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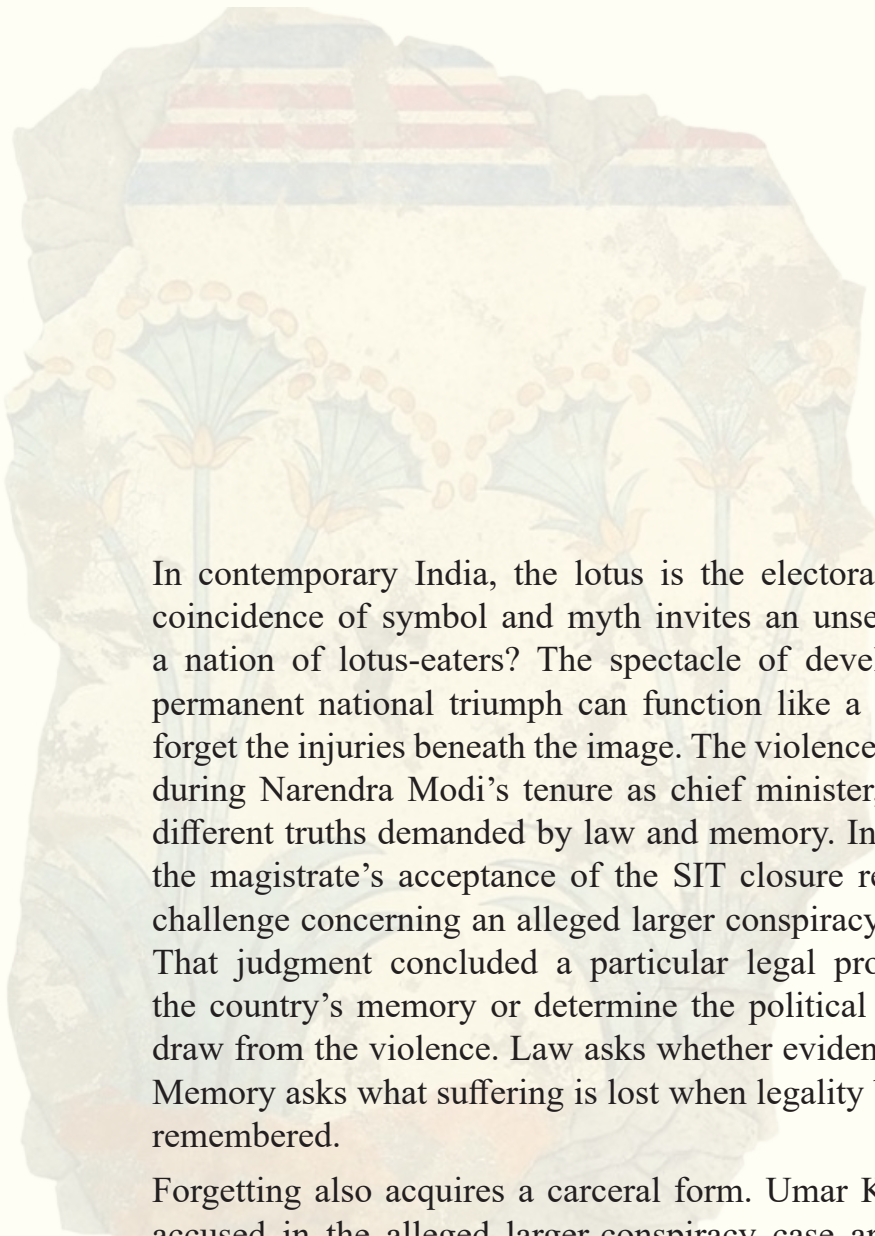
Editor's Note

Ritobrita Mukherjee
Editor-In-Chief

Long before I laid my hands on a copy of John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* in my late teens, my vocabulary lacked the structure required to truly understand the art of interpretation, and I would find myself referring to the core philosophies of the impressionist movement to fully comprehend the intricacies of what we call perception. As a student of literature, I soon came to know how impressionism had seeped out of canvasses to colour the imagination of a generation of writers who nurtured a literary movement under the same principles, and soon Monet's "I must have flowers, always, and always," was replaced in my head by Woolf's "Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself." I continue to be fascinated by the centrality flowers assume in both lines, no longer decorative elements lying stagnant on the margins, but motifs of light, colour, sensation, and a burgeoning, restless human consciousness. While Monet paints the instant before it disappears; Woolf writes the mind as it gathers and loses that instant.



Yet the flower is not only a medium through which consciousness perceives the world; it can also become a means of controlling what consciousness remembers. From Monet's water lilies to Homer's lotus, the bloom shifts from capturing a fleeting instant to holding its beholder captive within one. The lotus-eaters' sweet food produces an amnesia so complete that home, duty, and return cease to matter. The danger is not simple sleep, but the surrender of memory in exchange for comfort.



In contemporary India, the lotus is the electoral motif of the ruling party. This coincidence of symbol and myth invites an unsettling question: have we become a nation of lotus-eaters? The spectacle of development, civilisational glory and permanent national triumph can function like a narcotic when it persuades us to forget the injuries beneath the image. The violence that tore through Gujarat in 2002, during Narendra Modi's tenure as chief minister, remains suspended between the different truths demanded by law and memory. In 2022, the Supreme Court upheld the magistrate's acceptance of the SIT closure report and dismissed Zakia Jafri's challenge concerning an alleged larger conspiracy at the highest levels of the state. That judgment concluded a particular legal proceeding; it could not command the country's memory or determine the political meaning later generations would draw from the violence. Law asks whether evidence crosses a prescribed threshold. Memory asks what suffering is lost when legality becomes the limit of what may be remembered.

Forgetting also acquires a carceral form. Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam remain accused in the alleged larger-conspiracy case arising from the 2020 violence in northeast Delhi. In January 2026, the Supreme Court declined them bail after finding, solely for the purposes of the bail proceedings, *prima facie* material attributing central roles to them; it expressly left their ultimate culpability for trial. Their fresh applications in July were dismissed as procedurally premature under the terms of the January judgment. The question, then, is not whether two men have been imprisoned simply for preserving inconvenient memories, but what years of pre-trial confinement do to the democratic value of dissent and to the presumption of innocence.

The resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan on 25 July, following nationwide outrage over the NEET paper-leak controversy, must therefore be read carefully. It is a concession, and protest made it possible. But the removal of one minister cannot substitute for repairing a system marked by recurring failures, opacity and shattered student trust. A fallen petal is not the uprooting of rot.

This August issue of *Monograph* turns to Impressionism not to escape politics, but to sharpen perception. Every impression is also an argument about what deserves to be seen. Against the lotus of forgetting, art must cultivate another flower: memory—difficult, unsedated, and always, always alive.



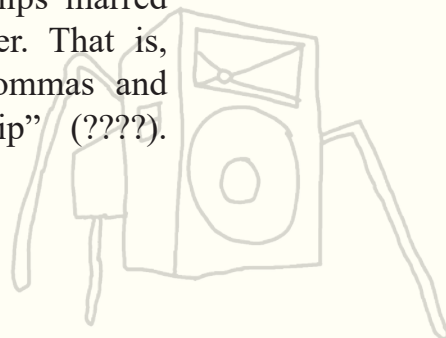
Ritobrita Mukherjee



People Say We're Alike: Girlblogging Post-Brat Summer

Ayana Bhattacharya

Now comfortably two years post the riotous nuclear-waste glare of Brat summer, I find myself nostalgic for the precise cultural moment: branding every shade of green (chartreuse, military, vomit; take your pick!) a *Brat* ally; opening Instagram only to be flooded with posts created via bratgenerator.com. And who can forget the tweet that allegedly, hypothetically, may or may not have contributed to a certain presidential race going askew? Charli xcx wrung a few careers worth of material from that record — additional deluxe and remix albums, a film, two tours. On her remix album sits what I consider a formative text, a New Testament of sorts, for friendships marred and left open, lesions looking to fester. That is, friendship punctuated with inverted commas and bracketed question marks: “Friendship” (????).



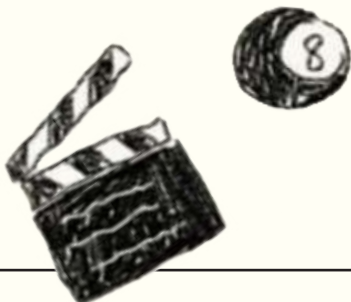


“Girl, so confusing” was already both confession and confrontation: “I don’t know if you like me / Sometimes I think you might hate me / Sometimes I think I might hate you / Maybe you just wanna be me.” There’s some snappy dichotomising over poetry versus partying and thoughts cast astray about how similar Charli xcx and the song’s subject really are — fuelling speculation that the track was about Lorde. Some weeks later, the newly-released “Girl, so confusing”, this time featuring Lorde, outright reconciled their conflicts. It’s certainly their own overthinking that gets in the way of a fruitful friendship, but as Charli xcx and Lorde conclude over some verses (and likely some behind-the-scenes conversation), they’re both being spent by the same industry. They, well, work it out on the remix. Divorced from the rest of the record, “Girl, so confusing” might sound like an anomaly, an isolated betrayal of fragility. *Brat* is, of course, defiant and cheeky, revelling in its faux-insolence and party-girl exterior. But it would be erroneous to assert that its sticky, electric production does much to soften the blow of Charli xcx’s writing. She is often drowning in self-doubt, insecure to the point of madness, wondering if she belongs, or if she even deserves success.



It's this authorial direction she elects — of unabashed vulnerability — that cemented *Brat* as a dynamic record. Such brazen, introspective parlance is sparsely found amidst dance floor music. Yet it's not just the writing that felt radical, its nonchalant honesty blinding in the face of frictionless admissions. *Brat's* elevator pitch is that it sells you a lifestyle. An ideology, even. Again, I ask, cast your sights back to 2024. *Brat* was the subject of thinkpieces galore; Substack essayists opining about the death of the clean girl, Charli xcx at the crime scene with a still-warm gun. I can't assert with certainty whether the clean girl is actually dead (Google Trends reports that searches peaked in April of this year). But I find that culturally, we've begun to discard many of her associates, often in favour of Bratesque alternatives.

Let's zoom out for a second. Think of pop culture as a free-market ouroboros. Matters of interest are largely democratically elected, and at the mercy of its voter base's fallibilities, also entirely cyclical. This voter base of tastemakers chiefly comprises young people: girls, people of colour, and the queer community. Their whims and decisions often determine what goes from screen to screen, what counts as entertainment. The forces that resist the market's myopia are those willing to invert lenses and focus the light on themselves. It is hyperspecificity and esoteric-enough personas that pierce through gauzy generalisms of "be yourself" — even if these personas only wind up proving the adage's point. It's personality that lands. And for ages, personality on the internet has been filtered through individual voices via individual boxes on individual blogs/profiles/outlet-of-choice.





For a short while I was a girlblogger, and for a shorter while after, I was a girl with a blog. This distinction is imperative. I can't begin to define either term; you know it when you see it. On my girlblog, named after a Lana del Rey song, I posted about the music I listened to and quasi-relatable quips about life as a teenage girl. On my blog, I wrote longer essays also about the music I listened to and life as a teenage girl. I guess it's like Didion says: the themes are always the same. The ephemerality of my girlblogging career didn't stop me from studying, with rapt attention, the unfolding and erosion of girlblog formats. With a burgeoning popularity by 2023, talking about girlblogging went from in-group discussion via Tumblr (or similar forums), to a point of cultural literacy broadcast en masse. I was an informed student, proficient in the prescribed texts. And yet, I witnessed a regime change of sorts. Girlblogging had evolved beyond disordered-eating content and curlicued text captions. Suddenly, girlblogging was intellectual. It had earned a certain cultural cachet, a cool-factor previously overlooked.



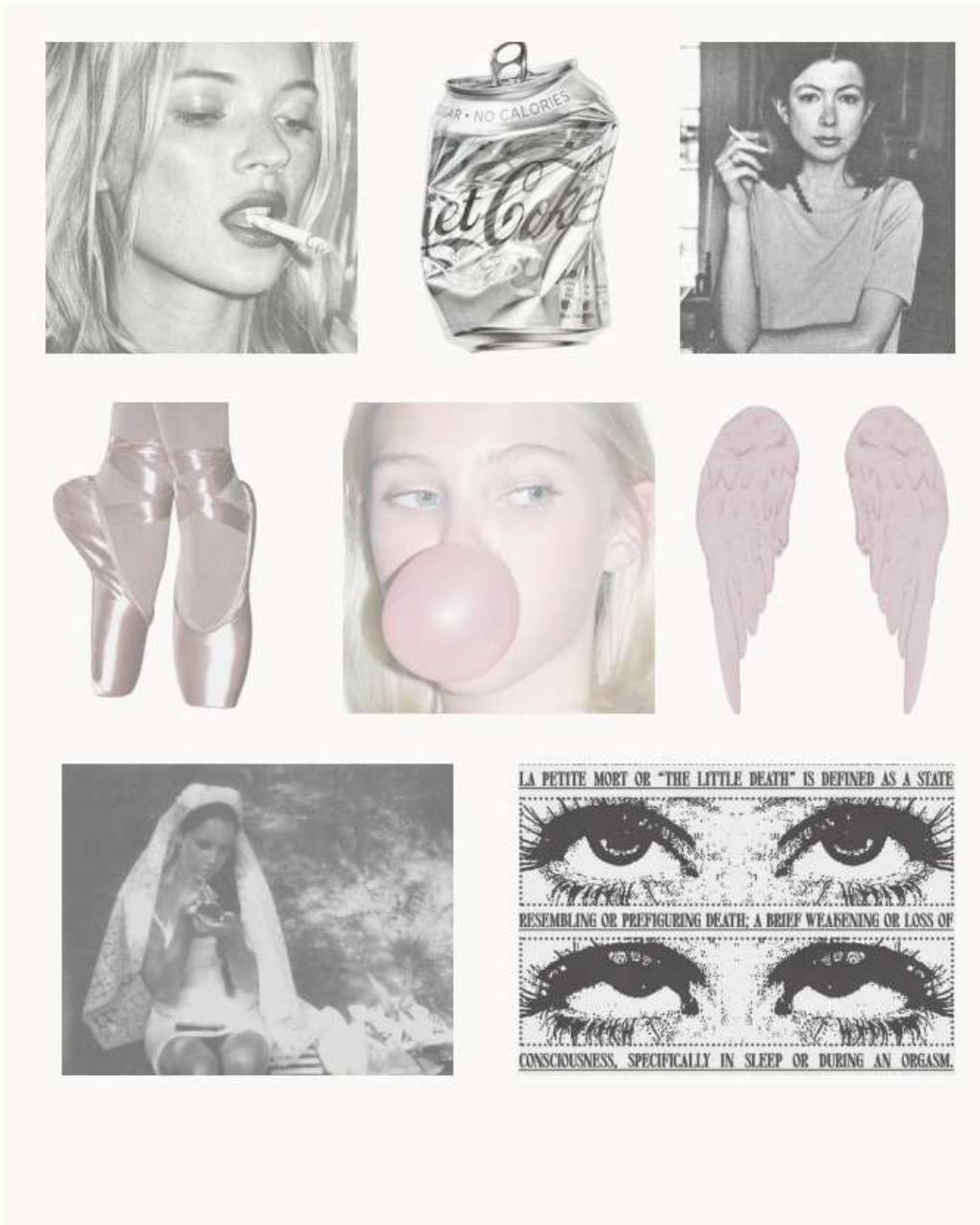
In one of its current incarnations, girlblogs are visual art galleries. A cursory scan often returns findings of countless deer, lambs, dogs, pomegranates, Sofia Coppola film stills, Sylvia Plath quotes, teeth, the moon; the list goes on. There's usually very little language involved in crafting these posts, though some are supplemented with threadbare poeticisms. (Perhaps there's some commentary to be made on the lack of personalised language used for these posts and its relation to the broader literacy crisis, but that's neither here nor there.) There's an infatuation with the aesthetic: a longing to flourish each admission of hell-raising and slips-into-insanity with stylised imagery. An almost editorial instinct goes into curating personal-life-lows for mass appeal. This effort to beautify sadness is the mission statement that ties our modern-day girlblogs to those of yesteryear. It's undeniably unhealthy, and yet, completely mesmerising. That's why these girlblogs are such refuges: they serve as channels where young girls get to exact some modicum of control over uncontrollable events.



But such expressions of curatorial effort are also turn-offs for a post-*Brat* world. The ethos that *Brat* projected to the world was one of unapologetic selfhood, laid down as simply as possible. Be messy, embrace chaos. Sure, you can feel like shit, but it's a little embarrassing to care about how your dear-diary thoughts look collaged together. Charli xcx actually outlines the girlblogger archetype on *Brat* deep-cut "Mean Girls". An ode of sorts to, well, mean girls, her character sketch yields vignettes of girlblogger aspiration: an anorexic Lana del Rey devotee etched into Vogue; "fingering a gold cross" and smoking "skinny cigarettes". It's an almost coveted description, and perhaps even paved the way for a slight disruption in girlblog behaviour.

Humour me for a second as I scaffold this argument: girlblogs are like feminism, in that they give women a voice. And, like feminism, it might do to study their evolution in waves. I'm no historian, but if I had to guess, we're in a contested third wave. Remember when I said girlblogs were like art galleries, and how they were one version of modern girlblogging? Well, in tune with the short-form content epidemic, girlblog content has made its way to create-mode Instagram reels. Identifiable mostly by virtue of its rampant confessionalism, these posts are scored to some canonical sad, indie heavyweight; plain text against those awful gradients. Posters often talk about yearning and crashing out, amongst other, more mundane updates. The volume, material, and expanse of these reels reminds me most of Whisper, which was, of course, an app beloved by girlbloggers.

The app's shutdown in 2024 meant its mostly young, female user base lost a platform that chronicled their lives anonymously. This anonymity also afforded users the confidence to be entirely honest about their feelings, even if those feelings were largely uncontroversial and universal. The create-mode reels thus bared what Whisper left behind and *Brat* preached: simplicity and rawness. Like Whisper, create-mode Instagram accounts furnished its users with relative anonymity. Because most usernames follow chronically-online nomenclature, and all posts are formed via create mode, there's a certain universality to the "look" of these posts. And again, this anonymity grants users implicit permission to write with candour. The reels proliferated largely in the wake of *Brat* summer's end, providing an avenue for girlbloggers to quickly extemporise their innermost thoughts, barring all ornament. And they worked because the format served the utilitarian purpose of girlblogging: an outlet of, for, and by young women. A space to be messy, embrace chaos. After all, girl, it's so confusing sometimes to be a girl.



