



A STATIC ATLAS

THE DIARY OF A DISCONTINUOUS MAN

Joshua Rothes

v. 145.0

*“There can be this point, at least, to
writing: to wear out errors.”*

—Maurice Blanchot

NOTE ON THE TEXT

This collection of studies, anathema, errata & apologia represents a diaristic approach to the unmaking of a book—perhaps more than one, perhaps all books. I ask the living to be welcoming to my ephemera, as though it came from the archive of the dead.

A Static Atlas

[1]

Meanwhile old aches signal the end of the night, a gully too wide for a lithe word to cross unmutilated. Poets slink home, the older, the slinkier, to do unconscionable violence to the couch cushions, repeating end over end, When you get back, If you get back, tearing at the fabric in liturgical cadence, minding the consequences of our frail human books. When you get back, if you get back. A mud day tomorrow, perhaps, a facial, put on a good show for a few days, get invited back, all the while knowing they are, ultimately, too contemporary for these starving parties.

[2]

Lately an inscription has formed on the ceiling. My eyesight is bad, but I can tell this much. I don't dare stand on a chair to read it. Not in this house, alone. But it seems to be getting bigger, maybe big enough to read in a few more days, so I will be patient and go about my business till then. I don't want to call anyone over in case the message is private, or just in case I need time to process whatever it says, for good or bad. I could see two or three days tops until the blurry pool which has nevertheless the distinctive contours of the written world resolves in a hand (how gruesome) big enough to read with the naked eye. Unless, of course, it is just getting longer.

[3]

Calm beguiles me. Of calm, I am distrustful. The pitch rings hollow. I want everything at a simmer at all times, because I feel like I am at a simmer at all times. Vigilant, I've heard it called. Until no one is calm, no one can be at ease, because through calm slips all of our worst impulses. Maybe I'm naming it wrong, but it'll do.

[4]

Happiness is catching honey in a colander, someone once told me. It was in a hotel, as I remember it, barely audible over the small orchestra employed to breathe extra life into the dingy lobby. Oh, yes, a quartet, but then I, too, am right. I stood and watched a bit. I filled out their music with percussion, in my mind, and they eyed me like they knew I put my greasy hands all over their concerto. I started conducting, first with only my mind, then with the tip of my index finger, carefully concealed under the jacket I held at my waist. They grew increasingly agitated, and it came through in the music, and because it was I that commanded them, my index finger was always on cue, and my face beamed wider and wider, until finally I laughed as my toe tapped out the tempo change which they immediately responded to. *B minor!* I cried out, and the tune became somber, if resilient. And then I stopped, all at once I stopped, content that I had set them on the proper course, that they could carry on my muster as long as their fingers

would allow them. But they kept growing more and more agitated, erupting in free-jazz flourishes now and then, more discordant with every variation. I stood aghast, until finally I saw that the one who had spoken those words about happiness only minutes before also had his coat held across his waist, but had been looking at me.

[5]

It takes courage to travel continuously, as I do. You cannot break travel into two categories, try as you might; the real and the imagined are one and the same. Nothing is experienced directly save for the mental. Are we clear? Once you've unburdened yourself of your high-handedness, perhaps we can then speak only of lived experience and begin to unpack why you mistake intervention in the world with being in the world. I can pass my hand through the hairs on my head, but I have not set foot in the forest of their stalks. Ask yourself, when you enter a village, what draws the people out of their homes? The passage of years is not enough, nor is your charity. I would have preferred never to have broached the subject at all, of course, but you insisted on it, thinking you could determine whether we had stared at the same Adriatic by having me name the shade of teal, as if it was not always the same blue hour for me.

[6]

I spend every day sorting myself into mortal and immortal parts. I have to start it again each morning, over quiet hospital synthesizers, birds pecking through the ash outside the window, I blame ever learning that the number of bones in the human body is uncertain, unknowable, not to mention the facets that are unanatomical, and which take up the bulk of my sorting. My sense of humor, for instance, will not survive the test of time, because it is too dry, too dependent on the fixedness of vocabulary; my cynicism, however, is eternal.

[7]

Laughing heads are resurrected more easily. Some would tell you it's because, like a sneeze, laughter is a moment of suspension; the body can neither defend itself nor seek out nourishment, so biological functions, even the slow-to-react ones, are temporarily relaxed. The answer, though, is a technical one. Something to do with the tightness in the cheeks.

[8]

A tree. Good, we start with a concrete object for once. A tree that is not quite two of me tall. A tree that, in the grips of summer, already has orange leaves in places, an untimely autumn brought on by a never-ending stream of dog urine. It is our desire that everything remain the same that brings on the fall.

[9]

A counterfactual: details deaden a text. To describe any one particular detail is to misdescribe another; or to describe any two facets of a scene or body to any depth is to admit defeat in representing the simultaneity of these features. If one mapped any one plot of land, even a square yard, in great detail, they would have to begin again almost as soon as they finished, a problem that scales down as well as up. The text must vivisect, not vivify.

[10]

I climbed steps in threes as soon as my legs were long enough, and picked out the last of my tiny teeth. I took every staircase I could find, and people would gather to watch as I made like, over and over, I had forgotten something, sprinting down (one at a time, but quickly) and then climbing back up, three at a time in a ridiculous, mantis-like lunge. It was a profound day when I learned that, at my still tender age, I was not yet too late—I had, after all, only sought to accelerate my growth into adulthood because I did not see how I would have enough time left for one last youthful escapade, and did not care to idle away precious months opening books and filing away my tongueless shoes. Childhood is, I realized, a shared illusion, and you shouldn't pass up easy marks.

[11]

As soon as I stand up, the resignation starts to build up like acid in my muscles. I sit back down. It doesn't abate, it just wallows in my feet. I stand up again and the waves crest my kneecaps. You should cover your eyes and lie down, my physician said over the phone; don't be tempted to get the mail, it's just catalogs anyway. I'm loathe to blame modernity for any ailment—I've never been fashionable—but, well, let's call this an *advanced* illness, one in which the milieu is a given precondition. I need only the slightest impetus to enter the deepest sleep, but I need reasons to stay upright. The way men used to sleep on trains (I assume some still do, but not in the same way), with that speculative look upon their faces, I sleep now, but face down, bad for reflux but good for digestion, or so I'm told. If my arm falls off the sofa, which is as far as I've made it, the resignation will cause the tips of my fingers to burn as if to warn me that boredom is the devil of all would-be masters.

[12]

Every day a fever, every day crushing moths against my scalding forehead.

[13]

I've been told that I cut an indistinct silhouette, that I could be anyone, and that if I could commit crimes by shadow only, they would be near unsolvable. I couldn't help but pay careful attention to my position

relative to light sources. Compliments, more than criticisms, tend to lodge in the psyche—they might be said to be a compassionate sort of parasite—but ambiguous remarks are the worst of all, compounding into a negative ideology, in this case, that my silhouette provides a kind of concave lens through which the I of the flesh appears. But I cannot learn the choreography of the cave backwards for the sake of one small remark; I must learn, I understand, to take these things at face value.

[14]

A silence should always follow speculation. It is unfair to pose an unknown hypothesis and then blather on with a mix of facts and misleading anecdotes (as if an anecdote ever led anywhere but back to itself). They must have space to explode in the way that a fragment becomes a novel, by realizing all possible avenues of cause and effect and then whittling them down to a manageable subset with a certain flow. Even the most purblind poet must realize the essential qualities of the pause, which needn't be long, a few seconds, hardly compulsory military service or the long overdue trip home. Of course I've assumed only benign motivations; only apologists seek to incorporate evil into the trivial [, the way black cats never pass up an open door].

[15]

In only the most general terms had an act been committed. How do we define that? That air had been moved. Well, alright. But again, only in the most general sense, that air had been moved, that not everything was in its starting place, relative to the *frame of events*. Action, like memory, is episodic. Movements chain together. Starting from first principles. . . we'll be here all day. An example, instead. Say it is a foggy morning, and you are a fox in pursuit of a vole. The dew on the ground softens your steps, but also leaves more of your scent behind. Do you approach downwind? What pattern do you draw across the steaming moor? A crosshatch leaves the fewest stones unturned, but is predictable; remember that the vole sat behind you in art class, and knows the same tricks to create relief and contour. You, the fox, must then undertake an existential act, you must performatively undermine yourself to lure the vole out of his earthen hovel. You might pause here to lament society's fixation on prodigiousness, that it expects so much of us at a young age. The course of action is clear. You retire, a dog.

