

CONSUMER



This document is intended for scrolling,  
you are cordially invited to join.  
Take your time or don't.  
Breeze through for all I care.

Arbor

Elias

December 2022

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Easy

Consumer

Consumer II

The Front Desk

Ars Poetica (something I wrote at work)

Our Time Away from Work

Mirror

We don't belong to ourselves

The Front Desk II

The Front Desk III

I Won't Act

The Head of Operations

Grove

Holiday Card  
On Progressives  
At the risk of appealing to Peterson-types  
Profit and Consent  
Scroll, Delay, Cum  
Voice  
Improvisation  
The Old  
Eyes  
Takes Two  
Mother-Wife  
On Arbor  
The Writer  
A last thought



## *Easy*

We are witnessing a swell of politically explicit popular art. It's usually empty, too easy to swallow, but it's the only thing we can bring ourselves to enjoy when we see injustice everywhere else. We can only enjoy when we *know* that we are fighting against the injustice, even if our fight is a lost cause. We lost years ago, in fact, and our struggle is now more or less against ourselves so long as it takes place in the realm of consumption ("I will choose to enjoy this art rather than the one I might find more difficult, less ideologically in tune with myself; I will deprive the latter of my enjoyment, which is the ultimate currency of our time").

More broadly, this is how we are taught to engage with *life*. We are hopelessly aware of the rot in our world—we're Doomers! To 'shut off,' even for a moment, is to let the rot win, and so we become lost in the symbiotic web of self-care and tragedy.

It's easier to operate with an utter pessimism (so often masked by the positive face of Internet-Leftism, mutual aid optimism, et cetera). Doomers are *haters*. There's no elegant way to say it. We hate because to enjoy directly is to assume that the rot has spared some corner of the world, and if we belong to that corner, aren't we part of the problem? If we can even enjoy that corner from a distance, aren't we part of the problem? This is how we think. And so we're left with the politically explicit art, devoid of complication and content—well, the cinematography is the content.





## *Consumer*

Let me disadvantage myself from the start—me the author, you the reader. *I have rarely enjoyed reading.* There, now you'll have some leverage over me as you skim these pages, since *I'm* asking you to read what *I* have to say when *I* only read *others'* work as a chore. I make myself do it and even then I fail, giving way to the faster pleasures of life always beckoning from the corner of my eye. There have been exceptions to this rule, of course, times when I read with genuine love and interest—recently Knausgaard's first volume of you know what, couldn't be bothered to start the second. It will come in time. I can boast a few real bouts of obsession with Kafka, Kundera, Murakami, and a few other writers who inexplicably tighten the loins of depressed men in their twenties.

One such bout has just begun, kicking into gear last week when I picked up *South of the Border*,

*West of the Sun* from the library, only to read the majority of the little black book on a pdf at work. It was Murakami's first novel while living in the United States, or something like that, probing loneliness, suicide, women from the past, unsatisfied bourgeois men, and a jazz bar. Another Murakami book. Deeply auto-biographical, you must think.

Murakami, like no other, always reinvigorates something dead within me—it's most dead when I have the least control over myself, scrolling before bed, smoking too much. I can intellectually justify these periods of empty consumption by styling myself as a Mishima acolyte, marveling at myself in the mirror without reservation much like Gen Z can enjoy an absolutely empty work of art so long as it's explicitly in tune with their own ideological bent:

the hard work of consumption is already taken care of, so we can simply give in to what's easy.<sup>1</sup>

And Murakami is indeed easy to read, in style and content—but with something especially appealing for the American in me. He doesn't have to *try* to attract American readers. His sensibilities, as a 'lost soul' from a lost place, Americanized to the point of cultural cannibalism, are impossibly close to our own. More American than we could ever be, since we would love to see ourselves as an outsider would, as if we were visiting this strange land for the

<sup>1</sup> I, like all Americans, struggle to focus. I gorge myself with writing and scrolling in alternating spells, sometimes weeks sometimes months. I may scroll during a writing spell, but it has no hold over me. I may write a line during a scrolling spell, but it is sure to be spiritually vacant. Each vye for my attention, though once I've made a commitment I find *myself* running after it, pleading for it to satisfy me. To me, they are both forms of consumption: I am bombarded by media and screens throughout my day, and in an act of resistance—writing—my abstention somehow follows suit. In my deliberate act against consumption—writing—I consume still, and to an even greater extent, taking in the world around me with a keener perception than I ever could during the 'ordinary' hours of consumption which fill the rest of my day.

first time. His aimless beaches, chainsmoking young women and sexually stifled boys, they're all realer to us Americans than anything we could dream up ourselves.

Just as his writing has inspired me to read again on more than one occasion, his sexually stifled boys have injected me with virility at times when I was sure I'd 'dried up,' so to speak. Ah, as an introspective young man down on his carnal luck, I had convinced myself that I was doomed to celibacy for the rest of my days—who can say they haven't—and that my dick would only work in my own company. I had tragically imposed a case of *bad dick* upon myself—this was some time ago, now.

Only *real* desire can move a soul from this stupor: real interest in a real person, not some Instagram shit, but desire strong enough to make us forget our inhibitions. And while Murakami alone can't arouse this desire, he asks if I can recall once



feeling this way. I am without a doubt aroused at the description of sex in a great many works, but Murakami offers a certain feeling of adolescence and confusion. Some readers find this quality to be predatory. On the contrary, I don't find that his sexual desire is directed towards young women, but, in the truly auto-biographical fashion, Murakami longs for the desire he felt when he himself was young, raw, and full of feeling. And maybe this can explain why his descriptions of unconcerned bureaucrats sting so deeply, since they can be neither satisfied nor frustrated with life when they've been so *emptied* of it by middle age (more on this in a moment). This is how it feels when I read these passages in Murakami, how it feels to be erotically reawakened: frankly, a shiny new body will not make my meaningless life complete. After all, there is a reason that I've forgotten! A reason that I need to wake up! There is no *continuity* in love, there is nothing which can both satisfy me and make my present life complete. Real reawakening

forces me to recall the rawness of youth, forces me to identify the meaninglessness of the present which has emptied me to this point.

I came across the following tweet some time ago. The pain of being misunderstood has stuck with me. From @racecard\_driver on 9/23/22:

what if Murakami was a totally normal dude and it was just his English translator who was really weird about women

ha ha

Let's move on.

How many of his characters passively consume entire worlds of classical and jazz records? I choose to see myself in these characters, although in truth I can't be bothered to sit through that kind of discography. Sure, maybe I have a few records under my belt, even fewer

albums. But what's the real difference between us? How am I to believe that they've amassed so many? The reason is the true source of their dreaminess: their essential boredom. A believable yet unattainable *contentedness* allows a select few of his actors to remain charmingly stagnant, at least until some greater force moves them into action like a marionette.

There's nothing easier to read as an American—all the pieces of ourselves we find in Murakami. We could analyze his Hemingway-factor, writing in simplified English before translating back to Japanese in order to cut away the fat. We could linger on his obsession with the crime genre, or on postwar Japan more broadly. But it's this otherworldly contentedness, a little postmodern, which always brings me back to him, pointing an accusatory finger at those of us who are numb to life.



## *Consumer II*

Aidan, a friend of mine, once told me that we watch theater, go to the museum, see a movie, all in order to reveal things in our own life. This thought has left a deep impression, as have so many of Aidan's passing comments. When I occasionally tell this to him—that something he said several months ago now forms a core part of my subjective experience—I expect him to remember the comment too, or at least the sentiment. After all, I remember others' *tweets*, and certainly my own—things that should only resonate with us for a moment. But if it can conjure up enough serotonin to prompt a begrudging 'like,' how close it will tarry in my mind!

Aidan, however, rarely remembers these pieces of wisdom. On one hand, I'm overwhelmed by his never-ending supply of thought: *he can't even remember an idea which changed my life?* On the

other hand, could this mean I know him better than he knows himself? In the circular, self-fulfilling logic of chapdom—yes, it does.<sup>2</sup> There is a certain merit, so *of-our-time*, in my tarrying: I naturally harbor the ideas, interactions, and moments which mean the most to me. But this is, of course, a dangerous game.

For example, when Hiatus Kaiyote came to Boston in August 2022, I drunkenly screamed as the chorus approached—All the Words We Don't Say!—a piercing cry just as the band unexpectedly paused for dramatic effect. The only voice in the crowd. I surely pissed off my fellow concertgoers (and possibly the band too), spoiling what should have been an ecstatic moment at the end of a beautiful performance. Well, it would have pissed *me* off. It continues to.

<sup>2</sup> For more on chapdom, see *Arbor I*:

[https://3585a894-fa23-47fa-8ab3-8d10e0e9cb25.filesusr.com/ugd/f6468e\\_0de4ac9291774b4eaeaecc97ecf72e4a.pdf](https://3585a894-fa23-47fa-8ab3-8d10e0e9cb25.filesusr.com/ugd/f6468e_0de4ac9291774b4eaeaecc97ecf72e4a.pdf)

Another example: some Armenian coworkers have stopped frequenting The Meat Spot, an exquisite sandwich shop nearby whose Armenian owner recently sold the place to some Turks. It's all business to me. I neurotically hold onto that ill-timed scream at the concert because of the effect I *think* I've had on others. It's all internal. And so I continue visiting the Meat Spot, since I have no illusions about the consequences of my loyalty. What, my \$8 sandwich is enabling the Turkish government? Give me a break, my dollars don't speak in a moral tongue—get your workplace to do that, and let it be Nike, not the corner store. When I'm occasionally convinced otherwise, it's only another internal fantasy telling me to feel shame for my purchase.

