insight into his personal views but the fact that this refusal was predictable, expected, “baked into the system,” is the remarkable feature here. Gorsuch’s performance—and it was, like the State of the Union or anything else a politician involves themselves with that unfolds in front of a camera, a performance in every way—had been baked into the script of the “Supreme Court nomination process,” and all Neil Gorsuch had to do was play his part correctly. To wonder if some ejaculatory fireworks by a senator on the other side—himself angling for a ten-second cut on the evening news—might distract the nominee from reading the script correctly, is to wonder if a Frisbee might alter the path of a comet.

This is why it is important to understand the sort of person we are talking about here. We are talking here about the sort of person whose preternatural instincts for restraint and self-mastery have gotten him to not so much a nomination hearing but a finish line. We are talking here about the sort of person whose elevation past the finish line hinges on his ability to indulge our public fables one last time, to play in front of the T.V. cameras one final role—the role of a judicial technocrat that is neither a Republican or a Democrat, an exasperated sitcom father who floats freely above the riffraff of politics, a cipher in black robes whose capacity for speaking about the principles and doctrines underlying various Supreme Court controversies is matched only by his facility for speaking in platitudes and generalities when confronted with a question that comes anywhere close to grazing his mind for an opinion of his own.

We are talking here about the sort of person who has been preparing for his confirmation hearings all his life.

What happens on the Supreme Court has policy ramifications for not only a set of petitioners and respondents but for every

citizen in the United States (and sometimes the “non-American” as well), and not the text of the Constitution but an 1803 decision by the Supreme Court to grant itself the power to invalidate Congress’s laws and the president’s actions made it so. When we think of how our country has transformed in the past two and a half centuries, we tend to think of individual strongwomen and strongmen, events that changed everything, marches and explosions and assassinations, cultural transformations that had as its source no single wellspring, certain presidents and certain icons, and we tend to think of the Supreme Court.

Our *Miranda* rights.

Interracial marriage.

Contraception.

A woman’s right to choose.

The desegregation of public schools.

I remember being assigned to read Plato’s *The Republic* by Mr. Phillips at Bellaire High School in Houston and falling in love with the idea of philosopher-kings. “This is the way society should be organized,” I remember telling Mr. Phillips, “by benevolent rule.” I stopped believing in benevolent rule the moment I understood our truest motivations, our deepest reasons for doing anything at all, are either forever self-interested or else forever unknowable. Neil Gorsuch was confirmed to the Supreme Court by the Senate on April 7, 2017—I remember watching his swearing-in ceremony in the White House Rose Garden three days later live on T.V., watching Anthony Kennedy as he administered to Neil Gorsuch the oath of office as Donald Trump looked on, watching Ruth Bader Ginsburg in her off-white blazer and dark glasses sitting next to Stephen Breyer in the front row, and wondering which of these eight justices the Heritage Foundation and the Federalist Society will get to replace next.

Gorsuch, who until his nomination to the federal judiciary in 2006 by a Republican president had been a card-carrying member of the Republican National Lawyers Association, continued to maintain throughout his twenty-hour hearing

that a “canon of ethics” precluded him “from getting involved in any way, shape, or form in politics.” There is a reason why, he said, “judges don’t clap at the State of the Union, and why I can’t even attend a political caucus in my home state to register a vote in the equivalent of a primary.” (It is worth pausing to consider here what sort of impression a man must have of his role as a federal appellate judge on the brink of rising to the Supreme Court that he should construe an inability to “clap at the State of the Union” or “attend a political caucus in his home state” as a net loss in his political efficacy.) It is one thing to acknowledge that our federal judges, as a result of a hyperdysfunctional judicial appointment process fashioned out of fourteen words in the Constitution, have ideological orientations that are if not “political in essence” then at least “predictable in consequence”—and then to dispute the value or significance or actionable implications of this observation. It is another thing to reject this observation altogether.

And yet there it is.

“There is no such thing as a Republican judge or a Democratic judge. We just have judges in this country.”

This statement would stay with me well after I had finished watching Neil Gorsuch’s confirmation hearings, during which he reflexively responded to any question about his four-decade-long involvement in conservative politics with the sentence: “Senator, judges have to stay out of politics”; would stay with me well after I realized that the face he had put on at the Senate hearings would be generally commended by the national media as “affable” and “congenial” and “clean-cut,” the face of a good ol’ boy from Colorado who had gone on to Columbia and Oxford and Harvard Law, and that any recognition of his testimony as a sustained two-day-long exercise in obfuscation would dissemble along party lines; would stay with me well after I had learned that Justice Gorsuch in his first two months on the Supreme Court had sided with Justice Sotomayor 40 percent of the time, with Justices Ginsburg and Breyer and Kagan 53 percent of the time, with Justice Kennedy 73 percent, with Justice Roberts 80

percent, with Justice Alito 93 percent, and with Justice Thomas, widely regarded to be the most conservative member of the present Court, 100 percent of the time.

A popular emphasis on a nominee's congeniality and affability and the presence of certain professional and educational affiliations functions only to give the nominee's actually relevant affiliations a place to hide, helps only to conceal from the American public that the nominee's "personal views" were all that mattered for the nominee's selection by the White House in the first place. This element of the "Supreme Court nomination process," unlike what unfolds publicly at the Central Hearing Facility of the Hart Senate Office Building, is abstruse, clandestine, and unabashedly fabulized—we do not know precisely how the nominees' names will be culled or on what basis or by whom. "They," and not the public, will know all they need to know about the finalists' ideological leanings and personal views. "They," and not the public, will counsel the finalist on how to obfuscate those leanings and views effectively.

There is no such thing as a Republican judge or a Democratic judge. We just have judges in this country.

It is one of the fables about our political process that we have not only inculcated our bright young things into believing, but punished them for not repeating—those bright young things who walk the procession every year from Harvard Yard or University Chapel or Stanford Quad to an internship on Capitol Hill, and then to Yale Law, to a clerkship on a Court of Appeals and then the Supreme Court, to a year or two at Latham & Watkins and then five or six at the Department of Justice and then, if all goes well, if the bright young thing is affable and congenial and has said the right things and shaken hands with the right people, to the attention of an organization like the Federalist Society or one of its many aspiring Democratic analogues, to a seat on the federal judiciary, and then maybe, just maybe, if the right person were to become president and the right person were to resign or die, to a seat on the Supreme Court.

To a greater degree than Congress or even the president, we have been conditioned to look to the Supreme Court to perfect the soul of our union. We look to the Supreme Court to interpret not only our laws, which may or may not be riddled with ambiguities, but our Constitution, which demonstrably is. We have discovered inside of those ambiguities the constitutionality and unconstitutionality of slavery, the constitutionality and unconstitutionality of segregation, the constitutionality and unconstitutionality of sodomy laws, the constitutionality and unconstitutionality of laws banning same-sex marriage, the constitutionality of forced sterilization and ethnic internment, the unconstitutionality of bans on corporate political speech. We are told that any one of these precedents can change at any time, be overturned by the will of some future Court. We are told to trust the justices who created these precedents, and to trust the justices who overturn these precedents, because in each and every instance they were not acting on their "personal views." We are told that in order to execute his or her functions correctly, we must learn as little as possible during the nomination process about a judge or justice's "personal views." We are told that the nomination process is a functional check on the judge or justice's power, a check that guarantees the judge or justice's "independence," and that this independence justifies the judge or justice's lifetime seat on the high court.

In short, we are told to trust those black robes.

The Supreme Court is the closest thing our country has to a benevolent despot, to unchecked elite rule, to a permanent class of philosopher-kings. I think of all those smart, affable, clean-cut boys and girls I walk past in the corridors of Yale, all the big words they use and all the wonderful fates they must be settling into in their minds. I think of all the stories they'll be able to tell from their time at the bottom of the pyramid, all the backs they'll scratch and all the fables that they've yet to learn. What would I want to know that they know before they put on those robes, and become our philosopher-kings? It is a question I suddenly realize arrests me completely. It occurs to

me suddenly that there will not be much for the rest of us to do, the great many of us who will not make in our lifetimes that walk from Harvard Yard to Latham & Watkins to the Robert F. Kennedy Building and then to the Supreme Court, as our attention spans dwindle and our democratically-elected institutions congeal with each passing year into partisan paralysis, there will not be much for the great many of us in this country to do but to turn off the T.V. and wait, to divert ourselves with idle amusements, to distract ourselves with petty bickering and even pettier controversies, to pretend we are doing something by “speaking up” about the bickering and “keeping up” with the controversies, to get out the “vote,” to make ourselves “heard,” to take action “today,” to turn on the T.V.—

and wait.

2017

The Pure Products of America

I HATE REDUCTION in all its guises, so this will be a hard story to tell.

What I've been after since day one. Perfection.

And in the perfection of that still and languorous summer afternoon, the day still stretched out long and trembling in front of me, I waited.

But for what?

Subversively: life flares brightest in melancholy.

I wrote those words in what must have been a bout of romantic abstraction: life, to put it gently, had stalled. A relationship had recently dissolved. I had returned to New Haven after a two-year absence to finish my last year of law school, and among the terse new faces I encountered in what had once been familiar haunts—the courtyard, the student lounge—places where clusters of students gathered to trade grievances for consolation, to rub ruby red the soles of their inside jokes, and work out the wrinkles in their plans: not a single friend. Company was hard to come by. And to top it all off, it was no longer summer. I wrote those words in the still white light of Connecticut in late October, beneath the tarpaulin of dying trees that obscured an overcast sky, longing for summer the way one longs for company at the margins of those red-hot clusters of people, melding into each other as clusters do, laughing, soldering, screaming.

In that light: life flares brightest in melancholy.

To wade in melancholy is to wade on the outside of things. I often think of melancholy in these terms—melancholy as a still blue swimming pool. Yet another romantic abstraction, but what can you do except fall in love with the waters in which you live? To wade in melancholy is to wade apart from those

red-hot clusters of people, to see them from afar, to put a cigarette to your lips and close your eyes to the thought that if you were only somewhere among them, somewhere inside them, if you were only at the raucous center of that widening gyre of grievances and consolation, of communal misgivings and communal affirmation, catching the chords of dissent in your throat as you speak, and laughing along to their inside jokes—that you will have somehow touched upon the brine of life.

But life flares brightest in melancholy.

Life flares brightest when those truculent instincts recede, when the expectation of integration is subdued by an apprehension of integration as in fact acquiescence, detrimental to the original spirit of the mind, free, indomitable. I am talking here about a period of my life when I spent most of my afternoons not in the anodyne light of the law school but in front of the window of a bookstore on Chapel Street, trying to put my finger on why I had found that light to be so starkly disagreeable, why I had stopped taking an interest in the community hours and lunchtime lectures, the afternoon wine tastings and potluck dinners, so estranged from my community that by the end of October a single photo posted to Facebook seen at the wrong place and time could send me faltering into my coat pocket, fumbling for a cigarette.

To be in melancholy is to be in some way out of step with the world, to no longer have access to certain signals. It comes, in my case and to my high solace, as a form of reverie—you open your eyes and there it is. That fluttering mesh screen. Those bright green leaves. A bright blue swallow sipping from a granite fountain on a calm summer day. You can even see it in the still white light of Connecticut in late October. What you invite in from the world outside you invite in only to augment the individual colors—I am talking here about reasons to stay in touch, the suppression of certain gloomy instincts, acts of goodwill among passersby that hint at brotherhood, love among strangers. You keep your eyes on the woman at the center of the raucous table who you imagine, too,

has succumbed to daydreams. Your experience of the world is augmented at all times by music, a voice in your ears that you don't quite hear but rather integrate as consolation, the first three minutes of "Cortez the Killer," the moment his trembling voice finally breaks through and your eyes are no longer on those laughing faces but at the world outside, at a fistful of leaves that have come shorn off their branches to be dispersed across the still white sky: "He came dancing across the water, with his galleons and guns." There—there it is, the world of other people be damned.

The brine of life.

Life flares brightest in melancholy.

In melancholy the music peaks. In melancholy the mind is prone to wander, the thoughts congeal, the sentences come. I spent much of that fall working on a novel that would and wouldn't come, pacing outside the law school and trying to avoid in the corridors those classmates whose fathers I understood to be the governor of so-and-so state, the senator of another, the Vice President. *Integration is acquiescence*. You try to hold it, sentences like these—you try to hold it in your ears as you pace and smoke—the sentences whisked out of reverie. But to let it linger—melancholy, that blast of blue—is to expose yourself to blue's inevitable inverse, much as nightfall inevitably blankets over even the blankest of the city's blank white October skies. Suddenly it is December and the campus is empty and you are caught in between imagined itineraries and imagined places to be, watching from your front porch the playful frolic of Christmas lights in your neighbor's living room window, and you are alone. Loneliness is like that. It catches up to you when you least expect it. Tonight, for instance, is Christmas, and in the dim blue light of a semester past with little but the outer edges of a novel and the company of books, music, and cigarettes to show for it, my loneliness has finally caught up to me.

I remember Christmas when I was a child, the specificity of my family's place on the outside of things. We were one of the families that didn't quite fit into any of the narratives that

America knew. Underclass, yes. Immigrants, yes. Unacculturated, yes. But with dysfunctions and paranoias all our own. On the table would be a rotisserie chicken from Fiesta Mart, discounted for the holidays. On the T.V., rooftops blanketed by snow, windows draped in light, the opposite of melancholy. In the other room my father would be screaming and my mother would be crying. I myself had the chicken and the T.V. and above all I had the industriousness of youth, had the truculent insistence that there in the vacuum that had failed to open up for certain outsiders like my mother and father—there in the country that had at its margins those linguistic and cultural exiles who for some impenetrable reason had chosen to abandon their homelands, and at its teeming center those comely and embattled people on T.V.—that there would be a place for me. Integration was all I thought about in those days, was all I was after—what others saw on T.V. as plot points, I saw as templates. This is how I remember Christmas as a child: sitting in front of the dim blue glow of the T.V. screen, in touch with the reality of where we stood in this world but dreaming of perfection.

Dreaming of integration.

Of course these are childish instincts, but childhood instincts writ large form the bases of adult society. In the wintry air of Connecticut tonight, standing alone on my front porch and trying to make out shadows in the lighted window across the street, I find myself drifting out of the pleasant narcotic hue of melancholy and dreaming once again of integration, dreaming of a hand to hold in the blue dim of winter. Insistently my mind turns back to that still and languorous summer afternoon back in August, sitting in front of an open window, that fluttering mesh screen, those bright green leaves. “I don’t want to go back to New Haven,” I remember saying to my then-boyfriend as the flutter of company thrummed its quiet rhythm all around me, the company of loved ones, the lament of a child. “I want to stay in front of this window forever.” Melancholy is like that. It has as its center some memory of being at peace with the world, in

step with the rhythms around you. On the snowy walkway outside the building across the street, a couple drifts past.

The most enduring memory I have of my generation being united around something was not the numbness that many of us felt on the morning after the election, or even the grace and relief almost all of us felt on the night of the election before that. I can still tell you every detail of the moment it happened, the moment the news broke on my phone, the moment the bedroom doors in my four-bedroom apartment all flung open at once and I could hear my roommates cheering and shouting from down the hall, "Quick, turn on the T.V.!" and later, "Come on, we're all going to Jimmy's!" The moment my country's fractured generation for the first and last time I can remember came together as one: the night we learned bin Laden was dead. I remember sharing a cigarette later that evening with a couple of Europeans outside Jimmy's, the chants of "U.S.A.! U.S.A.!" still echoing from a television inside the bar. "Well, he was kind of like your country's boogeyman, wasn't he?" I remember a graduate student from Germany pointing out, in a conversation that otherwise tracked the familiar lines of punishment and the balm of closure and just deserts. My country, I remember thinking, trying to marshal up the exhilaration that had come so easily to the crowd around me.

But an exhilaration that reverberates outward, like the kind that accompanies patriotism, and as distinct from the kind that accompanies the death of a boogeyman, has less to do with those private settlements of relief and closure and the balm of just deserts than it does with a more difficult solace. The solace of integration. "Here we go, baby!" the twentysomethings had cheered that night in front of the White House, holding up American flags and red baseball caps and twenty-four-oz. cans of Natty Light. "U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A.!" You experience it while watching breaking news, or as the difference between listening to music on your phone and listening to music in public, roused no longer simply by the opening thrum of Azealia Banks's "212" but by

that subliminal perception of cascading affinity, anonymous communion. You experience it at political rallies and at college football games, or on the Fourth of July, watching the fireworks among a throng of people as a soaring rendition of “Ride of the Valkyries” plays from an intercom somewhere in the black distance, that homogenization of sympathies bearing the banner of “common purpose” and yet inspired by that atavistic need to belong through and through, specific to no particular purpose at all.

The solace of integration.

I remember that solace from August, and now all of a sudden it is December—and now all of a sudden the year is done and the only sentences I can still hear in my head as I watch a pair of passing headlights illuminate the driveway across the street and the flare of Christmas lights in my neighbor’s living room window have to do with time, lost time. Time balms, time soothes, time flickers and inexorably passes, time and the world as we know it, the only world we’ll ever know, and every day we get a little older, the life stretched out in front of us closes in a little tighter, and there we still are, alone in our dreams, alone in our melancholy.

It’s when melancholy breaks that the trouble begins.

The danger is on all sides.

You drift in a clear blue pool that has at each border some harsher tint of color: envy, resentment, anxiety, dread, panic, and at last alienation. Melancholy breaks when you slip off the edges. I’m not sure when and where it happened in my case except that it happened sometime in the fall, the novel wouldn’t come together and the company wouldn’t come. All the people I ever met and liked untangled into loose ends. For a period of several weeks I would sit in the back of the classroom, trying to focus my attention on what my professor was saying but finding my attention drift inevitably to the classmates I remembered from various house parties or late-night outings I had talked myself into going to, the classmates

passing notes or whispers or sidelong glances to each other in the middle of the lecture hall, the girl who I had laughed about circumcision with over cocktails at the beginning of the school year, and why we hadn't struck up a friendship. The last party I ever went to was at a second-year's house where all I can remember anybody talking about was who at our law school was a conservative, who at our law school was a Republican, who at our law school had voted for the current president, MAGA hats were mentioned with a laugh of revulsion that might have accompanied, in an earlier era, the rumor that so-and-so owned an S.S. armband.

I remember spending most of that evening smoking a joint on the front porch, trying to figure out where in this new alignment I even stood. The election had done a number on us. It was easy in the beginning to watch the protests on T.V. and sink into the blindness of the padded covers, sink into the comfort of knowing that what you were watching on T.V. was on behalf of the outsiders, the downtrodden, the poor and lonely and browbeaten everywhere—I, too, remember viscerally my mother and father's many brushes with racism and nativism in this country, the vacuum that had failed to open up for them as they stagnated in the underclass. The vulgarity of this particular president's broadsides against certain populations, and more ominously his corralling of certain others, had shaken alive some intuition that the lines had been drawn, and on one side of it stood the good citizens whose empathy and compassion radiated outward farther than most, and on the other side of it stood—and this word came up more than once, came up in classroom discussions about immigration and refugees, came up at happy hours and afternoon wine tastings and evening mixers—"evil."

There was a sense that the country that had been promised to us when we were children was gone—and by us I do not mean American millennials, of course, but a very specific subset of us, I mean the ones who had at least a vague idea in high school of what a safety school was or what the word "undergraduate" meant, I mean A.P. students, I mean

the educated elite. (I remember taking a perverse pleasure in learning that a girl who otherwise seemed to live quite a sun-kissed life as the daughter of a national-level politician broke down in tears on election night after realizing her father would no longer qualify for a cabinet position.) “I don’t know what my country is anymore” was not an atypical sentiment of the time, a sentiment I remember identifying with when I was a child and a recent immigrant to the United States but that I was surprised to hear coming out of the mouth of a woman whose father and mother are both sitting federal judges.

I suppose the impulses that the election had awakened in the educated elite should have appealed to me, even if the educated elite did not: egalitarian impulses, an impulse toward a more perfect union, an impulse toward putting an arm around the poor, the lonely, the downtrodden—and inviting them in. The derailment of a political ideology hostile to our country’s most vulnerable inhabitants. An impulse toward perfection. In this light it is easy to see the curios of groupthink, the skepticism of dissent, the naming of dissenters at house parties, as reasonable compromises. “Incorrect attitudes,” it was understood, had cost us the White House. “Incorrect attitudes,” it was less often pointed out, had also enabled the survival and prosperity of the educated elite, had also afforded us food and clothing and electronics and raw goods from the developing world, had also seized from the debased conditions of the underclass the devalued labor upon which our own ambitions for the betterment of our lives now flourished—had also given us, in other words, everything we have. What is America, anyway, if not a country founded on and sustained by and nourished into preeminence by way of “incorrect attitudes”?

And how seriously are we to take any American’s attempt to ensure that these attitudes be “corrected”?

What I am talking about here is not hypocrisy but coherence. What each and every one of us is after, by virtue of our capacity to see and think clearly about the world, is coherence: the coherence of our ideals, the coherence of our

moral points of view, the coherence of our access to information, the coherence of the lives we live and the lives we dream of living—in a word: perfection. But America has never been a coherent country, neither the idea of it nor its lived experience, and the only thing encouraging us to see it this way is our sense that it would all fall apart if we didn't. One of the seductive fantasies about America is that it can be spoken about as a single idea. Yet even in its opening credo—out of many, one—one can detect a rich and suggestive shudder: a disunion of people, a disunion of cultures, a disunion of ideas and experiences and ideological starting points.

I remember as a child being taken in with the America diffused to me by the people I saw in movies, by the people I saw on T.V.—in short, by Hollywood, that Technicolor dream factory which in sheer scale and efficacy has put every other propaganda department in the history of the world to shame. More than any other engine of American life Hollywood in the last century has made America what it is to the world—a green light of beauty and prosperity, of innovation and opportunity, a multiracial, multiethnic monoculture to be envied and admired and dreamed of from afar. In fact it never was. What I saw as a child and understood to be “America” was in fact a culture particular to the people who were in a position to tell their stories on T.V. America itself was still somewhere else, somewhere impenetrable, swells and ripples of discordant ideas and experiences and ideological starting points, fumbling to march together under the same flag.

It's when that tangled mass of decaying algae and saltwater detritus reaches our shores that the trouble begins.

I am talking now about lives lived in radical obscurity from one another, lives whose only attribute of interest to the people who otherwise had no interest in seeing them were the attitudes they produced, the positions they rallied around, the votes they yielded. They are black or white or both or neither—they are left or right or both or neither—they are astute or naïve or both or neither—they are lives lived outside

but in the persistent shadow of the monoculture, lives of obscure dignity and laborious grace that invariably unfold against the pure products of America, the pervasive loneliness and melancholy and sense that no one is watching us, the perpetual indifference to all but the private fates of a glamorous few, the sedative patriotism that works only to obscure that indissoluble segregation of cultures and classes and socioeconomic experiences that is in fact the actual experience of American life.

That lives lived in radical obscurity from one another tend to inherit radically divergent starting points and tend to arrive at radically divergent conclusions seemed only to render that obscurity more palatable, those conclusions more untenable, the people out there more inadmissible. I remember being told on more than one occasion this past fall that certain attitudes, invariably traditionalist or reactionary or right-leaning but also invariably held by large swaths of this country, were not simply harmful or unsound or incorrect but evidence of human evil. That I happened not to align with these attitudes did nothing to ingratiate me to these observations. What I understood instead was that I had passed a literacy test, that I had read the right books and encountered the right people and inherited from those perspectives the right degree of tolerance and empathy and open-mindedness, that I had demonstrated in my attitudes a fluency with the moral vocabulary and ethical intuitions of the educated elite—that, in short, my attitudes had been gentrified.

“You can’t reason with them,” I remember overhearing someone say one day after class. “You can’t reason with people who want to burn it all down.” This unsettled me. “Burn it all down” was an exhortation I had last encountered in college, had last encountered in the company of Trotskyists and workers’ rights activists and radical feminists in the basement of the humanities building at the University of Chicago, when unemployment was high and wages were stagnant and Obama, two years into office, had failed to emerge from the center-left cocoon of his campaign rhetoric a revolutionary—an

exhortation which in the years since the Great Recession and that top-heavy recovery imposed to subdue it had mushroomed and billowed into every pocket of the developed world except its steel-plated surfaces—its government, its mass media, its major corporations and glittering universities—all as quiet and orderly and incurious as ever, as if they'd been designed to hum along with only minor alterations through even the apocalypse, untouched by fire: the fire was always somewhere else, and would always *be* somewhere else, inaccessible to the ideations and fixations and sensitivities of the American elite.

It occurred to me while watching an interview with an Ohio voter this past fall that the correctness or incorrectness of certain attitudes—nativism, tribalism, retrograde views on race or gender or sexual orientation, a general apathy to the fates of outsiders—held less of an interest to me than the curious predictability of these attitudes in an individual's worldview, given only scant details about that individual's material, social, and demographic condition. It had weighed on me, too—the melancholy, the alienation, the sense that my family and I had yet to earn a place in this country—I had recoiled in discomfort, too, watching the self-described “lifelong Democrat” in her forties or fifties struggle to explain why she had refused to vote for the Democratic candidate in 2008 and 2012, the doubts she had nurtured about our country's first Black president (“The information I was getting—could have been bits and pieces from television, could have been information that was not true—but it set in my mind that he would not represent us in the event of a war”). Yet inside these fears were doubts I suspect I, too, might have harbored as a child, green to this country and susceptible to conspiracy theories and invectives against elite rule—doubts that seem unintelligible to me now only in light of the fullness and richness of my access to the world, the circles I've been allowed to penetrate, the sensibilities I've had time to nurture.

And that's it, isn't it?

What begins as experience and instinct culminates as attitude.

What we are talking about when we talk about the correctness of one's attitudes is the correctness of one's encounter with the world, is the correctness of one's exposure to certain ideas and people and ways of looking at disorder, the sensibilities one has absorbed and the time one has had to refine them—is, in other words, the fullness and richness of one's access to the world that make up what we talk about when we talk about privilege. In this light the myths lose their piquancy, a certain power to animate: the Zoroastrian struggle between good and evil depresses into a mundane story of separate people in separate tribes who have evolved in separate pockets of air, each of whom has absorbed from the air around them an impulse to yield to "certain" outsiders but not others, an impulse to cleanse their base instincts of "certain" traditionalist notions about how we should live but not others, of "certain" tribalist intuitions about race and religion and country of origin but still not others—and the class of good citizens whose empathy and compassion are said to radiate outward farther than most depresses into a league of ordinary citizens proficient in the vocabulary of privilege and self-reflection in vogue with the powerful classes.

How we come to any of it—the base instincts, the immoderate fixations, the splotches of misheard information or the information that isn't there, the righteous indignation, the charitable and uncharitable interpretations, the reluctantly held suspicions and then our all too sudden urge to succumb to them, and the whole entire time, like a piano playing in the distance, that ever-shifting melancholy, those blue-gray hues—is the story of our lives.

From these hues: out of many, one never came.

In this light the country *e pluribus* was after never seemed so distant.



At any rate the melancholy had broken for me by the end of the semester, the distance between the integration I had always dreamed of and the specificity of my place on the outside of things had grown so acute that by the end of November even the window of the bookstore on Chapel Street had shed its dislocating potency, I could no longer call to mind those bright green leaves, that fluttering mesh screen, all I could focus on were the conversations that broke out into laughter at the surrounding tables. I began to spend my days and nights at home, writing on a table littered with takeout boxes long emails to people I had once been close to, people who had gotten married or moved to the other side of the country or both, but the only emails that ever came back were rejection letters for a short story I had sent out in August.

August stayed in my mind, magnified as both a milestone and an object of obsession, a point at which the music had soared and life stretched out long and trembling in front of me and perfection still felt imminent, within reach. In fact perfection never seemed so tall an order. I misinterpreted stoplights, blundered into puddles, lost my keys for a week and slipped a napkin into the front door whenever I went out for cigarettes ("It's no big deal, every writer I knew in college was a bit of an eccentric," my roommate told me by way of consolation). "This is no longer melancholy," I finally told myself toward the end of November, after the apartment had emptied and I found myself at nine p.m. on Thanksgiving evening running cold water from the shower to try and drown out the music from the dinner party upstairs (by then the thoughts no longer congealed, the sentences no longer came).