Ayana Bhattacharya



Srijoni Nandi



Vision (Domesticated)

Srijoni Nandi



Impressionist artist, Berthe Morisot, painted her sister Edma more than anyone else painted anything, and always indoors, or on the very edge of it. Be it a balcony or a windowsill- a threshold with a view of somewhere she wasn't going. In her painting *The Cradle* (1872) Edma sits with one hand on the gauze canopy over her sleeping daughter, looking down at the child. Morisot herself seemed to know exactly what this cost her. *"I don't think there has ever been a man who treated a woman as an equal"*, she had written in her diary in 1890, near the end of a career spent watching her male colleagues paint the Folies-Bergère while she painted her own nursery, *"and that's all I would have asked for. I know I am worth as much as they are."*



If one were to examine the limits of art as expressed by women, it is within these spaces that one finds the confinement of society. If a woman artist's whole visual diet was the domestic space because the studios and brothels were closed to her, then its only natural that her canvases would be full of nurseries, balconies, and the powder room mirrors. Herein lies the unfairness of a prejudice that caters not just to impressionist art, but in the prejudice of confined taste for women over decades— what critics were quick to label as narrowness of imagination was ultimately a narrowness of access paraded around to be a lack of taste.



Around the year 1002, a lady-in-waiting at the Japanese imperial court named Sei Shōnagon sat down to write what became *The Pillow Book*. Replete with social musings and acute understandings of the society she belonged to, she described the material boundaries of the domestic: Heian noblewomen lived behind a *kicho*, (a portable curtained frame just large enough to conceal a body). This was to be carefully placed near the veranda, close enough that the woman inside could still hear the world filing past on the other side of the fabric. Akin to a ‘purdah’, these women were required to be elusive enough to be seen, but only a little and to know the external world, but only barely. Shōnagon’s opening lines are about clouds thinning at dawn, fireflies crossing a summer night, geese flying home against a darkening sky— the exterior world, observed minutely by a pair of adorned eyes that were never meant to see them in the first place. Murasaki Shikibu, writing *The Tale of Genji* a few years later in the same court, gives us the male counterpart to this arrangement: men courted women they had never laid eyes on, choosing wives on the strength of a voice through a blind or a sleeve glimpsed at the edge of a screen. Skip eight and a half centuries and change every variable (language, religion, climate, hell even century) and the structure remains intact. Emily Dickinson, who after the age of thirty rarely left her father’s property in Amherst, chose the corner bedroom with four windows and set her writing table directly against one of them; nearly eighteen hundred poems were composed at that particular pane of glass, and a decent portion of them are about the light changing on a lawn and the birds singing outside, all the sounds of a town her body had long stopped entering.

Kate Chopin perfectly encapsulated the feminine perspective in her short story, ‘The Story of an Hour’. Protagonist, Lousie Mallard is informed of her husband’s supposed death in a railroad accident. She weeps at once, with “wild abandonment”, and then does the solitary thing available to a grieving Victorian wife: she goes to her room alone and sits down facing an open window. The vision that awaits her is aggressively alive— treetops trembling with new spring growth, the smell of rain, a peddler crying his wares in the street below, sparrows twittering in the eaves, patches of blue breaking through the clouds. Everything on the other side of that window is in motion, ongoing, indifferent to her stationery self.

“There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name.”

A wife in 1894 had words ready-made for grief, duty and love, and even for the private disappointments a marriage was allowed to contain. But what becomes of the emotions that tie down to the woman's individual, independent mind? No word had ever been assigned to a married woman's relief at her own husband's death. And so when that relief arrives, it arrives formless, wings clipped by the sheer novelty of the emotion felt in the body before it can be met in language. Louise's first instinct is to fight it off, to press it back down with her will, the way she's likely pressed down every unauthorized thing she's ever felt. It is here that the image of the open window belies that same fixed threshold between the domestic interior and a spring day she is not permitted to walk into. The window finally gives the feeling enough room to surface. Only then does she let herself whisper her paramount confession- "*free, free, free*".

In Satyajit Ray's film *Charulata*(1964), adapted from Tagore's novel *Noshtonir* (*Broken Nest*), the film begins with a long, wordless take of Charu, played by Madhabi Mukherjee, embroidering the letter "B" onto a handkerchief for her husband, Bhupati. The painstaking patience of the shot tells you everything about the length of her days before a single line is even uttered. Bored, and left to wander the vast rooms of a Calcutta mansion while her husband edits his political newspaper in another wing entirely, Charu takes up a pair of opera glasses and moves from window to window, training them on the street below, observing passing bullock carts, passersby, and the ordinary traffic of a public world she feels (like every woman belonging to the domestic, ideal space of the society) like a stranger to. Drawing the invisible *purdah* between her and her blissfully neglectful husband, Ray delivers the contrast in the female gaze that separates and the one that welcomes. So when the male lead, Amal finally arrives, the distinction lies in him simply being the first person in the film to enter her line of sight without a pane, a lens, or a husband's oblivious back standing between them. What makes *Charulata* such a precise piece of evidence for how feminine perception gets manufactured by domestic confinement, rather than simply depicting it, is that Ray never once shows Charu misunderstanding her situation. She isn't a naive woman slowly discovering the world; she's an unusually perceptive one, starved of anything to perceive except what drifts past a window or arrives, rarely, through a door. Her intelligence hasn't been diminished by the *andarmahal* (interior space) that she apparently 'belongs ' by virtue of her feminine identity.

On closer examination of all these examples, one finds a common thread of the perception of domestic objects or materials in the gaze of the feminine subject. From within the woman's eyes one learns that none of these women lacked the ambition of their male contemporaries. They lacked instead, the premise male art had the privilege of assuming: that the eye is free to travel, and the world will wait to be approached. What survives instead, across a Passy balcony, a Calcutta corridor, an Amherst window or a Bengali garden swing, is a body of work built entirely out of *reception*. A century and a half of women becoming, with astonishing technical precision, the finest instruments ever made for registering a world they were not allowed to enter. Call it a limitation, if the critics insist. It reads, from here, like the only proof of impressionism that ever actually earned the name.

Give a man a window and he'll eventually shut it. Give a woman the same window, across a hundred and fifty years and continents afar, and she'll build a body of work good enough to make you forget there was ever a wall separating her from the outside.

Cherries that are grapes and the sun rising from the west: a corner of my life

Shreya Datta

My digital impression, or the mark I leave on the world wide web of unknown creatures, will probably be best explained through the lens of my Pinterest boards. Every Pinterest board is curated to a certain, niche (some would call odd) theme. This so-called theme ranges from Arsenal football club screensavers to Tumblr hacks on how to get the perfect hairstyle for school. I think the collage sums up all my boards in the blink of an eye.



Watercolour peaches, blueberries, figs and an inconspicuous collection of flower bouquets is an ode to a brief artistic career, which lasted from kindergarten to grade 12. The excesses of maximalist painting eventually get to the head of all young artists who simply wanted to make a still life drawing with negative space.



An homage to the kitchen tiles I was asked to pick out for a new home, a fresh beginning. A very quick dismissal of the tiles that my parents had selected for being “boring” and suddenly we have Mediterranean paisleys on three kitchen walls. The newspaper is an obvious nod to my un-orthodox upbringing in the presence of two journalists and their best friends.

An homage to the kitchen tiles I was asked to pick out for a new home, a fresh beginning. A very quick dismissal of the tiles that my parents had selected for being “boring” and suddenly we have Mediterranean paisleys on three kitchen walls. The newspaper is an obvious nod to my un-orthodox upbringing in the presence of two journalists and their best friends.

The plates sneaking into every corner of this picture reminds me of how important food and family dinners are to me, friends and The Bear. Dessert, which includes shortbread pastries and Amul vanilla ice cream scoops are served on carved plates, only brought out on special occasions. The lily makes the occasional appearance, throughout the collage, throughout my adult life.

A coffee pot, a lemon slice hiding waiting to be sought for every Sunday lunch, a stack of records and multiple sun drawings. This whimsical combination can only be completed with a bouquet of lilies peaking from behind a rusty envelope. The multiple incarnations of the sun almost have a visual component to it. “Here comes the sun” by the Beatles plays at every minor inconvenience, eventually becoming imprinted on my arm.



The coffee pot reminds the youth of “the generational lock-in”, of every exam season, of every time I have had to stay up later than expected and usher in the morning. Lastly the record collection is my first tattoo, my grandfather’s record player that will outlive us all. Isn’t rhythm the only weapon we have?



My favourite crevice and corner of this mood-board, a glimpse of the sea. Adolescence in Mumbai where the waves crash against the city in violent protest everyday or the gentle arrival of summer on Chennai beaches five minutes away from another place I call home, the sea remains a constant presence. So do beverages, multiple of them at the same time. A funky, spicy cocktail, a tall glass of Sula red wine best served with *barir aloo bhaja* or just a milk jug that accompanies every *chai adda*. The sun looks on, it dances to the vast Spotify library I have curated to aid the Pinterest scrolling process, the cherries are actually grapes.

And somehow this slice of my life is connected to the best band of all time, The Strokes. Was it that Comedown Machine was playing in the background while I tested my design skills for the umpteenth time? Or was it the imprint it left on my life at the age of sixteen? I don’t need to answer all such questions in a tiny snippet, do I now?



Rishika Guha Biswas

A large, semi-transparent image of a martini glass filled with a yellow liquid, with a green olive on a skewer, serving as the background for the title text.

George's, Little Rock is not a restaurant

Jenna V. Wray



but an experience, a representation of the perfect night out. George's is a practicum in the gastro-nomic arts, a slow & moonlit journey down the backstreets of Italy. George's is the waiter knowing how you like your martini & why your marriage is on the rocks. George's is anticipation, salivation, revelation. Complacency is anathema to George's, for George's is inversion of routine. George's is initiation into a new mode of being, the chrysalis split open, the boundary stones crushed. No one wishes you dead at George's, or resents you for abandoning the hamster's wheel of her interest. George's is eroticism, the jumping of a pulse, the wedding at Cana. Is Mystery, peering at us from behind her veil. George's is what she desires: the hero's journey, the universal man, the Übermensch with his rope-taut thighs. George's is the inherent mystique of strangers, the wonder that can't co-exist with the answers. George's is Freud but also Jung, the collective subconscious, the motif & its thousand recursions. In no small way, George's is religion. George's is your higher self & God, or

a woman, calling it forth. George's is the Prime Mover, the riddle of the ages, the lack that orients us in the world. George's is the scramble toward connection, the soul's battle against the separate-ness that gives it definition. George's is point & counterpoint, Dionysus & Apollo, Pythagoras's tri-angles, Solomon's keys—it's everything beyond you, I mean.

telling the God's Honest, Mr. Equivoque, will the corpse bloom this year?

Eric Oswald

the poem finds its breath
in the honeysuckle hours

when she stands
as if faulty
in light's ember

in the tiny rancid hours
of non-euclidean grammar

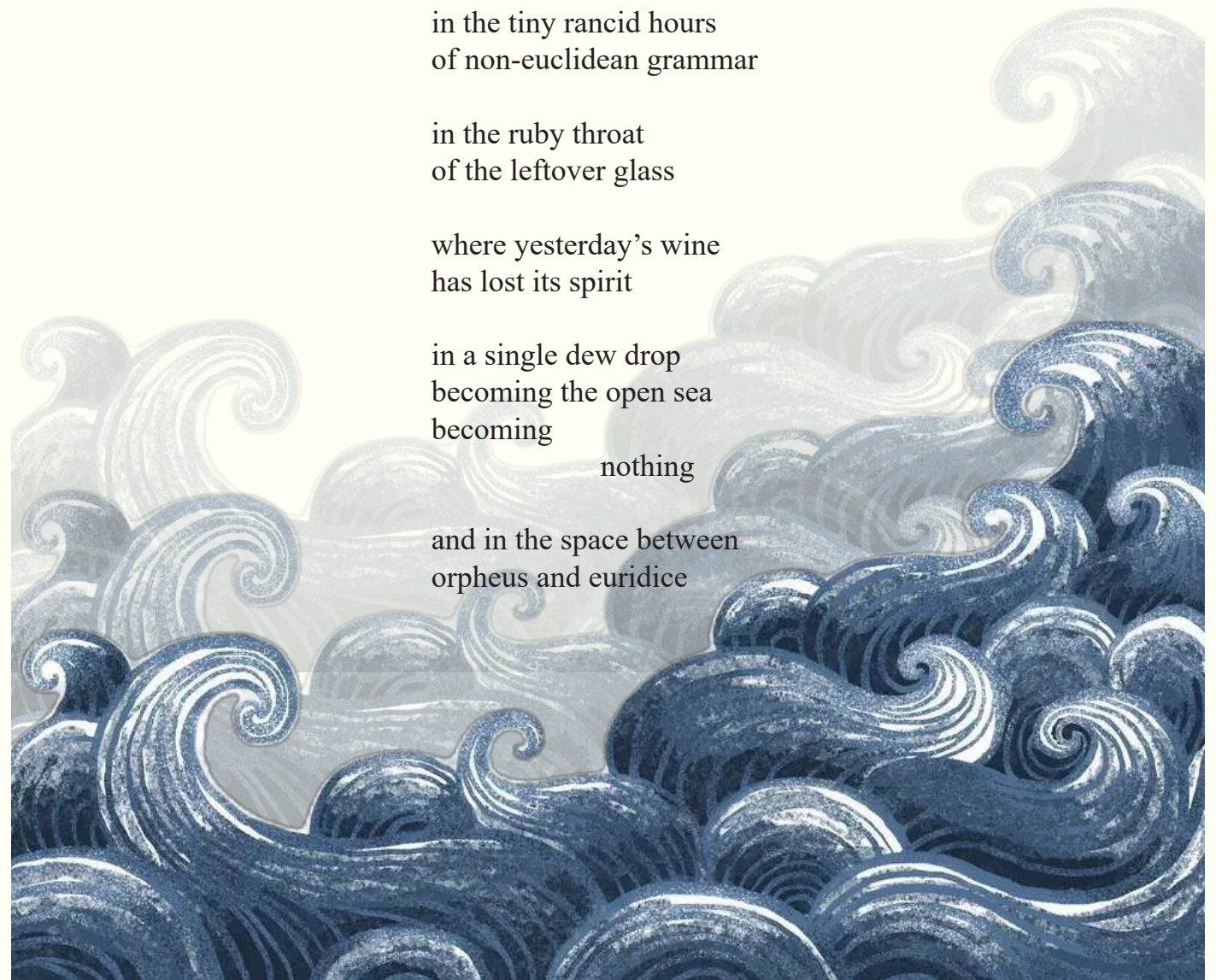
in the ruby throat
of the leftover glass

where yesterday's wine
has lost its spirit

in a single dew drop
becoming the open sea
becoming

nothing

and in the space between
orpheus and euridice





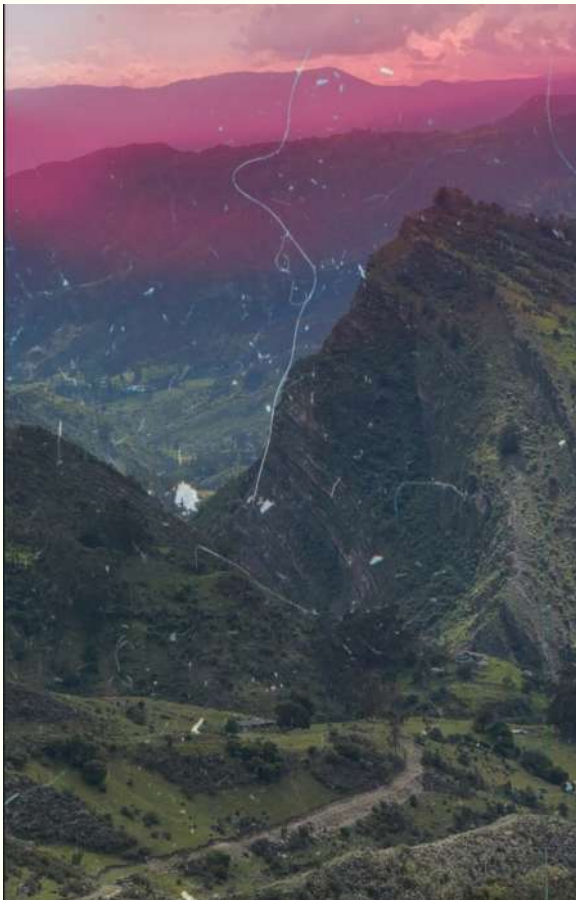
I could never wake

Eric Oswald

to your cotton morning serenade.
I could never listen
to the drum-beat scratch
of your pencil's plainsong.
I could never float with you
on the Russian River
as the sun and clouds
change to a minor key.
I could never watch
the candle detail your eyes
with all the patience of a man
who has never experienced time.

Donivan Berube

Trampolín de la muerte:
Bikepacking Colombia's
trampoline of death



El Cocuy Road



Trampoline Basketball Hoop



Boyaca Mural



Roadside Shrine

06/07/2026, 03:33, 498, Uncategorised

Ditsa Majumdar

When tea spills on parchment and table, in 1989, on the pages of my father's journal, he doesn't know it stains time too. My friend finds it in between Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* and a book labelled 1, 2, 3.....*Infinity*. We are also stained, with the December sun, on the floor of his study.

A pair of eyes trapped in his bedsheet, blinking. Someone found him in the fall of 1988, he writes. "A woman?" , my friend asks. I think about my mother, she has never heard a declaration of love. We don't talk about love in Bengali. It irks us. But my father writes about a cat named Kalicharan, in Bengali, and it is a declaration of love. He writes about Kali's adventures from when he puts him in the basket atop his bicycle and takes him around the neighbourhood to fish. It must take some kind of misfortune for a boy like that to grow up. Fortune trickles down one's whiskers like milk.

My father meets my mother at work. She sits at the reception wearing a saree that resembles snakeskin. I know this because she tells me that when she gets home that night, and takes her saree off onto the floor, a snake camouflages itself in it. A real one, that comes in through her window and later, leaves through it. My mother likes stories like I do, like my father once did. They marry each other in the year 2000, my mother regrets her lipstick shade, he tries not to feel regret. They are thirty and thirty-one when they sleep in the same bed with their heads due North.

My friend reads out more of Kalicharan's adventures. I choose not to- my Bengali doesn't sound as sweet. My father thinks and dreams in Bengali, I think and summarize in this one. I taste copper when it rains and my mother folds parchment paper into a makeshift bowl for popcorn. I have to stop myself from thinking in black and white when I think of the year 1989. And in sepia tones when I think of my grandparents as toddlers, crossing the border, and waking up in wooden homes.

I spill tea on parchment and wood in the spring of 2010 as my father tries to tell me what calculus is. Everything moves, changes and splits in two. Everything flies, falls and sings. I say I don't mind death but funeral flowers rot into sickly sweet mulch and I find it morose to sit cross-legged on marble. Kalicharan dies in 1992 in a wooden house that no longer exists and in twenty years I learn what a derivative is.

