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To Disappear

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To Disappear

by

Rachel Chenven Powers

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

Thesis Committee:
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Portland State University
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Abstract

This is a selection of linked lyric essays, covering explorations of memory, experience, nature, transcendence, insignificance, orientation, boredom, privilege, vocation, and more.

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The Earth's Edge

We drive out of Portland on Highway 6, going west, past strip malls and subdivisions; our eyes are trained to the distance, where layers of green hillocks recede into gray clouds.

We are four: Paul and Rachel, ages 48 and 43, progenitors; Joe and Isaac, ages 9 and 12, progeny. We are on our way to Sand Lake, to borrow a small seaside cottage for a summer weekend. In the backseat the boys are restless with anticipation. Paul drives with careful deliberation. Closed on my lap is *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf's slim beautiful novel of seaside life.

We pass a large swamp to the north, forked with headless tree trunks, sickly sticks rising from the dark stillness like damned but sunning souls. We pass the gentle bucolic of farmed hillsides scored in neat rows curving evenly along the spines of rolling hills. We pass the carcass of an old wooden barn, slats like bones; we criss-cross Gales Creek, a tributary of the Tualatin River. Trees strangled in ivy stand motionless as they are swallowed. Eventually we start moving out of light into the forest, heading into the Coast Range. Nestled in a roadside clearing to the south, a full-sized wooden bear, carved from a whole trunk, lofts an American flag. Then we enter Tillamook State Forest, where a clearcut swath of hillside is dotted with rows of baby trees planted in plastic sleeves.

We pass the summit at 1536 feet and start heading down the other side.

Lava rock hills form canyon walls to the north and south; the sun flickers strobe-like through leafshade. Every few minutes, yellow road signs alert us to pending rock slides, potential energy poised breathlessly above salal, hawkweed, daisies, and foxglove.

Sand Lake is a tidal estuary that swirls into the continent in saltwater ribbons like the marbled colors in the endpapers of an antique book. The house that we stay in is on the south end of the estuary, with a distant view, if you're facing northwest, of the Pacific. The house is ramshackle, filthy, utilitarian, cozy. Cuddlesome couches in the living room are perfect for afternoon naps, with a view onto a back deck through the mottled filter of a faulty double-pane window.

The back eaves of the house harbor a series of mud-and-grass nests tucked up between the wooden rafters, made by swifts. Any time of day, sitting on the deck, you can watch the swifts circle endlessly, low in the sky, black top feathers and red-brown bellies, forked tails. The whole season for a swift seems taken up by this endless circling. They are finding food for the babies that wait in the nests and squawk and chreep when the parents swerve in for a landing.

Paul takes the boys out to the water, or more properly the muck that rims it, just beyond the reeds at the end of a wild grassy lawn. I sit in an Adirondack chair reading my book. I am decompressing from my communal identity, surrounded by boys, thinking, with Mrs. Ramsay, that "All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal,

evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, invisible to others.”

Two swifts gibber to each other as they swing past me, taking turns on the nest, building, sitting, fidgeting. From where I sit I can see, just above their nest edge, one little red mouth, rimmed in yellow, opening up in the shape of a child’s paper fortune teller to receive food. One parent stays on the nest, swapping out detritus, tail flipping and twitching. The other circles out again and flies low along the grass, skimming for meals.

Later, in the upstairs bedroom, I hear a fluttering at the window, and I realize that the swifts are perching just inches away, separated from me by nothing but a triangular pane of glass. One of them has settled on the ledge, and when another alights next to the first, they commence a quick conversation, chirping back and forth at each other in tonal bleeps. One is sleeker, with a rust-colored throat and black tail feathers, while the other, slightly more rotund, has tufts of fuzz erupting from his head in the tonsure of a hoary old monk.

Like dogs, they lift their legs to scratch behind their ears, tuck their flat white beaks into their hind quarters to groom and scrabble, in short jerky movements. Finally, the sleeker of the birds flies away, and the old man remains behind, staring out at the lawn like a comic wise man surveying the inscrutable world.

On our second day we head out to a nearby beach, driving around an arm of the estuary to an abandoned patch indented with fingers of water seeping over the swollen sand. The day is cold and windy, and everyone is layered in sweatshirts, jackets, hoods, sunglasses as a screen between our eyes and the cold white sky. It is low tide, so we cross the rivulets easily, nestling into a protected round of grassy sand, surrounded behind by small hills of grasses and shorepine, facing a saltwater surface serrated by wind.

The boys immediately set to work building a dam, directing the water through several smaller pools, feeling their power to master this small portion of the universe drain away with every breach of the wall by water, or clogging of the conduit by sand. Eventually the whole thing breaks up in the encroaching tide, despite the engineers' herculean efforts to fortify their creation.

Next they want to make a fire. One of them digs a hole in the earth, one of them collects driftwood to burn, both direct the gathering of stones to build a protective wall against the wind. Paul and I are conscripted into the work gang and we dig the smooth black rocks from their half-submersion in the swallowing sand, each one worn to polygonal irregularity by wind and water.

After the fire is going we take out our sandwiches, pass out chips and granola bars and juice boxes, hovering into our chests against the wind with our sandwiches at our mouths like harmonicas. Above a hawk comes soaring over: Paul points it out, and as we follow his finger with our eyes, another, then another, joins the party. Eventually there are seven of them, multiple muscular hawk bodies drifting in the wind overhead, staring

down at us as if interested in our picnic or perhaps our littlest, most vulnerable members. Their singular eyes focus down, and I imagine their superhuman vision zeroing in on our teeth; our fingernails; our heartbeats keeping time in the crooks of our elbows. The hawks are large, dark lingerers, native to the distant hills, strangers to us. Their sevenness seems mysterious, and we wonder it aloud to each other before they finally drift eastward and out of sight.

Like me, Joe has long hair: the wind whips it across our faces in briny ropes. The sand kicks up and sparkles against our skin, grates our eyes, a patter of pinpricks like the pins and needles of a bloodless leg unfolding back into the light. A thick batting of clouds drapes the wooded hills to the east, streaked by brief striations of light.

Nearby a group of parents and children are hunting for crabs. The boys dig another hole and solicit these neighbor kids to compete in a game of rock-in-the-hole. Isaac gives ornate orders in a barrage of wind-swept words that float away before I can process them properly. The rules are entirely baroque and convoluted, involving many precise measurements of distances between thrower and hole, one rock from another. The game begins, points accumulate, losers become rabid devotees, and two remaining contestants emerge, backed by cheering fans, to take the title.

A man in rubbery waders heads out across the narrow channel that separates our beach haven from a small island remaining in the encroaching tide. A bevy of children, Joe among them, follows him, their teeth chattering, to stand on the tiny island in their wet stork legs and look for crabs. I try out the water too, up to my ankles. It is cold but

not unbearably so. Small emerald green snatches of seaweed float over my toes, some hairy, some flat and translucent like squares of stained glass.

I wander back up the sand, follow Paul and Isaac out to the surrounding grasses, where among the sedges a dead tree trunk lies gray and gaunt on its side, like a fallen Roman column, what is left of its roots whorling skyward. Nearby in the sand we find an enormous vertebra bone and begin speculation on its origin, its once-lifeform. Is it cow? Is it whale? It is too big to be dog or fox, and unlikely to be cow, even if some dog-owner brought out a hunk of bone for his mutt to chew on, since vertebrae rarely figure in such scenarios. We think--I hope--that it is whale, though why this one bone, no skeleton, no memory, just the thick yellow knob, with its clean central hole and its symmetrical protrusions, remains mysterious, impervious to our impoverished imaginations.

Isaac joins the other children on the island in the channel as it disappears, the water upsurging around their ankles in the rising tide. The man in the waders is still looking for crabs, and the children find several, each one measured with the man's special crab ruler, to see if they are big enough to be keepers, to be caught. Finally a burst of cheering rings out when they find one, just big enough to be sacrificed for dinner. One child brings it up from the water hitched in the metal tines of a crab rake. She dumps it on the sand near the fire. It lies there upside down, not yet dead, yellow with purple streaks along the nubbins studding its shell.

The wind stays heavy and cold. Orange flames flap between the black furrowed squares of carbon that emerge like blisters from the skin of the logs. Eventually the wind

is too much, too persistent, unremitting, victorious. The wind has won. We gather up our trash, bank the fire, hold our shoes in our hands as we ford the new rivers made by the incoming tide to get back to the parking lot, where our car is like a hot little heaven, still and quiet with the doors closed.

As we drive away, we notice that the hawks have come back and are lingering, arrested mid-flight on the shear of the wind, above the parking lot. They hover motionlessly, as if frozen in glass, an unanswered query.

On our third day we head to Pacific City. We park in the crowded lot at the Pelican Brewery and pad down to the beach, where more cars line up in the dense sand. We head north toward the twin formations of a sandstone cliff eroding into a massive sand dune.

The loose grainy sand turns soft and wet; we follow the curved white thread of attenuated seafoam laced with seaweed strands and the round translucent half-spheres of washed-up sea jellies. Haystack Rock is craggy and incongruous in the near distance.

The sandstone rises at an angle in yellow layers of compressed sand, tilting diagonally upward to a sharp line of peaks topped with wind-wracked shorepine, seized permanently in the shape of trees in a hard seaward wind, like the citizens of Pompeii, frozen in their eternal positions of awe and terror. On the beach below the flat barnacled rocks are square and long, like a pod of beached whales, their skin a series of pockmarks

and deep-set wrinkles, the barnacles on the undersides growing long like white beaks or the armored claws of armadillos.

Standing in the sandy canyon between two of these leviathans, the crevice smells of sea-funk and is slippery with shades of rust and shimmery green. The waves roll in, breaking in angles of piebald white and tumbling over our legs up to the knees. The white seafoam is really just bubbles that marble and dissolve as the water slides back from the shore. The huge ocean is rocking in its gargantuan bowl.

Atop the rocks are the time-scoured indentations that at low tide offer up tide pools, small clear cups of water in which the children forage excitedly for caught creatures, scooping out fish and hermit crabs with a small net and spooning them into a plastic purple bucket.

When we exhaust the delights of the tidepools, we head toward the dune, a towering pile of sand, 60 feet straight skyward. The boys scramble up before us, every so often falling to their knees like parched desert explorers. We come up behind them, trying to step into the flat stairs left behind by their clompy feet. Still, the sand falls away beneath us, creating a parody of Zeno's paradox, one step forward, one step back. After a few minutes, I start to run, just to be done with it, my heart beating hard, sweating, with the sense that I am sliding ever downward, the summit a distant dream.

Finally I reach the top--the boys are here already, Paul is close behind--and Pacific City spreads out beneath us, misted and tucked into the hills like a doll town. Small

whitecaps mark the ocean's gaining brink; past land, the water is clear and aquamarine, shading out gray toward the indefinite horizon.

Looking down from this vantage, the dune itself feels razor-thin, a mere window ledge under the feet of a jumping man. I am unexpectedly at the top of the shifting world, from which angle the verge of the known universe, once spreading out to the far-off perimeter, is now only a few feet away, dropping quickly into oblivion. The boys, still immortal, run and jump off what looks like the earth's edge. My heart disappears and dissolves, but on closer approach, there they are, laughing on a ledge below. In my mind rings the voice of Lily Briscoe: "Was there no safety? No learning by heart of the ways of the world? No guide, no shelter, but all was miracle, and leaping from the pinnacle of a tower into the air?"

The erosion of wind and feet changes the shape of the dune constantly. People stomp the sand away and then a storm blows through and builds it up again. We do our part. The boys are in love with the feel of this shifting ground, but eventually, I tire of stunning views and vertigo. Coming down the dune, gravity picks me up like a leaf on the wind. I run fast, as if my legs were wings, pushing toward near-flight at every step.

On our last day, in the lazy morning before packing up, I curl up on the pillowy couch and finish my book. Lily Briscoe is forever poised on the terrace with her paintbrush in her hand, contemplating the meaning of life. Ten years after Mrs. Ramsay's sudden death, Lily stands there again, trying to capture the passing moment and pin it to

the canvas. “One wanted, she thought, dipping her brush deliberately, to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that’s a chair, that’s a table, and yet at the same time, It’s a miracle, it’s an ecstasy.” In the background is always the ocean: the vast distances, the cliffs above the bay, the clouds, the weather, the overcast and undulating mood.

While she paints, Lily watches Mr. Ramsay and his teenage children take a sailboat out to the lighthouse. The wind moves the sailboat along; Lily paints and thinks; she watches the Ramsays shrink as they move away. “The sea stretched like silk across the bay. Distance had an extraordinary power; they had been swallowed up in it, she felt, they were gone forever, they had become part of the nature of things.” She rehearses in her mind the impossible desire to hold on to the minor ecstasy of beauty, as it slips through her experience, ignites, then disappears.

Our week ends as unceremoniously as it began. We pack up our belongings, clean the uncleanable house, leaving dead bugs and dust bunnies strewn about where we found them when we arrived. The swifts are still running their cycles across the lawn. The tide continues to wash in and out like clockwork, the cosmic timekeeper, ancient and reliable. The boys are sad to leave, but anxious to return to civilization, to the mediated world, where walls and screens separate us from the elemental exposure of wind on skin, sand in all the cracks, the view of oneself as a painter, molding a moment of simple vision: an infinitesimal dot, a digging child, a rigid shorepine in a relentless wind.

The Feeling of Nature

“So the sundering we sense between nature and culture...
is still another version of that bitter bifurcation long ago
decreed--our expulsion from Eden--although it differs
from the apparently similar Cartesian crease across
things in the fact that the two halves of us once were one.”
--William H. Gass, “Nietzsche: The Polemical Philosopher”

The city is a kind of trap, or maze, an artificial terrarium, in which I live
perpendicularly in the grid of history's urban planners, slotted into straight lines,
someone else's idea of order. Moving in this forced alignment, distant kin to cars and the
square brick of buildings, I feel myself a mere fly under the loupe of a cosmic scientist.

I dream of escaping this glass cage in which I'm caught, and finding a grove or
thicket in which to hide from that prying eye. But who am I kidding? I am too long in this
box and would not know what to do with my freedom. I want not nature at all but *the*
feeling of nature, bounded by the human scale.

Seeking nature is an irresistible form of nostalgia, seeking the purer better origin,
the imagined ancestral time, before things got so complicated. It is a way of asking, What
kind of animals were we in our distant history, when we had the full lay of fields and
forests as our homes?

Culture is young: Nature is old. I imagine a place that has created us, rather than a
place we have created.

I drive eastward out of southeast Portland, Oregon on a dark wet day in fall. As I go east from the upscale and still gentrifying inner urban core, the houses get shabbier, the businesses less trendy. As the street numbers climb, the neighborhood wealth declines. I drive through Mt.Scott-Arleta, through Foster-Powell, through Lents. Past I-205 the landscape starts to give way to scrubby underbrush, run-down houses with boarded-up windows, mysterious businesses with barbed-wire perimeters. Douglas firs appear among whole fields of blackberry brambles.

Finally, at the barely-marked edge of a dead-end street, I pull up to a trailhead across from a dilapidated house with a gas can and a tricycle sitting side by side on a brown lawn. I park in a tire-contoured slick of mud; climb out into the cold; round a rustic wooden fence; follow a packed dirt path into a stand of trees.