"This is textbook alienation."

I saw a specialist the next Tuesday but neglected to tell her about either the dinner party or the running of water from the shower. Instead we talked about ambition, the distance between the lives we live and the lives we dream of living, my ambition and my parents' ambitions and the ambitions of the

immigrants I had seen deported on T.V., about the ambitions that had projected some of us into law school and some of us into what is amorphously called the middle class (as divined by discretionary income or else the number of trees outside one's front window) and still others of us to claw against the blackened side of this country's borders, about the variance in scope and scale of ambition against the tapestry of discordant starting points and discordant outcomes that renders the fate of any "archetypical American," or even the phrase itself, too obscure to contemplate. What we did not talk about was what lay at the bottom of the well, the lives at the base of the ladder and the uneasy sense that there is no single point at which an American, simply by virtue of being an American, might cease to fall. Instead we danced, in so many ways and in so many words, around the problem of finding a place for oneself in this country—socially, historically, culturally, ethically—in the absence of having inherited one. "I just don't really have a sense that this country wants or likes or knows what to *do* with all the human lives it's given home to," I said.

"Do you?"

Generalized anxiety disorder, the diagnosis came back, which softened it. If melancholy is the fever dream that nevertheless fails to quite soothe us, anxiety is the night terror, a way of living inside the ambiguity of one's private fate, an apprehension of that ever-shifting blackness at the bottom of the well—I say ever-shifting because what lies at the bottom of the well is unknowable, that is the point—and hostile to all but the dread-ridden's private vantage point, amenable only to the dread-ridden's secret intuition. In this regard anxiety, on top of everything else, is also a perversely lonesome way of being, an experience of the world resistant to the world itself, resistant to the grandness of its theater (each of our fates, after all, being only one of untold billions), attuned only to the dark water lapping at the bottom of the well, to that encroaching point of no return, the place in the world that wouldn't open up for us, the integration that never came.

How we discipline these intuitions is a matter of life or death.

The integrated live parallel lives from the alienated.

The alienated go missing, the alienated trail off. The alienated catch a strobe of light in their irises and then vanish into the nocturnal black.

I think I'm finally touching the other side, my god.

I remember that night six and a half years ago, the night bin Laden died, the exhumation of sentiments that were at once so vivid and obscure to me, vivid because for the first time in our lives we were all aligned together on the same plane and obscure because exaltation in the company of others, as with indignation, as with indifference or goodwill and as with the homogenization of any sympathy that replicates itself by way of communal affirmation, is at last *unknown to itself*. Homogenization seeks only to obscure this mist. "From lying so much to try to have the same opinion as everyone else, because there's no point in arguing, I've been paralyzed." This is a sentence that appears in a letter written by Clarice Lispector to her sister Tania in 1946, and it is a sentence that has stayed in my mind ever since I first encountered it in Benjamin Moser's biography of Clarice Lispector this past fall. I carried it with me like an opiate to every social function, held it in my ear as the soft hues of melancholy dissolved into late-stage alienation, compressed it for its talismanic properties as the voices in the other room curdled into familiar configurations and I found myself gazing at a silent rendition of *Paris When It Sizzles* through a darkened window, alone on the fire escape.

The story of every empire is the story of replication.

Attitudes are replicated. Virtues are replicated. And above all allegiances are replicated, allegiances to this or that amulet, to this or that point of departure, to this or that way of untangling the world—truisms bleed into platitudes bleed into benign neglect bleed into self-serving indifference and amass into a miasma of shared wisdom, internal to each and every isolated pocket of people, and because so much of that shared

wisdom is unobjectionable (even murderers and misogynists and pedophiles seldom welcome it when the harm they inflict on others is reproduced in themselves), the miasma itself is rendered wholesale unobjectionable, and what we are left with are those accommodating people in whom the allegiances were replicated correctly, and the murderers and misogynists and pedophiles in whom they were not.

To be replicated correctly is to be a candidate for everything else.

The integrated absorb what they need to absorb to live graceful and productive lives—it is, in the final analysis, perhaps humanity's least intrusive way of holding isolated people with quarantined ambitions and quarantined fates together. But to be replicated incorrectly is to be exposed—not necessarily cast into, not yet, but exposed—to the most routine and lacerating of humiliations that can befall a human being, that fundamentally social animal, in the course of ordinary life: Alienation. Alienation is the means by which we, man, purport to repair the errors in our replication, and its routine application—from the scorn banally delivered about a colleague in passing to imprisonment and exile—is understood not only to be a matter of conventional necessity, but a delight to our sense of justice.

A delight?

Yes, a delight. What renders the retributive instinct so uniquely insidious is that is that an intrusion of self-awareness need not spoil all the fun. “Good awaits the good,” justice is widely understood to counsel, “and evil shall await evil,” and if humanity has been less than fully thorough in seeing through the first half of the equation, it has been rapacious about seeing through the second. The miseries men dole out to men are no longer doled out capriciously, erratically, not in this day and age, not in the developed world, not in America—they are always earned, a feather in the cap of our moral compass. In the least “equivocal” of circumstances, if one's transgression is lurid enough (if one is a mass shooter, for instance, or if one is a pedophile, or if one has committed some lesser offense but

looks and talks funny enough) the transgressor is flattened into a funhouse mirror parody of human life, a boogeyman, a moral monster—and to speak of the monster's essential likeness to the rest of us is to perpetrate some further indignity, some further assault against the monster's casualties, or else humanity's good name itself.

To be replicated incorrectly is to be at the indefinite mercy of the goodwill of the integrated.

In late-stage alienation even the general upward swing of human history has a tendency to disconsole. You begin to perceive each barrier rescinded, each glass ceiling shattered as less an intrusion into the palace than an encroachment upon some final exhaustion of the palace's good humor, the many rabid efforts of the integrated on behalf of the outsiders ("to put an arm around the poor, the lonely, the downtrodden—and invite them in") the prologue to some final depletion of possibility. Your eyes stay on the people out there. Who we keep out there will continue to be anomalous, passed over, unspoken for, "out there": for them we have devised the miasma and for them we have devised the taboos and for them we have devised our little punishments for upsetting those taboos. And yet in those taboos the discarded shivers of truth glisten—I think I'm finally touching the other side, my god.

In taboo the free-thinker swims, in those fetid waters the artist is nourished, the writer is revitalized, the music is forever discordant. To chart a path through taboo is to probe for truth in a basin of error. The danger is on all sides: at each edge of some sublime discovery lies the putrid carrion of moral and intellectual decay, the ordure of human folly, falsehood after falsehood after falsehood. The air is rancid, yes, but ah, *such sweet rancid air!* Such sweet respite to be banished by that miasma, to melt apart from those red-hot clusters of people, their solidified instincts, to forge a home away from common wisdom, those communal misgivings and communal affirmation, the modish convictions, fashionably virtuous or else fashionably transgressive, the integration, the consolation. In his exile from miasma the alienated divines his final

purpose, to sift through error for truth, to restore to its rightful place what the integrated have left behind, the alienated, that intrepid trekker, fumbling toward that final solace: the perfection of common wisdom.

The aim of all literature should be the perfection of common wisdom.

I think I've finally touched the other side, my god.

I no longer think of August, that still and languorous summer afternoon. I'm no longer homesick for the love I had had or the love I have lost. I live on a fire escape now, ten stories tall. It isn't quite the home I had imagined for myself, and I suppose I could tell you that the isolation terrifies me, the howl I had heard as the melancholy shattered, I suppose I could tell you that the lights of this country undo me, America, that atomized empire, so rife with error and so replete with avulsions, so awash in the sonorous peal of life stacked upon life, the cacophony of music liberated from every rupture, the place in this country that never opened up for me—but in fact it doesn't.

In fact it was the most beautiful thing I ever saw.

On Moral Judgment

Reserving judgment is a matter of infinite hope.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald,
The Great Gatsby

1

FROM CHARACTER EVERYTHING else springs.

It's an observation I've always taken to be quite self-evident—a tautology, really, if not quite a truism—if we take “character” to mean that moral constant inside all of us, that collation of experiences and memories and encounters with the world that the sum of our life-inputs add up to, the sum of our life-outputs being nothing more than one reaction after another, X followed by Y followed by Z—and if we take “everything else” to mean the sum of those reactions, the things we do, the choices we make, the desires we seek to realize. We pass through this world conscious of having a “character,” conscious of if not its every burrowed detail (after all, what is external validation for?) and if not its consistency (after all, what is “I contain multitudes” for?) then at least its constancy, then at least its solidity, then at least some permanence of memory that allows us to believe that who we are today is the same as who we were the day we were born, is the same as who we will be the day we die.

Tautologies, all of it—which is why I suppose neither the ship of Theseus nor that old yarn about us replacing every seven or ten years all the cells in our body ever held much interest for me. Our identities do not reside in our cells, just as

the ship's identity does not reside in its floorboards—an identity is an *interpretation*, an *overlay*, a *fiction of the human mind* assigned to disparate objects held together by a single through-line, the through-line being the physical proximity of floorboards that when bound together will form a recognizable “object” that floats on water, the through-line being the constancy of one's appearance or confrontation with the world that when remembered together will form a recognizable “person” who we can relate to as our sister, our mother, our husband, our colleague, ourselves.

I used to marvel when I was a child at how muddled it would all get if our memories were at any point erased and replaced in total by the memories of someone else—I used to think, “I'd be so confused, I'd be some other person convinced that he or she was in the wrong body,” until I thought about it some more and realized that I would no longer exist, that I would have ceased to exist the moment my memories were erased, that my interpretation of “I” had nothing at all to do with this shell of a body. I was nothing more than an illusion of memory, the most intuitive and workable interpretation of that weight of year upon year of lived experience, collated into a chain and from which only the first few years are truly missing, interrupted only by sleep. The coda to all this being that for the most part our cerebral cortex neurons are never replaced—our memories, though corruptible, become only in extraordinary instances so degraded as to cause us to question our sense of self, our identity—though the childlike part of me still wants to believe that if we passed through each other's bodies and memories every time we fell asleep, we'd never know it—intact from birth to death.

But what does this all have to do with character?

If an identity is an overlay, then character—along with our physical attributes, I suppose, along with the shape of our faces, the color of our eyes, the size of our bodies, the timbre of our voices—is one-half of what we think of as the substance of our identities, the non-physical half, the half that animates our physical shells into life. Character is the thing inside us

that causes us to dance, to sing, to laugh or to cry, and to choose *when* we dance and sing or laugh or cry, and to—well, not so much “choose,” exactly, but to “experience,” rather, or to “live,” perhaps (the semantics here are only the beginning of the difficulty)—what thoughts and wants and impulses course through us when we dance and sing, or laugh, or cry.

“From character everything else springs.”

But from where does character spring?

I come to this question from an interest in moral judgment. Short of aesthetic judgments (which I tend to think of, at any rate, as the larger category to which all moral judgments belong), moral judgments are the dominant means by which human beings evaluate one another, size each other up, decide who deserves what and—more interestingly—when to and when not to intrude into each other’s lives, intrude into each other’s freedoms, intrude into each other’s reputations, intrude into each other’s experiences of being alive. Moral judgments are pervasive in our society precisely because they are a means of social control, and the desire to influence what large or small aperture of society our freedom of expression (or more precisely, our tools of intrusion) has access to—a circle of friends, a workplace, an internet audience, a country—is general.

I know I might sound a bit down and out about all this but I’m actually rather neutral, or even fairly toward the pro side, on the issue of social control. Big Brother is social control, yes, fine, but so is the Responsible Parent. But so is the friend or spouse sincerely interested in the friend or spouse’s well-being. But so is any government short of anarchy. Social control is a given of our social experience, a premise, a starting point, and the point at which skepticism might most usefully be applied is not at the level of whether or not it should exist as a feature of human life at all—but when, and where, and why.

Moral judgment is the intuitive means by which we have tried to stammer out an answer to this question, and the law is our attempt to formalize it, codify it. And yet moral judgments—regardless of how they tend to be weaponized,

regardless of even the incentives they create—are not in and of themselves tools of social control. Moral judgments are just that—statements, observations, interpretations—they are every bit the overlay we place onto the world (a world that is neutral, a world of things that exist whether or not anyone is there to see them) that identities are: they are *fictions of the human mind*, and they are, like identities, every bit as disruptive, every bit as integral to our social organization as our ability to point out a thing and give that thing a name.

But where do moral judgments come from?

Many answers have been given, and I have combed through a great deal of them but I have yet to find one quite so compelling as the answer that points to a certain softness in the chest when we observe an act of moral goodness, and a certain sickness in the stomach when we observe an act of moral evil. I am talking now of course about the affects, about pleasure and displeasure, about what triggers our reverence and our esteem and our rage and our bile—I am talking now of course about the emotional self and all the fickle and elusive ways in which the emotional self intersects with the rational self, that notorious struggle between the mind and the heart, notoriously dubious, yet notoriously inevitable.

2

Three scenes from the American tableau, three recent instigators of moral bile:

There are the five boys between the ages of fourteen and sixteen who filmed themselves laughing and taunting a disabled man, Jamel Dunn, as he struggled to stay afloat in a pond near Byrd Plaza Mobile Home Park in Cocoa, Florida, on July 9, 2017. “Ain’t nobody finnin’ to help you you dumb bitch,” one of the boys says in the video. “Should’ve never gone in there!” Once the man’s head dips below water: “He just died!”—laughter—“Holy shit!”—more laughter. Dunn was

reported missing by his fiancée three days later, and two days after that, Dunn’s “severely decomposed body was found floating at the pond’s edge,” per the *Orlando Sentinel*.

There is the 911 dispatcher in Albuquerque, New Mexico, whose three-minute-long interaction with a friend of Jaydon Chavez-Silver—a seventeen-year-old boy who on the night of June 26, 2015, while “sitting on a kitchen countertop watching his friends play cards,” per the *Albuquerque Journal*, was struck by a stray bullet that had entered the window from a passing vehicle—ended like this:

Dispatcher: Okay, is he not breathing?

Caller: *Barely!* Take one more breath. One more breath. There you go Jaydon—one more breath. There you go Jaydon. Good job! Just stay with me, okay? Okay? There you go, good job Jaydon!

Dispatcher: Is he breathing?

Caller: He’s *barely breathing*, how many times do I have to fucking tell you?

Dispatcher: Okay, you know what ma’am? You can deal with it yourself, I’m not going to deal with this, okay?

Caller: No, my friend is *dying*, I n—

Chavez-Silver was pronounced dead later that night at a local hospital.

And then there are the videos—video after video, a new video every day—of police officers whose interactions with a public they are used to encountering only in the public’s most vulnerable and unguarded moments have produced in at least some officers some tendency toward impatience, some tendency toward excitability. “*Hey! You’re not in charge! Shut the fuck up and get out of the car!*” James Legg, a police officer, is recorded screaming with his finger pointed at Rose Campbell on May 4, 2018, five minutes after Campbell, a sixty-five-year-old diabetic grandmother driving through an affluent suburb

of Atlanta, declined to sign the traffic citation issued to her by Legg for an “improper lane change.” It took two officers to drag Campbell—who could be heard saying in the dashcam video: “Let him off, let him get his hands off. I’ll come out for you. I won’t come out for him”—by her arms out of the car. The traffic charge against Campbell, a Lyft driver who had a passenger in her vehicle at the time of her arrest, was later dropped in exchange for Campbell’s guilty plea to the charge of disorderly conduct, a misdemeanor.

What all three incidents have in common—and what, the more I think about it, almost all instigators in me of moral anger have in common—is some imbalance of advantage, although by advantage I do not mean political advantage or economic advantage or even social advantage, necessarily—I mean something stranger than that, something less precise, something less fully quantifiable.

I suppose the closest term I can think of to what I am trying to describe here is “existential advantage.”

What I think about when I think about the morality of any given social interaction is whom among the parties I would less like to “trade places with,” whose position I would less prefer to “find myself in,” and when I think about moral goodness I think about people who go out of their way to account for this difference in existential advantage—or in the case of, say, the teacher who sacrifices her life to save a student during a shooting massacre, the person who alters the immediate circumstances of some temporary advantage to pass that advantage along to somebody else—and when I think about moral evil, I think about people who are oblivious to their existential advantage over another human being. Who wouldn’t, barring some nausea with their moral makeup, rather be the arresting officer than the diabetic driver in the third exchange, the 911 dispatcher rather than the dying teenager in the second exchange, the laughing boys rather than the drowning man in the first exchange?

But existential advantage is always temporary, is always conditional, is always specific to a set of circumstances that

onlookers and observers inevitably collapse into the “*For fuck’s sake, can you believe she just did that?*” and what journalists and broadcasters immortalize into their accounts of the who, the what, the when, the where, the why. Its precise quality is necessarily subjective, and almost always unknowable: we the onlookers rarely have all the information we need to make some final assessment of who truly had it the worst, who truly had it better, and to what degree the party who had it better truly took some shameless and audacious advantage of the difference. And yet moral judgments are not only pervasive in our society but general, rampant, out of control. Some idea that people get what they deserve permeates not only the most obvious features of American life (the criminal justice system, Twitter) but less obvious features of American life as well: the American economy, the American meritocracy, American wealth, American despair, American celebrity, American catastrophe, the ever-unfolding outcomes and ever-shifting phantasmagoria of American social and political life.

3

From character everything else springs.

But from where does character spring?

Moral judgment invariably elides this question, invariably commits itself to some naïve vision of character impressed on us by our childhood folklores—stories of fallen wizards and schoolyard bullies alike—and reinforced to us in adulthood by our impression of brokenness everywhere, brokenness on the local news, brokenness in low-income communities, brokenness in the White House, brokenness in the people we encounter every day who we’d rather not encounter, or who really have in fact done all they can to make our experience of being alive more tedious, more difficult, more confined, more intolerable.

There are gradations of evil here—the unreasonable demands of the power-hungry woman in human resources

somehow less Hitlerian than the driver who slams his car into a streetful of protesters, although Hitler's name tends to be invoked in both, connotations and associations being an intuitive way the nuances of any particular act of evil can be analogized, condensed, encapsulated and made impermeable to further inquiry (racism, fascism, radical Islamic terrorism, sexual deviances of all stripes)—but the starting point is always the same: that some people are good (Gandhi, King) and some people are evil (Hitler, Pol Pot) and an awful lot of us are somewhere in between, express in varying situations varying degrees of good and evil but certainly not to the extent that some meaningful average couldn't be tabulated, some meaningful point of final convergence, some meaningful assessment of human goodness.

I disagree with very little of this.

I certainly agree that some meaningful assessment of human goodness could be, with enough information, tabulated across any given human life. What is elided in this discussion, however, is not so much the difficulty of making such an assessment—the absurd amount of information required to meaningfully evaluate anything other than a cartoon caricature of human life—but what it is we are in fact evaluating. The naïve assumption underlying any final assessment of human goodness is something along the lines of: “Look, we all have free will, don't we? We all make choices, we all make decisions. Do you think I've always had it so easy? And yet, look what I did with my free will.

“And now look what you did with yours.”

4

It was the intellectual advancements of the Scientific Age—advancements in physics, advancements in neuroscience, advancements in philosophy—that helped coalesce a great number of thinkers and writers in the past two centuries around the problem of determinism: the postulate that all

physical events, including human psychological states, our beliefs and our preferences, arise causally out of *prior states*, such that even the events of the human brain are finally determined by prior conditions, or “causes”—inputs external to a naïve conception of the human will as free, in control, at the helm of the ship, self-determined.

But not only because the experience of self-determination is so visceral and intuitive—there are other things I’d rather be doing, alas, than write this essay (I’d rather have a smoke downstairs, I’d rather meet Patrick out for drinks), and yet I’ve compelled myself to see this essay through, and see it through correctly—but because self-determination underlies so much of our centuries-old understanding of human nature: our appraisals of human goodness and human evil, to be sure, but also our interactions with other people, our ability to meaningfully change the minds of other people, or to see our efforts to change the minds of other people repelled by the force of *their* self-determination, and our ability to meaningfully change ourselves, which we do with varying levels of success, and varying levels of frequency—self-determination retains a vicelike grip over the human imagination.

To read a great deal of the philosophers who have written about the implications of determinism on free will is to praise anew the human species that finally stopped believing that the sun revolved around the earth—is to remember, in other words, how difficult it is to detach ourselves from interpretations of the world that are both visceral and intuitive. There is the attempt, in 1946, by A. J. Ayer in “Freedom and Necessity” to acknowledge that it is now “commonly assumed ... that human behavior is entirely governed by causal laws,” but to go on to deny that these causes necessitate their outcomes, to point out instead that “all that is needed for one event to be the cause of another is that, in the given circumstances, the [effect] would not have occurred if it had not been for the [cause].”

Causes, in this view, are merely sufficient and not necessary: the statement “A caused B” describes only the

circumstances that gave rise to B, leaving plenty of room for A to have given rise to C, to D, or to E instead. Why A does not in fact give rise to C, to D, or to E Ayer elects not to specify, articulating instead only his commitment to the belief that he is not, as it were, “a prisoner of fate.”

Roderick M. Chisholm, in 1964, adds a little more meat to this analysis, rejecting outright the applicability of determinism to human affairs and advancing instead, in “Human Freedom and the Self,” the curious proposition that human actions have *no* prior causes. “There is no such logical connection between wanting and doing, nor need there even be a causal connection,” writes Chisholm, demonstrating that flair for absurdity characteristic of thinkers who have attached themselves to a conclusion prior to arriving at one. “No set of statements about a man’s desires, beliefs, and stimulus situation at any time implies any statement telling us what the man will try, set out, or undertake to do at that time.” The human agent, that impossibly free thing, may at any point choose to “rise above his desires and do something else instead,” to “resist” temptations, to “resist” his desires—and this, regrettably, is as far as his analysis will go.

A review of the literature that begins with the end of human freedom in sight continues to disconsole, but at least Harry Frankfurt, in 1971, is able to articulate a defense for our intuitive understanding of human freedom that does not in the next breath jettison our intuitive understanding of human action as well. Human action, Frankfurt writes in “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” is preceded by deliberation—we, like some animals, “make decisions based on prior thought” but we, unlike any other animal, have a unique capacity for reflective self-evaluation that manifests in what Frankfurt calls “second-order desires” and “second-order volitions.” Simply put: a second-order desire is the desire to have a desire (“I’d like to at least want to quit smoking”) and a second-order volition is the desire to have that desire in fact be consummated (“I’d like to want to in fact quit smoking”)—a stickler of a point, perhaps, but since second-order desires can

nullify each other into oblivion (“I’d sort of like to want to quit smoking, but I sort of like being addicted, too”), while second-order volitions cannot, it is second-order volitions that are finally of interest here.

A person’s will is “free,” Frankfurt writes, when a second-order volition aligns with a first-order desire. Alice has made a “willing” decision to smoke when her immediate desire to smoke aligns with her internal evaluation that smoking is in fact a desirable thing to do. When second-order volitions and first-order desires contradict, the person is “unwilling”—addicts who genuinely want to quit, for instance, are unwilling. In this analysis, human freedom is predicated on a capacity for self-reflection and self-evaluation, the capacity to “want what [one] wants to want.” And yet to wonder if second-order volitions aren’t merely first-order desires with the unremarkable feature of having as their subject matter other desires, and to wonder further if the question of *where all these desires arose from in the first place* hasn’t been skirted entirely, is to finally miss the point. The starting point of Frankfurt’s analysis, like the starting point of Ayer’s and Chisholm’s, is that at the bottom of our desires lies what Nietzsche called in 1887 a “neutral and indifferent substratum,” a soil that hasn’t been molded by external causes to want what it wants—but somehow molds itself, but somehow molds itself every bit as freely as it was once thought by many that God molded us.

What each of these thinkers, sans Nietzsche, wants to do is preserve some grounds for indulging in the regard we feel when we encounter in the world some paragon of human goodness, or the bile we feel when we encounter in the world some paragon of human evil—: some grounds for believing that the people we hold in high esteem or else condemn as wretched were not mere *prisoners of their own fate*—: some grounds for being able to look either the Good Samaritan or else the school shooter in the eye and see something greater than a sunny day or else a hurricane, something more worthy of our moral (and by “moral” I mean explicitly emotional) praise or approbation than an inevitability, than the product

of some human psychology specific to a set of genes and the passage of those genes through an environment, something higher—more “godly,” perhaps, or else more satanic—than an *eventuality of nature*. In fact the fatalism of Calvinism is the only conception of Heaven and Hell that’s ever made any sense to me on its own terms—the predestination of the human soul acknowledged as such. It always struck me as odd that God would go through all that trouble of crafting billions and billions of dice and tossing them into the air, and tossing them through an experience of being alive, only to marvel with curiosity at why more of the dice didn’t make an effort to “readjust themselves in mid-air,” and avoid landing in Hell.

That some people *do* in fact make an effort to readjust themselves in mid-air to avoid landing in Hell, and others do not, I want to be very adamant here, has nothing at all to do with the capacity we’d all like to see in human beings to “transcend our constitutions” and “commandeer our own fates,” and has everything to do with that initial toss of the dice—that initial fling of God’s wrist, if you will—*fully revealing itself*. The lives we live, the impulses we have and the left swerve we take in that enigmatic moment when we could have sworn our impulse was to go straight, did not author itself out of nothing—and to the extent that we authored it ourselves, we authored it only because *we ourselves were authored*. Put very simply: we ourselves are nothing more than the culmination of a constitution authored by nature, and the passage of that constitution through an environment—the passage of that constitution through what is commonly condensed into the word “nurture,” the passage of that constitution through the world as we know it.

That particular constitution passing through that particular set of inputs in that particular instant would have always swerved to the left, even as his self-reflective consciousness could have “sworn his impulse was to go straight,” and what seems to onlookers to be a self-determined output is always a culmination, the product of a lifetime’s accrument of an unfathomable number of tiny and

unremarkable interactions, an inevitability of nature that would have always—in any given moment a choice is made, a desire is realized—

revealed itself.

5

From character everything else springs.

But from where does character spring?

The answer, alas: *from everything else.*

6

But if the worry here is that in being very adamant about all this, the next thing you suspect I will try and do is jettison moral responsibility as well: the fear is unfounded. What I'd only like to try and do is deepen our understanding of moral judgment, to see its emotional origins for what they are and then to remember that even objects with emotional origins—in fact especially objects with emotional origins—can have laudable functions as well. What I'd like to try and do is detach the laudable functions of moral judgment from the distortionary effects of its emotional origins: the capacity of emotions to enlarge a reasonable instinct into an excessive one, the tendency of emotions to produce what only in retrospect is understood to be an unreasonable outcome.

What I plead for—from myself more than anyone else (I think of all the times I've gone mad with a thirst for justice, feral with a hunger to settle the score)—is temperance.

What I am talking about now is a certain emotion, the same emotion that surges in my chest as well, and that most recently surged in my chest a week ago when I encountered on my phone the following headline: "A Black Yale Student Was Napping, and a White Student Called the Police." What I am talking about now is a feature of modern life whose lure I am

very much susceptible to as well: internet shaming, online outrage, the democratization of justice, the flattening of public reputations that now increasingly exist only on the internet into funhouse mirror parodies of human life, and applied similarly across all levels of moral transgression. What I am talking about now is the pervasive concentration of moral judgment across all walks of American life into its most harmful, irrational, and self-indulgent distillate:

—“*moral bile.*”

7

“I have every right to call the police, you cannot sleep in that room,” Sarah Braasch, a white Ph.D. student at Yale University, can be heard saying, in a video livestreamed to Facebook at 1:40 a.m. on May 8, 2018, and in a tone typically reserved by adults for small children, to the woman Braasch has discovered sleeping in a dormitory common room, a discovery so mundane during the early morning hours of finals weeks at universities across the country so as to render the intended meaning of her sentence bewildering, even inexplicable. In fact Braasch’s statement only acquires its decipherability when one remembers that: (1) Yale is a predominantly white university surrounded by neighborhoods that are predominantly non-white; (2) the *Yale Daily News* had run, less than two weeks earlier, a front-page story about two Yale students robbed at gunpoint inside their dormitory; and (3) the classmate to whom Braasch had addressed her statement is Black.