[16]

In spite of an aversion to the exact, the physical, the matter-of-fact, I am quite literal-minded. For example, my mantra is *disregard*. With this I ward away all earthly intrusions.

The program proceeded without the passion of the first performance. We took our paths, took every critical jibe square on the chin, five too many of this, a lamentable dearth of the other, convinced that, eventually, the repetition would beget the sort of familiarity that could be mistaken for greatness. And so on it went, our author continued to siphon funds from every imaginable foundation; the paychecks appeared, and so then did we. We took on the tones of the season, and the yellowed timbre of autumn became our calling card, though when every fall performance sold out, the other seasons soon became critical darlings in their own right. A few of us were stolen for a while for the film adaptation, but we got along just fine with the understudies, who now had children of their own. The author, we understood, had long since retired to a coastal villa, one with a staircase to the water. With this abandonment we began to improvise more, the piece taking cues from the off-stage dynamics between the actors. Roles shifted. The author had sworn the play would never have a female lead, but the press box was full when they learned we had off-handedly rewritten the bawdier bits. When the author came to investigate why his royalties had dwindled in spite of the attendance figures he saw reported in the papers, he found us performing an entirely different play of which we the actors were the collective author, and when he accused us of cheap parody, we laughed; he had gotten essentialism backwards!

[18]

She seems to have understood infancy after her fashion. Two years is simply enough to grow bored of anything.

[19]

It was only recently that the capture of a stomach— or rather a gastromorphic creature that shares a common ancestor with our stomach— was confirmed by tests of the matrilineal germ line. It was given a habitat, moist and lush, full of places to hide. Still, no one believed it. I mean the general public. Specialists had suspected for years. That the stomach was once its own separate organism, and through an accident of ingestion or invasion came to remain pat, grow a neuronal connection to the brain, regulate its own serotonin. It happened only once, like the mitochondria, but probably unlike life itself. The brain is tacitly aware of this, and the riddle of our collective anxiety can be explained by those long latent, even primitive areas of the brain which insist, to the detriment of its host, on calculating the long odds of itself.

[20]

Imagine, as I say the following, he said, my hands clasped, as one might if one were attempting to conceal countless miniature bats:

[21]

Guilt is the accrual of mass. It is a physical field which slows the particles entangled within it, like the

psychiatrist on his rounds, growing an increasingly tumescent retinue of questioners and complainers, of patients who seek solely to conspire with the doctor because only he, like they, are sane in this place of wicked malady. It grows like this until the “sane” outnumber the “insane”, and it is even guessed by many of them that the labels must switch, but no one will make the move and leave the group, a phenomenon known as a *sub-optimal loop*.

[22]

The apartment was not very big, the oven directly abutted the refrigerator, the prefab shelving units were needlessly abstract. I wandered from the end of the room to the other, tapping on the walls. The landlord and I had exchanged long letters (well, long on my part; brief and cloying on hers), developed, in fact, a semi-conspiratorial tone, and so when we met, at last, I expected the rapport would carry over, bolstered by prosody and shining eyes. I've never gone about relationships in a straightforward way; I am used to the jagged edges of unmatched expectations resulting in scrapes and the odd laceration. But the coolness with which I was received was startling even to me, no mention of my mother's health or the incessant, snarling doubts about my all-encompassing project. *Just sign the papers.* I continued to traipse the length of the room, noting every fickle scar that I would like to document for the sake of my deposit. The tapping tested for studs and for hollows, but to do it

systematically would be to risk a counting error, so I continued on in haphazard fashion. (If I was going to duplicate my efforts, I'd simply rather not have known about it.) She had to be present for all of this, but didn't soften at all. I grew afraid to tell her that I was in no position to take the apartment, that I had only agreed to see the unit in order to cement our friendship in the only way I knew how, through shared trial and lingering restraint. I can only hope that as she reads these words on the rental application that she understands, and forgives me for the sudden exit.

[23]

I wouldn't know how to start some stories if I could not use the device, "When I awoke. . .". It eases the pressures of exposition. So many of my stories begin with a character waking up, in a hypnopompic fog, and so few with a character pulling a cord hanging from the ceiling. I don't think this can be entirely chalked up to the expected frequency of aforementioned events in so-called real life. There must be an ideology at play. But which?

[24]

Hello, Lissitzky. Just a note that the trial was unfair, a—and I know you know this already, but to hear it from a stranger must still be a great relief—last gasp of a tired old man hiding behind his intellectual property. Euclid still hadn't forgiven Newton, and you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

[25]

There's a story about a Zen master who gives a young monk in his charge the task of editing every superfluous word from. . . well, it doesn't matter what. There's a danger in reading into anything too deeply. The result is of course going to be that the young monk rushes back in with a blank piece of paper, believing he had solved the riddle of his master's intentions. The real answer is a number. Your attitude toward religion notwithstanding, you are supposed to feel like the young monk was somehow misled, though you do not feel solidarity with him, and this, you realize, is the point of the story: the lack of attachment to the outcome.

[26]

Formalities aside, I am catching up on the arguments for and against the abandonment of realism in literature. Fernández Mallo says there are only two classes of literature, realist and antiquated, that experimental works must either be experimental because they approach one of the many complex systems underpinning reality in a novel-but-still-faithful way, or because the language used is totally unrealistic, that is, antiquated. Since I am only now catching up, I fear this puts me in the latter category, a party something like the beach house scene at the end of *La Dolce Vita*. Fellini, I've learned, is also out of fashion. Mallo's point isn't about fashion, though, so much as the hard-won picture of the world we've achieved through

science. Science cannot dictate how we are to feel about Fellini, try as they might. They can't make us read his biography or even watch his later films, like *And the Ship Sails On*, with its obviously fake rhinoceros. There is not even a they anymore, as consilience has shattered into a thousand niches. After Kuhn, I might suggest a different dichotomy, then: literature that is highly specific and so nonsensical to most, and one that sacrifices some detail for the promise of universality. Having already cited the rhinoceros in the Fellini film, I am thus resigned to the former.

[27]

I insist on asking questions that, though the answers are unknown to me beforehand, are certain to end in disappointment. To this end, I must be prepared to find any answer unsatisfactory, which is where the real craft comes in, the managing of expectations. This is a kind of stoicism, one that takes guile and a lofty-yet-calculated cynicism. The mind should, after all, be a well run homeland, where all dogged pursuits are harmoniously bound to a single goal, where rows of multicolored houses nevertheless possess an aesthetically strict *jouissance*, where predictability—and here we are back to the original point—applies only to that which may harm us, all of which, taken as *loci*, are part of the set that includes the answers to all questions. If I say of someone else, then, that I have read their mind, I mean no harm or insult—nor am I defending folk psychology—just that I am bored

with disappointment and long for fleeting things that exist only once.

[28]

Any utterance introduces into the world its opposite, not an antinomous couplet, but its logical inverse, which inevitably proves better suited for the environment—I mean here to treat the absurdism as a rational agent—because of its ability to hold clarity for ransom. So the truth is only ever manifested in these mad riddles, and we can be forgiven for seldom looking up from the extravagantly littered sidewalks.

[29]

In a sense, our walks together have the feel of poetry, of a despotic rhythm within which anything can be said but the obvious.

[30]

I have learned very little from examining the terms of contracts. I have signed them all, all that were proffered anyway, and ignored most of them to no real consequence. Keep the stakes low, my father told me, and don't buy anything on credit but a house or a car. There are ways, he continued, to be simultaneously rich and *not worth their time*. He died before his time, no poorer for it.

[31]

The possibility that, when flipping through a nearby book, we alight on a passage that speaks to us in our present circumstances, is enough to keep spiritualism alive in some sectors. This form of bibliomancy is especially suited to scripture, not because of the content or the purported divine inspiration, but because of the book/chapter/verse format, ensuring that no line is ever seen as trivial or excisable. Take for example the case of a Benedictine monk of the ninth century who went mad after realizing he had made a numbering error in copying out the Psalms, believing this to be punishment from the almighty for having his mind elsewhere, allowing his task to become rote and perfunctory. The story itself is almost certain to be a fabrication, most likely post-dating Walter Benjamin and his consideration of “art in the age of mechanical reproduction”, though it is impossible to say whether it supports his argument or not.

[32]

When a child is born, she is simultaneously perplexed and full of hope. There’s no equation to measure how the two relate, how they change over time, just folk wisdom about attitudes and outlooks, and the gradual acceptance of the shoulders as barriers to other interiors.