All of a sudden I am out of the gray city and enclosed in the speechless forest: walls of branches, roof of leaves. The sound of rain in trees creates a rhythmic clattering: *drop* and *tick* and *plop* and *clack*, as if the twigs and bugs were all tap-dancing, each to its own inner rhythm. I imagine them thus, all living things attentive to the music of precipitation, moving their tiny unseen bodies against a perimeter of branch and pebble.

I pick my way along a small mud path, winding through straight-backed flocks of Douglas fir and thin oaks, some upright, some felled and stretching across the feet of those still standing. The firs are hoary, their trunks thick with aging girth, extending upward unequivocally, each one sprouting a hundred skinny arms at 90 degree angles.

Their bark is furred with clay-green moss, riven with the hardened breakage of old skin. I move quietly alone among these ancient bodies.

Powell Butte. This old hill, rimmed with forest like a bald man's head, is one among many such hills near Portland, part of the Boring Volcanic Field that extends from the Cascade Mountains westward across northwestern Oregon and southwestern Washington. Its lava flows erupted from dozens of cinder-cone centers starting two and a half million years ago, dotting the region with many small buttes, now disguised as nature parks. Powell Butte is among the youngest, having erupted roughly 342,000 years ago, give or take 5000 years.

This 5000 years, a mere give-or-take for a volcano, encompasses the whole of recorded history. Not even God has existed much longer, 6000 years at best.

Being in the forest, winding up the muddy path through blankets of feathery ferns and mossy tree trunks, can take me back only so far. I cannot stand on the edge of this miniscule mountain and witness the convulsive expulsion of the earth's hot red innards, slide into the rock and become a wild, heat-hatched seed. I cannot dispense with opposable thumbs, upright stature, the meaty maze of neo-cortex wrapped neatly inside my skull like a crocheted blanket, popping and whizzing with neuronal exuberance.

I am the mere eyes of a bullfrog, the shape of a leaf. I can do little more than re-enact myself.

At the edge of the forest, the bright sun illuminates the yellow leaves. I make my way out onto the open meadow, stretching before me in waves of brown grasses, angled evenly against the wind. Morning mist wavers in the near-distance, like spirit descending from the light-streaked clouds.

In the 1880s, this area was called Camp's Butte, because it was used as an orchard and cattle ranch by the Camp family. In 1908, it passed to the Anderegg family, Swiss immigrants who took over the operation. They pastured 800 dairy cows on the meadow for several generations, and hosted late-night gatherings of the Swiss community. There was always dancing, singing, and yodeling.

Now the meadow is gridded with tubes of white plastic mesh swathing new-planted trees. In aggregate, they are alien gravestones luminous among graybrown grass. These new plantings are part of the restoration effort in the wake of reservoir construction, because despite the sense one gets that this meadow is the same meadow on which the Anderegg's cows wandered only a few decades ago, it is not the same meadow at all. Instead, it is a reconstructed image of that meadow, which masks a vast underground compartment filled with water.

The water reservoir holds 50 million gallons of water for thirsty Portlanders. It is less than ten years old. Roughly one football field wide and nearly two football fields long, it was constructed out of 18,000 cubic yards of concrete and 3 million pounds of reinforcing steel. When they were done with the building, they covered it all over again with dirt and grass, as if it had never happened.

There is something poetic in storing up water inside the heart of the volcano. Once a furnace, now a well; once a dairy farm, now a nature park. This modest hill has likely had more lives than we can know of, and more yet to come. In its current incarnation it plays the role of Nature, while beneath the costume of protected wilderness lies the engineering feat that supports the surrounding city. Our colonization of nature is complete, and yet--we are made of minerals and molecules, just like everything else. As I circumnavigate the meadow, with its defunct orchard of walnut, apple, and pear trees, I see no sign of the vast cavern beneath my feet.

I stop to listen to the metallic chirp of birds, a Latinate vibrato of beeps and squeaks, a silvery series of trilled notes like a radio signal broadcast into space by some unintelligible intelligence. To urban ears, this complex whistled sonata is what passes for silence. In the distance, I can still hear the deep rumbling vibration of eighteen-wheelers passing by on the highway.

A slight wind kicks up, sending a percussive tremor through the yellow leaves, a wire brush on a cymbal fading in and out again. Almost all the oak trees have broken branches dropped at odd angles at their sides like useless limbs, as if a hurricane or an army had just come through, carelessly hacking.

The Butte's modest summit of 630 feet looks out on the sharp peak of Mount Hood to the east, the lumpy, sunken hump of Mt. Adams to the north, craggy Mt. Jefferson to the southeast. The wind rises, the bushes tremble, the dry leaves of grass

shirr together, masking the soft trill of a spotted towhee. In the distance the mountains are gray-blue slopes against a curved slice of strident light. Only a painter could capture this stark luminosity, the shades and shapes, the fall foliage, symphonic in color, dotting the faraway landscape of hills beyond hills into the distance.

In the park there are supposedly rabbits, ring-necked pheasants, ground squirrels, raccoons, gray foxes, skunks, bats, chipmunks, coyotes, and black-tailed mule deer, not to mention 100 species of birds, including birds of prey. Rounding the edge of the old orchard off the north side of Summit Lane, a hawk glides overhead, its telltale wings set to soaring, the very shape of freedom. I follow this trail and find myself circling the meadow and coming back around again to a busy bevy of ground birds with brown heads, black eyes, chests of dirty white, pecking in a high-speed, frenetic movement. As I approach they fly off in all directions, peeling away one-by-one like the synchronized swimmers in an Esther Williams musical.

It is something of a mystery that this beautiful nature park has so few visitors, and thus provides the welcome illusion, if only for a brief interlude, that I am entirely alone in unmarked nature, the first woman alive among ancient trees and stunning views across vistas shrouded in mist and gray light. But wait--here comes a man walking his dog, a big burly St. Bernard type creature with muddy paws and a sad expression. And now a woman and her two children, vying with one another for the broken bits of sticks that litter the path. And now a biker, suited up in the finest gear, calling "On your left!" and sending a spray of pebbles against my ankles as he wheels by.

Are these people aware that they are recreating on borrowed time? Ancient as the Boring Volcanic Field is, it is not likely to erupt again in the foreseeable future. The Pacific Northwest's most famous volcano, Mt. St. Helens, is only 50,000 years old, an infant compared to Powell Butte's 350,000 years, and thus still in the prime of its fiery activity. Whatever hot spot beneath the earth here once forced itself out into explosion so long ago is no longer raging at the bit like a tethered race horse, eager to burst forth. Still, the lithosphere, earth's mobile upper crust, floats along in chunks of tectonic plate, driven hither and thither by the currents of the hot liquid mantle below. The process is ongoing: the earth is a hot little ball in space, a motile cell in its own bubble of atmosphere, heated from inside its molten core, both dangerous and sustaining to its passengers.

In Hawaii, an arc of islands created by still-bubbling volcanic activity, early inhabitants imagined their ecology as a war between sibling rivals, the sister goddesses Pele, Goddess of Fire, and Namaka o Kahai, Goddess of the Ocean. Every time Pele set herself up in a fiery home, Namaka o Kahai doused her with tsunamis to quell her force. Pele moved southeast (conveniently, as the tectonic plates moved northwest), starting up new volcanoes, creating new islands, new possibilities for life, as she went. This mythic past, a battle of elemental forces anthropomorphized into petty humanoid squabbles, seems as potent and poignant as any geologic explanation, extending backward into deep time, made of hydrogen, oxygen, and scientific deduction.

A cold wind picks up, and I head back toward the quiet forest, stepping carefully downward through wet scattered logs, curtained in dappled green light. In minutes I will

be back out in the city, overtaken by the amnesia that strips away any memory of nature's fierce force and enormous scope, once again hoodwinked by the illusion that she and I are separate, that civilization is more powerful than nature, rather than one species of it.

For now, Powell Butte is a small hill, surrounded by, impregnated with, the industrial imperatives of the city. It seems a captive nature, assimilated into the urban grid, fully harnessed by humans, made into a storage box and a recreation hub; a place to study and maintain the vanishing green world, a terrarium writ large.

And yet so old! And the youngest of its chain. A recent growth on the skin of an ancient face. And us atop it, looking out at our pavement kingdom, which will eventually break up, like the tectonic plates beneath it, shake off the city like an old coat, and float free.

Access to Grace

Rain

Another day of rain. The cars careen and whisper, windows blacked in the midday darkness, melanoid tires spinning off silver flecks of water. If Annie Dillard is right that “beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them,” then a noontime rain is a test of our efforts at vision. “The least we can do,” Dillard commands, “is try to be there.”

I try to be there, but grace is a slippery fish.

The rain keeps up its odd announcements, now rattling the car’s rooftop in tinny clatter, now sucking itself back up into the gray-draped sky. Even as it dribbles down, some middle swathe of air is rinsed in sunlight, a lit liminal line between sky and ground, revealing a pale rainbow half-arc'd in the middle distance behind silent fir trees standing guard.

Within minutes, the clatter softens to a susurrations, stops altogether, ceases, slides away in pockmarked plops down the wide front window. The rainbow fades, a faint misperception, six stripes of imaginary light, glowing away.

Stones

I have collected, over time, too many stones and dried bits of flora. I never bother to identify or otherwise explain to myself these bits and pieces. Instead of the categories as given to me by science, I make of them my own configurations. In one bowl I have only black rocks striped with white lines. In another, only stones with holes or pockmarks. In a third, rocks perfectly round, a fourth, rocks mottled with the composite color of some now-invisible geologic process of compression, material merging.

There is satisfaction when things fit together. The curve of one rock nestles perfectly into the cleft of another, though they were not formed together, but in distant regions of the earth's disparate crust. These stones are the strata of earth's sheddings, hardened into mountains and eroded back to pieces, plied for pressing aeons by gravity and weather.

Together, apart, together. Like this we create and are created.

Trees

It is that time of winter when the bare branches treat the sky as a muted canvas, making drawings in wet black ink. The effect is of a devastating Jackson Pollock, all crooked lines in fragmented intersection, a sinuous chaos. The trees know spring will come back, but the fragile branches, removed from the living green heart, reach out only toward empty air.

Yet a trunk is like the brawny shoulder of a grown man, an Atlas holding up the whole of the sky. Once, recently, walking in the compromised forest, a thin strip of oaks and firs ranging a meadow on the outskirts of town, I came across a felled trunk high as my head, and felt the sudden need to touch it as I would the arm of a beloved. I stood stroking the rough bark, feeling in my fingers the departed spirit of an immense forest, a tribe of broad and thewy beasts lumbering slowly across the land in their communal bulk, at a pace too primal to register in human perception.

Naturalist Loren Eiseley recounts an occasion of floating in a river and experiencing, for a short while, the vast history of all that floated with him. “I was streaming over ancient sea beds thrust aloft where giant reptiles had once sported; I was wearing down the face of time and trundling cloud-wreathed ranges into oblivion.” Surrounded by trees with my pale clumsy hand on the bark of one felled flank, I felt some of this history, some of this pulsing of life through ongoing time, some small portion of this connection to the incredible evolutionary accident of energy flowing through endless form.

Trees are the metaphor for everything: for human thought, with its branches of knowledge; for human language, with its ancient Babel of forked tongues; for the genealogy of life itself, with its emergence four billion years ago from some unimaginably slender common trunk. Roots beget branches beget roots.

Emergence

Time flows toward the future. Evolution flows toward complexity. We emerge from the origin point, some billions of years in our collective past, building our own bodies out of whatever materials come to hand, minerals, molecules, mechanisms we cobble into use and codify across generations, as much a form of energy in flux as any stable situation of matter.

From the intricately infolded molecular universe, life emerges. Everything else follows. First comes the structure, then its organization into systems. Or, like Plato's forms, does the system come first, and only later does structure mimic that unreal reality, a billion times over imperfectly impersonating some mathematical necessity?

The current mystery is organization, molecules creating genes, genes creating bodies, bodies creating cultures. Over 60 years ago Teilhard de Chardin insisted that "every man...makes his own soul throughout his earthly days..." Here we are, creating our very souls out of the materials given to us--molecules, dust--and thereby transcending, in some very natural way, our own naturalness.

But transcendence is perfectly natural. The universe emerges every moment something more than it was the moment before, complexity expanding the qualities, the categories, the multiplicity of interpretations, the points of view; becoming constantly birthing still more becoming.

Still, there is being too. There is saving sameness, there is stillness, there is longevity--the rain, the stones, the trees. This dual nature, both formed and forming,

opens up an infinite expansion of vision, or as de Chardin puts it, “evolution proceeds toward spirit.”

Grace

I keep waiting for grace to take me. Am I closed to it, that I wait and wait? Is it happening already and I just don't know it?

I know so little, and perhaps want for myself all the wrong things, so that it's easy to misinterpret what the world gives me. Maybe this *is* grace, this short shock of little life, gone as soon as it comes, yet so long and laborious in the living.

I am overwhelmed by life's reckless bounty. I am haunted by my lack of faith in continuity, in a little bit of rest for the weary. I am greedy: I have everything and still I want more.

So I go looking instead of just seeing, trying to whittle reality down to the explainable, though the remaining mystery is the beauty that I want most to witness. Grace has brought me again and again to the brink of this god, and I have hoped instead for some kind of closed system, some solid answer.

The only way out of this cycle is the only way in: the rain, the stones, the trees, the nature of the emerging world in its earthly specificity as much as its gaseous universal generality. I have access only to this tiny corner, *the rain, the stones, the trees*.

Through which grace has access to me.

To Disappear

Nothing exists but momentarily in its present form and color. One thing flows into another and cannot be grasped. Before the rain stops we hear a bird. Even under the heavy snow we see snowdrops and some new growth.

-Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*

Last summer was one of the hottest on record. It reminded me of the heat of childhood summers, in the Texas hill country, where I sat in the backseat of a station wagon, driving somewhere with a carload of other children and simply sweating, the closed-in swelter draining me, the palms of my hands, the tender skin behind knees and inside elbows, turning to salt and reverie. I took this heat for granted then, and thought nothing of sitting in that small enclosed oven, feeling my juices run slowly out of me.

But I had long since moved to the lush Pacific Northwest, where this same heat now burdened me. I spent the hot days shaded from this threatening weather, slathered in sunscreen, watering the plants around the yard's wilting perimeter. I was most anxious to keep alive a small rhododendron in the northeast corner, newly planted in honor of my dead grandmother. I had imagined its leggy arms growing tall and reedy, as elegant as she was in her prime. What if the plant did not survive? It was alive: planted to recast death as life in perpetuity. If it did not live, I might succumb to my worst proclivities, believe that all our doggedness is met only with erasure.

It was not a summer of anything resembling levity. I spent it waiting for the cool air of fall to come back to me. I had been trying to write myself into some small epiphany, to put away the years of youthful hope that were now behind me. I was hoping to come to some standstill, a swivel, a reckoning. I wanted to be done with life's hard questioning.