The evidence, taken together, points to what appears to have been corroborated by a story that emerged the next day that Braasch had also called the police on another Black student she had encountered in her dormitory three months earlier: that Braasch had, from an impression of her classmate’s race, arrived at the suspicion that her classmate was not in fact a classmate at all, that she was in fact one of the hundreds of

anonymous faces Yale students drift past every day in New Haven who “do not belong inside the building,” who “cannot sleep in that room,” and whose mere presence inside the common area of a Yale dormitory confers on a Yale student “every right to call the police.”

This angered me.

It angered me because profiling on the basis of appearance is a perversion of inductive reasoning, a perversion that burdens unrevealed individuals with undue precognitions—a moral ill—and because this burden is disproportionately shouldered by people who already pass through life marginalized, discarded, abandoned and cast aside in other ways, related and unrelated—an exacerbation of that first ill.

But it occurred to me also that in the past half-decade, I’ve come to find the viral attention routinely reserved for individual expressions of racism and other moral evils in this country to be tremendously misguided—an attention that appears to serve a large number of salutary functions with regard to the self-assessments of both the white and non-white purveyors of this attention, but that otherwise offers only the barest and most pro forma critique of the sociopathic instincts that American culture at large has imprinted, to varying degrees, on all of us.

And yet to point out this larger tendency toward sociopathy in our country—a tendency so pervasive so as to be not so much unremarkable as it is imperceptible, perpetuated in small doses as a matter of routine by the journalism we consume and the entertainment we imbibe, by highly regarded cultural figures with mass followings and enviable reputations, and finally by ordinary people of all races and political stripes—was to somehow miss the point: the point was that *this* girl hadn’t gotten the memo that it was all just a gag, a farce to be unlearned in college and deconstructed in grad school—*this* girl hadn’t cleansed herself of the sociopathic sediment left behind by the dirty water of the country she lived in, nor inherited from her circle of progressive friends a lifelong commitment by way of Facebook posts to anti-racism—*this*

girl hadn't learned how to unlearn America correctly, and how to publicize that unlearning on the internet.

8

Or perhaps she had.

"Racial distinctions? Not real. National boundaries? Not real. Religious affiliations? Not real."

This is a line from one of nearly two dozen guest posts authored by Braasch for the blog *Daylight Atheism* from 2009 to 2011. In these posts, Braasch repeatedly condemns anti-progressivism and religious fundamentalism ("History repeats itself. Again and again and again. How quickly one forgets the Civil Rights Era"; "I don't want to have to care about my uneducated and ill-informed next door neighbor's personal, subjective moral opinion about my life choices"; "Religion breeds racism") in between her recollections of a fleeting encounter with a woman wearing a niqab at the University of California at Berkeley ("a brazen act of gender segregation and slavery in the egalitarian public space") and her own memories of being raised by a family of conservative Jehovah's Witnesses ("If it isn't ok to adopt an African American or Native American baby and raise it to believe that it is sub-human on account of its race, why is it ok to take a girl baby and raise her to believe that she is sub-human on account of her gender?") and, above all, while decrying tribalism ("We are a single, global human family. A single, global human race. We are one tribe. One global community. We are one").

The woman who emerges in these posts is a woman who prefaces each of her post-February 2010 entries with the sentence "In loving memory of my baby brother, Jacob Michael Braasch (01/28/86–02/02/10)"; a woman whose memories of being a child are of being under constant "threat of demonic attack" and of a mother who "stood by and did nothing as her cult terrorized and tortured her children," are of coming across pictures of Michael Jackson as a child and crying almost to the

point of fainting, believing that “demons were going to appear at any moment” and of asking herself when she was ten if her mother was “trying to drive my abusive father to killing us all,” are of crying through her entire high school graduation (“I just couldn’t believe that I had made it, that I was free”); a woman whose entry on February 23, 2010, about her youngest brother Jacob’s childhood hospitalization (“I tried to communicate with him telepathically. I tried to tell him not to fight quite so hard to live. I tried to tell him not to be in such a hurry to get out of this place. I tried to tell him that the world is cruel and loveless and might not be worth the trouble. In my mind, I said to him, ‘I would trade places with you, if I could, you poor, stupid baby. You poor, stupid baby.’”) is prefaced by the sentence: “I was working on this piece when I received news that my beloved youngest brother, Jacob, had taken his own life by hanging himself in my parents’ basement.”

What I am trying to get at here is the inanity of extraction.

What I am trying to get at here is that nothing about human behavior—not the mild nor the saintly nor the satanic and subhuman—can be extracted from its causes: not Braasch’s, not her mother’s, not her father’s, not the saint’s nor the school shooter’s. What I am trying to get at here is that a lifetime’s sum of tiny and unremarkable interactions—interactions between a human mind and the human world—culminated in a woman whose unlearning of her society’s racist imprints, the evidence suggests, did not hold as fully as we would have liked; culminated in a woman who could both write, in October 2013, “Each and every human being belongs to our tribe,” and then encounter a human being, five years later, and not see a fellow member of her tribe but an individual whose mere presence as a Black woman in a dormitory common room suggested that she didn’t belong.

Braasch saw her classmate this way “willingly.”

Braasch called the police that night “willingly.”

Braasch, the evidence suggests, had in her forty-three years of being alive failed to cleanse herself of at least some of her society’s racist imprints “willingly,”

—and yet.

9

What frustrates me about so much of the mid-twentieth-century literature on free will is the degree to which human agents are devoid of human histories, their posited behaviors (“A shoots B”) suggesting a neutral canvas upon which a guise of free agency might be assumed. And yet to trade places with Braasch at any given point in her life—at the point at which she called the police on her classmate or at some hypothesized point years earlier when Braasch might have chosen to oblige herself to “be less harmful,” but didn’t—is to pass through her life *precisely as Braasch herself has actually lived it*.

The fact of this culmination—the fact of this accumulation of memories and experiences and confrontations with the world culminating in choices and decisions at every given point in a human life—is intuitive enough in the easy cases, explains why human beings are so generally predictable (the Queen of England does not pass through airport security in part because we know, even if we cannot explain “*how*” we know, that the Queen of England is not going to detonate a suicide vest on the runway), but true in the more difficult cases as well, difficult only because it is thoroughly unhelpful to see the white attorney’s racist outburst at a Midtown supermarket as a culmination, a logical outcome, a product of the life and land he was born into.

Nietzsche, as per usual, analogizes it beautifully:

For just as common people separate the lightning from its flash and take the latter as a doing, as an effect of a subject called lightning, so popular morality also separates strength from the expressions of strength as if there were behind the strong an indifferent substratum that is free to express strength—or not to. But there is no such substratum; there is no “being”

behind the doing, effecting, becoming; “the doer” is simply fabricated into the doing—the doing is everything. Common people basically double the doing when they have the lightning flash; this is a doing-doing: the same happening is posited first as cause and then once again as its effect.

The bifurcation of the “doer” into a “being who does” is an overlay, an interpretation, a fiction of the human mind—human choices, in other words, are no more extractable from the lives and minds that produced them than *light is extractable from lightning*. To put it differently: we might do well to see the world as made up of moral victors and moral losers, and to suggest that moral losers, in their moment of ethical and spiritual self-annihilation, could have “chosen to do differently” is to suggest that lightning, in the moment that it flashes, could have “chosen not to flash.”

But the neutral and indifferent agent who selects from a template of “do A” or “not do A,” and then chooses to “not do A,” is an illusion of self-awareness, exists only in the human mind—and here we have arrived at the most difficult truth. It is the great achievement of human imagination—it is the great achievement of humanity’s boundless capacity for self-reflection and self-evaluation—that allows us to *compare* what we “did do” against alternative courses of action: alternative courses of action that do not, in the strictest sense, actually exist, that exist only in the human mind as *ideas* of what we “could have done,” “could have said,” “could have decided,” “could have wanted,” “could have willed into being.”

All we have, of course, is what we did do, did say, did decide, did want, did will into being—all we have, of course, is what in fact did happen.

All life is culmination.

All observed behavior is revelation, and all human life is culmination—every human being is the passage of a genetic constitution through an environment that unfolds with a specificity we would never have even thought to question had

it not been for our imagination, had it not been for our self-awareness, had it not been for our hypothesis that because we were *tempted* by “not doing A” and even *wanted* to “not do A,” and at any rate had thought very long and hard about “not doing A,” before doing A, that “not doing A” was still somehow always in the cards for us—never entertaining, and for no other reason than because the implications are too dispiriting, that it never was.

10

Free will is an illusion of self-awareness.

This is the hill I'd like to die on.

When we talk about free will we are talking about the revelation of character.

It is a point that becomes all too obvious when we remember the innocence of the human newborn, and all of the memories that the newborn will go on to be imprinted by as he or she passes into moral maturity.

At what point in the newborn's life does he or she transform into a self-determined being?

All other people have are their pasts, tinged in the immediate present by the radiant light of their accrued capacity for self-reflection. And all I myself have is my own past, tinged in the immediate present by the radiant light of my own capacity for rational deliberation.

What we lose in learning to demand less from others we more than make up for in demanding more from ourselves.

This is in fact the hill I'd like to die on.

All we have is the present, all we have is the force of our self-awareness, and the force of moral goodness that all of our self-awareness, self-reflection, and rational deliberation can bring to bear. If it is indeed the case that we are molded then let us examine the thumbprints that have molded us—and then let us imprint our own, amalgams of the favorite hands we've come across. Choose your role models wisely—and *look*

for them everywhere, lingering on the ones that the society around us might have been too quick to discard. And try to forgive. Oh, but this is the hardest mountain to climb—all my life I've demanded justice, all my life I've wanted nothing more than to settle the score. After all to love humanity for humanity's sake has one grand downside: we are doomed to love something remorseless and unsalvageable.

And yet this is the hill I choose to die on.

Moral judgment, in the final analysis, is a tool we have for allowing us to love each other more thoughtfully, for counteracting the adverse effects of loving humanity for humanity's sake—a love that is, in the final analysis, either bound to disappoint or else bound to fail. Moral judgment, after all, has a very particular social function: it reduces harm. It creates incentives and disincentives that the great majority of human beings are responsive to, and these incentives and disincentives, historically, have pointed us in a number of directions—it has pointed us in harmful directions, it has pointed us to see women as less than human, it has pointed us to taunt and laugh at and compound the misery of social outcasts, it has pointed us to repress diversity in all manners of human expression, sexual expression in particular—but it has also pointed us in the direction of reducing harm.

And it is this single property of moral judgment that I would like to retain.

What I would like very much not to retain, and why I consider a thoughtful and delicate examination of free will to be so vital to our social and political organization, are the countless other functions of moral judgment that have proliferated like black mold around its single virtuous property: the tendency of moral judgment to fortify existing social structures. The tendency of moral judgment to redirect our attention away from damaged societies and onto damaged individuals. The tendency of moral judgment to compound and multiply preexisting damages, preexisting miseries. The tendency of moral judgment to reinforce charitable interpretations of the self and uncharitable interpretations of

others. The tendency of moral judgment to inhibit self-inquiry and self-examination. To remember that each of us command our souls only to the extent that our personal histories allow is to inevitably be more generous in our appraisals of other people—is to, as the Australian philosopher J. J. C. Smart wrote in 1961, “praise and blame [others] in a dispassionate and clear-headed way,” with only the end of extracting less harmful outcomes from future deliberations in sight—and, most urgently of all, is to temper the cascading effects of a social malignancy in this country that today has mushroomed all around us into America’s most celebrated cancer: not of hate, but of love’s truest opposite.

An indifference to the fates of other people.

The sickness of intelligence in a sickened world is that all we can see are other people’s sicknesses. I hold in my head now an image of the 911 dispatcher, the laughing boys, the arresting officer—I hold in my head now an image of all the people in the world who I imagine to bloom resplendent and incurious with existential privileges, all the people who I imagine to be among the finest and most powerful in the world, and who will do what they can to maintain their own power, and look out for their own—and I don’t know if I can do it, *I don’t know if I can do it*—try only to remember the sleeping infant.

Loving what is difficult to love does justice to the name of love.

Smoking at Night in Rio

“After dinner we’ll go to the movies,” the man decided. Because after the movies it would be night at last, and this day would shatter with the waves on the crags of Arpoador.

—Clarice Lispector,
“Family Ties”

1

DEATH HELD FRAGRANT all around us in this city.

Even in the upper middle class enclaves of the city, or perhaps I should say in the upper middle class enclaves of this city especially, or perhaps even—death in its prevailing interpretation, anyway, here in the circles I’ve traveled in in Rio, death as a wink and a smile, death as an odor in the air, death as the final breach of some unspoken settlement between the classes not to intercede in each other’s lives: death, finally, as autosuggestion—in the upper middle class enclaves of this city exclusively. To hear the stories that circulate like wafts of smoke around the circles I’ve traveled in here in Rio—Ivy-educated gringos and Brazilian hipsters, born between the years 1984 and 1995 (Burning Man being a not atypical reference point), and at home in a certain kind of café that turns into a certain kind of nightclub after sundown, the Blue Öyster Cult playing over Bose speakers in the corner of the room, cinder block walls lined with Marajoara urns and Judith Butler—is to observe in real time the curious intransigence with which the demands of upper middle class affluence contort themselves around the hallucinations of upper middle class paranoia, the Ubers taken from door to door, the “beach

party” that overlooks Copacabana Beach from behind a ten-foot-high wall, the armored sedan.

“I always tell my friends, if you have 80,000 reais to spend on a BMW, there’s no reason not to take half that money to make it bulletproof,” was a sentence I had heard on my second day in Brazil (I had come to Brazil on a summer exchange program organized by my law school), from a soft-spoken woman in her early thirties who had been assigned to talk to us about her work as a federal court judge here in Rio, but who had in fact spent much of the morning recounting to us the disintegration of her particular sense of hope and high purpose: that of the brilliant law student whose seat on the federal judiciary was won by placing first out of more than ten thousand applicants on a national civil service entrance exam, and whose transition into a life of social and material high privilege was tempered by a succession of immoderate encroachments: the encroachment of a failing economy (Brazil’s GDP had contracted by more than three percent in 2016, inflation had skyrocketed to 10.6 percent the year before, and unemployment had by 2017 reached a record high of 13.7 percent); the encroachment of a far-right populist presidential candidate, Jair Bolsonaro, whose primary resemblance to Donald Trump came by way of grotesque parody (“*I wouldn’t rape you because you’re not worthy of it,*” Bolsonaro once shouted from the floor of the national legislature to Brazil’s former Minister of Human Rights, moments after she had stepped off the podium) and who as of this writing has topped Brazil’s general election polls for more than a year; and the encroachment, above all, of *crime*—violent crime, lightning abductions and armed street robberies as a matter of routine—assault rifles pointed from motorbikes at unassuming professionals driving home from work on sun-drenched streets, tree-lined boulevards.

“*Upper middle class people everywhere are all the same,*” were the only notes I had made from our meeting that morning, the only sentence that seemed to capture the totality with which it all seemed to replicate familiar conditions: the right-wing

candidate, the looming peril, the failing economy that had failed to so much as scrape the underside of the ethereal class, the encroachment of bad behavior on the part of other people everywhere, less upstanding people, less well-educated people, less in charge of their lives people, more to venture and less to gain people. It was a sense of encroachment that had in fact dominated my early impressions of the city—a sense that some confrontation between two mutually unintelligible classes, each in the throes of two mutually unintelligible visions of the world's disorder, had culminated in some dramatically metastasized error of understanding. There was the psyche of the woman sitting here in front of me, a psyche that felt in many ways comparable if not identical to my own, a psyche that had seen the best and most sedate of what the world had to offer and had gone on to frame a perpetuation of those circumstances not as a matter of mere chance or happenstance, but of “personal safety”; that understood pleasure to have not merely a neurological function, but a social signaling one as well; that held in high esteem the bouquets of order and stability and predictability not as merely “objects to aspire to,” but as *baseline expectations from the experience of being alive*.

That the rich demand more from life, and are more prone to hysteria and hyperbole when they do not get it, seemed scarcely to me to be a revelatory point. And yet: one has the sense of some “slippage,” some “magnification,” to hear the stories that circulate like wafts of smoke here in the circles I've traveled in in Rio—stories of smartphones that could no longer be consulted after a certain hour of night, Montblanc rings that could no longer be worn and languages that could no longer be spoken—is to entertain some treasonous notion that what it means to be of a higher class is to have, on top of everything else, *dramatically metastasized expectations from the experience of being alive*, all the ordinary dangers of human life removed—physical danger especially, but physical danger that slips imperceptibly into and out of dangers to the psyche, dangers to the ego, dangers to some hallucinated sense of self (forever rising; forever ascendant), and above all the danger of

sameness, the danger of replicating in one's own conditions the conditions taken for granted by those of a lower class, those who got drunk in bars that had not yet been gentrified and got shot on streets that had not yet been written about in Fodor's; those who, as I was told in no uncertain terms on more than one occasion here in Rio, "have nothing and therefore nothing to *lose*"; those who encounter disorder and instability and unpredictability not as presages of the apocalypse, but as the givens of ordinary life. "I don't even feel safe in an armored car," the woman had said that morning without a trace of hyperbole—by then our conversation had wound its way through a vivid topography of colleagues being stopped at gunpoint two blocks away from their homes in fancy communities; eleven-year-olds holding AK-47s—"because it doesn't protect you against every kind of bullet."

2

I am standing alone outside one of those bars that seems to have sparked alive in the hollow of somebody else's melancholy, somebody else's desolation—one of those bars that seem to in the first twenty years of the twenty-first century sprout up with metronomic regularity inside the depressed communities of thriving cities all over the world, from a little bit of seed money and a flair for the *à la mode*, vinyl records next to chalkboard menus—watching three stories of people spill out onto the curb holding imperial stouts and sour beers and the dreams of who they'll be when they turn thirty; smoking at night in Rio.

My thoughts turn exclusively to encroachment.

"Dramatically metastasized expectations from the experience of being alive." This phrase lingers, the encroachment of those expectations against the world as it has been pervasively understood outside those gentrified circles that codify obscure misgivings into existential perils, and colonize bars in depressed neighborhoods, a world of

randomized windfalls and randomized miseries, a world unresponsive to the sense—so pervasive among the set of people who live and eat and drink “well,” and have thought for a very long time about how it all should “work”—that order is identical to reason and reason is identical to certainty. A world that does not rise up in the middle of chaos or disorder or one of fate’s grand sabotages and ask to speak to the manager. To travel for any extended period of time through any less than fully “gentrified” region of the world is to have a perpetual sense of this subversion, this betrayal of mutual understandings (“*I don’t even feel safe in an armored car*”), this encroachment—I remember from my time living as a foreigner in Shanghai how the nights would always resolve themselves, nights spent drinking in expat bars, raiding the liquor aisles of convenience stores in expat neighborhoods and substituting old faces for new ones among the ever-shifting montage of faces that appeared and disappeared (moved back to Canada or else South Africa or else New Zealand) within expat circles, the failsafe seed of commiseration among Westerners who otherwise had nothing to say to each other being the absence of Western indulgences, the absence of a Western way of doing things, the absence of a Western sense of order.

The mark of every enlightened man since time immemorial being not the generosity of his insights, but the comforts he’s grown adjusted to.

A certain chauvinism intrudes.

The encroachment of enlightened values into unenlightened ways of doing things, the intrusion of unrefined instincts into a world assembled around the expectations of the upper class—would it be a touch too mad to see the brushfires that result, nativism and populism and yes, *crime*—even crime, lawless nihilism—as the flame of some localized irrationality, ignited into its own mirror image? Irrationality that encroaches upon irrationality, madness that encroaches upon madness—has a more apt summary of the human condition ever been uttered? What docile fruit did the enlightened class

expect to be borne out of the seeds of its own dilating colonization?

Ah, but I too am mad now, I am.

To travel outside America as an American for any extended period of time is to touch again and again upon this shiver of mad self-recognition—the upper middle class whose artifacts of self-expression, the clothes they wear, the apps they use, the movies they watch and the voices they pay attention to, mirror our very own, the English that is spoken everywhere, the encroachment of the world's most visible and powerful culture into a world that, city after city, capital after capital, has been tamed into its refined submission. The image I'll always have from my time in Shanghai is of an encroachment that does not push back: the still pink dawn into which those gaudy and debaucherous nights inevitably settled, stumbling home from a stranger's apartment at five in the morning through silent, tree-lined streets littered with paper waste and crumpled cans and the shards of discarded glass bottles, the only sign of life being the rustling of a Chinese street-sweeper's broom against the debris from the night before, street-sweepers in clean blue uniforms whose faces were always russet and whose eyes were always tired and whose gazes never looked up.

What to do with this image I never knew, nor did I ever understand what to do about that insurgent impulse inside me to wonder why the dilation of the aristocracy into the arrangements of the underclass—the powerless who sensed all too clearly that the matches were rigged and the outcomes were set and that power accrues inexorably to the powerful—did not lead to *more* violence, *more* nihilism, *more* base instincts, *more* mutually assured races to the bottom, why the world that burned underneath the grace and sophistication of the imperial class—the favela tourists in Maui Jim aviators, the “self-made pauper stratum of first world young people bumming through the third world in search of cheap dope and the unspoiled in general” (Norman Rush, 1991); the Columbia-educated philosophy major who over gin and

Campari the other night had used the word “benighted” to describe the cities of the world that do not maintain municipal recycling programs—

why the “benighted” do not fight back,
why the revolution never comes.

And now: some flame has been lit inside me as well. Existential privilege, populism, that power accrues inexorably to the powerful, nihilism—they all have something to do with it, all have something to do with the image I cannot get out of my head of the waters crashing into the shore on the beaches of Rio, the vision of the world as I would like it to be (*compassionate, generous, just*) crashing into the world as we know it to be (with the aristocracy holding all the cards) and exciting some negative charge inside the soul—private passions running aground into public truths—and that charge is what I’d like to call anger. Justice, mad justice, vile justice: oh, it’s a lawless world that these instincts reduce themselves to, the poor eating the rich, the masses thrusting a steel beam into the gates of the castle—and as for me?

Well, I too was kissed by God in the womb, I remember with an offended speck in my eye as I light another cigarette outside the bar, remembering for the first time that not only the “benighted” but also the “enlightened” could not help but be imprisoned into who they are, into their passions, into their sorrows, into their instincts, into their fears. In front of the bar a boy in a University of Oxford sweatshirt is talking furiously and waving his cigarette in the air as his three friends toss their heads back in laughter, another group is shouting something in Portuguese to a man grinning at them from the balcony on the second floor, a boy in tight jeans passes a cigarette to a girl with tired eyes leaning against the hood of a Volvo, and, on the other side of the Volvo, a couple is having an argument, a woman in a red coat is telling the man trying to console her to fuck off, her rage drowned out by laughter.

Inside the pocket of every ambiguity self-interest flourishes.

We see what we want to see, we take from a thing in the world for which multiple interpretations exist the interpretation that most secretly flatters the instincts we already have, that most readily channels the passions and drives that flourish within us into a justification for those passions, into a vindication of those drives, and I—I who since my first day in Rio had already come to “see” so many disparate features of the world, the populist movements that have swept across Europe and America in the last decade or else the woman in the red coat shouting at the man in front of her and berating him in a language I don’t understand, as instances of the same thing—I, too, have seen what I wanted to see. Anger. The shattering of the sea into the shore. That fury. That flame. That distance in the mind between the world as we would like it to be and the world as it is, exciting some negative charge inside the soul—*the story of every revolution is a story of that distance*, the story of every political awakening, the story of every intemperate outburst, the story of every ill-worded email, of every thoughtfully written protest, of every plainspoken objection, of every prevarication, of every misdirection. Of every jealousy, too. Of every disappointment. Of every blow to the ego. Of every umbrage ever taken. I take another drag from my cigarette and watch the woman in the red coat pull away from the man and retreat into the bar. I try to follow the man, too, but he has already disappeared into the crowd.

The tiniest sliver of a stranger’s life, and I’ll remember it for days—the naked emotion in her eyes, her rage drowned out by laughter. Why hadn’t I wanted to look away?

Why had I wanted to look?

What had I seen in that fleeting moment if not some breach of modesty indistinguishable from a tear in the clothes we wear, if not some indignity not of the naked animal body but of the naked animal soul? For our souls, too, need clothes—our souls, too, are pockmarked by blemishes that we have the good sense to conceal (but aren’t some souls less blemished than others, just like some bodies are more graceful

and some faces more handsome? Yes. Yes, there's that too). Those blemishes: that must be what good men call "graceless" or else "vulgar" or else "unrefined" or else "evil"—and those pockmarks, that must be where, excited by some traumatic abrasion of the world as we would like it to be against the world as it is, the soul has hardened, and over the course of many years has become coarsened and inflamed—and anger, and as for anger. That must be where the soul has caught fire. Self-control is the name we give to the clothes our souls wear, and whether we wear them or not is not an action we perform once in the morning and forget about for the rest of the day but a triumph of constant vigilance. Those tiny encroachments—and they're always so tiny and indescribable to others, aren't they?—leave tiny scratches on our clothes throughout a day, throughout a lifetime, and whether some final incursion is enough to pierce the veils we hold up to obscure our blemishes from ourselves and each other is, at last, a moment of private reckoning.

The intrusion that excites a spark that ignites a fire, and the soul which in that impenetrable instant has become too tired to so much as hold on to its own clothes. The soul that has caught fire, burning through its skin—tiny fires that become a caustic statement said to a lover in passing, larger fires that in one moment might immolate a lifetime's sum of restless and watchful vigilance. It is in our nudest moments that these fires burn out of control, moments that for some of us only our families will ever see and for others of us may never happen at all and for still others of us—become public commodities, videos of public freakouts that are omnipresent across the internet, pornography that excites not the immoral thrill of human sexual pleasure but the moral thrill of another being's debasement.

And what a violation it is to imagine the people we admire the most in their nudest moments—sinful, envious, self-indulgent and solipsistic—their unrefined instincts bursting through their clothes as vulgar displays of raw emotion or else passing through the far more cunning guise of the rational

mind to become something truly odious and opaque to itself, something truly insidious. For I too remember the moments when I prodded my boyfriend gently during an argument, my voice calm, my face guileless, into becoming the worst version of himself—just to show him who the bigger person was. And I too remember the moments when my rational mind found joy in self-immolation, when I wanted to rain misery on the rich, when I wanted the world to burn, all because I didn't have enough gold to eat.

Anger.

A loss of the senses.

An inability to self-regulate.

I want to know where it comes from.

3

This has been a fever dream, this city, and I find myself alone at a febrile, sleepless hour of the night on my tenth night in Rio, a night on which the air is tense and the sky is opaque and the storm drains have spilled over after a long afternoon of unabating rain, wandering up a dim and drizzly clay-tiled incline that wraps around the side of a massive cliff face, an incline that across from the cliff face looks directly out onto the black waters of the Atlantic. The shapeless structures jutting out of the cliff face I know to be homes, although they are from where I am standing almost entirely obscured by dense foliage: I know they are homes because I have read about them, heard about them, been schooled in the irony of their presence surrounding and overlooking the Sheraton Grand Rio, the luxury hotel to which some Europeans I had met the other night while dancing in the streets of Lapa have tonight invited me: their presence on a high lush hill at the base of one of the tallest mountains in the city, their presence as the decrepit slum homes of a hillside favela that overlooks not only the Sheraton Grand Rio but also Leblon and Ipanema, two of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro, where villas and

secluded condominiums routinely go for over ten million dollars.

What has it meant to climb up this country?

What has it meant to see the encroachment of waters into the shore from two separate allegiances: (1) the black waters of low-status outsiders into countries that do not know what to do with them, or else into the imaginations of high-status insiders who do not know how to decipher them except as vehicles of symbolic freight (“the striving immigrant,” “the urban poor,” “the white working class”), high-status insiders who make up the near-totality of who we read about in the news or who we watch on T.V. and thus who, day in and day out, set the cultural agenda of this country; (2) the clear blue waters of high-status foreigners into anywhere we want to go in the world? “Anywhere we want to go in the world” is the dream of globalism, is the dream of capitalism and gentrification, is the dream of those clear blue waters that colonize bars in depressed neighborhoods and codify obscure misgivings into existential perils, those clear blue waters who have already in New York or Capitol Hill or Davos or Aspen sorted out “vulgar instincts” from “refined convictions,” “false” interpretations from “true” ones, who on their smartphones in cozy offices screenshot visa-free itineraries to Zimbabwe or Madagascar to send to their administrative assistants, and who cannot begin to fathom why there might not always be enough to go around for everyone.