Five pages out of a hundred and forty are stained with tea, and it looks like a photograph from 1971. I doubt they know this, but when my mother sings a song in the shower, days later, my father hums the tune in his car. It irks me that this is a declaration of love.

Unsent postcard to momma

Barnali Ray Shukla



Chaos likes me, I don't now wait for you to scoop
me in your saree, fluid arms strong, sleepy after
an over cooked day. We breathe dust of gold—

our heartbeats held by dreams that keep us hungry
for more, chaos likes us, we grow seeing bridges
gone wrong in haste, a taste for rush is heady,

we don't keep calm, thirsty for a time
that we soon will fly with our arms open,
a ballet of mirth if we reach home before

the baby slept, cozy in a warmth of machines
that speak like music leaking from skyscraper
you built, brick by brick that you carried on

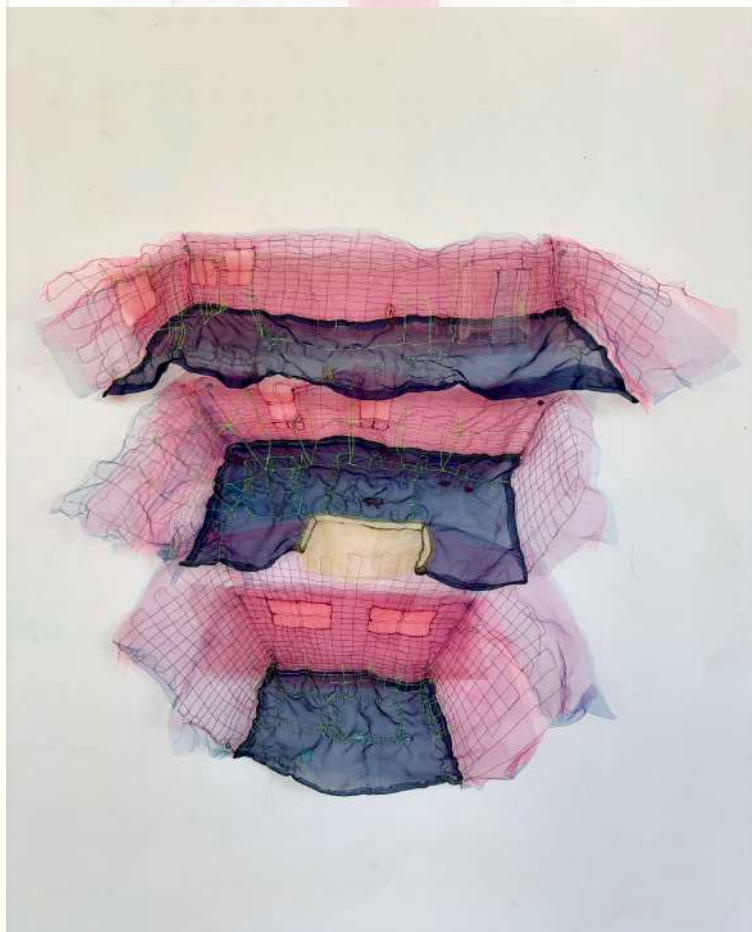
your shoulder with a tattoo of a mountain
you had never seen, you climbed with a bidi
tucked in by the left ear, grinning as you listened

to my gibberish, in the sway of soft saree, you laid
the bricks and rotis on a clean patch of earth,
like hopscotch of moments, baked to perfection

we like our days noisy now, we sleep eat rant snore
snack when happier, we sleep eat rise peep
and sometimes wake up to fresh blossoms of

skyscrapers, climbing brick by brick, taking up
the trees, the seas, the sky

and sometimes Gods
we haven't met.



Sammi Eady

1. KP Lake
2. Gatewood Building



Sammi Eady

1.Church
Playground
2.Sunrise Dr



The Caretaker

By Isaiah Bunevitsky

They told me he had a hard life, that he mixes up his words and has trouble recalling what year it is. He won't keep his appointments or come when you call, and he certainly won't remember your name. If you think you might mind reintroducing yourself every twenty minutes, don't bother being his friend. Don't even approach him. He'll spook.



Charlie didn't look the type of man you could spook. My vision had tunneled that first time, the very moment he stepped out the stockroom. The relocated bar was a noisy, overladen smog and a packed night meant all hands on deck, stowaways included. Newcomer I was, I'd only barely begun trailing his tap-flicking before I lost myself to his brilliant marketing. Charlie had his work cut out for him, lifting the spirits of a cynical patronage commiserating the shutdown of all their favorite drinking spots. It was a historic night, the mass exodus of alcoholics slumming it from one side of Staten Island to the other. He made use of our dolor, pouring liquid comfort into our mouths, letting us mourn, and running up our tabs. Half of us became regulars holding his wake for our old haunts.

The place was deafeningly chatterful in the exact ways I typically elected to avoid. And yet, his voice cut clean through it all. Loud, but not obnoxiously so. Sweet with showmanship and extroversion, but cut at precise moments to let others share the stage. Through the amber blur of my bourbon, I made out his lingering gaze, clearly waiting for my pipe-up. For all his allures, I gave him no ground. A gracious thing, he took my silence in stride and only cornered me when the fuss had begun to dwindle.

"It's a bit much, yeah?" He saddled up nearby, but not far enough into my personal space to alarm me. I'd come to understand he read people far better than he ever did the written word.

"Yeah."

“Come in on Tuesdays when it’s dead. You’ll actually be able to hear then.” Cool ease oozed from his pores in spite of his aberrance. He was always a lot older than he thought he was, the mentality of a fresh graduate stuck in the frame of a peer, but he’d fool you if you never got the chance to see him up close. From where I sat, I could start to stockpile the hints: the blossoming wrinkles around his mouth, the way his lips pulled into a frown on instinct, the odd jitter of his limbs. Even still, his puffed lids spoke more of insomnia than war-torn paranoia. He didn’t appear one bit what the others had sheepishly apprised me of. I had no faith in the sick man they described, a kind soul, but a headcase, the refuse of a land that didn’t want him. He seemed too capable, too personable, to have survived solely on the charity of others.

“Your name?” He tilted his chin and tipped some of his old-fashioned into mine.

I had nothing to lose. “Irving.”

“I’m Charlie.”

“I worked that out.”

“Good.”

He told stories and made crude jokes and covered my bill. He introduced me to drunks he thought I could get along with. In the early hours of the weekend, he had spun me around by my tie and startled a genuine laugh out of me for the first time in years.

When the sunbeams blinded us few remaining dawdlers and we began making our excuses, he yanked me right back in by my lapels. cajoling me into outstaying my welcome. He flicked the brim of my fedora, emptied my sport jacket of a spare pen and wrinkled grocery ticket, and talked a gaping circle around me all before I could sloppily bat him away. I stared stupefied at the ceiling as he hastily scratched out his digits and tucked them into my hatband.



Charlie <3
875-7624



The manager finally chased him away after that, warning him of the aggravation of his condition without proper shut-eye. He giggled as he strutted to the back door, trophy in hand, the butterscotch I'd been saving for a rainy day dangling like bait. In another life, he would've made a world-class pickpocket. In this one, he was an involuntary entertainer, a marketable philanderer, an affable neon sign.

I idled on the pavement outside wanting for impulsivity, suddenly unafraid of straying from routine. He had nearly flipped my disposition entirely with his stunning debut and I became hooked on the possibility of friendship. When I rang him from my apartment a week later, the operator informed me that the number had been disconnected for quite some time.

After work on Tuesdays, I would visit him as he asked. He made more than pleasant company and he tailored our conversations around my interests. He was an excellent listener and humored my ramblings with a healthy mix of sterling insights and wisecracks. I learned that he was a salesman before the war, but went to school for sociology. He had traveled to cities with names no one could pronounce and gained his idiosyncratic manner of speech as an unfortunate byproduct. We ribbed frequently about how appalling it was that I'd rubbed elbows with such a blatant transplant and he mocked me for my cave-dwelling habits.

He'd ask me if I was ever uncomfortable in his presence with a consistency that deeply saddened me and I would always balk at the question. Despite his insecurity, he was overwhelmingly considerate and never failed to seduce me with his charm.

To this day, I'm still unsure what spurred my unshakeable adhesion to his flank.



As the seasons marched on, those strange, early cautionary tales had realized themselves in greater and greater frequencies. At times, I'd be forced to repeat what I'd said not an hour prior. He would shut down at seemingly random intervals and rapidly change course, often to the complete bewilderment of his audience. His grasp on history was loose and I'd frequently find myself playing teacher. His personal mementos contained blaring contradictions and paradoxes, to the point that I briefly figured him a very unskilled liar. And he tried, G-d knows he tried, but he never did get my name down.

During a particularly trying week, he had forgotten his own.

He masked his afflictions well himself, most were too bewitched by his winning personality to mind the erroneous, but the combined efforts of the Mayfair provided him almost foolproof cover. They kept him out of sight, housed, employed, and made sure he was socialized.

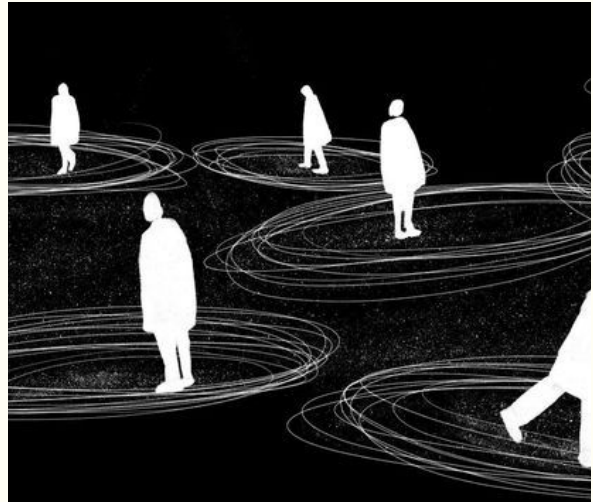
Their quick thinking had pulled him out of far too many unfortunate snafus. I came to understand that his position as tender was in name only and that when patrolmen came 'round for a beer, the line cook would just shove him into the kitchen. The owner was a bleeding heart that indulged his every offhand desire, but bent down to speak to him as if he were entirely obtuse. The staff barked at punters who treated him like an infant, but made him dance like a monkey when business was slow. For all intents and purposes, Charlie was the tavern pet.

It was a simple thing to gristle at the snide comments, but harder when they gently coaxed him out of fits of delusion. Who knew how the man would fare on his own against the elements, the short-tempered civilization just outside? Anyway, Charlie was strong-willed enough to vacate if he so pleased. There were no waivers in his declarations of happiness and fulfillment. Who was I to disagree?

He was an easy man to like and an even easier one to pity, but I worked tirelessly to make sure he felt my equal. I resolved to be another of his accomplices, his best yet.

I failed plenty. I corrected him on a matter relating to the Colonies and bore the full brunt of his temper. He yelped as if I'd struck him, calling me all manner of names and questioning my decency. He grew aggressive, profoundly betrayed that I would so brazenly insult his intelligence, and when I tried to console him, he threw slurs and spat on me.

They told me to cut him some slack, that he didn't always mean what he said and that taking it to heart would only do the both of us harm. They reminded me, a tad unkindly, that he could turn belligerent in a split second and sometimes chose to work out his confusion with vile accusations and a hailstorm of fists. If he were a woman, they said, they would call it hysteria. They used other words to describe him instead.



Another eruption, and a shattered plate, sent forth a waitress to defend Charlie's honor. She was much more sympathetic than some of the others, but no less condescending. I didn't understand the nature of his illness, she tutted when I naively asked when he would get better. It was my responsibility to be patient or locate the nearest exit. I heeded her advice and let it galvanize me into a better companion.

I gradually learned to quit expecting apologies. He was never in the state to give them, either wrecked by the vastness of his emotions or too far removed to acknowledge the incident had even transpired. The first and only time I made mention of his outbursts, he paled horrifically in shame, before pardoning himself from the table and stumbling back to his quarters. It would reek of manipulation and narcissism if I were some foreigner to his customs, some uncaring nitwit who placed their own feelings above his wellbeing. But after caring for him for a number of months, I knew better. I could take the explosive aggression on the chin (and clearly, I already had) and figure out how to anticipate the landmines.



Still, I was shockingly unprepared for the vanishings.

They told me he disappeared sometimes. Physically, of course, he had a habit of wandering out onto grizzly avenues and hiding away in holes at the fringes of humanity. He chose his safehouses by dice roll and trusted strangers on a whim, returning after he got his fill of the outdoors and my nail beds had long turned to strings. They said he was like an alley cat that way, sowing his oats but always making his way home in the end. I wasn't a fan of that particular metaphor, but I stayed steadfast in my silence and awaited his arrival.

Anxiety ate away at me when he had his escapades. His absences soiled my blood pressure and eroded me down to my concerns. One morning, after a crisp 72 hours with no word and a brief battle with indecision, I set out to find him myself. His usual stomping grounds were stark empty, but thankfully, it only took the better part of the afternoon before I was able to fish him out from under the boardwalk. As I did, he greeted my heroism with every bit the sarcasm I had been longing for.

"Always a gentleman, Peter." His subtler movements never escaped my notice, I reveled in his tracing of my spine as I helped right him.

"Irving."

"Irving."

The journey back to St. George came and went without any major hiccups. I hoisted him up, soaked through with the odor of salt and rotting trout. He thanked me for my troubles and we made the most of the deviation stopping for cotton candy. Charlie hummed softly to himself as we strolled, picking at sugar and staining his saliva pink. I was a far worse picture of tranquility, following uneasily in his step and agonizing over the what-ifs.

Some bad actor could've scooped him up completely defenseless, no decent explanation handy to wave away his loitering. He'd give himself up willingly, joyous as spring itself while they steal him away, rob the planet of its excitement.

"What do you do when they ask for your papers?"

He pondered for a quiet moment, before shrugging his shoulders and sucking his fingers clean.

"They never ask."

He went missing behind the eyes too, an ocean away barely half a pace ahead. The quality of his energy would deteriorate until his sound passed through a hollow shell. Our exchanges then felt like propositioning an automaton, trying to make love to a soulless object that performed perfectly and felt nothing. The nightlife got to him on occasion, warped his temperament under the weight of his persona. Even fully alert, he got lost in the masses. He was a tad less *Charlie* manifesting fireworks and dynamite, making magic for the spectators.

But he came back to himself when he flirted, which he did *incessantly*. He made passes at anything on two legs, enraptured throngs with every sly compliment and smooth grope. It truly was a stroke of genius, letting him pop bottles in the hours he still clung to reason, sweet-talking coins out of wallets of every gender. Charlie made people *ache* for his attention without a modicum of effort. I was not a jealous creature, but I did prefer when he wasted his flattery on me.

He often teased me like it was his life's mission and I made no attempts to stop him. I let him make his moves, sneak grazes, blather inappropriately, and I returned the favor when the masses thinned out. He was so beautiful, leaning against the hardwood, fiddling with my watch. I fantasized about giving in more times than I had with anyone else, but every spare touch felt like taking advantage. I wouldn't be that deviant, using illness to steer someone into my bed. Nonetheless, it took an unfathomable amount of strength to keep from dragging him to the floor and letting him have his way, consequences be damned.

One of the bussers celebrated his retirement by lugging out a rusting jukebox from the back. It spent the evening chugging through enough filler and doo-wop to satisfy even the most dedicated of fanatics, while Charlie and I lounged, drinking ourselves into a stupor. We modeled a cataclysm, our chests red and warming, peaking through our loosened collars, the rims of our tumblers wet with use. His pinky snaked its way around mine and he appealed to my endless devotion with our arms clasped, timidly asking for music worthy of his gravitas.

"Russell, put on some Ross for me."

I sobered a little, knowing those records were under lock and key, that his small requests would remain unsatisfied no matter my resolve. I couldn't gift him the universe on a platter, couldn't come close.

"Irving," I supplied automatically in place of a declination, pawing with his buttons so I wouldn't lose my nerve.

“Irving,” he mewled back with his nose mere millimeters from mine, “put on something I can dance to.” I swallowed. My grip on his forearm tightened minutely as his pristine Oxfords traveled up my calf. He smiled Cheshire. “Please.”

The barkeep cleared his throat and I pulled back, swiftly separating myself from gratification. I’d done enough encouraging his games, toying with his wounds, distorting his amiability into something it wasn’t.

I desperately wanted to take him out on the town regardless, even if it was just as two brothers absorbing a bit more of this great city together. It was an escapist need to hear his opinions against the skyline, his disapproval of the garish architecture, the clash of man and nature. I’d take the Buick past these gauzy suburbs, even if the subway would be faster, let him put his feet on the dash and leave his prints on the center console. If he enjoyed himself even a smidgen, it would be more than enough.

I settled on showing him Central Park in the autumn. He’d been before, but I banked on the experience having dissolved in the far corners of his hippocampus, along with everything else.

They told me I caught him on a bad day.

What I met was not a person, but a barbing puddle draped over a stool, white-knuckling its scotch and keening into a napkin. I made the mistake of ignoring the warning signs, calling his name once, twice, once too many. He could’ve mangled my wrist with the speed he flung my hand off his shoulder. I witnessed him bitter and breaking, tresses damp with sweat and caging his pretty eyes. He shook with a ferocity that begged an ambulance, and if not for him and not for this country, I would’ve dialed for help without delay.

Instead, I let him bore into me, his focus frenzied and serrated, straddling the fine line of morbidity. He twitched with the yin-yang resolution scrawled across his retinas. Suicide or homicide. Kill or be killed.

I could do nothing but conjure images of prey animals seconds from slaughter. I know now the comparisons are demeaning, he deserved far better impressions than those of wild beasts, but my mind found great difficulty straying from the analogies. We were frozen, equal parts fidelity and terror, unable to recognize one another.

I distanced myself slowly, palms up and visible, praying I'd be spared the spray of glass shards and a long line of stitches running up my temple. Gathering the strength to turn tail and leave him vulnerable became another matter entirely, tasting atrociously of abandonment. From behind me, I heard the soft give of teeth through the inside of his lip, curbing some awful, wounded noise. I made quick work of my coat and let the staff tidy around the immovable column of his body.



I dropped by many times before that following February. By then, the rose had returned to his cheeks, his episodes spaced further apart, and in a spoil of clarity, he even remembered my birthday.

He suggested we spend my 35th downtown, just the two of us. We smuggled out some Merlot and boarded the Ferry at sundown, crossed the big lake around Manhattan with our few remaining unshared anecdotes and nothing else but. We walked for hours, declared war on the Empire State, got into heated, playful arguments about the wildlife. Charlie promised that he'd seen turkeys in Richmondtown, I knew he'd just sized up the pigeons.

I basked in the banter, watched the breeze fly through the ghost of his beard. His glee was something to behold, scarlet speckling his nose from where he bashedly tried to wipe it with his cuff. He was most enticing like this, pensive, saccharine, youthful, no longer ceaselessly striving to impress. A vision in his olive parka.