I had already spent too much time searching for some reassuring clarity: in books of literature and history and philosophy; in years of scientific self-instruction, seeking a glimpse of the contours of reality, any brief bit of scaffolding on which to hang my questions, like worn-out garments, to see what could be remade from the scraps and leavings. Nothing but more scraps and leavings.

And now this new place, middle age, a complete anonymity, unburdened by anyone looking at me. If I could only lock onto this liberty.

Behind the urgent need to be heard, to say my piece above the din and clamor of other voices, I felt a subtle receding, a relinquishing of this obvious vanity. It felt like a stone settling somewhere inside my body.

Fall came suddenly out of summer, clothed in color, a season of activity. One day I took the bus to the art museum, hoping to see something that might unstick me. The fall trees flashed by in symphonic decay, from the hot intensity of crimson through an ascending array of wild oranges to an aureate, light-filled yellow.

I arrived at the museum, feet wet, hair frizzed, awash in rain. Inside I fled from the crowds, tromping up the stairs to an exhibit called “Seeing Nature,” where the quiet walls would provide a backdrop so that art might tell nature its own mysteries.

Against the spotlight made by white, I stared at each painting and each in turn spoke to me. Canaletto’s precise pearlescent Venice; the playful pastel of Klimt’s Birch Forest; Thomas Moran’s amaranthine Grand Canyon, auburn in striations of purple. Color like a small flag waving.

Like Moran, David Hockney did a Grand Canyon, horizontally covering a whole wall with fulgent synthetic color, which offended me. Didn’t Hockney *see*? Did he think the Grand Canyon lacked its own depth and secrecy, that he had to shock it up with his own bright vanity?

Among these declarative men and their grand *mise en scènes*, Georgia O’Keeffe’s six-foot iris drew me into its mesmerizing safety. All creation --the whole of the Grand Canyon-- safe within the petals of an iris, viewed in close-up and magnified to proportions of near-monstrosity. A forceful assertion of pink’s unexpected kinship with black; a refreshing lack of sentimentality.

After I left the museum, I walked up the street in the rain, my lamed umbrella drooping one of its eight corners. I stood for half an hour under the glass awning of the bus stop waiting. Even here, a downtown street, the trees were a lugubrious bouquet: deep red, rosy blush, sprays of citrine, glowing heavy bushes of russet. The flashing lines

of rain were caught fleetingly in the light beams of cars and passing buses, but not my bus, which was still somewhere back on the line, not yet being but still becoming.

I waited, holding Erwin Schroedinger's *What is Life?* in my lifeless fingers, somehow able in this cold wet moment to read the book though I had left it sitting on my warm, dry desk for some six weeks, unread. Now I let the words wash across me, meaning only what seeped through the layers of wetted wool:

the significant fact is the discontinuity;

they have no lasting effect, they remain unnoticed.

These phrases functioned as sound-bites of sagacity, to keep me in touch with an impersonal infinity, a beyond-realm insensitive to me and everything around me. Something that might loosen my clutch on identity, and mercifully release me.

Fall turned to winter, grey steeping the sidewalks and the low stone walls, the yellow-green of moss along the cracks. Grey in all the spaces, the low branches, the places between eaves and houses. A few last bushes were aglow with yellow flash. Broken sidewalk clefts cradled puddles of blank brown glass. Each thing disintegrated into the next.

The sun seemed put away, perhaps forever, a favorite toy given away by a callous mother. I stayed inside, watching the rain from the picture window. Each day, to the west, evening would start to set, rinsed of color. I felt drained by a wet passivity, a lack of agency, a disintegrating musculature. I sat alone on the stained red couch, watching the

world turned torrent, waiting. I did not have it in me to hope for the white throb of doveflight to streak by outside, seeking dry land.

Life still demanded its small banal tasks of upkeep, sending me out into the world on fool's errands. My windshield wipers scudded against the windshield unsuccessfully, stuttering away the aqueous onslaught in skittering sheets. Behind these I sat dazed and unhurried, watching the water-logged world in its mottled dream state. The air was dark as if in dusk descending, though the time was only noon, the hinge of day, when the sun (though it could not be seen, nor felt, nor known) turned back down and away.

The lights refracted in the millions of shivering raindrops, kaleidoscoping everything. I slouched in my overheated glass-and-metal box, parading away from one errand and toward the next, unseeing. Perhaps it was this that made me miss what was beside me: I felt disconnected from the street, unaware of my own spatial maneuvering, like a dumb animal on a spinning globe, insensible to its own astronomical meandering. My eyes were busy tracing the sparkling reds and greens that were like algorithmic rules to keep me moving. These lights would tell me who I was and where I might be going; how I came to be and when I would, finally, cease. And in a flash--

--the car beside me screeching. The nearly-silent heart in my chest suddenly leaping. My foot on the brake did its work without me: the world stopped spinning, closed its eyes, and nearly flipped me.

I came to again just as abruptly. My car was swerved against the curb, my breath returning. Another car was fish-tailed in a cross-hatch just before me. A man got out of it and came toward me.

Reluctantly I opened the window on the driver's side to receive him. Our cars had not collided, but we were both in horizontal displacement against the flow of traffic, which now patiently but unceasingly swerved around us.

He was tall and rangy, with thick eyebrows and big bright eyes. Somehow I took in nothing else about him, except his voice, higher than I expected it to be, but soothing. "Are you alright?" he asked, and I think I smiled. "Yes," was all I said, but he kept talking.

He had not seen me, he said. He had been trying to get over to the right lane to take the turn, he had been hesitating --perhaps it was this, the lack of decisive action-- his foot somehow too slow to angle against the pedal-- the ache in his neck from some recent labor, preventing his head from turning, his eyes from seeing.

As if he needed to make these excuses. Slowly he showed himself to be babbling. And then I saw that he was soaking, the rain unrelenting, now hammering. He squinted his eyes, badly shaken, wet with fright.

"Well, I'm alright," I reassured him, to send him on his way. He stopped talking, nodded curtly, and that was the end of it. He returned to his car and we both started off again.

But moments later I pulled over and sat shivering. I could not think about anything but the unexpected whinny of his voice, the clear, urgent tone of ethereality. I had hardly even looked at him, perhaps he was only a boy? Why had he been so concerned for me? When he got out of his car, I thought at first he was coming to yell at me, but instead, he had soaked me with an explanation, almost a pleading. Certainly in its way an apology. And I had failed to ask him even once if he was okay. I had simply stared and smiled--could I have smiled?--and then gotten on with my day.

Sealed into my dry box, what kept returning to me was not the near accident, the heedless and easy barbarity of automation, our metal exoskeletons barreling us forward through space and rain like it was nothing. Instead, a vision of the gathering rivulets streaking down his face and neck, and the gilded echo of his high voice, the voice of an innocent, a child, reverberating.

The rain went on as it does in winter, forever. Then finally, spring returned, furtive yet revelatory, the sudden radiance of sunshine after so much chilled dark waiting. The exhilaration of this passing warmth, an interval of gold on skin, brought goosebumps of delight, the rush of angels whooshing in. Edward Hoagland says it better: "Our moods can be altered simply by sunlight..."

The flowers unfolded, rose and puce, ruby, cobalt, copper, butterscotch. A thousand different shapes of delicate symmetry. The pear trees and the cherry trees dropped their small pink blossoms as if in some alternative world of fantasy, where rain

turns to flowers and the witch's curse is lifted. Unexpectedly, you are no longer consigned to this unfathomable eternity.

I went out to the backyard to check the rhododendron, which had made it through the rainy season green and hardy. Despite its early stunting by the heat, the dark wet winter had nurtured it, assuring that it could root successfully.

Nearby, hedged by a flowering dogwood and a pear tree, there was an in-ground pond, no bigger than a grand piano, ringed in big mossy rocks and high grasses. I sat on a wooden stump set out for a chair, among gatherings of long-bladed irises, leafy red and purple nandinas, and flat-palmed hostas. The ferns were coming out everywhere, each leaf ticking its feathers down a backbone of stem, little heads bowed, their spiral noses pointing down.

Sitting there absorbed in the feeling of sunshine, I heard a thwacking sound and realized suddenly that I was not alone. There on the murky surface of the pond were two ducks, a male with a thin neck, greenly iridescent, and a female, dull brown except for two small bands of shimmering blue on each wing.

I became quiet and rigid, fearful of scaring them away. It was hard to know if they were aware of me. I waited, watching them surreptitiously. They bobbed their heads and circled, leaving momentary contrails in the water like folds in some abundant heap of cloth.

Then they took off, ejected suddenly from the pond. He led the charge and she followed close, the color of sand. A great flat flapping of wings; orange feet tucked

beneath a white underbelly; the brown ruff, white collar, green throat. They arced overhead. Their wings were ridiculous, magnificent, the airborne crescent of flight, over the houses. Out of sight.

I sat alone in the grasses, afraid. That freedom elbowing me in the ribs again. The transitory nature of everything. I searched the moment for some small serendipity. Might I see things anew, in the light of this passing beauty? It didn't feel entirely good. Like a view from a cliff face, untethered to any escape route.

In the glow of this ambiguous relinquishing, words, for a time, came back to me. Just possibly, I could write from this paltry place and it would transform me: a small message sent out in a bottle to be drowned, unread, in the measureless ocean. I felt myself on the edge of this transformation, hopeful that I could submit myself gladly to this saving self-annihilation, this release from the need to be anything other than what the moment asked of me.

I knew that this was not really a way of being, or a form of practice: it was only a mood, fleeting and slippery, not mine to catch and hold. Later that same day-- perhaps within the hour-- I would return to my listless wondering.

I reached out and fingered the rhododendron, to see what the waxy green leaves might tell me. I thought of the bright gift of flowers, bequeathed at some point in the long stretch of primordial history, bringing a new palette of color into being, a beauty flush and fleeting, produced for nothing but the tiny bodies of hummingbirds, of butterflies, of bees. It was Shunryu Suzuki who warned, "We should not hoard our knowledge...We

should not try to surprise people by our wonderful treasures.” I could be done with bluster and pedantry. I could let my wonderful treasures escape from me, rise up to the cloud cover, dissipate.

They have no lasting effect, they remain unnoticed. Is this what we are here to do, to disappear? We exist on this border between being and not being, two faces of one electric possibility. This essence is its own opposite, eternal and yet devoid of continuity, ever-changing, the same as ever, self-contradicting. Epiphany, erasure, epiphany.

Artifacts

I have in my possession a simple but elegant silver penknife that belonged to my great-grandfather, William Bristol, my maternal grandfather's father, who came here by himself from Eastern Europe at the age of 12, passing through the port of Bristol, England just long enough to take the place as his new name. This knife was left behind in my grandfather's effects when he died, and it subsequently made its way through a crooked chain of possession down to me.

The penknife is the length and shape of a flat finger. A heavy silver rim encloses a cutaway middle section comprised of a rectangle of flat metal open at both sides. This central boxy shell swings out of its frame by a hinge at the lengthwise end, then slides sideways to reveal the knife. Elegantly it rotates around the knife and comes to rest around the metal frame. Now your knife is out and ready for action--say, paring, or opening a letter. Then with a flip and switch--done! The knife swerves and folds back into its hidden place.

There is little embellishment to this ingenious contraption, aside from a tiny bronze pin that holds the hinge in place, and the engraved sides, with my great-grandfather's name, "Wm. J. Bristol" on one side, and on the other, "MIDLAND MUTUAL LIFE Columbus, Ohio."

In its own time, this enticing tool was a gift given out to insurance holders, a marketing gimmick to reel in and keep customers. This simple object was once a cheap advertisement, on which to get your own name proudly engraved. From old photos I conjure an image of Grandpa Bill, standing at the edge of the green lawn of the hotel he owned on the Jersey shore, surrounded by the extended family he had generated and then sheltered, in the wake of the Great Depression, in his hotel rooms. He stands there quietly, a silhouette against the ocean with his hands in his trouser pockets, turning the knife over in his fingers and staring out to sea.

Here in my 21st-century hands, coded by history, the knife does not give up its subtler social meanings, its original, or previous, meaning-in-the-moment. Maybe it's not even right to call it meaning. Call it, then, information. For it does hold lost information, the same way that the memory holds a dream. You wake with a start, still heaving from your heavy investment in some other place and time, and find you have nothing of that variegated world but just the one word: *dream*. You know it happened, and it was riotous, emotional, ambiguous, and yet everything oddly made sense...but now all you have is an image or two-- now gone-- and the word that means everything you can no longer capture in words, an otherworldly experience, a whole life lived in a few minutes of quickened breath against an old pillow. Like this, the knife is reminiscent of a specific story of a place and time, of a personality or a social situation or a relationship in which the knife appeared, a minor player in a rich pageant-- now gone-- of multivalenced living.

I'm a collector of the odd old mysterious things that appear serendipitously in my life in the tapered shapes of other eras, bearing other customs of line and functionality, traces of cultures and societies from the near American past that have accreted, like plastic detritus on far-flung beaches, finally at my bedside shelf. In zip-locked bags and rubber bins I carefully pile heirlooms and random cumulation, collected over the years from yard sales, legacy, and happenstance. What is the purpose of these even stacks of boxes, this lump of bags? Why keep all this stuff?

It's partly the sheen of beauty with which historical distance coats everything: a jolt of longing flashes through me to inspect the sinuous or flattened or patterned forms that were once taken for granted as utilitarian until the next world overtook the previous and softened or sharpened all the corners, dispensed with or doubled down on ornamentation, turned to new methods of interface.

Maybe this sensation is nothing more than the poignancy of hindsight, but it doubles as a revelation of present-blindness: unless presented with this evidence of the past, we are hard pressed to remember that life was once other than it is, and never stops changing. There is such a fulsome variety in the multiplicity of forms, biological and artifactual, that have come down to us through evolution, which solves its essential problems over and over again --*eyes, teeth, intestines, fur, antennae*-- and continues its tinkering through human ingenuity, inventing new forms -- *handles, levers, buttons, wheels, engines*-- out of the old.

Not all of my treasures are inherited from family. When I lived in San Francisco in the 1990s, I acquired a 2-key laboratory counter, apparently for counting blood cells, from my best friend's boyfriend, a biomedical engineer at a biotechnology company. He had found it in the lab, and apparently thought of me.

The counter was made in the '60s or '70s by the Clay Adams Company, a manufacturer and importer of laboratory, surgical, and medical supplies. It is a small box-shaped contraption, made of gray-blue metal, institutional yet with rounded, midcentury corners. Protruding from the front are two red buttons, like typewriter keys, except without emblems or symbols to represent their correspondence to something beyond themselves. Nonetheless there is a correspondence. On the top of the box are two windows, whose plastic covers have taken a tint of rose over the years and show through to three numbers, each on its own little gear. The red buttons flip the numbers forward one-by-one, as in a slot machine, allowing the user to keep count, one-by-one, of anything.

Its analog quality makes it unspeakably quaint, an emblem of a slower world, the two red buttons incontrovertible evidence of human fingers. The numbers rotate by in an orderly procession, from 000 up to 999 and back again, translating messy reality into measured quantity.