Who cannot imagine the psychic weight that sets in as the darkened waters draw closer and closer to the lights of the city, only to see each time the lights dwindle, the city recede, the shore is empty, no one is home.

It was psychic weight that had created the conditions of my childhood, my family who had been lured as low-status outsiders into the most visible and powerful culture in the world, my father trapped perpetually on the underside of where he wanted to be, from the time he was a boy, trapped inside what was by all accounts a lurid and Dickensian childhood in the impoverished countryside of an impoverished

China, and all the way up until the last time I ever saw him, when I left my family to study philosophy at the University of Chicago more than a decade ago. Of course I recognize my father's voice in the voices of populist unrest, my father who was always so quick to find in difficult questions simple elucidations, my father who spent his days gambling away his debts and my mother's income on the New York Stock Exchange and his nights practicing his English by reading the news, by watching T.V., by imbibing the culture that had at last wanted nothing much to do with him, and that he would never be a part of. The culture he was a part of he had too much pride to identify with, and so my father never did become class-conscious—even as the late payment notices came in from the management office threatening to evict us from our \$300/mo. apartment we were still “upwardly mobile,” and whatever resentments my father harbored from that distance between the world as he would like it to be and the world as it is had been sublimated into resentments about that distance between the wife and child he wanted us to be—pliant, perfected, tamed into his refined submission—and the wife and child he had—unruly, forgetful, fragile the way humans are.

I cannot tell you who my father was in the moments that he terrorized us, screaming at my mother in the car because she hadn't brought enough money to pay for all the groceries and had humiliated herself at Fiesta Mart, or else chasing me from room to room when I was a child and rattling off a month's worth of transgressions to me so quickly that I could only hope from my crawl space underneath the bed that the walls would splinter, and the roof would finally cave in on us—but I can tell you who he was in his moments of sanguine lucidity. Plainspoken. High-minded. Self-certain to the point of irreproachability. The blame for that distance between the world as it is and the world as he would like it to be could be laid at our feet, and he would demonstrate it to us with evidence gleaned from the world around him that the world had yet to be cleaned of all defect: after all my mother *had* forgotten to deposit the correct amount of money into her

purse before leaving for the supermarket, after all I *had* neglected to put my toys away in the living room or hang my jacket up after coming home from school, and after all there is crime—violent crime—all around us in this city, there are kidnappings, there is warfare in the favelas that have decimated the lives of bystanders caught in the ambush of crossfire, there is the nihilism of eleven-year-olds with nothing to lose patrolling the streets holding AK-47s and the dreams of who they'll be when they turn thirty, no longer sterile, no longer impotent, no longer trapped, the world as it is at last a precise and immaculate replica of the world as they had longed for it to be.

I do not meet my European friends at the Sheraton Grand Rio.

Instead I stop to light a cigarette in front of the concrete balcony next to the porte-cochère of the hotel, a balcony that overlooks from six stories up the hotel's private beach where guests of the hotel during the day sit on white lounge chairs to read Nora Roberts and *The Wall Street Journal* and watch their children play in the surf, and where after sundown men from the surrounding favelas descend from the adjacent rockfaces to congregate in front of the shoreline. I watch as a handful of these men drag a large blue tarpaulin into the water while the others set up angling rods, and then I look out across the darkened waters at a smattering of lights in the distance, the lights of Ipanema, a luminous and unchanging imprint above the coastline at night.

I know now what anger is.

For many years anger has dominated my life, first as the traumatized child of a traumatized father and then as a traumatized adult, quick to draw uncharitable conclusions, quick to find defect in others, quick to want the world around me to collapse into my most perfect vision of what the world around me should be—my expectations metastasized, my resentments sublimated into their most reasonable and sympathetic articulations (look: “The matches are rigged and the outcomes are set and power accrues inexorably to the

powerful”) or else discharged against not their truest and most difficult sources—generational trauma, human fragility, the ego, the self—but their most vulnerable and permissible targets. The elite. The enlightened class. My father. I’ve done it in this very essay, haven’t I? Something about the way we look out into the world and extract interpretations. Something about what stands out to us in an image and what does not. Something not quite so delineable as confirmation bias or cognitive dissonance reduction or even motivated reasoning, although those might all be there too—but no. Something vast and grand and elemental to the way we extract truth from the world, something inherent to the point of view to which all images inevitably collapse—the meanings that we ascribe to anything but a fulcrumed function of our “point of view,” the meaning of our empirical observations, the meaning of our interpretations, the meaning of our purest intentions, the meaning of a single person’s life infinitely vast from the point of view of that person and yet infinitely remote from the point of view of the universe.

The meaning that obscures us from the abyss of nihilism.
Our allegiance is to our point of view.

This is the deeper irrationality, the irrationality secreted beneath its more visible and conspicuous children—those cognitive biases that can be isolated and classified and cordoned off like unruly children “into a separate room.” The irrationality that is neither unruly nor an aberration: the irrationality that is always there, ordinary, ever-present, intimate to how we pass through life—the irrationality of a partial and imprisoned point of view. A point of view colored by what we’ve gotten used to in this life: what we’ve come to expect, what we’ve come to admire, what we’ve come to remember, what we’ve come to take seriously, what we’ve come to take for granted. What we’ve come to forget. The irrationality of a rational mind that is complete to itself and incomplete only from the point of view of others—and from that mind comes the entirety of what we call understanding. And our many, many spheres of mutual understanding,

science, history, logic, mathematics, the loved one dying in front of us that we all can see because we all have eyes, the overlap between the aggregate of all rational minds—
and that is what we call truth.

Banalities, all of it, yes: and yet I cannot on this tense and feverish night in Rio, a night on which the air rots of sulfur and I have death on my mind and the sorrow of what I'm really trying very hard not to think about weighs more heavily than most—I cannot look away from the sense that all of the shared truths we *have* have somehow misled us, hypnotized us, lulled us into a false state of security—after all, which of man's triumphs has had no unintended consequences? Hypnotized by the advancements of the Scientific Age. Hypnotized by how many truths there are and how many truths we have access to. Hypnotized by the maelstrom of signals and numbers and facts and hard figures compiled by so many fine and reputable institutions to tell the story of our lives. Hypnotized by how many events that for centuries would have evaporated without a second trace and can now be photographed, audiotaped, videotaped, and shared en masse—which animal encountering such an embarrassment of riches would safeguard itself from the hubris of having the sea and wanting the sky and stars, too? Would not become proud, possessive and territorial over what its mind can do? Would not evolve to crave order everywhere, and evolve to equate order with reason, and reason with certainty?

The irrationality of forgetting that the blank space outside our field of vision that we sense as an absence is in fact infinite, ongoing, omnipresent and as vast as the space between stars.

High rationality is the name of the mind that sees through itself.

Oh, it's so many things that I would like to share with you, my love, and how I wish you were in this city with me—it's the name of the mind that sees past itself, impels its final settlements beyond that fulcrumed function of point of view,

beyond the cords of self-certainty that estrange us from each other and lurch us further and further back into ourselves—a mind that floats free and aloof from those cords until, at last, it can see our estrangement from the stars. Those cords of self-certainty that bond us to that vivid explosion of scents and perceptions and moods and colors that is at once the world in front of us and the world inside of us, and a mind that floats and floats—*ab!* A mind generous in its critiques of adversaries, and generous in its interpretation of adversarial critiques. A mind that remembers even in its surest moments—but especially when we are charged, and especially when we are sad, and especially when we are angry—that untruths and unsung truths live side by side in the blank space just outside our field of vision, just outside our bluest moods and our reddest emotions. A mind whose first instinct is to disprove itself, that lingers on all the ways we might have gotten it wrong—since after all, my love, what you’ve gotten right will still be true no matter how long you dote on its enemies, it’ll still be there and you’ll never lose it.

Oh, but it’s hardest to do when we’re sad, I know, I know.

I don’t want him to live anything but his maddest and most perfect life. I want him to be free. I want him to have access to all of the entryways and thoroughfares that I do and stretch out his ambitions across the world, oh I want him to have so many things but what can I do—this essay is useless. My hatred for the elite is useless. What the world *is* is what it has always been and there’s no use in ever dreaming it’ll be any different, and before I met him I had been fine closing my eyes to so much of the world, hadn’t I? I had been fine not needing for so many billions of people what I need for myself and what I now need for him—this First World life, a hospital right across the street from my house—and the only difference between him and so many others on this vague and indifferent planet who have brushed up against the immovability of fate is that I don’t know the names of any of the others, but I do love him. Do not love below your station in this world unless you can see that love through—is that the lesson here? But he

didn't know, and I didn't know, what our stations in this world were: we knew only that we were both foreigners in Shanghai, I an S.A.T. tutor to the children of upper middle class expats at the American School and he a twenty-five-year-old Russian who lived in a two-bedroom apartment with three other Russians and who taught English to kindergarteners, even though he himself had only studied English for three or four years.

"Gol-zon."

That's what he called me for the eighteen months we spent all our free nights together, eventually sharing a studio apartment in a much nicer part of the city dense with gelato bars and upscale boutiques and tree-lined streets and other expats. "You're the happiest little Russian I've ever met," I would always tell him, and he would redden in a way that only video could ever do any justice to: "Oh, Gol-zon." It took some time for the distance between our expectations from life to dawn on me—after all he too was ambitious, wanted to see as much of the world as I had ("We'll go to Brazil someday," he once promised me, since he had dated a Brazilian once and thus spoke a bit of Portuguese), and had even taken on a curious side project: he had been saving up all his money to move his two teenaged cousins from an impoverished city in Russia to Shanghai to teach them how to find work as English teachers, to teach them how he had made his way up in the world. I didn't know what to make of it when he told me that they'd be working as street whores otherwise—his sense of humor could get a bit dark—or when I found out he didn't know who Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton was (the election that year was all any of my friends could talk about), or when he told me that the reason he had such an optimistic and indefatigable worldview was because two years ago he had lost his job and run out of money and was on the brink of suicide when a friend made him watch a video of Oprah Winfrey interviewing Rhonda Byrne about her 2006 New Age self-help book *The Secret*, or when I finally googled where his family was from and saw that his hometown, near the border of

Kazakhstan, had the ashen and shelled-out appearance of a firebombed city, white concrete exteriors covered in graffiti, factories on the outskirts that looked like labor camps.

Mutually unintelligible visions of the world's disorder.

I remember the summer the rejection letters came back for the novel I was trying to sell, collapsing into his arms and crying blue murder and talking in bold letters about suicide as he tried to conceal a cough that had by that point lasted for weeks, if not months. "If you kill yourself I'll never speak to you again," he would always say in his gentle, tender way, our little inside joke. I remember the night his cough exploded into a fever, and he—dreamy, delirious—wanted only to talk about my writing, wanted only to talk about my "depression," and I remember the moment I finally put my hand against his forehead and in an instant snapped out of everything. When we got to the hospital we found out from the night nurse at the registration table who had thrust a thermometer into his mouth that his fever had reached 41.6 degrees Celsius. I remember the forty-eight hours we spent together inside the hospital, the C.T. scan, the I.V. room where dozens of patients sat on cots on the floor attached to I.V. tubes while their loved ones sat next to them. I remember sitting on the cot next to him and reading him Clarice Lispector's short story "The Smallest Woman in the World" and after that began to feel self-indulgent, showing him videos I had found on my phone of Michelle Obama and Oprah, whose inspirational speeches he could never get enough of. I remember not understanding why he was so at peace with the world, why this twenty-five-year-old who had the rest of his life ahead of him kept telling me again and again how happy he was that he had experienced true love at least once in his lifetime.

And of course I remember the night we got home, and the labyrinthine weeks that followed: the night he told me that the reason he had insisted on using condoms from the beginning of our relationship was because he had been living for the past two years with an untreated H.I.V. infection, and the weeks that followed of being shuttled from hospital to hospital and

finally to the Chinese Ministry of Health and finally to a single pharmacy in downtown Shanghai where he could buy a month's worth of medicine for six times the cost of his share of our monthly rent. I remember the day he paid for his medicine, and I remember the day he took out what was left of his savings to pay for his cousins to move to Shanghai, to pay for their deposit and first and last month's rent, the project he had committed himself to at the age of twenty-three because he had already come to peace with the fact that he was going to die.

A year passed this way, a year in which the expectations that had metastasized around my life—the upper middle class, Yale, a career in letters—had gone gray: I set aside my novel to take on more hours at work to help pay for his medicine, and not a day went by that I wasn't probing the tremors in the air for bad news, the student dropping out of his class that meant his teaching hours would be reduced, the cough after dinner that meant his pneumonia had come back, and he—he the most violent tremor of all—he who was always so unflustered about everything, the tremor which meant that for the rest of his life he would entrust his finances and health and soul's final fate to the irrational lessons he had learned on *Oprah*. "*The Secret isn't real*," I remember telling him one night in an effort to drive out what I saw at the time as a destructive, but which I realize now was in fact a useful and necessary worldview, recolonizing his mind with all of the "enlightened ways of looking at the world" that I had inherited from the University of Chicago and from Yale, reason, science, logic, more order, more certainty.

Not realizing until the months to come the degree to which only men who can distract themselves with enough worldly comforts to feed their hope and high purpose can afford to go without a religion.

On the worst nights—and we argued about everything, we argued about our sex life, we argued about his possessiveness and his jealousy, we argued about money ("*Are you fucking kidding me, asshole? Why the fuck would you lend your cousin*

700 RMB? Do you have enough money to pay for your medicine this month?"), we argued about how I always knew better about everything, the self-certainty I had inherited from my father and from my elite affiliations: I no longer remember the argument that led up to it but I'll never forget the day he charged at my head with a banana and smushed it into my face—on the worst nights the violence we inflicted on each other replicated the violence that had dominated my childhood, my father beating me with the back of a broomstick while I pounded on the walls, screaming for my neighbors to call the police. Looming in the background was the fact that September was drawing nearer—come September I would go back to Yale to finish my last year of law school—and I wasn't sure if I was ready for him to come with me, even if it meant bringing him to a country with liberal access to antiretroviral therapy.

Oh, if the waters are going to crash into the shore anyway, if the enlightened class is going to stretch out its culture and instincts and vision of the world's disorder across every last crevice of the unenlightened world then *why won't they stretch out their privileges and comforts, too?* An enlightened class that dreams of gentrifying the base instincts of the disinherited without gentrifying their sorrows, too—the former rising to the status of a moral emergency ("I don't even feel safe in an armored car") and the latter being a feature of the world that we just have to get used to—how can we possibly have it both ways? "Oh, but the former is so easy to do—we have all the tools we need to spread our culture and our values in the age of mass travel and mass media—while the latter pushes against the immovability of seven billion fates." Or else: "The former reduces the misery of everyone, whereas the latter reduces only the misery of the underclass."

Ah, so this is what reason looks like without its clothes: insular and tribal and base. For anger is not the opposite of high rationality—*insularity is*. Anger is merely insularity in its nudest and most violent form. Insularity is the world in front of us carved into its most impotent and disjointed pieces, and

base rationality is insularity that just happens to be true. Because this—and this is what I've been trying to tell you: something can be true and yet more deleterious to life than fiction, or else something can be true and yet in the absence of context move us closer and closer toward some greater and more insidious fiction—the blank space outside our field of vision serving only to make that vision more vibrant, more urgent, more vivid, more certain. The most insidious insularity of all is the insularity of the scientist, the insularity of the philosopher, the insularity of the enlightened man who *knows and knows*, his insularity cloaked in the fine fabric of truth and reason, in signals and numbers and facts and hard figures: the richness of a vision that can see all the way across to the other end of the sea, forgetting that even all of the sea is a drop in the bucket against the space between stars.

What has it meant to climb up this country?

It's meant: discovering that so many features of the world which are routine and mundane and taken for granted when encountered by other members of our species are in fact intolerable when encountered by ourselves.

It's meant: nurturing expectations from the world that do not translate readily across national—or else regional, or else cultural, or else personal—borders. It's meant: encountering the same defect of human life—racism or nativism or tribal self-interest, tribal privileges and tribal antagonisms, and above all *crime*—violent crime, lawless nihilism—as a “*call to arms*” when it happens to us and as an “*intractability of fate*” when it happens to somebody else, somebody more accustomed to the defects of being alive, somebody too obscure or else too distant or else too unsympathetic to be seen. That the defects we've set out to erase might not in fact be erasable features of human life is beside the point—the point is that these defects have incited *our* anger and so they must be accounted for, their culprits identified, their instincts admonished, their falsehoods refuted, and at the very least they must be *seen*—and better yet that the hues be monochrome, and better yet that the lessons be unequivocal, and better yet

that the disorder have clean edges, all that is nuanced and difficult about human life removed.

I realize now that the encroachment runs both ways.

That the instinct to perfect the world is no longer an instinct exclusive to the more perfect class.

They say this is a city where base instincts run mad.

I take another drag from my cigarette and look out onto the water, look out onto the men from the favelas night-fishing against the backdrop of drizzly Rio and her luminous Ipanema. Oh, I know not all of these men will have instincts that are all so perfectly refined and cleansed of all error, that some of them will smoke, and some of them will forget to recycle, and some of them might even go home tonight and beat their children. And I know that there are men in this city who would take my life in a heartbeat for a fraction of the money in my pocket, so long as they were certain that their crime would never be discovered—oh I know, I know. And who am I to say I forgive them, when I cannot even bring myself to forgive my father's father for inducing the traumas that induced my father? *"Show me your soul at its most impossible to understand and I'll show you all of the love I have."* This is what I had once wanted to believe about myself, but then he did show me, just like my father showed me and my crème de la crème classmates at Yale showed me, and each and every time I had a chance to prove my generosity I took my things and ran. "If you kill yourself I'll never speak to you again." But I didn't kill myself: instead September came and I moved on with my life, I went back to Yale, I went back to my dreams of writing a novel, I went back to the brave white banners of the American elite, and though I've tried many times to reach out to him he never did speak to me again.

Inside the pocket of every ambiguity self-interest flourishes.

What I write is not academic.

What I paint are fever dreams.

America opens its eyes and stretches her arms out across the world.

The bar I am sitting in is across the street from a Starbucks and the music over the sound system is Vince Staples and the mint julep I am drinking is named after Thomas Jefferson and a Detroit Pistons jersey is hanging on the wall outside the bathroom, signed by Isiah Thomas. “You want to know what I love about this country,” the young American next to me is saying to his friend as I try very hard to remember which one of them had grown up in Bethesda “*but gone to school at Stanford*” and which one of them had grown up in San Mateo “*but gone to school at Harvard*.”

“You can get very, very plastered here for about three dollars a night.”

I look at a T.V. screen on the other side of the bar, at a woman in a white blouse speaking into the camera and then at a video clip of Jair Bolsonaro being interviewed by a female reporter, and say nothing.

On my last night in Rio I go back to the beach, walk the entire length of Avenida Vieira Souto from the Sheraton Grand Rio to the other end of Ipanema, where I spend a long time smoking in front of a first aid station and gazing up at the lights above the horizon, the lights of the favela that overlook Leblon and Ipanema and that from far enough away no longer look like lights at all, but low-lying stars. Almost all of the friends I have made in this city—and I’ve made so many, gone out drinking and dancing with them, smoked in the windows of their apartments in Botafogo or Lagoa or Santa Teresa or else in one case, on the top-floor balcony of a high-rise in Ipanema (“paid for out of pocket,” my friend assured me, by his roommate, an Instagram model)—almost all of them rolled

their eyes whenever Bolsonaro's name came up, the more vocal and arousable among them going on to tell me all about what a sack of shit he was, what he'd said about this minority group or that one and all the places they'd move to if he wins the presidency in October, one of them would move to Colorado where she had bartended for a year after her marriage had dissolved, another would go to Germany, at least two more were bound for Portugal.

I had heard it all before, of course, the sense that the world could largely go on the way it's been going so far crashing into the screams of those who want the advancements to stop, the fires in their own backyards put out. That those fires—police brutality, mass incarceration, the combustion of fossil fuels, the excesses of capitalism; or else the deep state, the corruption of the liberal establishment, the absence of law and order in the cities, the installation of Spanish-language signs outside the hardware store on Main Street—are indecipherable as fires across the tribal borders that have opened up across our country suggests some deeper trauma, the trauma of a populace whose shared memories diverge so drastically from tribe to tribe that each attempt to put out the fires in our own fields of vision functions only to inflame new fires somewhere else: political correctness, identity politics, neoliberalism, neo-communism; or else nativism, authoritarianism, neoliberalism, neo-fascism. Of course I sympathize with some of these fires more than others, see certain of these fires as existential and certain others as tinfoil hat, and of course the fires I sympathize with the most—police brutality, mass incarceration, the incineration of fossil fuels, the excesses of capitalism—are precisely those fires that I stand to lose the least from if they are ever put out.

Inside the pocket of every ambiguity self-interest flourishes.

What I hear in the distance tonight is the hatred of ambiguity, the uncertainty of what to do in the face of what all rational minds can perceive as disorder—the disorder of corruption, the disorder of poverty, the disorder of crime—

exploding into a brave new hope in the form of an anti-communist strongman, or else into an even more tragic conflagration. Tribalism, in the final analysis, is on top of everything else—and this is a devastating conclusion, and yet the only conclusion I can bring myself to come to—a necessary surrender, a rational response to the immovability of sixty-two million votes or else seven billion fates, an instinctive mode of sheltering oneself from experiencing too many tragedies, *because to love too widely is to at last doom oneself.*

It's not just that there's beauty everywhere, which there is—it's that the world is largely populated by people who will save your life in a moment of crisis, even if you do not speak their language. Even if they do not know your name. The very man who would spit in my face tonight if he recognized me as a homosexual would love me for who I am if only a few remote features of the world had gone differently, if his father's visa to Canada had come through, if his mother hadn't as a child been forced to rely on Carmelite sisters for food—it is in our instincts to love, and to love in any sort of way that does not diminish love's name is to *choose your targets wisely.*

I try to remember this admonishment as I catch my gaze lingering on a family of four underneath the mounted lights of a luxury apartment building, sleeping on collapsed cardboard boxes. I do not know what will happen when the waters finally come into shore, when all of the self-certain voices and enlightened wisdom and brave new hopes are at last exhausted. What I do know is that death is not an existential mystery for everyone, but for some a place where we will all meet again in the afterlife, and for some a place that can offer no more sorrow or torment than what life has already amounted to, and for some—a sustained uncertainty, a direct function of how many “teaching hours” one will be assigned as a displaced worker in a benevolent host country on any given week.

What I do know is that if he ever stood on this hill with me it'd all come crashing back, this life that he'd never want to leave, smoking with me on this balcony and gazing out onto the lights of the city, the lights of the favela that from where I

am standing tonight look like nothing so much as low-lying stars, trying to convince me once again that *man is strong*, or else God is real. What I do know is that I need him here with me. He can marry an electrician if he'd like, get his associate's degree from a school in Germany, live separate lives from me, go home to separate dinners in separate houses with separate families, but what I do know is that I need him here with me—in the queer white light of the developed world.

And from our separate houses on top of the hill: we'll watch the waves come in together.

All of love is inside the goodbye.

2018

What Do Anti-Corporatists Want?

I stand here now without endorsements from any big-name politicians or celebrities.... My presence before you now symbolizes a new era in American political history.

—Shirley Chisholm, presidential announcement, 1972

I was tired of trying to be what you thought I am. There's a bad side—the stronger one and the one that dominated though I tried to hide it because of you—on that strong side I'm a cow, I'm a free horse that stamps at the ground, I'm a streetwalker, I'm a whore—and not a “woman of letters.” ... I fled you, Eduardo, because you were killing me with that genius head of yours.... And now I'm going to spend six months on the farm, you don't know where I'll be, and every day I'll bathe in the river mixing its mud with my own blessed clay.... You, at the core of your intellectualism, aren't worth the life of a dog. I'm abandoning you, then. And I'm abandoning that group of pseudo-intellectuals that used to demand from me a vain and nervous constant exercise of false and hasty intelligence. You ruined my intelligence with yours.

—Clarice Lispector,
“The Departure of the Train”

IN THE SECOND-TO-LAST year of Donald Trump's first term in office, eighty percent of Americans reported feeling unsatisfied with "the nation's campaign finance laws" (Gallup, January 2019), seventy-five percent reported feeling unsatisfied with "the nation's efforts to deal with poverty and homelessness" (Gallup, January 2019), sixty-nine percent reported feeling unsatisfied with "the availability of affordable healthcare" (Gallup, January 2019), sixty-four percent reported feeling unsatisfied with "the quality of public education in the nation" (Gallup, January 2019), eighty-five percent reported believing that "elected officials return favors for those who contribute greatly to their campaigns" (Ipsos, January 2019), and seven out of ten Americans reported feeling angry "because our political system seems to only be working for the insiders with money and power, like those on Wall Street or in Washington" (NBC/WSJ, August 2019).

In fact a broad public consensus about the influence of "insiders with money and power" in politics had by the late 2010s crystalized into something of a platitude, even a banality. In November 2018, eighty percent of American midterm voters reported favoring bipartisan legislation that would "reduce the influence of big money in politics and require full disclosure of all money being raised and spent to influence our elections" (Issue One, November 2018), a figure comparable to the percentage of Americans who told researchers in the late 2010s that they believed "allowances teach children the value of money" (Harris, April 2016), "nurses are honest and have high ethical standards" (Gallup, December 2018), "corporations don't pay their fair share of taxes" (ITEP, April 2019), and "summer passes by too quickly" (KRC Research, June 2019).

Of course, the emergence of a broad public consensus about the existence of a defect in our democracy has long been understood to have little to no bearing on the actual comportment of our democracy—which after all proceeds not

from the rule of the people, but from the rule of its hallucination. We are hallucinated first by the national media (who, in addition to feeding back to us everything we believe in the form of “polling data,” also provides the evidentiary basis for almost everything we believe in the first place, what we “know” and “need to know” in order to reliably formulate our “will” and translate our “will” into the election of our public officials), and then we are hallucinated by the officials themselves. What results is an interplay of misunderstandings and misapprehensions attenuated by so many levels of remove that in the same two-week span a March 2001 Gallup poll showed that Americans favored, by a margin of 76–19, “new federal laws limiting the amount of money that any individual or group can contribute to the national political parties,” Mitch McConnell, the then-third-term Republican senator from Kentucky, could assert on the Senate floor that campaign finance reform “ranks right up there with static cling as a matter of concern to the American people.”

What results, in other words, is the “*spooky action of the American democracy*”: popular will, churning as it does inside the roiling waters of America as it is actually lived, as it is actually experienced by the sea swell of Americans whose lives are rippled by scarcity and disorder and whose memories of that scarcity are of interest to a more comfortable class only insofar as their disorder can be stripped for narrative parts, moral clarity and symbolic freight—the medical debts that can’t be paid, the paranoias of children inside failing schools jostling to hoist themselves into a higher class (often without any awareness that the levers of the meritocracy-lottery exist and can be pulled), the paranoias of the underclass (“*It doesn’t matter who the president is—the FBI runs the show in this country, you didn’t know that Cole?*” I was recently advised by a homeless man as he dove for cans inside the recycling bins outside my apartment in New Haven)—condensing into the milk-white halls of the Hart Senate Office Building and the brightly lit studio floors at 1 CNN Center or 30 Rockefeller Plaza where sometimes it is captured, and sometimes it is

distilled, converted into sources of electoral capital in the form of white papers, in the form of policy briefings, in the form of editorial notes and production memos—but more often than not it simply evaporates.

A certain disconnect intrudes.

We might begin, here, with the polls.

It is a curious feature of our representative democracy, a democracy we are routinely advised by our political class is the “greatest in the world,” and in whose distinction the goal of “spreading democracy abroad” becomes a legible objective, that any direct consultation with the national electorate regarding any issue of national importance—“who we are at war with and why,” “who we raise money from and why,” “who we direct money to and why,” “who we look out for and why”—is unheard of, beyond the pale, a vestige of Athenian optimism, nonexistent: direct consultation with the American public takes place entirely at the level of “*who we empower to do the work of democracy for us*,” such that who we empower to do the work of democracy for us has now become synonymous with the democratic ideal itself. From this ideal the overt mission of the national media (“to edify the general public”) and the underlying mission of the national media (“to facilitate the generation of ad revenue”) finds its most lyrical synthesis: burdened no longer by the unenviable task of instilling in the American public a conversancy with the pros and cons of proposed federal legislation—but the pros and cons of a cast of characters.

