UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC À MONTRÉAL

HERE'S MY ONLY QUESTION
FOLLOWED BY
SUCH A SIMPLE TRICK

THESIS
PRESENTED
AS PARTIAL REQUIREMENT
OF THE MASTER IN LITERARY STUDIES

BY
MAXIME FECTEAU

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SUIVI DE
SUCH A SIMPLE TRICK

MÉMOIRE
PRÉSENTÉ
COMME EXIGENCE PARTIELLE
DE LA MAÎTRISE EN ÉTUDES LITTÉRAIRES

PAR
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LAU, love. Thank you for seeing me, and for bearing witness to the writer in there. By being so honestly you, precious stranger, you keep teaching me how to feel my way through the world—and through the words.

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ABSTRACT

This research-creation dissertation is composed of two parts.

Here's My Only Question is a collection of nonfiction pieces written in the tradition of the personal essay in American and British literature. Driven by such a question as *What does it mean to be aware and present in the world?*, the author recounts, in the course of five different essays, his experience with the fog-like symptoms of a chronic inflammatory condition, namely neurological Lyme Disease.

Such a Simple Trick is an essay about the craft of essays, divided into five chapters. Woven together by themes such as magic and gift giving, and inspired by studies drawn from cognitive science and neuroscience, these chapters discuss the roles that narrative imagining ("thinking in stories"), awareness and self-understanding have played in leading the author through the craft, and toward good, truthful writing.

Keywords: personal essay, illness narrative, magic, gift giving, narrative imagining

RÉSUMÉ

Ce mémoire de recherche-création est composé de deux parties.

Here's My Only Question est un recueil de textes non fictionnels écrits dans la langue et la tradition de l'essai dit « personnel », en littératures américaine et britannique. Mené par le questionnement *Qu'est-ce qu'être conscient et présent dans le monde?*, l'auteur raconte, au travers de cinq essais distincts, son expérience avec les symptômes à l'allure de brouillard causés par une condition inflammatoire chronique, à savoir la maladie de Lyme neurologique.

Such a Simple Trick est un essai sur l'art de l'essai, divisé en cinq chapitres. Tressés de thèmes tels ceux de la magie et du don, et inspirés par des études tirées des sciences cognitives et des neurosciences, ces chapitres abordent le rôle qu'ont joué l'imaginaire narratif (le fait de « penser en histoires »), la pleine conscience et la compréhension de soi afin de guider l'auteur à travers l'élaboration de son art, et éclairer son chemin vers une écriture sincère et fidèle à lui-même.

Mots clés : essai personnel, récit de la maladie, magie, don, imaginaire narratif

HERE’S MY ONLY QUESTION

WHEN DOES IT KICK IN?

I keep wondering when. Sometimes it comes as I'm being conditioned by YouTube to keep on watching, and I come across a stirring speech (David Foster Wallace's "This is Water" did it, sometime ago). I imagine it could turn up, also, if someone's fingertips were to graze my nape for the first time. Once, it showed itself at a music festival, during a rare moment of summertime bliss. Sleep deprivation was running high, yet dreamy eyes persevered all around. My whole crew was standing near at hand—near at hug. *Florence & the Machine* was closing the weekend. At some point, her voice reverberated through the crowd as her white dress whirled left and right and back to the middle again. There and then it happened: IT kicked in. I felt alive, aware, tapped into *reality*. A shred of life enwraps me, every time that happens, and for a little while, I just flow through. And when it's gone, again—

I wonder. I wonder when.

This t-shirt I'm wearing is yellow, school-bus yellow with bright red serif letters typed in across the chest. And every time I face the mirror, the question stares at me:

When Does It Kick In?

I first read those words a few weeks back, during a fuzzy, trancelike afternoon in my world. I noticed the shirt up on a wall of a place where hipsters (and sometimes a closet hipster) shop, up on St. Catherine Street. I hadn't been able to focus in over a week, which is the longest I'd ever been stuck in what I'll dub, so we know what we're talking about, "the blur."

The blur is where I live when inflammation lasts, in the blubber behind my eyes. (I do call it "my brain," but on good days only.) When I'm in the blur, I feel removed from reality. Yet I also feel I'm still *here*, in the middle of my life. It's a constant splitting up of myself in my mind. Even in the stillness of my apartment, I can't relate to what's around me—books opened and unfinished, a muted TV, the neighbour's yapping Shih Tzu. I spend my days researching online. And when I can't do *that* anymore, I lie on my bed, and I wait for my iPhone to buzz me back into reality, for a moment. But on the afternoon I'm talking about, I'd decided it was time to check in with the rest of the world.

Every time I go out plodding through the blur, I plan on avoiding blue light, wherever possible. Because that kind of light thickens my world: it makes it denser, and harder to navigate. "Blue" is the space in the light's spectrum which my brain is oddly triggered by, as if it doesn't know how to photoshop it out of my experience anymore. And as you know: the blue part of light shines on—and often *out of*—most things we look at every day. People like me have to find ways to get by, ways to outwit or deflect some of that blue. If the sky is covered up and gloomy, and the sun's golden rays aren't there to overrule it, I'll put dark glasses on. And I'll walk into town instead of going where every corner glares with fluorescent light, down on the subway platform.

The day I bought the T-shirt with the burning-red question, I trailed through a dingy underpass, got across the highway, and reached Montréal's commercial strip. The whole time I kept my earbuds in, but I never pressed play. I needed them to muffle the bad brakes, the bad exhausts, the bad tempers—the worst of all the usual urban clatter.

Medication, supplements and alternative treatments had been eating away at my savings for longer than I could remember, so I wasn't planning on spicing up my wardrobe. What I wanted, really, was to run my fingertips along fibers—hoodies,

shirts, whatchamacallits—and on different skins of denim. Some soft, some made to feel weathered. And in between: a world of difference. The kind of subtleties through which I can keep in touch with myself, when every last pixel of my screen is blurred. For a few wrinkly moments, I grasp at things, and I can make myself a little more aware of the fact that I'm *here*, unwell yet alive… and that the world's still right *there*, even as I can't quite feel IT in my mind.

These symptoms I live with are rare, but they do have a name: "Visual Snow Syndrome" (VSS). Three words I first read online, over ten years ago now, and they still carry the same surreal ring. Just as rare as the disease itself is, of course, credible information about the disease. But when you do find a trusted medical resource that mentions it, it'll tell you again, with the same military precision, the story they all tell: there is "no evidence-based treatment" for the condition at this time, and so there is "no cure," either. The syndrome, in fact, is best described as a "poorly understood set of symptoms." Which is, I think, all the information you need to get an idea of the amount of scientific data there is on the topic.

Still, the *Genetic and Rare Diseases Information Center* (GARD) details it best: VSS first causes "a person to see numerous flickering tiny dots that fill the entire visual field in both eyes." Think of the static noise you once could catch on the cathode-ray tube television set you might also have grown up around. That so-called "snow" is really the base layer—it's the syndrome's common denominator.

Then, depending on the odds "a person" faces, different layers of visual symptoms can add up, each with a Latin name that recalls—to me—waiting rooms and white-lab-coat-wearing "persons" with a proclivity towards medicalese:

- *photophobia* (light sensitivity);

- *palinopsia* (seeing the "spectre" of things after you've looked at them, a.k.a. "trailing");
- *nyctalopia* (impaired night vision);
- *entoptic phenomena* (seeing images from within the eye itself, such as white blood cells rapidly moving in the capillaries in front of the retina, or strings and blobs of varying sizes and shapes floating around);
- *diplopia* (double vision).

A few more, which are generally triggered by the sight of strong light or quick eye movements, include:

- *glares*;
- *halos*;
- *starbursts* (something like a sudden flash of lights—close your eyes, and think of the Millennium Falcon's front window as it moves into "hyperspace");
- and, in rare cases, *odd colours or shapes* covering your visual field.

Some ringing in the ears (tinnitus) or episodes of tremoring can otherwise occur. And when worse turns to worst—when the fire in the brain ("neuroinflammation") persists, and then peaks—there comes an unspeakable state of absent-mindedness, as if a filmy veil detached you from the world. Apart from saying that the medical profession calls this "derealization," I don't think I can say much that would make sense to you about this state of mind. But obliquely, I'll put it this way: when I spotted the flashy T-shirt up on the store's wall that day, my life felt so unreal that I read it as the most important philosophical question I'd ever come across.

On April 5th 2018, I broke silence about having lived with the syndrome since my return, in January of 2010, from a four-month backpacking Euro trip. That evening, cocooned alone on the couch, I called for help through a crowd-funding platform, explaining—to family, friends, and anyone else out there listening—that according to the dizzying volume of information I'd gathered and the dozens of connections I'd made, I had in all likelihood been suffering from a chronic infection for nearly nine years. An infection which can be traced back to a Lyme-disease-carrying tick I must've encountered during that month I spent trekking through Spanish backcountry.

I laid open the fact that I had, over the years, been snubbed by an unfair amount of doctors, that I'd pulled through and managed to deny the symptoms for some years, but that these symptoms were now on the rise, negatively correlating with my sense of having my place in this world. Hoping to make every aspect of my situation plain, I mentioned that the number of alternative treatments I'd been secretively following were proving mostly ineffective, that I was now carrying an unsustainable amount of debt, that I couldn't conceivably seek out proper treatment under these circumstances, and that if I was to recover even the slightest feeling of being the lively, clear-eyed boy I'd always hoped to be—I would need help.

This is my attempt at making sense of this otherworldly thread of my life. A thread which, to this day, can only unreel in my mind as a disjointed sequence of events—dim flashbacks of false starts and rocky realizations. As I tie some strings of my story together, my hope will be that we come to understand, you and I, why I was so tight-lipped about this blurry part of my life. Why I held on tight to the deadening belief that I was a hypochondriac at twenty, and woke up six years later with an increasingly disturbed view, watching the girl I loved breathe in her sleep, gently moving her amber curls away from her eyes and sensing already, without

blaming her, that she—like me—wouldn't bear to see me in this new light, and that she'd go.

The fact is, if we simply stop to appreciate the odds, that I've been struck by lightning, snapped at by a shark. Like a fraction of the humans alive today, I happen to be a living, breathing, and healthy-looking medical mystery. Which makes it all the more hard to believe when I talk about the way the world looks to me. And while I do believe that this fear to speak out I've harboured since the day I heard a doctor say "it's all in your head"—while I do believe this fear has to do with who I am, and with the little trust in my own self I'm able to mobilize in the presence of any kind of authority, I think it says a great deal more about how incurious and unkind we tend to be in the face of what we don't yet understand. And about our shrinking capacity to look another human being in the eye and say, simply, *I don't know—*

I don't know, but I see you.

It was in the end a lack of empathy in the medical community that sent me scouring the Web's lively, perplexing communities and the endless speculation it offers. And from then on, in all kinds of ways, things began to change. Through that other, hyperconnected place where I went frantically looking for answers by myself—everything, every story, every distant yet living figure I came across and interacted with in there—the good, the ugly, the bad, the beautiful—every bit of this radically human mess—gradually, all of it would shake things up.

It would shake, in fact, just about everything I thought I knew about the supposed polar ends of illness and wellness; about courage, desperation and the deep ramifications of loneliness; about the blinders of certainty and how lessons of humility are taught and learned; about the subtleties of intelligence, in anyone and anything alive; about the many facets of self-interest and compassion; about the

buried traps of denial and the very real possibility of losing or gaining that clear sense of who you think you are, of what you should do with this life, and of what it might mean, way below the surface of your own skin, to think about your "self," one sleepless night when you can only imagine it all stripped away.

Something happened, something that's still impossible to pinpoint dramatically changed in me, almost a decade ago now. It was an improbable shift, and it derailed the life I'd imagined for my twenties, the unblemished story we all can't help but dream up for ourselves. But the story to come is the one I lived. And if I'm set on telling it, it's because I find myself, this blurry day, thinking I might have it in me to stitch it up. And when it is, finally holding together in some delicate way, maybe I'll clench my fingers in the cloth, right where I see the question on this T-shirt I'm wearing, and maybe I'll feel, in that moment, that even the most wrinkly and weathered of the past few years were worthwhile.

I type these words now, and every now and then I stop to face the mirror by my side. I watch the hazel in my irises on the other side of the glittering snow… and I keep wondering. I wonder about my obsessive craving for true presence and awareness. I wonder if the time will ever come when I won't need the sound of David Foster Wallace's voice to feel in my mind the grasp of three little words: *this is it, this is real*. I wonder when someone new's fingertips will brush up the scruff of my neck to reach my earlobes and nothing else will exist in my world. I wonder if I'll ever put on this flashy T-shirt before going to a music festival with my crew, and in the thick of a crowd a stranger will stop me and wonder out loud: "When *what* kicks in?"

And as I'm faced with that question again, I'll grin while I look around for a friend's glittery eyes all over a sharp, vivid world, and I'll answer—

All of it.

LET THAT ONE BE ME

"That sinking feeling, Max... it's like… it's always there, these days. I mean, there's just too much we need to turn around in this world, too many minds and habits to change. I'm not making sense of it anymore… I can't picture the green world I used to see so clearly."

It's an oddly cold evening of May in Montréal, during the wishy-washy spring of 2018, and that dearest friend of mine is telling me she's found a name for the sense of doom that has been unsustainably lingering on inside her for some time now. There's a word with which to draw up that feeling, she says.

"Ecoanxiety. It's called *eco*-anxiety."

We're chewing gracelessly at porchetta sandwiches we grabbed from a trendy Italian eatery which recently opened on the main street of my neighborhood, the rapidly upscaling "Pointe," and as the sun recedes into a graying sky, a few sudden gusts stiffening the muscles in our shoulders, we lie in some green space by the city's canal—the waterway that cuts through the island's southern strand, heading off the treacherous rapids of the St. Lawrence River—and *we know*. We know full well we're just getting ourselves into another one of those desperately unresolvable chats each one of our lives depends on in its own wild and precious way.

"I'm always reading about it, you know, the trouble we're in, how real the warnings from decades ago are proving to be, because that's my job... How am I supposed to not feel so helpless? How exactly am I supposed to keep believing the tables will actually turn?"

I watch her expression while she pours out question after question, preferring not to answer any of them aimlessly. What I'm doing, in fact, is reading every fretful mote I catch in her hazel eyes as she says the word. "Ecoanxiety." How she's crying out for hope in the heat of every disturbing piece of news on our world and its ever-impending environmental nightmares. "Ecoanxiety," she says again, in the way you latch onto a diagnostic label when you come to realize that the glitch inside of you really exists, that it had a name all along. "You know what I mean, right? Of course you do." And what I'm thinking one more time in my life as she looks at me with those same stricken eyes is that she's beautiful.

If I believed the kitschy kind of wisdom that tells us things always play out the way they do "for a reason" (and whose reasoning should be behind much of this mess, now, I ask myself), I would go ahead and tell you that it can't in the least be a coincidence that the first time my eyes couldn't move away from her round, ruddy face she was sitting in the grass in front of our campus's central building. But these days I'm drawn to following this sort of easy logic the other way around, myself knowingly orchestrating its significance.

The stories we tell ourselves (in order to live, if not in order to survive), the ones we cherish as much as those we ache to forget, depend on us making well-formed connections as we look back. They rely, I mean, on our capacity to see through the governing chaos that gave us this life, and to imagine that in spite of its blind timing and its impassiveness toward what we'd desired or hoped to fend off from ourselves, some deeper web of meaning could spread throughout our own days after all.

And only in this way, in turning our mind's eye back in a sort of sweet retrospect, can we make up and trail after this web we've carefully crafted for ourselves, with that one lane in our memory, weeks or months or years in making its trace, in an

idle moment allowing us to see a snapshot from which it all just makes sense: I love, simply, how unreasonable it is of me to assume that I saw her waiting on green space that first time because I haven't come to know, and probably won't ever know so truly, anyone else as grounded and connected to the beautiful things of this earth as this one human I hadn't yet spoken to.

A decade has gone by, now, since that long gaze from the stairs in the entryway to that building, and I can still picture her sitting around before class in a circle of friends, her copper hair swaying gently every time she'd take a candid look at another smile and laugh away. I had yet no idea who she was or just how real and alive she'd prove to be with me, but I remember feeling it clearly then that I'd need to find out about this girl.

A miracle I haven't had a chance to long for yet, when it occurs, will tear my nerves with a jolt. And luck had it that day, in the fall of 2008, that I'd be zapped exactly this way only an hour or so after that first distant look at her, when I set foot into the assigned classroom for *Introduction to Western Philosophy*: when I took my signature timid look around, I collided directly with a pair of glittery hazel eyes.

But one of the face-saving things about being an animal in this world with an excessive instinct for survival is that when your life's scenario presents you with an electrifying opportunity, you can always, even in just a pulse's time, consider your options carefully: (1) give a sincere but inescapably awkward shot at approaching her, or (2) consider the particular shape of your feet while your mind pleads with itself for safeguarding your soul somewhere in the middle of that last row of desks all the way in the back.

This second, perfectly prudent strategy, worked out pretty well for me—it did. Right up until, I'd say, not even two weeks later, during our third or fourth

scheduled lecture of the semester, when she arrived at least a good half hour late (her struggle with the structured march of time became, as the years went by, a comically lovable thing about her, something I simply learned to have a ball with, often starting and winning bets on her arrival time), and at which point she sat, that's right: precisely by my side.

By the following class, we'd reached the conclusion together that 90 minutes of Plato's dialectic was well enough for that day and had decided to extend the ten-minute break to walk around the cemetery adjacent to campus. My best guess at that point was that she'd thought I was pleasant enough to keep the conversation alive. "Pleasant," I say, because "funny," "witty," "smooth-talking," or "generally fit for this world" all fail to appropriately qualify the many ways my hands, legs, eyes and mind each wrestle with their own idea of a right place to rest when I'm getting acquainted with someone I've determined to be too beautiful for me. But as we moved across grassy aisles, passing through rows of tombstones and stopping every once in a while to listen to the excited chirping going on in the branches above our heads, I soon found out that there was this world-redeeming thing about her—and then, instantly, I loosened up.

She was *kind*, and I mean of an all-heart breed of kind: her questions had that gentle, caring undertone, and you could easily sense, by the way she eyed you back expectantly for an answer, that whatever it was you were about to stutter out, she was truly curious to learn about you. That's what it was, the thing about her: *she wanted to know*. She was always leaning in that way. And for a boy like me, who'd picked up early on a sort of heightened awareness for those unsmiling parts in others that at any moment might have got something against him, she seemed to belong to herself and to the world in a way that invited me to do the same. And so I, too, asked about her, and I found out as that first semester went by that she really did want to

remain all ears, and precisely by my side, if I was going to choose to do just the same.

A year and some months later, in May of 2009, we were boarding a plane and flying to Quito on an intercultural exchange program we'd been admitted to through the social sciences department of the school we were attending. This trip, we'd been imagining and planning its every detail for the good part of a year alongside an entire crew of like-minded, starry-eyed millennials. And while each and every one of us awaited the moment we would finally meet the families with which we were going to spend one whole busy month, integrating as much as they'd allow us their daily lives—cloaking waves of nausea while we prepared dinner with some unknown parts of that pig that had squealed to its blood-bath-of-a-death the same morning or chasing away the "wrong" chickens from that snug little heart-of-the-woods mud house we'd been told to call home (by the end I'd developed a fairly agile mind for spotting the neighbor's birds before they could lay their beaks on our servings of grain)—we truly couldn't have imagined just how much of a reality check we'd be faced with in those warmer lands.

Before leaving, we'd drawn up in our minds a clear idea of what it meant for us to "make a difference." We'd planned on teaching some English to the kids we'd cross paths with, and to help in enlivening the walls of their schools, for instance, and in many ways we did work quite a bit towards some of those high-minded goals we'd set for… ourselves.

But mostly this journey turned out to be a way of teaching us much simpler things, such as the facts that some donkeys will stare blankly at the same gape in the universe for longer than any human being would ever dare to (had it moved even once, all day long?), that an iguana should be knocked out by slingshot before it can

reach and scavenge the day's clutch of eggs (oh, the malicious satisfaction of a blow to the head), that gazing at the myriad stars in a midnight sky as you lie in the most remote of trails will leave you open-mouthed and feeling hyperbolically alive for a minute or two ("To think that we're made of the same stuff, you and I, and all that… *stardust*, is it?"), and, above all, that this encounter with another earthly way of life was after all another item on the list of privileges for us to bathe in for a little while.

The feeling grew in us about that, over there, and as those days abroad we'd spent so long envisioning neared their end, our mild cases of naive megalomania ebbing away little by little as we met with the convoluted dailiness of these communities we'd waltzed into, we eventually figured it out: all of it could only have been meant to open up and humble our minds a little, and in the end what would be left is the luck we'd have in reflecting on that time every now and then, and to think of how it carved a bit of our characters, as it were, for the rest of our days.

In all kinds of ways this hands-on encounter with some wee small gears in the larger social and natural mechanisms that make up our environment was formative, because it gave us some ideas about the kind of people we could hope to be in this kind of world. Whether we puzzled over the politics of inequality on a global scale or considered the actual range of action involved in the ideal of preserving the ocean all around (remembering that jolly pain in our—everywhere—which had followed from those long hours spent cleaning out a half-mile stretch of beach on the coast of Ecuador that summer), we eventually did, as most dreamers do, come to terms with everything that would remain much larger and far more complex than anything we could ever hope to turn around all at once, as generous as our intentions were at any given moment.