I keep this particular item on my desk, and sometimes when I'm procrastinating, I depress the buttons idly and watch the numbers click into and out of view, counting nothing in particular. While I can imagine all the processes of a laboratory that might

have required this simple form of record-keeping, I wonder if anyone ever used it to count things outside of the confines of scientific experiment. In our current world, we are quick to quantify everything, but this little box reminds me that once upon a time, most of life lay outside the purview of such diligent record-keeping. With my finger on these flat red buttons, I straddle these two worlds, and have half a mind to keep this mechanism always with me, to make an experiment of myself, counting out my foibles in brisk red clicks, to be zeroed out, all forgiven, in the end.

Though my paternal grandfather was a podiatrist, an ophthalmoscope, dating from perhaps the 1920s, was in the top drawer of his heavy wooden bureau when he died. An ophthalmoscope is a small lens used to view the interior of the eye: now they are high-tech gadgets in doctor's offices, but ophthalmologists once carried them about in little leatherboard cases. My grandfather's is neatly tucked inside a decaying case, with its inventor --LORING'S OPHTHALMOSCOPE--stamped in gold letters on the front. Over the years this leatherette has badly chipped, showing graduated edges of crumbling brown paper like the cover of an old, well-handled Bible.

Inside is a green velvet interior with an auburn ribbon, cut short, its purpose now opaque. The tool itself consists of a delicate handle with a detachable round head. This head has a small circle of glass, with two separate lens wheels that are turned, in a cog-wheel system, to align. According to Dr. Henry D. Noyes of New York, writing in *Transactions of the American Ophthalmological Society* in 1880, "The instrument...has

only this claim to existence, that it furnishes a means of bringing before the eye a large series of glasses in rapid and uninterrupted succession, in a manner which the writer has found more convenient than any other.”

I put the scope to my eye, looking toward my open closet, and gently turn the wheel. In the miniature monocle of vision my clothes hang lax in sepiaed rows, spinning lightly through glassine levels of blur and haze. I walk through the house holding it up to my face, watching all my possessions, the bowls and chairs and throw-pillows and end-tables, lose their focus and turn yellowish, as if with every step I am striding into the future and looking back, through this little magic hole, into my own disassembled past.

Obsolete for the purposes of ophthalmology, I use this modest instrument to turn my intimate belongings into the fanciful garments of some imaginary history. In other hands, it might pass for the recovered eye of an ancient robot, or a tool used to measure the paths and angles of some alien and microscopic cosmology. It speaks in some general way of precision, attention, and the primacy of close measurement. With its swiveling alignment of tiny lenses, it speaks, in its way, of careful vision, of the reward to be had in looking closely.

My collection contains other equally random items, including a number of papers such as mailers, postcards, advertisements, booklets, and more. This printed ephemera is less directly functional, more rhetorical, revealing through its language, more than through its physical form, a mindset, the temperament of an era.

There is a *Dennison Coin Mailing Card* with a light paper flap which opens to reveal seven round slots in which to place various coins and mail them, to whom and for what purpose I do not know. There is a public service brochure, alarmingly titled *Plants Can Be Killers!*, printed by the Electrical Construction Safety Education Committee of Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1974, and saved and sent to me by my mother-in-law, who has a solid midwestern frugality and a quick eye for my proclivities. There's a police citation pad, belonging to the city of Elizabeth, Union County, New Jersey, printed in 1958, complete with blue carbon paper interleaved between white printed sheets, whose front cover reads "INSTRUCTIONS TO OFFICERS At all times be COURTEOUS FAIR and HONEST Remember that public opinion of traffic enforcement is judged almost entirely on your conduct." There's the exercise booklet *How to Keep Fit and Like It*, from 1957, showing line drawings of men and women in antiquated exercise clothes along with useful, if unfollowable, advice such as "Develop a pleasing, well-pitched voice" and "Analyze your thoughts. Remove the causes of specific fears and worry. If you cannot remove them, laugh at them."

There is something fetchingly absurd in the anxieties and platitudes of earlier eras as read through the objects they leave behind. Yet these talk to us, they speak, if only to echo us back to ourselves somehow. In his autobiographical sketches of childhood, Walter Benjamin describes the allure of "the forgotten" as the "trace of misplaced habits in which we could no longer find ourselves." So too with these half-forgotten objects,

which point to the presence of our ancestors, who remain unrecognized yet vital, living on unbeknownst to us in our own eyes and fingers.

Still, with some little distance in time, these objects speak less of the particular people who held them and more of the particular societies that, like fertile soil, grew them. As much as we are descended from our families, we are made from these more general cultural details-- the ophthalmoscopes, cautionary publications, and engraved penknives-- that have bred us to this point in human history. These are the shed parts of the bodies of other ages, that tell us how those ages were built, what they were capable of, how they saw the world.

One of my favorite items is an enormous glass syringe, the size and shape of a baton, with an aluminum tip and an aluminum belt at the base, where two delicate but well-calibrated silver braces provide the friction, by holding the plunger tight, to control its momentum. I have no memory of where I got this huge shot, which seems decidedly medical, if not veterinary. I feel its heft in my hand and try to imagine some white-clad nurse, dressed in the uniform of a less sterile time, coming at me with a foot-long needle protruding out of this heavy glass tube. I feel profoundly grateful that I was born late in the 20th century.

Such are the benefits of perspective and distance. Maybe that's why I lug these artifacts around from house to house, city to city, year to year, accumulating more of them as I go and storing them, packed carefully in their air-tight boxes like Christmas

ornaments, awaiting their annual reappraisal in light of passing time. They are reminders; windows; mirrors: they show us what we once were, and what will become of us all, making manifest the once-importance at the ruthless heart of all obsolescence.

On Drawing

1.

I have spent the past ten years trying to make myself sit still and draw, but drawing remains utterly mysterious.

All it requires, at this stage of the game, is a piece of paper, a pencil, and an eraser. It can be done almost anywhere, almost any time, with any object as subject, any topic, small or large, out there in the universe in front of me: a single creased leaf or a whole riotous tree, a single crooked finger or a whole flexioned body. My only mandate is to draw what I *see*. But even the simplest subject presents such an excess of complexity, such a confusion of line and shape and shade. How does a drawing depict a thing?

A sketch is a simple statement, unadorned. A white surface takes a black line, born of graphite or ink, turning a mute nullity into a tentative message. How does the artist know where to look to pick out the defining lines? In the fingers of a nimble draftsman, a pencil creates the world, line by line, gesture by distinct gesture. Sometimes the strokes are rough and smudgy, feathered with texture or the repetitive motion of a hand scratching scenes into life. Sometimes the draftsman has a clear, almost childlike style, brief perfect bands of dark revealing the edges and corners of some small and precise reality.

I have, as of yet, no style, no particular process, no talent, no common thread. It's just that once in a while, I sit down and try to draw the world into paper life. As John Berger says, it's "a form of probing." My drawings always fail, each "in its own unforeseeable and particular way." I also sometimes succeed, just a little bit. This success is a thrill, a form of transcription, a puzzle and a mood and a repeated motion.

2.

I never thought about how blind I was until I started to try to draw. The process both teaches and unravels, sends me back to the blurry vision of a newborn baby, trying to make out shapes and patterns. There are no lines, no edges, in nature, not even in the built environment, seen from a distance. There are only vague colors, fading into and out of one another.

It is nearly impossible to see the world, every pebble and raindrop, in its own fullness and ineffability, its boundaries and lack of boundaries. I watch it, try to capture it, or what it used to be, as my perspective shifts, or the wind blows the world awry, sending once-solid things into the disarray of entropy. In such unfavorable conditions, what can I expect myself to see? Drawing forces you into vision, demanding that you pick out some essential line to define the amorphousness of space. It requires careful discernment, a willingness to walk a thin line between abstraction and inexhaustible detail.

The compromise is the key. First you capture the structure, then you lay in the nitty-gritty. You have to keep working it over. The more you finesse it, the more it becomes intricate, complicated, beautiful, full of subtle information. Difficult, maybe. Sometimes even absurd. (Think of Brice Marden and his attempt to get the white page fully black. Any draftsman [even an amateur!] can appreciate the desire behind the attempt, the need to wrest opacity from the recalcitrant pencil, the wrestling with tools and materials, the attempt at a kind of mastery, despite the futility and even nihilism of the gesture.)

3.

It is easier, to me at least, to draw buildings than it is to draw flowers. The man-made is easier to mimic than the organic, for being more precise and repetitive. And besides, squares and rectangles are beautiful, too. The cantilevered intersection of planes, the modernist home, the downtown fountains, the buildings of a skyline standing at right angles to the world.

Fifteen minutes from my house, down a long loud car-crowded stretch of Powell Boulevard, is the Ross Island Bridge, a colorless piece of engineering where I like to go to sketch the skyline. From this waypoint I see the stair-step silhouette of downtown buildings, the brown bend of the river, the bullet-shaped boats, the fat concrete legs of other bridges. In the distance, miniature cars and trucks crawl along the double decks of Interstate 5 as it curls away to the north. Amidst the bass and whoosh of massive

eighteen-wheelers flying by behind me, I rest my notebook on the broad cement railing and sharpen my pencil. The shavings fly away into the wettish wind like little birds. I touch the dry pencil tip to the bright, cold paper; I try to distill the living, moving world down to one loose line along a mute page.

I use my pencil as a walking stick, leading me into this inscrutable act of translation. My eyes are like an ear that picks out a simple song from the cacophany of the morning scene; my pencil is the voice that sings it back to me. Momentous as it feels – every time! – to mar the white paper, the discovery is not in that first mark, but in the image as it reveals itself beneath my fingers. It is in the working and reworking that something glorious, something alarming, begins to happen. My inept hand is cold in its fingerless glove; my fingertips, graphite-blackened, build and blend. Slowly, a shape emerges, the definite contours of the facades as they intersect, the bridge arcing in front, the river running toward the page's empty corner.

4.

Drawing is not a finished form. It is preliminary, exploratory. Up until a certain point in the history of Western art, drawings were used only for practice and as studies for paintings, never as ends in themselves. Some artists, nonetheless, are primarily draftsmen.

Paul Klee made over 9000 works in his lifetime, over half of which are drawings. Will Grohmann published Klee's drawings in 1934, but the edition was confiscated by

the Gestapo, and Grohmann had to wait 25 years to publish them again, in 1960. In *Paul Klee: Drawings*, Grohmann writes, “Things visible are for him no more than isolated instances. There are many other truths still to be discovered.” Thus Klee in his mature years drew more in the vein of whimsical abstraction than from observation of these “isolated instances.” In an essay on drawing from 1918, Klee wrote that “The pictorial work originates in movement, is itself a record of movement, and is perceived in movement.” In 1922, he restated this more concisely: “No work is primarily a product, something that is; it is first and foremost a creation, something in process of being born.”

It is this ongoing momentum of the form that makes drawing so magnetic. In an interview published with a collection of his drawings by the Whitney Museum, Brice Marden recalls being in art school in Boston and being told that “there isn’t a major artist in New York who really concentrates on making finished drawings.” This prompted in Marden a lifelong love of drawing as an end in itself. “It seems to me the more fluent the drawing, the more it can express your ideas,” Marden says.

Neither Klee nor, later, Marden drew primarily from life, nor in a realistic style. Each had passed beyond the adolescent marvel of sketching from life, and on to the mature expressive possibilities of pure line. While at the Bauhaus, Klee taught his students that they, as Grohmann put it, “must learn how to see behind the facade of appearances, to grasp the thing by its roots.”

To grasp the thing at all remains a miracle to me. Appearance is itself so unstable, so multifaceted and indistinct: seeing is neither believing nor knowing, but merely

inferring one of a thousand possible forms, made manifest in a thousand differing details, hashed out in the pregnant language of lines.

5.

When I actually sit down and do it, I find that drawing is a door into a world uninterrupted by those pesky questions, such as *why* and *what*, that normally people my brain and keep it running on its hamster wheel of ruminating dissatisfaction. Drawing, unlike almost any other activity (in which I engage, at least), requires such a meditative concentration, such a focus on an act of pure translation, from eye to hand to pencil to paper, one after the next, over and over, that it admits of none of the neurotic self-doubt that attends my non-drawn life. It requires a kind of attention allowed only to monks and mystics, a singling out of the most elemental of details, and yet a weaving of those details together into a knot of reference, of resemblance: an act of magic.

Berger calls this an “exercise in orientation” and writes, “When I’m drawing, I feel a little closer to the way birds navigate when flying, or to hares finding shelter if pursued, or to fish knowing where to spawn, or trees finding a way to the light.” There is a way in which the elemental nature of the project, arising partly through intention and partly through some instinctual process of wayfinding, reveals the contours of the reality that yet elude the pencil.

In this way, I often feel that through drawing I have come to understand more about the physical properties and dynamics of the world. I feel that I have hit upon some

secret of universal process in the simple act of laying down and then working lines and the shapes they produce. Drawing continues to teach me about what the great polymath Gregory Bateson called “the pattern which connects.”

The geometry of drawing is a Euclidian revelation, point giving way to line, line to shape, shape to meaning. This is a lesson in roundness, in softened corners. To make perpendicular lines and then shade the corners into arcs immediately shows you the difference between our man-made world of straight angles and the world of nature, cells proliferating to fill in spaces and build up bodies. Drawing has given me a deeper feel for the roundness of space.

And so many other mysteries of nature have been revealed to me: through drawing I have come to appreciate aggregation, accumulation, the complexification of growth. I have experienced directionality, intent, and movement, as well as accident and innovation, consistency, repetition, scale, and internal relations – that is, relationality and relativity and relativism, all rolled into one. At some point, if I keep at it, I will start to experience evolution, and perhaps, somehow, communication and the transmission of information. Then, in a sneaky twist, drawing will have allowed me to understand language.

6.

But is drawing a form of communication? This amounts to asking if there is some hard line of disjuncture between communication and expression, between expression and

representation, between representation and understanding. I lick the tip of my finger and use the moisture to shade a slash of charcoal into a dark spread of shadow, to contrast with the white shine of light. This middle ground is immanent between the ideal facts of black and white: between the curved margin of solid objects and empty space is where the world exists. The paper simulacrum is a marvelous mirage, a moving target.

The deep reality, as Klee insisted, is in the unending movement of working and reworking. It is what evolution does and it is what artists do and it is what mystics do, too: go deeply into the actuality of movement, or its beginning and ending, stillness. Line is an ideal that encounters the contours of reality and curves into them: all it demands is concentration, a sheet of paper, and a 2B pencil.

Lingering on the Threshold

I am lying in the warm bed, waiting for sleep. I can't keep my eyes closed. The orange slash of hallway light rims the door like a bracket; the sound of night-street noises grates and groans just outside the high window. What do heavy trucks do at night in a quiet neighborhood, except act as the sonorous continuity between a specious reality of near-consciousness and the thin dreamstate that replaces it, tired of itself already, raging to get back to the rippling surface?

I swim back up to this layer of awareness, that holds me just under like the sinuous drape of a sheet over a dead body. Sleep. Can you be half-in, half-out of this psychophysical state? Is this place analog or digital, continuous or sudden, a break, a shut-down, a closed book?

It doesn't take much to summon me from one side of the abyss to the other. I float over it, a ghost, leaving my body behind. The truck becomes a windstorm. The house becomes a labyrinth. My hands become paddles, the sea surges up to meet me, and no explanation is needed: all scenarios and reasons and motivations co-exist, an unfolding multiverse of alternate realities impinging one on the other and pleating silently, if urgently, into each other.