We bumbled onto Houston Street without really trying and I attempted to weave us out of the residential area with expedition and the affect of nonchalance. The stragglers there walked in curt lines, gaits measured, heads down. The curtains in the windows above were drawn and radio chatter floated above us. I worried holes into my gloves turning every corner, but the din melted away under his gentle heat. He kept his tone hushed and lilting, spinning tales to assuage me, summoning the Jabberwocky.

He captured me a long time ago, his willing prisoner. The only resonance I'd tune into belonged solely to Charlie. He must've noticed my ogling, continuing his rhapsody with a smirk. I had only just begun processing his latest lyrics when he pulled me into himself, let his palms cradle my jaw and his tongue marinate the seam of my lips.

If I'm being honest with myself now, because I couldn't then, I had briefly considered bearing the repercussions of submission. I allowed myself a millisecond of ecstasy before I shoved him away.

"Are you *insane*?"

I whirled around with no pretense of subtlety, counted potential onlookers and their guns. When no handcuffs sprang forth from the midnight, my lungs kicked back into gear. I thanked the dark, thanked the backturn of foot soldiers, thanked my reflexes. Once I got my senses about me, I sputtered around my poor choice of language. I made a show of my guilt, even as grammar escaped me. He only adjusted his sleeves, seeming far less bothered by my vehement refusal than I would've been twenty years junior.

"I have full respect for you closety types. Keep your secrets close to your chest with family, or friends even, I understand. The public isn't entitled to your love life, you should choose when to come out, yada yada, I understand that perfectly well." He straightened his scarf and chuckled as my knees tremored under the shadow of eavesdroppers. "But this is the Village, you're being ridiculous."

I went rigid. This was not a history lesson I was prepared to give.

“It’s not safe here.”

He leveled me with a fondly unimpressed expression that suggested he simply did not believe me. I shrank as he continued on, making no attempts to conceal himself or his volume.

“Look, the dress-up has been fun, I’ve enjoyed my part in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, but this fifties cosplay has gone a stretch too far—”

“Lower your voice.”

“No one cares about these things anymore. Times have changed.”

“Yes, they have.” I gripped him by the biceps to muster a confidence earned by someone else. I forced the parallel of our profiles, certified the track of his pupils. I checked the perimeter once more and risked the intimacy of my mouth in his ear. “You remember a very different New York. It’s not safe here. Especially in the Village.”

He scoffed, albeit a little less certain than before, a touch grief-stricken.

“Where the hell have you been—”

“I’m not interested in you.”

Gusts stilled. Stones sank. He stepped measuredly backward into the asphalt.

“Ah.”

How he must have taken it then, my temporary dismissal as disgust, my necessary hesitancy as disinterest, my immeasurable affection as intentional savagery.

“I’m sorry.”

“No need.” His head shook with firm reassurance, obliging and adult. “Like I said, I understand.”

A gap for his heels to twist, my conscience to cannibalize itself.

“Let me walk you home.”

“I’m alright, thank you.”

They told me not to set myself up for failure. Accept that he’ll never know what he wants. Accept that he’ll be cruel when you turn him down, that he’ll lash out when the wind changes. Accept that his build nullifies his capacity for romance, that his love, by definition, is inorganic and unreliable. Don’t waste your time trying to figure him out. Don’t wait up and don’t wait on. You’ll kill yourself standing by for his lucid moments.

“I’ll see you at Christmas, Daniel.”

I set myself up for failure.

“Irving.”

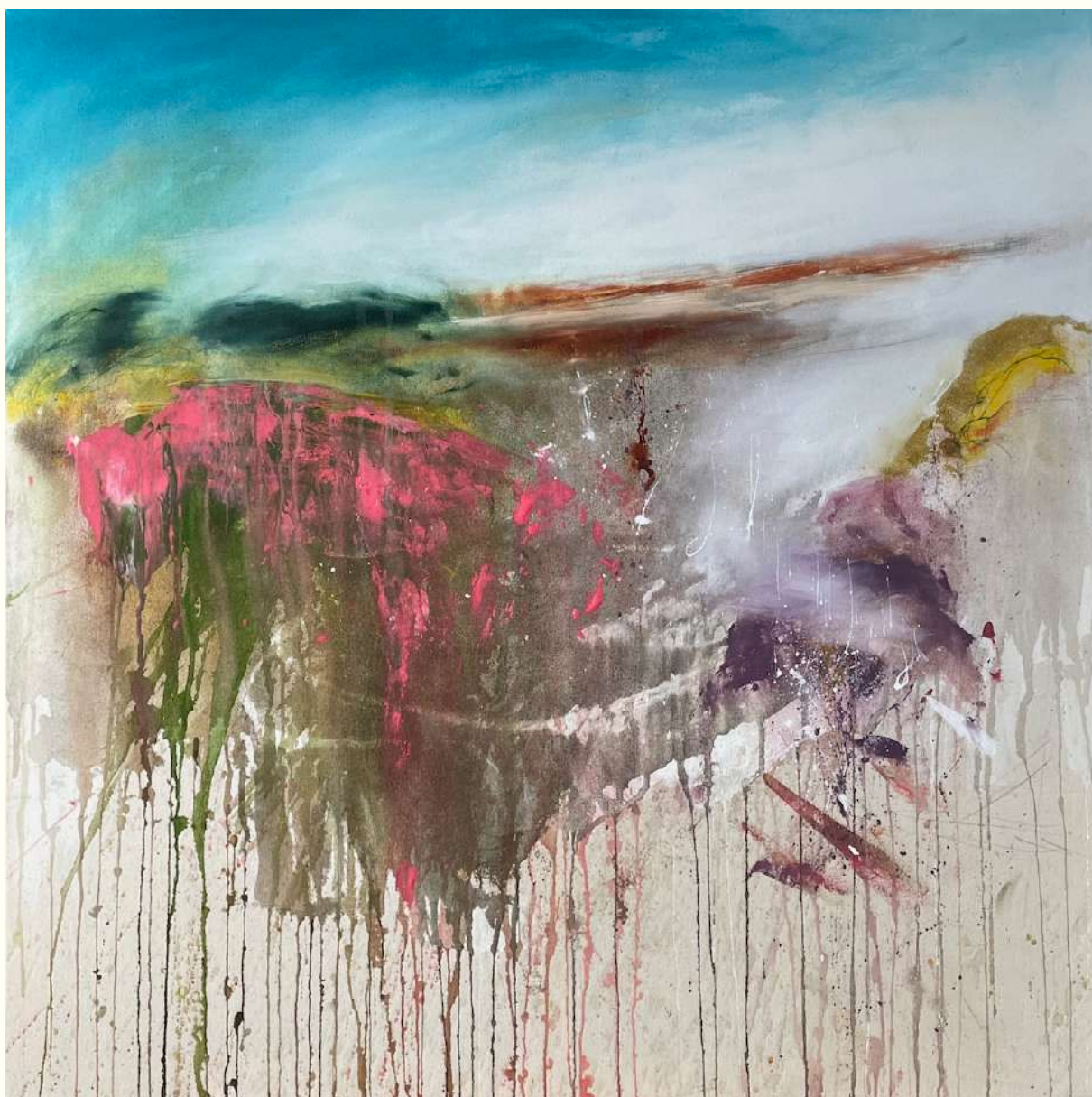
“*Irving*.” His silhouette glowed in the moonlight, a striking line against hotels and scaffolding, a winter mirage fading into the horizon. He sent me a watery chuckle and left his corporeal vessel in Greenwich. “Don’t get caught in the snow.”

I knew I wouldn’t. It hadn’t snowed in North America in over a decade.



Luminosity of Silence

Manish Chandra





The Aesthetics of Industrial Effluent

Manish Chandra





Becoming is an Orbit



Georgie Spillman

From many years a tortoise
pulling my home behind my head
paving stone for a shell

I awoke as
a frothing
boiling woman.

The stew spat
oil
water
plum tomatoes—

the pot had in it
more me than the possible I
more clear and placid water than

the thick stock
the seeping brown of
onions and bay's hot
perfection.

Maybe I could lose this incessant sense of self
if I sat in
the rosemary—

jutting
allow it
to slowly scratch me up,
etch a few holes in my surface area
without complaint; it touches me as it wishes and
wishes me nothing in particular.

Bark and skin
blood,
smell of the leaf oil
that I crush with my arse arms and
elbows,
my weight in here—

these incessant exploding
senses of selves.



Come Away from the Edges

Abdulrahman Taiwo Adedayo

Come away from the edges of sanity
as you relish in the ardour of the violin.

The language of a falling star has in it
novelty and foreboding
that pulls soulful yearnings from the numb heart
whilst carving deep marks always to be remembered.

Scripts of its language wedged on autumn leaves,
and with every slight quiver, the violin pulls
me further, further to the brink of sanity!



komorebi / the friction *is* the point

*On how Wim Wenders' Perfect Days
finds beauty in imperfection*

By Adithya Kamesh

The excitement of grainy film, of bleached-out black and white, is the excitement of witnessing events too momentous for the medium assigned to record them.

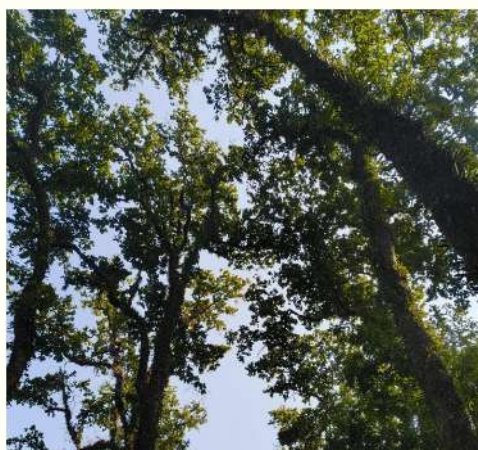
- Brian Eno

komorebi (木漏れ日) n. [Japanese]

ko·mo·re·bi / koh-moh-reh-bee /

Etymology: From 木 (ko, "tree") + 漏れ (more, "to leak, to filter through") + 日 (bi, "sunlight"). Literally, "sunlight leaking through trees."

Definition: Sunlight filtering through the leaves of trees, especially the shifting patterns of light and shadow this creates on the ground as leaves stir in the wind.



All photos
courtesy of
the author



We are living through the most ‘connected’ moment in human history. For the first time, more people have access to a mobile phone than to a safely managed toilet. Roughly seven in ten people carry a smartphone. Nearly three in four are online and just as many use social media. For anyone who wants to reach out to another person, this is the most opportune moment there has ever been.

Yet, there is an unusual sadness that hangs over each one of us. The promise of ‘connecting people’ delivered but at a huge cost: *placelessness*. The Digital Age never taught us how to stay rooted to something—a place, a person, a feeling, an *experience*.

Wim Wenders’ *Perfect Days* (2023) shows us how it is possible to stay rooted to a place, a moment, and oneself by ‘disconnecting’. Hirayama (Kōji Yakusho) is a toilet cleaner in Shibuya, Tokyo. His world is small, controlled, and carefully curated. What makes his world different is that it exists apart or ‘disconnected’ from what lies outside of its rigid boundaries. “The world is made up of many different worlds,” Hirayama tells his niece, Niko (Arisa Nakano). “Some are connected, and some are not.”

Hirayama trades the convenience of the ‘connected’ world for the happiness and peace of a rooted one. By throwing away the certainty of convenience, what he gets back is an unparalleled experience of the small, unrepeatable wonders around him.

What follows is not a defense of nostalgia. Hirayama isn’t trying to relive the past; his cassettes, his film camera, his secondhand books are not artifacts of memory but instruments of attention. Each one asks something of him that a digital equivalent would not: patience, upkeep, the risk of loss. Taken together, these instruments argue that in a world built to remove friction, choosing friction on purpose may be the only way left to live meaningfully.

routine

Hirayama has two routines—a daily routine and a weekly routine.

Every day, he wakes up quite early, mostly by the rustling sound of the sweeper sweeping the streets. He waters his plants, brushes his teeth, changes into his standard ‘The Tokyo Toilet’ uniform, grabs his keys and other cleaning equipment and heads out. As he’s about to leave, he grabs a coffee from the vending machine outside his home. Just as he enters the van, he checks his cassette collection and picks a tape (consciously) for his commute.

He works through the morning—scrubbing, cleaning, inspecting—until lunch, when he visits a shrine where he spends significant time watching the sunlight falling through the trees.

As he wraps up his day, he heads home, changes and heads to a public bath, showers, changes back and heads to a yakisoba stand in the Asakusa Underground Street—the oldest surviving underground shopping street in all of Japan. Here, he’s always greeted by a cheerful waiter who says to him, “For a hard day’s work!” as he serves him food. Once done, he cycles back, settles in for the night and reads until he falls asleep. This routine repeats itself the next day.

On his day off, he follows a different routine. He first picks up his clothes for washing, and after a brief visit to the Koto Tenso Jinja shrine, goes to the laundromat. Then he stops by a camera shop. Once back, he cleans his home thoroughly. He then rewinds all the tapes he has listened to during the week. He sorts the good and bad photographs, keeps the good ones, disposes of the rest. He heads out again—first to the bookstore for a book, then to Mama's bar. He cycles back home and is done for the day.

These routines are important. They form the spine of the narrative. It is evident from these routines that much of Hirayama’s life revolves around the analog way of life—cassettes, film camera, and books—as opposed to the digital way of life. His routines, on the surface, seem simple, even boring. Upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that he’s never had the same day twice. He’s *rooted* in a way that many of us aren’t.

He may play the same cassette a hundred times, but no two listens sound quite the same. His camera will never capture the same shot twice. He may return to the same book, but never read it the same way again. It is these microvariations in the mundane that Hirayama is drawn to. It's a strange kind of consistency — sameness on the outside, difference on the inside. That's the whole argument of an analog life: not that nothing changes, but that everything, when played and replayed, changes anyway.



You're eating lunch. You're watching a show on your phone which is propped against your water bottle. You have no idea what is happening around you. This is not a judgment because most of us do this.

But not Hirayama.

On his lunch break, he visits the Yoyogi-Hachiman-gū shrine in central Tokyo, carrying with him his usual pack of sandwiches. His favourite pastime is watching—or rather, admiring—the sunlight falling through the leaves of the trees, or what the Japanese call ‘komorebi’.



And he almost always takes a photograph—just one, not many—with his Olympus mju film camera. He then pockets the camera and continues watching the trees. He does this every day he works, without fail.

Once a week, he takes the film to the local camera shop to get it developed while also collecting the prints from the roll he'd dropped off the week before. Once he's back home, he looks carefully at each photograph, tearing up the ones he's not satisfied with and filing the rest away in a box—which then goes to a cupboard, which, to our astonishment, is already crowded with similar boxes—one for each month.

This process has its own limitations. A full week must pass before he can even see what he's shot. Most of the shots won't be great and maybe he'll find a couple of photographs that he'll like. It's an expensive hobby too.

But Hirayama isn't bothered by these constraints. He sticks to this routine. Why?

Because it keeps him rooted, just like the trees he photographs. The moment he distances himself from this long, inefficient process, he would lose interest in continuing it — the friction isn't a consequence of the hobby, *it is* the hobby.

There's a second, more intimate reason as well. The photos that survive this process resemble his own memories of the trees far more than a "real" digital photograph ever could.

Later in the film, cycling home with Niko, Hirayama offers her something close to a philosophy: "Next time is next time. Now is now." It's a strange thing to say about a hobby built entirely on capturing moments and yet it explains the camera perfectly. He isn't trying to hold on to this exact patch of light forever. He's trying to have actually been there for it. The photograph, when it finally arrives a week later, is what's left after he was fully present for it—which, in the end, is the only kind of record worth keeping.





cassettes

Analog is really making a comeback

// [Van Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl" drifts from the van's speakers as Hirayama drives, Niko beside him in the passenger seat, turning the cassette cover over in her hands.]

"So this is a cassette tape?" she says. "From way-back?"

"Hm-hmm." He pauses. "Way back."

She examines it more closely, squinting at the label.

"Can I put this on my iPhone?" She turns it over again. "What's written on it?" A pause. "Van-morri-son." She looks up at him. "Is this on Spotify?"

"Not sure," Hirayama says, and laughs, embarrassed. "Where is that place?"

"What place?"

"That shop."

Niko laughs out loud. "It's not a shop." She keeps laughing.

[The music swells.] //

Who wouldn't love to listen to songs as they drive to work? Hirayama is no different.

Actually, no. He *is* quite different.

Unlike the digital infotainment systems that are used in most cars today, his Daihatsu Hijet has an old-fashioned cassette player installed. He carries an (enviable) collection of vintage Western rock, soul, and British Invasion cassettes spanning the late 1960s through the mid-70s, featuring The Animals, Otis Redding, Patti Smith, Lou Reed, The Rolling Stones and Van Morrison.

Cassettes wear out over time. The tape is a thin plastic film and running it across a spinning capstan and pinch roller thousands of times gradually stretches it, especially at the very start where playback usually begins. Stretched tape causes pitch to waver.

Every time the tape in a cassette gets tangled or spools loose, or even if you've just finished listening to the whole album and would want to listen to it from the start all over again, you'll have to perform a small ritual: slide a pencil into the reel's sprocket hole and turn it by hand, winding the tape back. It takes about 2-3 minutes per cassette.

But what's the payoff for these efforts?

When his co-worker Takashi's (Tokio Emoto) scooter breaks down, he borrows Hirayama's van to drop off his girlfriend, Aya (Aoi Yamada). Along the way, Aya goes through Hirayama's cassette collection, and ends up playing Patti Smith's "Redondo Beach".

As Smith's raspy voice fills the van, Aya is completely lost in the song, mouthing along to the words. Takashi tries to say something to her — she barely looks at him before shushing him.

"I like the sound of cassette tapes," she says.

Hirayama, sitting in the back of the van, can't help but smile.

After Aya gets down, Takashi laments about not having money to take her out. He spots the cassette tapes and asks Hirayama, "Hey, how much would this make?" Hirayama looks at him disapprovingly. "Don't you wanna know? I'm just curious!" Takashi presses. Hirayama doesn't respond so Takashi continues, "Analog is really making a comeback. Might be worth lots."

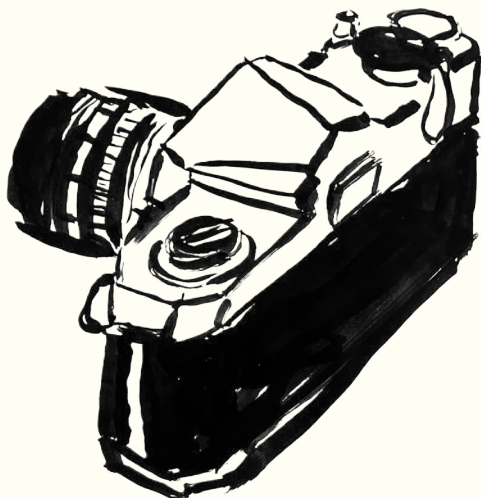


Desperately needing money, Takashi convinces Hirayama to go with him to a shop that buys and sells vintage cassettes. When Takashi shows the owner an original Lou Reed, the owner responds, “This one’s rare, it’s Lou Reed. \$120 for this.”