In this light the modern proceedings of the American democracy could be said to owe its greatest debt not to Athens but to Hollywood.

The cast of characters, once assembled out of a studio lineup of supporting players and rising stars (your senators and governors and state A.G.s and, if their credentials are in order, your small-town mayors), benefits all who might be said to have a “share” in the system: (1) benefits the political parties who, much like Paramount and Warner Bros. did as they transitioned out of the Silent Age and into the Golden Era,

have figured out two things: that the appearance of high purpose plays just as well as high purpose itself, and well-pampered players do not “rock the boat”; (2) benefits the national media, whose readership and viewership rise and fall in lockstep with the electoral calendar; and (3) benefits, above all, the players themselves. “Public servants,” they are called, although this term can’t help but strike the modern American as curiously vestigial, a throwback to a time when the ascent from obscurity into national-level politics did not come with such a rich and engaging menu of second acts attached, to be collected and cashed out upon the completion of one’s ascent into national prominence (or else one’s “service”): six-figure speaking engagements, seven-figure consulting gigs, eight-figure book advances, nine-figure Netflix deals.

To understand the institution of American democracy is to understand that a well-functioning corporation is one that cares for, first and foremost, all of its shareholders.

Each arm props up another arm: the political media prop up the political actors and the political influence industry (that constellation of lobbyists and interest groups and political action committees whose very existence is normalized and assented to by the industry that reports on them), the political influence industry props up the political media and the political actors (the amount of money spent by players of the game to influence the 2018 midterm elections, according to the Center for Responsive Politics’s OpenSecrets, totaled \$5.7 billion—a 200 percent increase from 2008), and the political actors, ostensibly the means by which “public opinion” is faithfully and exactly translated by public servants into “public policy”—why, they prop up the trusses of the circus tent, the main event, the larger-than-life spectacle of warring personalities and minute-by-minute accounts of palace intrigue that is itself, and neither the public policies nor the electorate whose opinions are said to give rise to them,

American democracy’s star attraction.

“Politics as stagecraft.”

From this opening credo the sullen distance between the American democracy as a point of pride (or even national pastime, object of obsession) for the insider class—“Democracy dies in darkness,” *The Washington Post* affectingly rebranded itself three and a half months after Donald Trump’s election, and three and a half years after *The Washington Post* became the private property of Jeff Bezos, the richest man in the world, in an all-cash purchase—and the curious remoteness of its operations from the actual needs and concerns of the American people naturally distends. If “democracy” is the means by which public opinion is faithfully and exactly negotiated by public officials into public policy, “stagecraft” is the means by which a democracy can be hallucinated, assured to us not by any conditions on the ground as we can discern them but by rote repetition—whisked out of its very absence into hologram life.

In hologram life the appeal of an ideality lives on.

Platforms are erected. Lawn signs go up. Million-dollar candidates running million-dollar campaigns hit the familiar beats of “hope” and “change” before either vanishing into private events with high-dollar fundraisers, or else targeting their appeals directly to the working poor (“small dollar donors”). T-shirts are donned. Impressions of where we are as a country are bandied about. Conversations with strangers evolve into friendship or devolve into enmity over a shared hallucination that what we have to say about the issues “matters” and is of “consequence” to the general trajectory of the country, and on Election Day, I Voted stickers become potent indicators of one’s participation in civic life.

In hologram life a palpable stasis settles over the tangible conditions of a national electorate whose life expectancy, according to a 2019 analysis by the Kaiser Family Foundation, began to “diverge” from that of “comparable countries” in 1980 and had, by 2017, either stalled or declined for three straight years—our acute despairs transformed into perennial “talking points” by an insider class committed not to the identification and elimination of the people’s miseries, but to the

identification and elevation of the people's favorite sons and daughters. Each and every campaign becomes first and foremost a campaign of brand identity, an exercise in character distillation: "The politics are horrible for the Democratic Party, that's my judgment," said Heidi Heitkamp, a former Democratic senator from North Dakota, to *The New York Times* in November 2019, about the decision by certain Democratic candidates to make American healthcare a pillar issue of the 2020 election. "We're making the issue about our plan rather than what [Trump] has or has not done.")

Central to the logic of hologram life—but incidental to its actual operation—is the national electorate itself, who can be said to have a "role" but not a share in the system.

Our "role," of course, is to intuit ourselves as "participants," as "members of a self-governing class," as "stewards in the management of our country" (we are letter-writers, we are caucus-goers, we are first and foremost agreeable players of the game)—all the while functioning, for all intents and purposes, as an audience (the closest we come, the vast majority of us, to a brush with power is a place in the selfies line during a campaign stop), or else as members of a deferential class (the closest we come, a sizable minority of us, to a brush with power is arrest and imprisonment), or else as passengers on a runaway train—helplessly we watch as the skies outside slur past us like a taunt, as our sea levels rise and our summers grow hotter, as our life expectancies decay and our wages stay stagnant and our prison sentences for the poor and disenfranchised necrotize into ethereal revenge fantasies, as the bodies of the homeless are found stuck frozen to bus stops while elite white-collar pay ticks up into the millions, as a distinctly twenty-first century vision of segregation coagulates across the race and class borders where a bygone vision of integration once stood, and the ethos of America as a land of neither hope nor opportunity but of *capital*, of *permanently entrenched capital*—America that immaculate arrangement, every man for himself, all sans one and one sans all—distends into its logical conclusion.

“The deaths of our loved ones ... they don’t care because it’s not the family of a Washington bureaucrat,” said Jose Leal, the father of Joseph Maciel—an Army Corporal who was killed in Afghanistan just two months shy of his twenty-first birthday, and three months shy of the War in Afghanistan’s seventeenth anniversary—to *Newsweek* in December 2019, following the release of a report in *The Washington Post* that revealed “senior U.S. officials [under George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump had] failed to tell the truth about the War in Afghanistan throughout the eighteen-year campaign, making rosy pronouncements they knew to be false and hiding unmistakable evidence the war had become unwinnable.” “Billions of dollars of waste with our loved ones’ blood for the gaining of what?” Maciel’s father continued.

“Nobody knows.”

In hologram life a pervasive sense that something is wrong inside the back of the train settles over—and even becomes a dominant topic of discussion among—our country’s insider class, while appreciable progress toward relieving a vast array of structural disconsolations that afflict our country’s underclass remains curiously stagnant. The word “stagnancy,” in fact, broadly captures so many features of America in the past twenty years, from the paralysis of our legislative bodies to the dilation of the War in Afghanistan into the longest-running war in American history—and our wide-ranging perception of the many, many stagnancies that have putrefied across this country, the soaring medical debts, the failing public school system, the capture of our electoral politics by “insiders with money and power, like those on Wall Street or in Washington,” lends our continued participation in electoral politics, our status as a captive entity notwithstanding, its curiously strident tenor. “Elections have consequences,” we are again and again admonished. “If you don’t vote, you don’t have any right to complain,” we are again and again admonished. (That any individual ballot in almost any federal election has the functional weight of a lottery ticket becomes an embargoed suspicion so at once self-evident and yet so sacrilegious that

one can't help but detect in the feverish retorts quasi-religious undertones.)

We are, in short, being summoned for our most profitable purpose.

“Stardom is a matter over which only audiences have any real control,” wrote legendary movie producer and Paramount Pictures co-founder Adolph Zukor in his 1953 autobiography *The Public Is Never Wrong*. As audience *we* select the stars that we want to see, and *we* select the performances that we wish to elevate—our role is central to the continued endurance of a machine whose relentless production of a democracy of the people, by the people, and for the people has been shown to endure just fine with or without the people’s input, were it not for a vital ingredient that only the people can provide: the imprimatur of legitimacy. Our centrality, at last, is ceremonial. “Polling data,” in this light, have above all a serene and sobering function: they are—beneath the colorless wording, obscured inside the coded responses—among the richest and most vivid artifacts of evidence to routinely and reliably reach the insider class (who, after all, rely on polling data to assess their candidates and calibrate their performances) that there are people in the back of the train screaming out for help.

These are screams structurally inhibited from gaining an audience with the insider class—people in the back of the train typically do not advertise their GoFundMe campaigns to finance their insulin supplies as the regular hosts of podcasts en vogue with the educated elite, or recount their clashes with Section 8 administrators as the talking heads on MSNBC—and as far as political (or cultural, or social) influence goes, they rarely become the “stars” that the broader public aspires to elevate. These are the screams of people whose recollections of anxiety and deficit and tragedy are routinely met with incredulity by America’s media establishment, so estranged have the latter’s experiences become from the life experiences of America’s underclass, from the life experiences of Americans who lack political power because they lack economic power because they lack institutional power,

genealogical power—or else of Americans who simply do not speak the metaphors, intuit the reference points, understand the rules of the game: non-participants in the land that America's insider class has reconstituted.

Those whose lives are not on fire tend not to be preoccupied with fire.

This thought occurred to me as I watched a group of undecided voters talk about their reactions to the recent presidential debate, as part of a focus group led by Frank Luntz, a veteran political pollster and a prototypical Washington insider if there ever was one (“Frank Luntz does not want the buffet. We are on the top floor of the Capitol Hill Club, the members-only Republican hangout a block from the Capitol...” was how a 2014 profile of Luntz in *The Atlantic* began)—as I listened to an undecided voter whose words were the mirror image of the words I had heard uttered again and again by the homeless and hungry out here in downtown New Haven: “I’m forty-five years old, and I was born a few weeks after Nixon resigned so my whole life has been post-Watergate, and there has not been a day—week—month—year where *anybody*, at *any* level of government, has done *anything* that has had a positive effect on my life. So when Senator Klobuchar and a lot of them get up there and act as though they have accomplished a great deal for us—it kind of rings hollow. I mean, what has Senator Klobuchar, what has really any of them done that has had a... I—I have friends who are Trump supporters and Bernie supporters, all across the spectrum, and I ask them all: ‘What has actually happened that has made your life any better?’ And nobody can come up with anything. Trump supporters can’t come up with anything that’s gotten any better. Nothing.”

“Obamacare,” a few members of the well-dressed focus group point out.

“Let’s go to the other one—” Luntz tries to move on, but the man presses his point.

“I work three jobs and have no health insurance, and I have a heart problem. And I have a special needs sister and seventy-

year-old parents who aren't going to live forever. This isn't a game to me. You know—I buried a friend this week. I've buried so many people over the last few years. There's good odds that somebody in this room isn't going to live to the next election. I'm tired of the horserace—I'm tired of the 'who's up, who's down' while people die. This is supposed to be a great country. It's not. Not anymore." I was struck by the poetry of this encounter, by the poignancy of this man's intrusion into a house that was not built for him, this voter whose very presence in a focus group led by Frank Luntz—a veteran political pollster who in 2016, according to *The Hollywood Reporter*, completed a "seven-year, multimillion-dollar renovation" to convert one of the rooms in his six-bedroom, 14,000-square-foot home into an exact replica of the Lincoln Bedroom, and an adjoining room into an exact replica of the Oval Office—suggested some residual faith in the system, some fundamental optimism in the face of impotence that somebody out there, up there, might be meaningfully shifted by his words, might be moved to listen, might be moved to care, might *come alive to the fire*—and I was struck, above all, by the poetry of Luntz's response:

"And that, does—what—for who you support?"

2

I don't want government to have a single thing on its mind other than the reduction of human suffering.

3

"Personnel is policy."

We heard that a lot during the most recent primaries, heard it most explicitly as an object lesson in what to do about the metastasis of the administrative state ("Presidents don't control most day-to-day enforcement decisions," Elizabeth

Warren wrote in 2016, “but they do nominate the heads of all the agencies, and these choices make all the difference”), but also implicitly in the appointments of Steve Mnuchin (Goldman alum, Secretary of the Treasury), Gary Cohn (Goldman alum, Director of the National Economic Council), Wilbur Ross (banking billionaire, Secretary of Commerce), Anthony Scaramucci (Goldman alum, White House Communications Director), and Steve Bannon (Goldman alum, White House Chief Strategist) into principal roles in the Trump administration, and the curious juxtaposition of these appointments against the populist rhetoric of Trump’s presidential campaign (“I know the guys at Goldman Sachs. They have total, total control over [Ted Cruz]. Just like they have total control over Hillary Clinton”) and the stridently anti-populist policies that followed.

So, yes: personnel is policy. Personnel create policy.

But who created our personnel?

It occurred to me over the course of writing this essay that what I really want to talk about is the meritocracy, and the psychology of a certain type of person who prospers in the meritocracy, and the fundamental innocence of the human soul. I revert again and again to an image of the human newborn, sobbing and blood-soaked and oblivious to her fate, oblivious to her family or lack thereof, oblivious to the conditions to which she would soon be assigned (the delivery room a clean one, the lights L.E.D.): this, and not death—and not when every aspect of death, when we die and how we die, is mediated by in-game conditions—is the great equalizer, and what we all have in common.

What I believe most ardently is that we are all anti-corporatists at birth.

We didn’t know it, of course—we didn’t have the words to say it, but what we did have, every last one of us, was this: hearts that were pure, souls that were gentle, and spirits that were free.

Now I know I’m being a bit childish now, but that is the point, that is precisely the point: *I am reserving my right to be a*

child. What has been well-documented by now is the spread of the artifacts. What has been well-documented by now is the spread of the outcomes, are the objects of excavatory interest for the archaeologists who will one day survey the fall of this country, the fall of this civilization, in the ashes of climate change, in the ashes of monopoly, in the ashes of unbridled monopolization and unbridled corporatization—of monopolies that raise wage-slaves who praise as benefactors their monopoly-overseers, and corporations so idolized that public opposition to them disperses immediately into cognitive dissonance—of “corporate interest deductions” and “capital loss deductions” and “favorable tax treatments of pass-through entities,” of favorable tax regimes everywhere, of governmental provisions that err unerringly toward the generation of private revenue, and legislative priorities that err unerringly toward the degeneration of public government, of power that errs unerringly toward the side of those who already have it—what has been well-documented by now is the spread of these tumors throughout the body-politic of this country, are the immunoglobulins that have risen up and stormed the bloodstream only to find that they can’t make any indent in the pathophysiology at all, are the bulbous lymph nodes.

What has not been well-documented is the culture that gave rise to these artifacts.

What has not been well-documented are the in-game conditions that transform the infant child’s untroubled psyche into an adulthood psyche untouched by the troubles of others. I come from the perspective that what we incentivize and do not incentivize in this country *matters*, and what we emphasize and do not emphasize in this culture *matters*. The transformation of education from a tool for the refinement of one’s own skeptical faculties into a tool for self-elevation; the reflexive idolization of power in this country (powerful celebrities; powerful corporations and the thought-suppressing diversions they produce; powerful brands of high distinction that we can affix to our nametags and call our own); and, above all, the instinct for self-elevation bred by our culture

in the very victors who, by virtue of their climb to the top, should have nurtured in themselves *an instinct for self-suspicion all along*—as it turns out, it all mattered.

Every last push and pull mattered.

4

I was not always a swamp creature of the meritocracy.

Climbing up this country was the last thing I had in mind as a child—the dreams that now smatter my upward gaze when I close my eyes were not there. The demons I have inside me today of self-ascension and self-elevation, more, higher, harder, better, faster, stronger, were not there.

Instead I mostly kept my words to myself and my gaze on the world outside, lingering my deepest sense of kinship with the weak, the soft, the slow and the small: this was my mother's influence, first and foremost. Every adult who walks past a homeless man today without giving him a second glance was once a child rendered thunderstruck by the cruelty of God's humor: in my case, I was nine or ten years old and in my father's car, outraged to see my father not acknowledge a homeless man standing outside our door in the searing Houston sun and begging him to roll down the window. But he did not roll down the window—homelessness was a feature of the world that children simply didn't have the tools to understand, my father explained to me that afternoon. When I grew up I'd know better. And he was right: by high school I no longer made eye contact with the homeless men and women I drove past on my way to school or the mall.

I was a C student in high school, and the rarest adolescent subtype of all—an extrovert who had no friends. My own incipient version of self-elevation in those days could perhaps more charitably be called self-protection (and maybe this is how all instincts toward self-elevation begin—as self-preservation): after three years of trying and failing to make a single friend in middle school, I inured myself to my fate by

being something of an *enfant terrible* in high school, shouting out wrong answers on purpose in class, measuring my classroom performance by how many books I could get away with not reading and measuring my weekends by how many older men I could sleep with, steal away to Galveston or Montrose or a cabin in New Braunfels with.

Nothing about my life in those years strikes me now as even remotely sanity-bound, let alone college-bound. The rules of the game were all but imperceptible to me: the all-important S.A.T. score, the all-important high school transcript, the all-important after-school activities—I had not even at that point understood that a college professor was not merely a teacher who taught high school at the college level, and my own high school transcript was littered with Bs, Cs, and Ds, although I did get an A in driver's ed. My own plan after high school was to do just that: drive, and drift—drift out of my father's apartment, first and foremost, and from then on—drift from the arms of one job to another—drift from the cocoon of one lover to another. This is what a vision of adult life looks like from a post outside the meritocracy.

The closest I came to having an after-school activity worth manicuring into a line on the résumé was cross-country. My teammates kept their distance from me, so to speak, and my coach found me irritating, perhaps because I was truculent about preserving for myself the one extravagance that made all those long afternoon runs in the hot Houston sun worth it: music. Every afternoon I would trail behind my teammates and lose myself to what was back then considered yet another sign of my eccentricity: *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie* by Alanis Morissette, my favorite C.D. at the time, whose lyrics and worldview (“You will learn to lose everything / We are temporary arrangements”) were among the only artifacts I had access to in high school that kept me in touch with the feeling that I still had a soul. From time to time the image of my father would loom too large in my mind, the weightlessness of what awaited me on the horizon after high school would grow too pungent to bear and I would abandon the run altogether, steal

away onto a side street of Chimney Rock and nurse a cigarette while staring into the opaque brown waters of Brays Bayou.

To be a member of the meritocracy is to be, first and foremost, the marketing executive of your own small business—the marketing executive of your professional ambitions, the marketing executive of your institutional trajectory (from Penn State to Penn Med, from the County Board of Education to Congress), the marketing executive of where you've been and who you know and where the people who you know think you might be going. We're all little acronyms on a stock ticker that way, and I can still remember the day my stock for the first time in my life began to rally—my mother was in the kitchen making dinner, the telephone was ringing, and I was on the computer in the living room “checking the results of something.”

Within the next hour, my mother would be struck in the face by two pieces of information that would radically amend her expectations from the next ten years of her life: her beloved father had just been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and her C-student son had just gotten a 1600 on the S.A.T. My father, predictably, used this score as an opportunity to beat me, hounding me that night until I collapsed into tears about how much potential I had squandered by doing so poorly in school—but the next day at school, I took my first taste of a bull market out for a test drive, ramming headlong into a conversation I'd overheard among my teammates at cross-country who were all white and wealthy and who never said a word to me, and who had all gotten their S.A.T. scores back the night before. “No you did not,” I can still remember Coach Hervat saying when I told him the news. “I'll bet you twenty dollars that you're lying.” I never did get my twenty dollars, but what I did get that day after pulling up my College Board account on Coach Hervat's laptop—Coach Hervat who was also my physics teacher, one of the classes I had gotten a D in—would be my first whiff of a marketing victory in the hypercompetition that is America's “*If you've got it, flaunt it*” way of life: Coach Hervat smiled and shook his head, handed

me two t-shirts from the cabinet where he kept all our team's athletic gear, and told me he was proud of me.

If you've got it, flaunt it.

And I did—and I did.

Ever since then the rest of my life has been a succession of marketing victories—this essay, too, by virtue of the fact I've put my name on it, is first and foremost a marketing victory. "*If you've got it, flaunt it*" is the ethical anthem of America in late-stage meritocracy, and what disturbs me about this anecdote is how inoffensive it sounds, this offensive succession of events: the suggestion that one's aptitude in anything other than pro-social behavior can reasonably be transformed from an object of personal pride into an object of public elevation and emphasis ("Tell us more," all the colleges I applied to wanted to know, "about what a bright and shining star you are"), the cascading feedback loop created when one's preoccupation with one's own rise to the top is compounded by the elevation of those preoccupations away from the concerns of an underclass now further and further beneath him ("*I can almost see it,*" I used to think to myself in college all the time, "*I can almost see what life looks like up there at the top, and my god—it's more beautiful than I ever imagined...*"), and above all, the deranged relationship this anecdote suggests about our country's attachment to the concept of just deserts: that because I was already in possession of something shiny, it was reasonable for me to want *more* time in the sun, it was reasonable for me to want *more* light, *more* shine, brighter, higher, bigger, longer.

"Homelessness is a condition that the homeless bring upon themselves," my father would tell me again and again over the years. In this light my father beating me after I had gotten a perfect score on the S.A.T. strikes me in retrospect as the sanest part of this anecdote: my father's diseased conception of what should be celebrated and what should be punished in America targeted at last at somebody who—for the first time in his life—was no longer weaker than him.

Every public figure you look up to is an emotional stand-in for some less attractive person you've never heard of with the same personal qualities, minus the ability to see a spotlight shining onto the ground and running over to it. I'm not sure if this was always the case, but it has no choice but to be the case in America today, the America of blue checkmarks, the America of *Vox* and LinkedIn and content engagement metrics and "So—tell me about your *platform*,"

the America of late-stage meritocracy.

I include myself in this analysis.

What enabled me to publish this book was first and foremost my willingness to sand down the edges: my responsiveness to spotlights, my eagerness to participate in every last rite of self-elevation demanded of me by the gatekeepers of this industry who had the authority to elevate me ("*Establishing an outstanding critical reputation is far and away the most important first step in how I intend to...*" was how the first paragraph of my book proposal began)—better writers than me with more original viewpoints and more interesting things to say will never make it past the Great Filters if they also happen to have a purer heart than me.

And they do—so they don't. I've met them, and I understand why they either gave up, dropped out of the running, or never had an instinct to run at all.

It is the very people we claim we wish to elevate—in popular culture, the thoughtful and the sincere; in academia and journalism, meticulous observers who are fastidious and take risks but think outside the bounds of what is likely to secure tenure; and in politics, anyone preoccupied with anything other than their own self-elevation—that the Great Filters of the Meritocracy (Hollywood, Harvard, the Hill) are calibrated and fine-tuned to smother and subdue, suppress from contention. The victors who are left are incubated by waters incubated by nothing but their own victories—and then we are all left to wonder how it all got so stagnant.

My own soul was forged inside those rancid waters.

I remember all the things I had to do in college in order to gleam and glow into a résumé at full mast by the time I reached the finish line: the caution and groupthink I internalized before taking a single step in any direction (“I had nothing to say in this paper and I just won a departmental award,” I remember saying in disbelief to a much brighter friend who, by virtue of her brilliance, her penchant for wonder and reverence with no attention paid to what she could show for it, would never qualify for academia). The fear of looking foolish that prevented me from following through with every last curiosity that wasn’t state-sanctioned, every last instinct that wasn’t state-approved (the “state” in this case being omnipresent all around us in the form of other people’s assessments, both formal and informal), and the attendant suppression of my own self-doubt and self-suspicion (“What is impostor syndrome and how can you stop it?” was my favorite TED Talk in college). The rewards I reaped for staying on message, for internalizing the fashionable critiques and cultivating the fashionable interests and for not asking any disreputable questions (“*Regurgitate and get an A,*” Phi Beta Kappa really ought to update its mission statement to read, I remember thinking at the induction ceremony).

We speak in this country about “*the best person for the job*” as if this phrase denotes a sound foundational premise, as if the job were in each instance a static position with static objectives that demand a static set of attributes, all quantifiable, and as if the best person for it would in each instance be the person who intuits every feature of the world as either an asset or a distraction, to be plundered for extractable resources or else discarded—people who have known since the age of fifteen or sixteen or twenty-one how to “play the game to win” at school. If an education is the means by which an unruly and undisciplined mind can be tamed and refined by the tools of empirical observation, orderly exposition, and cogent analysis toward the cultivation of reflexive inquiry and reflexive skepticism, reflexive hunger—then a meritocracy is the means

by which educations can be systematically hallucinated throughout the body-politic of a country, nowhere to be found except as patches of knowledge held together by self-esteem (“The first thing I had to learn at Harvard was how to trust my own instincts,” was how the TED Talk began) and guided first and foremost by the principles of social advancement and self-elevation.

In late-stage meritocracy the imagery of education is fetishized unironically: the iron-wrought emblems of courage, strength, and national unity under fascism become, in late-stage meritocracy, the Helvetica-family poshlost of bloated author bios on the inner flaps of book covers, thought-provoking headlines on websites en vogue with the educated elite (“*Is Democracy Dying?*”), cable news chyrons that identify a speaker on screen for six seconds as a professor at Duke, and data-driven journalism. Ideologies are disseminated throughout the body-politic not by intellectual self-selection but by brute force: groupthink and in-group and out-group shaming (“Did you see that thing in *Vox* today...”)—a condition exacerbated in the twenty-first century by all the projects we’ve yet to finish at work and all the shows we’ve yet to wrap up on Netflix, the outsourcing of intellectual labor to esteemed third parties (for some, the M.I.T. economist—for others, QAnon) the understandable reaction of Americans too overwhelmed by the demands of school or work to think *too long and hard about anything*. Groupthink becomes at once a source of shame and *de rigueur*. Tweets are read. Tweets are shared. Ideas are internalized and ingested to be recited rather than understood. Systems are not questioned until it becomes fashionable to question them, at which point they are questioned hysterically to the point of self-parody.

When we talk about stagnancy we can talk about the artifacts, we can talk about careerism or the metastasis of box-checking across every level of government or the curious alignment of “*the art of the possible*” with a reflexive supplication to the contours drawn for us by those already in power—or we can go to the headwaters. The formalization by the

meritocracy of a high-contrast social hierarchy (high-status and low-status *jobs* that translate into high-status and low-status “social positions,” high-status and low-status “net worths,” high-status and low-status “neighborhoods,” high-status and low-status “pockets of America”) creates incentives and disincentives that move us away from an underclass we are all so furiously trying to escape, and toward the direction of an upper class we are all so furiously trying to impress—assimilating us into a society in which appearance reigns supreme and individual expression is at all times calibrated for winsomeness (“Hey, take a look at this cover letter will you?”), and estranging us from the original aims of education (something about curiosity was it? or self-suspicion maybe? self-refinement, perhaps?)—so irrelevant are those aims to the fundamental aim of *climbing up the hierarchy*.

That fundamental aim, as it turns out, casts quite a long shadow, and I can still see its sullen monochrome in the way my antenna quivers at the thought of this essay being well-received, at the thought of this book’s “positive reception”: we are addicted to positive receptions, us A students, you know—we are addicted to platitudes, we are addicted to adopting into our worldviews the worldviews of the fashionably enlightened, we are addicted to assimilating ourselves into the contours of what the parameters of power have allotted to its aspirants, we are addicted to self-elevation. We pay attention to power—what power demands, what power abhors, what power keeps its distance from, what power aspires to elevate. We follow the trends, and rise with the tides, and have a gut instinct for which way the winds blow and where they blow from and when and how they shift.

And most of all: *we let the wind be wind*.

When we talk about stagnancy we are talking about a landscape in which the winds of power, everywhere, at all points along this unnatural topography demented and deformed by high altitude and high contrast, forever blow. Self-elevation is the instinct to pay attention to power only insofar as we look forward to being carried by it, nourished by

it, lifted up by it and into places we'd more prefer to be—reputations and self-understandings we'd more prefer to boast, institutional affiliations and social positions we'd more prefer to have. What the meritocracy works tirelessly and unyieldingly to produce, then, is a uniform product in this country: the resource-minded soul. Every virtue of human life—our intellectual virtues, our moral virtues—we the resource-minded are taught from an early age to intuit as raw goods, to be extracted and refined and leveraged toward their truest and highest purpose: social and professional and reputational advancement.