Yet there I lie, a lifeless body, a flop of warm meat waiting. Am I in or am I out? Where is the "I" who knows the difference? Then something-- a noise, a sudden seizure

of the muscles-- and I jolt awake. Then melt back in. Crossing and recrossing the threshold of sleep.

Literally speaking, a threshold is a spatial location, marking the simple act of coming across a doorway. The word is from Old English for doorsill, or “point of entering,” and related to “thresh,” with its original sense of tread or trample. Apparently there was a barrier placed in the doorway of medieval English cottages to hold in the flooring, over which many a peasant tripped. This was the original threshold. The doorsill emphasizes the briefly temporal nature of a spatial threshold: it takes time to move through space.

Of course, we use the word to mean a lot of other things, to contradict itself without any sense of betrayal or even confusion. It means a beginning, as well as an ending, as well as a middle, covering all of Aristotle’s bases. We celebrate, *She is on the threshold of a new life*. Or we mourn, *He is on the threshold of death*. Meanwhile, we are all here in the infinitely brief space of the present, on the threshold that stands unlocatably between past and future.

There are more technical senses of the word. In the medical field, the meaning of a threshold is narrowed to a subjective assessment of stimulus and response, as in a pain threshold, defined as the earliest point at which sensation becomes discomfort. In this

way, medical thresholds measure how much a system can bear before tipping over into a new state of being.

A system can only bear so much, but what changes, what gives in? Is a threshold merely a distinction, or is it a place in itself? Doorways don't move, which is what makes them thresholds: they mark a clear line between inside and out. They are immovable, definitive. But a pain threshold is a spectrum, analog, continuous, a moving target.

So a threshold is both, the time it takes to cross the space and the space being crossed, all at once. As Rilke wrote, "*Everything* is gestation and then birthing."

Scholar Subha Mukherji observes, of a photograph of a woman standing in an open doorway, that this threshold position compels us through both fear and desire. The emotional uneasiness of transitions is coupled with the excitement of the unknown beyond, the open possibility. Sometimes the present trembles with its unrealized potential, on the verge of a new uncoiling.

Sometimes we shrink that present down to a concerted ten or twenty minutes, just to feel that unease, that excitement. For instance, take the threshold of orgasm, with its edge experience of not-quite-yet. The expansion, in time, of the hope, the promise, the potential future: the headlong dive toward future-past. A cresting wave, on the edge of something altogether beyond, the unreachable which becomes in that instant the sudden gone. The scrabbling, begging, no-holds-barred end-stages, a pleading, a please, a pulse

like the light of the sun as it peeks and recedes between distant leaves, *please, yes, please--notyet---yes*. And it's over and done.

Or, the lingering orgasm one sometimes has first thing in the morning, when the kids are still asleep. You half-wake up, find a body beside you, and nestle in. Like underwater swimming, meandering, burnishing the borders of skin. One squeeze at the back of the arm, a pinch, and you fall in, keep falling, a slow anfractuous twirl like the light downward momentum of a leaf on a drag of wind.

The present moment is this kind of in-between.

It can feel elating to linger in this present tense. Where orgasm usually entails an effort to cross the threshold, intoxication aims to dwell right there on the doorstep, neither in nor out.

Of course, (as with orgasms), there are lots of kinds of intoxication, and each one plays the threshold differently. One moment you see the world through the lens of a presumed ordinariness, a things-as-they-really-are. The next, a matter of less than minutes, and you linger at the edge of a world turned sideways, normally-unnoticed corners catching the light.

Michael Pollan, writing on marijuana, notes that if consciousness is the lens through which we view the world, then “the drastic constricting of its field of vision seems to heighten the vividness of whatever remains in the circle of perception.” This is one interpretation of what it means to cross this threshold, from sober to stoned. There

are plenty of mechanochemical explanations of what might happen in this transformation of consciousness, involving cannabinoid receptors in the brain, dopamine responses, shifts in molecular bonds. Such explanations are at a different resolution from what Walter Benjamin calls “a constant and finally exhausting oscillation between totally different worlds of consciousness.”

The focused attention enabled by such distortion of given consciousness allows for an enhanced capacity for synthesis. It is a commonplace to laugh at the philosophical pseudo-insights of stoners, but Pollan is “tempted to agree with Carl Sagan” that the “aura of profundity in which cannabis bathes the most ordinary insights” is not a self-deceiving joke, but a failure to communicate. “We don’t have words to convey the force of these perceptions to our straight selves.”

Perhaps this not-having-words is what particularly marks the transition out of sobriety: the threshold is a non-place, which cannot be spoken of, or at least, translated from. On each side of the divide sits a way of seeing, a tendency of being, that speaks its own language and cannot make itself heard or known from the other side of the sill. These are foreign countries to each other, whose inhabitants judge each other on the basis of local mores, thus perpetually misunderstanding and discounting one another.

Whether the insights gleaned from stoned thinking are useful or gibberish, Pollan argues that they result from the present-mindedness that marijuana facilitates. He theorizes that the short-term memory loss that is characteristic of marijuana use might account for the slowed sense of time and the sharpening of perceptions one has when

stoned: “For it is only by forgetting that we ever really drop the thread of time and approach the experience of living in the present moment, so elusive in ordinary hours.”

This suggests that somehow mind-alteration is not a crossing from one perspective to another, but lingering in the spatial present in all its breathing vitality, the place we normally skip over as we rush headlong toward the next thing in front of us. To be stoned is to stand on this doorsill, to see the sill itself, its structural necessity, its ornamental allure, its nature as present, in which we are always moving from one place, one time, to another.

We tell ourselves stories of how this movement happens. Narrative underpins our lived as well as our imaginative reality, moving us from beginning to ending, across the threshold of middle where all the action is. We use this structure to make sense of ourselves, and the novelty it generates we fashion as “growth,” as catharsis, a coming to knowledge. Knowledge is always a little bit more complex than the ignorance that precedes it. That is what qualifies it as knowledge.

In the early 20th century, anthropologist Arnold van Gennep described human rites of passage as a series of thresholds that separated people from and reincorporated them into their social identities. Whether through rite or narrative, temporal thresholds are the cognitive and emotional geography of identity, which we use to pin down *before* and *after*, *beginning* and *end*.

We believe in a beginning and an ending, but for all we can know in this life, it's all middle. As Aristotle noted in his study of tragedy, there is no efficacy in trying to perceive the totality of an animal a thousand miles long: narrative must have its proper magnitude. Critic Peter Brooks wrote of Benjamin's claim that "what we seek in narrative fictions is that knowledge of death which is denied to us in our own lives: the death that writes *finis* to the life and therefore confers on it its meaning." We must get to the other side of the threshold before we can look back retrospectively to see what actually happened.

There is a scientific mystery beneath this human penchant for causality and closure. From the perspective of the science of complexity, thresholds are phase transitions between levels of complexity, in which the integration of smaller parts into a larger whole gives rise to new states of being, whole new organizations of matter that transcend the original materials out of which they emerge. Complexity begins to explain how the nonliving, rule-bound chemical dynamics of RNA molecules somehow evolved into living creatures; it shows how the nonconscious chemical dynamics of neurons might give rise to a conscious, thinking mind.

For some, this novelty, this transition, is a profound metaphysical problem. How can something arise out of nothing? How can one kind of thing become another? How we cross the major thresholds of which our universe is constructed continues to be philosophically problematic, because at close enough range, there are no clear boundaries distinguishing one moment, one thing, one place, from another. What from far away

appears distinctive, digital, looks intermediate, analog, up-close. This is Zeno's Paradox, an infinity of half-steps: all is in-between.

In the last two days of his life, after brain surgery to excise a tumor, after a stroke which left him comatose, and after two days on life support systems guaranteed to keep alive the struggling body of a missing mind, we sat around my grandfather's hospital bed and stared at his diminished form. He breathed raspily into an oxygen mask, and his adamant lungs filled the room with the noise of their toiling. The screen above his bed showed us the startling persistence of his body: pulse, heart rate, blood pressure. "What does the red line mean?" one of us would periodically ask. "Is the green line his pulse?" We all stared at the screen as if it were itself my grandfather's organs, pumping to an accelerated rhythm, as if it would actually tell us how he was doing, how he felt, when he would awake, sit up in bed, and say, "Oh, for Christ's sake, somebody shut this thing off! I can't hear a damn thing with all this beeping!"

Occasionally, when his breathing got agitated and he went into a seizure, his muscles tightening under the thin sheet, my grandmother would stand over the bed, kissing his face, rubbing his chest, begging with him to calm down. "Take it easy, darling," she would say, over and over. "Take it easy, sweetie, I'm here, it's me, honey, take it easy, I love you." The first time she did this I cried uncontrollably, and my mother left the room, and my aunt put her head in her hands and closed her eyes. After twenty-four hours of this, the grief became tinged with anxious restlessness. Listening to

his troubled breathing, we were all holding our breath. He was no longer with us, yet here we were, waiting for him to die.

The transition from living to dead is the last threshold we cross in life, when the whole system disintegrates back into no more than the sum of its parts. Even this threshold is a space, a duration, a drastic reordering of identity, more of a zone than a line. My grandfather didn't die in an instant: we sat around him for hours as his death proceeded, and none of us knows when the threshold was fully crossed. At some point, the doctor stood above my grandfather and with his speech-act declaration of the time of death, closed the door on a life that was, in the complexity of its millions of cells and multiple systems, still winding down.

However the threshold is crossed, we're crossing it all the time. We go from nonexistent to living, from living to dead. Newness comes into the universe, no matter how many thresholds we philosophize out of existence. I can understand why the philosophers try. The present, timeless and multidimensional and continuous, is our only window on reality, our only evidence.

Turned Around

In a letter to the journal *Science* written in 1884, Milton L. Comstock of Galesburg, Illinois gave a remarkable description of his sense of direction, which he claimed was instilled in him as a boy under the tutelage of a geography teacher. “I refer all objects to two rectangular co-ordinate axes which agree with the cardinal points,” he wrote.

In all places where I feel at home, these lines are consciously present, and all roads running north and south, or east and west, coincide with, or seem to be parallel to, these axes. All places which I have visited, from Massachusetts to Nebraska, are, with few exceptions, connected together in one system.

Comstock noted that “The principal origin of this system is in the northwest corner of a schoolhouse in Hamilton county, O.” He described facing north for these lessons, the result of which was to fix “in my mind the axes of my system,” a system by which he oriented himself in the world ever after.

I have always had a bad sense of direction. When I came across Comstock’s letter, I was amused and sympathetic, recognizing in his plight a familiar anxiety, always with me, of getting lost. I have many times over enacted a similar scenario to Comstock’s account of visiting other cities and finding himself turned entirely around:

Once, in a city which is regularly laid out, going along the west side of the street toward the south, I crossed the street and turned toward the north upon the opposite side, and went into an office at my right hand. Coming out, and wishing to continue my course toward the south, I really went north and spent several minutes before I could convince myself of my error. Possibly the mistake arose in the following manner. I lost my axes in passing from the street-crossing to the sidewalk, and turned north when I supposed I turned south; going into the office toward the right I seemed to go west; coming from the office, I seemed to be going east; and turning to the right, I was to my mind going south.

In just such a manner have I too repeatedly “lost my axes,” and gone hopelessly in the wrong direction.

As a child, I managed to get lost on my own street, a street I lived on from the age of six months to the age of eighteen years, and on which my parents still live. I walked up the long block one Saturday or Sunday morning some time in 1978, enjoying the weather, wandering lonely as a cloud and staring no doubt at my own fingers, characters as they were in the play of human drama I orchestrated upon them, tripping over my own feet, kicking at pebbles and noticing nothing but the meandering of my own mind until I looked up to find myself somewhere suddenly unfamiliar.

I wondered up at the many houses so suggestive of the secret lives of others: what family of strangers was tucked away in this sprawling blocky series of cement compartments, what happy feet ascended and descended some imagined central staircase

in this columned mansion high above the street? I stood in awe of these otherly buildings, until I remembered myself abruptly, and began, in a panic, to press myself through my paces, forward forward forward toward what I thought was my own home only to find myself passing again and again and then for a fourth time these same foreign places, suddenly frighteningly familiar.

Somehow (the details now are lost to memory) I ended up in the foyer of one of these houses, the kindly inhabitant dialling my parents' phone and saying, in a sweet voice as I stood crying before her, "We seem to have your child here." My parents came and got me, and it was revealed to me, as we drove the two blocks back to our own house, that I had apparently wandered into one of the many circular eddies which loop off of the main street. I had been walking around and around this circle, trying to find my way home without realizing that I had to turn right instead of left if I were not to circle back on myself yet again.

In *What Is Orientation in Thinking?*, a philosophical tract from 1786, Immanuel Kant uses a geographical metaphor to characterize the difficulty of philosophical inquiry. Reason, he insists, can easily lead us astray, and cause us to double back and retrace our steps, cognitively speaking. The essay is part of a larger 18th century debate about whether the human faculty of reason can allow us to affirm the existence of God: Kant thinks not, but he does want to put in a plea for how to use reason to orient ourselves in the universe of human morality. Kant rejects the possibility that we have access to an

authoritative method of reasoning that can guide us infallibly to truth or the good, but he does not thereby give up hope of orienting ourselves toward these goals.

Kant describes orientation thus:

To orientate oneself, in the proper sense of the word, means to use a given direction—and we divide the horizon into four of these—in order to find the others, and in particular that of the sunrise. If I see the sun in the sky and know that it is now midday, I know how to find the south, west, north, and east. For this purpose, however, I must necessarily be able to feel a difference within my own subject, namely that between my right and left hands.

The point he makes here is that though spatial orientation would seem to be relative to the constant external landmarks of the position of the sun and the regular revolution of the earth, it is in fact located in the bilateral nature of the human body. “In spite of all the objective data in the sky,” Kant writes, “I orientate myself geographically purely by means of a subjective distinction.”

Kant uses orientation, here as in other of his works, to create an analogy to thinking. Reason, in moving through ideas that end up in dead ends, or branch off into other lines of inquiry, or double back on themselves, mimics the effort of a person to move from one location to another without any certain map of the terrain before her. According to this analogy, when we lose sight of objective landmarks by which to guide our thought, we still have recourse to an inner subjective norm for making reliable judgments.

The analogy enlightens the pitfalls of reason as a mode of understanding: how many of us may not have such an inner subjective norm, or, in the vocabulary of psychology, a sense of direction? Kant recognized this possibility, fearing that this inner norm could be arbitrary, allowing people to imagine, morally speaking, that they were traveling north when in fact they were traveling south.

According to some psychologists who study human personality, a lack of sense of direction correlates positively with the personality trait of neuroticism, but negatively with extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness. There is a hopeful loophole to this psychological determinism: experience. A study from 2015 finds that the older the subject, the more likely he or she is to have been forced out into the world and thus to have developed coping mechanisms to manage the lack of innate markers. The authors write that “both the degree and frequency of engagement with the environmental space should be expected to affect one’s sense of direction.”