I can laugh at these inconsistencies much like the American progressive who boycotts Goya or, more to the point, those who have avoided Russian shops ever since the Ukrainian business began in earnest. In our 'equalizing' world of

consumption (we live in different homes but we can consume the same things, even if your things are ultimately better than mine), I tend to believe that these boycotts are politically inconsistent—purely pathological. And I find myself abstaining from Israeli-owned shops in the same confused fashion: I'm a believer in BDS to an extent, but when all's said and done, I rarely bother checking where these shops source their ingredients. Maybe the Israeli owners of the bagel shop detest their former country's government. Maybe these Israelis are 'clean,' and maybe The Meat Spot continues to enjoy my patronage while using Israeli tahini. There is no consistency here.

Whereas the Turk is a projection outward for my Armenian coworkers, the broadly Israeli establishments represent, psychologically speaking, a more explicitly internal struggle in my own life. (Neither form is better than the other.) Noxious combinations of broadly-Jewish



and Diasporic-Jewish identity politics (both left-of-center and racial in character) have poisoned the well, so that the struggle for Palestinian emancipation, for Jews like me, has begun to mean a struggle against oneself—whether or not you have some family in Israel, we view ourselves as more or less the same as our holy land compatriots. And while Radical Chicque is increasingly gaining steam among American youths when our dinner parties broach the topic of Israel, there remains a strange consensus view of how one should participate in a given culture: via consumption, the global-American kind. We eat at ‘their’ restaurants, attend some film festival in the South End once a year, like the correct posts on Instagram, et cetera. This is how we participate in our own culture, this is how we ‘show up’ for theirs. If we can’t buy it, it’s not culture. Diaspora Jews have a somewhat difficult job selling our particular culture without the strings of Israel attached—and if we *can* achieve this feat, it is

often through strictly anti-zionist t-shirts or something of the like. A little hamfisted, in my opinion. And so, we are either left with participation/consumption of actually-existing-Jewish culture with all of the unsavory chunks of Israel thrown in (but how savory are its baked goods, its shakshuka!) or the domain of Diaspora culture, largely relegated to a few choice corners of Internet consumption. You can't win in my position—Jewish, extremely American, and only mildly ideological, if I may be so bold.

To be fair, neither myself nor my coworkers would seriously liken this behavior to a 'boycott'. It's simply a matter of personal taste, not a coordinated response. And so I'll repeat myself when I say that *individuals'* 'boycotts' are pathological. We tarry, remaining ideologically consistent in our act of *not* consuming. We even *need* these occasional preoccupations with Goya and the like—purely individual, purely to satisfy

our own moral legers—in order to fight off the temptation of consumption. When our only outlet is consumption, you see, we must replace it with an even greater indulgence so that we can succeed in refraining. The atomized boycott is the ultimate form of consumption.







*The Front Desk*

A young couple stood motionless at the crosswalk opposite my front desk. People rarely come into the building. It's the sort of job you come across in Murakami stories—bookish, wise, relaxed secretaries man the front of some sleepy enterprise. It's normally hot outside when I read these scenes, and so I remember the stories having also taken place in the summer. I live in Boston, though. Not Takamatsu or Tokyo. Curious young protagonists who have left home and hope to locate a sympathetic character only slightly older than the protagonist himself, and who also share some general contentedness, a truce, with life—the protagonist will find no wisdom in the lanky fellow behind the glass at the front desk here (it was originally installed for Covid and has remained in place much like the other, more useless measures at this museum—I am asked to clean the pens that visitors use each

day while staff and visitors alike avoid wearing our masks).

The Murakami protagonist will only find a reasonably young, reasonably dull, and reasonably bored fellow behind the desk here. But it must be said, we really do share that limp contentedness with life: stable and comfortable for the time being, uninterested enough in the future to worry about the minimal income one makes while working the front desk of an empty museum—we both understand that, due to our social positions, it'll work out, even if we might not own a house like our parents. I share this certain bourgeois background with the Murakami protagonist, although I probably hail from a less interesting one—one has to have enough material for a plot after all. Only bourgeois enough to benefit from the guilt of the thing, none of the intrigue and cultural richness that I've convinced myself one gains after they hit a predetermined threshold of wealth.



And unlike the librarian we would visit in the second act of the proverbial Murakami novel, who provides sage advice when he isn't too busy cataloging and enjoying the hidden treasures of the institution which lie behind his front desk, I merely charge the hefty admission to the Armenian Museum of America. It's a decent museum in all fairness. Unable to leave my post at the desk, however, I content myself with reading the contents of the gift shop. I am remarkably unfamiliar with the objects on display behind me, but at least I've read a bit about it. The director once poked fun at me for reading 'communist' histories and instead suggested an illustrated pamphlet of the Armenian people for the uninitiated (children or tourists, perhaps) complete with plenty of typos and diagrams which show how ancient migrations from the region populated much of the European and Middle Eastern groups that we know today. I am skeptical of these diagrams to say the least, having seen the through shit, so to speak, as I

passed my childhood in the meager halls of my synagogue's Sunday School. Like the Armenians, we also claim lineage from the very earliest of men, so I can still appreciate the narrative.

Despite my interloper-credentials, more than a few of the salaried people upstairs seem to like me here precisely because I *am* Jewish—it may be that I dress well too. These allies are quick to point out that we share a common diasporic experience, a common historical oppression, et cetera. Visitors often share their surprise that the fellow at the front desk of the fucking Armenian Museum is not himself Armenian. They can tell from the last name on my name tag, which makes a terrible crease on the sweater I wear on Fridays, as long as it's not too hot outside like it is at this time of year. If I don't have a front pocket, I refuse to wear my name so close to my face on my collar, so the odd crease along my left nipple will have to do. And with my creased shirt, I sit removed from the extraordinarily old objects on

view; the labels; the staircase and the dark walls of the building's architecture, what used to be a bank; and the general cultural impression you would otherwise absorb as you stumble through its galleries. I sit at the front desk, removed from all this, waiting for my shift to end.

As I was saying, a young couple stood motionless at the crosswalk opposite the front desk, and turned their stance as if preternaturally curious about the identity of the bureaucrat behind the big glass doors on the other side of the street. They made their way towards the building. The front entrance sits at the corner of the museum, and the large glass windows mean that I can watch the cars and passersby file down the main square of this Boston suburb. Although I'm tremendously bored at the desk, my heart flutters when pedestrians come into view—perhaps *these* will be the ones who finally come in! The closer they get, eyes perusing the items from our gift shop seductively displayed in the window, the

more I dread our unavoidable interaction, that terrible encounter between customer and worker—and, for just a few moments each day, I find myself on the wrong side of this equation.

Yes, at first completely indifferent to the museum—you can always tell by their body language—the young couple made straight for our doors. What was this? A tall man in black jeans and generic sneakers, black t-shirt adorned with the yellow face made iconic by Nirvana, and a black baseball cap with no distinguishing features save for its remarkably curved bill, terribly hip; walking arm in arm with a much shorter figure, high-waisted jeans and big ass, a pink sweater and croc-top, stylish Adidas with a prominent heel. (I see passersby as shells, or rather, I only see their shells.)

The shell-couple made straight for the front door and stopped. They had made rather abrupt movements from the second the crosswalk had

turned green. The woman peered in. I began typing the password into the iPad, “General Admission” into Square. They looked sure of themselves, they walked with an attitude—two hot yuppies strolling about Watertown on a Friday afternoon. It was just after 1. The woman was clearly looking at something but made no move to open the door.

Reader, I’ve omitted a crucial detail about the front desk: due to the sunny corner doors and the tint of our windows, I have a glorious, unobstructed view of the street while the passersby can only see a few feet into the murky lighting of the museum. And as the woman looked intently into the one-way doors, she undid her bun and appeared to touch-up her eyeliner, completely unaware that she was being watched from the other side of the glass. She had no interest in the late Bronze Age bowl which sat on a pedestal at the front of the first floor gallery, the various admission fees, the museum’s hours,

or of any other visitor who may have graced our walls at the time (there were none). She simply used the front door as a mirror. Turning away and embracing her boyfriend (why did they have to kiss like that, and on Main Street of all places?) the threat of visitors passed once again. I set the iPad down and felt the muscles in my chest relax. Lissandra, the security guard who sits with me at the front desk, laughs at me each time this happens. She's right to do so.

\* \* \*

My roommates have each had the good grace to catch Covid just as the preceding invalid recovered. I was the first to be smote, a week later Vera, and a week later Marc. Already nebbish and introverted by nature, the three of us seem to have used the house convalescence as an excuse for our vices (much like the pandemic's effect in general). It was much easier to stay in our respective rooms than to make conversation

with one another. It also would have been easy to raise our voices to make ourselves heard through the self-consciously thin walls. Isolation is easier though. Having recovered from Covid only days before Marc's first symptoms, I could have even interacted with him—shit, could have even nursed my friend back to health without fear of catching it again. Reader, even if there was a chance that I could have been reinfected—well, I unconvincingly told this to myself but never believed it. I unnecessarily lay in bed for weeks after I'd recovered. And while the three of us have gradually thawed from this isolated window, it feels as though something stuck (yes, I'm writing about Covid, I know it's boring).

I like to think that the physical wounds associated with long Covid should include a certain dependency of ours—two, really—made worse by our time in isolation: the conjoined twins of delay and ease. Although I suffered from a cough and aches and all the rest, my chief

symptom during Covid was the suffocating expanse of *time* which threatened my well-being more than anything else. Looking down the barrel of a week, possibly two weeks spent in the absence of others (although I could hear them speaking in the kitchen), I immediately strategized how best to pass the hours, how to make myself efficient. I even looked forward to this time, with all its possibilities and freedom.

A tall bookshelf stares down at my bed (maybe this is why I prefer to lie on my left side, so that I face the wall, away from all these titles). Over the course of my isolation, I had planned to make inroads on three books that had tested my patience for the better part of a year: *Jude the Obscure*, an historical fiction about some petty lord's daughter in the Edo period, and a Gershom Scholem biography. Very little came from any of this, very little was read. When I treat what should otherwise be entertainment like a chore, the chore is futile. On the other hand, I made a



significant dent in *Attack on Titan* during my Covid-stay. I don't feel guilty for watching the entirety of *Attack on Titan* a second time, I feel guilty for using this form of entertainment as a means to procrastinate my books—after all, which is more likely to facilitate realizations and growth in my life? I failed to write a single line during these three weeks.