Free-thinkers pose a hazard for the meritocracy by virtue of their propensity to veer off program.

Free spirits tend not to play the game at all.

What the aspirants who remain in the water all have in common, then, is neither the high intelligence nor the high moral purpose so reputed to distinguish us from our less ambitious peers—but ambition itself, an interest in high status, and all the psychic deformations that tend to accompany the introduction of highly ambitious people into highly competitive social milieus. Incentives, as it turns out, take a toll on the human psyche, and over the course of many years and decades come not only to shape a trial-balloon generation but all the generations that come after. “Let me be clear that this pressure comes from the media ... and from the self-imposed pressure created by compensation packages that provide enormous potential rewards for directors and managers if [their] stock prices go up,” Margaret Blair, an economist and legal scholar at Vanderbilt, told Congress in 2008, during testimony that called into question the widely repeated platitude that “corporations have a legal responsibility to maximize shareholder value.”

We are now several decades into an era of American history in which almost all of our public figures were selected not for their high intelligence nor for their high moral purpose, but for their facility at finding the spotlight—sieved through those same Great Filters, incubated by those same hopeful

waters. What personnel *is*, then, is not just policy: it is a topography, psychic in character, a cognitive landscape diverse in temperament and disposition and ideology but uniformly deformed by a single common denominator, a single fundamental impulse—nurtured over the course of decades—to *let power be power*, and to *let wind be wind*. In God we trust and in platitudes we hide: inside the preferred rhetoric of the powerful we conceal ourselves as the winds of power lift us higher and higher toward more reputable ground (“Of course social media reduces complicated objections into their most desiccated formulations,” I once posted to Twitter, “#LetsDoBetter #DemandMoreFromOurselves”).

Platitudes are the means by which we the meritocrats catch the wind, our pollen uplifted—“Look at him go!” was what college admissions officers once said about our college applications, and what our ideological compatriots will one day say about our ideological self-presentation: “Look at him, saying the right things, saying *all* the right things, look at him go...”—they are the means by which we can disclaim our interest in high status at the same time as we embody it (“Look, I’m just saying what I think is true,” I shrug with an aw-shucks smile, and meanwhile the world out there continues to burn). Listen to that howling wind—those Harvard lights—that good ol’ meritocratic zeal which deadens and deadens everything. How are the stagnancies of this country and the platitudes of our society mutually assured?

One answer might be this: there is no greater advertisement in the world than a flattering mirror.

Be suspicious of all that assures the ascendancy of the self.

And forgive me that I don’t have a better explanation.

Forgive me that I don’t have a better way of going about this. Forgive me that I don’t yet know—even as I write this essay—how to stop being a hypocrite, how to stop looking for spotlights, how to stop climbing upwards.

I’m still trying to climb out of something.

People whose lives are not on fire are structurally incentivized to not see fire.

When the history of the 2020 election is written—and it will be written, inevitably, by members of this country’s comfortable class, by journalists and media professionals and pollsters like Frank Luntz, by the urban and well-educated (and well-compensated, and well-situated)—the nascent conflict between corporatist and anti-corporatist Democrats during the Democratic primaries will be misremembered, its most ardent contours suppressed by people who, broadly speaking, are not incentivized to see the fires.

Complicating this observation, however, is the remarkable extent to which people who are comfortable and well-situated have in fact been incentivized to see at least “certain” fires, have in fact come to find themselves in environments and social circumstances in which moral power is foundational to reputational power—and thus a valued and cherished currency for the perpetuation of one’s own social power. From this sublime entanglement of self-interest and brotherly love the comfortable class has unconsciously evolved its own guardrails, preventing the train that it controls from skidding unambiguously into a preoccupation with self-elevation too obscene to be tenable—discretion and misdirection being, since feudal times, the name of the aristocrat’s game.

Egos are formed this way, out of ids that once roamed mad and wild and free out there in the open pasture.

The moral ego of the twenty-first-century American aristocrat tends unfailingly toward liberal-mindedness, toward progressivism, toward brotherly love. “I’ve said that we would not be getting married until everyone in this country had the right to get married,” actor Brad Pitt told comedienne Ellen

DeGeneres in 2011, referring to a commitment he and his then-girlfriend actress Angelina Jolie had made in solidarity with same-sex couples in America, whose relationships would not be legally recognized in all fifty states until 2015. (Pitt and Jolie later tied the knot at a château in France in 2014.)

This was a “fire,” of course—the inability for Americans of my sexual orientation to marry the girlfriends and boyfriends of our choosing—and I still remember the relief and gratitude I felt the day this fire was finally put out (“EQUAL DIGNITY: 5–4 Ruling Makes Same-Sex Marriage a Right Nationwide,” the *Times’s* front page blared on June 27, 2015), as well as the relief and gratitude I had felt for so many years before when I realized that so many of my friends and countrymen untouched by this particular “fire” nonetheless still recognized it as such.

Solidarity.

Paying attention to where and why and how suffering has burrowed itself into the human species—because suffering, like power, is insidious, is a shapeshifter, knows better than anyone how to bore itself into a stagnancy and cloak itself as an inevitability so that it can no longer be dislodged.

Human suffering is everywhere inside this species, inside this country, taken for granted as an “inevitability” both when it can be traced back to the misguided decisions of an individual or else the cruelty of God’s humor (homelessness, healthcare bankruptcy, voluntary deployments that end in tragedy, childhood traumas that end in solitary confinement and suicide), or when its genealogy is so generalizable across a class or racial demographic as to be demonstrably structural (homelessness, healthcare bankruptcy, voluntary deployments that end in tragedy, childhood traumas that end in solitary confinement and suicide).

Outside the gates of America’s comfortable class, America is broadly, demonstrably, and unambiguously on fire—and yet a curious thing happens when the burden of seeing these fires falls upon the shoulders of this country’s comfortable class: certain fissures become imperceptible. Certain limitations

intrude. Certain fires become all the rage to talk about, and all the rage to put out. So many egalitarian victories in America in the early twenty-first century can be explained this way, and so many glaring and flamboyant oversights—who we let into the castle, who we let into our fields of vision, who we let into our fields of empathy, who we let into our conceptions of what does and does not add up to a dignified life.

Who we keep out there will continue to be anomalous, passed over, unspoken for, “*out there*”—the mid-2010s was when I, no longer the wide-eyed teenager, first began to perceive each barrier rescinded, each glass ceiling shattered as less an intrusion into the palace than an encroachment upon some final exhaustion of the palace’s good humor. Because palaces do strike back. People do get tired. The comfortable do grow bashful about chipping away at their own comforts to redistribute them downstream to someone else, and palaces do strike back. Even limousine liberals have their breaking points.

And yet the redeeming thing about breaking points is how easy they can be to conceal: the many rabid efforts by the powerful on behalf of the disinherited has given the whole entire decade something to boast about—I, too, remember all the protests I laid on the ground for, all the open letters I signed at Yale. Which is all well and good so long as we remember just what, exactly, all these solemn efforts and good intentions truly amount to. If they are aligned around the suffering of others, then yes, good—hope still springs eternal. On the other hand: if the pursuit of these efforts revolves around the bright burning star of one’s own moral ego, set into orbit by an emotional demand by the comfortable to see themselves first and foremost as good people (a demand that requires more and more emotional pruning and tending to the more and more one’s comforts proliferate)—then what will continue to persist will be this curious ecological stasis:

The underclass will continue to burn.

And the comfortable will continue to cloak themselves in the self-actualizing warmth generated by the benevolent glow of their political and moral worldviews.

The way to keep anything in the world going is to cloak it in its opposite.

This thought occurred to me as I thought about Adolph Zukor and Jose Leal and that anonymous man in Frank Luntz's focus group, about the screams rising up from the back of the train and the liberal-minded professionals who now make up the leadership and backbone of today's Democratic Party—*aristocracy fine-tunes itself over the course of centuries*. And to the extent that these screams can be heard at all, they are heard only to the extent that they can be captured, absorbed, and reconstituted by communications specialists into perennial talking points, moral clarity and symbolic freight—lives are reduced to iconography every day.

And here we arrive at the final capture.

It is the meritocratic elite that finally determines who among us will have a fighting chance at an audience with the American people, who among us will be indulged with attention and showered with airtime, rendered first into "supporting players" and then into "rising stars" and at last into household names. "My 'strategy' is not a strategy. My 'strategy' is that I seek to speak as deeply, articulately, and passionately as I can about what I see to be the deeper truths confronting our nation, challenging our nation to live up to them.... This is not 'strategy'—the whole strategic mind is part of the corruption of the political system. I'm not trying to figure out what to say to get people to *vote* for me.... I'm inviting the American people to get deep with me."

This invitation was issued by author and activist Marianne Williamson on January 31, 2019, three days after Williamson announced her candidacy to be president of the United States, in response to a question posed to her by CNN's John Berman about what she saw as her "path to victory for the Democratic nomination," and the transformation of Williamson's invitation into its perfect opposite—the transformation of Williamson's candidacy into

a prolonged object of mockery, humiliation, and disdain by the professional class (“Why does she want to run? It’s a little tough to say. She writes on her website, ‘My campaign for the presidency is dedicated to this search for higher wisdom,’” wrote *The Atlantic* in December 2019, omitting from its reportage the twenty-nine policy pages whose position papers make up the bulk of Williamson’s website; Joe Biden’s policy page, by contrast, offers fifteen sentences and twelve bullet paragraphs) is among the most poignant suppressions of a political campaign by the national media that I have seen in my lifetime.

In contrast to so many of her rival candidates who appeared to view the American presidency as the culmination of their professional self-actualization, the reasons Williamson has cited for “why she wants to run” have in fact been obvious from the beginning—were obvious in 2011 when Williamson took the stage at an Occupy Wall Street rally to decry, among other things, the capture of our electoral politics by the “military-industrial complex,” by “corporate subsidies,” and by “tax cuts for the very rich”—were obvious in 2004, when Williamson led a national grassroots campaign to establish a cabinet-level Department of Peace during the height of the Iraq War—were obvious in 1997, when Williamson first articulated her support of economic reparations for the descendants of American genocide—and were certainly obvious by January 28, 2019, the day Williamson announced her run for the presidency: “It’s like when you look at television shows these days and you see these stories about some young person who ‘escaped’ poverty—she used to live in a car, she used to live in a homeless shelter, and now she’s going to an Ivy League school.... We are American and we need to ask ourselves, ‘Why are there so many millions of children who have to *escape*?’”

To examine with any depth or rigor Williamson’s decades-long exhortations against the transformation of American democracy into what she calls a “veiled aristocracy,” to examine her speeches and writings and interviews where she

decries “the rise of an authoritarian corporatism that threatens to erode our country’s democracy,” or the two books she’s written on American history and politics, the first in 1997 and the second in 2019, is to encounter again and again one of the most forceful and evocative responses to the question “What do anti-corporatists want?” that I’ve heard in my lifetime. “*This orgy of deregulation began with Ronald Reagan, it began in 1980, but no Democrat since has too much to brag about, because the truth of the matter is, while in some cases—not all, unfortunately—the Democratic Party has slowed down the orgy of deregulation, it has never made a serious effort to stop it.*” This was Williamson in 2011, at the height of Occupy Wall Street. “*The undue influence of money on our politics is like a cancer underlying other cancers, the issue underlying all other issues.*” This was Williamson in 2014, during her unsuccessful run as an independent for Henry Waxman’s seat in California’s 33rd congressional district, now held by Ted Lieu. “*Class warfare in this country is what already has been and is being waged against the middle-class and poor among us, and the prevailing system feels it has the upper hand in that war because our prison system is large enough to handle the expression of rage that inevitably arise among our most disadvantaged citizens.*”

And this was Williamson in 1997.

Far from being the vanity project that vast segments of the American public appraised it to be after reading appraisals of Williamson’s candidacy in the national media, Williamson’s candidacy was in fact a natural terminus—the logical culmination of a life and career spent outside the gates of Harvard, insulated from the many, many years behind closed doors spent “shaking the right hands” and “cozying up to the right donors”—a life that, by virtue of her humanitarian résumé, has been thoroughly incentivized to *see the fires*. More so than the stability of her political commitments or the richness of her historical vision, it is Williamson’s work as a direct service provider to H.I.V./AIDS patients as the founder of the Los Angeles Center for Living and later Project Angel Food—her demonstrated allegiance to seeing and

paying attention to and at last trying to alleviate the miseries of an otherwise underseen and underserved underclass—that lent Williamson’s candidacy its singular credibility among 2020’s crowded field of candidates.

In this light, the absence of conventional artifacts of self-elevation was a feature rendered again and again into a bug by a credentials-minded national media that had no real interest in examining Williamson’s candidacy at all beyond luxuriating in its gall—its anti-intellectualism—in the embarrassment of it all. It would finally be neither Williamson’s political message nor her humanitarian résumé but her career as the author of multiple spiritual self-help books that would be examined, dissected, and harvested for parts by a political media eager to produce, by way of decontextualized extracts from Williamson’s books, primitive fabulations of who this candidate was and what she stood for—culminating in a hazy and finally spurious account of Williamson as not only “anti-vaccine” and “anti-science” but a bona fide danger to America’s mentally ill and disabled, and even to the very H.I.V./AIDS patients who Williamson once served.

Despite the frequent intimations otherwise (“Oprah’s spiritual advisor” was among the early diminutives lobbed against her), Williamson’s isolation from the insider class was so complete as to render not only her anti-corporatist message—but the very fact that she had a message at all—indecipherable to the writers who wrote about her. “Her style toggles from chummy to authoritative,” wrote *Los Angeles Magazine* about Williamson’s 2014 congressional run, in an early presage of how Williamson’s political ambitions would again and again be narrativized by the national media. “‘We’re doing fine. We’re cool,’ Williamson says of the American people. ‘It’s the U.S. government that is bringing us down,’ she adds. Five minutes later she raises her fist and her voice to exclaim, ‘It’s time for us to repudiate an aristocratic system!’”

That the message of anti-corporatism is not a message taken seriously by either the national media or the political class is not a revelation particular to Williamson’s candidacy.

And yet the arresting totality with which Williamson's name and reputation would be dragged through the mud by the national media—first through scorn and then through alarmism and at last through outrage (her vulnerability in this case being her affiliation with “New Age hogwash,” a disfavored idiosyncrasy)—was a potent warning shot, an instructive reminder that hive minds are not to be rankled, meritocrats are there to be listened to, and palaces do strike back. “I’ll—I’ll tell you this,” *The Daily Show’s* Trevor Noah told Williamson in August 2019 after her closing remarks on his show was met with twelve seconds of uninterrupted applause:

“You sound a lot more sane when you’re given more than a minute to speak.”

9

Williamson's message, of course, was never the problem.

To talk about what our government would look like rooted in its love for its people and in its love for humanity was never the problem.

To talk about what our politics would look like centered around what Shirley Chisholm called in 1972 “the needs of man's nature”—and in particular *the needs of the underclass*—was never the problem. “You know the political establishment and a lot of the media establishment fulfill the same aristocratic archetype that's at work everywhere else in America,” Williamson said on New Hampshire Public Radio in April 2019. “It's the idea of a small club who seems to think they're ‘entitled,’ who seems to think they're the ones who ‘know,’ and they're the only ones worthy of our trust going forward.”

I thought about these words as I thought about the homeless men and women I had met in New Haven—the hypercompetition that already epitomizes the meritocracy-lottery even after so many people have been excluded from

playing, and how many people the competition must continue to exclude in order for those same opportunities to be available to us, and available to our children.

It was lost on nobody I met at Yale that, as Joan Didion put it in 1991, “the condition of being rich [is] predicated upon the continued neediness of a working class.”

That the privileges we enjoyed derived principally from the logic of outsourcing—the outsourcing of responsibilities we’d prefer not to have (military service, for instance), labor we’d prefer not to do (cleaning toilets, for instance), and salaries we’d prefer not to take home onto the backs and shoulders of an underclass who we go on to imagine as preferring to have them. “It is not a man’s duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous, wrong,” Henry David Thoreau wrote in his landmark 1849 essay “Civil Disobedience.” But “if I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations,” Thoreau continued, “I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man’s shoulders.”

And therein lies the rub. We *need* certain fires to stay the way they are so that we can pursue the lives and careers and retirement accounts we dreamed of in college. We *need* certain fires to stay the way they are so that we can pass down a “fighting shot at getting ahead” to our children. Stagnancy has its losers, of course, but it’s created a blazing skyful of winners—and we the winners understand what the world looks like down there, unclothed and unsheltered.

We’d prefer not to come down.

And so we imagine away the shoulders.

Do not intuit so many fires that you yourself go up in flames.

From this pragmatic and finally very human first principle talking points are written, solidarities are affirmed (“I love that,” DeGeneres had said after Brad Pitt reaffirmed his anti-marriage commitment to thunderous applause—“I love that”), and fires are hallucinated so that the biggest fires that rage across this country are never the ones that have anything to do with the screams and shoulders holding up the sky.

What do anti-corporatists want?

We want the miseries and suffering that has burrowed itself into the stagnancies of this country—every last misery, every last stagnancy—to be recognized as such.

We want a national media that is alive and awake and attentive to the scarcities and disorders that rage across the life experiences of the most invisible among us.

And we want elected officials who—by virtue of their support (who are they empowered by, and why?), by virtue of their motivations for seeking power, by virtue of the constituencies and platitudes they do and do not cater to—have been *thoroughly incentivized to see the fires*.

And when that day comes: no stagnancy will crumble, no hallucination will come undone overnight, but we'll at last have some empirical basis for our demand that hope still spring eternal—because I, too, still insist for myself upon that childish demand: I, too, remember the hope I had felt when I read about the candidate nominated by her little brother to run for Congress in 2018 with the aid of Brand New Congress, an organization founded in 2016 to recruit nontraditional candidates who would run, *The New Yorker* reported, “non-corporate, ‘small dollar’ campaigns.”

The candidate, *The New Yorker* continued, “smiled and recalled that her brother had asked her if he could send in the form and, on a lark, said O.K.”

I remember understanding that for many observers this candidate's less than fully cutthroat rejoinder to the prospect of career elevation (“But I was also working in a restaurant! I mean, it's one of these things where it was, like, ‘Eff it. Sure. Whatever’”) would be interpreted as a “bug,” a kink to be smoothed over and worked out by her defenders before it could be used against her by her detractors.

I remember that for me it was the feature.

“I'm not running ‘from the left,’” the candidate would post to Twitter on July 3, 2018.

I'm running from the bottom.

*I'm running in fierce advocacy of working class
Americans.
That's my North Star.
Always has been.
Always will be.*

One week earlier the candidate—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who prior to her congressional run, *The Guardian* reported, worked “as a waitress and bartender to help her mother, a house cleaner, fight foreclosure after her father, a small business owner, died of cancer”—had defeated Joe Crowley, a ten-term incumbent and then the fourth-highest-ranking Democrat in the House of Representatives, to become the Democratic nominee for New York’s 14th congressional district.

I don’t know how else to say it, so I’ll be a little childish again.

It gave me hope.

10

What do anti-corporatists want?

“Anti-corporatism” is a misnomer, but a necessary one.

To speak of anti-corporatism is to speak of a constellation of syndromes whose full name would be too cumbersome to say.

It is in part a recognition that the distribution of power—economic power, political power, cultural power—is now arranged aristocratically in this country. Popular culture bonds to money bonds to D.C. to produce a near-unanimous tendency to comfort the already comfortable—who are celebrities anyway, if not a thousand or so aristocrats who have managed to earn the goodwill and sympathy of the masses, whose presence in our lives bond us closer to the human family, and whose weddings and funerals routinely outshine the deaths of a thousand children in Yemen?

A pandemic of nihilism, ennui, and depression has given rise to a culture of celebrity idolization whose only consequence is to sedate the lonely and propagandize the aristocracy.

The national media—far from being a megaphone of the people—is now a megaphone of the comfortable, by the comfortable, and for the comfortable. Their bread is buttered by the elevation of stories about the already powerful—the culturally powerful, the politically powerful, the ideologically powerful—and their loudest voices are now themselves stars. Our emotional investment in pop culture—like our material investment in the stock market—is both too ubiquitous to disrupt and too obscure to contemplate, concealed by many layers of intermediaries.

The interests of the comfortable and the interests of the disinherited, existentially, are not aligned.

And yet these two investments mutually ensure that the interests of the comfortable and the interests of the disinherited will be forever intertwined, rising and falling as one.

Cultural power, political power, and economic power are now controlled by a single entity in America: the comfortable class. Divided ostensibly amongst itself into two political parties, the Republicans and the Democrats, they are in fact a single organism, bonded by a common ideology: “Let’s not linger for too long on the broken. Let’s not linger for too long on the disinherited. Let’s not linger for too long on other people’s despairs.” Not lingering for too long on other people’s despairs helps us only to see our own despairs all the more clearly—so clearly that they’ll eventually become the only despairs we can recognize. (For the bourgeois left, White Fragility. For the bourgeois right, The Road to Serfdom.)

The injustices acknowledged by the comfortable class are now the only injustices that exist in the world.

The fixations of our preferred media outlets become our preferred fixations, too—and it only gets worse for the disinherited from there. Corporate consolidation of the media and corporate consolidation elsewhere together ensure that both cultural power and economic power will be forever out of reach of the underclass. The meritocracy plucks from the underclass only those plucky voices demonstrably susceptible to being conditioned into the values

of the bourgeoisie. Meanwhile the two-party system in America strangles the last remaining source of power nominally available to the underclass—the Democratic Party, once the party of labor, is now the party of a multiracial, multiethnic bourgeois elite.

American culture is now held hostage by, to the point that it's become synonymous with, an entertainment-industrial complex that thrives off the pleasures it gives to the masses—this is how all aristocracies have historically worked, on “give and take,” on “you get yours and we get ours,” on what was back then, even in the age of aristocracy, “a free and fair trade.” The American aristocracy is nourished into life by pop culture and the national media, which is itself now more consolidated than ever—who watches the news? Politically aroused people who want to stagnate inside their views. Market forces incentivize media outlets to realign, producing more stagnation. Of course we all know this.

Why is any of this a problem?

And here's where the despair sets in.

Corporations down the line favor public policies that favor the interests of management over the interests of labor and the interests of the disinherited—let alone the interests of the environment, let alone the interests of non-participants. There is now a near-total capture of the American democracy by the comfortable class—but because so many in the American media are themselves members of the comfortable class, the American media fails to intuit the breadth of the despair. And because politicians now enjoy star treatment (a national-level politician is transformed instantly into a celebrity, and thereby instantly into a member of the elite), their interests are almost entirely—with the sole exception of those politicians who have staked their names and reputations on identifying with this diagnosis, on identifying with anti-corporatism—aligned with elite interests.

The human cost to all this?

In addition to overlooking the underclass in our own country, aristocratic interests prop up a global war machine—the defense industry resembles the financial industry in how well its preferences are represented by the preferences of the federal government, while the troops on the ground remain largely drawn from the underclass.

“Corporatism” is the name of the culture that all of the above represents, and “anti-corporatism” is the name for the movement that, in the past two decades, has come alive to stop it.

2017–20

On Identity Politics

To come here and discover that ... in actual fact we weren't wanted, has been a very shattering blow.

—Michael X, BBC interview, 1970

GIVE IT TIME—a little sprinkle of time—and everything that ever was will pass into its perfect opposite: lives go out, purposes fade, the sane go mad, what once charmed will irritate. Entangled inside the intuitive kitten-paw hierarchies that entangle our children (little bruises in elementary school and literally brutalizing by middle school), the “identity-characteristics” I had stumbled into so unthinkingly as a newborn in the delivery room, eager to have a go at life, would by the middle years of my adolescence crystalize into something of a discovery, harden into something of an enclosure. “It won’t *play*,” I can still hear Margo Channing’s voice declaring conclusively from the other side of the room, rejecting out of hand another character’s suggestion that they all call it a night in *All About Eve*, and no other sentence better captures how my body and mannerisms and habits of speech fared for me as I carried them out into the world as a child, and offered up my identity to others—: *none of it played*.

Of course “hierarchy” is at the center of this, is the locomotive of this story, but there are a few quick points of interest we must stop at along the way. The first is disfigurement. In all narcissistic societies when a human being becomes disfigured enough, they become non-entities as they pass through the world, invited to attach by no one. Imagine a number line. A state of perfect indifference to another being’s existence (the images that come to mind now are of a camera

zoomed in on a couple having an argument as the extras mill about in the background, or else a journalist late to a meeting hurrying past a homeless woman) might be thought of as the neutral zero along an x-axis that extends all the way to the right as “putting the other being first,” “putting the other being’s needs before your needs,” “putting the other being’s good fate before your good fate,” ripening all the way into love.

Indifference is the absence of love, and dehumanization is love’s inverse. What we have to remember here is that a little bit of self-interest will accompany us through our whole entire journey across this number line—the self-interest that we were all born with, by virtue of the fact that our experience of being alive is segregated from everyone else’s.

To follow this x-axis all the way to the left would be to pass through indifference first, the neutral zero, where self-interest naturally wins out against the background actors who we walk past on our way to an important meeting, or else the seven billion people who we in America tend to remember only as abstractions (“In this photo essay from Reuters, photographers capture ‘playgrounds’ built among landfills and junkyards, and children swimming in polluted...”), and who we love in name only. Physical distance is one way that a human being can become disfigured, literally impossible to see, but it is not the only way. A second category of disfigurement might be traced back to how an individual in question has “chosen to live his or her life”—my father, for instance, will be forever disfigured in my eyes for how he treated my mother when I was a child. Features of the world as diverse as imprisonment, religious excommunication, political polarization, and the bumper sticker “*Fairness isn’t giving my money to lazy people*” can all be traced back to this second category.

And a third category of disfigurement can be traced back to how we were born.

The central feature of every narcissistic society is hierarchy. In a hypothetical animal society in which every last herring is undifferentiable from any other herring, every last

herring is protected with undifferentiated urgency by every other herring as a matter of due course—all the dignity a herring will ever need in the eyes of another herring ripens into full fruition the moment it is born.

It's quite the opposite here on land.

Hierarchy gets its teeth into us early in America, starting with the way young children intuitively gravitate toward certain identity-characteristics (certain faces and voices and body-types, all passed through the norms of gender—this is the stuff of Disney doe eyes) and magnifying exponentially during our teenage years before reaching an orgiastic pitch in young adulthood, during which the reflexive separation of all other human beings into “*aspirational*” and “*not quite aspirational*” on the basis of a grab bag of identity-characteristics, both physical and non-physical (this is how we come to admire certain strangers and public figures—never forget: our feelings about the superiority of others are entangled inside our feelings about the inferiority of others), becomes at once a mode of life and a source of ever-present malaise. Segregation—cultural, racial, ideological, and above all to keep the disfigured and bad-fated as far away as possible from the sun-kissed—settles across the land.

From the lowly individual these preferences naturally reproduce themselves into the country at large over the course of generations, reinforced by tribalism, and mediated by intertribal power advantages that stretch out for centuries—traceable back to the bloodiest succession of dice rolls in the history of the world. Into this flame-colored hellscape children of all races, genders, physical abilities, and identity-characteristics are born, and well—it's been a fucking doozy, hasn't it? For some of us a sense of the world's openness to us accompanies us wherever we go, the number line lurches toward love and attachment as a matter of routine, beginning with the smiles and high fives that attach to us as children and deepening into the recognition that we can enter into whatever commercial establishments or civic arrangements we want to as adults, we can live where we want to live, we can work where

we want to work, we can play how we want to play. Our experience of being alive is identified with freedom.

And for others of us?

The world of other people is a logjam of rejections and suspicions—doors that close for us the moment we step off the bus, branching footpaths that bloom into dead ends, the number line stagnates at neutral zero wherever we go, dipping toward dehumanization as a matter of routine—only our families and pure-hearted strangers take any notice of us. You'd laugh if I told you the humiliations. There were the discordant notes that sounded whenever I tried to make my way to anyone as a child—the accented English and the awkwardness that makes plain the presence of every social chameleon (all the way into my mid-twenties I thought drinking water out of a glass, as opposed to out of a bowl, was a sign of affluence—I used to make a point of waiting until I had stepped out of the kitchen and into a friend's living room before relieving my thirst, so I could drink my water out of a glass in full view of other people). There was the childhood sexual abuse (a neighbor, a pink-tiled bathroom) that, prevailing views notwithstanding, amounted to little more than a molehill in the alpine terrain of my childhood disfigurements—that I would relive a million times over if it meant I could flatten the surrounding vista.