Still, the authors fail to note the vicious circle here: such engagement can be precluded by a lack of sense of direction. Before I had any experience in life (and before the era of GPS and cell-phones), getting lost was my principal source of possible panic. If I could get lost, I would, and once I was not merely a walker but also a driver, the terrain of my disorientation widened to a vast panic-inspiring vista. I got lost in my own city, and later in other people’s cities too; I got lost on highways, hurtling past appropriate exits in sheer terror of ever finding my way back; I got lost in strange neighborhoods,

some leafy and lovely, some run-down and destitute, happening gratefully, tearfully upon pay phones at gas stations in college towns and seaside vacation spots and any other place I might chance to visit and in which I dared to take a drive.

In fact, of course, this penchant for going badly geographically astray was like a containment field that kept me close to my known environs. Though I longed to indulge a purely imagined sense of adventure, I was more likely to stick close to home. When I went away to college, it took me three years before I ever left the college campus to explore the different city in which I, nominally at least, spent four formative years of my life. I was afraid to go too far lest I never make my way back: in this tentativeness I kept my callowness intact, and lost my education.

Unlike poor turned-around Milton Comstock, my initial lesson in the axes did not come until the relatively late age of 22, when I graduated from college, moved to San Francisco, and bought a map. This map was nothing extraordinary, the size of a sheet of legal paper, designed for tourists, compactable in four easy folds, perfect for any pocket. But to me, it was a revelation, no less than if it had been a crumbling scrap of papyrus from some newly-unburied vault in some ancient land.

For the first time in my life, I could make my way around without fear or worry. By foot and by Muni streetcar, I traveled the whole of the gray-clad peninsula, exploring the variety and vagaries of this new city. I wandered aimlessly, joyfully, through the Haight, the Castro, the Mission, all the way up to trendy North Beach, all the way out to

the sunwashed Sunset. I walked the streets endlessly, drinking in the flamboyant bohemian vigor, the sheer junkiness of San Francisco. The map was the city in miniature, held in the palm of my hand. Its tight geometry shunted me, like a pinball, through its maze of streets and scenes.

Ever since, like Comstock, it has been “my custom to travel with a map before me.” I, too, upon experiencing a new location, immediately refer it to its proper location according to the axes I can visualize through the use of a map.

Maps have not always been thought so salutary. The very first mapmaker was a Greek by the name of Anaximandros, a disciple of Thales of Miletos, who lived some time in the first half of the sixth century B.C. An important figure in the origins of geography as a discipline, he was possibly the first thinker to develop a conception of the shape of the earth.

Writing roughly 150 years later, the historian Herodotus complains that maps are notoriously unreliable, capable of distorting distances and topography, leading those who rely on them into faulty decisions, mistaken directions. Still, mapmaking quickly became an essential tool for both practical purposes and for the emergent theoretical discipline of geography. In creating an overview of geographic space, people were for the first time able to relate distant places with one another, to extend their concept of the world, to recognize the possible extent of the unknown, and to imagine exploration, both literally and figuratively, into that wide space of mystery.

Geography scholar Dennis Cosgrove writes that “the instrumental use of maps in daily life can obscure the epistemological and interpretive challenges that mapping presents.” Maps offer us a vision of control, of organization, of everything in its proper place. For me maps are nearly a talisman, allowing me to control the external environment, to locate myself in orderly space.

But Cosgrove reminds me that “...all mapping involves sets of choices, omissions, uncertainties and intentions...” Maps today are rarely as distorted or incorrect as they were in the time of Herodotus, but that does not mean that maps are complete or unbiased representations of space. Like other systems of abstraction, maps attend to one level of organization at the expense of the rich detail of other, noisier dimensions. What am I missing of the world when I hold fast to the map instead of the territory it partially describes?

Humans are unique in the animal kingdom for having a highly atrophied sense of themselves in space and few innate tools with which to address this lack. Digger wasps find their way to food and home again by first simulating their flight paths over the nest to memorize key landmarks. Rats observe their environment and construct cognitive maps of relationships between landmarks. Geese keep a continuing running tally of their distance and location from the nest and can determine their current location based on that record. Desert ants can see the polarization of light waves, allowing them to judge the position of the sun by the shape of the movement of light.

Homing pigeons have nerve fibers embedded in their nostrils that contain specialized magnetite molecules, which they can use to navigate geomagnetic fields in the earth. Some findings suggest that humans might have small deposits of iron in the bone of the nasal cavity, but few researchers currently support the theory, broached by British researcher Robin Baker in the 1980s, that humans have a magnetic sense.

Humans who are still in touch with ancient sensitivities to land and sea, such as Bedouin trackers in the desert, Puluwatese sailors in the ocean, and Inuit hunters in the Arctic, build gradient maps by reading wind and wave patterns and other environmental cues, to find their way home from long journeys through more or less featureless, landmarkless terrain. They also use storytelling as a key technique to identify landmarks and encode maps in memory. Geographer Colin Ellard compares Inuits sitting by a campfire telling stories with digger wasps memorizing their landscapes by way of orientation flights. “By naming landmarks and embedding them into stories, Inuit trackers are using a tactic analogous to one that is used by digger wasps, but this tactic is much less dependent on geography,” he writes.

Much is made of narrative as a uniquely human method of meaning-making, but Ellard insists that it is also, perhaps originally, a method of place-making. If narrative creates our sense of time, and mapmaking creates our sense of space, then together, the two encompass our symbolic framework for organizing the vast and varied external world into a carefully-curated and orderly self-understanding.

Ellard generally insists that humans are poor navigators, but he notes that “one key to accurate navigation in human beings is the development of an acute sense of observation.” I wonder to what extent my use of maps has obscured or dulled my sense of observation. It has certainly instilled in me a lack of tolerance for the unexpected, the serendipitous, or the undirected.

The flipside of this is that my mind is my field of discovery. While physically I am unlikely to wander, I have no trouble--indeed, I have great joy--wandering mentally, along all the alleyways and dead ends and circular streets of the mind. When Kant compared the human capacity for reason to the human capacity for sense of direction, he was asserting the notion that a basic self-sufficiency is woven into our very bodies, a thread that we can follow out of the mystery of the unknown and into the safe haven of familiar territory. When it comes to reason, I know I have found my way only when I read other thinkers and find my own thoughts written in their books. This is like finding a long-lost map of a land you half-thought you had been only imagining.

When it comes to space, I must have a map to guide me. Rebecca Solnit writes that “Never to get lost is not to live.” Surely there is something to this: in my fear of getting lost I have over and over lost access to an experience that might have offered me the new perspective that comes with disorientation. But the beauty of a map--even a mistaken one, or a despotic one, which chooses for you your boundaries and categories--is its laconic abstraction. In what is missing, or what is misconstrued, lies a wide-open space, room for an actual experience of territory.

There is more than one way to get lost. Ellard takes note of the “psychological tendency” that over time has taken precedence over the instinctive animal ability to observe and experience the nuances of physical spaces. It is because of this prioritization of the psychological, this ability to live in our minds, that we are able to project ourselves into the wondrous world of imaginary places.

Now I live on the eastside of Portland, Oregon, which is separated by the Willamette River from the downtown area. Staring across the river at downtown Portland, I always find the city incomparably beautiful. Walking along the esplanade that runs up the river’s east bank, I can’t resist stopping for a moment to sit on a bench and look out over the water, calm and brown in the cool air, its blank face rippled with the mark of the wind, two waveforms intersecting in the space between land and sky. In the background, the undulating green ridges of the Hawthorne Bridge are flanked by the tall colorful backdrop of downtown buildings, striped and glassy, rising in rectangular colors of rose and teal on the opposite bank.

But no matter how often I go there, being downtown always gets me turned around. I cannot for the life of me remember which way is which, which order the streets go in, in which direction lies the river that stripes the city north to south, forms the eastern boundary of the district, and provides the landmark that should lead me home. I never know which direction I’m going, can never find my car, and must turn in circles

twice or thrice before fixing in my mind my place between the buildings. I never revel in being lost, but always try with frustration to find my way.

Some philosophers argue that thought itself is language-like; others argue that thought is map-like. Some argue that thought is both, or rather, that maps and language consist of the same foundational features. Each is systematic, productive, compositional, and recursive, involving the repeated, successive use of relevant rules and definitions for creating or organizing meaning. Each, in its own way, offers the possibility of narrative: as with Inuit hunters, narrative is a linguistic form of mapping, that organizes space in terms of time and vice versa, re-integrating in conscious experience the foundational physical reality, made mathematical by Einstein, of the integral relationship between space and time.

Philosophers and physicists have their own specialized visions of reality; GPS notwithstanding, we less exalted beings have only our own bodies, without benefit of an objective view of our world from on high. We are *in* it, tiny and confused, our magnets misaligned, our animal capacity to triangulate badly scrambled by generations of reliance on our own clever technologies. The farther we penetrate into the unknown, the more lost we become.

We compensate, we construct the world for ourselves and so reorient ourselves to a new world, half-imaginary, where we build our own realities, and wander them, waiting to lose ourselves again.

Doing Nothing

I was close to my nadir of boredom when we decided that we would go to Morocco. I had been bored for nearly a decade, having stepped out of time into the tidepool of domestic life at the birth of my first son. To ease the incessant mundanity of childrearing, I had spent some of that time writing and drawing, but most of it, when not consumed with diapers and playdates, was taken up with quotidian escapism in the form of intoxication, television, and picking fights with my unsuspecting husband.

Now the kids were older and I was ready to move on to the next phase in life, but I didn't yet know what that phase would be. I spent my days circling our small house, wondering what I was supposed to be doing and how I should go about doing it. Then my husband got the opportunity to chaperone a group of college students in Morocco, and the institution sponsoring the trip would pay for our whole family to go with him. I was anxious to escape the boredom of being stuck in my life: I needed to get out of my routine to be able to reset the feedback loop that kept me from moving forward.

I was not the only bored one in the house. My children, typical media-saturated American pre-teens, spent as much time on screens as we would let them, and left to their own devices, they could spend continuous hours stimulating their dopamine receptors with light, sound, and narrative. When not on screens, there were books, pens and paper,

Legos, board games, the tool shed and a bunch of scrap wood, as well as balls, paddles, sticks, wheels, scooters, skateboards, roller blades. There had to always be something.

The trick was to find something to focus on for every one of the day's long minutes. When such focus was enjoyable, time flew by and the world disappeared outside of the spotlight cast by attention. When there was no focus or the focus was not fun, my usually sweet and bright boys became instantly restless and irritable, often hopeless in their assessment of the possibility of satisfaction. When *really* bored they writhed in agony. We all, in our ways, were churning through our stimulations and coming up against our intractable boredom.

I was ready to throw the iPads out the window, the new one along with the one with the cracked screen. When the Morocco opportunity arose, it seemed like an obvious answer to our commonplace conundrum. Travel is nothing if not a respite from the familiar, a time-honored flight from boredom. I told myself that it would be a good way to force the boys off their screens and into a slower pace. For myself, I only hoped that I could get back out into some more stimulating world than the confines of my own brain.

In *Ennui To Go: The Art of Boredom*, from 2005, John Winokur concludes that contemporary America holds the reigning title of Most Bored, and that boredom has long been a problem for anyone with time to spare. Winokur writes that “for most of human history people were too busy trying to survive to be bored, but by the eighteenth century the rich suddenly had the leisure to worry about whether they were having fun, and

boredom has flourished ever since.”

This timeline notwithstanding, Winokur traces boredom back to the *taedium vitae* of Roman late antiquity, through the *acedia* of medieval monkhood, and into the *weltschmerz*, *noia*, and *ennui* of modern Europe. This lineage makes sense, as it applies to the times and places in history when some people had time on their hands and not much to do in it.

Surely that was my own problem: alone in the house all day, nothing to do and nowhere to go. I tried getting a job, writing a novel, volunteering with various organizations, and hours of rearranging the bookshelves. I must have been too bored to begin with, so that I could not fully give my attention to any of these possible paths of action.

In an essay on boredom from 2012, Joseph Epstein takes pains to parse the “semantic problem” of different shades of boredom, from situational to existential, defining boredom as “chiefly an emotion of a secondary kind,” not to be confused with depression.

Be that as it may, my boredom was one ingredient in a stifling sense of uselessness. The cycle started anew each day, when I realized not only that there was nothing to do *today*, but that there might be nothing to do *anywhere ever*, that our very existence might be so inconsequential as to admit of no purpose, meaning, or reason. I suffered from a modern, secular version of *acedia*, which scholar Patricia Meyer Spacks defines as “a combination of what we call boredom and what we call sloth...understood

as a dangerous form of spiritual alienation.” Kathleen Norris, who claims to suffer from that malady herself, defines it as an inability to care about doing anything at all.

I knew that I could go far and dark with my apathetic despair, but I saw it come and go over and over, like the endless tides, myself flailing in its swell and gasping for breath in its recession as if unable to learn to step out of the waves. I hoped our trip to Morocco would shake me out of it. That boredom seemed to be a function of time and stimulation meant that giving ourselves more time with less stimulation might reverse or reroute the feedback loop that was running me through its dead-end cycle of stimulation and paralysis.

The Moroccan escape started out rather slow-going. We traveled by interminable plane for fourteen hours of suspended animation, through a six-hour layover in Frankfurt, and a train from Casablanca into the crowded terminal of the Fes train station.

Exhausted and disoriented, we waded through a close, pungent crowd of people as if through water. Outside, Paul hailed a small, red taxi, which stuttered up and we climbed in, first the bags, then the boys, then Paul, then me. The taxi drove us out of the new city and left us at the Bab Boujoloud, the western gateway of the medina, the old city.

In the Fes medina, we wound along high-walled alleys, through a close crowd of bodies, clutching each other’s backpack straps to keep together. Cars can’t fit through the narrow dirt streets, so the traffic was human, donkey, occasional moped. The pace was

slower but the space was tighter. We bumbled along amongst the people and animals, agog at the crowded market street life all around us.

When we got to the small third-floor walk-up, we slumped against the doorjamb, exhausted by the empty boredom of traveling and now also by the unfamiliarity, the press of people, the sense of enclosure. In our small furnished apartment, the boys collapsed on the ornate bedspreads of the twin beds. I got a second wind and began to unpack. I knew we would adjust to this new environment, and I was relieved to finally *be* somewhere, to inhabit a slow different space, to stimulate ourselves to some necessary adjustment by some foreign version of action or inaction.

I knew that the traveling part of traveling would be boring, and I had prepared us beforehand. The boys carried their iPads, trading the cracked and the good at regular intervals, which did not prevent the inevitable competitive wrangling that regularly broke out between them over unequal access to resources. (Or in their words, “It’s *my* turn!!”)

For myself, I had packed a stash of notebooks, ready to draw, write, or take notes. I demanded of myself that I make something more of my travels than just *experience*: I would record everything, so that I would have something to take home with me and use later. I would not be bored, but would use this trip as an excuse to do something, a spur to my own inwardly-focused action.