But I've never had difficulty reading at work. In fact, this is when I can really lose myself in the text, when I really enjoy these things most (these things which require effort to begin, to break from our inertia of fast pleasures, but quickly become fulfilling and wonderful in their own right: forcing myself to imbibe a half hour of Faulkner is painstaking but, when done right, I'll have taken something beautiful and voluminous from my day—otherwise there's no function to this life). It would be easy enough to scroll at work, but I find myself reading, jotting down some thoughts, scribbling the odd poem when I sit

behind the front desk. During the many free hours in my apartment, I can begin to read, write, or perform some other difficult but meaningful task whenever I choose. But I rarely do. While time isn't completely limitless during this window, in the sense that I must go to sleep by 11, the notion of five hours' leisure is, I must say again, *suffocating*, unreal (not that five hours of leisure is by any means sufficient). I look forward to these hours of freedom, as I can spend them alongside any of the fast pleasures I desire, the very things I long for during the workday. At the front desk, however, I must simply pass the time, not relish in it—and yet, once I begin reading here, I become fully immersed, only brought back to reality through the sniffing salts on pedestrians' boots clamoring through the two sets of double doors before me. There's a twisted feeling of surplus during my work hours.



*Ars Poetica (something I wrote at work)*

Conflict is static.

More than ever, I question  
whether happiness  
is the most important thing.  
It's only important  
to be at peace with yourself.  
That doesn't mean tranquility (Nyquil)  
in most cases, at least.  
I have two jobs, both  
requiring me to pass  
a lot of passive time.  
They're quiet and don't ask  
much of me. I should  
have enough energy  
for passion projects  
at the end of the day,  
after work, that is,  
I should have more energy  
for myself, at the end of the day,

than my friends have.

They have to work harder than me.

But it's still difficult to use this time.

It's not because I'm

too tired – but I am

easily fatigued ever since

catching Covid. (I'll spare you any more, this is

just the official story I tell myself. It's the drugs.)

You see, it's difficult to work

for myself.

At work, there's a boss.

For artists, there's an audience.

For myself, I try to

imagine a descendant

finding my work one day

and enjoying it,

and for a moment it works,

I work.

## *Our Time Away from Work*

Art must be familiar enough to the audience so that the piece is not completely alien (the words on this page are hopefully comprehensible and grounded so that you can follow the course of my thoughts—I am using common language familiar to both of us); but also vague enough to let the audience feel a bit of confusion and danger, a bit of groundlessness which forces them to form their own associations with the artwork in question. With these two conditions met, the audience can 1) relate to emotions and beliefs that they have already felt and 2) perhaps take a step forward in their development of self.



*Mirror*

Can I tell you something?

Only one sexual experience will remain with me till I die: both of us faced the mirror and, just for a moment, as I looked at her, she looked at herself. I watched her as she watched herself. Surely the high water mark of my erotic life.



*We don't belong to ourselves*

I devised the perfect joke while watching a relatively unimportant match at the World Cup: Mexico and Poland, semi-periphery in the global political hierarchy, semi-periphery in the global soccer hierarchy.

When I told my brothers, I qualified the thought as follows: "I came across a doubly-niche tweet the other day, something which could have only appealed to a specific group of historian/academic-soccer fans like myself." My brothers did indeed laugh when I explained to them the core-periphery basics of the world system, and the utterly middling performance of the Polish and Mexican soccer teams in recent years. But I suppose they may have found the joke a little flat if they knew it had come straight from my own perverted mind. A 'hit tweet' on the other hand, is legitimized by the group.





## *The Front Desk II*

I'm training a new hire to work the front desk. I'll be working upstairs from now on, full-time. The work is tedious and my windowless office is located directly across from my boss's, but the pay is too good to turn down. So here I am, behind the front desk for a few more days with an Armenian girl who is actually a couple of years older than me, but somewhat small and so treated like a teenager by the visitors and the other full-time staff. She is still learning English. Visitors come with Armenian last names but whose mailing address and upbringing are indistinguishable from my own, at least in the macro. When the new girl has trouble typing their names or communicating the museum layout, they are visibly uncomfortable.

The liberal fantasy of an incompetent cashier can only sustain itself so long as the person behind the register doesn't require the customer to think

about themselves. Let me give two examples: 1) In my own case, I might resemble the customer's earnest, well-spoken son who received a similar education yet, for some inexplicable reason to them, still works in the service industry. This combination often results in an anxious, spectacled fellow who at first over-identifies with their place of work (an intellectually or historically rich tourist site, let's say) but psychically crashes when the realities of labor and non-profitism begin to reveal themselves even in these last bastions of ideological purity: a museum, a library, whatever. 2) An 'incompetent' cashier—in this case, one who is still learning English—is ordinarily treated as a flat representation of difference, and the customer will always find themselves in the dominant position of this difference (the cashier *serves* them for christ's sake). For Armenian Americans visiting this museum, however, they already pride themselves on their Armenian-difference from general society—that's why they're here in the first

place. In the case of ‘the new girl’ then, the English-deficient difference of the incompetent cashier reflexively shines a light back onto the customer. They find this difference quite vexing when the incompetent cashier is Haitian, but they are only uncomfortable, deeply uncomfortable, when the Armenian cashier has trouble with English: the Armenian-difference is a source of pride for these customers, so how can they possibly reconcile this with someone they would normally belittle were it not for this cashier’s ultimate *embodiment* of Armenian-difference, their *own* difference! She is more Armenian than *them*! Do you like - anymore - Museum information? No, we’re good! (Let’s just go, honey.)









*The Front Desk III*

Is anyone still here? Anyone still reading? I feel as though I'm just talking to myself—or maybe someone will join me later (you, whoever you are).

Maybe we're only drawn to the idea of authors and artists because we would like to be one ourselves, one of the last culturally acceptable lifepaths which acknowledges our G-d Complex but is also respected in a way which politics or economics is not—and these industries are the two primary pillars of our G-d Complex, today. Maybe we still respect the artist because we believe that they are fundamentally incapable of changing anything: the power to change is seen as fundamentally corrupt.

*I Won't Act*

“There are three types of Armenians today, Elias: Those from the Republic itself, who are more Russian than their other two counterparts; those from Persia, who don't want to associate with those Armenians from outside of Persia; and those Armenians dispersed throughout the rest of the Middle East. American Armenians have come from all three of these groups, but they are more or less American now, so I'm just talking about these three. After 1948, my home in the Armenian quarter was taken by the Israelis and so I lived in Beirut for some time. The first time I tried to cross the river home, I was caught and briefly jailed, where I told the attendant soldier that I was just trying to go home, and he told me ‘Yes, I understand you. I feel for you. Really. But I just can't let you.’ A week later I tried to cross the river again and that time I made it. I hid in the Jerusalem monastery for a year. Every time there was a car bombing or something, the army would

look for young people in our quarter, ask for papers, and throw them in jail if they didn't have any. And so that was how I was caught. I was deported to America where an uncle of mine had already moved. I had only been in this country six months when I was drafted."

"For Vietnam?"

"For Vietnam. I was sent to a Fort in Kansas for training. Before we were sent out, I had a birthday and requested three days' leave: my twin sister and I, no matter where we each were in the world or what was happening around us, have always been together for our birthday. So the three days' leave was to be with her. When I got home, I learned that my father was dying, in the hospital (he lasted a few more years, it turned out). No one had told me. Some people said, 'you could just arrange welfare checks for your mother and sister.' I would not accept this—this was my family, I wouldn't leave them."

What checks? I wondered.

“So I stayed. I went to college with the GI Bill and worked as an engineer for thirty years, retired when I was only fifty five.”

After arguing a bit about welfare, I had tried to joke with this man about an attack-ad against Dr. Oz’s senatorial campaign which had been funded by the Armenian National Committee of America (which, from the outside, looks like a relatively toothless AIPAC).

“Well, he *is* Turkish, but he’s also a Republican,” shrugging his shoulders.

He did not seem to dislike me because of our political differences, I think, aware of the profoundly determinate role that each person’s historical experience plays in our lives.

Nevertheless, I was often-as-not treated as a comic presence in his life, our workplace being

so small and comprised only of people closer to his age than mine. I wore strange glasses and was expected to parrot the liberal discursive line whenever general politics were alluded to in the office (general politics were luckily subordinate to intra-Armenian debates or politics from within the museum: budgets and values and culture).

I want to tell him, and I think he understands in any case, 'There are certain things that my generation believe which can't be treated as comic anymore, simply because a third of the country believes in this shit now. Forget about the culture war—we all hate tech-libertarianism and we all want state intervention in the market, stimulus checks, and to a lesser degree, loan forgiveness, state energy, national healthcare. You can't treat me as an oddity anymore, and I think you are aware of that just like you are aware of the tremendous historical shifts that have happened over the course of your own life. But you still don't have to worry, because very few of us, and

certainly not I, really believe that we can do anything about this, so we will wait for others to create and sustain political movements for us. Or, maybe you *will* have to worry about this, but there's no reason to feel any personal blame towards me, as I increasingly feel that *I* have no responsibility or power in my historical actions. Were *you* an historical actor of any great importance as you moved from place to place, exercising individual choices, true, but within a tightly constricted time of powerful states and historical flux in the form of Israeli deportations and American conscription? And was it really possible for you to leave your mark on the course of history when history again changed as the New Deal order withered, as the American state receded from the general welfare and from our personal lives? At a time of even greater chaos (which can actually be quite useful in 'changing history' in the direction of your own beliefs, aspirations), but now having lost the shallow footholds made by the Labor armistice with

Capital during a short few decades in the middle of the century, this Reaganite chaos would—'

Getting ahead of myself. Here's the gist, what I'd really like to tell this Armenian man in the office: We young won't act on our beliefs, so you don't have to worry about us. Even though our beliefs lie in conflict with one another, we are both of the opinion that we *are not* historical actors, and, because of this, the office can remain at peace.