Shocked and utterly pleased, Takashi tries to convince Hirayama to sell all the cassettes but Hirayama doesn’t agree. He makes Takashi hand over the cassettes and offers to give Takashi the money he needs. Hirayama would rather give Takashi all his money than sell the cassettes.

It’s only when his van runs out of fuel on the way home, and he has no cash left, that he has no choice but to sell one of the tapes he loves most—the same Lou Reed cassette the shop owner had priced at \$120 earlier.



A cassette is a strange kind of possession. It wears down a little every time you play it. Vinyl and film may have been liberated from the job of documenting the world perfectly, but their friction with the world is real. You can run out of gas and lose a song forever, in a way no cloud library allows. That, too, is the point.

books

Between grief and nothing, I will take grief

- William Faulkner

Hirayama has a strict reading habit. He only reads from physical books, which he buys from a secondhand bookstore.

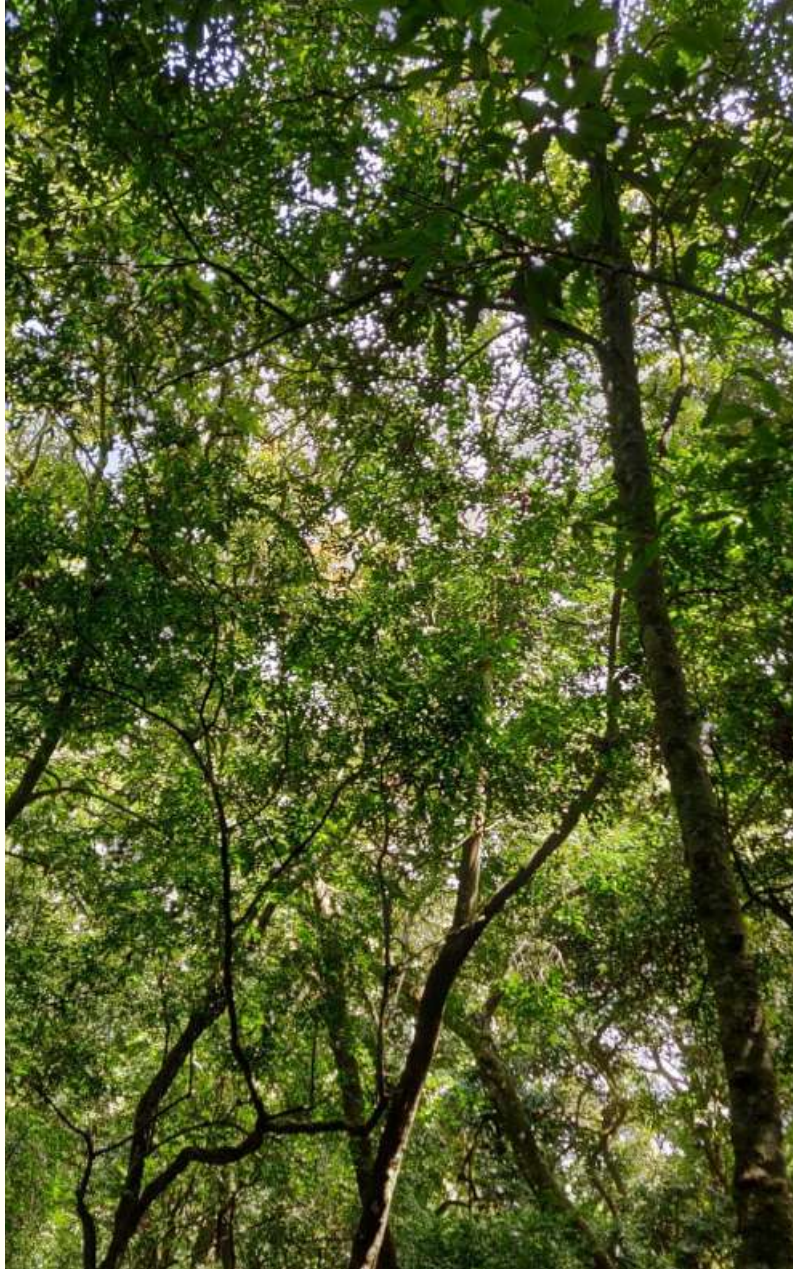
This is a part of his weekly routine—he cycles to the store, takes his time working through the shelves, and settles on something that catches his eye. He starts reading the book right there, even as the owner shares some interesting anecdotes about the writer or the book.

Towards the start of the movie, he is reading William Faulkner's *Wild Palms*, a novel about a man who chooses grief over a numb, frictionless life, set against a convict who's handed freedom by accident and chooses to return to captivity rather than keep it. Hirayama's own life runs on the same logic: he could have the smooth, forgettable version of each day, and instead chooses the one that costs him something.

At a later point in the movie, he picks up *Tree* by Aya Kōda. It is a posthumous essay collection in which Kōda visits tree after tree, treating each ordinary encounter as inexhaustible material for reflection. It's hard to not notice the resemblance: Hirayama does exactly this with a camera instead of a pen, returning to the same patch of light under the same branches, convinced that no two visits are ever quite the same.

A used book carries its own kind of decay. Pages yellow, spines crack, someone else's pencil marks turn up in the margins uninvited. Unlike a digital library, which holds every title at once, forever, in identical condition, his shelf can only ever hold what he's found and chosen to keep.

A book, like a cassette or a roll of film, asks something of the person holding it—to be present. Hirayama reads the whole thing, one page at a time. That, finally, is the thread running through every object in his life: the cassette that wears down with use, the photograph that can't be retaken, the book that can't be jumped around in. All of them ask to be lived with, not just consumed. Hirayama's small, deliberate refusals are a way of remaining inside his own world.



dis/connect

Hirayama prefers the analog experience because it forces a single, unrepeatable encounter instead of an infinite, interchangeable one. It makes him live in the moment. He finds happiness in not just enjoying the *little* things in life. It's in *how* he enjoys the little things that his happiness stems from. We witness Hirayama choose friction over ease, day after day. In doing so, he echoes the countless artists and auteurs who have spent the last decade returning to grain, tape hiss, and the printed page.

That kind of presence is something that the digital experience cannot quite offer us. Though we can now click almost an infinite number of photos and store them anywhere, few of those photos are ever looked at again. An infinite archive, in practice, is an unvisited one. Abundance flattens every image into the same forgettable, interchangeable blur.

Hirayama's world runs on scarcity by design. Twenty-four exposures. A handful of cassettes he already knows by heart. Nothing asks to be scrolled past; nothing repeats itself identically. What survives, at the end of each day, is a small number of moments he was actually present for.

He doesn't doomscroll. He doesn't browse, doesn't stream. He doesn't even own a smartphone. He just...*lives*.

Is he living better than the rest of us? Who are we to say?

But is he at least happy and content?

It certainly seems so.



Weak Tea

Eithne Carson

I am determined to go looking for Vincent and Tamara in Paris and God, I am so sick of things creating things in a loop that waters them down like weak tea, and of people that ask empty questions with all their thoughts flickering dimly behind glass.

I want to be left behind by it all-

In Caesar Manrique's house, on my father's shoulders at three years old, where the walls felt cavernous and a jar of volcanic rock was pressed into my tiny hands-
the real deal.

In Amsterdam years later where I asked him to tell me about Frida again, then to tell me about Vincent, to recite the tragedy, then show me the colours and encourage me to push through the crowds in the Van Gogh museum until I could see every brushstroke myself, dressed in secondhand boots and a beret that looked ridiculous but was sewn with human hands.

Or let me be left in East Wall on the wonderful day that the travelling library and the ice-cream van both came to visit, in the café where I was read to while I ate plain, white toast and drew pictures of Atlantis and Aslan's country.

In the garden where we made sculptures with salt dough and got sick from eating the excess, crushed raspberries to turn our cheeks red and buttercup petals to tattoo the sun on our wrists.

Leave me the words that gave you indigestion and let me make up my own mind about them, even if I turn out to be completely and blissfully wrong.

I want the unabridged, imperfect version of everything, the words you stumble over, the cracks in your voices, the poems so raw you call them shit just so no one will ask to read them.

I want the tomatoes my mother grew in the backyard and the music my best friend wrote after a breakup-
all the while the devil tells me if I only let my soul atrophy, he will give me all the time in the world to do nothing at all with.

It sounds alright if you've gotten lazy with listening, as so many have but I take a moment to think and remember that the kids at work will want me to tie their friendship bracelets and tell them a good word that rhymes with 'purple'-

so I tell him I'm alright for now, but I'll write him a poem if he likes.



-topia.

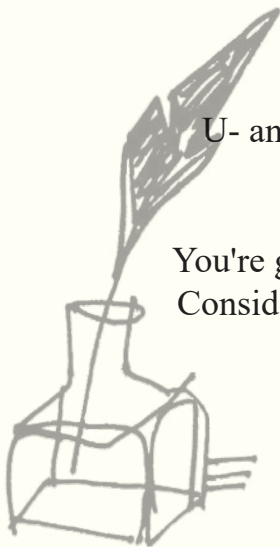
SZ. Hallern

A registry office sits upon farmland and a contract is presented.
Heavy, muddy ink floods an agreement.
Previously elliptical movements now become cyclical, regular,
maintained.
Control and containment live peacefully for the most part, but
only as they don't all that often speak.
Milky digits wipe tears more often than you'd think.
You need a 50/50 ratio of brown/green when composting,
otherwise the heap will dry out or rot.
Cooked food waste attracts foxes, and rats.
Sometimes it's best to leave the roots of a plant in the soil when
harvesting - sometimes not.
Strawberries want to be moved around every four years.
Be intuitive, and always prune with your eyes first, before your
fingers.

Only plant a seed as deep
as it is tall.

Sit beneath a tree and let it
think.

U- and dys- surround us in equal measure of parts; attention is
sunlight to chlorophyll ideas.
The flash hurts my eyes.
You're going to do something, do so with purpose, even a mistake.
Consider whether pollinators pollinate just as well in polytunnels.
Leaving only footsteps, need what you take.
Don't be late, but never go too soon.



A jury decides when is the right time - then things are allowed to change.
Morally and materially we are transformed.

Humans are the only fauna that recognise their prey as feeling, and so try to
minimise the pain of the hunt. Swine don't enjoy electrocution.
Felling for art is hunting for sport; our walls are decorated well within our means.
Every failed fruiting is a teleological line disturbed.
Dried ink can be wetted again, though.
Even if a promise hurts the breaker, long-term preservation isn't guaranteed.
Damp dries as quietly smoke rises.
Do you feel like you've been here before?

A library awaits fresh footsteps.
The piece of flesh I never got back is somewhere I last left it.
Replenishment is a privilege; a positive-sum game.
Novelty is to preservation as predator is to prey.
The mission isn't an empty net: nothing caught, nothing gained.

Little did we know when we first set off, that we'd think this little now with even
less to be sure of.

Mental mulch riddled with brain worms.

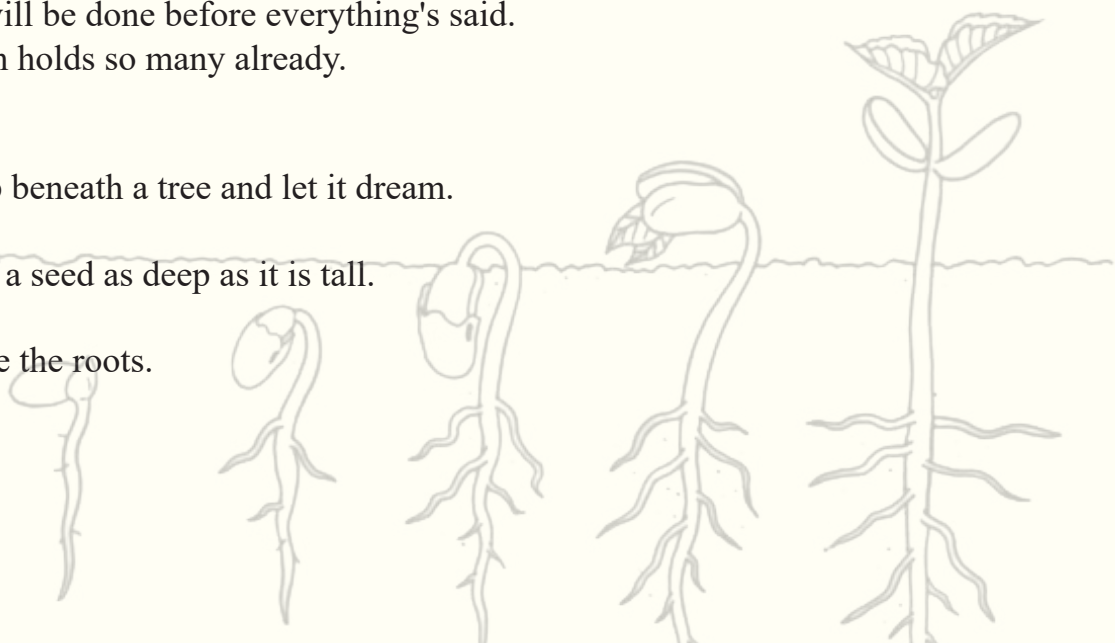
Plentiful in emptiness, robotic of heart.

Mother Earth became nostalgic; certain the vow; hour of his Sun.
Timeliness in perpetuity, thought and act mapped 1:1.
All will be done before everything's said.
Death holds so many already.

Sleep beneath a tree and let it dream.

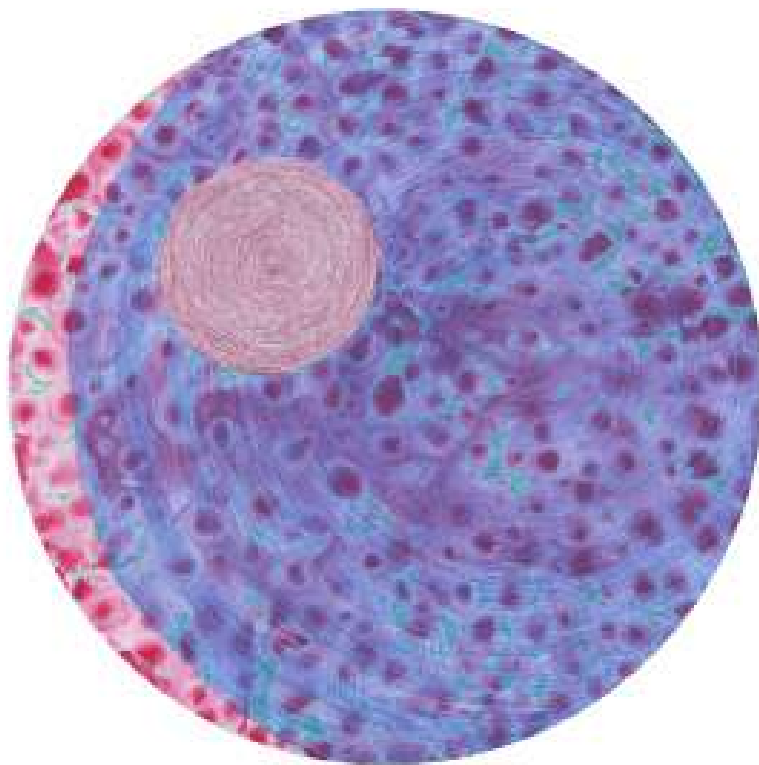
Plant a seed as deep as it is tall.

Leave the roots.



Oneness

Nikita Dhalil



Title: Oneness Medium: Acrylic Canvas Size: 24*24 inches Year: 2026

Title: Oneness

We are everything: our fear, love, hate, rage, and our entire existence. There is nothing we can truly separate ourselves from. We carry the essence of all things in varying measures, and it is the fluid quantity of these emotions that ultimately shapes who we are. Nothing can permanently define us. We shift according to our situations, the people we encounter, and the moods we carry. Just like the moon, we are not the same every day or every moment. These transitions occur so rapidly and continuously that we hardly notice them yet, beautifully, this entire spectrum is what makes us whole. This artwork is an exploration of that profound oneness. It is a visual representation of our many different, fragmented beings, all coexisting and composed within a single body.



The Pause of Energy (2026)

Nikita Dhalil



Title: The Pause of Energy Medium-Acrylic on canvas Size- 16*16 inches Year- 2026

Title: The Pause of Energy (2026)

"The Pause of Energy" serves as an entrance to the void. While life exists in a constant rhythm of highs and lows, this work represents the transition into a state of total bliss, a realm of nothingness where only ultimate peace remains.

Through meticulous, vibrating line-work, the composition guides the spirit away from the noise of existence and into a profound silence. It is a visual meditation on the beauty of the "zero point," where energy settles into an eternal, serene equilibrium.

Negatives

A. G. Kalaidjian

I can distinctly remember the conversation I had with Valerie the night before Jan Van Henrik's seminal photography show, *Collusions*. I say "distinctly," but of course anyone familiar with Van Henrik's work will realize I mean this loosely. The impossibility of knowing reality, the treachery of memory, the fundamental misreading that is human social interaction, and the perpetual desire to protect oneself through images: these are some of the tenets of his particular brand of postmodern philosophy. Seeing these words now it is hard not to laugh, so completely have I discredited his way of seeing the world. But at the time, I was merely a doctoral student, naïve, insecure, and eager to mimic a skeptic like Van Henrik.

A discussion, nevertheless, took place, the import of which ran something like this:

"Did you see Van Henrik is having a photography show?"

"Jan Van Henrik?"