[33]

When I hear the word *significant*, I can't think of anything worthy of the description.

[34]

When the word *love* is most frequently misused, it is in the place of the word *prototype*.

[35]

A metaphor for a straight line can only be another straight line. To put it another way, there is nothing more that can be said of perfection. To put it another, why speak of it at all? As the Greeks had it, imagining the sphere around the earth as unique in the cosmos for the tendency of things within it to change and decay, perfect things are of another realm entirely; they share neither our air nor our concerns. Why even bring it up?

[36]

I repeat myself often enough to know how numb I must make others. I am well rehearsed and comfortable in my role, and would go on playing myself regardless of the size of the audience. I read once about a Spanish actor who played the part of Don Gonzalo in an early cinematic adaptation of Jose Zorrilla's *Don Juan Tenorio*. Don Gonzalo is the father of Doña Inés, the fiancée of Don Juan. He is shot by Don Juan in the first act for attempting to have

his would-be son-in-law arrested for kidnapping his daughter, who had broken the spell of Don Juan's lust and filled him with a more pious kind of love. In the second act, Don Gonzalo serves as the harbinger of Don Juan's imminent condemnation—first as an idolatrous statue in the pantheon that has been erected over Don Juan's family home in Seville, then as a wraith beckoning Don Juan to hell—from which the titular hero is saved by the grace of his beloved Doña Inés. The actor became so enamored with the part over the course of filming that he immediately flew to Mexico to act in a stage version, payed handsomely so that marquee could boast of his connection to the film. He continued traveling around, seeking out the role of Don Gonzalo. He would take no other parts, not even a charitable offer to play Hamlet proffered by a theater manager in Montevideo who had come to suspect some kind of mania at play. He would eventually settle in Encinasola, a small Andalusian town, where he would perform the role of Don Gonzalo in the Easter pageant until his death.

[37]

Put me in any room and I will bump into the walls. I am a passive figure in the landscape, in spite of what I just said. Today I awake on an island dappled with low junipers amid the torn rocks.

[38]

To be in the best possible position is to be in any one

position for an unimaginably long time. The richness of longing is all we can tolerate. On the other hand, what is more elegant than contempt?

[39]

I can design a series of rooms for you, or we can talk, but we cannot do both. Every room would have something in it that would prompt a serious discussion, and every room would have something in it that would cause us to burst into laughter, but it cannot be both; every room is, in any case, an elaborate pustule. Two people; that's a contraption. Contraptions can take on almost any form, but their parts are unified by a common goal, and it can't be for one to follow the other—a contraption can have more than two parts, but must have at minimum two. Less is a tool, which can have many uses. This isn't a thought experiment, by the way, and it isn't an exercise in lateral thinking. It's life. If we do not exercise we die, if we do not do our exercises, we will repeat them until we do, or else, we die. How many times have I said that clothes make the posture of the wearer? Always. How many times have you said that the cut of a jawline can predict murder? Twice, but you were looking at the same person. And you tell me I waste time on diagrams, diaries, placing numbers next to every footstep like plotting a waltz (and isn't that what I'm doing?), when all you need is orientation, and tell me, what kind of orientation is possible without all of those notebooks I keep, without even

a compass? You're asking me to sketch you instead, to throw away the graph paper, but you would never tell me outright that that is what you're asking me to do, you think I have to come to it by my own logic, and that my logic will eventually sidle up to your whims because it has before, so you think, that reason is a trough, a basin, that I've been there before, that my only sin, that the *only* sin, is the sin of obliviousness.

[40]

It takes so much effort to maintain a sense of continuity. Persuade me, then, that names have literal meanings.

[41]

I want to relate to another as I relate to music. (It is idiotic to speak of harmony between individuals, but that is neither here nor there.) I like to listen to music so quietly that I do not notice when it ends, because the music has become indistinguishable from the noise from the street; what greater intimacy is there than the certainty of a presence where there is none?

[42]

I have a sense of tragedy as being a sensation resistant to mystification. That is, it is not an outward feeling. The self can confuse, seduce, infuriate the self, but it cannot mystify the self. And while tragedy is always the result of circumstances (*vide supra*), by their etymology external, the why of tragedy, here separated

from the how (invert, if you like), is internal, more specifically, is an internal category that manages to contain the external circumstances. Tragedy survives in us as a series of fractal archetypes, like those diagrams of the eight or ten or two kinds of stories in which, when examined closely, it becomes obvious that the subsequent diagram always contains the former, and vice versa; the shapes of stories are insets of coastlines.

[43]

I take special care to imitate the dead whose recourses are few. The living are still shedding selves like spiders molting, leaving clouded husks to crisp in the creases of doorways. The dead have burst open, immediately, upon decay setting in, spilling their innards out as gardens as rich as their influence. Eight legs, as in the spider or the octopus, seem to be enough to mimic most other living creatures—the wasp always gives itself away as a wasp, sooner or later—to be heroic or delicate as the situation calls for, the transformation itself always well conducted and orderly.

[44]

Tell them, if they haven't heard, to expect order, to expect a chalice of legs marching in unison, which is to say, all order and no room for the lips, a palpable nothingness; tell them, if they haven't already heard, that if you go to bite down and hear a crunch, just move on to the next one, that they like to play games

like this so no one can steal from them, leftover children included, but we haven't gotten that far, because we have, what, discretion? discretion is how rumors start, rumors no better or worse than the truth, but uninhibited, what was it that someone said, that rumors are facts made purely of style, and what then, is an action that is made purely of style, I wonder, a crossing of the ankles or a tic like sibilating in bed. So what do you want the rumors to say? From there we can draw back and reconstruct you, not from a dusky likeness, but from crusty residue hiding under a rock to avoid the sun, lest it evaporate completely, get called back to god who keeps every bit in a beaker until you're back with the almighty for good, piecemeal, like transparencies in a textbook.

[45]

You're sick, isn't that enough? No one expects anything political of you, no one would guess that shedding selves is, in reality, an extracorporeal sepsis, but then the world has been septic almost since the beginning, certainly since you were born—I know you don't like to go back any further, so I won't; we've spent a long time getting here without any numbered steps, with one or another of us—pausing to wash my hands—more prominent than the other at any given moment, which helped us not be photographed together, not yet anyway, and so we could compose ourselves, or we are continually composing ourselves, for that eventual snapshot, and whether it's a souvenir

or blackmail remains to be seen.

[46]

What project did I imagine for myself when, as a child, I crumbled dead leaves into a coarse powder? Was there a goal, or just the pleasure of the sensation? I've always had a need to pick at things, at packaging stickers, at scabs, at seams. It feels somehow related, a kind of betrayal of the natural order of decay. Impatience, then. To no one's surprise.

[47]

Just imagine that there is something more to the brief intervals in which we allow ourselves the freedom of perfect expression, except. . . even perfect expression is thin and ambiguous, on the best of days. But we'll go on hiding in corners, occasionally improvising passion from whatever passing syllables we can pull into the shadows, hands twisting them into form, and a blissful confusion might for a moment pass as contentment.

[48]

No, really, I am being serious: Filth and prosperity. Everything is a function of square footage.

[49]

The futilist refuses breakfast on the relevant grounds, and thus is forced to eat lunch at an ungodly hour.

[50]

And just what do we forfeit when we allow sleep to be invaded by daytime occupations, specifically, when we dream the rote repetition of a mechanical task? It tenses our muscles, preventing the unconscious mind from feeling at ease sorting its inventory, robbing us of new memories, of new nodules from which we might hang our tired obsessions. Given that, let us only think of a wet cough when we use the word *productive*.

[51]

Every evening a different color and the several spaces that face the windows take on the hue for a long time afterward, at least through noon the following day. Fog, dust, pollutants. Even the sulfurous clouds of Venus must produce a dazzling sunset.

[52]

A new leaf. A decision. To be a poet? To act as one. To accept that a text is the inverse of a living system, in that the smaller, the more simple it is, the more unique it is, because once emergent shapes form, once they lumber among us, we're bound to throw categories at them, and they are bound to stick, whereas with the infinitesimal, we are able to forget them for a while, crush them with careless movements, especially the solitary ones, and, yet, when we are reminded of their presence, we cannot help but feel awe that they have stayed together, sharply featured, that they have stayed alive at all.