*The Head of Operations*

From a collection of porches stretched out across  
the city–  
what was once the perimeter of the city, now the  
city itself–  
isolated eyes, maybe in the company of one or  
two friends,  
silently watch the skyline like they're facing  
Jerusalem.

I'm told that the city is empty.  
The tallest buildings are the emptiest, its first  
floor pond full of life  
and the chain coffee is at least staffed, filling the  
cups of a few women in suits and tourists.  
All the other floors are busy siren calling former  
acolytes  
Come Back to The Office

“We’re better suited for rich kids’ apartments  
than cubicles,”  
the halls whisper to each other in hushed tones.  
“What was that?” The Head of Operations, the  
only fucker in the office,  
marches through the hollow space and quiets the  
cubicles  
by his presence alone. The cubicles are both  
resentful and scared of the guy.

When he goes home each night, divorced and  
lost the kids,  
he writes a few lines (bars) for his legions of  
admirers on Reddit.  
He’s quite popular, but much too right-leaning  
for polite society (after all, he has a job to keep)  
so he remains anonymous, venting and taking  
meaning from life  
in the intimate space afforded by words without a  
name.

He lives in Newton, far from the skyline. His son  
is one of the few  
souls who actually live in one of those stupid  
high-rises we all watch in unison.  
They haven't spoken in awhile. The Head of  
Operations doesn't have many  
friends, any really. So when he doesn't write, he  
consumes,  
listens to TruAnon, and wishes, above all, that he  
could comment on their Patreon.  
(Most of all, he appreciates Liz. What... analysis!)

The small crowd who actually believes all the  
Epstein shit is, unfortunately,  
uninterested in his kind of philosophizing –  
most, at least. (But Liz–not Liz!)  
Alas, to comment on the Patreon  
– to leave *any* digital trace apart from his Reddit  
prophecies –  
would threaten the anonymity he'd been fostering  
for years.

All that down the drain! No, it's too big a risk.  
(She would never know how he felt.)

He would appreciate Liz from afar, like his own followers appreciated him.

True, he had received one or two messages from his fans over the years, but this never satisfied the itch that he had always been searching for.

Oh, to be a fan! To have a G-d! What was it about these celebrities who came so close?

Well, because *others* had deified them! He'd seen the comments, he'd seen the numbers, he *knew* that Liz had already been made a G-d! Such appeal!

Deep in the recesses of the Head of Operations's psyche, he never yearned for Liz to 'pick' him (although this was undeniably part of the equation).

He yearned for a moment of release, a moment of abdication:

he yearned to have a G-d himself! To be told what to do and congratulated and praised when he was occasionally asked to be his own G-d.

And, it's true, the thought crossed his mind on more than one occasion that anonymity was beneficial for the follower as much as it was the G-d.







*Grove*

G-d

if I had a first born son I think I could sacrifice  
him for some cooler weather right now  
you just gotta test me.

Boston

No longer a left liberal capital simply because the  
headquarters have been democratized  
among a slightly larger group than before, akin to  
the move from aristocracy to bourgeois control,  
and so nowadays LiBeRaLs (PMC, here) set up  
shop in every town of 40,000+  
because their brand of associating with the world  
is also the ascendant ideology in capitalism, it  
has the inside track  
because it can coexist more easily with  
globalization, taking in refugees and all that  
–not saying that’s wrong, but sometimes  
humanitarianism

is an easier host to the capitalist bug, which  
needs us  
to take in refugees only to blow some steam from  
the pot before it boils over  
and accept immigrants as a welcome addition to  
the low-wage labor supply:  
the need for more low-wage workers in the U.S. is  
the same force that caused the refugee crisis  
in the first place.

Boston  
is assimilated to this way of thinking just like  
every other city in the country  
give it a break  
everywhere's bad but you still find yourself  
enjoying some places  
even when you know all about it—you can't help it.

Roy Hargrove and Father John Misty,  
that's what I heard strolling around Berklee the  
other day

what I understand to be an overpriced  
conservatory  
which is decent nonetheless but looked down on  
by the music-world.

That wouldn't have been enough,  
but luckily there is an additional something in  
the people here  
(like anywhere else, but just a little different in  
each place<sup>3</sup>)  
just now starting to boil

<sup>3</sup> The Grove: a beautiful refuge for travelers, but one with little undergrowth. The trees preside as kings here, high above the grass and flowers; omnipotent and indifferent hosts to the ticks. Or perhaps I'm mistaken: maybe this is a certain grouping of ascetics and monks? Still indifferent, but only because they have no need to consider others in order to find their own peace—individualism at its greatest extreme. The trees don't care if the grass is happy, they are too busy being happy themselves. Or maybe it's that the trees don't care if the grass is happy because the trees cannot care at all—this is what happens to someone who can't accept to wait for "politics, art, images, and people" to court him because he was too impatient and showed his hand, too desperate to give his attention to something. This is how I see the lonesome group of trees that a traveler (refugee) would stumble upon in this fairy tale setting—a grove.

just now, though, they can't say no to the constant  
temptation

lured back to immaturity:

we used to be courted when politics, art, images,  
and people demanded our attention,  
now we demand to *give*, voluntarily, our attention  
to something, anything, at any given time.















## *Holiday Card*

Have you ever seen a ‘Holiday Card’? They belong to a certain class, but the unholy sentiment can be found in all corners of dominant culture today. The exhibitionism you find in social media tends to box each of us up into a brand—the clothes we wear, the kinds of artists we listen to, the alley of humor we ascribe to. And we do this voluntarily, contorting ourselves into an easily digestible object of consumption because it’s hip (probably because of sex). We need our ‘audience’ to understand us in the palm of their hand—quite literally, if you’ll excuse the metaphor.

Well, this aesthetic phenomenon took a slightly different tone a few years ago when Facebook was still king. Life updates and milestones, paragraphs and entire albums of photos rather than a select few: Holiday Cards hold onto this antiquated respectability, a view of life rooted in

1990s-2000s Americana which prizes achievements, status, and familial success in a more hamfisted yet sincere dialect than we speak today. The self-objectification of Holiday Cards turns our *entire* lives into an object of consumption, with all of its events and regalia composing the self-repeating patterns of our peacock feathers. The more recent self-objectification you find in Instagram and especially TikTok represents our culture's anthropophagy in its matured end-logic: marriages and children are still milestones to be consumed and posted, but we no longer have to wait for these events, or even for interesting *thoughts* to come around (blogs; Twitter, to some extent; possibly Reddit) when we are now able to rapidly post content simply because we *identify* with a brand of living. The Facebook of yesterday was slower.

The uniqueness of our 'shitposting' (a blurry photo of a bookshelf, a dog on the street, an

off-the-wall meme which captures *something* about our present state of mind, something which mirrors the breakneck pace of our thoughts) contradicts itself: the avowed uniqueness of our ephemera does not belong to itself, but to a wider brand. When we come across shitpost-worthy sights and reflexively take a picture, it is because we already envision that ephemera-of-life within the frame of our profile, as objects of consumption, objects meant to be understood not on their own terms, but under the umbrella of our own object-self.

The 'brand' of ourselves which we submit to on Instagram dictates how we interpret the images of our life beyond the screen. We belong to that branded version of us, and by way of our identification with that floating brand (to repeat, something which exists *outside* of ourselves), we will *always* have content to offer up to our 'audience,' an audience of enslaved consumers just like ourselves.

The lifelong self-objectification of Facebook and Holiday Cards is a slow process which is primarily concerned with social rank and milestones. These markers are still vital to the self-objectification of today's social media (how ideologically pure you are, how ideologically vocal) but this new drug works a little faster. (And yes, it's quite clear to me too that the rapidity of life-consumption has also made its way into Facebook—the binary distinction I've drawn between 2000's and 2020's consumption is only made to flesh out its trajectory in recent years.)

We white suburbanite kids (although most of us have now made our way into city centers, and only to push those city's former residents out to certain suburbs again) tend to recoil in horror from Holiday Cards for two reasons: 1) we are simply ashamed of our class and our family's ideological and social affectations, which run exactly counter to the cultural affectations which are most highly prized today, on Instagram for

example; and 2) we find Holiday Cards' 'slower' life-consumption and self-objectification ridiculously old-school. We're too busy showing off our depop thighs at a rally, positive message and all encrusted in the caption—we think there's an edge to it.





## *On Progressives*

1

Progressivism combines 1) its adherents' effort to historically advance their native ideology and set of morals, and 2) its adherents' awareness that their set of morals is, for the most part, shared only by members of their own class.

This leads Progressivism to an unfortunate contradiction produced by today's political climate: the political necessity to describe the working class's sense of the world, their experience in general, as *just*, even as they are simultaneously shocked with this group's stated politics. I'm not saying that poor people *are* or *are not* conservative, I'm only relating the Progressive mindset. And while this is a very ridiculous generalization (and all ideologies generalize so don't feel so good about yourself), we should consider, for example, working class European sentiment towards (non-Ukrainian) refugees. Just

as the British working class has operated somewhat uniquely throughout history as a result of benefiting somewhat from colonial treasures, the working class in many countries at the top of the world order have little solidarity with ‘the rest’ because—at least once upon a time, if not now—they are kept just a little closer to the ruling class than their international equivalents. (This false alliance with the rich hurts the metropole’s working class, at least in the long-term.)

2

Traditional liberals follow the same contradictory course, but to a slightly lesser degree: their more explicit devotion to property-as-morality (more on this in a moment) distances them from a supposedly infallible working class.

3

Many Progressives, meanwhile, also deify the working class but renege their own agency in an effort to ‘stay consistent’. They want to

historically advance a certain ideology and set of morals, but their political program is written according to what they *believe* to be the working class ideology. American Progressives and leftists of all stripes, at least rhetorically, disavow their instinctual ideological tracts and morals to better align themselves with their truly *just* image of the poor (“unlearning”).