What I'm getting at here is that at some point during that time after we returned, our thoughts about our role in the grand scheme of things grew subtler, and we

realized that if we ever were to feel good about the work we'd choose to spend our days (which is to say our lives) doing, we'd need, before anything else, to think about what this work was about far down inside us, and to see whether the reasons we could catch in those depths added up with the kind of world we itched for. And I should say that, as it is for every meaning-feeding creature just like the both of us, we didn't really have a choice in this: we chewed over these questions all too often to have developed any kind of knack in putting them away.

So, one of these days I figured it was sociology my brain-waves were particularly drawn to: our deeper ties as communal beings, those were forces I wanted to unearth, and the sort of story I thought I'd like to tell. She, having registered after a while that the anxiety growing and lingering on in her eyes had less to do with her lack of mental toughness and more to do with the crushing pressures of her working environment, escaped in an attempt to quiet her mind by seeing and experiencing some nooks of the planet, in many different parts, building strong connections as I know she does. (I'll admit that I've jealously feared, for a passing moment and only the once, that a baby elephant friend named Mina would forever deprive me of her.) And in due course, with perhaps a final little push from someone, she circled her way back home for good, grounding herself in the ropes of environmental work.

Throughout the years between then and now, as the psychodramas that follow from lost loves and our inner struggles with this idea of an intentional life shaped and reshaped again our respective selves, it became more and more evident to the two of us that whatever it was our prevailing X-rated-Hollywood-sizzling-red-hot-love culture had chosen to put down as the dead-ended "friend zone," we were carefully molding between each other a relational space that could resemble something like that 400-year-old Bonsai tree which, at 8:16 a.m. on the morning of August 6th 1945 in Hiroshima, showed our panic-stricken world that some things are rooted profoundly enough to stick around even as disaster happens.

As our twenties unfolded and our conversations multiplied, reaching every time new depths which, in many respects, seemed always to feel the same to us, we came to a sort of awareness that in living with minds like ours the ride would probably go on repeating itself just this way: we'd grow, and break, and then at a certain crossroads we'd feel perhaps a little more alive than ever before, only to break all over again… But whichever bends, twists and unscripted turns these bodies that carried us through our restless days would have to follow and take on, one thing, we could always remember, would hold: this gravitation—this bond that brought us safely back to us—it would keep us true-blue to each other, through thick and thin.

And some thicker days came for me. One winter, in 2010, I'd arrived home from Europe inexplicably ill, and feeling as if I'd lost, somewhere along the way, the lively boy she'd grown fond of. But it was still there, that thing about her: she stayed *right there*, at my side, and *she wanted to know*. No matter how bizarre it was to hear about my mystery disorder. No matter how odd and nutty I sounded when I tried to sketch it out with words for her to picture. She was there to listen, plainly, and tried to figure what it could be like, the indescribable bubble of symptoms I was just beginning to feel trapped in, without ever having me bear just how helpless it made her feel to be unable to rid me of those symptoms in a heartbeat.

In a way, she was doing what every doctor I visited in those early days had been incapable of doing. She was paying attention to what I needed to pour out. I say this remembering it clearly, her voicing those words very early on in my new life with the syndrome, the words I desperately needed someone else, out there in the unclouded world I myself couldn't see anymore, to say to me: "Just lay it all out, Max, even if it doesn't make sense to you, even if you feel like I could never understand what it is you're seeing, feeling, living with—whatever it is, tell me, and just know that I can hear it."

That was in the spring of 2010, and we were lying one afternoon on a green slope of the park at the base of Mount Royal, the mountain sitting at the heart of the island, just a slight walk away from the dodgy semi-basement of an apartment I'd moved into in Little Portugal. (The good idea had been to find a pad from which I would be in a position to walk to campus, and this bad idea of a place where to live had turned out to be the only affordable option.) It was a cheaply rented apartment where mold grew back on the concrete base of the walls despite my every effort to wash it off once a week and where I spent most of my days lying in bed in a large, white, and mostly bare room with little to no sunlight reaching inside. Sometimes I'd bring myself to type into a search bar and would go on to read, someplace online, about the possible causes of the disturbances I was seeing—("A problem with vision is one of the most common symptoms of MS, and often one of the first that people with MS notice.")—and more and more often I felt as if I was losing my mind.

In retrospect I think it's not exactly melodramatic to say that I *was* losing some of myself. During that first year of undergraduate life, as I struggled with a syndrome I hadn't yet found to be *real* (a word which, in our clinical environment, will sometimes be abstracted from the patient's experience until it's found to perfectly equate some other, more "reliable" words such as *documented, studied, identified, known*), accumulating medical appointments throughout otherwise stagnant and anxiety-ridden weeks, I was going about my life in a kind of survival mode, often fighting, fleeing, or freezing—if I hadn't found a way to stay asleep. And she was careful enough to catch that, all that was really going on, spiraling inside my mind. She knew about the life that it sucked out of me to have to keep silence about these disturbances, only so I'd never again have to doubt myself in trying to make invisible things real for others, and never again have to watch that same exact obliviousness in anyone's eyes. She knew… and so, she never once looked at me that way.

Years passed while that coping strategy—the perfect, veiling silence—was an option I had. Good years even, I'll even say: I pulled through that early, rocky period and secured a certain ease of mind in the thought that I had to be making it all up. This thought, it seems to me now, finds a way to settle something like this: when that nerve-racking thing you're stuck with can't be proven to exist, remaining undetectable, at some point your mental acuity starts to dwindle, and that innate awareness for how you actually feel can steadily make way in your mind for a certain blindness regarding that same, *very real* thing. (Remember what mom said: "Just close your eyes and it'll go away." This was like some tardy monster under my bed, and eventually, as with others before it, I covered up my senses enough to forget that the thing could still be watching me in my sleep, waiting.)

Then the night came when the syndrome kicked in one more time to reach a whole new high, leaving me with no conceivable way of hiding or ignoring all the trouble it caused me anymore. That night, after catching a few tremoring tones in my voice over the phone, she rushed to my door. When she was done reading the message I'd drafted before she arrived—a letter I was hoping to break this mind-numbing silence with, finally allowing myself to call family and friends for help through a crowdfunding platform, just so I could stay afloat for a little while longer, and keep researching my way toward proper treatment—she held me tight for a minute, and then she looked at me with those same stricken eyes I told you about when I first said how beautiful she is, and that time again despite how worried she actually was, she said some words, and she stopped my doubts right in their tracks, offering me just the window of opportunity to press *send*, and find my breath again.

"You're the most courageous person I'll ever know… you know that, right?"

It's a little over a month later when she's telling me about what's going on in her mind, what it feels like to live every day with the angst that comes from being crushingly aware that so much of our way of life is spoiling the ecosystems of this Earth. I'm careful about hearing her every word, watching her in the grass just beside me, when I'm struck with a snapshot in the mind.

"Remember that night with a million stars, in Ecuador, when we were lying in that dirt road in the middle of the woods?" I say to her.

Of course she remembers, I think to myself, catching quickly the faint coming of a smile in the way her ruddy cheeks are moving upward.

"Remember how tiny we could imagine ourselves, that night, and how we talked about stardust for a bit, as if we'd grasped, in that moment, what that word could actually mean."

"You're right," she tells me, "you're right, I know, this is so much larger than me. But you know me—I'm really giving it all I got."

"Of course you are. Because, you know—you're the most generous person I'll ever know… you know that, right?"

In bed, that night, in the book I'm holding, it so happens that I read, for whatever reason in this world, about the life and legacy of Rachel Carson, the woman who pioneered the environmental awareness many of us are now acting upon. An impassioned marine biologist, and one of the very first scientists to write lyrically about the hard facts and the naked truths behind our unsustainable ways, Carson strove to tell stories that would ring true enough to compel people to change those ways for the better. And "stardust," I learn then, is the word she personally enjoyed

using to draw up that feeling we're sometimes blessed with when we experience the most beautiful of coincidences, when the synchronicity of things will untwist in a way that allows us to think, if only for a pulse's time, that chance couldn't have had a single thing to do with what this life has given us.

THE ONE WITH THE BEAUTIFUL TITLE

I wish I could've begun by telling you her name. But I haven't paid enough attention to register that piece of information yet. Well, the fairer way to put it might be: my mind's been too blurred up, every time we've spoken. Which amounts to three (four?) occasions. Anyway, she's yea high, which is to say that her eyes stand an inch or two (or three?) below my own. The cloud of her hair is either inky or white (unless it's of a mix of hues in between). She could be living anywhere between her sixty-fourth and her seventy-sixth year in this world. She's daintily built with thin, wrinkled fingers and a sweet, welcoming smile. She's often seen buzzing around the two-storied, piano-equipped bookstore where she works, by which I mean that she looks for requested books the way a honeybee flurries through a wildflower garden.

Walking in there, I go through tall glass doors with thick wooden rims and brassy rails for handles. There's a distinct weight in the hands as I push through—like a feel of literariness. To me, this is a "thick" space: an off-white neon glare. My dark glasses sit at the tip of my nose while a hoodie shelters me from the surrounding motion and Lady Gaga's voice traveling through in this dry, papery air. I come to this place with a specific book or two in mind, and mostly because I can interact with a screen instead of a walking-talking-inquiring human being in order to find out where the pages I've come for are buried. On every occasion I compute my every movement to minimize the time I'll have to spend rifling through book-lined shelves, knowing all too well that I'll be growing dizzy by the second in this light, my face canted sideways trying to track one exact title through the snowy haze.

I walk toward the nearby escalator to be lifted away. I know where to find, up there on the second floor, a search station with just the directory I need to be as efficient as I want to be in getting my eyes quickly back into their quiet, dull-lit living room, looking down the pages of a new book. Somewhere near a small side-shelf display with the swaggering header *THE CEO BOOKSHELF*—that's ordinarily where I stick my fingers out and start pressing keys…

"Let me help you without this thing, will you?"

That's about what she said when she appeared the first time in that nook, hovering at my shoulder. And as soon as I saw the zest in her eyes, I had a sense that this lady wouldn't be one to take *Oh I'm alright, thanks* for an answer. Besides, I wasn't much of a reader at the time, and I knew myself just well enough to be certain I'd be soon stumbling over my own words if I tried to pretend I really knew what I'd come for that day.

We never grasp altogether how an addiction worms its way in, slipping into our grey matter until it settles there, quietly, and for good. And it's not exactly straightforward for us to grasp that because whatever the thing, we were so charmed by how it made us feel from the very beginning that we were in some way blinded by its light, and couldn't discern just how steadily that something was really at work, hardening some of our neural circuits *without notification*—accomplishing all that brainy wiring in fact so delicately that we'd only catch ourselves craving for more of that beloved something long after the thought of it had started to take over a whole big fat region of our mind. It sounds like I could be alluding to such luscious, electrifying things as an iPhone, *PopCorners*, methylenedioxy methamphetamine, or the "One Ring to rule them all," but what I'm really getting

at here, since I'm talking about this specific addiction of mine, is a voice of a vulnerable kind speaking to me from the pages of a book.

I can't tell you flatly how and why it happened—that first truthful read and its particular afterglow, a feeling I went seeking out like a lost high, afterwards—without telling you how long a while it was, setting the stage for that hallowed little place in my mind (and, more concretely: on those wooden shelves in my room) where such voices now live. For a start, books were pretty sparse around the suburban Montréal home where I grew up. Apart from that heavy, multi-volume encyclopedia collection which it seems every self-consciously respectable family felt it should showcase once it joined in on a certain middle-class ethos (and which I've spotted in more than one apartment during those undergraduate years, usually covered in a thin layer of dust which appeared slightly stickier than that of the collection I had known, and sometimes brightened up with a few stacks of even stickier ruby-red plastic cups), I can't remember turning the pages of anything that didn't give off that subtle whiff of mildew during those first few years when I could manage getting myself through basic sentences.

There was, come to think of it, a "dreams dictionary" that interested my mother on a semi-regular basis, and which typically rested atop the toilet seat of that bathroom on the first floor by the kitchen, but every time I found myself bored enough to lay it open, I'd be left with a curious mix of emotions through blended odors of rose water; not exactly the proper setting, still less the substance, of any sort of literary awakening. (Bringing to mind the tacky blue-green covers of that book on my laps, it now strikes me as a peculiar place to be while finding out that the abyss you were looking down on a few hours ago might indicate that you "recognize within yourself the so-called bottomless pit or void.")

As I imagine any child burgeoning through early conscious years, I was as strange as I was true to an unfettered sense of wonder. During one balmy summer

afternoon in our backyard, overlooking Lake Saint-Louis, the waters surrounding, to the south, most of the island's western shore, where at every hour you might catch in the distance a cargo ship steaming through the St. Lawrence Seaway, I once pinched my nose through drifts of drying seaweed before telling my mother that, once I'd have reached a certain age, there could be no doubt I'd "move wheat and passengers around the world for a living." What kind of inspirited forces in our universe could have led that budding little brain of mine to think of such a saintly occupation for itself, there's no way of knowing, but that eccentric, card-reading friend of the family would've told you it was for certain I was "the host a very old soul."

I had an innate attention for most things far away, or very much larger than myself; which is really a way of saying that I was easily concerned with most things too intricate for me to grasp yet (if ever). But in chewing the cud, I'd often find out that a part of me mechanically wanted to know about anything that seemed otherworldly. It's as if I sensed, in a raw and wide-eyed way, there had to be something gravely important about it all that I should hope to find out. (I'll say, as noble and pure as this frame of mind comes out, talking about it now, it proved just as useful in obsessing over a *Gameboy*'s 16-color screen until I could "catch them all," or in strategizing about how to win over the rarest kind of *POGs.*)

"Looks like *Mamie*'s found a new disciple," I once heard my mother say, alluding to her own mother's undying Catholic faith, arguably the only one left of her devout kind in the family. The man we called *Pépère*, her husband, kept a dark bronze Buddha larger than my skull in his personal "salon," a closed-door and incense-smelling meditative space in their narrow apartment of rue Cartier in *le Centre-Sud* (the harsh French-Canadian working class neighborhood where they both were born, and bred, and which they called home), and the staunch atheist that

he was had long grown tired of hearing about her beloved *petit Jésus*' miraculous ways.

Mamie was a lively, stress-driven woman who on any occasion would make sure to appear neat in what she wore, her head of curling auburn hair invariably well-kept, and with a distinctive smile that showed an upper lip softly asymmetrical to the right; a quirky trait I'm reminded of anytime I happen to look my own face somewhat closely in the mirror. Her one childhood dream had been to train as a dancer, but she'd spent the time before she married, her late teens and early twenties, drudging away in a manufacture on the east side of the island, picking chocolate-coated marshmallow cookies out of ice-cold refrigerators and placing them into plastic containers to be boxed. Those frigid working conditions had caused the joints in her fingers to swell more and more by the year, and had left her with stiff, contorted hands, the ragged touch of which I can still imagine tugging on my own little fingers through the stink of subway stations or commercial strips while she ran—and I really mean *ran*—errands, hunting for bargains across the city, chuckling again and again at my complaints of sore legs.

In fact, the first time I ever considered the word "God" and began to imagine that it implied something of a "big deal" was during a piping hot Montréal summer afternoon spent with her. We'd already made, the both of us, a thousand or two more hurried footsteps than the weak-willed kid I was would've wanted to make on any normal day in his life, and at one point along the way, I stopped her right in our tracks, one hand yanking at her puffed up fingers while I lifted the other, my index pointed overhead, well above my eyes.

"Can we go in the big castle?" I said to her.

Normally, having heard any one of my requests as we went along (bubble gum or ice cream or hot-dogs…), she would pull my arm a little closer toward her hip

and let out a *Maybe later, come on now* or a *You won't eat all of that, alright now, let's go*. But this was something else, entirely. It wouldn't end up stuck to my hair and it wouldn't drip all over my shirt and it wouldn't ruin my appetite for dinner. And, over and above: it wouldn't cost a penny to see. The big castle was, in fact, the Notre-Dame Basilica… and I don't think there existed another place in town where she would've preferred having me look around while she did her hopeful thing. (Except, I suppose, bingo nights up on rue Masson, where I'd wind up spending each individual quarter she could possibly find in her wallet through my ever-failing attempts at grabbing a cuddly toy with the arcade machine's incapable claw. That was *my* hopeful thing, as ill-fated as it always turned out to be.)

That evening, when she told *Pépère* how open-mouthed I'd been at the view of those holy stories she'd told me all about in the afternoon—all that I'd seen pictured in the vividness of tall stained glass windows—he reportedly barked at her something along the lines of *Don't tell me you're converting the little one, now?* But I can only imagine she'd found herself in too good of a mood to argue the case with him about that. Besides, she was aware that there were a hell of a lot more "big castles" we could visit, her and I together, in just about every corner of our city, so-called, "of a hundred bell towers." She knew where to find each of her favorites, anyway, and by heart.

Some weeks later, I made up my mind on asking my mother if she could please get me this one book, "my first book," I said. I wanted to read that one important book I'd been hearing about because, I explained to her, it told all the "sacred stories." And she did hand me that first book of mine, just a little while after. A child's version, mind you, brightly colored with illustrated snippets of the "big deal" I had a feeling I'd find out about somewhere in there, but she did get it for me. And I went on, all amped up, to figure out what it was all about.

So much so that around age nine, after I'd asked her to confirm for a third time, stressing again a worrying need to know that really, surely, with absolute certainty I'd been signed up for the coming celebration of first communion, my mother had found a covert way to bolt out of the house and straight into the town church, where the man in charge of registration must have had to tell her at least three times "I'm sorry ma'am it's really too late," before she hastily replied, "Well, if that's the way it's going to be, then someone here will have to explain to my son why God is closing his doors to him." Early the next morning a priest phoned her wanting to express a wholesome apology, and it was almost ten years later when she confessed, with a smug little smile, that I'd been right that day in sensing she'd forgotten.

I've often wondered, getting myself through the blurriest of my days with the syndrome—when I would've needed most an almighty lifeboat to keep my mind afloat—I've often asked myself what had happened to that early faithful inclination, where and when the "big deal" had gone on to be lost on me. Looking back, if I were to hazard a guess, I'd say it started fading slowly and steadily out of my mind after that fateful day in the fall of 2001, when word of mouth went viral through schoolyards that some shade of devotion had to do with what had happened. But I suppose that guess warrants a different story altogether.

About seven years later I found myself planning, with a handful of friends, a two-month-long hiking trip through an age-old pilgrim's way on the other side of the Atlantic, because I'd been told about some otherworldly stuff that could happen to you on that journey, how you could walk yourself through some deeper days over there, and in all sorts of unknown ways feel your mind evolving by the footstep. "To walk inside yourself and meet no one for hours," Rilke writes in one of his letters to the young poet Kappus, "that is what you must be able to attain." I remember holding onto a sense that there had to be something true and real, some roaring kind of personal revelation I might be able to attain sometime before I'd

have made the last of those steps. And so, I hurried—some might've even told you I *ran*—through that long walk, barely ever complaining of sore legs and stopping only the once for a giant order of fast food I hadn't been able to finish (adding the letters "XL" to that order had turned out to be, in the end, overkill).

There were plenty, and I mean so many "big castles" to point and gaze at along the road to the ultimate one in line, at Santiago, but I don't recall being particularly moved by the grandeur of them, not much and not even the last one, about which I remember quipping to the group, lying there in front of the cathedral's imposing Romanesque bell towers, that if instead we'd only taken a similar hour-long look at the photos of it we'd all found online before leaving, we would've spared ourselves from hundreds of starving bed bugs and the sorry plight of tendonitis.

One thing I do remember helplessly needing to do over there, however, is to cry. I cried when I found out I wasn't in love with my first love anymore, and again when I couldn't figure out what on earth I thought my dangerously Wi-Fi-deprived brain was doing on this religious path. There were, of course, many heartfelt moments we were blessed to live on this path, no doubt about that. On any given night we could be chatting away, going over each of our day's inner and outer scenery while a pinked sun slowly sunk below a windswept plain… the kind of stuff so generically picture-perfect (and to wit: so alliteratively spoken about) that the only way to make it alive and somewhat more than postcard-interesting in my mind is by recalling the sharp tang of boxed rosé flushing down my throat or the smell of manure fermenting so close around that our nostrils would be numbed by its walloping reek until it was edited out.

But what I've committed most to memory were those days when I'd be walking all by myself with a very bad case of the sniffles, sore eyes, a chesty cough, and cold rain pouring down my neck until every inch of my underwear was soaked—*why did I have to come here, and what in the hell am I running after?*—and I never

knew, during those loneliest hours, who I was really talking to. I cried out of pure joy, too—a kind of rapture which, for all I know, might've been the sweetest expression of sorrow I'll ever have felt—when I heard the ocean's roar at Cape Finisterre and, quietly seated in the thick mist of that edge of the world, completely drenched, I came to the realization that there had to be an end to our free-and-easy roaming around the country, and that there could be no doubt we'd reached it then, that very end.

Yet, another thing which seems perfectly clear to me is that, without a doubt, on any night along the way I could've—in fact, the word here is, I *would* have—argued strongly to you or anyone around that not one shred of that, of me being there, wanting to experience this spiritual "Way" inside and out, could have anything to do with any kind of faith in anything. "I swear, faith's a feeling I've never *truly* had," I would've replied, believing—a high road out of the religious idea—that some things must clearly *kick in*, show themselves soundly inside, before you can go on telling people they're alive in you.

Thinking back on many of those nights spent seated in a circle, outdoors or around a dinner table, and generally coming to discuss spiritual matters with some fellow walkers I'd just met, I'm awkwardly reminded of some of my attempts at distancing myself from the "pilgrim thing" in this path I had—whether I liked to recognize it or not—chosen to follow, coming up every time with a new long-drawn variation on this most basic statement of denial: *Hi. I'm Max. And I'm not religious*.