Our bodies are frayed, riven, worn, covered in hooks, pits, and burrs, each in mine a handhold for you. I'll start crying if you tell me about a place where they eat the kind of animals I kept as pets as a child, even if the people there are now exploited, hardly eat them at all because so much has to be exported that the locals can't afford it, I'll still think it's an abomination, and I won't pity anyone, but I'll cry, and I won't scorn anyone, but I'll cry, just like I do when I think of tumors that can't be irradiated, that people are forced to live with, even benign ones, but that can't be removed because they're enmeshed in nerves or arteries, and I think about the shape their skulls must take, knowing it to be nonsense, the first to degrade, even, but imagining the shapes of their skulls with cavities dotting here and there, not ones that have been eaten away, but more like popped blisters, veins clinging to the outside of these malformations; when I hear you tell stories about machines I shudder, because the way you tell it, machines have to learn how to walk like anything else, like the very first trains would often leave their passenger cars behind, how teams of oxen had to pull them back down the track so they could try again on tottering wheels, how the first printing presses translated everything into the form of an instructional manual; it's not fair to make me think everything works like this, but I'm so gullible that I believe all of the books are already written, the summery account of every earthquake, every lost

innocence, every mutilation, because you think that way, that stories have these shapes, and it only takes minimum, what, a thousand books to capture every scenario, or given enough blanks, a hundred and forty. Not everyone can live that way.

[54]

Absurdity lay in a heap of rubble, done dirty by a world that learned its secrets on contract and then stole them, making itself into an inane facsimile.

[55]

One can either be dragged, carried, or pushed through life. There are no static dramas. I get a kind of seasickness from standing still for too long, or not seasickness, but that special kind of nausea that results from the disorientation of parallax, when the slight sway that invades my legs creates the sensation of the earth moving underneath me. (The same effect when a car moves next to your bus or train, or as in an underground aquarium chamber watching kelp sway in an artificial tide.) As light worsens the effects become less pronounced, but then, even Prometheus's buzzard slept.

[56]

Benjamin wrote that the major city, through the naming of streets, has turned the labyrinth of the ancient Greeks into one of language, befitting, an ultimately bureaucratic endeavor, however romantically painted.

[57]

Ever fertile: I might invent a creature, and give it qualities!

[58]

It is too bad that we hide ourselves away complaining, hearing only the muffled complaints of others from behind their respective bushes. A thicket can hold as many complainants as nesting fowl—a romantic image if ever there was one, the bushes thrashing about once two compatible complaints have found harmony with one another. But modernity forbids such experimental relationships (modernity, the result of interbreeding among genetically distinct groups of hominids), though you hear coos mixed with the most middling of gripes on moonless nights, and perhaps, to clarify a point, someone speaks at length about a child with some fondness, a daughter in the city who cannot even see the stars at night for her troubles.

[59]

Can we salvage the abstract?

[60]

We do not have to go far to find waiting for us the experience of bottomlessness, that wave after wave of abyssal fear that comes from encountering a world that feels sullen and finished. But Blanchot said, reportedly, that “fear is not philosophy”, and I am prone to believe his translators.

[61]

There are times we step on passion as on a snake.

[62]

It doesn't matter what's gotten under his collar, the prickle of a sudden woodwind among the brass, like the kindergarten classmate who still scrunched their Rs, or else the brush of an incompatibly cool June breeze, to raise all the way from the ankles the kind of bile that could aspirate anyone else—no, it was we who were sunk in his marsh.

[63]

There ought to be a car on every train, a section on every bus, for those who have gotten on by mistake. Others may gawk, play pick-out-the-drunks by their posture, but also listen to their stories, perhaps offer help or a kind word. If intermingled, they might well feel more embarrassed, fight the urge to apologize at every incidental contact with a shoulder or thigh, or else feel as assassins among the throngs, powerful for possessing a different aim, but bearing the guilty burden of their *métier*.

[64]

I can't stand to recount the torpid details of a conversation in the frenzied, unbroken rhythm most people seem to expect, as if most conversations weren't just low, muddled voices tying one another in knots, syllables fighting to get past one another like two

detectives solving different crimes based on identical clues.

[65]

I decided to keep vigil one night for parties unknown, not only because I had frightened myself with the sound of my own footsteps, but also because it is a much smaller world than we believe it to be. Whoever, then, might take comfort from the lamplight, or the irregular, pulsing flicker of a film on TV, I keep in prayers that fall limply to the floor, because I believe in nothing except for other lamps and the ersatz heavens they embody.

[66]

And why should I tear myself away from ongoing projects just in order to explain myself? Situations are flitting, the self fungible, so take a photo on the day that I die, and that will be my biography. I can't be described in terms of my relationship to other things, because there is no one shape that fits a given vacuum; by definition a vacuum could be filled by any number of things, otherwise it is not a vacuum but an impression, a fossilized dinosaur track. I'm being difficult, but I do need to hear a reason for your curiosity, or am I to believe you go door-to-door asking everyone about their place in the kingdom of heaven?

[67]

I decided, one day, that fascination had become a crutch, and so I discarded it, piling enthusiasm on top of it, promising my whims the same if they turned their gazes too high. I was left with the more sensible faculties, and so set to work crafting sensible stories, stories that took their bib overalls off at the end of each day and washed them in warm water so they would be spotless for the following day, stories that got a good night's sleep, that limited drinks to one at dinner, that stayed within their narrow range without catching their imperfections on door jambs, that did not waste time laying in the grass counting stars or complaining while staring at the sun, stories that did not beach themselves on sandy shores. Resignation became the author of my stories, and, after a time, it didn't need me to carry on.

[68]

In the morning, as I uncurled from sleep, I found atop me a small animal. If I were a fabulist, I would give it many contradictory features—a bucktoothed tail, or something along those lines—describing its tendencies in misguidedly human terms—oh, it meanders about like an academic at a conference mulling whether to attend a seminar or beat the lunch rush—but I am, as best I can tell, something less than a fabulist. I tried to flick it off me, but it did not budge, and so it was not an insect. I tried to warm it with my hands, so that it might have the energy to

leave on its own, but it turned sideways and showed me its belly, crisscrossed with lines, so it was not a reptile. Why am I so selfish, I wondered, why is every move I make a thrashing kick against the world? So I waited while it kneaded and turned. If it wished to be domesticated, I would do my best to accommodate it. If it needed privacy, I would turn my head and watch it sidelong through the mirror. The mental maps we have of our bodies can be expanded, infinitely so, to account for tools, pets, and phantom limbs. And, in fact, as long as I've been here, supine and near motionless except for my writing hand, it is indistinguishable already from my own numbness.

[67]

If you pause to watch long enough, it ceases to be an intersection.

[68]

I jump through lapses in judgment like a show-dog.

[69]

Anxiety is not like the Hydra, no matter what anyone says. The growth of new anxieties is in no way tied to the cutting of old ones. Less like heads, more like hair; the persistent pubescence of anxiety.

[70]

A peculiar area of study: The dreams we have some two to three hours into a full night's rest. Studies

of lucid dreamers have reported mainly images of wilderness, but wilderness askew, for instance grapes growing on trees or desert mosses that flower year-round. There seems to be some theme around burrowing; frequently there are brochures for partially underground houses left on a table nearby, mold disclosure forms tucked neatly inside. A string often leads somewhere important from childhood. No one follows the string. The knowledge is tacit. Even when the researchers instruct the lucid dreamers to follow the string, they seem to be unable, or irremediably disinterested. Suggestibility, in fact, tends to suffer during this stretch of roughly an hour, during which the researchers themselves are also most tempted by sleep, even though they should be used to the schedule. Sleep, and in particular this period between two and three hours into a prolonged slumber, may therefore produce a kind of weak magnetism. In any case, the dreams that follow these often mimic our waking behavior so closely as to jar us quickly into more restless sleep. They are thought to be among our least enduring dreams.

[71]

With stilted and uneven strokes I attempted to paint the living room walls (ten horses for a mule) the color of complexity, of unapologetic nuance. I began beautifully, then raised two daughters to follow my path along the hallway, to the den, never to know the dirty sidewalks and rotting rosebushes of which the

world as such is composed. I can't keep them from that meeting, I wouldn't fail so miserably as a father, but I could prolong everything in between, imbue with shame their guilty dreams, bed-rid myself and sabotage my faculties one by one until they were both comfortably seated, ready to sell me short, but upholding to the end the values that I taught them.

[72]

I must pace when I cannot sleep. I imagine losing consciousness as I tread on rough terrain, walking it into the carpet, which I will vacuum out of habit the next day. I grind it in, imagining a sooty stain forming at my feet, but I won't turn on a light, the same way I won't read a book once I have a preconceived idea of its contents, especially if I like it.