While political flexibility and empathy are extremely important in any character and at any point of history, this lack of moral conviction in oneself is dubious and rather problematic in a group of political actors (the PMC) with a relatively high concentration of power. We need bravery too.

4

Conservatives, at least rhetorically, do *not* seek to historically advance their native ideology, but rather seek to ‘return’ our cultural situation to a supposedly stable state of affairs. No one is

deified except for property relations, which speak for themselves as an innately moral set of laws: you have every right to kick your roommate out of your shared home if you are the lawful ‘master’ tenant; just as slave owners had every right to treat their ‘property’ as they wished—an admission which, when we follow its logic to the end, also explains nearly every labor relation between then and now (customer service, hourly wages). Those who lack property and the benefits that come with it are vilified by conservatives rather than celebrated—their lack of power is itself a sin according to their propertied sense of morals. Liberals essentially share this worldview.

5

As such, leftists and possibly some Progressives are at least attempting to embark on a brave new course: leaving the *propertied* worldview which has dominated most cultures since the dawn of surplus. But it will take a little more polishing

before it's ready to seriously challenge the existing order.



*At the risk of appealing to Peterson-types*

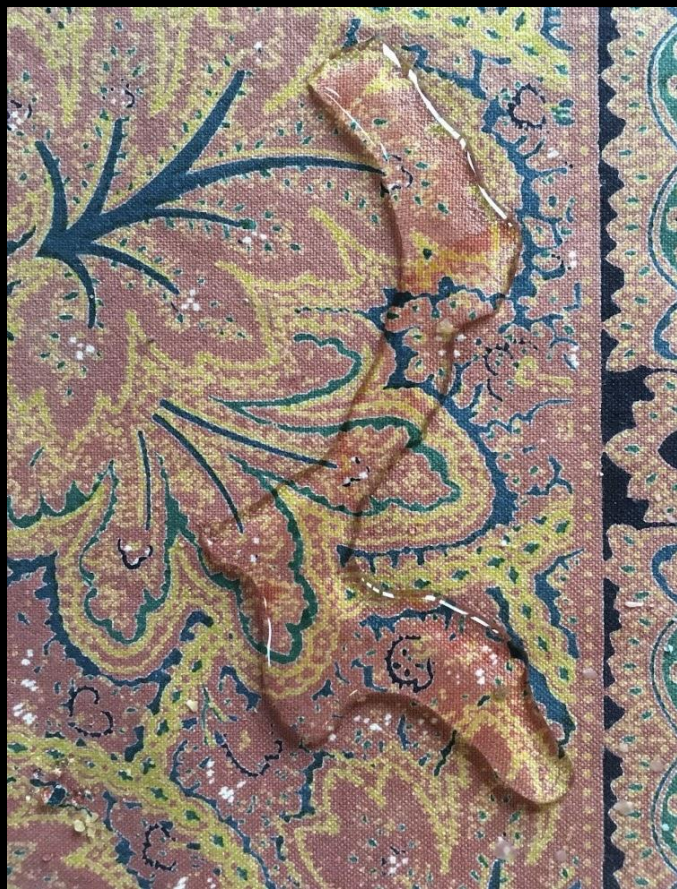
We (culturally speaking) are simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by *knowing-what-he-wants*. At our most reactionary, we associate sexual confidence in men with a proclivity towards manipulation, since we are afraid of anything resembling power (and our pathological aversion to power leads us to believe that interpersonal social relations between two individuals—gender, race—cannot be overcome). You'll have a rather easy time locating a sexy profile from a woman and/or queer social media user, whereas straight men are more rare in this regard. Surely part of this is due to the internal politics and expectations we find in masculine spaces—although this can't account for the legions of horny soy boys out there: I assume that there are quite a few of these fellows who would otherwise grant their followers some muscles or happy trails, but a majority of straight men (and all social media users, actually) intuitively

recognize that, as part of our cultural contract, straight men should generally avoid *being sexy*, as their outward display of sexual confidence immediately generates caution in our culture—it is associated with predation, objectification, et cetera (this doesn't mean that men behave *modestly* when they log-on, but they *are* implicitly encouraged to). On the other hand, women/queer *sexy* profiles (forgive the bastardized category, I'll have to hope you read this in good faith) are permissible because they subvert the assumed predation of sexually confident heterosexual men. We encourage ourselves, culturally speaking, to subvert this assumed baseline (*knowing-what-he-wants*) because it has for so long represented the default setting of global culture's gender relations. This state of affairs is quickly turning on its head, however—and what could be more representative of global culture than its failure to recognize cultural/historical shifts? The Peterson-types advocate a ridiculous *return* to remedy this soy-ification of men, but to dismiss



the historical shift altogether, and just to spite  
the Peterson-type's analysis, also misses the  
point.







*Profit and Consent*

*Eyes Wide Shut*'s Bill Hartford, played by Tom Cruise, is the spitting image of today's *sub*: he doesn't *want* to have sex but feels that he *should*. He only 'goes along with' flirtations—he refrains from contributing to flirtatious encounters and makes no effort to move the conversation 'further down the line,' so to speak. (Flirtation, in the abstract, is to move closer and closer to 'saying it out in the open,' slowly revealing and subsequently acting upon your desire for one another.) But Bill doesn't prevent or discourage the women flirting with him either, responding neutrally as woman after woman each edge closer to an erotic promise: Bill follows the procrastinated path of least resistance. He never makes an effort to 'say it out loud'. He only stalls long enough so that the promise can never be reached, and the act is never consummated.

A related scenario: a friend of a friend recently told me about a coworker who had flirted with her for several months. After inviting her to the hot tub in his apartment, he revealed that he had a girlfriend—his flirtations were subdued for the rest of the night. How can we explain this fellow? The simple answer lands upon a man who finds flirtation enjoyable but doesn't actually want to say-the-promise-out-loud, not entirely unlike Tom Cruise's character (and this is how plenty of young people use Tinder—the swiping and sparse conversation is an end in itself, as many users have no intention of actually meeting up with their matches).

I tend to believe that this fellow falls in another category. He always wanted to 'get with' her, but he also wanted an 'out': without exception, *the final act of flirtation is transgression*. And in this particular case, he understood that the consummation of their flirtation would commit an additional, more explicit social

taboo—cheating on his girlfriend. Our protagonist wanted my friend to commit the transgression to at least absolve him from being the active participant in this taboo—it’s easier to ‘go along with it’ when you are the subordinate party (and the masochist/sub, in many cases, is actually the party with more control—remember that our hero invited my friend to his hot tub in the first place).

The two parties have beat around the bush, gradually edging closer to ‘saying it out loud’ until they’re more and more sure of the other’s shared desire. Even without the taboo of infidelity, however, ‘saying it out loud’ is to *leap*, often guessing before you are completely certain of the other party’s desires (or sometimes *acting* without a care for the other’s desires). And American culture, more than any other, is infuriatingly polite. We can’t do anything without the other party’s *official* approval (and for understandable reason). “As long as it’s alright with you, maybe we could actually do takeout

tonight?” No damn it, it’s not alright, I’m on a budget and we had already decided to make pasta at home an hour ago! But if I say this out loud, *I* have transgressed. In many other cultures, the first speaker would simply say: “I actually want to do takeout tonight.” The positive statement of disagreement leaves more room for conversation between the two parties than our polite, ostensibly (and often falsely) democratic culture allows in the United States.

And to really say it out loud now: consent culture was born from this American culture of politeness and false democracy. Flirtation in itself treads into the unknown, risking transgression; there is always 1) an unequal allocation of power between the two flirts, and 2) a clear absence of rules in the flirtatious relationship. After all, once the rules have been set, a contract in place (saying in out loud: *I am* interested in you), the flirtation violently ends, its previous state of possibility forced into an answer



(yes, no, something in between). At one extreme reading of consent culture, we would like to completely erase the dangers of transgression by contractualizing sexual relations—that is, forgoing flirtation, since these relations are unpredictable and negotiated fully between the two individuals (dangerous but, in my opinion, vital characteristics).

And we are understandably afraid of the wider social dynamics at play when two individuals relate to one another in public (a man and a woman at the bar, a white and a Black passenger on the train). There are cultural protections—when it comes to consent culture, these take the form of *expectations*—which we can set in motion to account for these wider social relations. As Yanis Varoufakis notes in *Another Now*, consent culture is preferable to “sex under duress”, but it also precludes the possibility for two individuals to create their own rules, their

own world between one another.<sup>4</sup> Here comes the supposedly radical line that heterosexual flirtation is unethical, as the unequal distribution of power between man and woman leads some to the conclusion that ‘all heterosexual relations are non-consensual.’

This egregious doctrine of our time can be found in all corners of our culture: class traitors do not exist, genuine romantic love between those of

<sup>4</sup> “Transactional sex was, of course, better than sex under duress. But it did nothing to enrich, empower or liberate women – or indeed men. Only a readiness to fall in love could do that, because falling in love was, in her opinion, the exact opposite of free-market, transactional sex... falling in love means surrendering control to an ‘other’. It threatens the foundational ideology – of exchange value, of individual agency and self-determination – of financialized capitalism.” – *Another Now*, Yanis Varoufakis, p. 162.