And then there was the surrounding vista itself.

I am telling you now that so long as your life conditions are not life-threatening, it is not a great effort to exist.

What makes existence a drag is high contrast.

High contrast is everywhere inside this demented topography, it is the smile we give to the luminary and the smile we give to the luminary's doorman, it is our dream-vision of the best-case scenario for our lives and our nightmare renditions of the worst—it is what separates every category of human fate from every other. At the peaks of disfigurement—the images that come to mind now are of children born into cyclical poverty who become the adults we cycle into solitary confinement; the slaves who clean and peel shrimp bound for

Whole Foods and Red Lobster (i.e., “the overseas market”)—the audacities of high contrast begin to take on quasi-comedic undertones. (What comes to mind now is my memory of watching, on a grainy T.V. set at a hospital in Peru, an interview with an American movie star that had as its closest spiritual analogue Woody Allen saying to his psychotherapist on a couch in Manhattan: “*I feel trapped. What I want is more freedom.*” Something about his identity-characteristics just wasn’t doing it for him, had made his experience of life poorer for the wear. I can only imagine the profound haze of confusion and affection and longing that I, too, would have felt had I been born into the global underclass and—to unwind after a long day’s work—put on a Hollywood movie.)

The disorder is general.

With modernity came existential freedom for the great many of us, and inside these growing pains we remember, at both the scale of the world and the scale of America, that *existential freedom didn’t come for all of us*. But as in a mass psychosis, we bury these uneasy suspicions, sublimate the uneasy apprehension that “*none of this was right, none of this was just, and none of this is fair*” into pieces we can digest, into pieces we can do something about, into pieces we can handle. We buy fair-trade coffee. Dreamlessly we return ourselves back to the vigor of daily life, the quiet charms of being alive—we remind ourselves that we, too, have to find our way through this world and bring to mind our own afflictions, call to mind our own memories of being passed over and pushed aside for a whiter face, remember all the ways our own identity-characteristics just haven’t been doing it for us either.

And then, only after our strength is restored, we turn our gaze back to the world outside.

What lingers in the aftermath of catastrophe is not the catastrophe itself, but the soul that its contusions create.

Pure hearts are my great interest here—the figures in human history who stood out to me above all others when I

was a child, the anti-narcissists, the figures who pushed back against a view so prevalent in our modern age, and so favorable to the perpetuation of our meritocracy, that humanity is primarily a self-service experience (“If you’ve got it, flaunt it,” “It’s a dog-eat-dog world out there,” “It’s every man for himself”), lowering the bar for all of us .

In fact the one true privilege of having been raised in the twenty-first century is inheriting a humanity made finer by these pure hearts: a humanity of heroes everywhere, albeit far many more unsung than sung, hidden among and doing the quiet work of counterbalancing the effects of all the many narcissists who, too, have shaped the course of this species.

I want to be clear, now, about what I mean by “narcissist” and “anti-narcissist”—words I rely on only because there are no ideal words for what I am trying to describe.

That existential freedom did not come for all of us creates a duty in all of us who it did come for.

In high school I remember being mesmerized by the quiet work of Harriet Tubman, whose escape from the South marked the beginning of a decade spent traveling thirteen times back into the South to rescue seventy others from genocide, who became the only woman to plan and lead an armed raid into enemy territory during the Civil War, and who during the end of her life devoted almost all of her time and money to maintaining a home for the poor and elderly, despite being poor and elderly herself—I remember emphasizing during a class project on American heroes, without quite understanding why, that *Tubman herself had died in poverty*.

In retrospect I was already beginning to sense, I think, the thrum of anti-narcissism strumming its quiet drumbeat all around me—empathy and compassion for more vulnerable people, people born into the wrong time and place or else people born into the wrong identities, the wrong physical envelopes, people disempowered by all manners of structural humiliation inherited from our narcissistic forefathers who thought only of themselves and their own tribal affiliations,

war and genocide, climate change, systemic abuses of all manners and manifestations. Everyone's life dream back then, like Harriet Tubman's, was to make the world a better place for other people, and we would write about that life dream on our college applications, we would post about it to Tumblr.

I myself had volunteered at a soup kitchen, beaming with pride at how my weekends were spent, unlike my peers, in service to other people. If you had asked me back then how I identified I would have told you with a straight face that I identified as a budding young humanitarian—a moral compass that pointed inexorably due north had by then become intrinsic to my self-definition, and empathy and compassion intrinsic to how I understood my generation (no, they weren't quite where *I* was in terms of moral thoughtfulness, but they were still less morally misguided than all the Strom Thurmonds and Eugene McCarthies that had come before them). "Jesus Christ, you're such a self-important hypocrite—*how can you not see that?*" I would fume to myself late at night, hate-reading a user on Reddit less contemplative than I was just to feel better about how my own moral compass had turned out, on a smartphone whose factory origins I didn't really care about, while popping shrimp into my mouth.

By the time I graduated college, the spirit of Harriet Tubman was everywhere, embraced by all of our country's most vaunted thinkers, the spirit of duty to others and self-sacrifice the unifying element of all our most vaunted cultural institutions—Harvard, *The New York Times*, Hollywood, Silicon Valley, Capitol Hill—and I couldn't wait to climb the meritocracy myself, get in there and make the world a better place. An egalitarian self-presentation would be my little red rocket ship to the top—and I pinned some hint of it to every last internship application, some trace of my moral and social high purpose to every last conversation I ever had. I even plundered my love for Harriet Tubman to vault myself into law school (an actual sentence from my personal statement: "What always moved me the most were not the stories of those

who were deprived of their freedoms and were forced to fight, but those who had their freedoms, and *chose to fight anyway*").

I waltzed right in to Harvard and Yale.

The world was still on fire, yes, but that was only because the meritocracy hadn't finished working its magic yet. Our country was still clogged by narcissists from an earlier time—tribal narcissists, racial narcissists, First World narcissists, people who cared about nothing so deeply as their own self-elevation—the opposite of the spirit of anti-narcissism that all of our finest graduate programs and the masthead of *The New York Times* embodied. We just needed to wait until my classmates who spoke out the loudest about injustice took over the reins—with each passing year, the meritocracy would elevate an ever more pure-hearted subset of us into higher and higher positions of power and influence, making the world an ever more humane place to live for the most voiceless and disempowered among us.

That the meritocracy might not be very good at elevating pure hearts at all—that the people who set the cultural agenda for our country in Brooklyn Heights and DuPont Circle and Los Gatos and Harvard Square might not generally be high-minded free-thinkers with all their ducks in a row, and that any pro-social outcome that dripped down from the meritocrats might simply be the more palatable byproducts of a system that by and large converted the spirit of duty and self-sacrifice into ever more potent strains of narcissism—were thoughts that could only upset me. "*Who the fuck do you think you are? Have you seen my Twitter feed? I've earned my moral stripes with every last ideology I've pushed back against, with every last belief I've held onto.*" In fact my knuckles were raw from how hard I held onto an understanding of myself as a good person—all the clarity I had flowed from this spring.

Moral clarity is an intoxicant, and it can be used to prop up the most defenseless among us—as so many of our foremothers have done—or it can be used to prop up ourselves. That moral clarity only achieves full clarity when this latter function becomes perfectly obscure is an irony

understood by every child the moment his sobs of hunger and his sobs of gluttony are treated differently by an exasperated parent. I myself look back on the life I've lived in a haze, unsure of where inside this thicket of self-flattery and high purpose the pieces actually fall—which palatable effects on the lives of other people dripped down as a result of the love I had for other people, and which dripped down as the milky white byproduct of narcissism.

Because narcissism is every bit as world-shattering as love is—in fact it is a subset of love, it is a love that bonds the self to the self, and the tension between the love we have for others and the love we have for ourselves is made muddled all the time by the mundane ways in which these two loves exist so often in harmony.

In fact these two loves exist mundanely in opposition to each other.

In fact we so routinely cannot have our cake and eat it too that entire civilizations have collapsed under the weight of all our many attempts to try—and inside the pall of climate change, our entire species might too. Narcissism has shattered the world at precisely the fault lines where pure hearts have gone on to mend it. And let me be honest now: of course nothing is more inimical to my heart and soul than the prospect of true duty and self-sacrifice.

Let me be clear now.

Narcissism has given me everything I have.

The original appeal of identity politics is the forever and ever appeal of humanist politics.

“High resolution” and “grace” are what I suppose I'm after here, high resolution and grace in the face of what all reasonable minds can apprehend as a vast and fine-grained disorder. The texture of disempowerment is vast—varying not only between individual to individual within a single identity category but between minute to minute within a single individual life. Identity politics—like its older stepsister class

politics—is an act of *unionization*, a way of essentializing individuals with similar attributes under the common banner of disempowerment, and pooling that disempowerment into moral clarity. Sometimes that attribute is disempowered by definition (my father, for instance, is physically disabled) and sometimes that attribute is disempowered by social and historical circumstance (my father, for instance, is non-white, uneducated, and poor).

But the moral clarity generated by disempowerment tends to incentivize all disempowerment politics—including class politics—toward narrative stasis, toward permanent victimhood, toward a resistance to accommodating precisely the shifts in power dynamics that the politics itself seeks to realize. (Try telling Marie Antoinette on her way to the guillotine that she was overpowered.)

I've seen the powers and freedoms granted to me as I transitioned from childhood to adulthood proliferate over time, in part due to the victories of identity politics, but almost all of it due to the unmitigated failure of class politics to *gain any traction in America*—I *needed* class politics to languish as I was climbing the meritocracy, you see, I *needed* the labor of the underclass to continue to be devalued so that my own purchasing power could continue to exponentialize, I *needed* scarce resources to continue to circulate unevenly throughout humanity so that the existential freedoms I enjoyed could continue to accrue to me without ceiling. (I plant, now, a kiss of gratitude on the forehead of every child who lives in poverty so that I can afford the goods and services your mother and father produced for me. Maybe someday you'll figure out a way to get into Yale, too.)

And inside the low-resolution accounts of disempowerment produced by identity politics my own moral clarity grows and grows—what a fabulous enemy of injustice I've grown into! I just want everyone in the world to have what I have without having anything in the world be taken away from me, I embrace every critique of injustice that stops right at the feet of my own complicity, I puncture an I-shaped hole

into every bomb I lob into the powers that be. After all, there's a wonderful little ceiling to the paths forward suggested by identity politics that the paths forward suggested by class politics can't quite offer—no story I could possibly tell you about the Rorschach pattern of my voting habits can quite fully account for my presence inside the restaurant while people outside the restaurant sleep hungry.

We can all intuit this, and so we choose our paths forward accordingly.

Narcissism, after all, is primarily a disease of the viewfinder. Inside the narrative stasis of my own disempowerment I've found all sorts of ways to have my cake and eat it, too. I go along with the depictions of human misery en vogue with the bourgeoisie, whose good graces mean everything to me, and do my best as a team player to help obfuscate anything inside the contours of disempowerment that might complicate the photograph, or fail to flatter our own superiority. I elevate certain degradations into fires of utmost emergency while keeping certain other degradations unseen, certain surpluses misremembered, certain identity categories insoluble as a matter of routine. And in exchange for my "team-player status," a photograph favorably blurred will still somehow manage to capture every last microhumiliation I've ever received.

An egalitarian politics produced by a narcissistic society will produce some of the blurriest photographs in the world.

The empowerment of the already powerful is best served by low resolution.

The empowerment of the most voiceless and invisible among us is best served by high resolution.

In lieu of high resolution, I double down on my own moral clarity—there I am, a perpetual figure on the backdrop of the right side of history. What each of us have inside us is an ancestry, proud and sprawling like the view from the highest mountain. In the final stage of identity politics: gorgeous new walls are erected over our identity-characteristics, and we are free to invent our lives however we want inside of these

palisades, insulated from the idiosyncrasies of identity that might individualize us a little “too” much for the moral and social high purpose we were all born for—we’ve seen all too clearly what happens to the turncoats and apostates.

Acts of high resolution and acts of grace alike become recast as acts of “apologia”—efforts to excuse power, exempt power, enable power, to offer power the fawning tongue-bath of fan service. In fact “apologia” is distinct from grace—the former springs from a commitment to maintaining one’s own privileges and complicities and proximity to power, while the latter springs from a commitment to human dignity for all. “*Human dignity for all*”—could any thought be so quaint? Could any spirit be more at odds with these strange times we live in than having only the fleeting trace whispers of a good life yourself—and yet devoting those last trace remnants of your well-being and vigor to people who, in the moment you encounter them, have even less than you do?

Yes. In fact, mundanely yes—in fact the spirit I have just described mundanely animates every last homeless American I’ve ever known and befriended on the front porch of my old home in New Haven.

Pure hearts are everywhere in America.

Anti-narcissism is only absent—structurally absent, and for structural reasons—from the cultural institutions that tower over this country. *Do not take at face value the moral clarity we disseminate.* That “existential freedom didn’t come for everyone” is the difficult truth we must all come home to—and how we come home to it will be a moment of private reckoning that will vary from tribe to tribe, culture to culture, and individual to individual. We have seen all too clearly now how the loudest voices in politics, academia, and the national media will come home to it.

I know now what dehumanization is.

It is identical to indifference, it is identical to the neutral zero. Linger at the neutral zero for too long and the moment self-interest intrudes, you’ll be extracting from the bad fates of others all the moral and social and professional capital you can

mine—this is the gravitational pull of narcissism. To look at your own pain but not stall there—to jump immediately from our own pain to the sincere pain of others—is an act of duty and self-sacrifice made difficult all the time by forgetfulness, and made impossible by moral clarity.

And yet inside the clear blue waters of moral clarity I float, underneath the palm fronds, in dark glasses, reading *The New York Times* and sipping from the bad faith of others—entranced by all the bad consciences they seem to carry and all the narcissisms they seem to embody, all the news that's fit to print, all the cake that never ever seems to spoil. Was this life for everyone? No, I do believe it was not. I do believe it was just for people like you, and people like me.

And with the moral clarity of someone who has everything to lose if his betrayals were ever seen clearly,
I sleep soundly at night.

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

Joan Didion: A Travelogue

Surfaces tended to dissolve here.

—Joan Didion, *Miami*

1

THE PLACE TO start here is that an artist's body of work, in the course of the artist's passage from a peripheral cataloguer of our cultural defects to "cultural icon," inevitably undergoes obfuscation. This obfuscation is necessarily subtractive in character, and, in the case of those luminaries for whom our reasons for recoiling from what we now perceive to be their "anachronisms" are identical to the reasons we require their lionization, not without its galling ironies. Societies, after all, evolve at a geological tempo—vast deposits of subversive convulsions can take centuries to congeal, naïve impulses resist erosion—and on the scale of the timid artist, particularly if the artist is "subversive," particularly if the artist is catholic in her distrust of first instincts, what is subsumed of the artist's output into her culture is above all an exercise in sly and studied resistance: the acquisition of not so much the artist's body of work as revelation, but of the artist as symbol.

2

The artist as symbol. — Or perhaps we ought to start here, at the superficies, since that is also our entrance into everything else. Joan Didion, as with any iconoclastic thinker whose output has been placed into the canon by a culture that no

longer knows what to do with its iconoclastic thinkers, is first and foremost a symbol—and, like all symbols, she is an aftermath flattened into a photograph. She is the unamused expression in black and white holding a cigarette. She is the after-dinner mint of her pithiest and most quotable sentences, a decorative garnish in a literary sensibility's self-presentation, shorthand for "I, too, admire precision" or else "I, too, see through posturing." She is the memory of an essay on Haight-Ashbury, another on Jim Morrison, another on self-respect, a book about grief, another about dying and another about California, or weren't they all about dying, or weren't they all about California?

She is, in other words, to a culture that demands of its artists and thinkers only that the culture's most cherished instincts be left intact, anything and everything short of the contusions and subversions she left in her wake. There are the verses that seem to welcome the extinction of man obscured beneath a panegyric to the Hoover Dam. There is the pervasive tendency in her writing to locate in her adult subjects the assumptions and ideations of children: Joan Baez ("ever wounded, ever young"), Doris Lessing ("assaulted at every turn by fresh evidence that the world is not exactly improving as promised"), James Pike ("a man who moved through life believing that he was entitled to forget it and start over"). Or more provocatively: there is, in her 1990 essay on the Central Park jogger trial, the striking rejection of the assumption that rape entails a violation "absent from other kinds of assault," and a further suggestion that this assumption might be specifically "masculine" in origin ("Women do not want to be raped, nor do they want to have their brains smashed, but very few mystify the difference").

And then there are, dusted throughout Didion's writing dating back to *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, intimations of the racism underlying and embedded in what Didion in 1966 identified as white America's "primitive progressivism": Didion, in 1966, quoting a white liberal teacher who has grabbed "a pretty Chinese girl by the arm" and "wheeled her

around to face me”: “Look. You wouldn’t have seen this here before the war. Look at those eyes.” Didion, in 1990: “Whites often mentioned, as a clinching argument, that [Al Sharpton] paid his demonstrators to appear; the figure usually mentioned was five dollars.... This seemed on many levels a misunderstanding ... too deep to address, but on its simplest level it served to suggest what value was placed by whites on what they thought of as black time.” Didion, in 1992: “The Sister Souljah moment, in this view, represented [Bill Clinton’s] call for ‘an end to division’ that ... [served] to demonstrate that he was capable of dominating, or ‘standing up to,’ a kind of black anger that many white voters prefer to see as the basis for this country’s racial division.”

She was the writer who saw this country more clearly than any writer I had ever encountered, before her or since her, and her sensibility, for better or for worse (remember it was Didion who said that “setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer’s sensibility on the reader’s most private space”)—her sensibility has invaded me. To work in Didion’s inheritance is to labor under the motionless gaze of this country’s last living adult: motionless because she did not “subscribe to the romantic view of man’s possibilities” (1977). Motionless because “if I could believe that going to a barricade would affect man’s fate in the slightest I would go to that barricade” (1970). Motionless because, as Didion told NPR in an interview with Terry Gross in 2011: “I—I myself have always found that if I examine something, it’s less scary. You know, I grew up in the West and—we always had this theory that if you saw, if you kept the snake in your eye line, the snake wasn’t going to bite you. And that’s kind of the way I feel about confronting pain. I want to know where it is.”

"Lily heard the shot at seventeen minutes to one," is the inaugural sentence of Joan Didion's career. Pain has been the starting point of Didion's encounter with the world ever since, the through-line connecting all of Didion's signature images: the car engulfed in flames on the side of the road in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, the ashes of her mother and husband and daughter behind the wall of the cathedral in *Blue Nights*, the boy living in the garage of a condemned hotel who has started a fire after chewing on an electric cord in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, the girl running down the highway after the car carrying her mother and stepfather and brother and sister in *The White Album*, the body found in the desert with no eyes because "the vultures got to it before the photographer did" in *Salvador*, the rattlesnake that slips in and out of view in seven of her ten nonfiction books, and two of her five novels.

The world as rendered by Didion is a world of senseless and obscure cruelties, and yet—and this is a crucial recognition, the vital point from which her sensibility deviates from the mundane—these cruelties are *not*, in fact, Didion's central disconsolation. Had Didion's apprehension of catastrophe proceeded solely from her catalogue of bad dreams then we would have in our hands a very different sort of writer: we would have in our hands a sister to Doris Lessing, perhaps, whose work Didion upbraids in 1971 for betraying a "determinedly utopian and distinctly teleological bent." Lessing was a writer who saw the horrors and catastrophes of history as fundamentally subordinate to, and therefore tamable by, the will of man.

Didion did not.

Consider what Lessing, in her 1971 introduction to *The Golden Notebook*, tells the reader she would like for every child to know about how the world has settled: "What you are being taught here is an amalgam of current prejudice and the choices of this particular culture. The slightest look at history will show how impermanent these must be." And now consider what Didion has to say about Lessing's career-long interrogation of those choices and prejudices: "Not until the

end of the five-volume *Children of Violence* series [which Lessing completed in 1969] did one sense ... a metastasis of that cognitive frenzy for answers. She had seen, by then, a great deal go, had seized a great many answers and lost them. Organized politics went early. Freudian determinism seemed incompatible. The Africa of her memory was another country.... She had been betrayed by all those answers and more, and yet, increasingly possessed, her only response has been to look for another. That she is scarcely alone in this possession is what lends her quest its great interest: the impulse to final solutions has been not only Mrs. Lessing's dilemma but the guiding delusion of her time."

4

Anachronisms. — Didion's essay on Doris Lessing appears in a section of her 1979 essay collection *The White Album* titled "Women," and it follows an essay that, on the combustible potency of its most incendiary sentences alone ("If the family was the last fortress of capitalism, then let us abolish the family"; "She particularly needed contraceptives because she was raped on every date, raped by her husband, and raped finally on the abortionist's table"; "Increasingly it seemed that the aversion was to adult sexual life itself: how much cleaner to stay forever children"), is today the entry in Didion's oeuvre least equipped to withstand the moral erosions of time.

And yet this essay—titled "The Women's Movement" and first published in *The New York Times Book Review* in 1971—arrests in microcosm the disconsolation that sits at the heart of not only Didion's worldview but in many ways her project as a whole, Didion's contribution to American literature in the twentieth century: the disconsolation of discovering that, after all of the horrors have been tabulated (the car engulfed by flames on the side of the road, the denials and defects, the delusions and disillusionments), what we are left with on the other side is not so much a deliverance from

those horrors as the self-assured purveyors of solutions that do not quite add up: is the search for an answer that has come back not so much empty as deceptively full, is the appendage onto a world of complexity and ambiguity conclusions that follow from not so much our desire for truth,

but our insistence on a happy ending.

To read a great deal of Joan Didion is to remember finally how seldom ambiguity dissolves into happy endings.

Didion's is a sensibility "distrustful of political highs," apprehensive always of "something facile going on, some self-indulgence at work," committed immovably to the "exploration of moral distinctions," and what emanates from that sensibility—happily, for the reader—is an observational eye that veers inexorably past the self-evident and toward the complicating detail, the unsettling caveat. And because irreducible ambiguities make for poor sloganeering, Didion's writing is rarely hospitable to political purposes. "To believe in the 'greater good' is to operate, necessarily, in a kind of ethical suspension," Didion writes in "The Women's Movement," decrying the "coarsening of moral imagination to which ... social idealism so often leads."

Confronted with the choice between idealism and stoicism, Didion opted for stoicism every time—and indeed, what many critics tend to remember about "The Women's Movement" is this: Didion lampooning a feminist writer's unwillingness to "accept the universe," Didion's resigned commitment to the ambiguities inherent in the experience of being a woman ("the irreconcilable difference of it—that sense of living one's deepest life underwater, that dark involvement with blood and birth and death"), and her concomitant distrust of any analysis that seeks to obscure or flatten those ambiguities for political purposes.

But this is only half the story.

"The have-nots, it turned out, aspired mainly to having."

This remarkable sentence appears three paragraphs into "The Women's Movement," and in nine words encapsulates the disconsolation that animates the second half of the essay, a

disconsolation no longer with how high-minded ideals resist complexity and ambiguity, resist facts that do not quite suit a summoned purpose—but rather with what happens to those high-minded ideals once they ascend “out of the mimeo room,” out of the realm of cerebral analyses and into the world of actual human beings.

In the case of the women’s movement, Didion argues, humanitarian ideals become trivialized in translation.

The movement’s theorists might have propped up high-minded ideals founded on claims about the world whose soundness or urgency one could choose to find dubious, and Didion did—but at least “it was serious.” The women’s movement, however, in its transition from a “febrile and cerebral passion” of high-minded idealists steeped in Marx and Dante into an object of mainstream public discourse, would come to be embraced, Didion argues, by “converts who want not a revolution but ‘romance,’ who believe not in the oppression of women but in their own chances for a new life in exactly the mold of their old life,” and at whose mercy the theorists now found themselves “engaged in sullen public colloquies about the inequities of dishwashing.”

Didion even allows that the hyperbole she chides the theorists for in the first half of the essay, for all its demerits, might have a place insofar as it is able to politicize a demographic: “To make an omelette you need not only those broken eggs but someone ‘oppressed’ to break them: every revolutionist is presumed to understand that, and also every woman, which either does or does not make fifty-one percent of the population of the United States a potentially revolutionary class.” But for Didion, fathoming oneself as an object of subjugation is admirable only insofar as it is an intermediate step, the basis from which some broader project of social reform (“that inductive leap from the personal to the political”) would then proceed.

Hyperbole, in this view, might have a role as a reservoir of metaphorical truths, to be deployed by idealists to evangelize a subjugated class into pondering the subject of their own

subjugation, and then into pondering the subject of subjugation more generally: prodding the subjugated to “perceive their common cause with other minorities,” and prodding society, at last, toward a more general revision of the social order.

But this never happened.

The revolution, instead, had gotten mired in the personal, had failed to make that “inductive leap from the personal to the political,” had stalled inside the insular self-interest of an insular population with insular frustrations and insular demands—producing an insular “idealism” disconcertingly inert at addressing the subject of subjugation more generally, as a global phenomenon.

In this light Didion might be said to have anticipated the modern-day pivot toward intersectionality, bringing to mind an image of Anna Howard Shaw scolding Southern white men in 1903 at a convention in New Orleans: “You have put the ballot into the hands of your black men, thus making them the political superiors of your white women! Never before in the history of the world have men made former slaves the political masters of their former mistresses!”

The have-nots, it turned out, aspired mainly to having.

What reformers demand, societies concede as a matter of justice—and it is from this appeal to justice that the specter of self-interest gains its curious potency.

On the one hand, one might presume that to demand justice for oneself is to necessarily manifest at least a modicum of self-interest—but this is mistaken.

To demand justice from anyone—to demand from the law or else from a private entity or else from a fellow citizen the imposition of “justice” onto an outcome that is otherwise unjust, that is otherwise unfair or unequal—is to invoke a claim that X deserves Y not because X is of any *particular* race, gender, class, or identity, but because X is a citizen, because X is a taxpayer, because X is a human. In other words the claim becomes generalized, magnifies immediately beyond the “personal”—the claim does not so much embody self-interest

as it does transcend it. Any claim that X deserves Y necessarily becomes a claim about what is owed, as a matter of due course, to *all* citizens, to *all* taxpayers, to *all* humans. The theorists and rhetoricians understood this, Didion points out.

The broader public did not.

Aware at all times of the tiny fictions that slip imperceptibly into larger metaphorical truths (“Half-truths, repeated, authenticated themselves”), Didion recoils at the broader public’s appropriation of an ideology directed toward anti-subjugation more generally into an ideology directed toward the sanitation of all that might be considered unclean or imperfect about the experience of being a woman, toward “eternal love,” “romance,” “the Big Apple,” “the chance to have some fun”—galvanized by the movement’s metaphorical truths not toward a reevaluation of the social order, but toward some “astral discontent with actual lives, actual men”:

More and more, as the literature of the movement began to reflect the thinking of women who did not really understand the movement’s ideological base, one had the sense of this stall, this delusion, the sense that the drilling of the theorists had struck only some psychic hardpan dense with superstitions and little sophistries, wish fulfillment, self-loathing and bitter fancies.

The prevailing moral logic of our society, concealed beneath a mask of seriousness and high purpose, appears to seek, first and foremost, “that *all the dangers* which life once held should be removed from it, and that *everyone* should assist in this with all his might.”

This is not Joan Didion writing about the women’s movement in 1971, but Friedrich Nietzsche writing about the moral fashion of late nineteenth-century Germany in 1881.

The inequalities of human life, at the level of both “outcome” and “opportunity,” are so deeply embedded across every last feature of human life, large and small, as to be not so

much rampant as they are general, exhaustive, all-encompassing. In this light: what features of the human experience should be properly eradicated across the entire heights and depths of the human order—and what features belong properly to the category of what Nietzsche satirizes as “*all the dangers*” of human life, of what Didion satirizes as “little sophistries, wish fulfillment, self-loathing and bitter fancies”?