Still, there's this one thing I've clearly chosen to believe anyway, and it's that *Mamie* must have prayed one last time to Anthony of Padua, her dearest holy figure, and the patron saint of lost things, on that December evening of 2013. And when she slipped away into the good night, she went on never having lost her faith. It wasn't so long after she passed that I faced the lady in the bookstore without really

knowing what I'd come for. And I remember distinctly how she stood there, right in front of me, apparently ready to run around the place with me.

"Is there something you're looking to find in here?"

I had only a hunch; and that hunch was telling me this thing I was looking for might be called an "essay collection." But when is it ever so straightforward?

"I'm actually not quite sure what I'm here for. I've been immersed in pretty dense theoretical stuff for the past few years—I'm a sociology major—and I've definitely gotten a little tired of it. I think I'd like to read something more… more personal, I guess, but that would also still be driven by social themes, big questions. *Think pieces*, I'd say, you know, but with some kind of intimate story in them still… I guess what I'm looking for could be—"

"*Essays*, then?" she said, with such simplicity.

"Well, yeah. I think that might be it."

"There are memoirs that fit your description as well, but it's more commonly essays. OK, well, let's see what we've got."

Did she stretch out a hand at this point, and offer me a tow all around the shelves? Not exactly. But I have to say that's how I imagine it went down, when I try to capture again in my mind how deliberately it happened that I ended up with a pile of six or seven titles teetering against my chest. It was as if I'd been summoned to be the sidekick of some famous old detective, and this was a spur-of-the-minute, one-shot opportunity to take it all in. And the closing of this case might as well all have happened in a flash, because one second I was trailing after her, and the next

I found myself cross-legged in a quiet corner of the bookstore, craving to get my mind through every page she'd stacked between my arms.

Her first recommendation, I remember, was Tony Judt's *The Memory Chalet*. She put the book in my hands, told me about his diagnosis of ALS, the inner struggle, highlighting how beautiful and engaging she thought they were, these memories that followed from such a tragic transformation of his body. Then she got quickly moving again, snatched a black book out of a shelf a few steps away from where I still stood, reading over the other's back cover, and straightaway she handed me *White Girls*, by Hilton Als, saying good things about his work as a critic for *The New Yorker*, and how brilliantly, she emphasized, he could stitch life stories together with his fine analytical thinking on such varied themes as music, history, gender, or race.

"Right up your alley—doesn't it sound like it?"

Then she hurried along again, apparently driven, that time, by a different breed of enthusiasm altogether.

"Alright, come on now, I just thought of something else hiding over there," she said to me, her eyes lighting up as her gaze turned and she started breezing toward the *Social and Cultural Studies* section.

I remember watching her index sailing smoothly along an entire row of spines until she finally spotted the one she had in mind, a book with a black man photographed on its black and white cover, his eyes upcast, his expression wary—fiery, even. I could see her contemplating the picture, her thumbs pressed firmly against both sides of the book. She was still, now, and soundless. Cautiously I moved some fingers toward the thing, intrigued. I thought I might look at it myself while, I expected, she would go on briefing me on the matter at hand. But instead

she turned its first page open and, in a half-hushed voice, speaking just above the babble of the place…

> Dear James:
>
> I have begun this letter five times and torn it up five times. I keep seeing your face, which is also the face of your father and my brother. Like him, you are tough, dark, vulnerable, moody—with a very definite tendency to sound truculent because you want no one to think you are soft.

She lifted her face. Her eyes were glassy, and for an instant then, they were locked with mine. She turned back to the page and carried on…

> You may be like your grandfather in this, I don't know, but certainly both you and your father resemble him very much physically. Well, he is dead, he never saw you, and he had a terrible life; he was defeated long before he died because at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him. This is one of the reasons that he became so holy.

She paused for a short moment, and then, softly, she shut the book. I could see the man's face again.

"This one… this one I don't think you'll ever forget," she said, wiping away the tail of her eyes with one slender hand as she handed me the book with the other.

"Thanks for that," I said to her, gripping James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* for the first time, and hoping I'd manage to hold back every drop I could feel swirling up behind my eyes.

Apart from telling you that the gushing out of tears used to be a somewhat trigger-happy bodily function of mine, a curious adaptive strategy for the neurotically reactive which, as the laws of probability would have it, I've inherited from the most delicate and susceptible in the long line of human beings from which my

make-up was pooled, I don't know that I can spell it out entirely, why it is that I once cried so much. What I'm easily reminded, anyway, is that for many years it happened almost every day. For good reasons and bad, and sometimes, even, for no apparent reason at all (the body, naturally, knew a deeper realm of reasoning). And then, at some point, it just stopped. Between a growing, shameful sense that exposing myself so often so vulnerably was really putting me at risk socially, and the hope that no other pretty girl or grown man in a suit would ever again think I was soft, I managed to contain myself in a certain emotional stiffness.

So, while I can't say that I've yet felt the sedative pharmacology of benzos (however tempting a solution a chill pill can be), no more than I can tell you I've ever been spirited enough to push my body through a run so long that it would induce that "pain-killing euphoria" some say they're rewarded with, I've certainly come to know a little something about the crier's high. It's one of those chained reactions which I quickly understood, the connection between a full-blown outpour and what comes afterwards: that blessed aftereffect leaving the body soft in every part, and the mind strangely composed, as if in a mindful trance. And I know now that that's all because there'd been another flooding happening inside, all at once. Receptors all across the brain synchronously binding with dozens of hormones and neurotransmitters: endorphins, serotonin, oxytocin—a storming sea of all kinds of molecules, each one taking part in orchestrating that perfect calm after the cry.

I used to shed tears so easily that I was once known as *the boy who does that*. Which is why it always came as a surprise, watching a hard-hitting movie with any of those friends who've known me long enough, that I could be the only one with stainless cheeks when the rest of them had nearly emptied a whole box of tissue. My understanding about this, so far as I can think to understand, is that the act of crying has for me little to do with catharsis. I've never found myself able to channel some long-forgotten feelings by getting my eyes through even the most well-crafted

of *Netflix Originals*. Even as a kid, or a teen, during those years when they could at any moment show up unannounced, my tears never wanted anything to do with the fact that an extraterrestrial with a beamy finger was boarding a spaceship going home, no more than they thought Wilson (the smiling mute) drifting tragically away from his one-and-only friend could in any way be worth their while.

The plain fact about my tears, I've come to figure, is that they care very little for the reflection-of-real-life in a twisting plot, and that instead they seem to be intimately linked with the littlest unvarnished beauty, or violence (that's if, in a crying moment, those can be distinguished at all), of any twist in a real-life-human's story. Whether it's someone else's or in fact mine (that's if, in a crying moment, these stories can be distinguished at all) which is being altered or exposed before my eyes, what happens then is an actual gripping inside, an overflowing sense that I'm being ambushed by reality, naked reality (in other words: by what-had-really-been-going-on-all-along), and which in revealing itself to me is in fact saying:

Look how unaware you were.

Tears that speak this way signal something of a life's tragedy. A true, carnal struggle that flows from *awareness kicking in*: the girl with the beamy eyes won't be coming back to you; the boy you'd known as a one-and-only friend is drifting away for good; the fiery man whose eyes you're watching on this book's cover is telling you the bitter truth about the color of his, and in fact your, skin.

Again, I don't know that I could've spelled it out for you, what happened later that day after my first encounter with the lady in the bookstore. And as far as my selective memory goes in remembering crying moments, I can't tell you where I was exactly or whether snow was falling crisp to the ground or melting away in the streets of Montréal that night. But I do remember distinctly that I cried, that it had been a while since it had felt so real, and that I knew then that I'd lost touch with

just how much my body needed to do that. I'd lost touch, in fact, with *the boy who does that*, and with an integral part of myself.

This is, I think, what that night's tears were telling me: I cried because I'd been reading up on an emerging movement called *Black Lives Matter*, and had acted emotionally engaged with its struggle in conversations around that time; I cried because I'd attended the previous semester a course named *Sociology of Ethnic Relations* and had carefully read and discussed some important research papers on the matter of racism (which could be titled, say, "The Genomic Challenge to the Social Construction of Race" or "An Empirical Assessment of Whiteness Theory"); I cried because I'd thought myself perceptive and socially conscious enough to have gotten a decent grasp on the inner workings of white privilege and racial discrimination... but I'd never weighed these realities as intimately as I did then, hearing stories of Baldwin's Harlem—the true-to-life violence his sentences vividly told, and how real it all felt to my mind, when that violence would meet, piercingly, with the tragic beauty in his sentences. And: I'd certainly never seen myself so plainly as one of the "lost, younger brothers" he speaks of in that opening letter of the book—all of us who, despite how "woke" we claimed to be, in reality, didn't *really* want to know what racism was inflicting on people's inner and outer lives—a letter he'd originally written for his nephew, and which that night he also spoke in a clear voice for my inner ear to overhear, leading me to that tearful realization.

Look how unaware you were.

And you know, it also occurs to me now that I must've cried so much that night for another reason. I must've felt gripped that way also because I was just beginning to understand something else, something which would crystallize in my mind a few years later, meeting again with the lady of the bookstore, and living then with a renewed awareness about how ill I really was: that night, with Baldwin's voice in my hands, was also the beginning of my figuring out that the story of a human life,

when shared as true as it is in fact hard, could sometimes be heard, and felt deeply, by someone other than the one who'd dared, honestly, to tell it.

Curiosity can, and in fact will, be a fickle, codependent kind of thing (we might make one adjective out of two, here, and call it plainly a *human* kind of thing). We've each known it to be the most avid feature of our attention, the probing little paths in the wander of focus: we've noticed and asked about the tinge of blue in the flicker of a flame, or those purplish hues down the middle of sunrise; we've wondered, even if uneasily, about what could possibly be unraveling in the dark vacuum of a black hole, or what sense should be made of that red streak widening on our skin; and then, for good measure, we've interrogated, we've highlighted in bright yellow this or that page's third or seventh sentence from the top, and we've gone on to mark across the blank of its margins all that we aspired to grasp just a little better.

Our stories, big or small, personal and collective alike, often rehash for us the one piece of truth in this: there is power, of a most sensible and compassionate kind, in caring for how things work, and in wondering why they behave precisely in their own way. And the healthier expression of this digging around for knowledge, we learn, and learn again, will also think to look deep into the knotty, fleeting stuff of our own minds. But this curiosity which serves to keep us alive (and, in practice, which makes us *nice to know*)—as it is with most double-edged, *human* kind of things—this curiosity of ours is intimately tied to a countervailing force, a much more sombre bias in the span of our attention which, for its part, will widely occupy the mind until we forget the glowing colors of our own keenness, and kindness. It's in this fuzzier show of attention that we lose touch, some of these days, with our intrinsic bidding for *awareness*. And this loss of touch with our more open-hearted

selves, it's triggered by that other, more shadowy stuff that's well alive in us, and which we'll often be very quick to forget is called, should we dare to name it—*fear*.

The very first time the microscopic life of microbes caught my attention I was reading the only other book I remember interesting me early on. Around that same time when my mother had played the merciful-God-card to be sure she wouldn't disappoint my faithful little mind and its growing concern for its bible's stories, she'd also signed me up to a book club, and every so often she'd ask me to look through a catalog and make a pick. This pick turned out, every time, to be the same: some while later we'd receive in the mail a new issue of *Cyrus*, a children's encyclopedia which, in a youthful and playful kind of Socratic dialogue, would spell out some of the curious things of this world. "Cyrus" was the name of the series' protagonist, an old savant who was called upon to answer about the inquiries of many other quirkily named characters, and these questions could have to do with just about anything transpiring or living on in our universe at large.

What's a microbe? asks a little one named Marius on page 93 of the series' book 10, after his older brother blurts out at him, *Get out of my way, snot*. And so Cyrus explains: any organism which is composed of a single cell is considered a microbe, and these organisms can only be observed with very powerful microscopes. We cannot see them with our bare eyes, but, he goes on specifying, *They are living beings, and they are essential to life.* It's a moment I can remember strikingly: feeling bewildered exactly then, reading this line.

Were microbes, bacteria, not the reason behind the recurring earaches I suffered from? Was that not why we had to visit that weird, well-fed and mustached man in his white coat—the pediatrician? And those bitter pills; and all that banana-tasting syrup pumped down my throat with those plastic syringes? Was the point of these medications not to get rid of the microbes thriving in me, so I would no longer have

to sleep with *Vicks*-greased cotton pads pressed down my ear canals? How could these *living beings* possibly be *essential to life*—to my life?

"That's a question for *Pépère*, buddy, no doubt he'd love to chat about that with you," my mother would sometimes say, replying to a pressing investigation of mine. And she would say so neither out of parental laissez-faire nor because she believed her father possessed all the answers, but simply because she knew just how much he would grin in hearing these questions coming from one of his grandchildren, and how much fun he'd have in sustaining even the slightest bit of mystery in the conversation.

We've all witnessed it: how patently amazed anyone will be at the faintest expression (illusion, is it?) of genius coming from their offspring… well, he was no exception. In fact, what I should say is that he confirmed the rule about that pretty dramatically. "See, little Einstein here, he just figured it out," he'd tell everyone around, every time after I'd listened to one of his explanations and stared blankly at his imperial smile for a few seconds before letting out that usual I-think-I-get-it sound—"Ah-huh." But the day I asked him about microbes he hadn't heard that sound just yet, because instead of answering my question he'd probed back at me, the way teachers will work to keep curiosity alive in a younger one's mind until they can themselves dig up a more detailed version of an explanation: "Of course you need them. Many of them help you survive, because you do the same for them. They need your body, too. It's like a family, you know. How many do you think are alive in you right now?" he asked, in a kind of professorial tone. I must have said my schoolteacher could tell me, but I don't remember ever giving him the answer to that question.

Pépère was a proud man; I know this to have been anyone's first—and generally lasting—impression of him, whether one admired or was in fact bothered by this apparent boldness in his nature. It had to do with this curious instinct programmed

in him, a willful bent in his mind which, from his youth onward, had led him to march against the grain of his social environment, as if he felt compelled to find life past the Sunday sermon at Sainte-Marguerite-Marie and those gunky, traffic-packed streets by the Jacques-Cartier bridge. (I'm talking here about a sort of headstrong attitude toward the world which I only came to fully appreciate a few years after he passed, entering university and figuring out, one night while finishing up a second-rate term paper, what the words "social capital" could've concretely meant in the lives of the people who'd come before me—realizing, that is, how far apart they really were, the Montréal him and I had known, and been bred by.) And it was that stubborn something in him which had become—outwardly, socially—his most charming quality, but it was also that very something which lay at the root of his unfading inner struggle to figure himself out.

Everything had taken a dramatic turn for him around sixteen, when he'd gotten into a fierce altercation with a religious brother, a schoolteacher. His "unpardonable behavior" in the end had him kicked out of that institution which he, just like most every other teenager he knew, had to attend. His mother, insisting still that he shouldn't drop out, had had no choice then but to move him into the neighboring English-speaking high school, doing so in spite of the fact that he could hardly manage even a simple conversation in that "upper-class" language in those days.

As all of this trouble was going down, he'd also informed his ever-faithful mother that, from then on, he wasn't to be woken up on Sunday mornings anymore, and with bitter regret she finally let go about that (she, of course, had known better than to pick this fight with him). It turned out to be a year, two at most, before he could speak the other tongue of the city better than just about everyone around him, and for the rest of his days he'd on occasion pride himself in watching the evening news of the CBC rather than that of its French counterpart, *Radio-Canada*.

With a slim, sturdy build, a thick head of coal-black hair and a winsome smile à la Dean Martin, he was said to be, in the late 1950s, the most handsome boy in *le Centre-Sud*. And so, following the match-making logic of the time's close-knit, gossipy neighborhood life, he'd pursued the girl who, for her role, was broadly considered the prettiest to be living around the same parts. ("Would you please stop staring at her," he had to tell his sister at the table, the first time he brought *Mamie* over for dinner to meet his family.) Of course, it wasn't very long before they stood together by the altar at Sainte-Marguerite-Marie, on the day of their wedding, and, coincidentally, the last time *Pépère* would ever choose to enter those tall wooden doors.

In his late teens he'd then taken up work as a longshoreman down by the river, in the commercial port of Montréal, and when he wasn't unloading ships of their various contents, sometimes overhearing his coworkers' schemes to make a few more bucks by walking off with a handful of the day's shipment (a trick of the trade which his wife, all too afraid that the cops might one day show up unannounced at their doorstep, resoundingly opposed), he reveled in what he considered to be more sophisticated pastimes: lounging in his lazy boy by the stereo, headphones on, cigarette at the tip of his fingers, listening to the sounds of Miles Davis' *Birth of the Cool*, Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, or Mingus' *Blues & Roots*; sunbathing, dark glasses on, meticulously reaching darker skin tones through the summer by ensconcing himself in that long chair on their apartment's narrow back-alley balcony; meditating, legs crossed and eyes closed in the heart of his solitary "salon," observing the faintest differences in his every breath or scanning every inch of his body with the same transient, neutral-as-possible frame of mind; polishing his hunting rifle until it would without a doubt be "cleaner and shinier than every piece of my wife's tableware"; or taking out books and magazines from the local library, comfortably reclining in his living room couch, eyeglasses resting low on his nose and, with a glass of whiskey in hand, reading up on some of the latest stories having

to do with all the finer kind of stuff which, with his usual effortless cool, he'd often appear entirely absorbed in.

In all kinds of ways he was more particular than most when it came to his likes and dislikes, and he could hardly ever leave behind this precision in his tastes. He liked to iron his own shirts using his own meticulous, sequential method, and disliked when *Mamie*—busy as a bee with everything to do around the apartment and dealing with the complaints and needs of their three children—would push the iron too hard, too quick or, in his mind, without the required attention to detail. He liked to maintain his vinyl records collection and the different glasses and bottles in his liquor cabinet in their specific order, and relative position, and disliked when anyone displaced or lay their fingers on any of his things. He would, anyway, almost always detect what appeared slightly out of place. "If you stepped inside his 'salon' in his absence, the way the carpet would wrinkle up and mold your footsteps would betray you, and that was bad news for everyone" my mother once told me, "but when he found out that I enjoyed some of the music he kept in there, he'd sometimes let me put the headphones on for a little while, and I could even sit back in his chair."

At extended family gatherings, when a potluck had been called, he liked to give his own tea sandwiches a distinctive trait—by making them rectangular, or by using a loaf of bread special enough to be the only one of its kind in the mix—because he disliked most people's bland, or otherwise flat-out bizarre, ground meat or egg salad recipes (at the thought of taking a bite out of an unknown preparation and, God forbid, having to chew on a piece of celery, he'd recoil).

One Christmas evening in the dining room of their apartment—I might've been eight or nine—I remember vividly a moment we shared. I'd carefully analyzed the way my aunt and mother had set the silver and cutlery on the table, as well as the position of the few ornaments and candlesticks throughout that space (all the while,

I'm about convinced, Louis Armstrong was singing *trees of green* and *a wonderful world*), and I'd spent some minutes shifting things around back and forth until I'd reached a certain satisfaction in seeing their ordering. And when, finally, I turned my gaze up, I noticed him standing at the other end of the table, his hands resting on the upper edge of his special chair. The thing had been relocated to the living-turned-dining room—temporarily of course, for the needs of this special occasion—and he'd been watching me with clear interest and a smile… *that* smile.

"I like it when things are symmetrical," I remember telling him.

"Oh, me too," he said, merrily, "me too."

The older I grow, the more I find myself reaching out, feeling this need for connection with a certain "cracking-open" breed of the people around me, and the clearer it seems to me just how much *Pépère* appreciated this way of human connection—the real, almost complicit kind. The kind of connection you get when, at the height of a true conversation, two people will look into each other's eyes, catch in there a light they'll recognize as their own, and simply know *what's up*, what's really going on, what the meaning being held in that silent moment's air feels like to the both at once. (Isn't this the sweetest occurrence of what we like to call, these days, a "vibe"—that soundless, shimmering thing that seems to gel us together as we open up, and come to understand one another?)

There were a few months in his midlife when, having grown, I imagine, a little weary of the noise and crowdedness of his household, he'd felt again that same need to march to the beat of his own drum, and to reach for a deeper understanding about things—about the most *human* things, I mean. Come every weekend during that period, he'd leave it all behind, and would spend the better part of those days in different rooms of the nearest hospital, accompanying some of the loneliest patients of the palliative care unit. Which means: he'd sit at their side and, when they

happened to be so inclined, he'd discuss with them as openly as they'd allow the conversation to blossom, and grow, inquiring into their thoughts and memories through the last days of their lives. "I found that often they couldn't quite go yet, and they would suffer during that time, and it was always because they hadn't gotten 'closure' about something," he explained to my mother, many years later, "so we tried to reach that space in their mind through the conversation, whatever that meant for each of them."

In a way he was particular about that, too, needing to understand people's inner lives. That of strangers, even: what shapes their worries and sorrows had taken over the years, he wanted to know, and just the same about the sources of their aliveness, what had kept them going, with or against the currents of their own days. And maybe that was because he needed to remind himself that these polar things of a human life—like day and night—happened to grow and fall apart every time together, intertwined in every which way you looked at them: a breakdown would, time and again, mutate to a breakthrough, and every smallest strain of death inside would be turned into that little bit more of life.

My suspicion about this is that he felt that he should stay curious about other people—their shadows and their lights—because he experienced this curiosity, in its expression and really at its core, as an act of kindness. (Maybe that was, in the end, *his* hopeful thing—what his faith rested on.) What I'm suggesting, anyway, is that it must've been that same stubborn, inquisitive something inside of him that made him feel—and really kept him—*alive*.