“Think about it: sex cannot be good and thus truly consensual, if I am giving you something in order to take something back. It can only be good and thus truly consensual, if I do it because I can’t help myself. It is only good if I have lost control and I am loving it. Good sex, authentically consensual sex, can never be contractual, with specified terms of exchange. Nor can it be governed by codes of fairness nor confined to certain types of relationships. Like two mirrors facing one another, two lovers generate an infinite self-reflection. Whatever it is that they are giving one another can never be itemized or quantified.” – *Another Now*, p. 166.

different ages cannot exist—at base, we disbelieve the idea of different people loving each other. *We believe in sameness because we are afraid of power: empathy is dead.*<sup>5</sup> As a result, cultural ‘protections’ via contractualized relations are set in place: this is the leading ideology of the day.<sup>6</sup> Even worse, however, is our propagandistic framing of that ideology: that our *contracts* which we take from the broader cultural context (consent culture, so this thinking goes, protects against the monolithic, unempathetic relations we enter

<sup>6</sup> “When we reconfigure societies to put exchange at their centre... we violate our nature. Humans thrived by hunting together, cooking communally, making music and telling stories around a blazing fire at night. Sure, the societies that replaced these communal practices with market exchanges unleashed great powers, allowing them to overwhelm others that did not. But there was a price to pay. Market exchange dissolves what makes us human. It is why our souls feel sick. By allowing exchange value to triumph over doing things together for their own sake – for the sheer hell of it – we end up crying ourselves to sleep at night. It’s what depresses us and enriches the self-help gurus and big pharma.” – *Another Now*, Yanis Varoufakis, p. 218.

during *any* interpersonal setting) are in fact *democratic*, since they protect the socially disadvantaged party. Well, we are certainly *safer* today under consent culture than we are with sex-under-duress, but the measly ceiling of our contract-thinking prevents even the possibility of love (this contractualization of society encroaches on every corner of our life, not just sex): we have little freedom to negotiate 'the rules' of our relations between each other, as these are increasingly determined from an outside force (expectations, dogma).

## *Scroll, Delay, Cum*

Why do we scroll?

On one hand, Big Tech has fashioned the perfect erotic device to keep us in its grip. We're not interested in the content of the next article, image, or meme when we scroll: we're interested in the moment spent between these things, when the *promise* that the next piece of content will actually satisfy us, after hours of unsatisfactory scrolling, still lives. In this sense, the scrolling is infinitely erotic: the erotic, flirtatious promise is intensified the more we scroll as our longing and sense of frustration expands past a new breaking point with each new article our thumb lands on.

In another sense, however, scrolling represents a new, transhuman form of eroticism where a minimum level of orgasm is unnaturally suspended long past the moment of its natural death. In 'normal' erotic flirtation, we first have to

overcome a series of obstacles (broaching polite conversation, broaching impolite conversation, broaching our erotic partner's interest in us, et cetera). What's more, the moment of fulfillment—when the erotic promise is finally 'said out loud' to one another—is only a moment. Orgasm subsides. But when we step into that transhuman eroticism we all know so well from scrolling, we are catered to as we come: we face no obstacles in the digital pleasure-dome, no artful beating-around-the-bush. And worst of all, the *digital* act of fulfillment is indefinitely long and without fluctuation, no peaks or troughs to speak of: a minimum, dulled speed is kept so that we can maintain a rudimentary moment of orgasm for as long as we remain in our scrolling flow-state.







## *Voice*

1

When we Tweet or post an infographic to our Instagram story, we are behaving as if we were *voices*, as if we were speaking at a press conference for a public eager to point out our contradictions and immorality. And why wouldn't we, when there is a feeling of permanency to digital engagement?

2

Although we can delete our tweet, our 'audience' has a long time to read it, analyze it, and categorize its author. And when we worry about how our audience thinks of us, this self-consciousness is really a proxy for our own perception of ourselves: no one is really taking too much stock in their mutuals' personal discography of Tweets—no one except each discography's own author, ourselves. We imagine that our 'audience' is thoroughly analyzing our

life alongside us when in reality our ordinary days and our ordinary opinions are actually experienced alone.

3

When we really *speak*, however, conversations pass and our ideas are fleeting. When I speak with an old friend, I trust that they will have changed since the last time we met—naturally. If, in my view, they had once acted immorally, I would like to give them the benefit of the doubt and believe that they had changed (I can say the same for myself). I try to hold strangers in good esteem until I am proven otherwise—besides, what kind of life is it to assume *ill* of strangers until proven otherwise? And in the case that this old friend-turned-stranger still behaves or believes differently than I, I'd also like to think that there's a window of acceptable difference between friends. I try.

The written log of our past Tweets, on the other hand, connects us directly and unnaturally with our past selves: it is always there for our ‘audience’ to see. Today’s thoughts are, with enough scrolling, curated alongside those of many years ago. This sacrilegious, graven image of our life trajectory—our trajectory being the maturation of our thought and character—inhibits and discourages growth: our digital proximity to our ‘old’ self (in the form of old Tweets, for example) implies a loyalty to our past positions (which only we, the author, are ever really concerned with) since we tend to delete any past Tweets which we’ve deemed unsavory after-the-fact. To change (*not* to delete the Tweet despite disagreeing with it now—or at least *feeling* as though you should disagree with it now) is to open ourselves up to the imagined piranha-journalists at our press conference calling attention to our moral inconsistencies. We

understand our digital personas to be official:  
voices.

5

So why wouldn't this paranoia seep into our 'ordinary,' physical world too? Our relationships can no longer handle ambiguity or difference: 'You can either fall in line with the same dogma that I do or we can no longer be friends. After all, our friendship is only possible because we each love the same dogma, not because I love you.' Don't mistake me, fascists are no friend: political agendas are still important in our relationships. But those of us who can only bear the mask of connection with people who are the same as us, people who belong to the same church—they are not much friendlier. This impulse comes either from a sense of moral narcissism or a fragile sense of moral wandering, where friendships can only last through the sanctioning of a third party—a shared dogma between friends, friends who cannot possibly offer supportive friendships

if their basis for empathy is measured by their own moral righteousness or that of an infallible third party.

6

We know that this is true, that friendships are suffering due to our historical conditions and that people who are averse to *difference* will suffer the most, because, simply put, *people* are different. Some traits are shared and some distinct, but the years of the pandemic have thoroughly convinced each one of us that we are alone-unique, at the very least. Some experiences we share, though isolated-‘yes, all people must feel this way when they scroll’-and some things we know to be even more distinct from one another because of these atomized years.

7

Our digital personas, by the addictive design of social media and Big Tech engineering, display time in a flat line: our periods of growth and

regression, ideological fluctuation, et cetera, are fused into a single incoherent character who, unlike a 'physical' friend whose conversations truly pass, we can study all at once. We do our best to make our digital selves coherent by latching onto a fixed post, a dogma, and sticking to that line. This way we can't be terrorized by those journalists so easily—and so we also begin to think of ourselves as moralistic *voices* when we leave Twitter, when we talk with friends, family, strangers.

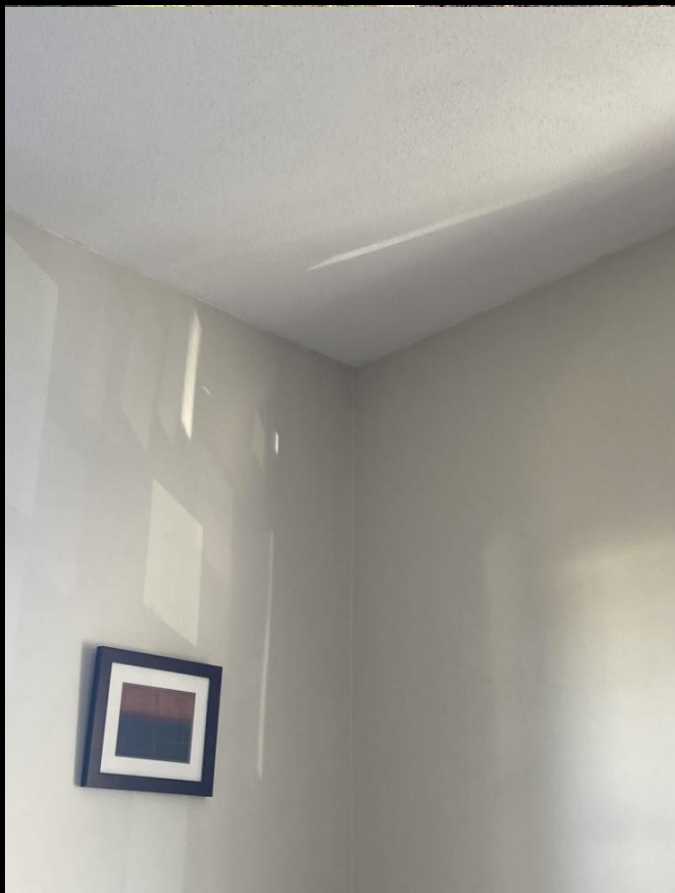
8

Maturation comes with vulnerability: we have to accept the risk of being wrong. Living in trepidation, afraid that we will be judged poorly by history, is no way to live. After all, we can't assume that historical judgment will be any good. We have to conjure the strength to act according to our *own* sense of morality rather than behave as if our future descendants were watching us, as if they will read our Tweets and study us and

perhaps condemn us too. We have to live for more than their eyes, for an imagined audience, when we are really not perceived at all despite the wealth of Tweets and other digital detritus that a stranger could scroll through if they were so inclined—but none ever will be, just as we are disinclined to thoroughly examine others like we hope they will for us—is this what they mean when they talk about the Singularity? I am fully aware that, throughout history, the self has always been created by our imagined audience. But this unnatural bridge to our past spells something new and inhuman about today's relationships, something worse about tomorrow's.









## *Improvisation*

1

We measure mastery along a line with two poles: mastery through meticulous practice and mastery through improvisation. We usually prefer the former in most cultures, even if we might personally prefer spontaneity. Beethoven's refinement is more revered than the direct quality of Miles Davis because we can more easily understand time-intensive hard work: even if it's the hard work of a genius, the symphony is paradoxically more accessible to us than the unattainable brilliance of improvisation, perhaps because we can imagine *ourselves* writing the symphony if we only had the work ethic and the time. In truth, these two approaches—refinement and improvisation—are entirely different mediums expressing entirely different things. The narrative structure of music which emerges through long contemplation is different from a narrative created in a single moment—stream of

consciousness has its own beautiful logic to it, its own meticulous structure, and the fact that it occurs naturally is a testament to our kind's profound ability to find connections in this world.