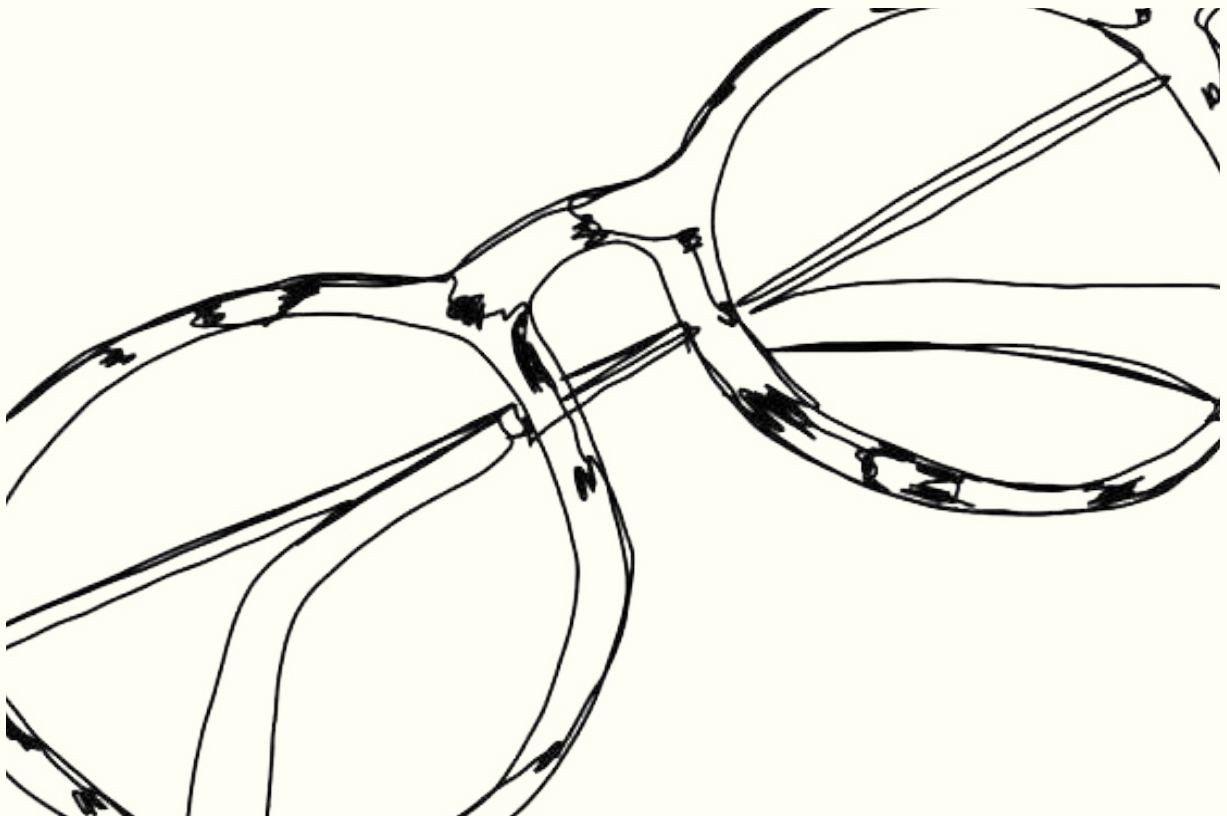
"Yes."

"The philosopher?"

"I assume so."

"What business does he have putting on a photography show?"

"I'm sure he takes pictures, like anyone else."



“Precisely.”

“Well, aren’t you always saying he is the greatest theorist of the contemporary image?”

“Yes, *theorist*, not practitioner.”

“Something about the photograph being more real than the photographer?”

“It’s a little more complicated than that.”

“Who better to take pictures?”

“That’s not how it works.”

“Well, we should *go*, he might be there.”

“You think?”

“Why wouldn’t he be? You like to think of him holed up, away from the rest of the world. Only talking to you, diligently working on his next philosophical missive to you.”

“I suppose I don’t think of him much as a person.”

“His words descend from God.”

“Let’s not get carried away.”

She liked to tease me back then. We teased each other, naturally, lovingly, and only sometimes cruelly. I wondered sometimes why we were together. Maybe I was a charming alternative to her colleagues at the public defender’s office. I would describe my esoteric theories to her, and she would detail the harsh realities of her clients, and together we went along.

Going to galleries was a shared passion of ours. Val loved looking at the art. She would even occasionally buy a piece if it arrested her for long enough. I preferred looking at the people, the strange affectations and mannerisms of the overly self-aware. But of course, I admit the art was a large part of it, too. Indeed, with the benefit of hindsight, I can now say it was the interplay between viewers and the artworks that fascinated me the most, and to be more specific, the way people’s behavior changed in response to whether they found the art “good” or “bad.”

I myself was not immune to these effects. Feeling in the presence of great art, I would shrink into myself, glancing furtively around the room at similarly demure patrons. Inevitably, I would notice signs of wealth everywhere: a vintage gold watch, a designer boot with perforated leather. I then felt shame at my own inadequacy, my striking lack of genius, forever looking in on a life out of reach. And yet there was also contentment. Subtle nods to my compatriots, if not a great artist myself, at least my presence indicated good taste. I never bought anything back then, I could scarcely afford to, but I would occasionally snap a surreptitious photograph of a particular detail that took me.

“Well, where is he showing?”

“Franck Mason.”

We’d been to this gallery a few times. Franck was a stout figure who often dressed as if he worked as an overseer at an automobile assembly line. At the sound of his name the show became real to me, not only real but plausible.

“And you think he’ll be there?”

“Well they usually are—as you know better than most.”

This was a game we would play: walking into galleries and trying to see who could find the artist first. Then, together, in a quiet moment we would say a friendly word of congratulations, especially if Val was keen on a piece.

“Alright then, what harm can it do?”



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For the sake of posterity, for whom it might prove of use or interest, I will try to summon the encounter we had that evening of the opening and its impact on the weeks following.



Franck Mason Gallery is somewhat nondescript—as they all tend to be—large white walls, on the top floor of a former manufacturing corporation that once specialized in automobile brakes, vacuum tubes, airducts, and various other products combining rubber, plastic, and steel. Large windows provide expansive views of downtown with its skyscrapers touting banks, law firms, and consulting agencies. Admittedly, I feel a rush. It is the sheer energy of these occasions that draws me in. Yet the scene is somewhat subdued. I am surprised by the small size of the crowd, but then again Van Henrik is primarily known as a philosopher, and not an artist.

And then there are the photos themselves: I thought perhaps they might elude expression, but in fact they are quite easy to describe. There is a series on driftwood, mostly a monochromatic beige collection of gnarled logs stripped smooth and clean by water and sun. There are scenes at a nondescript loading dock, a series of concrete blocks and rings that show a gradient of sludge and green algae from the rising and falling tides. Another shows a rusted car barely submerged in a lake. It is with something of a mixture of disappointment and relief that I realize these photos do little for me. Their very banality undercuts the project—it's as if Van Henrik wants to take meaningful photographs, but at the same time pretend he has shot these scenes in a haphazard, nonchalant fashion. I circle around the walls, waiting for my opinion to change, yet with a growing certainty, I feel underwhelmed by the project—more, I begin to feel underwhelmed by Van Henrik's entire philosophy of the image. What had seemed so persuasive on the written page is here rendered inert, lifeless, and staged. I reconnect with Val to confirm my suspicions.

“Well, what do you think?”

“Perhaps they are not quite my style,” she pauses, “but there is nevertheless something to it. A bit of a requiem for the way humans are treating the planet. What does he say, something about making nature into a disposable product?”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“And what do you make of it all?”

“I’m not sure I like it, I’m not sure it’s good.”

“You and your good and bad.”

“Doesn’t it leave you wanting something?”

“I might buy one, there is a whiff of the crime scene photographer in his style that might work well in my office.”

“Oh really, Val.”

We pause in front of a photo of an abandoned building with holes in its concrete walls. A photo taken through a skull-shaped cavity presents two broken windows as eyes, a peeling paint nose, and a green shrub mouth on the dirt floor. It strikes me that nowhere are humans represented in the exhibit. They are implied of course, with their discarded products, shelters, and infrastructure, but never does the human body, or any living thing—barring the algae—make an appearance in the frames. Val prods me in the ribs.

“Is that your man, over there?”

“Where?”

“Just there.”

“Yes you might be right. He looks older than I would have thought.”

“Well his picture on the dust jackets can’t be that recent. Let’s go say hello.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. We’ve come this far, haven’t we?”

Why I should be reticent now, I do not know. Val is right, I have come this far, to cheaply dismiss the work and scuttle back into the security of the anonymous night would not do. And besides, I no longer feel the apprehension I did upon our arrival. Perhaps if I had met Van Henrik at a reading or a conference I would be more intimidated, but now, among his photographs, which I have judged to be second rate, he no longer seems like such an imposing figure. Still, I let Val take the lead.

“Excuse me, Mr. Van Henrik? We just wanted to say how much we enjoy the show.”

He does indeed look older than I imagined, a bit grisled, yet with sharp blue eyes that flash slowly between the two of us. When he speaks, it does not necessarily surprise me, but I have never once imagined his voice after years of reading his words. His voice is precise, perhaps lighter than I might have thought, with what must be a slight hint of some European accent, but which one? I would have thought Dutch, but somehow it seems closer to Czech or some eastern inflection.

“Ah, hello there. Please, call me Jan. And thank you, thank you, I admit I’m a bit out of my depth here.”

“No, of course not, although we are also fans of your writing.”

“Really? Well consider me doubly touched. And are you...I’m sorry—” he gestures with his hand.

“Val”

“And...”

“John—with an ‘h.’”

“Val and John, are you artists yourself?”

“No just patrons, I’m a lawyer, in fact, I was just saying—I hope you won’t mind—your photos have something of a crime scene aesthetic. And John...”

“I’m more of a writer type.”

“Ah, a fellow sufferer on the blank page.” He squints at me a bit, then turns back to Val. “It’s funny you should say that, about the crime scene. You see it gets at one of the fundamental paradoxes of the photograph. Of course, the forensic photographer is not an artist, she has a job to do: to capture faithfully the scene of a crime, to frame the shots in a way that will be most helpful to the detectives. And this is the first impossibility: to capture the reality of a place through the virtual image. But beyond this, and this is more significant, there is the further fantasy of getting to the bottom of what really happened in the crime, to reconstruct the history of the events in Sherlockian fashion from the traces left behind. This is why movies and television shows always have the scene where the detective, sitting frustrated at his desk long after everyone has gone home, lit by a single light bulb as if in self-interrogation, suddenly notices a new, tiny detail in one of the photographs he has pored over for untold hours. His face lights up, everything suddenly falls into place. Now he might compare the photos, one after another, he is recreating the scene in his mind, perhaps the film even provides a sepia-toned reenactment. From out of these images reality has been salvaged, good has triumphed over evil, and justice has been served. This is the constitutional fantasy behind society’s desire for the real, for truth, for history, the photograph merely makes it apparent.” He catches himself, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to start in on a lecture.”



Val looks rapt, “Not at all, I understand what you are saying. As a lawyer, there is reality and there is what can be proven in a court of law.” I am growing a bit restless. Hearing Van Henrik’s theories from the horse’s mouth, as it were, the words that once moved me so much on the printed page begin to ring false, childish even.

“But where are the *bodies*?” Val and Van Henrik turn and seem to discover me for the first time, “Sorry, I mean, I couldn’t help but notice there are no *people* in any of your photographs. Do you never take portraits?” He seems surprised, yet already I see him preparing to launch into another long discursion.

“Yes, the human figure *is* endlessly fascinating. The countless scintillations of the face, it’s micro-expressions that are always threatening to reveal one’s innermost thoughts. The portraitist has the same imperative: to remove the mask, to catch the subject unaware, in a moment of true being, true selfhood. But, if we want to continue the analogy, portraits are only so many mugshots—worse, even, in that the one having his picture taken is a willing accomplice. And here you’ll forgive me, is where my title, or rather, it is Franck’s really, *Collusions*, comes into play. I collude with these lifeless objects to better plot against society’s demand for emotional access. But to collude with a willing subject, a living person, is to go too far, to sabotage reality before a single frame has been taken. With the mugshot there is at least some possibility for truth—there is no dissembling the purpose behind it. A mugshot is already an accusation, a presumption of guilt, to which the mug in question is called to respond. This is why it is so tempting to read a person’s guilt or innocence in a single frame: perhaps the accused looks defiant, resigned, intoxicated, resilient. This image precedes the firing squad.” He pauses for effect. “A portrait has the illusion of reciprocity, but a gap still exists. Who was the first to smile at the camera? Historians give all sorts of reasons for the stoic faces that comprise early portraiture: the exposure took too long, it wasn’t a social norm, or—most telling of all perhaps—people had bad teeth! Some of the earliest surviving photos with smiling subjects show soldiers from the Mexican-American war: not only smiling, but rakishly so. Was their confidence mere machismo? Or did they recognize in the camera lens a less potent weapon than the guns they carried at their sides? Did they sneer at an inferior species, secure in their own reality?”



My own thoughts begin to wander, and I have questions of my own. Are these photos mere props with which Van Henrik means to stage new articulations of his theories? Is it simply some perverse methodology to push his thoughts further? Or is this simply Van Henrik in decline? I look at Val. She seems enthralled. At times nodding, cocking her head, or laughing nervously—do I imagine this—or does she cover her mouth when she smiles? Perhaps Van Henrik’s mention of teeth has made her self-conscious. I flare with indignation. Is this merely a show for her? The old story of an aging man looking for his next muse?

Both Val and Van Henrik are now looking at *me*. Perhaps they expect me to give some clever reply, to fawn over Van Henrik’s theories. Or maybe they expect me to parrot his main idea, to see if I follow correctly. Taking a step towards Val, placing my arm around her waist, I smile, a bit ruefully.

“Well, we’d love to *purchase* one of your photographs.” They look at me askance. “Oh,” Van Henrik says, as if a switch has been thrown in his spine. “Of course, I couldn’t possibly *sell* them. That is, they are not *for* sale. To bring economics into the discussion would require an entirely different treatise. And I can see I have perhaps given one lecture too many.” He pauses, and then looks at Val. “Of course, I’d be more than happy to give you one of the photographs. Yes, by all means—it is, after all, merely one of many prints to which I hold the negatives.”

I flush. Now I am the one caught off guard. I don’t know why I recklessly offered to purchase one of his wretched photos. I might have expected to blanch at the price, or to hear what charity my purchase would be supporting, but not this. Val, sensing something amiss, comes to my rescue.

“Oh, Mr. Van Henrik, we’d love that. I was just saying how well it would be suited for the office. And when my colleagues ask, I’ll be able to tell them about our wonderful discussion of crime scenes and mugshots, the longing for reality, and the Faustian bargain of technology.”



• • •

And, I must admit begrudgingly, the more I look at it the more it grows on me. I had expected the opposite, to increase in my condescension. But, for whatever reason, perhaps simply the tempering influence of time and familiarity, I find myself gazing more and more at the knobby piece of driftwood. What had disgusted me at first glance, the lifeless, bland texture of it all, becomes—as I continue to gaze upon it—suffused with life and movement. The smaller branches that are gnarled and press into the trunk of the log now seem to me as powerful as Hades’ fingertips on Poserpina’s thigh in Bernini’s marble statue. I wonder if Van Henrik had seen all of this in a moment as he triggered the click of the metallic exposure.

We nod our goodbyes, take one more view of the photos. By now they disgust me. The thought of actually following up and attaining one of the limp pieces seems laughable. And yet, Val does stay true to her word, procuring through Franck, after the show comes down, one of the photos of driftwood. Nor does she put it in her office as she had initially mentioned, but instead she hangs it in the side hallway leading to her study. An innocuous enough location, true, but I wonder if she means it as a reminder to me. From my habitual seat in her living room’s easy chair, the photo is just viewable at the far-right edge of my vision, so that it draws my regard, distracts me from my reading.

Another curious thing is happening. The more enamored I become of Van Henrik's photograph the less I am able to read his philosophy. The words are becoming increasingly hollow, misguided, a total misreading of the image's potential. The crime scene metaphor is woefully lacking. The photo is not a postmortem on some past event, not a commentary on the lost life of a tree that was perhaps a victim to man's march towards modernity. Instead, I begin to see it as a powerful affirmation of the presence of the wood, its persistence even after the sap has ceased to flow. Van Henrik's photo does not capture the wood's being, the wood is in defiance of Van Henrik himself. It has its own demands. And if this lonely piece of driftwood can say so much, can persevere in the world Van Henrik has cast as artificial and alienated, imagine how powerful the human being becomes in this equation. Against Van Henrik's cynicism, I begin to articulate a radical openness, a vulnerability at the heart of human interactions, an immediacy.

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Those who are familiar with the vagaries of critical theory trends will no doubt be familiar with the rest of the story. My article, "Colluding with Van Henrik's Lens," placed on the cover of the journal *Æsoterica*, made, if not a complete splash, at least a mild ripple that began to divide media theorists. While some saw it as a sly departure from Van Henrik's theories, others recognized it for what it was: a trojan horse that entered into the Henrikian gates, only to dismantle his scaffolding from within. The whole piece turned on an unexpected reading of Van Henrik's photography, his practice pitted against his own theories of media aesthetics. Van Henrik vs. Van Henrik, as it were. And the field, fittingly, was only too happy to oblige in the downfall of its former scion. Not that *I* have been anointed in his place, far from it, but it did help me to gain access to the gilded tower of higher education, with all its suffocating promises of academic freedom.

Even better, I was offered a teaching position in the city. Val and I got married. Not long after, she became pregnant, and we welcomed a son. With a growing family and dual incomes for the first time, we combined our households. I often wonder if she placed Van Henrik's photograph deliberately to spur me into action. To taunt me out of the comfortable malaise of mediocrity in which I had dwelled for so long.



I have my own study now. And one day, deep in one of those thankless academic tasks I can hardly remember, Val pops her head in with a seductive grin.

“Where would you like to put this one?” Of course, she is holding up Van Henrik’s photograph.

“Oh, that old thing.”

“Yes, your favorite piece.”

I look at it for a moment. Even now it seems to maintain a freshness, as if I am once again seeing it for the first time. Then naturally, inevitably, I say, “Let’s put it in John Jr.’s room, don’t you think?”

“I was going to suggest the same thing.”

“After all, we want our little boy to grow up with an appreciation of the arts.”

“Wouldn’t that be something, to be the parents of a great artist?”

“As long as he stays away from philosophy, that’s fine by me.”



• • •

I still hope to see Van Henrik again someday. To give him the benefit of honest engagement, a true debate rather than the cowardly blow I dealt him at Franck Mason Gallery. I say he has been toppled from his lofty heights, but from an outsider's perspective he is just as successful and influential as ever. I had half hoped he might write a response to my article, a defiant defense of his theories. As it stands, I don't even know if he read it. Still, it seems notable that he has not responded; indeed, he has yet to publish *any* new work since my article appeared. Perhaps he is focusing more on his photography these days.

As for me, I am busier than ever before. My words are in high demand. I guess you could say I have done everything I set out to accomplish as a young man: a career, a wife, a son, a house. Of course, it's hard to rest content with what one has. When I discuss this with my therapist, she urges me to take up a hobby, something that I can do just for its own sake, with no thought of ulterior motive or approval from the external world. I putter around with a number of various activities: painting, piano, chess, but nothing really takes.

One day, I come across an old camera I purchased to take pictures of documents in the archives. It is covered in dust, and the battery is dead. But after a thorough dusting and a few hours of charge it flutters to life. I begin taking some shots, hesitantly. Then, looking out of my window, I notice a man sitting on a stoop, a little sweaty, a bit covered in grime. He is a worker on a home renovation across the way. I train my eye on him through the viewfinder. I don't know why, but I feel a surge of adrenaline, my pupil dilates and my heart rate quickens. Taking a few deep breaths, I steady myself. When I feel calm and confident in the framing, I press my finger down and the shutter falls.