There are many versions of stimulation, including the video-game kind I was trying to wean my sons from, and the alcohol-and-pot version my husband and I sought

to escape. But over the years, as I had attempted to write and draw my way out of my own introversion, I was coming to realize that art-making might be a similarly futile attempt to stave off boredom, another form of endless, diminishing-return self-stimulation. I had always thought that my restless creativity was a good trait, a way to more fully and deeply explore and experience the world. But over time, it had begun to feel more like a pressing compulsion to record, to *avoid* experience by insisting on capturing it. Perhaps I was so bored because these stimulations had become a detriment to the experience I was trying to express.

Epstein quotes Isaac Bashevis Singer to the effect that “the purpose of art was to eliminate boredom, at least temporarily.” Patricia Meyer Spacks, a scholar of literature, reiterates this sentiment, giving special attention to her chosen field: “As action and as product, writing resists boredom, constituting itself by that resistance,” she writes. “All ‘cultural advance’ derives from the need to withstand boredom; literature is a single instance among many.” Thus, not only art, but caring craftsmanship, moral engagement, aesthetic exploration, intellectual inquiry, religious practice: they all offer a respite from boredom, engaging the doer in the purposeful, absorbing action that psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls “flow.” Pursuing flow seems to be our species’ great spur to both innovation and satisfaction. It’s what keeps humanity *doing*.

Such constant doing is both good and bad in equal measure, something that had become clear to me when watching my children execute both creative ingenuity and mind-numbing repetitive zoning-out on their electronic devices. Video game designer

Jane McGonigal relies heavily on Csikszentmihalyi's theory in her recent book, *Reality is Broken*, to show how the experience of playing video games matches up with Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow. McGonigal points us toward a future in which we prevent ourselves from ever doing nothing by creating for ourselves a constantly compelling "real" world of goals and connectivity and motivation by extrinsic rewards.

McGonigal's world of constant stimulation is a chimera, because our current state of endless connectivity notwithstanding, it cannot be maintained, leading, like other addictions, to the development of tolerance and the crash of withdrawal. It smacks of Robert Nozick's Experience Machine, a philosophical thought experiment from the 1970s that posits a machine capable of generating the illusion of a perfect life, fine-tuned by the individual for his or her own definition of success and happiness. Nozick's question is, would you want to be hooked up to such a machine and live a life of complete illusion, even if the illusion seemed substantially real?

Nozick's answer is clearly no: morally speaking, such a choice is a failure, such a life a lie. Nozick compares the choice to drug addiction, in which the user experiences false grandiosity and joy when high, and destructive despair when cut off from intoxication. McGonigal admits that tolerance development is a problem for gamers, but she does not see any reason that we should ever be cut off from instant and constant reward activities: she does not even consider withdrawal. Nozick's insight is that given a choice, we would not want to live the delusion engendered by such stimulation, but in the new world of technological possibility, I was uncertain whether or not there was a choice

to be made. Such delusion seemed to be a more or less inevitable part of our lived reality.

Each day in Fes was much like the one before it. We lived in a furnished third-floor walk-up cluttered with decorative embellishments and ceremonial objects that crowded us into the apartment's many corners.

This crowding extended to the packed dirt lanes outside, enclosed by shambling stone walls which once protected the city from the surrounding countryside. The medina was a pre-industrial enclave, a 500-year-old small-scale local economy, where families continued to send their dough to the communal oven on a tray on someone's head. It was still home to roughly 250,000 people, living some time-forged blend of medieval and modern lives.

In the busiest part of the medina were the souks, the market streets, shaded by the tall clay buildings and draped across with thatched awnings. Shoppers bustled together at small market stalls lining both sides of the alleyway. The ground was dust, cobblestones, ragged rugs. A wide array of smells, from deliciously spicy to chokingly chemical, wafted through the air: artisans cobbled in small streetside hovels making and fixing things; meat mongers crudely hawked the fly-specked parts of dead animals; vendors neatly stacked their flat, round breads in sweetened piles. Everywhere, emaciated, mewling kittens prowled the edges of the commotion, looking for handouts.

Everything there was tightly-packed, people and their products shoulder to shoulder, hemmed in by the clay walls defining the space. The compact, connected

medieval geometry of the buildings gave the whole city an organic hivelike feeling. Held together with stone, mud and wood, the walls loomed several stories high and were propped together across alleys by wooden buttresses and other antiquated engineering. Many walls seemed liable to collapse at any moment.

In our first days navigating this close maze, I was reminded of a quote from Paul Bowles: “Fez is the place where nothing is direct. Going into the Medina is not like entering a city; it is more like becoming a participant in a situation whose meaning is withheld.”

I appreciated this sense of mystery, but unlike Bowles, I did not quite know how to participate in it. I wanted to sink into the medieval rhythms, the alternately welcoming and inscrutable offers of absorption in a slower, nearer world. I wanted my children to be shunted out of the virtual worlds of their screens and into the midst of this teeming crowd of undeniable reality.

But often the mystery was too great, too intimidating. For every day we spent in the souks talking with vegetable vendors, we spent two in the little apartment, watching TV.

Epstein generalizes that “boredom is often less pervasive in simpler cultures.” Was life slower here? Were people able, even content, to do less without the attendant ache of irritable restlessness that characterized our onerous American doing? Spacks, in her study of boredom, insists that most 20th and 21st century authors are too quick to

take boredom for granted as an inevitable human condition. She suggests that our “culture of narcissism” causes us to assess the world according to our subjective experience of it, rather than according to other possible systems of assessment, including “meaning in relation to a theological order of things or to a system of family and local responsibilities.”

Despite the continued hold of such traditional systems on developing countries like Morocco, they are currently caught in the midst of the long transition from pre-industrial to post-industrial that the West has unleashed on the globe. This transition was nowhere more starkly visible than in the Fes medina, where economic opportunity is scarce. I marveled at how many people I saw doing nothing, or at least very little. There are many jobs, like guarding and manning shops, that consist of doing almost nothing, all day, every day.

For instance, there was the storekeeper at our neighborhood *hanut*. The *hanut* was a small square of space carved out of the outside wall of a building, just big enough for a man to crouch in, behind his rows of candy, gum, and bottled water. The storekeeper sat in this tiny, dusty space day after day, waiting for school to get out so he could sell a few cents’ worth of candy to passing children.

Another such character was the the guard who sat outside a nearby *dar*— a wealthy household— on a small fold-out chair. Every time we left home and every time we returned, he was there, sitting quietly in his chair. He had no cell phone to fiddle with, no book to read, and only the occasional acquaintance to greet. All day every day, he sat in

that chair doing nothing, and he seemed to be comfortable with it, or used to it, at any rate. He didn't seem to be desperately seeking stimulation of any kind, except to say hello to passersby and neighborhood children.

Seeing people spend all day doing nothing put into stark relief the relentless self-stimulation of American culture, with its endlessly multiplying list of compulsions, intensifying our experience of doing nothing as boredom. Philosopher Thomas Metzinger calls this cycle the "hedonic treadmill." He is referring to the chemical processes in our brains that foster pleasure-seeking and pain avoidance, or more accurately, dopamine-reward. Metzinger writes that "The hedonic treadmill is the motor that nature invented to keep the organism running. We can recognize this structure in ourselves, but we will never be able to escape it. We *are* this structure."

Spacks disputes this notion, preferring an interpretation of personhood that gives less weight to biological determinism and more to cultural constructions of self-understanding. She assumes "that people without such terminology didn't need it--not necessarily because they weren't by our standards bored...but because other categories of interpretation satisfied their understanding of their own situations."

I did not know how the guard and the shopkeeper felt, whether they were bored or whether, as Spacks would have it, they took their lives for granted in a way that as a Westerner I could not manage to imagine.

My paucity of cultural imagination notwithstanding, there were aspects of Fes that

caused me great wonder when it came to this question of stimulation. For instance, one of the most stunning sights in Fes was the Bou Inania Medersa. Built in the 14th century as a religious school and mosque, the medersa is now a tourist destination, an exquisite example of the ornate architectural decoration typical of Moroccan artisans, and one version of a medieval decorative tradition common throughout the Muslim world.

The medersa was little more than an open courtyard two stories high, a defunct star-shaped fountain in the middle of a brightly-tiled floor. Above, the second story consisted of a continuous wraparound balcony overlooking the courtyard and ringed by many small chambers, once dorm rooms for resident students. The walls of the open courtyard, and the small prayer alcove attached, were adorned in a mixture of tile, plaster and wood. Every possible surface was alive with decorative density.

Patterned *zelij* tile of dusty russet and sea-foam green abutted in precise, repetitive intersections to create stars and geometric motifs; the tilework covered the first few feet of wall, then gave way to incredible slabs of plaster carved into a symmetrical profusion of latticework. These were edged by the intricately-carved wood of doors, lintels, panels and sills. In places, wood gave way to domed plaster alcoves and arches. Repetitive design riffs enlivened every possible nook and plane.

The intricacy and comprehensiveness of the decoration was crowded and intense, like the medina itself. But unlike the medina, it was quiet and mesmerizing: the gorgeous patternization, especially in this house of religious study, seemed designed to induce a kind of spiritual euphoria. While very little is known about how these designs were

expected to function for the viewer, many scholars have seen cosmological and numerological significance in the complexity of patterns, and have suggested that the purpose of Islamic geometric design is to foster spiritual understanding through contemplation.

This seems highly plausible to me. The patterns were fantastic and fascinating; their production seems a marvel of mathematical and aesthetic ingenuity. The underlying geometry offers the opportunity for both regularity and near-infinite aesthetic innovation. I wonder if the impulse that drives this orderly exploration to such elaborate and rapturous heights might be, among other things, a need to stave off boredom.

On my frequent visits to the medersa, I often took out my notebook and tried to record the mood, starting with the eight-point star. I was awed by the pressure for precision and limitless repetition that the star induced. Everywhere the star appeared it seemed to demand endless symmetrical reiteration. As a decorative architectural motif, the star was never alone, but always one among a thousand other stars, a carefully choreographed crowd. Each of its eight corners pointed longingly off into an infinity of possible space. It waited there, itching to replicate itself.

The visual vitality of the walls shaded seamlessly into a silent hypnotism. I tried my hand at copying out these infinite geometries, but I ended up with only lopsided stars, embarrassed and alone upon the page. Most of the time I never even took my notebook out. I could imagine this decoration having once served as a tool for meditation and contemplation, a paradoxical spiritual spur to flush the mind of the mundanities of life in

favor of a divine stimulation.

In 1754, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote his famous essay *Discourse on Inequality*, wherein he posited that civilization was the cause of inequality among men, along with many other problems of human life. As civilization “advances”--that is, as human technological capacity gets more complex--so too does it become more difficult to enjoy the fruits of that advancement in the face of all the additional problems that it simultaneously constructs. If the complexity of civilization has increased in tandem with the rise of inequality among people, so too has it engendered increasing opportunities for stimulation that have become their own form of imprisonment.

Rousseau argues that life was better when we were more like the animals we evolved from. While this might be the first philosophical argument from nostalgia, it nonetheless holds a powerful kernel of truth: if civilization saves us from the brute ills of naked nature (as suggested by Rousseau’s contemporary, Thomas Hobbes), it also introduces into our lives as much difficulty and hardship as it relieves.

Technology-boosters like McGonigal imagine technological development as a tool for utopian self-intoxication, while ignoring the emotional peril that constant stimulation has already put all of us in. There is no end to this stimulation, nor to the frantic boredom it engenders. It can never be satisfied in a magical world without boredom.

Some think that the only hope for this situation is what Metzinger calls

“consciousness ethics.” According to him, the evolution of consciousness can be seen as the emergence of “an expanding ocean of suffering and confusion where previously there was none.” As a way to manage this negative increase, he turns to the ancient practice of meditation as the only known antidote to death-by-overstimulation.

Meditation is currently trending in contemporary Western psychology because, as any dabbler in American versions of Zen well knows, meditation helps us to shut off, rather than encourage, stimulation, by sitting absolutely still, silent, and emptying the mind of all thought. While meditating, there is nothing going on to distract you but the aching in your legs, yet the energy of constant mental action will not cease. The task of silencing yourself is impossibly difficult. Doing nothing seems to be the ultimate form of doing something.

I didn’t meditate in Fes, but as the weeks wore on, I found myself alienated from my chosen self-stimulations. I stared at my drawing notebook with bafflement, as if it were a piece of complicated machinery I had never learned to use. It sat quietly on a ceremonial silver tray for the whole month, untouched. I wrote a little, but the daily logs I had planned for myself, in anticipation of writing an essay about Morocco afterward, did not materialize. My notebook held my Arabic homework and that was it.

Not only that, but I didn’t even try to make the most of the experience. Before the trip, I goaded myself in my journal to “Note details, ask questions, visit everything, seek out interactions!” But instead of this naive version of being deeply engaged in every moment, I often just sat quietly and looked around. Of course, I was often restless, and

vaguely dissatisfied as I washed the dishes, made the beds, and climbed to the roof to hang the clean wet clothes in the glare of the Moroccan sun. And it's true, sometimes I was bored.

But other times I slipped into a kind of calm, mesmerized state, absorbing my surroundings without the judgment and interrogation characteristic of my *doer* self. Instead of trying to convert the raw material of Morocco into some finished product, a commodity, I occasionally enjoyed the experience of simply *being in Morocco*.

My favorite memory of the whole trip is of one quiet afternoon that I spent alone at a cafe near the Bab Boujloud, where the foot traffic is thickest. I sat at this crossroads for over two hours, the warm sun on my skin, the hum of human bodies buzzing past, the stray kittens mewling at my feet. After an initial impatience to get the check and move on with my day, I gave in to a realization that I had nowhere to be and nothing to do. I could have taken notes— *colors, faces, fabrics, voices, flavors!*— but I didn't. My notebook remained closed on the table beside me, and after a while, even the thoughts running through my mind fell slowly, blessedly silent. In that serene moment, I felt my body somehow revel in the generous pause. It was surprising to me that this state of doing nothing did not induce boredom, much less existential despair, but instead a kind of empty, quiet relief.

I am hopeful that I can take this lesson with me. Our constant action is the very thing that makes us so bored, but we ought not to confuse boredom with inactivity. Some or most of our time we will desire, and be forced by restlessness and economy, to

relentlessly keep doing; some of the time, if we're lucky, we'll get to sit around quietly, doing nothing.

On Singing

From an early age, I was made to understand that I had a terrible voice. My mother always claimed that she had a good voice before she became pregnant with my older sister: that momentous event turned her from a soprano to a tenor, and ever since she has only irregularly shouted out a dysphonic tune, in a joking manner meant to insinuate (as far as I could internalize) that singing was a joke and furthermore, an imposition on those around you.

My older sister had a beautiful voice, though I can't say I ever heard her actually sing. She was shuttled off, for a period of time, to voice lessons, while my younger sister and I were deemed unworthy of the effort, and left to warble to ourselves, under our breath, at our own peril.

Singing was not a thing my family did. Neither, in fact, was music. One Sunday a month my father would put some Motown on the stereo and clean the house: he was in awe of the girl groups of the 60s: the Shirelles, Martha and Vandellas, the Ronettes.