2

But strangely enough, as many will agree with me (and, if not, I apologize to offend, dear reader), the improvisation that you find in a theater can't hope to compare with the dedicated playwright, who thinks with time and care as they construct their plot, devises their characters who are compassionate enough to *be believed*.

3

Why does *theatrical* improvisation fail where it finds success in music? Because in popular theater today, characters are only written to be *believed*. Music is sufficiently distanced from verbal language, which is the form of language most closely assimilated to *culture* (human

culture, global culture, make of it what you will) due to the word's great ability to categorize and make connections. But these connections already form naturally in the world. And if we can say, bizarrely, that verbal language constitutes the *lingua franca* of humans' many modes of communication, then the playwright (who is normally closer to Beethoven than Miles) recognizes these connections and, attempting to translate the natural structure of life's spontaneity into a fictive metaphor, inscribes a graven image which can't keep up with reality (and I think that this is why historical fiction fails to impress, in the end, as the genre implies that *history* needs to be 'dressed up' to make it interesting). The original, real event inspires its fictitious representation in art. The artist recognizes the beauty in reality and, exposing their own compulsion, cannot rest until they channel this original feeling into an artistic world that the artist themselves has built—we have trouble letting things rest these days.

4

In short, theater is too close to reality. Yes we hear music in daily life, but the concepts which have found a host in the guts of verbal language, these form the bedrock of our sense of reality. Musical communication is already relegated to art, so Beethoven can attack our senses more easily. It can hit certain nerves and bring to mind emotional connections which we could never articulate in words. In this sense, music can touch the universality behind archetypes, whereas theater cannot avoid the baggage of cultural connotation when it uses these symbols—it's impossible for a play to evoke the universal *mother* without touching a particular cultural connotation. I tend to believe that this *can* be achieved in music, though we would never describe a passage as 'maternal'.

5

But I've lost the forest for the trees—I have plenty of respect for theater and my fascination with

musical communication seems unnecessarily competitive here. My issue today is with theatrical improvisation–improv. Because of its proximity to the verbal condition, this form of improvisation is too close to the natural structure of reality. This organic structure is already interesting, but improv implies that it isn't–otherwise, why would one take an interest in improv? Forgive the cliché, but we are always improvising–the stuff of conversation. To force the issue is to miss the point. As an aside, this is why Knausgaard succeeds and why the best literary movements of our time will either move towards the Norwegian's style of auto-fiction or an increasingly abstracted form. None of this in-between.

6

Music, by virtue of its distance from ordinary conversation and because it is already 'restricted' to art, claims access to those universals-behind-the-archetypes (see point 4).

There is a cathartic beauty in Beethoven's measured construction, things so complex that they could not have been made in a day (a chapel built by one man takes quite a while, and when we bow our heads, our level of respect for the maker's talent is proportional to his dedication to his craft, evidenced by the precision of the saints in the fresco smiling down to us). But Miles tells us things in the course of one musical conversation which we couldn't possibly imagine, conclusions which should take hours to reach and hours to develop. And if we did take so long to find the right structure (to write an improvised solo in advance) its magic would be ground to a pulp. There is something essential to directness which is at threat today, during our time of polish and coherence. It's what eroticism, now almost-extinct, is made of (I'm not talking about sex, which is alive and well; nor am I talking about self-care). It's the same substance that empathy is made of.



## *The Old*

The old must feel confused with the world and the present phase of history. We will be the same way at the end of our life. It's easier to understand our always-turbulent moments when we haven't seen very many moments. And it's easiest to understand the present when we haven't seen any other moments remarkably different from our own. We need a restricted window of view to be able to make any sense of, to be able to make a full, coherent picture of such a disparate and mammoth topic: the present, the world, et cetera. It's more difficult for an older person to understand the present because they have to make sense of the trajectory between their youth—the Cold War, let's say—up through today. They carry wisdom and biases from the past which make the present overwhelming and confusing, just as we will in a few years' time. We young people only have to make sense of today,

with no regard for the past or, more importantly,  
its relation to the present.

## *Eyes*

The longest stretches of my life spent without crying all seem to end when I remember that my father will die. And since the more noticeable features of his aging are really quite new, so too are my occasional floods of anticipatory grief (and the periods of stoic tearlessness are also growing in length and frequency as I distance myself from an overwhelmed and runny-nosed childhood, the youngest of three brothers). My father is losing his eyesight in a terrible fashion. A doctor injected something directly into his eye this morning, the first procedure of what will now be a monthly routine. Like my father, I've never been able to use contact lenses—how can those people manage to place something directly onto their eyes? You can imagine how viscerally disturbed I was when my mother texted the news this morning—I'm frightened by syringes too.

When we describe the world, we use sight above all other senses. When we describe our politics, we describe our 'worldview'. And we always see the world, we rarely hear it. Because of this, we are mostly unaware of our eyes. Just as we forget about our body during the times of the day when we're *not* in front of a mirror or camera, we're also unaware of our eyes. We're only reminded of sight when something is too bright. On the other hand, it seems that we're very often preoccupied with tasting our dinner or listening to music. Dinner and music are each relegated to specific activities at specific times. While we are always tasting and listening, certain activities ask us to isolate these senses.

*Feeling* and *seeing*, though, are more difficult to isolate. Our hands are always sensing the humidity of the air, our feet the roughness of the ground. And our sight, even when we are in the midst of a Picasso or standing in front of a sublime Californian valley, allows us entry into

the experience, but is always appreciated secondarily. There is something intellectual taking place in a museum, something mystical and possibly psychological taking place in front of the valley. Our eyes, for most of us at least, are the precondition for ecstatic experience but not the primary liaison between us and the ecstatic experience. The experience is 'happening' elsewhere, being felt elsewhere, and apart from our sight.

I'm certain that we can rewire ourselves, the relationship between sight and ecstatic experience (I don't know of anyone who thinks that blind people *feel* any less deeply) but it must be difficult. Moving to an alien country complete with an alien language and alien landscape, demands, first and foremost, that we integrate our *existing* selves into this *new* place. There's a negotiation between self and environment, and a continuity between your own sense of past and present. Loss of sight, though, demands that we

reformulate our existing self altogether. We haven't moved, the outside world hasn't moved: only one's own internal experience of the world has moved, and they are completely alone. It would be one thing if others around them were losing their sight (my father, unlike the characters in José Saramago's *Blindness*, is losing his vision somewhat gradually), but blindness is not infectious and so it 'hits' sporadically—the newly blinded person is rarely flanked by comrades who are also blind (and especially by those who are recently blinded like themselves).

My father is rarely moved to tears. If I were in his position, my mother (his wife) driving me home from the appointment where I had received the prognosis and first injection all within a span of an hour or two, I surely would have cried. My experience of life, month to month and day to day, would surely change, drastically I think. He normally bears these things alone though. And if

you can believe it anyways, he doesn't seem to mind the needle so much.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> While it'll never be what it was, my father's deteriorating sight has more or less stabilized. We can thank the needle.





## *Takes Two*

A friend of mine recently critiqued the many Jewish 'loopholes' which ease the restrictions outlined in the Talmud. For example, by placing stews in the baker's oven on Friday afternoon before sundown, Jews can ensure a warm meal on Saturday without lighting a fire themselves. Lighting a fire is prohibited on Shabbat, but a warm meal is not. There are quite a few of these 'loopholes' in Jewish law.

Well, these rituals are only loopholes if you think that the reason we perform them is to suffer (that we should not have a warm meal). Generally speaking, Christians follow the rules of their creed in order to suffer like Christ, who walked as a man. Christians, in turn, walk in Jesus's footsteps when they suffer as their saviour did, experiencing the same moral struggles, the same moral conclusions that he did as they control their own desires to act immorally. There are

democratic and empirical elements to Christian obedience, each worshipper needing to suffer for themselves in order to convince their corporeal person that their moral and spiritual inclinations are true (Harold Bloom).

Jewish ritual, on the other hand, offers a more direct relationship between power and obedience. The laundry list of divine laws was given to us and we were meant to follow it. There is a great history of negotiation and discord between the Jews and G-d, but our relationship to *law* (with the exception of abstaining from leavened bread during Passover, which is similar to Christian obedience) is more detached and straightforward: it's not about suffering. G-d told us not to light a fire on Shabbat, so we'll simply leave our meal in the already-lit oven—what does any of this have to do with a warm meal on Saturday? These 'loopholes' aren't meant to *get around* anything—we have a one-to-one, almost

face-value relationship to these laws. We perform what is allowed and we refrain from what isn't.

Again, the Christian prioritization of *suffering* consequently democratizes and individuates rituals: Christians perform rituals to 'know for themselves'. The Christian set of morals is internalized, embodied, carried, fostered within the corporeal body of man. Jews on the other hand, perform rituals, simply put, to obey. And so our relationship to these rituals—rituals which are more-often-than-not vessels for Jewish morals, but aren't always so—is detached. Whereas Christian law (at least in the United States) is indistinguishable from the individual Christian's person, Jewish law exists *outside* of the Jewish body, the Jewish spirit, and possibly the Jewish people. And in many respects, this allows for Jews to think more critically about our restrictions and rituals. It is easier to think critically about a power external to yourself than it is to examine a power which is not only a part

of you, but a power who you represent yourself, as *man* in the image of Jesus (Bloom). Some may find the comparison crass, but it's not so different from the state of labor today: many who feel more connected and passionate about their work and their workplace are more easily susceptible to manipulation from their employer. You have to work *and* enjoy it (Žižek).