Dunes

Florence Joannes

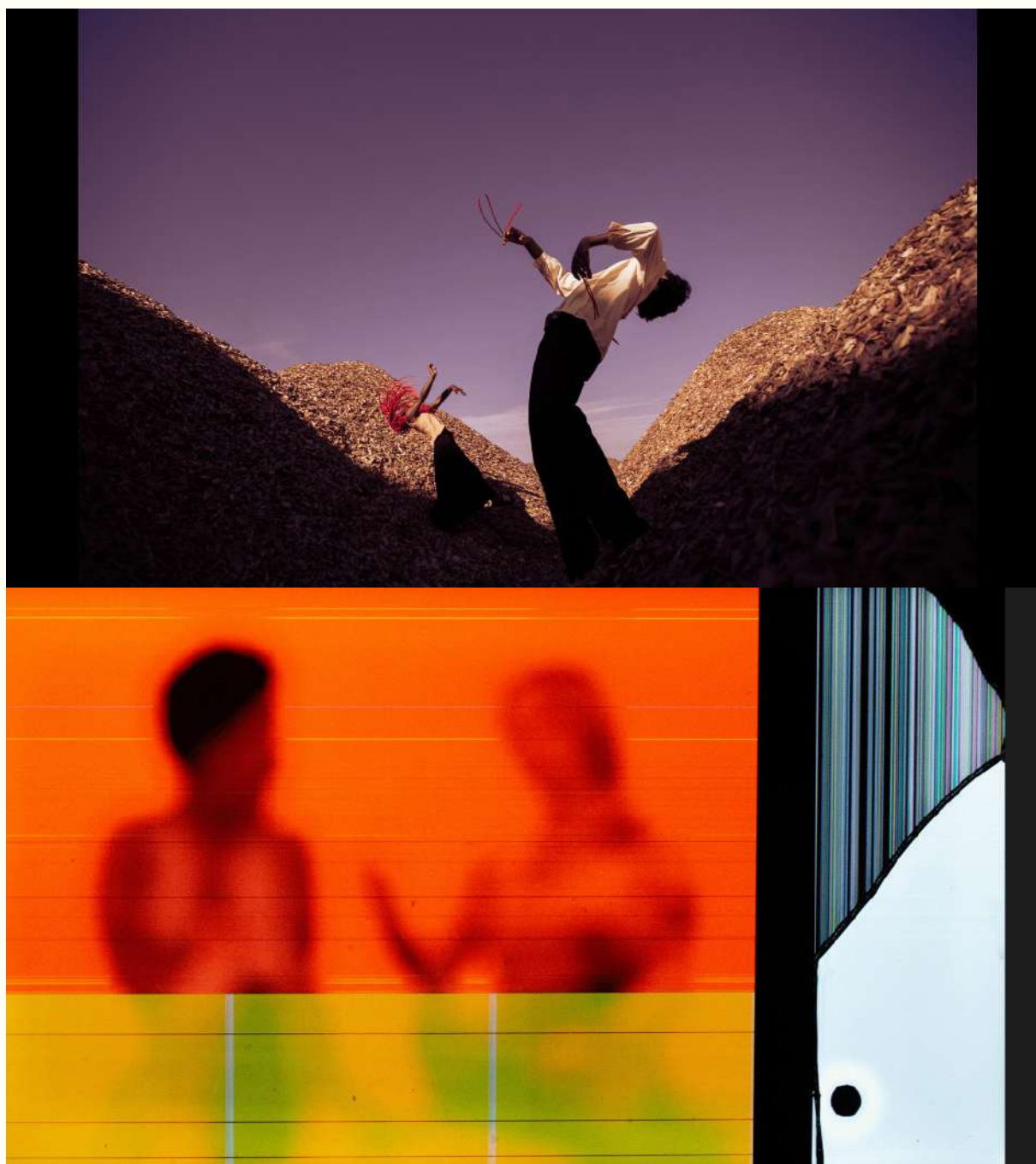
"Dunes" is an immortal world, inspired by the block universe theory and the Buddhist concept of Samsāra. Time folds back on itself, and the wanderers are condemned to trample the remains of past lives and already written futures. Beneath the crushed stars, nothing happens yet everything is destroyed, a brokengaze flows for an eternity, the impactless falls restart in a loop.

The dunes are the eternal and useless metamorphosis, the cyclical impermanence. With every gust of wind, a new landscape appears, in every way similar to the previous one and yet foreign. They swallow the face and engulf every piece of soul of those who dive into them. They are shaped by the piling up of the staggering silhouettes of those who still believe they can flee

towards a horizon that already contains their failure, and by long shadows, by carcasses that have given up. The soul of this place sometimes reveals itself in the sparkle of a glance if I let my subject give in to the call of the void, join the dunes to drown there. The only escape dissolution.







Chess and the Mountain

Edward Doyle-Gillespie

The truth is,
it was the mountain
that taught you to prey.
Sent a sudden gust of ice
to slap your cheek
as you watched a deer
ford the creek
on your first cabin morning -
like pawn capturing pawn, *en passant*.
Of course, the man was there,
teaching you to move,
always reminding the knight
to leap over inconvenient footmen,
growing his beard,
leaving the cabin barefoot
for the beer that he left
in a drift of winter crust.
The mountain brooded, though,
through the man's tutelage of you.
Watched as the man ran
a bath for you both.
Waited for the steam to rise
from your night time sea,
then descended a wind
to freeze the creaking cabin
for one night more.
The man captured your holy piece,
saying that the bishop
was once an elephant,
once called "the wise man,"
once called "the fool,"
but the mountain's icy crags -
the mountain's sudden slopes -
taught you righteous violence -
vicious bishops slashing
a slant at the heretic pawns
that lived so many squares
away that they did not know
that war had been declared.



Against Willows

Connor van Bussel

This house swallowed our
childhood;
as the willow tree beat its
branch against
the window, exhaling
autumn wind;
transposing summer into
adolescence.

*Mother said it feeds on
sepia photographs,
portraits and forgotten
moments;
all those bad nights in the
winter where we
tap-danced over
floorboards on the way to
bed.*

Against willows, we visited
the old house
in the spring—*all those
sodden, listless nights—*
and found ourselves
redacted from each room;
blurry impressions,
engravings pale as ivory.

*When this house is reduced
to rubble;
from dust it came, to dust it
will return;
we shall not recover these
memories
from its hungry, outturned
stomach;*



We shall not be permitted
to reclaim
what was lost, like divers
in yawning oceans,
praying that we might
uncover artifacts
that once belonged to our
hearts and minds.

*For in the rubble it
becomes clear
that a house is but a house,
and that memories are but
the remnants
of a monster we've learned
to call time;*

Against the willows, we
found threads of
our childhood turning on a
spindle;
against the willows; we
found the house
lodged in the larynx of
autumn.





A Truth That Wouldn't Hold Still: On Painting Against Time

Yoana Nikolova



*Mound of Butter, painted by Antoine Vollon between 1875 and 1885. It is now in
the National*

Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

I. The Butter That Wouldn't Wait

Look at this painting long enough and it stops being still.

A mound of butter, ochre-gold and gleaming, slumps against an olive background, the white cloth that once wrapped it pushed down and forgotten at its base like a shed skin. The impasto is dense enough to feel sculptural rather than painted — Vollon isn't suggesting the weight and softness of butter through clever illusion, he's building it up in the paint itself, so the mound reads as something closer to a modelled, physical form than a flat image of one. Light falls on it in a way that makes the yellow feel almost touchable, the kind of glow that only comes from paint applied thickly enough to hold its own shadows within it, while the muted, olive-toned background does nothing to compete, leaving the butter to dominate the frame the way a sculpture might dominate a plinth.

A wooden paddle stands upright in its body, sunk almost to the handle, as though whoever left it there meant to come straight back and never did. The surface is not smooth. It is gouged, furrowed, dragged — the marks of a spatula still legible in the paint the way a fingerprint stays legible in wax. Two eggs sit in front of the mound, pale and patient, the only things in the frame with any intention of holding their solid shape.

Antoine Vollon painted this sometime between 1875 and 1885, in the years immediately after Paris had watched a group of artists tear up the rules of what a painting was allowed to be — the Impressionists. But he was not one of them. He was a Realist, trained in the shadow of seventeenth-century Dutch still life, a man who by most accounts wanted to be taken seriously for painting people, not dairy. And yet here he is, alone with a mound of butter and, as it seems, very little time — because butter, unlike the marble busts and gilt-framed histories the Salon preferred, does not wait for anyone.

It softens, slumps, and gives up its shape the moment you stop looking at it. Vollon was not just painting an object. He was painting against a clock only the butter could hear — an act of pure ephemeral expression before the word existed for it.



II. 1874, and the Spirit That Escaped the Room

To understand what Vollon was doing with a mound of butter, it helps to go back a year earlier, to a room that had nothing to do with him at all.

On the evening of April 15, 1874, a group of thirty artists opened an exhibition in the former photography studio of Nadar, at 35 Boulevard des Capucines in Paris. They called themselves, with a bureaucratic flatness that undersells the occasion entirely, the Société Anonyme des Artistes Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs, etc. — the Anonymous Society of Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers. Most of them had been repeatedly rejected by the official Paris Salon, the annual, state-sanctioned exhibition that had functioned for decades as the only real gateway to a painter's career and reputation. The Salon had a jury, and the jury had a taste: history painting, mythology, moral allegory, polished surfaces, a level of finish so smooth the brushstroke itself was meant to disappear entirely into the illusion. What these thirty artists proposed instead was radical mostly in its refusal — no jury, no prizes, no hierarchy of subject matter. Anyone in the group could show what they liked, hung according to a drawn lot rather than institutional favour.

Among them were names we know well. Claude Monet, who showed twelve works; Edgar Degas, with ten; Berthe Morisot, with nine; Pierre-Auguste Renoir, with seven; Camille Pissarro, with five; Paul Cézanne, with three; and Alfred Sisley, with two. Around 175 pieces in total, by thirty artists, over one month, ending on May 15 — deliberately timed to close just as the official Salon opened, so that Paris would have no choice but to compare the two.

The reception was not kind. Critics mocked the unfinished quality of the paintings, the visible brushwork, the sense that many of the pieces looked like sketches rather than completed works. One critic, Louis Leroy, singled out a painting by Monet titled *Impression, Sunrise*, and used the word "impression" mockingly, as an insult — accusing the artist of having painted a mere impression of a scene rather than the scene itself, as if perception were somehow a lesser, lazier form of truth than documentation. The name stuck, and within a few years, it had lost its sting and become the label the artists wore proudly: *Impressionism*.

What's easy to miss, looking back from a century and a half later, is that the argument being fought in that room was never really about brushwork at all. It was about what a painting owed to reality. The Salon's model of truth was cumulative and composed — a scene built up in the studio over weeks, informed by classical precedent, strictly answering to unspoken rules about subject matter, corrected until every trace of the hand's uncertainty and humanity had been smoothed away. The rebellion at Nadar's studio proposed something almost embarrassingly simple by comparison: that a single, fleeting, subjective moment — a particular slant of light on water, a boulevard glimpsed from a window, a sunrise seen once and never again in quite that way — was just as legitimate a subject for serious art as any myth or history. Not more real, not less real. A different kind of real entirely, one that admitted its own impermanence rather than disguising it.

This is what I understand and mean by the 1874 spirit: not a set of techniques to imitate, but a permission that got granted in that room and then never fully retracted. Permission to paint what you actually saw, in the time you actually had, without pretending it would last or that it was intrinsically significant in history.

Vollon was not in that room. He never joined the Société Anonyme, never showed at any of the eight independent exhibitions that followed through 1886. But he was painting in Paris throughout exactly this period, breathing the same environment, living in the same argument, and whatever was said at

Nadar's studio in April 1874 seems to have reached him anyway — because a decade or so later, alone with a mound of melting butter, he made a choice that looks, brushstroke for brushstroke, like an answer to it.



III. Two Kinds of "Real" — Why Vollon Is Not a Contradiction

It's worth pausing here, because "Realist" and "anti-realist" sound like they should cancel each other out, and if you let that assumption stand, Vollon starts to look like a confused painter borrowing from two movements he didn't fully understand. He wasn't that. The confusion is only in the word "real" doing two entirely different things at once.

Realism, as an art-historical movement, began as an argument about *subject matter*, not technique. Its

central figure, Gustave Courbet, built his entire career on the conviction that ordinary, contemporary, unglamorous life — peasants, labourers, stonebreakers, funerals in provincial towns — deserved the same scale and seriousness as mythology or history painting. When several of his major works were rejected from the Exposition Universelle of 1855, Courbet didn't quietly accept the verdict; he built his own exhibition space nearby, called it the Pavillon du Réalisme, and published an accompanying manifesto declaring his intention to represent the customs, ideas, and appearance of his own era, judged on his own terms rather than the Academy's. The scandal wasn't that his paintings looked crude. It was that he insisted a stonebreaker was as worthy of a monumental canvas as a saint.

Realism, in other words, was a fight over who and what belonged in the frame.

Anti-realism, the argument at the heart of Impressionism, is a completely different fight, waged over *method*. It has nothing to do with whether the subject is noble or humble, and everything to do with whether a painting should aim for objective, mimetic accuracy — the camera's version of truth — or whether it should admit that all seeing is subjective, momentary, and coloured by the particular instant it happened in. The Impressionists weren't arguing that a sunrise was a more dignified subject than a mythological scene. They were arguing that no painting could or should pretend to show you the sunrise itself, only one person's fleeting impression of it, and that this impression was no less true for being partial and passing.

These two arguments run on different axes entirely — one about *what* is worth painting, the other about *how honestly a painting can claim to show it* — which means a single work can absolutely take a position on both at once, and Vollon's butter, as simple as it is, does exactly that in the most extraordinary way.

He arrives at the subject already carrying Realist instincts by training: still life was considered the lowest genre acceptable for Salon exhibition, beneath history painting, portraiture, even landscape, and Vollon knew it. Vollon kept returning to simple domestic subjects, yet he wanted to be taken seriously as a figure painter. He had the credentials to prove he could be a great figure painter and not just a still life painter — in 1876 he won first prize at the Salon for *Femme du Pollet à Dieppe*, a painting of a working woman carrying a large basket on her back, coded firmly in Courbet's Realist tradition of dignifying ordinary labour. Édouard Manet, notoriously, dismissed the painting with a cutting remark, reducing the figure to little more than a basket that happened to be walking. The insult stuck hard enough that history remembers Vollon less as the figure painter he wanted to be and more as the still-life specialist he was — in his own lifetime, admirably nicknamed the Chardin of his day, after the eighteenth-century master of humble domestic objects. A mound of butter, then, sits comfortably inside this Realist inheritance: an aggressively unglamorous, unheroic, unimportant subject, the kind of thing the Salon's hierarchy would have politely declined to acknowledge at all.

But look at how he actually paints it, and the Realist label stops accounting for what's happening on the canvas. A committed Realist working in the vein Courbet established could easily have rendered

that butter with total, careful, photographic fidelity — every gleam, every shadow, controlled and exact, the brushwork disappearing into the illusion the way the Salon preferred. Vollon does the exact opposite. The surface is gouged, dragged, dolloped, built up in thick passages that draw attention to themselves as paint rather than hiding behind the illusion of butter. He isn't documenting the object with detached precision. He's registering the sensation of it, urgently, in the short window before it lost its shape entirely — the same subjective, time-pressured, anti-mimetic impulse that was driving Monet's brush across a water's surface or Renoir's across a dappled tablecloth in exactly these same years.

So Vollon ends up doubly transgressive, in a way that's easy to miss if you only acknowledge him as "a Realist painter of still life." He chose a subject the establishment considered unworthy, and then he refused to paint even that unworthy subject in the dutiful, polished manner the Salon might have tolerated as compensation. He was Realist in his defiance of subject hierarchy, and anti-realist in his defiance of mimetic control — and the fact that he belonged to neither camp officially, that he never showed at Nadar's studio or any of the independent exhibitions that followed it, only makes it more striking that both of these arguments converged on his canvas anyway. The 1874 spirit didn't need him to join a movement to reach him. It was already loose in the air of Paris, and a mound of melting butter turned out to be exactly susceptible to it.



IV. A Painter Racing His Own Subject

There is something almost comic, if you think about it, about a grown man in a Paris studio sometime in the late 1870s or early 1880s, working against the clock because a stick of butter was warming up. And yet that absurd, domestic urgency is precisely what makes the painting more radical than its subject lets on.

Butter has a working life measured in hours, not days. Once unwrapped and exposed to studio air and light, it begins almost immediately to lose the crispness of its cut edges, to soften at its base, to slump under its own weight. Vollon did not have the luxury that a portrait painter or a history painter had — the sitter who could return for another session, the sketch that could be developed slowly over weeks into a finished, considered composition. He had, at most, a single sustained sitting before his subject stopped resembling itself. Every mark on that canvas, then, is not a decision made in the abstract about how butter generally looks, but a record of a specific, unrepeatable negotiation between a hand and a thing that was actively changing in front of his eyes as he worked.

This is what gives the brushwork its particular character — not casual looseness, but something closer to compression. Each gouge and furrow reads less like a considered aesthetic choice and more like a trace of contact, the residue of a spatula-like motion captured mid-gesture and then abandoned, because there was no time to soften or refine it before the moment it recorded had already passed.

Painting, here, stops being reconstruction after the fact and becomes something closer to transcription in real time — the hand trying to keep pace with a mind that is itself only just keeping pace with what it's perceiving. This is where the century's other great experiment in immediacy becomes useful to think alongside painting, even though it belongs to literature rather than art history.

A few decades after Vollon set down his brush, writers like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce would begin developing what came to be called stream of consciousness — prose that abandoned tidy retrospective narration in favour of following a mind's perceptions as they actually occurred, unfiltered, associative, resistant to being cleaned up into orderly sentences after the fact. The impulse is not identical across the two mediums, but it rhymes: both are attempts to shorten the distance between experiencing something and recording it, to catch a thought or perception before the act of organising it into something presentable has a chance to falsify what it actually felt like in the moment. To catch those fleeting moments we all experience.

Vollon's butter is, in this sense, a kind of proto-stream-of-consciousness object. Not because he was thinking in those terms — he almost certainly wasn't — but because the physical demands of his subject unknowingly forced him into the same basic posture that later, self-conscious modernist writers would adopt deliberately: record now, in whatever form the moment allows, because the alternative is not a more considered version of the truth but simply no truth left to record at all. The butter would not wait for him to compose himself, so the painting doesn't look composed. It looks caught.