[73]

Nature fools us into thinking that it cannot be ridiculous, because ridicule needs an object. Certainly its creatures can be ridiculous—just wait for any of them to scratch. But it wants us to believe, for instance, that it cannot rain ridiculously, that the wind only blows with a straight face, that water strictly eats at the earth with a grim chisel. Nature would have no cause for semantic games before humans, so I can only assume we are the reason for the ruse, as we've never been particularly kind to those who can laugh at themselves.

[74]

My finger scratched absentmindedly—literally, absent my mind—at the arm of the sofa. This must have been an unconscious habit that had been going on for some time, because before I knew it, I had scratched clean through the upholstery. The couch, at least the arm, had been stuffed with newspaper, a curious find. Sure enough my curiosity got the better of me, and I soon discovered that the entire structure of the sofa was not wood and metal, as I had assumed, but yellowed newspapers in various stages of decay. A quick glance at no more than five pages led me to my next discovery, which is that none of the newspapers were real, that is, they were all what we might call stock, or props. They did not belong to any particular town. The headlines were generic, lacking geographic specificity and with no mention of the wars and famines which, given the dates, should have been front-page news. They were a kind of alternative history, I realized, valid inasmuch as they portrayed the world through the contours of absence, the kind which, given the right social conditions, might be called upon to stand in as the truth. And so I transformed, in a matter of hours, from loafer to archivist.

[75]

I do not want to offend anyone, but neither do I gain any pleasure from the obtusely figural. I cannot name this or that, and often the work of implication is more than I want to take on. I have the same attitude

towards cleaning the tub. Oh, it gets done, eventually, but only after much hand-wringing and a nap or two. Into a blank file goes the sooty, alarmist prose, out comes eggshells, brittle in situ, but eminently quotable.

[76]

In the last week I have suffered setbacks. In a sense, my pupils haven't widened, and as light streams in through the pupil, I imagine a much greater quantity of darkness entering through the porous ring of the iris, which feels cool on the retina, like night air, but which also pools and distorts whatever weak light reaches in.

[77]

No one anymore has the right to bring honor to the table. The table itself is already crackling. Why not call ourselves poets? Soon enough there won't be anyone to dispute it, to call us scabs, to insist upon single-channel intentions which, sure, grant precision, but a niche can also be a narrowing hallway, us a mouse, chased by the pitter of Kafka's smiling cat.

[78]

The death of the last dictator means the end of all deadlines as we know them. Expectations in a free world are mediated in so many ways—this whether it is a matter for the state, or of contracts between individuals; no one setup would have come to dominate

the scene. The circulation of large amounts of work, the shared honesty, the end of cinema as we know it. Prose could return to its natural, unshorn state. Who ever praised Beowulf for its concision, or counted Cervantes's adverbs? It might be all well that those who write only for the deadlines are confounded into inaction. The columns will be empty (and will we repine for the glossy opine?) but as advertising dries up, the pagecounts can stand to shrink.

[79]

We had hardly mobilized when the order came down to stay put for another night. Word came down that the high command was waffling. But it was more than a lack of confidence in the plan, as such; a rift had formed, splitting the high command into two camps along the question of whether Balzac, strictly speaking, could be considered a *humanist*. One side argued that he never let go of the oppressive attitudes at the heart of his dreary nostalgia for the honor culture of pre-revolution France, while the other, conceding from the outset that this was indeed the case, believed his writing moved well beyond this attitude, showing enormous empathy for the emerging working classes, art being a higher manifestation of consciousness. It had nearly come to blows, and so the word was sent down that we would stop for the night, still within sight of the old camp, while the debate was mediated by outside experts. But too much damage had been done to morale, and by morning, the last of us were

splitting off from one another along the outlying roads. If they had come for Balzac, we couldn't be far behind.

[80]

It has been estimated that, because of their importance to certain branches of developmental psychology, one in two sets of twins has been clandestinely observed against their knowledge during the course of their lives.

[81]

*The wrath of threatened pride
speeds toward us and
yet we brace
for the consequences
of our faulty irony
as if it was played
on a toy fiddle.*

But what do they mean? In his essays, the Spanish writer and critic Benjamin Jarnés says of the ironist that he knows the hoarse roar of the ocean, but prefers it played back to him, childishly, on a violin. My dreams are always flooded, from above and underneath. Moss clings to everything. Pinecones swell on the ground. They're never the perfectly preserved ones seen through the crystal waters of an

alpine lake, but ugly, bloated things, shedding green flesh. Too much water in the soil, I imagine, causes the trees to shed their cones prematurely, as if they were worried that the added weight would tip them over in the besodden loam. All of this is still only the botany of dreams. Or all of this is, extraordinarily, a botany of dreams.

[82]

I dropped onto a bench and only just got my legs stretched out before I made eye contact with another person who, through complex but silent prosody, was indicating that they, too, had intended to sit on the bench, that they had been eying it for longer than I had, and that it was only my dumb proximity to the bench that afforded me the chance to recline comfortably in public. It was not that time slowed down as they got closer, or that we were destined to prove Zeno right or wrong with a darling fable of our own. I was in a position of power, and I relished it. How seldom did I have anything worthy of envy, even if my claim to it was only that I was a citizen and it, a public good. At this still intermediate stage in events, I wondered, how might I exceed the traditional allowance of space? And so I lay down. (I never said I didn't lack originality.) The distance between us was still great enough that I could try on different positions. On one side my hip hurt; on the other, I could no longer watch the soundless approach. On my stomach I was forced to contemplate the irregular

stains on the concrete below the bench. On my back, I had no choice but to lay with one hand behind my head, and the other blocking the sun from my eyes, hardly a position of readiness in the event of a serious altercation. So my hip, once again, took the brunt of my petty recumbence. Spectators began to assemble. Words became audible. I took off my glasses and hid them among the shrubs as best I could with a short toss. No sense coming out of this with two problems, I thought, as the first blow of the cane landed.

[83]

I fear unraveling. A person can unravel, and I don't mean literally, in the sense that their bodies begin to fray, until at last they snag a foot on an exposed carpet tack and, after making it to the store, realize with their last conscious thought that there is a trail leading back to the door jamb in the bedroom. I mean that the force that holds our predilections and memories together to form the globulous selves that our friends celebrate and our enemies detest is mysterious and unstable, prone to leaks and, in the most extreme cases, dramatic ruptures that render us, for lack of a better term, decoherent. Disjointed, maybe. But it's as if the qualities that were once contained (whether we think of them as having been protected inside of a membrane or set in gelatin) are now floating loosely, as debris on a calm ocean. It is not easy to capture such moments in parables and fairy tales, but examples are rife throughout folklore,

usually by the transformation of a human into an animal, a raven (little did they know) or a deer (what Artemis did to Actaeon was a kind of unraveling), and also in the kind of gossip that informed many of these stories, of sudden inexplicable changes involving drifting attention and forgotten habits, rumors that, more than once, have incited violence. But I am not afraid of stigma, nor is this a fear similar to the fear of death, of crossing a threshold without awareness. It is, as best I can describe it, the fear of an unpunctuated sentence.

[84]

What has finally unfolded, a getting-on-with-it. Trying to carve your name in a wet stone with only your fingernails makes for a fine manicure. Become a man who points and gestures at everything.

[85]

More importantly, history is written by those who write history.

[86]

On a gas station bench, a man lamented to another, hardly listening, that the world no longer made sense, citing the fact that, “You can go to jail for kicking a dog, but you can kill cats all day long.” The end of the sentence had the quality of a trailing off. To where? What is the real problem?

[87]

And why this Sunday bias against verticality? For what? Kneeled over or in bed, dead or in a state of supine aloofness. That god may be a toad is the only solution I can think of. Though perhaps I am more partial than I thought.

[88]

Dawn transforms nothing except the sick into the ailing.

[89]

Every kind word is a compromise, every critique an immoral peace.

[90]

Stopping still, indeed even the head still at tilt and in unison and noble in silent soliloquy <don't pause to consider> in a different language, the falling dried needles for miles around like the slow faint croak of a comb being bristled, wind kicked up, a gale, a breath, the smell of dog so unnatural, too, the idea that any of this could be destroyed; there was no order, it could be reshaped, and it was remarked how safe we might be here if we could steer clear of the trees, should the worst happen, and it seemed ambivalent, almost, and that nothing could truly be destroyed, that destruction was a sentimental idea mocked up by us to apotheosize chemical reactions and abrupt physical change but all of this, looking around, could

be as old as anything and everything or younger than one of us, any of us, and it would be foolish, head asunder, to retrieve or surrender the distant basket of world memory, to cook for ourselves, to even light a fire, as if on a frozen lake, and I was dizzy, disentangled, and finally laughed at the idea: if only we could avoid the trees.