The basis of Christian obedience is a recognition of oneself: the follower walks and suffers like Jesus, sees the moral value in Christian teachings, and *only then* 'knows' for themselves. Again, the Jewish follower is more detached. We view ourselves apart from power. Christian obedience views the 'right to conquest' (the right to dictate moral values, the right of G-d to govern) from an inverted vantage, where Jesus already exists within each follower and divine law is participatory. Jewish obedience views the 'right to conquest' for what it is: a relation of power. And despite Martin Luther's disparaging of this

‘overly subordinate’ relationship, one which supposedly fetishizes *the Word*, the Jewish recognition of difference between ruler and ruled is the first condition, in any relationship, to really speak to one another. Power is within every person and between every relationship, and requires negotiation (Jordan Peterson only says the first half of this). If we only accept divine law when we’ve been convinced that our ruler is *like us* (Christian obedience fashions its believers in the image of Jesus), we’ve already missed the point. You can’t speak between yourself and yourself.

To be a bit bolder—which is to speak in specifics—the Left’s popular adoption of intersectionality follows the same formula as Christian obedience. It’s certainly true that different members of society relate differently to the rest, and are *treated* differently *by* the rest. But when this logic of individuation meets political action (how can we form connections when *each*

person carries their own unique assemblage of privileges and social markers?), we are left with a completely atomized base of lonesome individuals. The popular adoption of intersectionality—and, really, it doesn't matter to me if you think more highly of its original theoretical prose, since intersectionality's atomized version is the form that we encounter on the street, in ordinary conversation, the popular adoption as its ultimate logic—the popular adoption of intersectionality is less concerned with universal concerns which may link people of differing status and experience, than it is concerned with establishing difference and legitimizing each person's own relationship to the world.

To be clear: the best way to legitimize our own subjective experience is to embrace our links with others. The fully atomized realization of intersectionality, which understandably places trust in *only* those with one's own shared

experiences, precisely follows the model of Christian obedience: power is legitimized through oneself. Only *trust* oneself (the American universalism is one of shared isolation—it's only fitting that liberalism's crusade against the John Wayne type has essentially reproduced the same archetype for its believers to emulate today, although today's form, via identity politics, is possibly *more* commercialized). The fractured and cold, dizzying and (you knew it was coming) schizophrenic world of the 21st century West fosters this mindset. And it's quite true, marginal people (Black women, for example) are often punished for trying to find universal bonds between their own experience and people who fall on another side of the intersectional-world-hierarchy. But when we completely forsake the possibility of empathy (a path that the popular Left has trod down, along with the rest of the globalizing world of politics and psyches) we can't hope to fight the root causes of any of our plights. We each have

different interests, of course, but is there no reconciliation between them? If that's really the case, then our solitary master has finally perfected its tactics of divide-and-conquer after honing its skills for thousands of years. We're lost.

Let me return to the case for 'Jewish obedience'. As Americans, we've understandably taken on a value set which prizes democratization and individual freedoms. But I'd like to claim that detachment from G-d and detachment from power are not so repressive as they may first appear. There is freedom in limits. The emancipation of man will *not* come through inclusion: becoming our own masters, stepping into the part of G-d already inside each of us, may not be so liberating after all. And acknowledging the existence of an Other—a brother, a master, or an equal who is separate from you—allows us to have a sense of self in the first place (a sense of our *own* moral value set



which the Christian model of suffering paradoxically stifles). A minimum of two speakers are needed to form a language. Without confusion, the moment when we all speak the same word, we no longer need to speak at all. It takes two to tango.



## *Mother-Wife*

Hollywood Westerns always seem to include a character who refers to his wife as 'mother'. I can't think of anything more disturbing to us, with all of our modern sentiments—and especially for men. Of course the love towards mother and the love towards wife are distinct from one another, but can this really explain the situation? Can this fully explain our disgust? I have two hypotheses.

1)

As painstakingly vile and penetrating as the mother-wife image may feel, a part of me wonders if this discomfort is specific to our historical moment. Calling your wife 'mother' in the 19th century indicates that we were once more open, deep in the human psyche, to the idea of a single woman—the woman at any point in life who was closest to you—filling the archetypal niche of *the* woman. This beloved

person is always attached to the idea of family, security, and, hopefully, happiness. Family, for many young people today, is simply those closest to you at a given time—friends and confidants change, or should we say accumulate, and many of us move from place to place.

Today, we find the conflation of sexual-woman and maternal-woman to be simultaneously repulsive and chauvinist, but for the 19th century character who never ‘leaves the village,’ one’s base feeling of love may have been associated with fewer faces: in an ideal world, love is a current which runs through *all* of our relationships with each other and with the world—not transcending the barrier between sex and caregiving, but present in each. It is not a different love.

For some, this universal love erases difference (the old adage, “men think that all women are the same!” or, to quote Noname: “You want a nasty bitch, psychiatrist that cook like your mama”). But

to think generously of our 19th century cowboy, perhaps in this past age love and empathy were *not* fractured as one moved across different kinds of relationships. Not just that “Love is Love,” but that the *feeling* of Love is the same across all *forms* of Love!

We vociferously avoid the sexual contamination of mother and the maternal contamination of wife: setting aside the understandable hereditary disgust of the first contamination—the wifely mother—we are disgusted by motherly wives because of its strange inversion of hierarchy: this goes far beyond the typical subversion of domination (woman-pegging-man) instead asking the man to love *up* to his sexual wife with all of the openness and vulnerability he was allowed as a child with his mother. Yes, we discourage this *loving up* for the unfair expectations it places on the woman, but it is a much graver sin in our culture because it asks heterosexual men to *love wholeheartedly*. Freud’s Madonna-Mistress

Complex (taken up by the manosphere in its own twisted analysis) tells us that a man who really loves his wife can't fuck her, since sexual attraction depends on the objectification of women—and how can we love an object? Sex, in turn, becomes shameful.

2)

For most of recent history, the form of this universal-woman appeared to us as heterosexuality and the family—hence the mother-wife image. But the honest conclusion of this logic is more anarchic and fluid (and I say this as someone deeply skeptical of anarchism). The true end-logic of the mother-wife universal (which, to reiterate, need not take the form of a mother-wife, but only as the predominant nurturing figure at each point of life) is to recognize that your beloved will change. The mother and the wife are two particulars, two individuals who step in to fill the universal role of mother-wife: the one to whom you are devoted.

The universal here is love, devotion; the particular is only one person. Very few stay devoted to one person, one ideal, one belief for their whole life.

So, there is a second reason we are repulsed by the mother-wife: *our* mother-wife (our 'wife,' that is) will create a *new* family. We will create new experiences, possibly new children, and also contribute and adhere to the human culture of our own generation. Otherwise, we *latch on* to the repulsive past and our own repulsive childhood (which only becomes repulsive to us when we can't develop past this early stage of life).

And the 19th century husband who calls his wife 'mother,' what about him? He is less concerned with cultural progress than you and I. His children will experience childhood, as he once did and as all humans have. His children will grow to have their own mother-wife and have their own children, all in the same tract of land,

and he will think of his parents' death when his own life comes to a close. For better or worse, there was a more cyclical relationship to the life-cycle and the world in these earlier times. Today, however, we are rooted to our time—how could we not be? Our ancestors lived generation to generation in one place, the same land, village, farm. The ancestors who moved to a new place formed a new line (of family, of human experience) and were treated thereafter as founders, mythic. Nowadays this is commonplace. Mobility is guaranteed, unpredictability too: we can't hope to replicate the past generation. And this historical atomization—this certainty that no one before us and no one after us will understand our unique human experience—beckons us to find a suitably distinct beloved, someone entirely new, leaving the village, the past, and childhood behind.





*On Arbor*

I still feel close to myself-from-the-past; not necessarily the person I was, but the experiences I went through, the ways I felt, maybe the music I listened to.

\* \* \*

It's difficult to artistically produce: you either write what you most want to say at the risk of *corniness* (unsubtle, naive, too-forthright) or you overcompensate by abstracting and heightening the intellectual part of your work.

The difficult solution is to trust that these initial feelings—what you most want to say—come from one of millions of nodes in a wider human culture of feeling, of aesthetic and literary tastes. Some people will simply dislike another node's prose. Others will understand and see themselves in whatever sentiment the prose evokes in them.

I can't exactly explain it, but this somehow explains a fundamental piece of Arbor. Each of us holds their own world of tastes and interests distinct from the others, but there's an Arbor Thing deep inside of us binding our otherwise disparate attributes together. This Arbor Thing is born to as many different cultural contexts as there are members of the group. We each represent a distorted version of that Thing, so that when you shine a blacklight onto our 20-something year old skin, you can see the stains (and often they are beautiful) which our unique cultural and familial contexts have left on that initial Thing we were all born with. Das ding. haha.



## *The Writer*

Vera, my roommate, writes. I think we should find camaraderie here if I could just muster the courage to show her this, tell her that I also write—only aspirationally, of course. She has been published. The first week we moved in together, she said something to the Gertrude Stein tune of “A writer is only a writer if they’re writing a lot. I don’t consider myself one because of this. At the same time, I consider it the most worthwhile thing that I do with my life.” So I’ve been afraid to confess. And yet I couldn’t agree more with her sentiment: art is meaning-production, and writing is where my meaning comes from because it is where I can most explicitly describe it. So why aren’t we writers? I feel the same enthusiasm and the same apprehension as her.

I’ve been ruminating over an observation from a friend, Antonio: in American life, we’re discouraged from talking seriously. And I wonder,

is this only a strategy to avoid meaning? *Thinking* about meaning? We instinctively avoid these conversations. If our concept of meaning went up in flames, the consequences would be frightening, so much so that even counter-culturalists are unconsciously wary when we mention it. And we can get close to that meaning when we talk about politics, for example, but, as Antonio pointed out to me, there's a reason we don't talk about G-d.

*A last thought*

When I was young, I often worried over my 'last' thought. What would run through my mind in the moment before death? I didn't believe in an afterlife at the time, so I hoped that my racing mind would land on something of great significance—family, a lover, love in the abstract. Our last thought will likely be arbitrary, neither repairing the damage we've done throughout our life nor detracting from the love we've already imbued into the world during the few decades ordinarily granted to us. It is still important. As are the impressions of us left in the minds of our loved ones after we've gone.