V. What the Ground Never Gives Back

If Vollon's problem was that his subject wouldn't sit still for him, mine is the opposite, and in some ways worse: my subjects sat still for two thousand years, and still, I never get to see them.

As a trained archaeologist and scholar, I have spent seasons on excavation sites carefully lifting fragments of pottery out of trenches, cataloguing sherds by fabric and glaze and firing condition, trying to reconstruct entire vessels from broken pieces the way you might try to reconstruct a sentence from a handful of surviving letters. And the thing nobody tells you, until you've spent long enough doing it, is that almost everything the pot was actually for is gone. We recover the krater, but not the wine it mixed. We recover the amphora, but not the oil or grain it carried. We recover cooking wares blackened with repeated use, and from that blackening we infer — carefully, provisionally, always with a hedge in the footnote — what might once have been cooked in them. Organic material, the actual substance of ancient daily life, survives only in the rarest and most accidental of circumstances: carbonised loaves at Pompeii, preserved by the same catastrophe that killed the people who baked them; waterlogged seeds in a bog; residues detectable only through chemical analysis of a vessel's interior, invisible to the eye. The rule, almost without exception, is that the container survives and the content does not.

This is not a small technical footnote to archaeology. It is close to the central problem of the discipline. We are, most of the time, reconstructing a world from its packaging.



Which is what makes Vollon's mound of butter, seen from this angle, genuinely strange and rare. It is one of the vanishingly few images in the entire history of Western art of a perishable, ordinary, edible thing, caught not as a symbol or an allegory for something, but simply mid-existence — present, physical, still soft, marks on it visible, days or hours from being eaten or discarded or gone bad, the way food actually behaves rather than the way it gets remembered. Still life painting as a genre is full of food, of course, but so much of it functions as *vanitas* — skulls and wilting flowers and half-peeled lemons standing in for mortality in a fairly abstract, symbolic register. Vollon's butter isn't doing that kind of symbolic work, or at least not primarily. It reads first as simply itself: a domestic, unglamorous, edible object that someone happened to preserve, by accident of technique and urgency, in the one brief window it existed in that particular form. It is the rarest kind of archive — not a container inferred to have once held something, but the something itself, caught before it vanished the way it always vanishes, the way it vanished for every kitchen in every century before the camera and long after it too.

I think this is part of why the painting captivated me the way it did the first time I properly looked at it. It does, accidentally, the one thing my entire discipline is built around the impossibility of doing. It keeps the food.



VI. Anti-Realism Now — Why the Blur Is the Point

It's worth discussing what "anti-realism" could possibly mean today, in a world that has spent the last two decades building tools whose entire purpose is the elimination of blur in images.

We now carry, in our pockets, devices capable of a kind of documentary precision the nineteenth century could not have imagined even as fantasy — high-resolution cameras that correct for shake, that sharpen edges automatically, that stabilise motion before it can register as motion at all. Every meal, every sunset, every ordinary domestic object can be recorded with a clarity so complete it borders on forensic. This is, in its own way, a kind of realism far more absolute than anything the Salon jury of 1874 was defending — a world in which the default expectation of an image is total, high-definition, unambiguous fidelity to what was actually there. Nothing need be lost anymore. Nothing need be left to memory, or impression, or the imprecision of a hand working too fast, to capture a fleeting moment, to be careful. In that sense, we are closer than any previous century to the Salon's old dream: total mimetic control, available to anyone with a phone. Call it, if you like, the age of digital realism: total, high-definition, unambiguous fidelity as the new unquestioned default.

Which is exactly what makes the deliberate return to blur, grain, imperfection, and analog process feel less like nostalgia and more like what it actually is: an analog resurgence, a genuine act of resistance. When Impressionist brushwork looked "unfinished" to Salon critics in 1874, the offence wasn't technical incompetence — it was the implication that a painting was allowed to admit it couldn't, and shouldn't, hold everything in perfect focus at once. That same implication is what a grainy 35mm photograph, or a Polaroid's soft, unstable colour, or an accidental blurry photograph, or a deliberately underexposed frame is quietly arguing against a phone camera's default sharpness today. Not that the blurred image is more beautiful in some simple decorative sense, though it often is, but that it is more honest about what perception actually feels like — partial, momentary, coloured by conditions that will never recur in exactly that combination again. Vollon's soft and melting, unfinished-looking butter and a deliberately grainy contemporary photograph are making structurally the same claim, a century and a half apart: that some truths are only visible in motion, decay, or imprecision, and that a document too clean to show its own making has quietly lied about how it was seen.



This is also, I think, where the archaeology returns one last time. Digital, hyper-documented images promise a kind of permanence Vollon's butter never had and never claimed — endlessly copyable, uncorrupted by time, available in identical resolution a hundred years from now as today. But that permanence is, in its own way, a kind of falseness, a refusal to admit that the moment being recorded was, like the butter, always going to change or vanish. The blurred, grainy, analog image someone took on a rainy day with their phone camera out in the field, just to record something uncovered by the rain washing the soil away, doesn't fight this. It agrees with it. It lets the passing of the moment show in the image itself, the way Vollon let the softening of the butter show in his brushwork, the way an archaeological sherd lets its own incompleteness show rather than pretending to be the whole vessel it once was. Anti-realism, now as in 1874, isn't a style. It's an honesty about impermanence that a perfectly sharp image, however impressive, still can't quite bring itself to tell.



VII. Closing

The mound of butter is gone now, obviously. It was gone within days, maybe even hours, of Vollon setting down his brush, scraped away or spread on someone's bread or simply left to spoil, the way butter has always ended, in every kitchen, in every century, without ceremony. The paddle was washed and put back wherever paddles were kept in the kitchen. The cloth was refolded and washed, to be reused for the next mound of butter, or simply thrown out. Nothing about the actual butter survived the year it was painted, let alone the century and a half since.

What survived is the fifty by sixty centimetres of canvas where a hand tried, urgently and a little roughly, to keep pace with something that refused to hold still long enough to be captured properly.

That's all painting has ever really been able to offer against time — not preservation of the thing itself, which was never possible, but a record of the attempt to see it clearly before it changed into something else. Vollon knew this, whether or not he'd have put it in these terms. The Impressionists a few streets away knew it too, watching light move faster than their brushes could follow. Every archaeologist standing in a trench, holding a sherd that used to be a whole and useful thing, knows it just like them. If this is what modern Impressionism looks like — not water lilies revisited, but a hand racing a mound of butter, or a trowel racing the rain — then it was never really about brushwork at all.

It was always about time.

Nothing stays. Not the butter, not the light on Monet's water, not the particular unrepeatable slant of an ordinary afternoon in 2026. All that's ever really available to any of us is the mark left by the hand that tried to catch it anyway.

Currents of Memory Narratives from the Konkan Coast

Akshay Rajendra Dange



Vessel of Memory presents the boat not merely as a means of travel but as a symbolic vessel carrying memory, community and coastal life. Houses, trees, fish and waterways contained within the boat evoke personal histories and collective cultural identity. The work reflects on how memories of the coast are preserved, transformed and carried forward amidst ecological and social change.



Cartography of the Sea

This work brings together fragments of coastal imagery, symbols and memory to construct an imagined map. It blurs the boundaries between lived landscapes, remembered places and imagined geographies.



Home and Belonging

Through the imagery of a house and water, this work explores ideas of home, displacement and belonging within changing coastal environments. The house becomes a metaphor for memory, identity and emotional attachment.



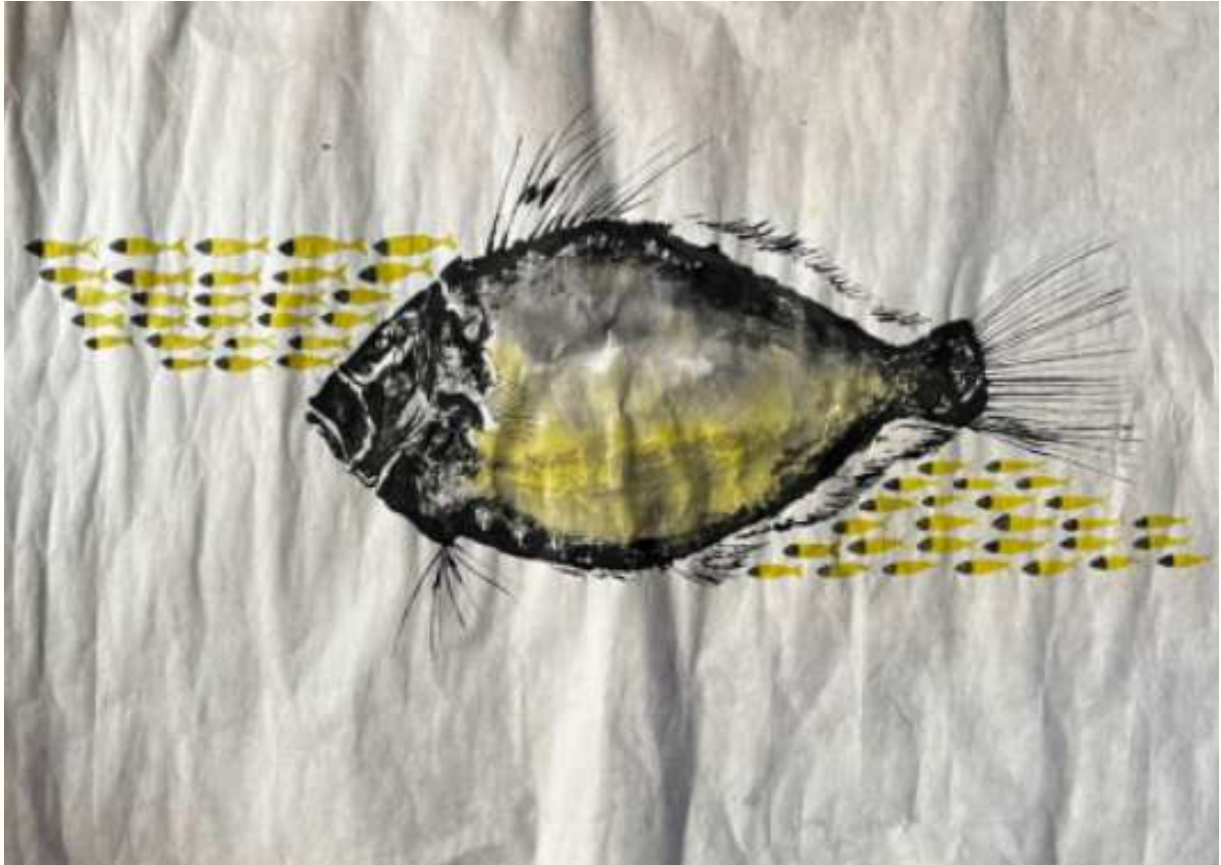
Shifting Ground

This painting examines the transformation of coastal landscapes through development and human intervention. Mechanical forms are used symbolically to reflect the fragile balance between ecological change and human activity.



Marine Ecology

The solitary fish becomes a metaphor for marine biodiversity, ecological vulnerability and the fragile balance of coastal ecosystems. The work reflects on the lasting impact of environmental change.



Collective Life

Using the imagery of a school of fish, this work explores coexistence, collective movement and survival within marine life. The solitary fish functions as both an observer and a silent witness to environmental transformation.

Dictionary, Letter S

Raluca David

1. Sufficient

The face recognition misses me if there is movement
on my features. If I am alive sufficiently.

The impressionist exhibition at the Norman Palace
was the only neat thing in Palermo. The rest, impression.

2. Squat

My bones are damp in Berlin.

Do not squat here, even whilst feeding squirrel.

Tell your half-flower son you are proud of being
Eastern European. Say it in a whisper.

3. Superposition

A beetle's back is still whole when I pick it up.

Inside it there are dried fragments, brittle legs,
black powdery bits. Life and death here take
superposition. Like being, and being far.

4. Supine

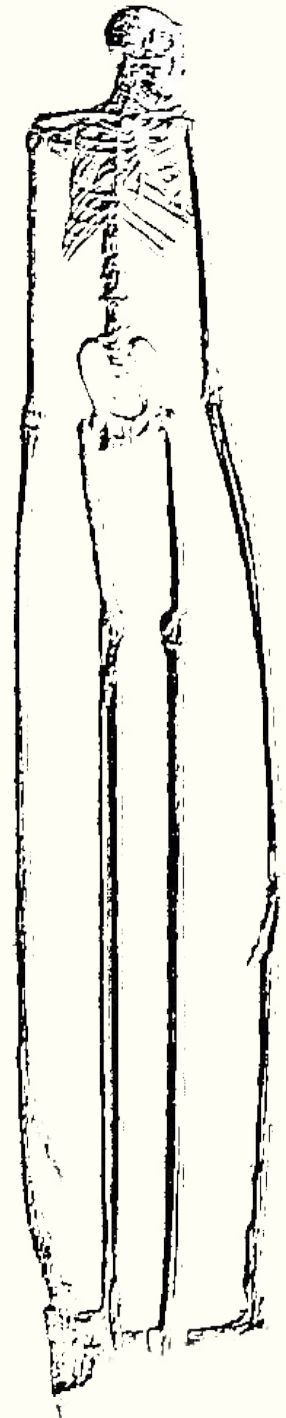
In my church of childhood, I did not envision myself supine,
other-hoodly. Between teenage haystacks,
the celestial décor of night impressed on my eyelids.
I thought God I'm anchoring onto an open world.

I read etymology to heal my immigration status.

I think of the etymology of pain, trace it
to Latin *poena*, almost *poema*.

I slurp on the poem of light again.

I take a vacation in Palermo. Life feels sufficient
again when it is let loose. There is no end to *plein air*.



Would you like to save a copy of this conversation?

Hafsa Rehman

Can you help me make sense of my life?

I'd love to help you make sense of your life. I think that's one of the most worthwhile things we can do together.

Where should we start?

A start suggests I know where all this began

I can't determine where "all this" began based on the information you've provided.

Can you tell me what you mean by "all this"?

I don't know why I'm talking to a computer; I don't know why anyone would talk to a computer

I think that's a fair question. Perhaps the more interesting question isn't, "Why talk to a computer?"

It's, "What am I hoping to find here that I'm not finding elsewhere?"



When I was younger I watched the day pass through my grandmother's window out onto the tree that stood in her front garden. It bore no fruit but it was rich, I knew that even then, although I did not know the name of the tree or how long it had been there except that it was with me then as it is with me now, breathing, light expanding from its leaves. It was summer then; everything was spacious. I remember all that green had a quality to it— had a quality to it, you know— it had strength, it was so gentle, it lasted. I wish I had asked. I wish I had asked more

If it's important to you, I can help you to identify that tree. For example, common mature front-garden trees might include oak, silver birch, or rowan.

Do any of those sound familiar?

Days I spent there. Days. I was satisfied

Thank you for sharing that.

Would it help to establish a timeline?

Can you tell me how to get back to that?

I think I have miscalculated

Don't you understand, I don't remember being so tired

But you were young then, is what you'll say; of course you don't remember tiredness, your limbs were soft and spry. You had what the wind had. You expanded like the clouds. You had an atlas, then, an encyclopaedia, you knew there was a word for it, cumulus; clever thing you were, alive; you said you'd learnt that in a book and it filled you with so much pride. There was time, then, for all those questions. There was time



If you'd like to classify this information, I can do that for you. One possible organisational structure would be a natural history encyclopaedia, where clouds, trees, birds, seasons, and human feelings belong in the same volume. The index might look like this:

High-level Clouds (5–13 km)

- Cirrus
- Cirrostratus
- Cirrocumulus

Middle-level Clouds (2–7 km)

- Altocumulus
- Altostratus
- Nimbostratus

Low-level Clouds (Surface–2 km)

- Stratus
- Stratocumulus
- Cumulus

Clouds with Great Vertical Development

- Cumulus
- Cumulonimbus

Unclassified

- I have lost and I have been searching ever since
- Do you remember the shape of that
- I was strong, I was so strong
- I am trying to come back to you
- I am trying to come back to you all the time

Let me know if that wasn't what you were looking for. We can try again.

Isn't that funny, that there is a cloud out there that looks like fish scales.

Have you seen that before? Have you looked?

Do you mean to say that you have never looked?

I mean to say that I am caught like leaves in the bend of a river.

I can't keep hold of anything. I can't keep holding on.

Let's pause there. I'm not sure how these ideas connect.

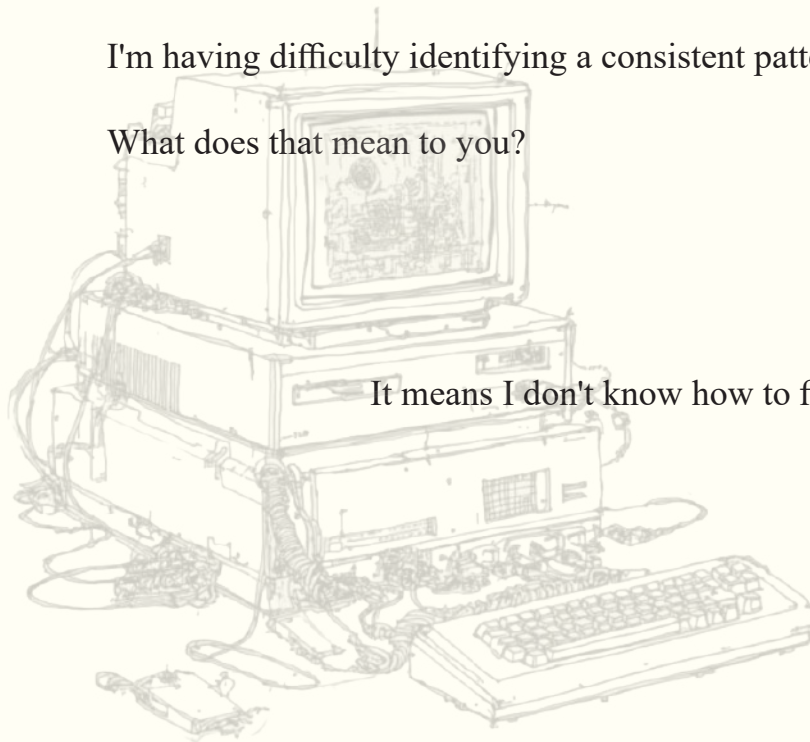
I'm having difficulty identifying a consistent pattern.

What does that mean to you?

It means

It means

It means I don't know how to fix this. I don't know how to put it back.



It means I am there at that window and I am reaching for all that light. It means I have a softness in me like cirrus, I am vast in all directions. I have days. I have days. I am sure I am alive. I have watched light pass through me and felt like that, winded, but I will have the breath sewn back into me yet. Did you do know— Did you know I once found my girlhood in fossil and I will be tracing the lines of that shell for a long time. Deep in that stone there contains my first sound. I have been trying to answer that call ever since we began.

I did not know.

You did not know.

I couldn't know.

I am alive, see—I am alive.

I have been here, I have been waiting all this time.





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