When he found out, in the spring of 2006, about the illness in his lungs, seeing those masses that had been growing in him for some time without him knowing (and then, in somewhat of a flash, when he learned that he would soon have to begin a difficult regimen of chemotherapy) he didn't want anyone with him during his initial appointment with the oncologist. No one else, not even his prettiest-girl-in-

the-neighborhood, would know how bad the situation really was, no more than anyone would know what he'd be given as a prognostic, whether the treatment plan he'd undergo could be a curative one, or whether it was the kind that aimed, rather, at "prolonging life" for some tentative amount of time.

When his going reached its roughest points and his physical appearance began slowly to change, and then change dramatically, he didn't want any of his grandchildren to see him—which, in truth, actually meant *remember* him—this way: haggard, increasingly frail, and carrying, somewhere deep within his eyes or in the curving of his lips, the shadow of his fear which, I imagine, he didn't think he would be able to hide. All I'd hear about those days is that he turned his senses and his focus to himself and his finer pleasures—to meditation, and to music.

As he tried to straighten out in his mind what it was that had shifted inside of him, what story this illness wanted to make of his life, on every day that his weakened body allowed for it he'd sit before the keyboard in the living room of the apartment. The instrument had been purchased and plugged in for the first time a few months before that day when he'd seen the X-rays, as he'd hoped it might wake him up from that dream he'd long had to touch and thump a piano with his own hands… to maybe one day, like Art Tatum or Oscar Peterson—with that groove and that style and that special composure—to maybe one day make his own soulful sounds with it. And so, he spent many of those final hours in a kind of disciplined solitude, practicing scale after scale, one missed note after the other, listening to every one of them while they turned, still, into that little more of life. There could only have been, I think, one feeling about it all that he felt he should keep in mind in those days, and there is, I think, only one way to word it: that he should prepare for one final improvisation, methodically of course, but with all the required grace.

The last time I saw him was in 2006 and it was Christmas, and he slipped out of his turquoise sedan to take his habitual confident stroll toward the entrance of our

three-floored house on the lake. We lived in one of the more affluent and predominantly English-speaking towns on the west side of the island, a half-hour drive from their inner city apartment. And every time I looked out the front window when *Mamie* and *Pépère* arrived, he walked toward the door as if a red carpet had been laid out before him. It felt no different that afternoon, when he rang the doorbell and came in saying *Hello, hello* in his signature loud and clear tone, and the whole family assumed that his reasons to feel good about himself were all the more real, this time: he was alive, still, and his condition was apparently improving to a point where he felt that he could be seen by all of us.

He moved around the house at a slower pace, but he appeared as determined and as breezy as we'd known him to be. And another reason for his feeling alive that afternoon, was this: his knowledge of chords and scales and rhythms had progressed through those months he'd spent moving his fingers across his keyboard, and, that day, he planned on making sounds with the grand piano in our living room. "*Pépère* is excited to play with you Max, he told me more than once," my mother had told me, also more than once. And while I don't recall much of what we said that day, he and I, I can easily get a feel in my mind for that moment when we played together. I sat next to him on the bench in front of the shiny dark-red wood of the piano, and I picked and strummed my guitar along with his chords. We improvised this way for a little while, following his lead, and then we chatted about a few colorful blues progressions and improvised some more along those lines. And all that time he seemed happy and composed, and he looked at me with a gentle smile I'd never seen on his face before.

Some six weeks later he found himself in a hospital bed, his body weakening by the day, and a doctor had the duty to let him know—in another flash—that he'd soon have to be moved to the place's palliative care unit. That same night, curled up on the couch by the piano in our house's living room, I learned that he was never

moved to the palliative care unit, and I wept. It became clear to me, as the night progressed toward day and the wee hours slipped away one by one, that I'd seen but hadn't been able to read through his smile that last time. And I hadn't been able to do that because I'd been too afraid—afraid to take a real look at what was happening to him, and afraid to find out all that he didn't want me to see.

Look how unaware you were.

A year or so after he passed I decided to plan that thousand-mile hike with a few friends through French and Spanish backcountry, a curious journey during which something, somewhere, shifted inside of me. That shift caused the syndrome to take hold of my view on the world and, at some tougher points down the line, of my sense of what's real altogether. What I'm trying to say is that he would never hear about this "not-really-religious" path I'd chosen to follow, no more than he'd know about this hope I carried along the way that I might figure myself out over there, alone with my thoughts. And I imagine that's why I've often wondered, over the years since the syndrome first kicked me into this new life, what kind of probing questions he would've had for me, had he been there when I came home struggling with that invisible—and soon believed to be imaginary—illness.

Almost every day now my eyes catch the dark bronze Buddha sitting at the top of my room's bookshelf—that hallowed little place where I keep *The Fire Next Time* and every other voice that has a way of gripping my mind and bringing me solace when my going reaches its roughest points—and almost every time when I look at it I so easily get a feel for that something floating in-and-around me, as if that "vibe" we shared him and I was, in those moments, present in my room's air. And it's in those moments that I'll think to myself, with that fond devotion we seem to reserve only for the departed, that of course *he* would've been one to be aware of my inner struggle. That *he* would've watched over me and perhaps noticed what I kept hidden, what I hoped nobody would spot in the real uneasiness of my smile:

how chilling it was to feel myself cracking open inside, and how afraid I truly was at the thought that I might forever be alone in this, never mentioning to anyone how steadily I felt I was losing touch with my earlier, livelier self in the thick of these impossible symptoms.

I suppose what I'm holding onto, this way, is this belief that he would've been the one to read through me as he knew to do, and that I would've found that I could open up to him about how ashamed I actually felt in those earliest, dizziest days with the syndrome—ashamed that none of what was happening to me could be explained by anyone, not a single one of the many doctors I'd visited, and ashamed of what I could then only experience as a deep-seated and imperceptible flaw in my psyche, like a fault line fracturing through my sense of sanity. A fault line which in the end had been turned into a blind alley when it was read and interpreted, by one last clinician who'd run out of curiosity, as the story of a *hypochondriac*. And I despised that story as much as I feared what it said about me, and what it might do to me (which is, after all, how the seeds of shame are sowed).

In some way my grandfather's presence in-and-out of my mind has now turned into a glimmer, a blinking hope for a certain "closure" which I can never truly harness. And what I find myself sustaining, instead, is a kind of mystery—a mystery that lives on in a particular way when I feel again that need to sit right in the middle of my room's bed to simply watch the lives-and-deaths of my own breath with my eyes shut, and then find myself, alone with my fleeting thoughts, wondering about how he might've found a way to tame, and transform, through our truest conversation, that nameless fear I carried across the years after he was gone.

But my transformation of mind would happen, instead, this way: I remained afraid of finding out what could possibly be unraveling inside of me, and covered every shadow of my fear by keeping silence about it all, even as my condition worsened and I felt my grip on reality melting away, until I walked into that

bookstore on rue Sainte-Catherine on a winter afternoon of 2016. This lady who'd handed me a few precious books three years earlier stood again next to me. And that day she'd be so sincerely interested in what I'd been covertly going through, that I was finally reminded of this simple, kindly possibility: I, too, could be curious about my illness, and, really, about what story this inner trouble was making of my life.

I knew I was sick in a flash because one second I was tired but fine and I was sitting in a London tube train and the next second the light was suddenly hurting my eyes and I saw all those things in my vision but I couldn't really describe them to the nurse I saw straight after and she said it was vertigo and gave me Dimenhydrinate which I quickly realized was just Gravol and I knew right off that whatever it was I was dealing with it was for sure worse than what Gravol was supposed to help with and I just felt more nauseous and that flight home a week later was tearing my nerves and I felt as if I was being pulled into a vacuum and my brain circuits were frying but I remembered that the nurse had told me it would go away soon and any symptom I'd ever had had always gone away quick so I believed her and trusted that it would all be over soon but then I came home and what I was seeing was clearly not going away and I started spending hours in waiting rooms to see all these doctors one after the other GP ENT neurologist scan scan scan and some of them took me seriously in the beginning and thought I might have issues with my spatial awareness or something "maybe some virus in your inner ear which might take a while to get rid of" but most of them brushed me off and mom was worried in the beginning but then she started looking not so worried anymore and even a little annoyed with me and then six months later it wasn't gone and I was starting undergrad classes and meeting all these new people who obviously I'd never tell about those things I was seeing because I thought all of that was really weird and I

wanted to be a normal guy because I'd always wanted to feel like a normal guy and I didn't like it when I thought people thought I was weird so really I acted as normal as I could even though I kept thinking it was awful to not feel like myself at all but they didn't know who I was before so it didn't bother them and I guess that made me feel kind of normal sometimes and not as weird I felt inside and anyway I had to keep at it and try to focus anyway because there was no other solution and I did what I had to do and then that last doctor I saw thought that seeing him for the third time about this was a little much and he thought the way to solve this case was by letting me know that I was for sure anxious and stressed out and imagining things because "patients do that you know they start overthinking about things" he said in that condescending tone I remember and then he gave me that speech where he told me that I was young and had nothing to worry about yet so there was no point in freaking out so much so I just had to believe that because that was the only actual "solution" I'd heard all that time and then I stopped bothering everyone with those things I was seeing and that distance I felt between me and all of them because it wasn't real at least I had to believe it wasn't real and I got through those undergrad years and fell out of love and then fell back into love but then it started taking over my world again and growing stronger and I felt myself slipping away but nobody around me would remember in fact most of them hadn't even heard about these symptoms in the first place and this girl I loved was wondering why I was getting lost in my head all the time and "why are you so anxious all of a sudden" and I didn't have it in me to open up to her about how bad it was really getting because I had a feeling she wouldn't believe me because after all nobody had ever had any real reason to believe me and when I think about it I even stopped believing my own self and my own senses so she clearly she wouldn't believe me and she'd probably think it was all really weird so I hid it from her and then she met this other boy who was not stuck in his head and she went away and I was all of sudden alone in this which is what I'd always feared the most and obviously I started wondering again about what could be causing all these symptoms but I just can't convince myself

they aren't real anymore but I still ask myself "are they real?" isn't it just easier to keep going and forget of course it is and I've been trying to do that but clearly it's getting worse now these neon lights in here are hurting my eyes again and I lose myself in a blur all the time and I can't focus and there's static swirling all over and I see more and more floaters piling up in my eyeballs sliding over people's faces when I talk to them and I'm having trouble getting through sentences on my computer sometimes because they shimmer around the edges and they lag across when I scan the screen and then other times I forget words mid-sentence when I'm talking to someone and my head starts to pulsate and spin that's what's going on so no I can't just keep going like nothing is going on I have to ask myself what this really is but what if I look into it and I realize it's a much bigger issue than I thought of course that would be awful but if I don't I'm going to lose it and maybe I really need to know or at least to try to know and maybe I can figure out what it is and the truth is there's always this thing I'm avoiding because when I think about it the second I try to connect the dots and wonder if something happened during that hike in 2009 I keep thinking about that one time in Spain when I was sweating buckets all night and shivering with that really bad fever and then I woke up and I was feeling fine but I was weirded out and it was a few weeks later that all of it kicked in in that London tube train so what if it's really that night in Spain that something happened what if it happened that night that something like an infection kicked in remember that woman who'd told you about ticks on the hike that one afternoon she was worried about them and saying how they can bite you and you can get all sorts of neurological problems down the line and I didn't want to think about that but then I thought about it and asked that last doctor and he laughed at me when I brought it up I remember and he said that was nonsense and then that's when I realized that this whole Lyme thing was really controversial and I thought it was kind of weird and wanted nothing to do with it so if I start saying this might be my problem now nobody will believe me so do you really want to look into that possibility of course it's crazy but what else am I supposed to do just wait it out

until it gets even worse and god knows what's going to happen man wake up the reality is you don't even have a choice at this point what else is there that I can—

"Max, I'm going upstairs to look up a book on one of those computers they have up there."

"—Huh?"

In the blink of an eye I'd let out that oblivious sound and landed back from the restless heights of my inner chatter. Noticing how I stood again by the many titles of "my" *Best Self*, I regained a sudden awareness as to what I'd been staring at all along, and what the neon glare, above, was doing to my eyes. And, in the last instance of my attempt at waking up, I was diffusely reminded of this: the friend I'd followed inside this place a few minutes earlier knew not a single thing about the syndrome, still less about everything that was spiraling inside of me in that very moment. So, I did what I knew to do, and to the extent that I could, I acted normal.

"Oh, those things, yeah—yeah, sure, OK, I'll come with…"

We were lifted up and I trailed after him and within a minute or two before he walked away wanting to locate the exact section which the screen had laid out for him. I pressed a key and deleted his search and closed my eyes for a few seconds—my pupils were intoxicated by specks of blue light radiating toward them—and when I sensed that nobody was any longer moving behind me, I blinked strenuously in that usual effort to feel myself present in the world again, hoping I could regain a temporary amount of focus, and I typed in those two words I'd been shyly keeping in mind:

HEALING LYME

Natural Healing of Lyme Borreliosis

by Stephen Harrod Buhner

"What are we looking for, here?"

I froze.

"Huh? Oh, hum."

She leaned in lightly.

Straightaway I saw who this lady was, and then remembered how open and sweet she'd been with me that first time. I remembered her voice's gentle tones and I could certainly catch some hints of that same considerate glimmer in her eyes. But as it would go down in my mind I'd in fact compute none of those kindly cues. Instead, my nerves throbbed, letting me know just how petrified I actually was: clearly I'd have to say something about that book. I'd soon have to explain myself in some impossible way—that's what was really about to happen—and the trouble I faced then correlated directly with the fact that I was utterly confused and really had no idea where to begin this story.

As a matter of fact, I had no idea whether I could even begin to tell it at all. The truth being that I didn't know if I myself could hear it, and bear it again, the story of a possible mystery illness going on inside of me. What happened in that moment is something like this: my brainwaves, triggered, whirled my mind's eye back to the sight of a doctor's clinical, self-satisfied grin and the hot flush of all my bottled up shame dyed my cheeks and the one last thing I remember feeling in my bones in that split second before she spoke was a faint, jittery hope that she wouldn't be able to read any of that on my face.

"Oh, no…" she said, seeing those words on the screen.

I watched her eager look melt away.

I don't know that I can paint a true-to-life portrait of my mind dissolving and my insides pressurizing as I watched her, but whatever happened to me right then had to do with the crashing awareness of having been unmasked, and what skyrocketed to engulf her and every bookshelf around us was the density of the blur I was living in. And while there's very little I'm able to repeat verbatim from what was said after that, I can still hear reverberating in my inner ear the inflection she gave to those two littlest words: the slight pause halfway across, the drooping pitch toward the end. In fact, I hear the sound of those words just as clearly as I'll get a feel, when I play them out again in my mind, for everything she meant to say. I realized, as she moved her slender hands away from the keyboard and turned toward me expecting I would say something, that I had made, without realizing it, a few steps backwards and away from the search station. I could see, on the screen, the small dark green cover of that book I'd hoped to dig up all on my own.

We stood there face to face, our eyes locked once again, but this time with every inch of my silence trapped in the space between us. It was as if every word I could think of during those long seconds was automatically suctioned out, thinning the surrounding air and keeping me in a mindless, soundless void. All I sensed was that she, in that moment, could likely feel what it felt like to be me. How long a while it took, I can't say, but at some point she did what I've come to know she does, and she took it upon herself to speak.

"I don't know about your struggle, she said, and you don't have to tell me, but I want to tell you that it's possible to get through this…"

Her first words had come straight out of thin air to reach me across the haze. And as she carried on, steadily I was waking up: despite how white the light was that beamed from the place's ceiling, I was no more in a hospital waiting room than she

was wearing scrubs. Against most odds, what was happening was this: she knew a few things about the mysterious, multifaceted troubles of Lyme disease, and she'd read through me well enough to think it could be a good thing for me to hear a story.

A close friend of hers had lived and travelled across every mile of a puzzling medical path—that's what she wanted to tell me—and she remembered much of how it had unfolded for her. She'd been ill, and what she'd thought was "a mild flu" had lingered long enough to cause more problems and begin to worry her. She'd been taken seriously by some doctors at first, and then not so seriously by the same doctors sometime later when the complexity of her symptoms had persisted past the average eight minutes she had to explain what she felt was happening to her.

She'd been told at a certain point by one of them that all of it was beyond the shadow of a doubt happening, in short, *all in her head*, and as difficult to admit as that was, she'd believed and held onto that verdict until it was no longer reasonable for her to think it could be true. She'd found herself at a loss, with a growing load of symptoms, and without any other choice but to read up about this disease on her own, educating herself on much of that controversial matter. She'd been able to connect some dots for herself, and then had sought out one of the few doctors who dedicate their practice to this disease and who claimed to be open-minded and literate enough on this emerging infectious complex to connect the dots some more about her case (it seemed that many of these doctors had suffered from it themselves, or had otherwise found a close relative in this murky medical condition).

This consultation had offered her, for the first time since her life had been changed, some valuable amount of clarity on the state of her own of sanity. ("Turns out she wasn't a hypochondriac after all," I recall the lady telling me.) She'd finally decided to put her health in the hands of this doctor and had followed her treatment regimen while she, remembering that the matter had to remain in her own hands,

had made sure to stay curious all along and to make her own mind, to the extent that she could, on what had to be done to heal her. This chapter of her life proved, by and large, to be a remarkably difficult and uneven journey, but she'd come out the other side of those darker days with a brighter outlook on life, and with her symptoms having, for the most part, faded away. And now: all of that, the lady of the bookstore wanted me to know—*all of that was also possible for me*.

I cannot, try as I might, script from memory what I thought of telling her about my situation while she shared her friend's story. I remember that, when she mentioned the complexity of her treatment plan and how challenging it had been for her body on the whole, I voiced some worries about the side effects of a potential longer-than-conventional course of antibiotics. Right off, she'd thought to reassure me: "Think about the people who receive many rounds of *chemotherapy*," she said, weighing the word, "maybe you know someone who's been through that yourself, and people live on, even after that…" I also have a faint recollection of telling her how alarmed I was at the thought that my condition was worsening, and I remember mentioning the heart of that restlessness in my mind: *nobody but me could know how bad it really was.* "The more you open up and tell people about it, the better it will be, you'll see," she said.

Of course I must've tossed around and stuttered out a few more uncertainties about it all, because all of that was weighing on every square unit of my mind at that time. In many ways I know that she'd felt that weight—perhaps something of it had come hovering in the air between us—and I see now what she hoped to do, in this act of kindness: to slowly sow the seeds of an opening in our conversation, a space where I might feel that it was possible to speak. And I still wonder, to this day, what I could possibly have looked like at the height of this realization, standing there in front of her, a miniature version of my five-feet-six-inches-and-three-quarters-self reflected in the glassy mirror of her eyes: whatever it was, and no

matter how ill-defined my inner struggle would seem, it occurred to me then that no matter what, *she would listen*. And she would do so because all along she'd been aware of this one piece of truth in the lines of my story: an open ear was precisely the kind of thing that what would begin to heal me.

When our conversation took its final turns, she moved closer toward me and gently grabbed my hands, holding them together. There was a new, hopeful strain of silence in the air.

My friend appeared in the distance, book in hand, and I noticed him from the corner of my eye.

He was headed toward the two of us and, in the moment when he stopped, she folded me into her arms.

"Your story matters, you know" she said to me, "don't forget that."

She turned her gaze toward my friend, raised a delicate smile, and strolled toward a nearby customer.

"What happened here?" he said.

"Do—do you have time for coffee?" I said.

It wasn't long before I read, someplace in one of those many books and websites I opened up and rifled through after that day, that a 2016 study from the Weizmann Institute of Science estimated that there are in fact 39 trillion live bacterial cells within the average human body.

"How many do you think are alive in you right now?" *Pépère* had asked me, hoping I'd stay curious through it all.

It's now been almost two years since my last encounter with the dainty white-haired lady who *reads*, and I'm only barely reminded of the existence of artificial light as I enter the bookstore. I pass the weighty front doors of the place and notice that, this time around, the self-help section is larger, and straight in plain sight as I step inside. But I move away, not wanting to be waylaid by puffed-up stories for my future self.

Instead, there's this one book I want to get my hands on quick, now. Some wizardly work of poetry which "seems to have unusual access to this membrane between this world and some other world," and which, through its verses, "keeps slipping into that space." I just recently got wind of this literary magic, while listening to a podcast, and of course that part of me which mechanically wants to be in touch with this kind of otherworldly stuff was stirred up in the same instant. Since sentences don't shimmer as much when I read them through these days, I find myself turning my eyes toward the pages of books as much as I feel the need to. And, let me tell you: it feels good to slip into other people's worlds again. Although every so often I'll have to lose sleep over a truthful read, things happen in those moments. Things that keep me—and, really, that make me feel—*awake*.

The closer I get to the higher floor, the clearer the music of the bookstore's piano sounds to my ears. I step foot on stable ground and I notice, ahead, that a salt-and-pepper-haired man, a customer, is playing the instrument. *Clair de lune*, I say to myself, *I think that's it*. He misses a few notes and a few dissonant tones echo faintly in the air, but all of them reading or chatting away at the café's tables by his side don't seem bothered one bit. The man is working out some more technical passage of the piece, and, meanwhile, it occurs to me: the bookstore's life goes on. I turn left and make my way toward the poetry section. Where to find it, I know exactly; and its shelves, anyway, are few enough that I really have no need for location

specifics on the book. I pass by *THE CEO BOOKSHELF,* glance at the screen in the corner nearby, then it's about a dozen more steps before I come to a halt, tilt my head to some degree, and begin to glide one hand's fingers across rows of spines, hoping to pinpoint the title I'm eager to read.

The Half-finished Heaven, I repeat to myself, moving along.