[91]

Coming from the angle of a death, even a slow one, I'm struck by the taste of sulfuric springwater. All of my beginnings are confused, and this one is no different. The reader needs to be thrown off, or they will not be receptive. But death, even as plot-device, lingers, like, I might add, the taste of sulfuric springwater, such that there's really no chance of saying anything meaningful that is not also death-related after that initial invocation. How clumsy, I feel, having thwarted myself, and not just within the bounds of this page. It will now spill over into everything I write, infect every grocery list, tint greeting cards, already sufficiently given over to the pallor of death. Might this have started earlier? No, only right now, as I panic, attempt to pin it on an earlier, more foolish version of myself, one whom I could blame without causing much harm to my present reputation. But no, that death up there, no more than a salvo, has changed everything, and will, soon enough, seep into your own prose, like strange matter, and musty turns mildewed turns moribund, it is now the death of the

novel, felled by a germ, our intentions forever cut off from our hands, repatriated only by our own literal deaths. How then can we live within this perspective?

[92]

I once thought it a moral defect that I cannot, in public nor in private, draw a straight line. Even in surrogate situations I am unable; for instance, my handwriting slants badly on unruled paper, as if gravitationally perturbed, as if an as-yet-undiscovered planet orbited just off the page to the bottom and to the right. In my reading of an old Zen monk, I came across this explanation: In order to draw a straight line, you must consider all variants of a line, all of the lists and curves and doublesback, and draw exactly none of them. In that way, it is a bit like telling the truth. But I rather like the idea of gravity, and believe a straight line to be like any thought, which is to say impossibly connected to and interrupted by proliferant others (this is surely unoriginal, comparing thoughts to, say, minor planets). I leave the apartment door unlocked to take the trash out, and by the time I return, I put the key in the door, and it turns out that I have not even taken the same set of stairs.

[93]

Do not correct anyone on the pronunciation of Kierkegaard. There is, invariably, someone better suited nearby.

[94]

I lie immobile, thinking thoughts like: All mistakes are fatal, given the right circumstances. Like: Any moment of doubt is a kind of blindness. Like: Panic is meant to be felt only a few times in life, and always produces in us the hormones that precede death? (What do they do? Is it a kind of pickling agent?) Some animals will even die if you panic them; they only have the once, and not even that, properly. We aren't cut out for this. We've only invented new reasons to panic with the blooming of modernity. It's this and not the spate of suicides that brings down life expectancy across the board. We're dependent on an ever more complex constellation of contingencies, such that the odds favor death-hormones being secreted daily, when the creature of the hour of chance lifts its head, malcontent, and basks hungrily in our susceptibility.

[95]

Dawn: I get the sense at last that the birds are inquorate.

[96]

In the Department, no one sings above a whisper or raps their knuckles thoughtlessly or crawls around hoping to find pennies in the carpet. They pay us too well for that, though not enough to stop us singing entirely.

[97]

God, the shameful, insufferable pedant is at it again, talking through his nostrils at us. We all bore the weight of his words, death by a hundred thousand feathers, as well as the responsibility for having accepted the invitation, both as a personal matter, and, as each acceptance gave the event a legitimizing boost up, as a collective; while you might expect those who were among the first to accept would carry the greatest burden, but because none of us, strictly, knew that anyone else had accepted—this legitimizing force took only the form of an unseen field—the burden was equanimeous. As we stood in a circle around him, it was not merely the ones to his back that imagined, induced by the cheap wine, a scene in which he screamed at us, *Et tu? Et tu?!*

[98]

Ambiguous tones issued from a low object. It wasn't much to speak of. You had to really crouch. It said the best piece of writing advice it ever got was to not try to be Borges. And just like that, it was Borges.

[99]

Guilt is a mourning for the future, an utterly unique emotion among animals, the rest of whom are content in the present, still, preparations for the future mere forms of mania, the inexplicable toil of caching seeds or the tingling of magnetite that spurs on great migrating herds. We heed it, are made lame by it,

exchange it for artist's supplies on the open market. And in each pale artist, the ones with the turned-up noses, there is—strongly insinuated is—something like a dilapidated piano. Every one of them exudes a nocturne, in other words. Living in this penitent state, the artists, the pale ones in particular, brace for the easterly crowds, pockets deep with plastic debris, the dark sediment kicked up and muddied like shit stew, mucking the compounds of the firmament. What am I saying? That artists are beggars by nature, and are made rich all the same. Writers are then the ant of the unfair parable, made bitter with turmeric and lyme, but to play this out any further would be to suggest a theme to vary and a key to my disposition, which I guard closely.

[100]

To describe a person is to play at horoscopes, to over-rely on generalizations and biases. This is too soft. To describe a person is to do to them a kind of violence, personally, professionally, etc. We cannot possibly predict how our descriptions will ring in the ear, at what angle it will carom off a bathroom wall. As people have a tendency to rise and fall with expectation, to describe a person is to alter the course of their life in unforeseen ways, inserting jutting obstacles at unpredictable intervals. This is why family relations become so difficult later in life, because no one has an earlier and more unalterable set of expectations for us. Abstention thus remains the only noble course.

[101]

I am ashamed of myself, even an hour ago.

[102]

I am a singular term. It is a kind of duty, given a name, to be what one was previously, to provide clarity when referred to by an as-yet-unknown-but-entirely-inconsequential third party, the identificatory function of whom is unimportant until they are likewise named. If you made a request at the bank and they returned with an unexpected amount, whether it favored you or not, you would suspect something, that the whole of currency had been devalued, because to otherwise resort to an approximate accounting would be ruinous. The nakedness of this mode of being, however willfully obscure, gives me a perpetual well in the gut, this occupation of which, if it was not already evident, became a matter requiring action.

[103]

The reading public adores a paranoiac, but I am not one. I play only the odds, but not like a gambler. I respect all non-zero probabilities, whereas they have reasonable limits on what they, at any given moment, must consider. This takes up much of my time, this ridiculous faculty of imagination. I pile contingency upon contingency and concentrate until a rapturous buzzing overtakes me and I experience a sudden loss of consciousness. So what if I went bald early and

will never plant trees in the Levant. There's clarity and then there's exposure.

[104]

How is it that one can feel sympathy toward oneself? Sympathy is an emotion that substitutes for knowledge. It is an imaginative state. One cannot be both projector and screen.

[105]

I want to be liked, or at the very least, I don't want to draw any attention to myself. I want to be small. Primitive aggression frightens me even as it causes me to wear down my incisors. I crave aloneness, and when I cannot be alone, assimilation. I don't want to be found unrelenting in a back room. In general I do not want to be found. Let the rain sequin me with a kinder and more intimate tyranny than I am used to, breathed wet once again into stubborn astonishment. Except that, it was obscure. I never consider my own happiness.

[106]

I was contrived to make minor points. My parents saw to this. My first debts were of my own making, to their credit.

[107]

The presence of so-called intrapsychic conflict, the desolation that can come from multiplicity, the

voices on your shoulders, the quiescent lance spiked against your skull now and again. The mind is in constant discourse with itself, I've been told, and it is the illusion of a self that keeps us from noticing the shifting underneath, saccadic suppression for the soul, as it were. We have no inner monologue, at barest a dialogue with a silent conversant reminiscent of ourselves. It is increasingly likely that, within our capacity for managing interpersonal relations, that the self we present to each familiar person is a different one, a tuned version of something more primitive, like trying to get a piano directly from an oak. As relationships wither or overtake us, so too do these selves. If it is unnerving enough that there are several of us, it is doubly so that the dead almost certainly outnumber the living.

[108]

A debate between linguists, on whether the shape of human thought more closely resembled poetry or more closely resembled prose, had come to blows.

[109]

Who expects anyone to be gentle? Everywhere you look there are black eyes and washbasins tinged pink, teeth stuck in drains, hair smiling from small cracks in the sidewalk. Our fathers were right, that the world is brutal, but for different reasons than they surmised. Grey and forgetful, they suffer along to the rhythm, but can't so much as hum the melody.

[110]

Guilt exists whether you write or not.

[111]

Let's wind down for the night and leave the second lecture for tomorrow. It's a dangerous idea, that we should be busy enriching ourselves all night. Custodians of ourselves, is that the line? The mind moves on shoes without soles. Another one. I'll rest when I'm dead. Fair enough. But let's examine the premise: death has its own rigidities.