Beyond that, singing was more or less taboo in my childhood home. Singing was likely to bring down nothing but judgment upon your head. If you're not good at something, there is, manifestly, no reason for you to do it; being made aware at a tender age of your shortcomings closes off the many paths of endeavor you might otherwise struggle down so fruitlessly. It was not my parents' intention to discourage, nor, I'm afraid, to encourage: it was only to shut us up, lest we interrupt them in whatever state of

marital detente they found themselves. We had better be silent than be the butt of their snide or even worse, indifferent, attention.

Many people first come to singing, if not in the bosom of the family, then in the church. We were Jews, so, no church. We did, in the several years surrounding the bat-mitzvah age of my sisters and myself, attend services at the synagogue, but the singing there was all atonal chanting, ancient and minor-key, having nothing in common with the tunes we might sing to ourselves or hear, in a rush of adolescent confusion and bliss, on the local top-hits radio station. At our yearly Jewish celebrations, Hannukah, Passover, the High Holy Days and the low holy days, where other more Jewish Jews might join in *Dayenu* and *Chad Gadya* and so forth, my family sat silent, impatient, and irreverent. Such was our heritage, passed down from my parents' parents to my parents to us: put a lid on it, kid.

One of my first mature encounters with unselfconscious singing was in college. I was living in a dorm, using a communal bathroom. One day, entering the bathroom for a morning shower, I found another woman already in line before me. She was a statuesque black woman with copious ebony braids and skin the color of rich dark chocolate. She stood at the mirror, singing with abandon as she prepared for her shower, her voice gorgeous and commanding, apparently unconcerned with my timid white presence. I remember especially my own sensation of irritation: how dare she sing so boldly, in public, disturbing my hobbled excuse for peace?

It wasn't until after college that I began to discover, to absorb and soon worship, the sound of black women singing: first Ella and Billie and Aretha and then Chaka Khan and Roberta Flack and finally, Nina Simone, the goddess whose awkward deep and strangled voice brought me to myself in a rush of serious confrontation with all that it means to be a woman, and all that I had shut out by closing off singing. In those erotic heady days of confused youth, hearing Simone sing *I Want a Little Sugar In My Bowl* was an experience of transformation, a thick heavy sad sexual moment of self-recognition, a revelation.

It was years from that moment, sitting in dark silence while her deep voice washed over me like a tide, in and out, over and over, carrying time and life and god and sorrow in that one hot and heavy song, to finding my own voice. I had to work my way through a series of self-judgments, pushing out of the repression of habit, of discomfort and self-consciousness. And then after that, I had to learn how to find and follow a tune.

Sometime in my thirties I started printing out the lyrics to songs and working through them, methodically, until I had all the notes down pat. It turned out that singing was not so much a matter of innate talent as of a willingness to turn your voice, carefully, at each and every note, to the tune that was required. It was a slow and painful job, but by no means impossible or even inaccessible, even to a poor-voiced white girl such as me. It turned out you could find the tune, and meet it, like a messenger on the road, intercept it and carry its message down to the town and spread the good word, such as it was, to the

earless air. If only you could find a nonjudgmental place to hear yourself, you could maybe eke out a little song.

I found this new practice intoxicating. To sing was to give my whole body over, starting at the delicate throat and yet billowing like a strong wind through the head and the trunk, out along the limbs, like lightning directed, to give my whole self over to this simple song, to become an instrument and to play myself, if imperfectly, yet gloriously, and in grateful humility for this bombastic moment of expressive emptying. I was emptying myself of this song, that ran through me, of the history of beauty and sorrow of which its words and sounds spoke, of a whole history of human struggle, erotic and emotional, full of life and rebellious insistence on continuation, on defiance despite desperation, of grace, of loss as gain, as growth.

I love to sing, and I sing often. I have lately hoped to find myself a choir, a group of women willing to sing with me, and celebrate my song. This still hasn't happened, perhaps largely because I have not yet gotten over the sense that no one in her right mind would want to hear me sing. Even my children (especially my children) moan and gripe when I try to send out even a simple line of tune. Children are the most intolerant of anything conspicuous or not conforming to the strict mores they perceive to be in eternal operation in the universe.

But I sing—around the house, in the car on my way to and from this or that—I sing. I consider this a minor triumph, if not a personal transport: I sing and it feels grand and I love to sing. I may have failed in a million other things, but in this, I have at least

come to a tremulous, grateful peace, a sense of myself as something more than flesh, a knowledge of some unknown mystical thing: I sing.

A Thousand Mornings

Paul and I bought our first house in 2002, just after we married. It was a little bungalow on Franklin Street, where we were stacked on top of each other, vying for bandwidth in the home's few tiny rooms. The house was built in 1928 and full of the decaying charm of artifacts imagined in another era, for a different way of living. It was a hobbit house, by the standards of the bloated America in which we found ourselves. We had no choice but to stretch into the space.

Before we had kids, it was cozy, but by the time two babies had come along and grown to boyhood, we felt we were bursting at the seams. In theory, each boy had his own 8x10 foot bedroom, though in practice one was for sleeping, one for Legos. Paul and I moved our bedroom into the attic, braving a treacherous ladderlike staircase every day to get to and from the half-finished triangular garret, where we stooped under the inclined planes of the ceiling, except in the central seam of the space.

By nature a lover of solitude, I cursed this crowding, pressed in on all sides by small people and misplaced walls. The house was inopportune, awkward, with built-in closets and shelves made for people of another era. Each generation has cabinets to fit its major appliances, which are useless to the next generation's technology.

In my effort to fit us all into the house, with our books and toys and secondhand furniture, I tried to become a space-savvy organizational mastermind, but as our boys

grew and our needs changed, the organization of space became nothing more than an ongoing effort to crawl out from under all our stuff.

Still, the house was our collective body, the physical constraint that shaped our daily trajectories in space. Its narrow hallways and sharp corners, its steep staircases and the constricting distance between walls and furniture, tuned our bodies to a perpetual contraction. We had to maneuver carefully around each other, around the sharp wooden corners of chairs and bedframes; we had to develop a prescience about each other's next moves, to go left when the other went right, to slide past each other, bellies grazing in the intimate distance between furnishings.

This was the autumn of the Syrian refugee crisis. My sister was distraught about it. The media-frenzy over the image of the drowned four-year-old boy resonated with her; she was the mother of a four-year-old boy. My sister imagined her own child dead, and the terrible unthinkable agony sent her into a panic of desperate calls to action. "We've got to do something!" she demanded of me.

In October, Paul had spent several weeks in Greece, where he passed a day meeting boats of refugees on the island of Lesbos. When he got back to the States, we both filled out applications to volunteer with refugees through Catholic Charities. Few of the refugees would be from Syria, because the U.S. government had barely agreed to take any. But there were plenty of other refugees to take in. Once processed, we would become "Cultural Navigators," to be matched with a refugee family, welcoming them at

the airport, providing support on a weekly basis for the transition from Somalia, Iraq, or Burma to Portland, Oregon. We would take them to the grocery store, help them set up their cable, show them how Americans were expected to live.

I wanted to volunteer, but I was terribly shy. The very thought of making small talk across barriers of language and culture and personal history sent me into a spiral of guilt and anxiety. What these people needed was nothing more than a welcoming face, the knowledge that they were accepted here and could safely make it their home. I felt totally unable to provide this simple service.

I combed the volunteer announcements, imagining myself helping Ethiopian teenagers to learn English, Nepali families to use public transportation, young Iranian women to open bank accounts. I stared at each opportunity with disbelief, a lack of constructive imagination. An empathic blank.

One day, I came across an entry titled: "Storage organization & support needed!" The charity's Resources Coordinator, Peter, maintained a small storage space in the basement of the building for the household items that were necessary to stock the apartments of arriving refugees. I immediately emailed the volunteer coordinator. If there was one thing I knew I could do, it was organize household items packed into a small space.

I met Peter in the lobby of the Catholic Charities building on 27th and Powell. He had an athletic body too broad for his small blond head. The storage space was a locked room off the underground garage, filled with metal shelves stacked with sheets, towels,

pillows, dishware, silverware, and toiletries; lamps, toys, cleaning supplies; clocks, pots and pans, first aid kits.

The room was a mess, dental floss stacked next to crock pots stacked next to dish detergent. Boxes and bags spilled out over the floor, making it nearly impossible to move through the space. Peter swept the air with his arm and said, “Here it is. If you can figure out how to get this place in order, I’d be eternally grateful.”

We had been in our house for a decade and a half. We had considered moving almost yearly; we were always able to convince ourselves, in the end, that staying was fine, that living packed into our space like sardines was good for its own inherent limits, its organizational requirements, its moral rigor.

There were other considerable factors (primarily laziness and relative poverty) that kept us in the house, but a genuine affection was also among them. Each decision to stay caused me to recommit to the house, to claim it as ours, to remind myself of the ways in which we were intimately formed by it. The house taught us to dance: it improved our balance, our posture, our tolerance for one another.

Almost. There were times when I cursed it, when the boys were in a heap of wrangling limbs, all wild shouts and brotherly taunts, and nowhere for me to go to escape the noise and tension. Under this pressure, I started to become obsessive about the storage space. Every Wednesday from 10 a.m. to noon I left the house and drove twenty blocks to my newest form of cramped freedom. I let myself into the locked concrete basement

room and sorted through endless boxes of donations, marking everything on a clipboard and squeezing it into its rightful and proper place on the rickety metal shelves.

People donated the darndest things. A few older women from local parishes donated endless rainbows of crocheted blankets, which Peter would put on beds and photograph, then return to the storage room unused. People would often make off with the sample-sized soaps and toiletries from hotel rooms and then donate them in bagfuls of miniaturized generosity. People would donate items that I could not see that we would ever give to refugees: shot glasses, popcorn makers, adult diapers, tinted hairspray, socks printed with Christmas trees and Halloween witches. Peter had trouble parting with anything clean and in good working order, regardless of how unlikely we were to use it, so there were big plastic bins on the unreachable top shelves filled with such hoarded miscellanea.

I quickly came to think of the space as mine. I became the arbiter of locations, the instigator of order. Unlike in my own home, where my efforts at designation were always undone by the unruly native inhabitants of the island, the storage space was a quiet haven in which I could spend a few hours putting things right. Each time I came in, the new bags and boxes of donations cluttering up the entrance, the unfolding sheets falling off shelves, the stacks of chipped and mismatched dishes, all submitted, eventually, to my exacting genius for careful and sensible arrangement.

The living room was the biggest room in our house. I loved its feeling of

openness, yet I filled up the room with shelves and tables, finding surfaces and storage in which to stuff ourselves and our muchness. Much of this furniture had been lugged with us from house to house for over a decade, accumulating as we went: found pieces, inherited pieces, old drawers we had once turned into shelves, portable, rustic, unique, part of our history, intent on squeezing themselves into our future.

In the midst of this carapace of furniture, I sacrificed harmonious arrangement for a few extra feet of floor space. I forced the couch, the rug, and the coffee table up against the wall, exposing a small playing field. On many days, while alone at the dining room table trying to write, I found myself walking a circle through these eight square feet of empty floor, where my arms could reach in both directions without touching anything; where I could lie on my back, if I wanted to, and luxuriate in the respite of empty space.

Peter and Ron, another volunteer, would come every Wednesday to gather items to set up a new apartment. Some of the refugees had relatives or friends in Portland, but many of them had no one except each other and Catholic Charities. Peter and Ron collected items in big rubber buckets: dishware and utensils; colanders, rice cookers, baking sheets, spatulas, serving spoons; can openers, dish towels, hot pads, tea kettles, frying pans. Towels and toilet paper; trash cans and pillows; toothbrushes, shampoo, soap and sponges. I became acutely aware of what variety of items are seemingly necessary to our American idea of home.

Each time Ron would start pulling items from the shelves, we would try to

imagine what they needed, who they might be. We knew little more than their ages and nationalities. Iraqi family of 4. Somali family of 7. Burmese family of 8. Congolese family of 11. Ron, a grandfather himself, often stood in the cramped section of shelving reserved for blankets, picking out the softest and smallest for the children. If they were girls, he chose pink with puppies and hearts. If they were boys, he chose blue with soccer balls and balloons. He would hold them up and ask me if I thought this one or that one would work, rubbing an edge between his thumb and forefinger to make sure they were downy enough to comfort a frightened child. After he made his choices and left with Peter, I would open a new bag of donations and replace the depleted stock with more of the same.

Other employees would often come down three flights of stairs to the basement to remark on my progress. Most often it was Michelle, the Refugee Resettlement Coordinator. “This place was such a mess before you came!” she would exclaim, peeking her head around the door and beaming at me with her generous, if slightly affected, smile. “Thank you so much for your help! It makes such a difference!”

I didn’t quite believe her. I was alone in a room rearranging cleaning supplies and toiletries. I spent hours just putting forks, knives, and spoons into their respective bins. If I’d been doing the same thing at home, I would have felt the necessity of organization in the service of the plainest of living. Here it felt too far detached from the living people for whom it was happening. It didn’t feel especially *vital* in the effort to be a decent human being. After all, home is not made up of forks and knives. Many people had lost

everything--their communities, their cultures, their safety; the familiar, so necessary to daily functioning.

But I enjoyed putting things in their proper places.

Home is less than the sum of all my belongings. As E.B. White once observed, “A man could walk away for a thousand mornings carrying something with him to the corner and there would still be a home full of stuff.” This essential stuff-full-ness of the average American household has always overwhelmed me. Yet it is also the thing that has, over the years, honed the way that I inhabit space. Like an Indian yogi, I have always fantasized about downsizing, wanting to squeeze myself into a little droplet, liberate myself from the burden of so much baggage. Despite this desire, I have always lived among the multiple miscellaneous marginalia of American life, the ballpoint pens and endless scraps of paper, the necessary yards of shelving and storage, the drawerfuls of pushpins and extension cords and duct tape. It is this very plethora that confronts me, and that I try to tame, in the storage space.

But it shows up even in the most basic and utilitarian of items. For instance, when I prepare sets of dishes for each arriving family, I must often resort to including at least one printed mug. The stacked selection includes 75% Christmas mugs, 10% corporate mugs, 10% vacation mugs, and 5% golf mugs. One says “Work is for people who don’t know how to play golf.” One pictures a cartoonish drawing of a blue whale above the

words, “Had a whale of a time in Maui!” One is from the National Museum of Rollerskating in Lincoln, Nebraska.

I imagine a large family, huddled together on their first day in a strange land, wondering at the odd but apparently intractable American custom of drinking coffee from a gaudy decorated cup. Sipping his native tea from one of seven mugs depicting various Christmas themes, might a refugee draw the conclusion that Americans learn their most cherished values, both sacred and profane, from the shiny curved surfaces of their drinking vessels?

On Sunday, I rearrange the living room.

Sometimes I rearrange out of necessity, to make room for new hobbies, new weather. More often, I do it in order to generate a little excitement, to shake things up. Rearranging creates a new puzzle to solve and another opportunity to reappraise our stuff. It’s possible that rearranging lets me pretend that we have moved to a new house or even a new city, and life is not the familiar and therefore boring thing I fell asleep to the night before.

I move the parts and pieces around into new compositions, like a composer finding a new sound in an alternate arrangement of instruments. It is an end in itself, making new places for things to fit into, then putting things once again in their place.

If this newness quickly becomes old, so much the better.

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