A few times over I scan the same shelves.

Search status: nowhere to be found.

I take two steps back and whip out my iPhone, thinking there's a way to further investigate the matter online.

—hmm… you're supposed to be in there somewhere.

A delicate voice speaks in the vicinity, and its sound flows from the aisle on the other side of a tall shelf standing just between us. It's an instant, only, before I recognize whose voice that is.

That's the lady.

She sends off a customer, book in hand, and I appear around the corner.

"Excuse me… could I get a little help from your eyes?" I say to her, "the website tells me there's one copy left, but I haven't been able to spot it around here."

Of course, she tells me, asking for the author's name.

"Tranströmer. Tomas Tranströmer."

"Oh, yes!" she says, with a rising pitch. "Are you looking for the one with the beautiful title?"

"*The Half-finished Heaven*," I say, smiling. "If there's a copy in this place, it's not in its right place."

"Yes, that's the one! Oh, I'm sure it'll turn up."

We spend a few minutes moving back and forth along the small section, standing, bending down, crouching. Every now and then I stop and turn to her, ready to call it quits, but she doesn't budge. I figure there's something of an old prospector in her. She knows, as when laying her eyes on the pages of a book, that the payoff comes to those who keep their focus narrow, and sharp. She's *aware*, that way.

"Here it is," she says, cool and calm, slipping the lost book out of its hiding place and handing it to me.

I look at its cover with satisfaction, both thumbs pressed firmly against it.

I notice, when I look up sometime down the line, that she's watching me with clear interest, and with a smile.

"Would you read me one?" she asks.

I grin at her, and turn the book open.

"The odds…" I tell her, "it's the title poem."

And in a half-hushed voice…

Cowardice breaks off on its path
Anguish breaks off on its path
The vulture breaks off in its flight

The eager light runs into the open,
even the ghosts take a drink.

And our paintings see the air,
red beasts of the ice-age studios.

Everything starts to look around.
We go out in the sun by hundreds.

Every person is a half-open door
leading to a room for everyone.

The endless field under us.

Water glitters between the trees.

The lake is a window into the earth.

We stand, her gaze hovering at my shoulder, and in that moment after I speak the poem's last word, we examine each other's expression for yet another precious little moment. She breathes in deep, taking in the moment's air as if something special had slipped into that space. And, meanwhile, I think I know how she feels.

"Every person is a half-open door," she repeats, with a kind reverential awe.

"Leading to a room for everyone," I say after her.

"Thanks for that," she says.

"Well, I owe it all to you," I tell her, raising *The Half-finished Heaven*, and seeing again all the glitter in her eyes.

It occurs to me, having passed the piano and reached the bottom of the winding stairway that, again, I didn't catch sight of her name, or even think of asking for it. But maybe the fairer way to explain this *slip* of mine, now, is by telling you that the center of my attention was in that moment too narrow, too absorbed, to think of seeking out that piece of information. Maybe, this time, after all, I wasn't so caught up in my own blurry mind.

What I wish I could tell you, anyway, is that while I was headed down toward the ground, the man practiced the quiet, closing crescendo of *Clair de lune*'s coda. But I'm aware that that might sound, well… a little too good to be true.

LETTER ABOUT A POLAROID IN MY MIND

Freaks, my dears,

I've tried to get this first line right about a dozen times, hammering over the backspace key, and finally I figured out a way to get this vibe of ours going and make it all happen. No one else in this place can hear what I'm hearing right now, no more than any of them can feel all that's swirling up in me, and how for a little while I'll have to contain it all just behind the surface of my eyes as I type through.

I could blame the highs of the weekend we just spent together, dancing and losing and finding each other over and over again around the festival's grounds, but what I'd actually be blaming then is the sober fact that my serotonin levels must be freakishly low now, and will likely stay this way for some few more days. But this morning the rays of the sun are pouring through rue Notre-Dame and into the café's bay window to reach my face, and while behind a barista slams used coffee out of portafilters, it occurs to me what this is about. I'm feeling teary-eyed and sentimental this way, this moment, because I know there's a thing or two I want to say about us. *That's* what this is about.

So, this is what I did: *Shake It Out* is playing—loud, very loud—and my earbuds are buzzing more and more as the song fires up and she says, you know how she sings it again and again, she says *It's hard to dance with a devil on your back*. I type in this lyric and I try to follow the rest along in my mind, but quickly I'm confronted with something I could've told you would happen before even I tapped play, because I know it to happen every time we end up blasting the ballad in someone's kitchen or living room, all too early in the morning: I can't, my memory falters. The song's lines, in fact, were never registered.

What I keep seeing now, instead of committing words to memory, is one of you standing on a countertop, his fist clenched and swinging up and down with every crying syllable. I see two of you holding each other's palms way up in the air, circling them in every which way as you shout it all out. I see one of you twirling around a few times before she jumps, and then catches sight of another, bouncing back and forth on a couch. And like all of us, he's, well—he's walking on sunshine.

It's a vivid scene developing like a polaroid in my mind. And while I sit here this morning, a lonesome space cadet staring out this café's bay window, there's this one thing I seem to know beyond the shadow of a doubt: what I keep seeing, in essence, is *friends*. Friends busting silly moves and belting out melodies and beaming into each other's eyes for always a wild little while. And it's precisely those friends I want to tell you about, here. My guess is I want to explain to you, and to myself, what this freaky bunch is living and breathing in these wiggly moments of the night, why every time I forget to mind Florence's words, and what, in the end, all of this might mean.

NOT SO LONG AGO ON A GREYISH MID-SUMMER AFTERNOON, WHILE WE WAITED FOR sunlight to break through on the dock by the cottage at Bark Lake, I stared into space for some time, as I so often do, and then told one of you something I'd noticed: that so much around us was caught up in a constant, never-ending "wiggle," anywhere and everywhere we happened to look. What I didn't add then is that what I'd noticed had been mentioned by a cunning man with a salt-and-pepper beard named Alan Watts, in one of his many talks, on which I'd recently stumbled online. "The world is a great wiggly affair. Clouds are wiggly, waters are wiggly, plants are wiggly, people are wiggly. But people are always trying to straighten things out," he tells us, in the clip I'm remembering.

When I heard his crisp, high-toned voice go on like this about our world's wiggly ways, just a few weeks before this summer's weekend by the lake, I found myself again deep into a YouTube rabbit hole. But in the instant of hearing it, I knew this tidbit would make a beautifully elusive idea to be tossed around in a conversation someday. A thought that won't surprise a single one of you, given how quickly I turn to easy philosophizing when I sense the slightest opening for it, and how just as quickly it happens that most of you will think *Here we go again*… and yet you will, in the end, still listen. This kind of awareness, I've come to see, is one of the truer things these friends I'm talking about offer each other: they find it in them to pay attention to even the quirkiest of each other's preoccupations. Yet for a while—and this may well turn out to be the point here—for a while, I'd lost sight of this inside me.

But I was telling you: the world is a "great wiggly affair." And among the few things I pointed out then, if I remember, were ripples running softly across the lake's surface, while a dragonfly with a loud buzz squiggled at my feet. I pointed out two of you floating around nearby, laughing and blurting out cries while you fought over the prized seat on top of a large inflatable unicorn. And I can't be the only one to remember how resoundingly the sound travelled to reach those of us who sat on the dock, reminding us, again, that love is often so tightly trapped in the air between the two of you. Then I spotted something small gliding through a light, patchy breeze in the distance. Under a slight press of sail, a boat, pushed forward by the same air we could hear rustling through leaves above our heads. I remember we talked about how invisible this wiggliness can be, sometimes, and about the different ways the wind, for one, only exposes itself by shuffling the world around.

"Every bit of it, whether we see it or not—just wiggling around in its own way, you know," I said, "all the way through to the insides of the littlest atoms, when you really think about it."

"It's as if everything's just striving toward a kind of balance, some stable place in the middle, but nothing, no one ever really reaches it, in the end…" you—the wise little freak I was speaking to—added. And still now this strikes me as so beautifully accurate, if deeply unnerving, a thought.

Never really reaching it—isn't that what it's really about, getting through the thick and thin of our lives? When I try to straighten out in my mind how it's been—my days, and the struggle they so often turned into since the blurry world of my symptoms couldn't be kept a secret anymore—I often think of a particular morning in the apartment where I spent my most trying year, living with one of you freaks. I hadn't been able to sleep, and I can still call back the way pain travelled along my nerves, that night, and those distant trains piercing through the dark silence of the Pointe.

I'd made it down from the upper floor to get my hands on a rare-and-spare pill hidden in a deep corner of my overflowing medications cabinet. But I'd been forced, well before daybreak that morning, to stop by the couch in the living room, overtaken by my symptoms. The squiggly snow flashed electrically in the dark while shocks zapped across my spine. I remember my fingers trying to hold on to the wall around the corner from the staircase, never gripping the flat surface.

Then, like a swallow coming against the hard reality of a windowpane, I crashed: I fell flat on the springy cushions of the room's sectional, and I lay there with my eyes closed, inert as ever. But my mind, interrogating my body, was spiralling again: *What's going on, what's this flare-up for?* I remember obsessing over the word, even, that morning, "flare-up," repeating its skyrocketing sound again and again, "flare-*UP*." I bounced the word around my mind so insistently that it quickly came to feel empty. And for a few hours, after that, all I did was watch the rays of

dawn replace the yellow light, outside, and the chaotic way, caught in the bare branches of a tree facing our apartment, a plastic bag whirled in the air.

It must have been around seven when you came down from your room. And when you saw my eyes staring out the window, the rest of me curled up under blankets, you looked outside with me for a short while, in silence—and I remember feeling, for some reason then… I remember knowing I didn't have to say anything.

"Can I do something to make it easier for you, bud?"

That's when the thought of you came back to me: *you have freaks, remember, you have friends*.

Pretty soon after, you walked out the door on your way to work. You didn't know, but your simple question eased my mind into sleep.

I don't think I've ever felt so far from finding a "stable place in the middle" as I did that morning, freaks. But I think I know why my mind veers back so insistently to that scene—to that couch and that pain and that wiggly view from the window. The view we shared for a little bit. I think the scene's been flashing back to me because, for the first time in a long, heavy while, I'd been in touch, on that morning, with the friendly place inside me, where you always are.

The wiggly little ones, the bacteria that cause my symptoms, when I dared to look them up and watch them do their thing, online, I found out that they, too, love to dance around inside me—have I ever told you about that?

I write "have I ever," as if I didn't know the answer to that question. As if you weren't aware that, for the longest time, I avoided talking about *all that* with every one of you. As if I'd forgotten that, when the symptoms of Lyme and my syndrome

came back raging inside me, I felt myself slipping away… and I figured that, if I kept silent, the Max you knew and loved could keep alive, somewhere in his friends' eyes.

After I wrote that open letter and cried out for help, a few years ago, you all saw how real my troubles were. But you discovered *all that* the way everybody else did: from a screen, and from a distance. You found out that the little wiggly ones under my skin were making me sick. But you had to read your friend's story as if you'd come across the story of a stranger. And I know you must've wondered: *Why in the world couldn't he tell us about all that?*

Since that dark morning with my buzzing body on the couch, I've spent a lot of hours lying around and wondering about that, my freaks. And this morning, all by myself in this sun-kissed café, with a few teardrops running quietly down my cheeks while I stare out the bay window, I find myself thinking about each of your loving faces. I'm remembering the festive weekend all of us just lived together… and finally, I think I'm seeing a little more clearly.

It's always darkest before the dawn, the lady in the white dress sings, loud in my ears. And still I watch you beautiful freaks. *I've been a fool and I've been blind.* I see you belting out the words as you beam into each other's eyes. *Well what the hell I'm gonna let it happen to me.* And what I'm finally seeing, in there, is myself—your friend. *And it's hard to dance with a devil on your back. So shake him off...* Your friend's struggling body—just the way he is, with the little ones dancing inside him—wiggling it off in the middle of that gorgeous, tender bunch we all make. *Shake it out, shake it out*. We dance, and we're here for each other, in and out of each other.

We're here, because of all that glitters through our eyes. Yours, as loving as mine.

I see *all that*, now, my dears. And I think you should know—

I'm sorry. I'm sorry I ever doubted your eyes.

MAX

THE SPACE BETWEEN

I waited for her reply, and for twenty full seconds those three dots blinked in and out of existence until the screen read: “Max, I’m sorry.”

Then the dot-dot-dot came throbbing again.

(…)

We hadn’t gone a day without texting, the two of us, since the night of our first date. An evening picnic, charcuterie board, wine and all, the whole thing had unfolded through the misty orange-turns-to-pink of a June sunset. By the end of it we were lying symmetrically across the grass, facing the sky beneath the distant glow of lampposts. Both suspensefully silent. Early the next morning I’d sent her a shot of dawn’s rays pouring through the blinds of my bedroom. And when a bit of the same sun came to me from where she was, some minutes later, I held my phone down on my chest for a bit, and I just smiled.

(…)

“I’m going to stay away from my phone for a while.”

(…)

Before bed, on most nights since that first date, she’d follow a tiny ritual with me, beginning always with the same question: *What was today’s highlight?* Once, I’d texted her a few lines about my grandma’s crackling laughter, which I’d heard a few times over Zoom earlier that day. I told her how it had softened me someplace inside. She wrote back telling me about a little boy and his father, a scene she’d witnessed while nursing her coffee that same morning: “They were chasing each

other across the park, truly cherishing it, laughing fully." Sometimes, when one dared to call the other with a follow-up question about the day's highlight, we'd get lost in conversation. And we, too, would end up laughing fully.

(…)

"This isn't about you. I just need some time."

I watched over the screen, waiting. But the dots weren't coming back.

She needs time? Sure, makes sense. I need time, sometimes, too. Right? But how much time? Does "time" mean "space," actually? And if so, does her needing space really mean that it's…

"Hey, no worries, I understand…" I texted back, "I hope I'll see you on the other side, really." But my message turned green—undelivered.

Every time I typed something into our conversation, after, I'd backspace on every word.

She needs time, she said. So wait. Give her the space.

She piped up again from my buzzing pocket about a week later. It was a grey Sunday morning, and we exchanged a few quick texts, making plans to see each other again. Walking over to join her in the park, later that day, I remembered when I'd set eyes on her in the distance, the first time. She stood there keeping an eye out for a stranger—smiling, waiting.

"Here," read a new notification on my phone.

I came around the block and saw her sitting against a big ash tree, her bike heeled over at her side. Her arms were braced together, resting atop her knees.

“Hey you,” I said, getting closer.

Her gaze moved up to reach mine. “Oh, hey.”

I knew, already. But still, I thought I should smile. “What’s up? How’ve you been?”

“I need to tell you right away,” she said. “I don’t think… I can’t pursue this romantically. I’m sorry.”

I took a deep breath, looking at the clouded blue in her eyes.

“I’m… I’m just… I’m not there.”

The last time I’d heard a sentence like that, I was the only one to know just how blurry my world was getting. My ex had spilled her guts one evening, and had told me something I already sensed, but didn’t want to hear: her feelings for her colleague had been growing for a while, and it was time for her to go.

Even four years after, I was still keeping the subject of dating at arm’s length. I had to “focus on me,” I’d repeat to everyone around me, and on “getting better.” When anyone mentioned the possibility of setting me up, I’d act aloof—which was so out of character it was draining—until I could find a way to withdraw. Every so often, my mother (or a friend who always knew the answer) would ask: “Have you met a nice girl yet?” That kind of question nagged more and more at my mind. Because I knew that the people who were asking—the people who cared about me—were right: I was flinching from taking a chance on love again.

When life gave me a slightly clearer view on the world, and few good days a week to work with again, I also grew tired of those lone wolf vibes I was giving off. And slowly, I warmed up to the idea of matching with strangers online. I wavered about it, when I finally gave it a shot (downloading and deleting and downloading again a whole merry-go-round of dating apps), yet on the whole I made enough conversation to go out on a handful of first dates. But every time, I'd left the bar scene alone, and brain dead from a few noisy hours of patchy conversation. On my way home the last time, buzzed and drowsy on a late-hour bus, my life freeze-framed—as if I'd turned into a Hopper painting—and I missed my stop. I remember how the snow was getting to my socks while I walked my way back to my door, pushing against the winter wind, and I also remember how I kept telling myself that I was done with modern-day romancing, at least for a while.

And I stood by that thought. Until, a few months later, the threat of the virus came over all of us, at which point all of it was put in perspective for me: *No matter who I ask out, now, we'll for sure end up sitting on green space, apart, with just a picnic blanket and a conversation to fill the space between us…*

Which is, of course, just the way I came to know Lauren.

We'd matched on Hinge, an app she was quick to call "Cringe." (I knew very well that some of us keep our soft spot for rom-coms a self-serving secret—a secret often hidden behind a tinge of irony—and I so hoped that was her case, too.) From the moment of our first exchange, I'd found it strangely easy to chat with her. So it wasn't too long before I asked about us possibly meeting in real life.

"I'd love to chat with you in human," she'd quickly messaged me back.

And in human, sitting at a distance from her, I learned that she'd been forced back home from London, where she studied psychology, some weeks before. The inquisitive type, there was something generous about the way she paid attention—

a look almost studious, yet relaxed in a smile. We chatted away that first evening, telling each other about books and songs and podcasts, many of which we'd find out we both loved. At times, she'd pull out her phone to quote a piece of poetry she thought I should hear, or she'd interrupt the convolutions of my thinking-out-loud to say something like "Hmm, I love that language," or "Why is it so hard to hold paradox in life, sometimes?" Meanwhile, I'd watch her send her tresses behind her shoulders with a swift backhand every time she'd say something goofy enough to make us laugh… and at some point back there in my mind it dawned on me: I—every part of me—felt in the right place, at the right time, sitting just six feet away from the right human.

"How concerned about COVID are you, really?" I asked, a few socially distant dates down the line.

"What are you asking me?"

I cleared my throat. "I think… I think I'm asking you if you'd be comfortable with me getting an inch away from your face."

Our eyes locked for a bit after that—and we smiled at each other, waiting.

"Human freedom involves our capacity to pause between the stimulus and response and, in that pause, to choose the one response toward which we wish to throw our weight." The last time I'd sat next to her in human, Lauren had recited something close to this pithy line—which comes to us from the existentialist philosopher Rollo May—before telling me about the wisdom she sees in it. And before I spoke, that Sunday afternoon, a version of those words had been floating in and out of my mind for a number of days. I like to think that they helped me hear what she was really saying, instead of everything I feared.

"I have to tell you," I said, taking a seat by her side, "I'm scared, too."

I waited for the right words.

"I've been scared for a while, honestly. Scared of a lot of things I had little or no control over. I can tell you about them, if you like. But the thing is: I don't want to let that fear guide me anymore—not with you. And you know, whatever it is that's been going on between us… I really feel there's something precious about it. Something I just hope we can keep alive, us two, in whatever form it'll take."

I used to get a queasy, self-conscious feeling in the pit of my stomach every time I thought I'd have to tell a stranger about my invisible troubles. But as I shared the depths of my story with her that day, she listened carefully—she really did. And I did the same. Lauren, I learned that afternoon, was recently single. And even though we'd both sensed the chemistry between us, I could see, as she spoke, why she feared she might not be ready for what it had in store.

Love, when it starts to show itself to those who've seen it before, can appear—in the space between—as a rapturous, explosive thing… and given the potential for pain this mixture carries, it makes sense that we'd want to keep it at bay, or even try to extinguish its chances altogether, like I did during the years when I was most ill. So we tiptoed toward each other, the two of us, instead. We didn't hurry to find out what this spark we'd felt might do to us. We still smiled and we still laughed, and from time to time some sunlight still came to us from our phones. But we gave each other the time and the space we needed to see how we truly felt.

And then one night later in the fall, as the sun was setting, pinkish again over the St. Lawrence, we were snuggled up in a cottage by a crackling fire, when she wondered out loud, "What would you say you're most afraid of, now?"

"What are you asking me?" I said, as if I didn't know.

"I'm asking just that," she said, her eyes set on the flames. "I know you've been through a lot, these past few years, and you seem at peace with all that… so I'm just wondering, I guess."

"Probably…" I stopped as a throb grew inside my chest. "I'm afraid of telling you how I feel about you."

Her fingers twined with mine with a squeeze. "But you don't want to let that guide you, anymore… right?" she said.

Then she turned to look at me—smiling softly, without a sound. She moved a hand toward my face. With my eyes closed, in the dark space of my mind, I could feel her seeing me. The fire was glowing around us, and I knew she was there.

In the heat of *all of it*, I'd told her. I'd told her the truth about me, and when I opened my eyes—

There I was again. Right beside her.

SUCH A SIMPLE TRICK

1 | NAMING THE MAGIC

Magic. What would happen if we reached for this much belittled word, brought it to the surface of our minds, and used it to discuss how crafted language sometimes travels—via books—from inside a writer's living body, out into thin air, and then slips through the pores of another human?

Magic. You, me, Alice's sister as the little one tumbles down a rabbit hole—all of us readers who relapse every so often into worlds we raptly feel are made of *true good writing*: each of us has known the same special thrill. A solitary, yet all-encompassing thrill. A thrill so damn thrilling that, just before it dissipates, it sends us searching for more of its quiet ecstasy elsewhere, in new pages, again in another writer's sentences.

Magic. Say we choose to hear this little word liberally, neverminding its history, and we let it ring afresh… "MAGIC." What sort of quirky, mind-bending questions might we then ask? What would the word allow us to imagine we're saying, for instance, when we've been "in the zone" while typing a long loving email, or "spellbound" by an essay of Joan Didion's finest? What kind of sorcery is that?