[112]

To spend all of our waking moments verifying our impressions would be tantamount to death, as I imagine death to be a state of constant reverification. There is a well-known law regarding the compatibility of inverted propositions—in which, by repatriating lost selves rather than severing them, those sagging and homely corpses regain something of their prior attractiveness, and other nuances not contained within this hurried report. If it appears that I am taking a shortcut by way of calling sound a mere reflection of my previously held and shoddy theories, well, one cannot well go on for long scrounging off the opinions of strangers. And after all, who has the time anymore to bake from scratch?

[113]

Who understood anything the many-footed man said, only that he was speaking to the future and not to us, concerned only with the scope and extent of his posthumous life, not wanting to be oblique to his true, intended audience, and this meant taking certain liberties, making educated guesses as to the topology and climate of the future language and packing his suitcase to match, so to speak. But, as Amiel once wrote, that's a rather hairless way of looking at poetry.

[114]

In the morning, the sun is mine for an hour, before it belongs to anyone else. For that hour it is polychrome and bloated around the middle, as if it is slouching in a thin blouse. I think it wouldn't object to such an unflattering depiction, because it knows better than most that art is stubborn. It does not have a philosophical temperament, which demands too much of everything and belittles its own reflection—a great flaw when you have only one constituent; disastrous when they are as numerous as we are.

[115]

There is no upper limit on the fragment, e.g. *an iceberg twice the size of Manhattan*.

[116]

Absorption, in one form or another, is the true term for death. That is true in life as it is true in language.

(I am, as ever, going on about the origins of language as spatial phenomenon.) Once coordinates overlap sufficiently, one word will suffice—coordinates and profile. If the position and outline are the same. If the relative density is the same. Etc., etc. A semantic concern, then: can the process of *absorption* change the character of the absorbing body enough to merit a lexical shift? It would seem not, and that we would need a stronger word, like *endosymbiosis* or, more succinctly, *inter*.

[117]

The search for a new language is also the forfeiture of the old, like saying, The winter of this year, and meaning opposite ends, but continuing on talking like there's been an agreement. In the winter of this year—and here I'm already thinking of the future, which above all else is odorless—we'll warm our hands by the cracks in our lips, which deflate us as they lose heat, and the pomp with which we die, gradually, constitutes something of a new language, one incompatible with the old questions, because it concerns only a few moments of our lives and will then be gone, a universe in a particle accelerator. I don't regret my most careless comments,—I lost the leg on which regret tends to gnaw some time ago.

[118]

No one will ever speak of the atom again, nor all the stars, nor will they consider the earth in those terms,

as something with mass, with shape, with age. The lectures were clear: the volcanoes with their ash, the crystals, none of them give off their own internal glow. No one can, anymore, speak of people, about the conditions in which they find themselves, often deaf and imperfect, though occasionally with good ideas, ideas about the earth that we can no longer use, about an earlier time that has been sealed off and ascribed to magic, which has fewer interpretations to juggle, fewer connotations, because people revolt through language exclusively, and everything that can be done with words and sentences, the agreements or the incommensurable gaps, can simply be renamed, words once close can just as soon move away.

[119]

To be critical, or as we like to put it, to *think critically*, the sense for the anodyne must be the most finely tuned, every nobility born of inertia, but not every ordeal a vulgar mess. I'm confused. I have no aspirations. All of this happens to coincide with a little uneasiness, a loss of fundamentals, the regular ascension of a line that does not identify me. To everything I apply a blur, to soup we return, the cure for all nausea, since nothing will be missing in it.

[120]

All speech concerns relations between objects, typically the speaker and another, but sometimes objects

or agents (a privileged subclass of object) entirely separate from the speaker. Language connects objects. The other parts of speech can be thought of as forming a spatial diagram, carrying information such as mood, velocity, mass, temporality, etc. This applies to abstract as well as concrete objects.

[121]

Coats, like coffins, have to fit only in the broadest sense. Mine is the color of ruddy sand on an overcast day, made of waxed cotton, but it is not my coat I mean, nor is it my coffin. (In the span of a sentence my attention has already gone off, been lost, and come back.) I could tell you more about my coat in order to tell you about all coats in order to tell you about the coat that I mean, tiptoeing around the coffin all the while, because the second coat, though I have spent most of my time talking and thinking about coats, going so far as to describe my own (the hood is not detachable), is merely a device for prying at the lid of the coffin, as it were. It's a stupid threat, ambiguity, and won't make many friends. It's a problem I have, skirting the issue. I'd rather linger over a figure of speech, here lies our mother tongue, certainly never a blue body. I can't speak what my own clearheadedness makes apparent. I sit as a bare country table, away from many possible distractions and trivialities, and yet I cannot tell a story that would appease and account for the opening line. As a bare country table? Here even my fingers slip into

metaphor to escape the cold. Today I have chosen a coffin. To say more—and here I can now put a name my fear—would be to turn death into an anecdote.

[122]

Still, every now and then a person who favors a rat, objectively—and a person who favors a rat can still be conventionally attractive, mind you—proves themselves to be untrustworthy, and you catch them peering over your shoulder at the ATM, etc. If it's not nature, it's second nature, the result of seeing their face projected back at them with these characteristics attached. It is funny, without exaggeration, that many of us are cast in life, this way. That is, that the relative few in charge of casting commercials, movies, etc. over the years have no doubt, through their predilections and instincts, reflected our faces back at us over the years to startling effect. There are appearances, sure, as clues to nature, but appearances lack critical information, which is why physiognomy fell out of fashion but the reading of tea leaves remains a cottage industry.

[123]

Legend had it that there was once a great underground shadetree in the caverns just miles south, and from which the town takes its name. Even in the time of legends, the shadetree was a legend, though it was also a regular destination, and anyone who doubted its presence could see for themselves. But its legendary status was still a mystery as—and no one,

even then meant it as an insult—to why it was at all useful, this shadetree, when it cast no shadow. Indeed, no one would need to venture more than a few meters into the cave to find relief from the harshest sun, and the tree grew further still inside. It was remarkable in other ways, to be certain; that it could produce its leaves at all in the perpetual dark of the cave, receiving no nourishment from the torches that frequented. And every time someone would question the legendary status of the shadetree, someone older, invariably, would tell the skeptic to pluck a leaf, and wait for the absolute hottest part of the day to leave the cave. And when they did, and the leaf touched sunlight for the first time in its existence, it would expand rapidly to take in as much light as possible, granting the carrier as much shade as he or she could ever need. And so another generation learned the trick of the underground shadetree, and it wouldn't be long before they dragged someone even younger along, hoping to hear the same objections.

[124]

In time the neat arc of life disintegrates. We are found lapsing into sentimentality for the past and the future. They do surveys now, asking the public how they feel about a catastrophically violent end to the universe versus the prevailing theory, of the accelerating expansion of spacetime leading to a lonesome aridity of matter. The results of the religious are discarded in processing, but they are still asked. Science,

too, has magazines to sell.

[125]

I am not disputing outright the contention that it is more difficult to keep just one oath than to honor several. If I have a point to make, it is only about how cavalieri we accept the counterintuitive as factual under the thinnest pretense. For instance: What is often taken as a matter of surplus is actually a purely deontological argument. As soon as a second oath is taken, it becomes possible—perhaps even inevitable, given that no two lines can remain parallel forever—for conflicts to arise, so that one has to appeal to some externality, onto which is transferred a portion of the oath's censorious heft. The keeper of a single oath has no such recourse. They are bounded on all sides by terms and conditions. The inward pressure is stifling. They are asked to forget themselves, and often a new self emerges, condensed around the germ of the oath.

[126]

If the word is indeed a virus, we should at least strive to be interesting hosts.

[127]

Prayers and longings—after a time the veneer of saintliness gives way to spent tissues and makeup, held up by our fears, which ultimately give us shape, because what we fear limits us, and the shape implied

by those limits is what we have come to call the form of the person, and the contours in this, like the scores in limestone from smaller rocks advanced by glaciers, serve as our identification, and we, who so often attempt to disfigure ourselves, pretend that it is not this play between fear and glacial time that shapes us, rather that it is in the music we prefer, the foods we eat (as if both didn't pass through for the worse), the language we intone, our particular choice of words, picked up from, yes, the movies, but also books, though mostly from those we have chosen to emulate, for better or worse, as if it was a decision we were at all privy to, choosing who we emulate, an accident of physiognomy in most cases.