To read “The Women’s Movement” profitably today is not to absorb uncritically all of Didion’s observations about the state of the women’s movement in 1971, but to survey with watchfulness the degree to which movements for reform in the twenty-first century have or have not conformed to this general tendency: the tendency of moral claims that have as their basis some broader principle of “anti-subjugation” to deflate imperceptibly into demands that do not quite generalize beyond the factions and tribes to which the demander happens to belong (“*Today in the United States and the developed world, women are better off than ever,*” Sheryl Sandberg, a Facebook executive and today one of the richest women in the world, writes in the introduction to her 2013 bestseller *Lean In*)—to pass unsuspectingly into some insular ideal of a cleaner, more perfect life (“*Worldwide, about 4.4 million women and girls are trapped in the sex trade,*” Sandberg continues)—to pass imperceptibly into self-absorption (“*But knowing that things could be worse should not stop us from trying to make them better*”)—

to slip imperceptibly into self-interest.

5

Naïve impulses resist erosion. — But naïve impulses resist erosion, utopian impulses especially.

6

Subversive convulsions. — The landscape of Didion's sentences is a landscape stripped of all mundanities, cleaned of all but the most barren and potent of sentimentalisms, the product of a mind whose impatience with the self-evident and intolerance for simplification borders on the pathological—and her compulsion to depict, with pointillist precision, the nuances and rival considerations that render easy solutions unsustainable, if not inapplicable, is the hallmark feature of her prose. The idealism that bloomed across certain pockets of the Californian vista in the mid-twentieth-century was an early and persistent target: the idealism of the Los Angeles Maoist whose world was one of “immaculate clarity” made meaningful by “high purpose”; the idealism of the Monterey folk singer who preferred to live “where the sun shines and the ambiguities can be set aside a little while longer”; the idealism of Hollywood actors who reduced political choices to “choices between the good (equality is good) and the bad (genocide is bad)” and who persisted in seeing “social life as a problem to be solved by the good will of individuals.”

To pass through this vista, as Didion did, “distrustful of political highs,” “convinced that the heart of darkness lay not in some error of social organization but in man's own blood,” was to be “robbed”, Didion would write toward the end of *The White Album*, “of a certain capacity for surprise.” Cruelty failed to surprise (“There were twenty dead, no, twelve, ten, eighteen”). Irony failed to surprise (“Striking black militants dropped in to chat with the deans”). And at last despair, too, failed to surprise—“Terror is the given of the place,” Didion would write in 1983, and although the place in question was San Salvador in the haze of civil war, one couldn't help but hear an echo of the American disorder that Didion had painted so vividly during the first two decades of her career: a disorder resistant to idealism, resistant to high purpose, resistant to the “good will of individuals” and whose “heart of darkness” Didion would spend the next three decades elaborating in perhaps the finest achievement of her career, the two dozen or so pieces commissioned from Didion by Bob

Silvers of *The New York Review of Books* and reprinted, incompletely, in two mid-career collections:

After Henry and *Political Fictions*.

In these essays the anti-utopianism of the first half of Didion's career would reach its apotheosis, dilating lush with evidence drawn from America in the late twentieth century of some essential stagnation, some fundamental resistance to progress stemming *not* from what Lessing saw as the "impermanent amalgam of current prejudice and the choices of this particular culture," but from what Didion saw as "some error in man's blood," from some tendency in man to veer again and again toward hypocrisy, toward mendacity, toward self-delusion and tribal self-interest.

In these essays "blacks continued to be excluded for cause from juries in trials involving police officers accused of killing blacks" and juries "continued to stay out two hours" before bringing in "acquittals, on clear days, in the summer." In these essays "entire families slept in the discarded boxes in which new Sub-Zero refrigerators were delivered, at \$2,600 per, to more affluent families." In these essays the stories of Americans "living wretchedly and marginally on the underside of where they wanted to be" were erased and replaced by the national media with stories of people "getting and spending rather than having and not having."

In these essays race and class are foregrounded, and Didion's sympathies—Didion who even in the 1970s had written more favorably of Black radicalism than of white liberal idealism: "As it happened I had always appreciated the logic of the [Black] Panther position, based as it was on the proposition that political power began at the end of the barrel of a gun"—are unambiguously proletarian. A persistent motif in these essays is a tendency by the powerful (typically American politicians and media professionals) to absorb, co-opt, ignore, and at last refashion toward their own purposes the humiliations and ordeals of an underseen and underheard invisible underclass.

A quintessentially Joan Didion observation: Nancy Reagan, whose husband Ronny had on the campaign trail inundated the electorate with promises to disentitle “the welfare queens, the student loans used to buy certificates of deposit, the young man who went into the grocery store and bought an orange with food stamps and a bottle of vodka with the change,” was later “surprised to learn (‘Nobody had told us’) that she and her husband were expected to pay for their own food, dry cleaning, and toothpaste while in the White House.” Elsewhere in *After Henry*, Didion closes an account of the forcible repatriation of Hong Kong’s Vietnamese refugees with this striking coda: “Some Vietnamese were photographed crying and resisting as they were taken to the Hong Kong airport. Hong Kong authorities stressed that the guards escorting the refugees were unarmed.”

“Eyes on the Prize,” Didion’s 1992 account of the Democratic National Convention that nominated Bill Clinton to be the Democratic candidate for president, is an account of a year in which “one American city, Los Angeles, had already burned” (referencing the 1992 Rodney King riots) and another American city, New York, had “a week before in Washington Heights come close to the flashpoint at which cities burn”—a year in which “944,000 American citizens and businesses filed for bankruptcy, a figure up twenty-one percent from the year before”—and a year in which the Democratic Party would at its national convention unite around a platform calibrated almost entirely toward appealing to its last two remaining constituencies: big-money donors (“I mean it’s no longer a thousand dollars. To get into the act now you’ve got to give a hundred thousand,” Didion quotes a Democratic donor as saying) and centrist voters.

“We had reached the zero-sum point toward which the process had been moving,” Didion would later write, “the moment in which the determination of the Republican Party to maximize its traditional low-turnout advantage was perfectly matched by the determination of the Democratic Party to shed any association with its traditional low-income

base. ‘Who cares what every adult thinks,’ as one Republican strategist had presciently said to *The Washington Post* in 1998. ‘It’s totally not germane to this election.’”

Shepherded by the view that “the failure of Democratic candidates in five of the six national elections preceding 1992 derived from an undesirable identification with the party’s traditional base,” the Democratic Party had by 1992 repackaged itself around a coded emphasis on the “people who used to vote for us” (characterized by the political director of the D.N.C. as “a suburbanite, in a household with about \$35,000 income, younger than forty-five, with a child or two, and in a marriage in which both partners work”)—a coded emphasis on “less entitlement” and “more empowerment,” on “rewarding work” and “ending welfare as we know it,” on “cracking down on deadbeat parents” and putting “100,000 more police on your streets”—a coded emphasis on the middle class, in other words, that betrayed no hint “of what had once been that party’s tacit role, that of assimilating immigration and franchising the economically disenfranchised.”

What Didion documents is what the historian Thomas Frank would later describe in his 2016 book *Listen, Liberal* as the end of the “proletarian period” of the Democratic Party.

“Repeated and emphasized often,” wrote Ted Van Dyk in *The New York Times* in January 1992, the term “middle class” would signal to “1980s Reagan Democrats that it is safe to come home to their party because poor, black, Hispanic, urban, homeless, hungry, and other people and problems out of favor in Middle America will no longer get the favored treatment they got from mushy 1960s and 1970s Democratic liberals.” “Instead of talking about Democrats lifting someone out of poverty,” Didion quotes a Democratic pollster telling party officials, “describe the party’s goal as helping average Americans live the good life. Instead of saying Democrats want to eliminate homelessness and educate the underclass, talk about finding a way for young couples to buy their first home and offer financial help to middle-class families to send their kids to college. Instead of saying the Democrats want to

provide health care for the poor, focus on making sure all working Americans have coverage.”

The ordeals and humiliations of the underclass, then, are depicted by Didion as a source of continuing interest to the Democratic elite only insofar as they could be absorbed, co-opted, deployed at campaign events and photo ops, and cashed in on the first Tuesday of every November. The actual circumstances of their despair, Didion observes throughout *Political Fictions*, are so otherwise devoid of urgency that the appearance of a genuinely populist candidate—say, Jesse Jackson, who ran as a Democratic presidential nominee in 1988 on an anti-war and anti-poverty platform (“His foreign policy positions emphasized ‘self-determination,’ ‘human rights,’ and ‘economic justice’ in third world countries,” *The New York Times* wrote in 1987 regarding Jackson’s presidential announcement: “On domestic policy, he promised to strengthen programs to prevent drugs from entering the country, ‘to make corporations and the wealthy pay their fair share of taxes’ and ... to invest a portion of Government pension money in building new housing, highways and other capital projects”)—would be regarded by D.N.C. officials, Didion writes in her 1988 essay “Insider Baseball,” as a “bomb that had to be defused.”

The worry in this case derived not from the fact that Jackson was Black and therefore not enough whites would come out and vote for him: the worry in this case derived from the fact that Jackson “had no experience in elected office,” didn’t “sound like a politician,” spoke out against the establishment, railed against “politics as usual,” inveighed against what Didion says “had come to be the very premise of the process, the notion that the winning and maintaining of public office warranted the invention of a public narrative based at no point on observable reality”—and therefore too many whites *would* come out and vote for him. “He’s talking about right now,” Didion quotes a white Jackson donor saying over dinner. “You get outside the gate here, take a look around,

you have to know we've got some problems, and he's talking about them."

Charles Taylor, in his review of *Political Fictions* for the website *Salon* in 2001, chastised Didion's analysis for exuding "a disjunctive air of naïveté," for being "unwilling or unable to acknowledge the pragmatism of politics." In fact the narrative line that runs throughout these pieces is just that: an acknowledgement of pragmatism, an implicit recognition of centrism as the inevitable terminus toward which all idealism finally settles. "This notion that the citizen's choice among determinedly centrist candidates makes a 'difference,'" Didion observes in "Insider Baseball," "is in fact the narrative's most central element, and also its most fictive." The collapse of idealism into pragmatism, like the collapse of idealism into self-interest, is a central property of our political and social life—not so much an aberration of history as it is one of history's many encoded features: pragmatism, centrism, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, Hong Kong authorities, never for long the revaluation but always, in the long view, the reinforcement of our aristocratic order—it is to these poles that the arc of our moral universe, though long, inexorably bends.

"Some error in man's blood."

This is the heart of Didion's worldview, and it is this worldview that Didion so relentlessly elaborates over the course of her mid-career nonfiction: some essential stasis, some higher-order immovability, power that accrues inexorably to the powerful and, last but not least, the transformation of this stasis by our national media into dynamic and digestible narratives that work ceaselessly and without remission, day in and day out, twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week,

only to obscure that stagnation.

Distrust of first instincts. — “We tell ourselves stories in order to live.”

This is our first instinct, and this is also the instinct that Didion’s career-long body of work teaches us to most belligerently distrust. The lesson is an unruly one to integrate—unruly precisely because the richer, more unalloyed access to truth toward which this counsel points precisely demands that we concede some final inevitability, some final confinement of our sensibility.

What we have instead are the pieces in front of us.

What we have instead is a composite from which smaller pieces can be *isolated, distilled, taken apart and reconfigured by way of deductive reasoning*—what we have instead is an intelligence from which larger pieces can be *induced, thought up, extracted from conjecture and tested for truth by way of empirical analysis*. What we have instead, in short, is the human mind—a mind capable of both empirical observation and inductive imagination and whose capacity for distinguishing faithfully between the two is the hallmark measure of health and high function.

“We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the ‘ideas’ with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.”

Didion said that.

The artist’s body of work as revelation. — What is objectivity?

One answer might be: the absence of an end in sight.

“Inquiry for inquiry’s sake.”

The sustained application of a critical intelligence onto the world not only as we see it but as it is taught to us, excerpted to us, culled out in snippets and proliferated to us by the people

we know and by the people whose job it is to know, by “public figures”—C.E.O.s, politicians, cultural movers and shakers whose speech, processed through a domestic public relations industry that in 2016 generated \$13.5 billion in revenue (a 119 percent increase from 2001), now consists almost exclusively of platitudes—by “cultural commentators,” whose ability to win and maintain some atomized segment of a national audience united only in its aversion to depth and nuance (“tl;dr”) now depends almost entirely on their ability to fortify preexisting instincts—and by “journalists,” the newspapers and wire services and cable news anchors whose conception of “objectivity” in their reporting on everything from war games abroad to corporate consolidation at home has retreated, bizarrely, from a disinterest in the consequences of skeptical inquiry to a disinterest in the *act of skeptical inquiry itself*.

This extraordinary conception of “objectivity” has proliferated across what remains of a media landscape arrogated by snap judgments and hot takes, thoughts typed out in an afternoon over an intellectual diet of *The Times* homepage, a blog, a cable news channel on YouTube, and Twitter—an internet-centric vista in which, to borrow the words of Didion (reviewing a book by Bob Woodward in 1996), “the disinclination to exert cognitive energy has reached critical mass.” “Amnesia was our preferred take,” Didion told the audience during a panel convened in 2008 by *The New York Review of Books* to discuss that year’s presidential election, and to examine the absorptions and preoccupations of the American media today is to remember just how permanent this amnesia must be, this alacrity to chronicle new names and faces reading from the same scripts as if the substitution of new names and faces constituted its own revelation, this general reluctance to penetrate beyond the agreed-upon and widely known, this general tendency to coalesce around received wisdom and received views.

The failure by the American media to gauge reliably the breadth and depth of public support for Donald Trump in 2016, or to document with any courage prior to 2017 the

decades-long sexual abuse by certain influential powerbrokers within its own industry, to take only two recent examples, might have been a chance for the American media to self-inquire about certain embedded tendencies. But these apprehensions mingled uneasily with a journalistic culture already averse to multipolar examination, and certainly multipolar self-examination, and so these apprehensions were summarily discharged, redeployed into the term “fake news” and thereby quarantined, jettisoned, offshored to Breitbart and Infowars and thus rendered inapplicable to itself.

“A preference for broad strokes, for the distortion and flattening of character and the reduction of events to narrative, has been for well over a hundred years the heart of the way the city presents itself,” Didion writes in “Sentimental Journeys,” an exploration of the implicit and explicit narratives underpinning the national media’s treatment of the 1989 rape and assault of a female jogger in New York’s Central Park, and arguably the crowning achievement of Didion’s career—a distillation into some 16,000 words of the cascading intelligence that both underpins and singles out Didion’s worldview. The assault on the jogger, Didion points out, was only one of 3,255 rapes reported in New York City that year—“including one the following week involving the near decapitation of a black woman in Fort Tryon Park and one two weeks later involving a black woman in Brooklyn who was robbed, raped, sodomized, and thrown down an air shaft”—but “the point was rhetorical, since crimes are universally understood to be news to the extent that they offer, however erroneously, a story, a lesson, a high concept.”

The elevation by the media of this particular victim into a symbol not only of “triumph,” but of triumph over the very specific challenges facing New York City itself, had in part to do with the victim’s race and class—the victim, white, was a graduate of Wellesley and Yale and worked in Manhattan as an investment banker—and in part to do, Didion writes, with the “demonstrable ‘difference’ between the woman and her accused assailants,” five boys (four Black and one Hispanic)

who lived in subsidized housing and who were eventually convicted and imprisoned in 1990 before their convictions were overturned in 2002 after DNA evidence identified an unrelated man as the sole perpetrator of the assault.

“Despite the fact that [jurors] would eventually mention physical evidence as having been crucial in their bringing guilty verdicts ... there was not actually much physical evidence at hand,” Didion would note in 1991, listing a fragment of hair untraceable to any particular person and dirt samples similar to dirt found in other areas of the park.

To suggest, however, that this minimal physical evidence could open the case to an aggressive defense ... would come to be construed, during the weeks and months to come, as a further attack on the victim.... So fixed were the emotions provoked by this case that the idea that there could have been, for even one juror, even a moment’s doubt in the state’s case, let alone the kind of doubt that could be sustained over ten days, seemed, to many in the city, bewildering, almost unthinkable.

The specific challenge facing the city itself, then—as understood by “many in the city”—was crime.

“Crime had long been taken for granted in less affluent” neighborhoods, Didion writes, and had only by the late 1980s become the subject of more general examination once “the more privileged, and especially the more privileged white, citizens of New York had begun to feel unnerved at high noon in even their own neighborhoods.” What had been violated in the assault, then, was the hallucination favored by the professional class of a New York “where getting and spending could take place without undue reference to having and not having”; a hallucination of a New York devoid not only of the irritations associated with the underclass but, for all intents and purposes, of the underclass itself; a hallucination of a New York where “grave and disrupting problems,” “problems of not

having, problems of not making it," problems of "people living wretchedly and marginally on the underside of where they wanted to be," were still too segregated to be seen.

The rape and brutalization of a white investment banker in Central Park ("an eerily exact and conveniently personalized representation," Didion notes, "of what the *Daily News* had called 'the rape and the brutalization of a city'") was both an assault on this hallucination and a convenient outlet for the professional class to "transfer and express what had clearly become a growing and previously inadmissible rage with the city's disorder," a means by which "an increasingly visible underclass could be confronted by the middle class, both white and black, without guilt." A good deal of "Sentimental Journeys" is devoted to investigating this preference by the powerful to view even flagrant inequality and flagrant disempowerment among members of a nominally shared physical and cultural space (the shared space of a park, for instance, or else the shared space of a city—New York, Didion reminds us, is a city "where entire families slept in the discarded boxes in which new Sub-Zero refrigerators were delivered, at \$2,600 per, to more affluent families") as nonetheless conducive to a "naturally cohesive and harmonious" social order, against which all instances of crime and disorder can then be viewed as senseless violations—deliberate disruptions by deliberate actors—and not as predictable outcomes, the unsurprising byproduct of structural and endemic, system-wide social atomization.

Central Park itself, Didion points out, was born out of just such a delusion:

It was the duty and the interest of the city's privileged class, [the park's architect Frederick Law Olmsted] had suggested some years before he designed Central Park, to "get up parks ... so attractive as to force into contact ... the gentleman and the rowdy." The notion that the interests of the "gentleman" and the "rowdy" might be at odds did not intrude: then as now, the

preferred narrative worked to veil actual conflict, to cloud the extent to which the condition of being rich was predicated upon the continued neediness of a working class.

Narrativization, for the powerful, functions as a sort of sedative, a way for the powerful to reaffirm their good intentions and paper over their uneasy guilts, a soporific for the broader middle class to, knowingly or unknowingly, render opaque not only the city's "actual tensions of race and class but also, more significantly, the civic and commercial arrangements that rendered those tensions irreconcilable."

And yet the imposition of narratives onto these same events by the underclass, Didion would go on to suggest—"the repeated references [within the Black community] to lynchings ... the weird and self-defeating insistence that no rape had taken place and little harm been done the victim"—would function as its own soporific, generate its own obfuscations (and here we have the turn, the move to complexity, the absence of an end in sight, the sustained application of a critical intelligence by a writer whose sympathies are otherwise unambiguously proletarian).

Because: there is also the fact of that slide, that fall, that slippage on the part of the disinherited from some sober recital of the truth to some amplification of the truth, and even sometimes to a betrayal of the truth—"It was said that the prosecution was withholding evidence that the victim had gone to the park to meet a drug dealer. It was said, alternately or concurrently, that the prosecution was withholding evidence that the victim had gone to the park to take part in a satanic ritual"—some slippage on the part of the disinherited who, unlike the powerful from whom the powerless are required to request relief, bear the weight of past trauma, bear the weight of historical memory, and bear the weight of their own memories of being pushed aside, ignored, dismissed, passed over for a whiter face, stopped at an intersection and frisked, stopped at the door and asked to leave.

For the disinherited: narrative functions not only as a source of explanatory power (“Let me tell you what I mean”) but as a source of psychic and social power as well (“Let me say this just to get it out, just to get it all out,” I remember saying to my boyfriend in my moments of deepest distress). Stories are structurally incentivized to foment beyond mere objectivity, beyond inquiry for inquiry’s sake, beyond the absence of an end in sight and toward the alleviation of some psychic weight, and toward the galvanization of support for social interventions often seen as directly proportionate to the amount of sympathy and urgency that can be instilled into an amenable listener (“*Boyfriend beats shit out of her, they blame it on our boys,*” Didion overhears a woman saying in the corridor outside the courtroom where the trial took place).

It strikes me as probably true that the backlashes and recoils that some critics reserve for all instances of hyperbole and fictionalization stems in part from some clumsiness at accounting for this phenomenon, some inability to allot for (and finally try to accommodate, try to forgive) the deforming effects of years and years of psychic weight. But it strikes me as also true that hyperbole and fictionalization will, in the long run, necessarily work against the interests of the underclass, and that the assiduous policing of all hyperbole and fictionalization by a more powerful class will be but one more weight that the powerless—in their imperfect and finally very human efforts to realize some broader and possibly unattainable relief from the weight of their conditions—will have to bear.

9

Sly and studied resistance. — Possibly unattainable?

Yes.

What Didion describes in these essays, and what she has spent the greater part of her career identifying, are not the incidental features of our social organization but structural

features of human life—the ways in which people do and do not see each other, the ways in which people can and cannot relate to each other as people at all, the general tendency of power to accrue upon power and of inequality to perpetuate itself, in spite of and sometimes even because of the most valiant efforts of our democratic institutions and social reformers—a broadly anti-utopian vision of the world in which people at the bottom of the well will be excavated and lifted out, only to be replaced by new people at the bottom of the well—a world not only bereft of God, but bereft of any prospect of finally eliminating the bottom of the well—a world broadly resistant to refashioning itself into a form that would bring moral beings any lasting comfort.

Some error in man's blood.

"[It] seems to me that you'd never get a Nobel Prize for Literature," NPR's Susan Stamberg once remarked to Didion in a 1977 radio interview. "Not because of any lack of skill, mind you, but because that prize is given for optimistic and positive views of life."

The thought occurs to me that not only the Nobel Committee but the American public in particular has been and will remain resistant to Didion's broader conclusions—and not necessarily out of any qualms about its essential veracity (although such qualms would certainly be valid, since the world as we know it has yet to fully "pan out"), but its essential utility. What good is truth, the idea goes, if it is only useful in describing the world? "The point," Marx said famously, "is to change it." But that Didion works in the legacy of not Marx but Nietzsche is clear, Nietzsche who wrote in a letter to his mother at the age of twenty: "Is not the true inquirer totally indifferent to what the result of his inquiries may be? For when we inquire, are we seeking for rest, peace, happiness? No, only for truth, even though it be in the highest degree ugly and repellent.... [And here] the ways of men divide: if you wish to strive for peace of soul and happiness, then believe; if you wish to be a disciple of truth, then inquire."

The thought occurs to me that if Nietzsche had been Californian, his name would be Didion.

But couldn't we still do the best we can?

Yes.

And here an even cursory examination of the American vista in the early twenty-first century continues to disconsole: the reformers and reactionaries who collaborate only in speaking over each other, the politicians who regenerate themselves year in and year out promising us that this year they'll change, and a national media that persists in relaying to us the story of our country as if Didion's most penetrating insights had never been written at all—her lessons never learned, her assessments neither disproven nor integrated. I think often back to a particular phrase that appears at the very end of Didion's foreword to *Political Fictions*, although the entire sentence is worth repeating in full: "That this was not a demographic profile of the country at large, that half the nation's citizens had only a vassal relationship to the government under which they lived, that the democracy we spoke of spreading throughout the world was now in our own country only an ideality, had come to be seen, against the higher priority of keeping the process in the hands of those who already held it, as facts without application."

Facts without application.

The application, of course, has been somewhere else, since the society that does not integrate a speaker's dissent might still do well to integrate her image. And here I remember the many ways in which Didion's image has been co-opted by our literary and cultural establishment: the tote bags, the Netflix documentary, the essay collection and even a writing contest at the University of California at Berkeley named after what is perhaps Didion's most famous essay, "Goodbye to All That." "Goodbye to All That" is a fine piece of writing, but to rest her reputation on this and *The Year of Magical Thinking* and two or three other selections from *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and the first sentence of *The White Album* is, in a career as formidable and disruptive as Didion's, not only to deflate her

achievements, but to cast Didion unwittingly into that most poignant and immovable of invisibilities—the invisibility of the thinker whose ideas are hidden in plain sight.

The legacy of her most interesting insights facts without application.

“This is the big league of pain, all right, and readers from the sleepy majority are likely to scream for her to douse the lights and try to get some rest,” Wilfrid Sheed wrote in a review of Didion’s 1970 novel *Play It as It Lays*. “Yet she sees nothing that is not there. Miss Didion is a reporter, not a hysteric: prove to her that the world is not like this. Prove that marriages don’t die and that children don’t suffer. Then you can sleep.” The thought finally occurs to me that this invisibility is not only embedded in our preferred narratives but possibly anticipated by Didion herself, Didion who saw more clearly than anyone else that inexorable and finally very human tendency to see what is immovable and look the other way, to take comfort in the road already traveled and look with dreamy pleasure at the thoroughfares still to come, to remember finally that there is nothing all that wrong with doing the very best we can, to douse out the lights, and sleep.

10

Obfuscation. — They shoot intellectuals in America, don’t they?

2017

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!*[™], 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 the 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 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 angles and clean lies—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 lines 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 read after her into the linguistic equivalents of failed states.

And in Lispector I discovered the world.

I've fellated 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 proposition in this country. For what taunts and teases the human mind is *uncertainty*, and what deadens a 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 by 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 allowed 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 erode 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?

Fate, 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—can you hear me? Did you ever think you'd live to see me wash into the sea? I splash cold water into my face and rub open my eyes, but the water that laps at my feet is 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, is 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-assurance, dripping down from the lips of the swollen-hearted—words are spoken. Souls are engaged. Unions are consecrated. But all articulation is obfuscation, and the words we choose—as with the families 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 piece of furniture 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 sight 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.

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 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 a candid description of the parallel universe that I in fact inhabit, not the world as we know it, but a world in which everything I hold "true" 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 the 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 specific to our egos. 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 radicals 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. Tribal solipsism will be the communal enemy that all of humanity will have to confront and rise up against 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 will for the rest of our lives 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 egos to win narrative momentum, for competing wills to power to win narrative control, animated by our intelligence, 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—while Reason returns us back 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 of 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 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.

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 the 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 abilities, and scarcity will never end—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 elevated 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 *someone has to stop the upper middle class from winning*, someone has to stop

the upper middle class from capturing every last segment of society, every last segment of power, every last segment of a culture that used to be free and pure-hearted and compassionate enough to mean something.

What I fight for is a country forty years from now made up of four hundred million people who love 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 large 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 street in Saigon, his nostrils flaring peacefully as his scalp peels back to reveal flames dancing on his skull.

What could move a 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 life 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 of our egos look the same—it's a beautiful and disordered species we have, 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 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 genuinely thoughtful and clement and intentional soul. And as the waters finally close in on me, I turn to language once more to reassert 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 have for being alive would be 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 I adore it.

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

On the Shore of the Wide World

"I'M NOT SURE I believe in free will," I said, "or evil."

Later that night at the riad he would teach me his favorite epistemological problem (Gettier), which we would work on together until almost sunrise, in notebooks that by the end of the summer brimmed with Arabic lessons.

"Suppose you were born on April 20, 1889," I began, "to Alois and Clara Hitler, and fate unfolds for you exactly as it had for Hitler himself. If our choices emerge from our characters ... well, what sort of character would you have developed?"

I continued: "Look. Obviously, anyone who espouses racism is..."

Did I even need to say it?

I struggled for a word that could adequately convey my disapprobation, yet the only word I could think of was "evil."

"But part of dispensing justice well, I think, is dispensing it dispassionately ... which is just easier to do when you see 'evil' as an eventuality of nature."

He shrugged, gazing across the sea at what looked like Gibraltar.

"Reminds me of a saying."

Years later, in response to a Facebook status I had written excoriating Donald Trump, he sent me a single-sentence message:

"Search others for their virtues, thyself for thy vices."

It was a mirthful callback to what he had shared with me that first night in Morocco.

"*Marhaban ya sadiqi...*" I began typing back, with the hope suddenly washing over me that we would teach each other tiny lessons on how to live for the rest of our lives.