Magic. A root of the modern English word is the Greek *magike*[1], which in most contexts refers to the use of charms, or incantations, through which you and I—as mundane manifestations of Nature—might want to wield supernatural powers over the course of things. But the success of our elusive chants, so the legend goes, would

[1] One etymological dictionary tells me it's akin to *tekhne*: "art" or "skill." See "magic," *Online Etymological Dictionary,* <https://www.etymonline.com/word/magic>.

rest on whether Nature will choose to hear us out and do her part (that is: all of the heavy lifting). And it appears that the Great Mother hardly ever burdens herself with human hocus-pocus. But then again, does she not, sometimes, with those who happen to speak the same language?

Magic. Our little word's meaning is often tainted by a bit of a swollen term: "*super*-natural." In such rational times as ours, hearing someone allude to powers that might circumvent the cosmic Laws of Nature is like hearing that the great Albert Einstein, when questioned by a mother who hoped to turn her son into a world-warping scientist like him, told her that she must read her child "fairy tales and more fairy tales and even more fairy tales."[2] At best, the left-brainers among us react with a tight-lipped smile, and think it's a quaint thing to say.

Magic. Yet if we consider the word anew, could we choose to make no fuss about the misfortune that is our apparent mugglehood, and instead concern ourselves with the fun fact that we—late hominids with biggish brains, back scratchers and private spacecrafts, I mean—have evolved to pull off far-out mental feats with little or no *conscious* effort? Imagine a word for all that we accomplish without needing to spell it out in our minds.

Magic. How do I grow my hair? How do I beat my heart? How do I green my eyes? How… do I understand anything vocalized by anyone standing outside my own monologuing mind? On the whole, I *do* understand what I'm told. But am "I" doing it? Understanding the words of others is some kind of trick our minds accomplish, for the most part, without any delay. It just *happens*, the way Gordon Ramsay abandons a raw bird he's been seasoning on the counter and pulls out an

[2] See Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tale*, 2nd ed., Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 2002, p. 1.

immaculate roast from right under. *As if*, we think, witnessing his obvious sleight of hand.

And yet. "The ease with which we interpret statements and construct meanings […] is absolutely misleading," cognitive scientist Mark Turner tells us in an opening page of *The Literary Mind*, "we feel as if we are doing no work at all."

> [W]e use complicated unconscious knowledge to understand the speech but feel as if we are passive, as if we merely listen while the understanding happens by magic.[3]

The understanding happens by—"magic"? Right, by *magic*. But not "real magic," just good old, plain, let-me-saw-you-in-half magic. The magic of magic tricks. The magic of illusions. The…

Magic? Maaa-gic… MAJ-IK… MÆDʒɪK…

Something sound off?

Linguists call it "semantic satiation." It can occur after saying a word too many times, in too little time. In a flash we come to see that a word is a sound is a sound is a sound is a sound is a… and as our faces scrunch up, what we experience is an awkward truth about our talking tools: in a linguistic vacuum, a word carries no meaning at all. Yet, here we are, and (I can only hope) you *do* decode what I mean by such a towering abstraction as "linguistic vacuum."

Throughout our all-day, everyday mental workout, something is constantly invoked inside us, and it's doing every bit of the heavy lifting (for us). That something processes every meaningless sound our eyes come across when we read,

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[3] Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 6.

and it serves us, on a silver platter of firing synapses, a world of meaning—a world we can interpret and understand. Sometimes, to top it all off, we're even given a flurry of feelings. How fantastically improbable. As improbable as a bunch of elves coming in at night to do all of a desperate shoemaker's work (for him).

The abdominous G. K. Chesterton, in a particularly cheeky essay, makes an observation keen enough to be useful, here, in clarifying at last why the word magic should matter to us:

> It is one thing to describe an interview with a gorgon or a griffin, a creature who does not exist. It is another thing to discover that the rhinoceros does exist, and then take pleasure in the fact that he looks as if he doesn't.[4]

Not a human soul would dare deny it: rhinos are magical creatures. Just as Cleopatra luxuriated in her daily (donkey!) milk dip, they love to wallow in mud baths until the sludge covers every inch of their thumb-deep skin. Out of keratin, the stuff of our nails, they form the pike that has earned them renown across the animal kingdom: their gorgeous horn. To our safari-crazed eyes, they have just the profile for the role of "supernatural beings." If none existed, a dreamy teenager would've doubtless conjured one up and carved it out of wood, some 4000 years before Christ was born, the same day the first dragon was ever depicted.

But rhinos, as things stand, are (still) among us. They're as real as the blubber that's firing up behind my closed eyes now, when I try hard to picture one. And this green place's atmosphere can't be the only thing our sludgy cotenants share with us. I've read that a courting female rhino will produce an infrasonic whistle-blow (a signal our poor primate ears won't pick up) that's strong enough to vibrate

[4] Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, London, John Lane, 1908, p. 17-18.

through iron bars the size of my skull. A part of me believes that, in a way not so far-fetched, whatever her chosen Mr. Rhino feels when he flirts his tail around and trots over to meet her, his feeling must approximate the shiver that made its way across my nape the first time I read this line from James Baldwin's "My Dungeon Shook," an essay which is also a letter to his nephew: "To be loved, baby, hard, at once, and forever, to strengthen you against the loveless world."[5] A sentence like that really *does* something to me. Its rhythm, its softness. There's something infrasonic about it that thins my skin, every time.

As Chesterton before me, what I'm trying to point out is simply this: it's one thing to think that "magic" should refer only to Potteresque make-believe, to powers and creatures that live in our myths and stories (which is saying, after all, that *writing* is what keeps the magic alive in our minds). But it's quite another to wander outside the immediacy of our human lens, for a minute, and to wonder at our species' pretty nifty skills for making symbols of the world, and then using these symbols to yammer on to each other about every little crumb of it. Have you ever overheard yourself turn a bunch of coded grunts and hums into a meaningful, relational singalong?

Human language is something dreamt up from the roots of our senses that's grown into a most rootless expression of all the living. Our words have become the "wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things," says Virginia Woolf in an essay on the craft of writing. They even stay alive, she says, much like we do, "by ranging hither and thither, by falling in love, and mating together."[6] Words, when all is said and understood, "belong to each other." Yet, we are the

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[5] James Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation," *The Fire Next Time*, London, Michael Joseph, 1963, p. 18.

[6] Virginia Woolf, "Craftsmanship," *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, London, Penguin Books, 1993, p. 142.

ones who nurture them, by giving them the light of thought ("they do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind," Woolf repeats, not twice, but three times). We give them the light of thought, so long as they'll sound—if only a little—like what we know and feel, inside, wordlessly, to be *true*. And to our ears, they often do sound like the truth feels.

Some words burst our caged chests wide open, while other words worm their way toward our bones, and never leave. Surely "we do language,"[7] as Toni Morrison once put it, but we do *it* just as much as language, in turn, does, and undoes, and remakes, *us*. That dance, that meaning-making give-and-take, that wondrous word-work without end—that's who we are, and what we're made of. We measure the meaning of our lives through this articulate *whoopee*-ing around. Out of the bebop of consciousness, we manage to *make* sense. And my sense about all that jazz is, I think, pretty simple. If we're going to sound like we're telling the truth about our mind, and just how fanciful it can be, I think we'd better give (whatever it is that undergirds) all this wordy dreaming we do, the kind of name it calls for.

MAGIC

[7] Toni Morrison, "The Nobel Lecture in Literature," *The Source of Self-Regard*, New York, Knopf Doubleday, 2019, p. 106.

2 | FEELING THE MAGIC

My earliest memory of being touched by the magic involves a bit of a cheat. It happened during high school, late in the first year. For a writing exam, we were asked to compose a piece that would evoke a sense of place. Sensory detail was key, narrative only secondary, our teacher insisted. “Pick a vibrant setting! Any place in the world you’re curious about!” The bulk of the assignment consisted in coming up with vignettes as vivid as we could craft them.

At thirteen, I was too young to have heard the writer’s dictum *Write what you know*. Yet, just by following what I was curious about, I was led there anyway. Growing up around boats meant that I loved all things boating: the clicks and creaks of the docks, the lake’s whole spectrum of smells, or the way my father, at the helm, looked at once like the captain of the Titanic on the ship’s fateful night (a sharp, serene gaze to the distance) and a football fan on a balmy Sunday afternoon (Budweiser in hand, he chucked peanuts down his mouth with the other). On days out on the water, he was *it*, quite simply. And I loved it.

Grabbing the classroom globe, I let my index sail across the blue. Somewhere in the middle between Peru and New Zealand, in the South Pacific, I parked my finger on at a tiny patch of Polynesian land. An island which, I thought, would have all sorts of hues and textures: I imagined coral reefs, crystalline waters with rainbow-coloured fish, people (Natives?) with intricate attires. *Voilà*.

The island I’d pinpointed was named “Mo’orea,” and I remember liking the pretty sound of that. Two characters then made their flashing appearance. Budding

lovers, he was a fisherman, and she, a gifted jeweller. I remember how I spent that first exam hour making a page-full of notes, and witnessing a story being born.

But it was later that day, on the bus ride home, that I first really sensed something of the magic's doings. My mind, I noticed, was still at work, even well after the school bell had gone off. *Hard* at work, I mean. As I stood "alone" in that raucous crowd of teenagers speeding across the highway, Mo'orean scenes cascaded along, vying for my attention. I teased out scenes and parts of sentences. When a word echoed or an image stuck, I took it they should be used. The (pre-smartphone) trick was to loop these findings in my mind until I made it home, so I wouldn't lose them.

Once there, I bolted through the front door, my bag dropped to the floor and my feet pounded up the stairs and into my room, where I jotted everything down. I sat at my desk for a few absorbed hours, then, and I just kept watching, and listening. I wrote everything that seemed to be insisting on making it out. When my mother hailed for dinner from the first floor, I landed back in my chair. And then I remember having a trippy, yet also kind of delightful feeling: I felt as though the writing I'd just done, in some curious way, had *done itself*.

"There are few artists who have not had this sense that some element of their work comes to them from a source they do not control," writes Lewis Hyde, in his classic essay on how gift giving relates to artistic creation and imagination. "The gift must stay in motion."[8]

This sense that something in me would have to stay in motion is what the little cheat I first mentioned was all about. The next morning I entered the classroom with a cue card in my back pocket, inked with details about the Mo'orean lovers. I waited

[8] Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*, 3rd ed., New York, Vintage Books, 2007, p. 189.

until I was in the clear and, slipping it out, went drifting off again into the story's flows.

Something else happened many times on that after-school commute. Something I haven't given much conscious attention since those days.

Every afternoon when I stepped onto the bus, I scanned the seats to locate one kid, my age but much bigger. And when I saw where he was, I gauged his mood. I imagine it'd been obvious to him from day one—seeing how small, shy and sensitive I was—that I'd be among the easiest targets in the room. When he (and his friend who watched and snickered from the sidelines) understood, after the first few "jokes" and slaps in the face, how passive and silent I'd remain, I became the *only* target in the room. It took a few months before two older girls, seniors, stopped him mid-hit one day, scolded him, and went together the next morning to a headteacher's office. But during those months before they intervened, he seemed increasingly in a bad place, and the roughness he carried inside often came out on me.

So much of what went down in that bus I thought had been erased from my memory. Until one incident resurfaced, recently. It came a few days after I began probing my mind for an answer. I'd been hoping to trace my story back to my earliest attempt at writing from personal experience, when one morning I entered a bus on my way to work. The driver looked me in the eyes with welcome, as usual, and then I walked head first into what Vladimir Nabokov, in his *Lecture on Literature*, calls the "associative stage." A bodily state "marked by a kind of spiritual thrill which in English is very loosely termed inspiration."[9]

[9] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1982, p. 377.

> A passerby whistles a tune at the exact moment that you notice the reflection of a branch in a puddle which in its turn, and simultaneously, recalls a combination of damp green leaves and excited birds in some old garden, and the old friend, long dead, suddenly steps out of the past, smiling and closing his dripping umbrella. The whole thing lasts one radiant second and the motion of impressions and images is so swift that you cannot check the exact laws which attend their recognition, formation, and fusion—why this pool and not any pool, why this sound and not another—and how exactly are all those parts correlated; it is like a jigsaw puzzle that instantly comes together in your brain with the brain itself unable to observe how and why the pieces fit, and you experience a shuddering sensation of wild magic.[10]

I got off the bus some fifteen minutes later, knowing that there was something to write. A story had been given back to me.

The whole thing started when the big guy snatched my lunchbox from between my feet as the bus was coming to a stop. A few students got off, and the bus began to accelerate again. When I looked down and noticed that my lunchbox wasn't there, I heard chuckles from behind my shoulders telling me it was too late. I turned only to watch it happen: the box flew out the window, hit the ground, and the remnants of my lunch scattered on the sidewalk. I ran forward asking the driver to stop, and when he did, ran outside to pick everything up.

All of them inside waited.

When I re-entered, I remember being nonplussed by the crowd.

The hush that had fallen over it. The strength of its gazes.

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[10] *Ibid.*, p.377-378.

My own eyes lowered, and I slipped between bodies until I reached my backpack. The bus got going again, and with it, the teenage commotion.

Early on, as I watched over Mo'orea to write about it, the sand had monopolized my attention. Later, I saw why. It was the texture from the surroundings that tied the lovers together in thought.

For the better part of her days, she would sit on the beach, her feet pawing at the shore while she worked at her trade, showcasing shell bracelets and necklaces by her side. Whereas his days, long and harsh as the weather, would be spent out on the open sea, far enough to reach depths where fish overflowed. Often *too far*, she'd remind him some nights. And every time he'd say, *yes yes*, she was right, looking as self-assured as he did the night they'd first met. Still, he kept something of her touch near at hand when he was far out: a palmful of sand, in a large conch in the cockpit. When the sea roughened at times, he'd reach for it to feel the grainy softness of her skin.

The sounds and images that resurfaced gave me little to see of all that happened before I stepped foot inside the bus again, that afternoon. Try as I might, I can't recall the colour of my lunchbox. I can't even describe a single trait from the big guy's face. In fact, all of them in the scene appear faceless. Save one: the bus driver.

Like everyone else, he didn't break the silence when I came in… but I remember the look on his face. A look that spoke of kindness and understanding and dignity. A look that said, in my inner ear's language, *I see you, buddy… and I know that's not easy, I know*.

His eyes might've locked with mine for a second, no more than two, before he drove us on. But I can see now that something inside me held onto their image, for me, for longer than I knew.

Just days ago, I was sharing this memory with a wise-old woman, a mentor of sorts who's skillful in helping me understand the fears I carry (in life as in writing), when she asked: "These moments when you were a kid, when you ended up hurt… who did you talk to about that?"

There was a pause as I realized. "No one," I said through a sigh.

She kept silent for a second or two, wearing a look I'd seen before.

"That's the traumatic part, see. Not so much what happened as what didn't happen: the listening ear you needed in someone else, the feeling of understanding you couldn't come to on your own."

It was then that I remembered: I *had* tried to arrive at something on my own—through writing. Some months after the lunchbox incident, I'd hoped to tell the entire scene, up to the joining of eyes. Simply because I sensed it mattered that I flesh out what had happened, and put words on what I'd felt.

I think that, as I fumbled to *make* sense out of myself that day, I must have felt, without seeing it yet, that I would have to be a writer. "By which I mean not a 'good' writer or a 'bad' writer," to echo Joan Didion on making this discovery,

> but simply a writer, a person whose most absorbed and passionate hours are spent arranging words on pieces of paper. Had my credentials been in order I would never have become a writer. Had I been blessed with even limited access to my own mind there would have been no reason to write. I write

> entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear.[11]

For a few hours I remember pushing words around or hammering them off the screen and mostly just staring at a blinking cursor. It was as though I didn't know how to watch and listen and transcribe anymore. And I couldn't finish what I'd started. I wouldn't yet find out what it was I feared so much, in putting some of myself on the page. All I knew, then, is that I felt watched, and overheard. As if those gazes surrounded me. So I went away. I went away for a long, long time.

Over a decade later, when I faced the page again, this time needing to write about the unexplained symptoms that now monopolized my attention, I felt that watchful presence again: every time I'd sit to write, I sensed a crowd of doctors, flanked by some of my friends, and even loved ones… all eyes showing me how incredulous they were about my troubles.

But when I remembered the bus driver, I looked over little me—little me trying to do this the first time—and something happened. I felt relieved, even redeemed. It hit me that this need to write, to *truthfully* write… it's been there for me all along. Because this is a need, after all, and a kind of gift, that can't be exhausted. Even as I didn't know how to care for it and let it be heard, something of its magic knew to stay put, and to keep alive (for me). As if it knew I'd go looking for it again, one day.

The best part, of course, is when we find out that what was given to us was meant to be passed on. Since stories can only live on as a gifts do: by being received.

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[11] Joan Didion, "Why I Write," *Let Me Tell You What I Mean*, New York, Knopf Doubleday, 2021, p. 49.

The day our “sense of a place” was handed back to us, our teacher insisted that some of us read our stories aloud. But when she pulled the Mo’orean tale out of the pile, fear gripped me, and I faltered. A friend sitting next to me then bolted out of his chair, snatched the sheets from my hands, and went off to the front of the room.

I remember now my classmates clapping, and turning their eyes to meet mine, as we envisioned the last scene, all of us together.

His boat had capsized and been swallowed up one afternoon. And as he swirled below the squall, down toward the seabed, he held one last hope with his breath: that his body would reach the ground, and graze the sand again.

3 | RECEIVING THE MAGIC

Sometimes the magic in an essay will leave markings on my bones. With this one, we're in New York at twilight, in a passage of Joan Didion's "Goodbye to All That." She's twenty-something and new in town, and above all, she's late to meet a friend. Yet, somewhere along Lexington Avenue, she enters a store. She comes out with a peach in her hand and stands on the sidewalk to eat it. "I could taste the peach and feel the soft air blowing from a subway grating on my legs and I could smell lilac and garbage and expensive perfume," she writes.[12]

With time, and with every new reading, a connection's been carved somewhere inside me. Whenever I push the pivoting doors of a subway entrance in Montréal—large, heavy steel doors that sometimes exhale so much they'll make your eyelids flinch—there's a chance Didion's peach will spring into my thoughts. The scene has become the kind of flash cut that spends most of its time down in the depths, but that sometimes crops up to be caught in the spotlight of thought, breaching the current of consciousness. Exactly the way, some places along on the St. Lawrence River, beluga whales will come up for air before slipping back below, briefly dazzling those humans who happen to be watching, and who know so little of what's going on in the deep.

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[12] Joan Didion, "Goodbye to All That," *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008, p. 228.

"Consciousness is a wonderful instrument for helping us to focus," writes Mark Turner, again in *The Literary Mind*, "but it is a liar about mind."[13]

> It shamelessly represents itself as comprehensive and all-governing, when in fact the real work is often done elsewhere, in ways too fast and too smart and too effective for slow, stupid, unreliable consciousness to do more than glimpse, dream of, and envy.[14]

So, the cognitive scientist invites us to be a little envious, and to look past the illusion of an all-embracing conscious attention. From there, Turner's theory runs something like this: long before we humans could utter words, early members of our species would quite naturally interpret the world through the lens of "narrative imagining"—through stories.[15] A complex of interrelated actors, objects, and events was always, to our pre-verbal eyes and mind, appreciably at play. With generations of insistent imagining, a pool of narrative schemas began to form in the mind, schemas which our most ancient tropes now point to.

Take one example. Behind such a common saying as "When the cat's away, the mice will play," we find a skeleton of a story, an abstract narrative that informs us about the typical interactions of predators and their prey. Yet, there's always a hunch within the human mind, an inkling that has us thinking: a story never ends there. In fact, a story might never end, *at all*. Once its spine is abstracted, a story can prove useful well beyond its plainest level of interpretation. Beyond mice having a jamboree while the cat is out and about, teaching Alice a few life lessons. Taking up the adage again, we'll readily *project* the narrative backbone of "When

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[13] Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

[14] *Idem.*

[15] *Ibid.,* p. 4.

the cat's away" onto another story we're witnessing in our world, in a (quite effortless) effort to make sense of this new situation:

> Said at the office, [the narrative backbone] can be projected onto a story of boss and workers. Said in the classroom, it can be projected onto a story of teacher and students. Said of sexual relationships, it can be projected onto a story of infidelity.[16]

This lightspeed ability to use one story as a template to understand another is a projection Turner calls "parable," and the crux of his theory lies in the power of this cognitive trick, since he suggests that the mental process of parable makes up no less than "the root of the human mind."[17] Thanks to it, us humans have grown to think, know, act, create, speak—and, of course, *write*. From this logic follows a fascinating retelling of our development of language: contrary to conventional thinking, our capacity to tell each other tales, whether tall or true, couldn't have been "built up from the sober to the exotic,"[18] from the rudiments of grammar all the way through to literary writing. "It works the other way around," says Turner:

> Story precedes grammar. Projection precedes grammar. Parable precedes grammar. Language follows from these mental capacities as a consequence; it is their complex product. Language is the child of the literary mind.[19]

As this mind-bending story goes, we might've had a hunch for the model plots behind folk tales thousands of years before we devised a first cluster of words, and began to line up these words into sentences. Small wonder stories that invoke archetypal heroines and villains would emanate from wildly different cultures, all throughout human history. In a way, the meaning supplied to every human life

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[16] *Ibid.,* p. 6.

[17] *Ibid.,* p. 168.

[18] *Idem.*

[19] *Idem.*

hinges on this mental sleight: our minds can project narrative over narrative as spontaneously as, say, bees figure out flowers. We don't need to be taught the basic tricks of the trade.