[128]

I had a dream that I entered a foyer that, down to the brass fixtures, resembled that of a musty protestant church, while the exterior was that of an amodern medical complex, tan bricks and low lines. I should have perhaps started as I walked up to the building, rather than skipping to the foyer and backtracking. After waiting in a small line where we (who are these background actors?) were given shopping bags, and then the foyer opened into a marvelous room under an immense atrium, filled with plants and book intermingled in the most interesting ways, along the walls and in many circular displays. The books were all the most richly illustrated academic texts on books, books thick as three hammers on the trees of

a single region, in never-ending series. This was only the botany section, and many such rooms followed, richly themed, some more baroque than the others, but all in good taste. At one point, I looked down to find a young girl following me. I held her hand as we traipsed around the immediate area, until at last her parents recognized her, thanking me profusely, giving me the air of above-suspicion that one seldom encounters in life. And here? In the waking world? Well, if you run up to a child at full sprint, shouting, Do not be afraid, is it any wonder when you get kicked in the shin?

[129]

Chapfallen, I returned home. I can't think without a grid in front of me, to place all of my new words under the old and, when the time comes, to issue some elementary proclamations, But we are alive! and the like, painful admissions, but necessary all the same. I wish I could play to the room, trot out all of the old hits, but it's not in me to indulge the fantasy of the same old new beginnings, night after night. Everything is too raw. I cannot stand the whiplash any longer, when I turn back to hope, radiant hope, only to find, moments later, the blackness of being forgotten, passed over, and if I wasn't guilty of the very same, I would cut a sympathetic figure.

[130]

I can't look back on any discussion objectively. I got the better of it, or else I got the worst of it. What I would really like to say is never of much importance, what is important is that I conform to a conversational schema, not quite a completely dead rhetoric, under which every conversation would devolve quickly into non-sequitur, but a loose *expressive framework*, full of cases and conditions that do not generate conversation, but rather seed it. In truth, I feel a slow vibration behind my ear that at times mumbles something useful to me in low, ambiguous tones. *You're in your head*, someone yells, as if there were an alternative. Where else do people go? But I should get out of the street.

[131]

In the distance, my father. Several crows. The ground is frostbitten. I wave, I flail. In the interest of everyone, I stop. There trickles an iciness down my back. My mother would drop keys down the back of my shirt for nosebleeds. It often worked. I pose in my most natural way. I suck my stomach in. At the time, I didn't know what tripe was. Enough salt makes anything palatable. In the interest of everyone, I demur. I encourage others to go ahead in line. I wave them by in traffic. I sit, cars four deep, allowing pedestrians to cross.

There is this idea, that character reveals itself in the most dire and threatening of circumstances. That is an absolute lie. By the time we engage in flight or fight responses, we're well beneath the mental layer of character, of conscious decision making; it would be terribly unfair, then, to ascribe to someone's character their response to danger, to panic. Now, in this "layer" system, does up influence down, down influence up, or are both or neither true? It doesn't matter. None of that has anything to do with character. You couldn't prove it. The mouse that hid from itself, the choice to live an absentee, a slow dial, the rampaging uncertainty that at once expects a miracle and prepares a will. In the future, for instance, if we could somehow read the contents of a dead person's brain, if we could know, for certain, to whom they truly wished to leave their wealth in the moments before their death, would that knowledge supersede their last will and testament? Is the notion of sound mind thrown out? If so, why not permanently; why not refuse to ever let it back in? Or, we might decide that, for better or worse, this is character. Bequeath everything to the dog, or else bury it with them. It's possible, even, that this thought may only solidify after the heart has stopped, in those last few seconds, the first and only thought of death.

[133]

I am not arguing that a person is only *themselves* under ideal conditions. There are no ideal conditions.

[134]

I cannot put easily into writing what is needlessly baroque and baneful. I'm filled to the brim with the pus of this inability. I have a sickness for reaching farther back into the past than I should, for issuing regularly updated anxieties based on the certainties of the moment. What is this thing to my left? I make a cross with my fingers. It doesn't matter. It's a rock I found on a walk. I pulled it from the river, in fact, thinking I would leave it in the flower bed, but now it stays with me, so that I can remind myself that I can never know it. What mediates its experience of me? It can know damage from sufficient force, so surely it recognizes gentleness? Bending forward, I tell it the weather. It's not unaffected by wind and rain, so does it not know them? Hotness and coldness are sensations, states of being. I present myself from different angles, from above and below; in the below, I must look like an ape ready to smash an underripe coconut. Has such a thing happened before? I know they use tools, but I couldn't promise you the climate is right, anywhere on earth.

[135]

Is there a difference between what I understand and what I remember? I don't think there is.

[136]

What I want for myself is not extravagant, and yet it resists description. This is because I am lazy. It takes energy to dress up private desires for public functions, energy I don't have, or that I don't have to spare. Take me, place me under the same sheet, and a different body will emerge, with different aims.

[137]

I am training at the mirror for hours every day without a break. What experts will not tell you is that it is possible through sheer will alone to change your physiognomy, sure, with physical tricks, but with no implied disfigurement, no cosmetic realignments. How your nose responds to your laughter, how much you raise your chin when listening intently, the angle of your lips, both collectively and independently. There are a thousand small corrections to be made, each transfiguring not the face but the countenance. Try on a snarl. Discard immediately. The political power gained by making the right kind of nuisance of yourself if worth the social isolation. I could try on a face for the kids at the river, but my surprise at the reaction, that first reaction, is part of the presentation. Recalcitrance, if I've narrowed it down correctly, is found in the eyebrows.

[138]

No one read much of Caesar's poetry, but Caesar didn't much care.

[139]

Allowing my guilt to take the form of literature is, perhaps, another attempt at maximizing my own insufferableness.

[140]

What have I been doing all of this time? Have I written over hours or days or . . . ?

[141]

Vigilant. I've stumbled upon this is a word that, while utterly unpleasing, nevertheless captures something of my natural posture. I am vigilant, tense at all times, like I am walking on ice. Small steps. Keep the muscles taut. Be prepared to react. Imagine everything that might go wrong and engage the parallel processing power of the decentralized pre-conscious to navigate each situation in turn and return a report, the sum of which are then translated and transpiled into my baseline level of anxiousness. This is why my jaw swells when I chew tough foods.

[142]

I must have private ambition, inaccessible to me, in order to fear so much for the future.

[143]

Are my multitudes silent when one another are speaking? Are they soloists, ensembles, or a cacophonous, tuning din? Could I swallow enough stones

to hemorrhage bile? I don't know enough of how the body works, a ship adrift, the miniature society on board forced to make decisions, turn the rudder manually to suit the current, find new and inventive ways to dispose of excrement. No one can learn to read the stars because there are no books on board. Naturally. So we idealize, particular the port from whence we set sail, and in turn we despise it, because it is absent. In our clearer, more mature moments—I am speaking as the temporary leader of this miniature society, but like any leader of a post-revolutionary council, I could be replaced at any moment, mid-line—we are able to hold both the ideal and despised images of the port in mind, both the paths and roads leading from the port to our respective homes and the ice-green water as well as the foul language used by the workers and the sanctimonious boldness of the gulls, big as badgers, but more often it is one or the other, setting factions against once another, which is not to say the vessel against itself, which it would be wrong to give agency to in this respect, even in this doomed and obvious metaphor.

[144]

Because of the quiet now between shifts and the laxity of the policy requiring a manager to be on hand at all times and, further, to ensure no overlap between the shifts for reasons evident only to business school graduates, I have now taken to working both shifts, napping in the break room with its deep leather

couch—the only indefensible expenditure—in the off-hours. In this way the pathway from the body to the brain had become a circuit, a more natural state, and anyway it was no sense separating the two, especially as the latter, here defined as a component of rather than antinomous to the body, has slowly been found to be farming out many of its so-called baseline functions, beginning with the hindbrain, which believes itself destined for greater things. The stomach is the beneficiary in all this, finally trusted, though all the while scheming its own methods of advancement, practicing its motor control. It doesn't want to be in charge, but would make a charming second fiddle. Once more with feeling cut straight out, bypassed, relegated. We could do great work together.

[145]

I could rebrand as the font of muted pastoral hymns, forego all reluctant ties to the modern world, most of which I failed to mention here, though they were present all along, I would even say more futuristic than you might have realized, real bleeding edge. In fact, the archive might all along have been the silent antagonist of this beleaguered prose, but I've concealed wherever possible tension and climax, because those are the tenterhooks of memory.