Instead, some ancient, nonverbal faculty continually sends express mail to consciousness, a ready-rendered view on the world. And this world we witness isn't just a place where stories keep happening. It's better than that. It's a place where the stories we know are meant to help us decode what *has* happened, as much as what *might* happen. Each of us' everyday attention is in every way *literary*, then—and vitally so. Since narrative imagining isn't simply a feature of the human mind. It *is* our mind. "The literary mind is the fundamental mind."[20] Stories, in other words, aren't exotic things the dreamer types among us cook up with words on rainy days. Nor should the term be reserved for the sort of hauntingly beautiful prose some of us will recall while passing through pressurized subway doors, or while taking in the acrid air of trash. Stories run through us, they keep us *alive*. And they've been doing this (for us) for much longer than we imagine.

Stories really are the lifeblood of our mind's magic.

When something happens—clicks—between us and good writing, our insides sometimes ignite in a spark of our senses. This, science is increasingly allowing us to spy on: the brilliant blubber behind our eyes really does light up during powerful

[20] *Ibid.*, p. v.

reads. Brain scans now show us that, as we read, our synapses can be awakened precisely as if we were, in real life, *experiencing* what's described on the page.[21]

Sometimes, my mind will even blur the boundaries of that vicarious experience. Images from Didion's essay, I've noticed, have floated through my thoughts long enough to have been quietly photoshopped. She never mentions passersby getting around her, no more than she talks about the buzz of Lexington Avenue. Nor, even, does she say a word of the peach's trickling juice, and a drop reaching the edge of her wrist before she wipes it off. Yet these sequences, in my mind's eye, have come to make up the scene. To the point that I've found myself searching for words that would describe these cuts, when I've gone back toward the piece a second and a third and even a twenty-fifth time. I could never locate them, of course. Something had imagined these words (for me). And what I'd find, instead, elsewhere, were the writer's particular cadences creeping up in some of my stilted sentences, like the way she often lets a long one be unfurled by *and*, and *and*, and *and*...[22]

I've come to see this sort of oblivious appropriation as the highwater mark of literary experiences. When, over the span of years, I return again and again to the same pages this way, they start to give me an addictive feeling. The kind of feeling you get when you're about to watch one of your all-time most treasured films with a new love. Good stuff, and so much of it, is thoroughly expected. And yet, therein looms, as well, a true element of surprise: *How will the story turn out? How different might it feel, this time?* As if to return to a beloved book was to return, not just to some sentences we love, but at the same time to a jumble of past selves. As if we could get, through the beloved book, to a place where we could watch ourselves

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[21] See, for instance: Simon Lacey, Randall Stilla et K. Sathian, "Metaphorically feeling: Comprehending textural metaphors activates somatosensory cortex," *Brain and Language*, vol. 120, n° 3, mars 2012, p. 416-421.

[22] Refer to the sentence quoted on page 92.

evolve, and at the turn of a page could see ourselves—every one of us—meaningfully coalesce into here and now and this improbable book. This improbable love.

A fairy-tale sort of happening that could wind up feeling as real as real life. And it would feel so real, not despite, but precisely because the story is still the same old beautiful thing. And because something about it still works on us like a charm. The peach, as they say, is in the eye of the beholder.

Essays that lure me back like "Goodbye to All That," I come to read them, not really with my focused attention, although some of that must be involved in parsing the words, but instead with a much earthlier part of myself. I want to say: with the crazy quilt of nerve strings that keeps me whole. Vladimir Nabokov, in his *Lectures on Literature*, speaks similarly about this sensation. Highlighting what true good writing achieves—"the merging of the precision of poetry and the intuition of science"[23]—he tells us that in order "to bask in that magic," a wise reader should read "not so much with his brain, but with his spine"[24]:

> Although we read with our minds, the seat of artistic delight is between the shoulder blades. That little shiver behind is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained when evolving pure art and pure science. Let us worship the spine and its tingle. Let us be proud of our being vertebrates, for we are vertebrates tipped at the head with a divine flame. The brain only continues the spine: the wick really goes through the whole length of the candle.[25]

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[23] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

[24] *Idem.*

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 64.

If we're lucky enough to get our hands on the right book, we can glow in the dark, yes. But the question remains: what is it, in the writing, that lights us up? No doubt, fusing "the precision of poetry and the intuition of science" has something to do with providing fuel for that lighter's click. It's also a word-perfect way of describing how Didion's voice feels to me, in "Goodbye to All That." Something I could say of many other essayistic voices.

That's one remarkable thing about this form of writing, especially when it assumes a personal touch: it will admit a perfectionist's shot at the moon, literarily speaking. I'm saying this while staying clear of genre territorialism[26]: the succinctness and intimate human quality of a good essay, when compared with the scale of narrative and imaginative ambition a novel allows for, gives the little autobiographical thing the allure of a philosopher's stone—it's pocket-sized, and it looks unassuming, but if your temperament suggests that you should believe in its mojo, it packs the power to alchemize your life. "A novel has a story, a poem rhyme," begins Virginia Woolf's boldest question, in a small critical piece titled "The Modern Essay,"

> but what art can the essayist use in these short lengths of prose to sting us wide awake and fix us in a trance which is not sleep but rather an intensification of life—a basking, with every faculty alert, in the sun of pleasure?[27]

The essayist must "know how to write," Woolf answers, momentarily turning herself into a tautology. Only to then reappear sparking up the obvious, and letting us catch a glimpse of what lurks within the art: an essay, she says, "must be so fused

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[26] No matter the label, anyway, we know that to the mind a story is a story is a story is a…

[27] Virginia Woolf, "The Modern Essay," *Collected Essays*, vol. 2, London, Hogarth Press, 1966, p. 41.

by the magic of writing that not a fact juts out, not a dogma tears the surface of the texture."[28]

"Goodbye to All That" abounds in factual details, come to read it with an eye for them. She talks about Xanadu, about meeting "the widow of the celery king of the Harlem market." She mentions that she wore, during those years in New York, a perfume called *Fleurs de Rocaille*, and another called *L'Air du Temps*. She informs us that, for a while, she cut herself off from everyone she loved, and that her days, during that time, were blurred up by tears:

> I cried until I was not even aware when I was crying and when I was not, cried in elevators and in taxis and in Chinese laundries, and when I went to the doctor he said only that I seemed to be depressed, and should see a "specialist." He wrote down a psychiatrist's name and address for me, but I did not go.[29]

As I consider the kaleidoscope of facts that gives a diamond-cut feel to this essay, it hits me that Woolf's "magic of writing" must be precisely the point, here: to me, not a line of "Goodbye to All That" feels forced, or bluffed, or artfully contrived. Controlled, no doubt, but not contrived. The essay feels like what the truth feels like. Something we can all recognize, when it's there, but can't ever single out in a sentence. It has to do with a certain emotional honesty. Paired with some sort of intelligence. Didion's fun-fact-filled remarks are often pointed, yet perceptively funny. Funny in a way that's clever, even considerate. Wit, I imagine, is a better word for that.

But still, all of this isn't exactly the point. The fact of her crying, alone, isn't the point. Her quips, smart as they sound, aren't the point. The point—the aura that surrounds every word she writes and gives an air of authority to her voice—is that

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[28] *Ibid.*, 41-2.

[29] Joan Didion, "Goodbye to All That," *loc. cit.*, p. 237.

she's *aware*. Her awareness is the beautiful thing (and her literary mind's peachy trick). Her awareness is what allows her to line up the facts of her life in ways that reveal what she's getting at, instead of explaining the heart of her message away. Her awareness is what allows her to make connections, arresting connections, and to show a kind of clarity of self-understanding that we, the readers, get to just *get*.

And if I get *her*, it's because, in a way not so far-fetched, she gets *me*. She may not know a single fact about my life—who I am, what makes me tick, cry, whistle, scream, or tingle at the nape of the neck. But she knows this: I haven't come here to watch the Empress strut around in her new clothes. I can see how the Empress has learned to weave with words. Oh *that*, she has. But her writerly skills, it turns out, have very little to do with her telling me that, on occasion, "some Veblenesque gorge would rise in my throat."[30] That adjectival sin, "Veblenesque," is pardoned, and pardoned at once. Because the Empress—I felt this as soon as I first saw the last period on the last page—is naked. She's naked, *and she knows it*. Which I guess is what makes her, in point of fact, not an Empress, but a true Sorceress. She's so aware of having no clothes to show for, in the end, that I, as her reader, can't help but hear her out. And can't help but believe every pondered thing she's come to say, here, in this essay. I even come back, and believe again every word of it. As if any word of this story could, any second now, unscramble the story of my own life.

Is there something to be said, then, about me, myself, and Didion's peach? To begin fleshing out a perfectly mushy answer, I'd say: it was something like love at first read. The day I discovered "Goodbye to All That" was also the day I discovered that someplace inside, a part of me was crazy about the essay—and I mean, *so particularly crazy about the essay*. It was something like the way Didion felt, from

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 236-7.

the first, about her beloved New York: "I was in love with the city, the way you love the first person who ever touches you and never love anyone quite that way again."[31] This literary obsession, it turned out, was a seed. I felt it take root in me. I wanted to read more pages with intimate human voices like this one, so many more. Which I did. And still do.

But an old, abandoned idea also began to come up for air around that time. Weeks went by, and then months, and the same belugan thought would show itself, *more and more* insistently. As insistently as I felt the need to reread the same essay, it would come back. As if to say to me: *Can't you see me? Don't you want to do something about me?* I hadn't tried my hand at personal prose since the early days of high school. But there I was, slowly wanting to put something of myself on the page again. I wanted to write an essay just like that one, and I wanted to do it just because it seemed something inside insisted that I do so. The whole thing, I will say, was as sweet as thrusting your tongue through the fluff of a mid-August peach.

Yet, deeper, at the core of me, something hid. Something that felt like a hard, gluey kernel in your palm, when you have no way of throwing it away. I first read "Goodbye to All That" during a time when I often cried, alone in my apartment. I cried because I was sick. *More and more sick*, in fact. Which was something I was the only one to know about. And something I wished I could forget.

I knew I'd soon have to say something about… well, about *all that*.

I was in love with the essay. But I didn't think I was ready for what the essay asked of me.

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[31] *Ibid.,* p. 228.

"Goodbye to All That," on the surface, is Didion's au revoir to a city that transformed her. But as a parable, of course, there's more. The essay is a story of disenchantment, and then of growth. It's an elegy for a past self.

This narrative backbone is what I felt so deeply. I took it in with a shiver, and with time it made its mark along my spine. Which is also exactly the way Didion felt about her dear city, as she wrote the opening lines: "I can remember now, with a clarity that makes the nerves in the back of my neck constrict, when New York began for me."

Every time I went back toward the essay's words, they'd wake up an ancient wisdom. The one that lives on stories and breathes beneath every human mind. And every time, something would light up. It was in that light that I felt I needed to look at myself, and my life, a little more clearly. I call this kind of bright-white magic "wisdom," but I use the word in a sense more radical than we're used to.

I think of wisdom in the sense of "seeing clearly." Which often has to do with coming across the right story. And also, sometimes—as we peek, through good writing, into the mind of another—with being lucky enough to spot a white whale in there. One that will keep coming back up for air (for us). An experience which, as Lewis Hyde explains, is quite a transformative gift:

> Most artists are brought to their vocation when their own nascent gifts are awakened by the work of a master. That is to say, most artists are converted to art by art itself. The future artist finds himself or herself moved by a work of art, and, through that experience, comes to labor in the service of art until he can profess his own gifts. [It is] when art acts as an agent of transformation that we may correctly speak of it as a gift.[32]

[32] Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

If I've received anything from the labour of Didion's hands, it's a kind of spine tingle that has me insistently wondering: *What kind of trick is it, that allows you to write sentences that speak so truthfully about yourself?*

4 | MISTAKING THE MAGIC

"There's also this story about you," the interviewer says, "that you would be seen reading Hemingway, and taking the sentence structure apart."

"I did," Didion says. "I taught myself how to type by typing Hemingway's sentences over and over again."

"Looking for…?"

"Just how they worked. Because they appeared to be so simple, but you would come away from a string of them with the overwhelming feeling of… of whatever he had in mind for you to feel. So, I mean, obviously something was going on in the sentences."

He picks at his chin. "You—"

She cuts him. "And, um, you know what was going on…"

"Yeah?"

"It was a… a withholding… there was withheld information in these sentences, and it had to do with a rhythm. I mean, I can't exactly explain—"

"But you got it."

"Y-yeah… mhm."

He segues. "People that write about you say that there's this sense of perfectionism about you. *Total control*, and perfectionism."

"Well, um, ah, y-, um… I… I… I do… like control, yes," she says, chuckling through the end of her sentence.

CHARLIE ROSE, 1992

If it isn't written all over me yet, then let me say it: for a while, I tried to make Didion's cool, authoritative tones and seductive mannerisms my own. It was mostly oblivious on my part (I think). Yet I went at it with a kind of self-important envy. But unlike her neurosurgeon-calibre chiseling of Hemingway's sentences, I didn't end up "getting it."

When I finally read my copycatted lines with a clean mind, some months after I'd written them, what I got instead were thoughts of putting my laptop in the oven and watching the silver thing smelt through the grillwork. I was of course the last to hear just how stuck up they—just how stuck up *I*—sounded in those pages.

Nothing abnormal here, I've been told. It appears everyone (children, especially) will grow a voice they can relax into by fumbling with sounds they love but aren't theirs, and by failing to make their own spines tingle with them. There's a cliché in there, and it's here for us: you come to sound like yourself by missing the mark at sounding like everybody else. It's apparently an important step. As important as discovering that you're so enchanted by someone else's spells, you'll "take the sentence structure apart" in hopes of putting your fingers on the magic.

But there's quite a world of difference, in the end, between loving the sound of someone else, as it resonates along your spine… and then loving—someplace where you aren't exactly aware—*what it would say about you*, if only you could bring your own self to sound like that someone else.

As humans, "our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is not spinning webs or building dams," writes cognitive scientist Daniel

Dennett, "but telling stories, and more particularly concocting and controlling the story we tell others—and ourselves—about who we are."[33]

Every one of us therefore concocts and controls a *self*. An idea which does, for us, something analogous to what a *centre of gravity* does for an inanimate thing like the Tower of Pisa: it keeps the record straight, even against all appearances. Like a centre of gravity, a self is "a fiction that has a nicely defined, well delineated and well-behaved role" within a story (just as the first does within theoretical physics).[34] It's really an abstraction of a narrative kind. But in practice, it's quite a spectacular abstraction.

Our mind's self-(pre)serving trick goes something like this: it continuously tries to "make all of our material cohere into a single good story."[35] The main character, *I*, appears at the center stage of the tale. Throughout every day of our lives, something inside us is characterizing our behaviour this way (for us). As the tip of that idea ("myself") reaches our conscious attention, above the sea level of the mind, what we get to feel is a *sense of self*. A sense of making sense—as one *particular* human being. And if we're able to narrate the "story of me" to ourselves this way, with such unstudied ease, it's because the human mind is, at root, the same old *literary* marvel:

> just as spiders don't have to think, consciously and deliberately, about how to spin their webs, and just as beavers, unlike professional human engineers, do not consciously and deliberately plan the structures they build, we (unlike *professional* human storytellers) do not consciously and deliberately figure out what narratives to tell and how to tell them. Our tales are spun, but for the

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[33] Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, New York, Little, Brown and Co., 1991, p. 418.

[34] Daniel Dennett, "The Self as the Center of Narrative Gravity," *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*, New York, Psychology Press, 1992, p. 103.

[35] *Ibid.,* 114.

> most part we don't spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source.[36]

There is, however, a shadier side to our tales *spinning us*—to our sensing, by and large nonverbally, our own life as a narrative abstraction. It also means we can readily envision the backbone of a story like "Perfectly Thriving Me" without much effort, only to then incessantly project that story onto the much more rickety thing which is our actual, full-bodied experience.

I often think of the day, in high school biology, when we talked about the different organs of the human body. For one reason: it's the day I learned that the skin—every square inch of it—is not only one of the organs, but in fact *the largest of them all*. "Odd, isn't it?" said our teacher. *So odd*, I remember thinking, scrutinizing my latest scrape. And more recently, during a bus ride, I wondered: *why*, exactly, does that feel odd?

I imagine I'd rather not *see* myself as compostable stuff. Consciousness is happy to screen out this (subtly morbid) fun fact for the same reason I'll look away when the TV showcases intestinal surgery. To think of all this fleshly stuff is like having to watch a B-series horror movie: it holds more gore potential than I tend to want in my daily life. And the body's after all just a bloody accessory, I feel. It isn't where the headliner is playing. Smack in the middle of the skull—*that's* where "I" really exist, I think. Which is why, like most of us, I feel most at home in that place where words live. I, too, like to *live in the mind*. Or, even more to it: I prefer to live *as* the mind.

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[36] Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, *op. cit.,* p. 418.

Of all the "daily drama of the body there is no record," writes Virginia Woolf in "On Being Ill," one of her classic essays. "People write always of the doings of the mind; the thoughts that come to it; its noble plans; how the mind has civilised the universe."[37]

> Literature does its best to maintain […] that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, and negligible and non-existent. On the contrary, the very opposite is true.[38]

The very opposite is *very* true. Yet I came to see that such is life—that in fact I *am* a body, and don't simply "have" one—the same way I came to appreciate that the stove's inviting orange glow wasn't just "for nice": for the truth to sink in, it had to get past our skin. Through my crazy quilt of nerve strings.

This is one of the deeper reasons why pain, or any physical symptom really, will come into our lives as a nuisance: it first gets in the way of *what* we think we are. We hurt, and suddenly life makes us aware of our embodiedness. We don't feel like pure, free-willed essence, anymore. We feel like a heavy, out-of-whack contraption. Like a grocery cart whose damn wheels just won't go straight. And after a while, when the symptoms don't buzz off, we start to feel like we're losing control of *who* we are.

Chronic illness skews our centre of narrative gravity that way. Our sense of self—of both *who* and *what* we are—gets wobbly. Not just because a disease must be added to our story's equation; an event which, in itself, can carry a traumatic kind of weight. But also because many of the things by which *I* used to define *me*—

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[37] Virginia Woolf, "On Being Ill," *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, London, Penguin Books, 1993, p. 44.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 43

the data points that pixeled our self-image—start to split, and shift in all sorts of directions.

*What's happening to **me**? **I** don't deserve this.*
***I** shouldn't be sick, **I**'m a healthy guy.*
***I** don't feel like **myself**.*
***I** want **my normal self** back.*

Some weeks after a stream of microbes left a tick's body and got under my skin, a whole list of neurological symptoms kicked in, and in reaction to them, I started having oscillating thoughts like these every day. And when the symptoms stuck, I felt as though my body—a.k.a. *life*—was toying with *me*, like a cat does with a clawed mouse. My sense of self wavered, because my story was coming apart at the seams.

"Our human environment contains not just food and shelter, enemies to fight or flee, and conspecifics with whom to mate," Dennett writes, "but words, words, words."

> These words are potent elements of our environment that we readily incorporate, ingesting and extruding them, weaving them like spiderwebs into self-protective strings of narrative. Indeed, […] when we let in these words, they tend to take over, creating us out of the raw materials they find in our brains.[39]

A word I ingested as soon as I heard it coming for me was *hypochondria*: an anxiety disorder in which someone has a strong irrational fear of becoming ill or believes that they have illnesses despite a lack of evidence. Three months after my symptoms appeared, this word came screeching out of a doctor's mind. For the third

[39] Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, *op. cit.*, p. 417.

time in those three months, I sat in the neon light of this doctor's office with the same pixelated visual field, the same foggy brain, and the same compounding case of health anxiety. And right after he said it out loud—"hypochondria"—he made it clear that this would be the last time I'd see him about these troubles I'd been imagining.

Then came a pep talk. Which—I will say—was respectable enough that I felt I could go on believing it: I was *young*, he told me, and undoubtedly *healthy* ("in the prime of life," is what he said), and I'd do myself the biggest favour if I could just focus on living up that youth again. My mind, split up in self-confusion as it was, proved to be just the kind of place where a word like that could take root, and thrive. I helplessly needed a self I could cling to, and now I'd found the story of "Hypochondriac Me." So I let it spin itself around the nervous mess of my days, and for a while it tied my self up quite nicely.

When I figured out, a good ten years down the line, that this cat that'd been toying with me might be the bacteria that cause Lyme Disease, I pulled myself up and started to see my symptoms for what they were: *real*. Yet, at the same time, the more I considered the possibility that these bacteria had nested in my body's tissues, and that they were the ones scratching my nerves from the inside, the more I felt the patched-up story of *me* unravelling again, and head off script.

The centre of my mind was not holding. I'd oscillate between the determined mania of research and the insecurities of needing to prove to everyone (starting, of course, with myself) that there'd actually been something going on with me all this time. I wanted to remedy the "lack of evidence," and clear any mention of "hypochondria" off my resume. So not only did I start to talk about the disease with friends and family, I also decided I should make the case for it in front of doctors. Which proved, of course, to be my worst idea yet. That is, until the idea came to me that I should *write* about the disease, and rewrite history.

My default setting as a sentence-maker had always been, and very much still is, *cerebral*. But nothing could make a Scrabble-32-pointer like "incomprehensibilities" more attractive than the thought that no one around me would believe what I was telling them. My focus was thus on matters of "style." But this "style" I was so focused on had no connection with the awareness and emotional honesty I personally loved to find in good writing, and good essays. It had instead everything to do with convincing incredulous people—real, but also *imagined* incredulous people—that they should believe the story of "Perfectly Sane Me."(In this story, before telling an MD how it all began, I'd mention I could go through my "anamnesis" for them, from the "onset" of my symptoms onward, and a few minutes later, Lyme Disease would reveal itself as "neuroborreliosis.")

And last but not least there was, of course, the thorniest, and most synapse-crippling literary problem of all: *How can I convey my symptoms so that they feel as real to them as they feel to me?* To "hinder the description of illness in literature, there is the poverty of the language," Woolf tells us in "On Being Ill."

> The merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare, Donne, Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. There is nothing ready made for him. He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other (as perhaps the inhabitants of Babel did in the beginning) so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out. Probably it will be something laughable.[40]

Decidedly it was something like that. My symptoms, on the page, came out as shady incomprehensibilities. And my story? I think what I envisioned—to put it in a narrative backbone—was an edge-of-your-seat-dramatic recounting of "My Journey through Medical Hell and Back." I sensed and savoured the possibility of

[40] Virginia Woolf, "On Being Ill," *loc. cit.,* p. 44-5.

a heart-skipping story that would highlight, at last, one resoundingly relevant fact: *Max wasn't crazy after all*.

But just as the last few sentences must have sounded, my first few drafts turned out not so much dramatic as *MELO*dramatic. The drama wasn't provided by the facts themselves, but instead by yours truly—and his highbrow friend the thesaurus. In the deepest part of this rabbit hole, I was picking out the prettiest words, but hearing them only as sounds. I was being cajoled by glitzy adverbs and titillating adjectives into typing them… and I was letting them drive my story off a cliff. I wrote a whole lot more melody than meaning this way. And the whole thing ended up a rather wordy bore to read. So wordy, in fact, that when you skimmed it, your face could scrunch up the way it does when you've been semantically satiated. The story, if there was one, was spread thin, free-falling in bits across a linguistic vacuum.

In the end, what I feared most still happened, of course. Doctors—even as I took care to use their lingo—knew I was scared. Readers of my first drafts knew I was scared. Everyone could see through the style, and through what *I* wanted the style to say about *me*.

If I did a few helpless things when I was first confronted with the self-confusions of chronic illness—things like writing preciously insufferable prose—I did them, deep down, for the sake of my story. I did them hoping to find again a place where to live inside of me. But there's this tricky thing about the human mind, whereby a story, and especially a story of *me*, can be known, and truly *felt*, long before it shows itself. And long before it can emerge from the facts of a life, and be fleshed out in writing.

The first dictum young writers are told to follow is usually: *Write what you know*. But for a while, all I knew were facts, situations. *This and that happened. This and*

that was painful and confusing. And although I painstakingly wrote them, these weren't giving me anything true and transformative enough to make a story. The day I figured that out is the day I saw that my hands were covered in bad writing—and most importantly, that no amount of writerly trickstery would change that.

I started to think I'd never really had anything to say. Which, in a way, I was right about: one of the few things I was stone-cold certain of, back then, was that I hated the disease, and I hated the life I was living with the disease… and I knew I didn't have the guts to put any of that in writing. I'd obsess over my sentences, and would try to make them ring just as "perfect" as Didion's, only because hers were among the few things that still made me feel alive, and understood—and, just, wonderful. "*Total control*," some critic said about her style. So did I. But I'd mistaken what that control was all about.

"You can read the life you're living, but you cannot change a word," I once heard Leonard Cohen say, in one of his last interviews. For some reason I'd scribbled this line in a notebook, even without really knowing what he meant. But just now, as I write this, I see the truth in it. What he meant is that you don't get to choose the truth about yourself. You only get to look for it. And, if it so happens that you care to find that truth out and let it be heard, you get, also, to root around for the words to tell it. The gift, if there is one, is in the compulsion to track down the ones that feel like the truth feels.

For a while I thought it was foolish of me to have imagined writing could give me something I didn't already have. Something like a sense of self I could call home. But—thank the magic—it wasn't. It's just that I needed to see myself a little more clearly.

5 | SEEING THROUGH THE MAGIC

Stephen Buhner is a wizardly man with a bushy white beard and a dark droopy beret atop his head. He wears copper-coloured specs around his eyes, and also, at times, a genial smile across his face. Answering a question—a question about plant intelligence, or the human "feeling sense," or bacterial ecology—he'll speak slowly and steadily, often with a quirky pattern of emphasis, lengthening syllables at the end of his sentences to underline important points. And about our day and age's overblown (ir)rationalism, he seems at any moment ready to roll out a lovingly irreverent comment. He's a herbalist, and a superstar at that. "Among the plant geniuses of our time," according to folks who know enough about the anxiolytic virtues of a green thing called *Leonurus cardiaca* to say so.

I've never met him. I've come to know him through his work: he's the human being who spent years scouring through thousands of scientific articles in order to devise and write the first comprehensive herbal therapy protocol for Lyme Disease. This particular part of his life's intellectual labour of love gave my health a new impulse, a few years ago. And it changed the course of my life.

When I read that he'd been given a terminal diagnosis, and that death neared him, I wrote to him to express my gratitude. In an essay published on his website, which is excerpted from his forthcoming book, *Earth Grief: The Journey Into and Through Ecological Loss*, he speaks of the depths of grief, the emotional experience which, as we come to terms with indelible loss, leads us progressively into a new kind of life. Whether this process is brought about by chronic illness, or the death

of a loved one, "grief tears apart the world one has known,"[41] he says, and with it the very fabric of who and what we believe we are.

Reading everything Buhner had to say on the subject of self-loss—while remembering that the lively guy I feel myself to be, now, is rooted in the breadth of knowledge I've received through his books, as well as in the many medicinal plants that *give* me, every day, the strength of body and mind to go on—was as cathartic a reading experience as one gets. But here again, just like it happened with "wisdom," after I dug up the etymology of "catharsis," I came to use the word somewhat more radically than we commonly do.

It's a curious thing in modern literary analysis that one of our most ancient terms is—we think—derived from a word with a medical connotation. Associated with the idea of cleansing, the Greek *katharsis* (which famously appears in Aristotle's *Poetics*), has been widely translated as "purgation," a process by which the body rids itself of the stuff that drags and clogs it. But when "we examine the whole range of use and the development of this word-family," philosopher Martha Nussbaum writes, "it becomes quite evident that the primary, ongoing, central meaning is roughly one of 'clearing up' or 'clarification.'"[42]

Still today, I haven't purged the disease. Yet, while I read the Wizard's words, they made me appreciate all that the experience of chronic illness has made me *see* with more clarity.

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[41] Stephen Harrod Buhner, *The Journey Into and Through Loss*, April 4th 2021, [PDF], <https://www.stephenharrodbuhner.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/covidgrief2.pdf>, p. 20.

[42] Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 389.

Lyme Disease, the way I lived it, forced a kind of thinning on me: I became porous, in at least two ways.

First, since agents that so clearly *weren't* me were now living inside me, I felt invaded. Which is why I began to cultivate a single obsession: *Find a way to get them out*. I hadn't been one to give much thought to the way my food had grown, or to the substances that were fed to it as it grew. But now, as I read about the "optimal healing environment for the human body," I came to deny myself almost every one of the tens of thousands of "food-like products" that fill up the shelves of any old grocery store. Relentlessly anxious in my research, I'd let dangerous-sounding abstractions fill up my mind. Concepts such as "environmental toxicity" or "oxidative stress" or "methylation defects" or "abnormal omega ratios." All of which, by some chaotic chain of cause and effect, I imagined were enabling my symptoms. The food I was eating could be part of the issue. The treated water I was drinking could also be. The urban air. The electromagnetic fields. The people around me. My thoughts. My past. Me.

Ultimately, I came to see most of the world outside my skin as potentially linked to what had gone wrong inside of me. I couldn't draw the line so clearly between *myself* and *all the rest* anymore. How would I live the story of "Healthy Me" in such a sick world as this one? I was adamant that I wasn't "losing it" the way some of my friends and family thought I was. Yet I see now that I *was*, after all, losing something of myself in that craziness. I didn't know *what* was *what* anymore. I was trying to outwit "them," the way a dog dizzies himself with his own tail, but I was getting close to losing touch with the precious little sanity I had left. I felt I was at a loss for my self… but, I'd made it all happen on my own, and out of panic.

This kind of self-loss doesn't semantically satiate us the way a repeated mantra does. It works the opposite way: the world is steadily hollowed, in our minds, of its long-established meaning. We "fall and experience a rent in the fabric of our

reality," as Buhner puts it, and "it takes time for personal identity to change, to alter itself at the deep, nonrational levels in the core of us."[43]

Before I could see my self in a new light, I had to go far enough into the depths to start seeing the world the way it had always inherently been: devoid of any meaning. I saw and heard words, but just as abstract things. Words as units of thought—as "thinks," we might say—the same way "meters" are just abstract units of measurement, determined out of social convention, and for convenience. Words don't exist in the world, *they live in the mind*. And ultimately, the things of the world are "unspeakable," as the semiotician Alfred Korzybski once put it. *The map will never be the territory.*

What does "world" mean?
What does "bacteria" mean?
What does "illness" mean?
What does "self" mean?

For days on end, I could dwell on a thought like "my life has lost its meaning." But to stand by such a thought was like climbing a signpost instead of going in the direction it's pointing: I'd emptied the symbols of their power, and now I conflated these hollow symbols with my actual experience. And for as long as I held on tight to this void, my health was at a standstill. Because I'd forgone my experience of life.

Good, truthful writing only became conceivable when I decided, erratically but surely, to crawl down from that signpost, in my mind. This is the second way in

[43] Stephen Buhner, *The Journey Into and Through Loss*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

which I became porous: I started to do my work in a threshold, in a *thin place*.[44] While writing, I let myself travel outside of my conscious attention, and *lose control* of my story. I didn't fear to glimpse deeper anymore, and discover some long forgotten narrative backbones that live on inside me.

What I do, now, is I root around for such fossils. I think that the truest part of my labour—as a writer—happens as I attempt to excavate these fossils with care, by gently brushing off the wordy dust until I come to see the stories of me more clearly.

I used to fear being judged for wandering outside of a single "good" story of me. But what I came to experience, and even enjoy, in the process of grieving, and of becoming porous, is that I'm so much more than the narrow self, and the narrow story, I'd been clinging to. There's so much more to who I am—and so much more to tell—than I'd imagined.

Another understanding I was given during that time was this: the disease agents, uncomfortable as they can be for my senses and my conscious attention, have become integral to my being: they're constitutive of my life, as I am of theirs. Before I was sick, I might have figured I was alive, but chronic illness pressed on me that I'm alive *among the living*. I started to see the mind that works at large,

[44] In the Celtic imagination, "thin places" are "locales where the distance between heaven and earth collapses and we're able to catch glimpses of the divine, or the transcendent or […] the Infinite Whatever." See Eric Weiner, "Where Heaven and Earth Come Closer," *The New York Times*, Cultured Traveler section, New York, March 9th 2012, online, <nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html>.

through and beyond me, and that manifests and expresses itself in myriad other life forms.

Take bacteria. I learned that they build communities inside me, sharing nutrients and resources with other microorganisms to form a shield of sorts, which humans have named "biofilm," a substance that blankets all of the cooperating bodies (they make themselves invulnerable to my immune system or to the toxicity of antibiotic molecules, in this way). I learned that they communicate through a host of sophisticated means, one of which relies on strands of DNA left behind to be picked up by other individuals, a technique that allows them to share precious knowledge in countering the many threats that loom in their environment. I learned that they can recognize their kin, and that they will, when they sense it necessary, alter their behavior to favor the survival of family members. I learned, in other words, that bacteria, like words, *belong to each other*. And that these beings live, after all, as meaningfully as I do… as we *all* do.

But unlike the cathartic clarity that came from reading the right essay, this kind of understanding grew slowly inside me. Slowly and, well, *chaotically*. As my research progressed, I found myself obsessively revisiting and reframing the past, in my mind. "Everything has to be replayed, over and over again," Buhner says about this, an experience that feels obsessive. But what's brought into play, and what evolves little by little, through this obsessiveness, is in the end "the degree of personal responsibility for what has happened."[45]

In the beginning of this process, I was rewriting every detail, hoping to distance myself from the symptoms, and of course from the infection behind these symptoms. But the more I came to know the microbes in me for *who* and *what* they are, my revisions were asking that I reinterpret my experience of the past, and give

[45] Stephen Buhner, *The Journey Into and Through Loss*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

it a new meaning in the present. I doubted myself endlessly, and often cursed myself for being so uncertain about what was going on with me, but meanwhile something deep-seated—like an affective push inside—was inching closer and closer, in the depths of my mind, towards a truth of my own. A truth I could take responsibility for. A liveable truth…

*Bacteria aren't toying with **my** life.*
***Life** is playing with **life**.*
*The **Self** is playing games with **itself**.*

In this grander view, the living as a whole, the Self—or "the Green," as Buhner dubs her—might have good reason to surprise herself with pain or illness. Through this grieving process, maybe she comes to remember, again and again, that she even exists, that she's *there* (stub your toe, and then blurt out the truest thing you know…), and that being there's a marvellous thing to begin with.

One thing's for sure: through pain or illness, life makes itself known—and I mean vividly known—to our conscious attention. This, in many ways, gives *meaning* to our mind's whole experience of life: illness arrives, and with it must come, down the line, something to "fight" for, which means something to care for. Or better still: something, you know… something to *love*.

Writing about my troubles was thorny, at first, because I was scared. And I see now that what I feared—and in a way *knew*—would happen, if I wrote truthfully, was I'd find out that, in the depths of me… I didn't feel my sick body was loveable.

When I loved *who* or *what* I wanted to write about, naturally, I found it in me to write—and to do the long, compulsive, painstaking work demanded by good writing. This first meant that I'd write about the human beings who'd loved me

through my troubles, and who loved me *unconditionally*. The people around me who'd become, as Buhner says, the *real* physicians in my story: "those who work to alleviate suffering."[46]

And as I watched how they did it, how they loved me, I began to appreciate that this was something I could give myself, as well. And I could give it just as unconditionally. I saw that there are many stories buried, lying dormant inside me. But every one of these stories will ask that I—my symptoms, my emotions, my flesh and bones, my life—be seen, and *heard*. A kind of magic I wasn't capable of weaving, until I started to see the blank page for the one and only thing it could ever be: a void to fill with meaning. And therefore: a mirror to the fears, the limiting beliefs, and the self-judgements of my inner life. Since the only gaze that could ever stare at me, as I faced the page, was of course my own: *No one can rightly judge what you've come to say, when you've given it enough time and care and attention to make sense of it—to do the true hard work of making good writing out of what you've been given.*

"I've gotten convinced that there's something kind of timelessly vital and sacred about good writing," once said David Foster Wallace in conversation, arriving at one of the most perceptive conclusion about the craft I've ever come across. "This thing doesn't have that much to do with talent, even glittering talent," he went on:

> Talent's just an instrument. It's like having a pen that works instead of one that doesn't. I'm not saying I'm able to work consistently out of the premise, but it seems like the big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art's heart's purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text. It's got something to do with love. With having the discipline to talk

[46] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

> out of the part of yourself that can love instead of the part that just wants to be loved.[47]

To love yourself enough to write the stuff you'd never have said but knew you needed to say, letting the truth about you live on, and be felt elsewhere, in others… that was the trick. Love, in other words, is the trick. All at once the thorniest, and most profoundly simple, trick there is in the book.

And writing, from this point of view, revealed itself to me as a kind of illness. An illness asking that we learn to love ourselves enough to understand what it means for us to be ill—and to let ourselves find out about the things we don't want to know. A chronic, obsessive itch inside that asks that we love ourselves, and love ourselves so truthfully, that in the end we don't need anyone else to love us for how "pretty" our illness is.

Life asked me if I was capable of loving my struggling body. Maybe it's time I love my writing hurdles for what they are: *my life*.

I can't say that what I healed from should truly be called Lyme, in the end. But I do know this: I found a way to health, and a way back into a meaning-filled world, by reaching far into the depths of my mind and out.

It wasn't rocketry. Nor was it anything mystical. It was something plain and simple, actually. Plain and simple as wanting to know the truth enough to write it down—and catching a hint of love in the words.

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[47] Stephen Burn (dir.), *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, [ePub], Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, "Literary Conversations Series" coll., 2012, s. p.

Now. Have we lost track of the…? Surely not. but all along, because of our rationalistic background, I feared the MAGIC could be imagined as an invisible sprinkle that touches our souls by tingling our spines. Something we're just "blessed with"—like divine grace, or a mystical experience. Something that *transcends* us.

But from the very beginning, I insisted that the point I was making is the opposite: the magic is happening in our flesh and bones, and throughout our crazy quilt of nerve strings, right this minute of our lives. Right this second of *every* life there is. I was explaining that the magic isn't some transcendent mind at work somewhere in another realm, but instead an *immanent* one, at work somewhere at the core of every one of us. A mind that's alive in anything alive.

So I called our attention to all the magical things we accomplish with little or no *conscious* effort, like: spinning and projecting stories about the world, or understanding each other's words, or falling "madly" (what a curious expression that is) in love—or even, just as beautifully, healing. I wanted to underscore as magic the work Nature does, within and through us, without us needing to verbally command her to do it.

In doing so I went on and on, mostly, about the magic of human language, with a special interest for my favorite of its corollaries: good writing. This special interest proved somewhat fruitful, I think, because it allowed me to show that we, as humans, can sometimes channel the magic, in a very real and immanent way. If the stories are already in us, as the cognitive scientists suggest, who needs transcendence after all?

I tried to clarify how the craft of stories, which is carried out by our capacity to form words and sentences, when done truthfully, seems to happen right at the threshold between Nature's mind in us, on the one hand, and the work of our conscious attention in listening to what she's trying to tell us, on the other. The slow

articulation of good writing seems to happen in such a thin place: a place where we get a feel for the mind at large, and where our fixed knowledge of *who's who* or *what's what* blurs up and blends. A playful place, really, where we lose touch with ourselves. Yet we do *it*, and it does *us*, in the most creative and meaningful way imaginable.

But my focus on our human way with words, which I framed as the crux of our magical prowess, might've been a tad narrow, I see now. And so, to clarify my point somewhat further, I want to end with a story. A story of a human being much like the rest of us. A human being named George Washington Carver…

Born a slave—somewhere in Missouri, sometime during the Civil War—he was kidnapped as a young child, along with his sister and mother. Later located by an agent of the Carver family, he was the only one to be returned to his birthplace. When the war ended, the Carvers decided to raise and educate him as their own. Since no local school would accept a Black student, Mrs. Carver took it upon herself to teach George to read and write. During his early years, because of his poor health, he spent a lot of time wandering around the farm, studying plants and wildlife.

When a young adult, he pursued botanical studies at Iowa State University, becoming the institution's first Black student. After graduating, Booker T. Washington awarded him, right away, a professorship at the famous Tuskegee Institute, in Alabama. Carver then began a brilliant academic career, earnestly teaching and researching plant biology.

He went on to do ground-breaking research, unearthing new uses for crops such as peanuts, sweet potatoes, soybeans and pecans, and achieving such renown that Gandhi sought his advice on matters of agriculture and nutrition. Carver's inventions, numbered in the hundreds, include over 300 from peanuts (milk, plastics, paints, dyes, cosmetics, medicinal oils, soap, ink, wood stains, etc.) as well

as 118 from sweet potatoes (postage stamp glue, flour, vinegar, synthetic rubber, molasses, etc.).

In *The Man Who Talks with the Flowers*, a little book written by a friend of his in remembrance of the man's life and work, the author recounts a conversation between Dr. Carver, then in his sixties, and a white, twenty-something evangelizer named Jim Hardwick, with whom George had fallen madly in love:

> "You have a habit of talking to a little flower or a peanut and making it give up its secrets to you," remarked Jim. "How do you do it?"
>
> "You have to love it enough," said Dr. Carver. "Anything will give up its secrets if you love it enough. Not only have I found that when I talk to the little flower or little peanut, it will give up its secrets," he continued as if talking to himself, "but I have found that when I silently commune with people they give up their secrets also—if you love them enough."[48]

[48] Glenn Clark, *The Man Who Talks with the Flowers: The Intimate Life Story of Dr. George Washington Carver*, Mansfield Centre, CT, Martino Publishing, 2011, p. 20.

Dear Stephen,

I'll never forget (well, "I" will, but the Green won't) the time in my life when the fear of Lyme Disease brought me to your book. As I let your hopeful, kind-hearted words sink in, something happened. I was slowly seeing that what I'd come to reclaim wasn't, as I'd hoped, my health (which was really an obsession with *control*). What I found, during that time, wasn't even a cure. But instead a precious kind of caring. One I hadn't been aware was lost on me. I saw that my struggling body was something I could love. Same with the microorganisms that lived, and still live, inside of it. And I could even extend this love to the whole kaleidoscope of life forms which Earth expresses and embraces. Because of your work, some of these life forms are now caring for me, and I'm gently recovering.

It is understandable that, in a civilization which separates mind from body, we should either try to forget death or to make mythologies about the survival of transcendent mind. But if mind is immanent not only in those pathways of information which are located inside the body but also in external pathways, then death takes on a different aspect. The individual nexus of pathways which I call "me" is no longer so precious because that nexus is only part of a larger mind. The ideas which seemed to be me can also become immanent in you. May they survive—if true.

Gregory Bateson

You have been, for me as for so many, a true teacher, in ever so subtle and profound ways. Just again last night, when I read your piece about the approach of death, and grief, I saw some of myself through the clarity of your mind. And this morning, while out on a walk along the St. Lawrence River, this little note came to me. I think it's meant to tell you that your ideas are well alive, and that they'll keep on living, in the larger mind of the Green. And so, in its spirit, the words are—

Thank you.

Thank you for the truth. For living it. And of course for telling it and passing it along.

MAX

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