

Radical Sense  
Isolation Reader Volume 1

**JAMES BALDWIN**

**Untitled**

**Lord,**

when you send the rain  
think about it, please,  
a little?

**Do**

not get carried away  
by the sound of falling water,  
the marvelous light  
on the falling water.

**I**

am beneath that water.  
It falls with great force  
and the light

**Blinds**

me to the light.

## Necropolitics

It was a time for us when any daily occurrence was preceded by death.

—Angélica Liddell. *Y como no se pudo: Blancanieves*  
*[And Since She Didn't Rot: Snow White]*

We'll begin with a brief outline of the *state of exception* and the Italian theorist Giorgio Agamben's argument in this regard. Agamben examines governments' increased power during periods of *supposed* crisis. Agamben refers to these periods as *states of exception*, in which civil and individual rights can be diminished, replaced, and negated as the government demands more powers. Quoting Agamben, "In every case, the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without *logos* claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference" (Agamben, 2008, 40). Thus, Agamben's

*state of exception* exposes how the suspension of laws during a crisis can become prolonged, turning into a generalized state, in which the object of biopolitics is *bare life (zoe)*, a term that denotes the “simple fact of living” common to all living beings—as opposed to the *bios* that refers to the categorization of political subjects.

For Agamben, Nazi concentration camps are an example of the loss of rights as a result of imposing an absolute existential precarity, reducing human beings to extreme vulnerability. In the global era, however, there are many more examples of this extreme infringement on personhood, visible everywhere from the public arena to the workplace and even in the most intimate spheres. It takes the form of the utter destruction of bodies stemming through predatory use and their incorporation into the deregulated neoliberal market as another commodity, from the sale of organs to exploitation as a quasi-enslaved labor force. In both cases, we lose our *property rights to our own bodies*.

To further this point, we need to delve deeper into a discussion of the body,<sup>1</sup> since the body is the primary target of necropolitics, and what the body entails is a complicated and problematic enunciation. Agnes Heller writes that “it was modernity itself that legally emancipated the body for the first time in recorded history, by extending the *habeas corpus* act (once a nobleman’s

privilege) to everyone in principle” (Heller and Feher, 1994, 16). In modern societies, the body represents at the very least a doubling nexus, that is “in the modern world—where the body was legally recognized by the *habeas corpus* act, and where simultaneously the major trends of social life aimed at oppressing, eliminating, silencing, sublimating, and replacing that legally existing entity—a social space lent itself to biopolitics” (Heller and Feher, 1994, 17).

From this analysis, we see both that the body is enunciated as a metaphor sublimated by politics, and that where biopolitical processes and the reversal of biopower occur, the awareness of and responsibility to *habeas corpus* becomes more meaningful. It is in the nexus of the body where subjects become subjected and, at the same time, it is the concept of possessing one’s own living body that has activated the subjected subjects, since it introduces them into a field of action as active agents despite (or perhaps due to) the fact that power is *always operating on bodies*. Nevertheless, there is a third reading of power and the function of the body in hyperconsumerist societies: the body as an increasingly valuable asset as it is reinterpreted as merchandise, another modality of biopolitical governability, an aspect that has not been considered and that is based on the highest economic profitability and its function within necropolitics.

For necropolitics and endriago subjects, the body is fundamental because it is conceived of as a critical commodity, since this is what gore capitalism advertises. The body has a specific value, ranging from medical and aesthetic technologies to “take care” and “rejuvenate” it to the release of the body after it is kidnapped and a ransom is paid. The body’s care, its preservation, its freedom, and its integrity are all offered to us as products. There is a hyper-corporalization and a hyper-valorization applied to the body, which has been transformed into a profit-making commodity. The market has capitalized life itself through this endangered corporality, as the body has become an ever-more-profitable commodity.

Paradoxically, at the same time the body’s importance is sold as commodity to all of the subjected subjects of civilian populations, there is an inverse movement orchestrated by endriago subjects with respect to the body. These figures tend to desacralize the body, both the body of the other (in order to commercialize it as an exchange commodity or its death as an object of work) and their own bodies. They gamble with their bodies and purport to surrender them, following a suicidal logic that indubitably leads them to their own bodily destruction and the loss of their own lives. This is the price that must inevitably be paid within the logic of gore enrichment, grounded in the assumptions and logic of bank loans:

This is the new rhythm of criminal entrepreneurs, the new thrust of the economy: to dominate at any cost. Power before all else. Economic victory is more precious than life itself. Than anyone's life, including your own. (Saviano, 2008, 114)

There exists, then, a negotiation with death, whether this happens through the strict adoption of capitalist logics or in a syncretic way combining capitalism and ritual. This is the case with Mexican criminals who have recently endorsed a particular cult that worships death, glorifying and elevating death itself to the position of sainthood. This syncretism is inherent to gore capitalism, in the sense that a population constantly subjected to the pressures of death's proximity will look to renegotiate death's role in the context of their society or social group. This renegotiation achieves the additional goal of inserting *endriago* subjects into discourse. So it is no accident that this discursive articulation takes the form of a religious cult—the context of many *endriagos* (in the case of Mexico) is deeply religious—which allows for their own discourse to develop with faith as a primary element. Faith is at the core of religious discourse and this is, in principle, the only discursive form available to them. Examining prayers to Santa Muerte, what is noteworthy is that they do not ask not to be killed, but rather for their deaths to be quick. These *endriago*

subjects have renegotiated the role of death in their daily lives, allowing them to become active subjects in their own relationship with death.

In the contemporary era, death emerges as the nucleus of biopolitics, which transforms it into necropolitics. Achille Mbembe argues in this respect that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes” (Mbembe, 2003, 11–12). As in the case of Agamben, Mbembe sees Nazi Germany as the perfect example of this sovereignty over death, though Mbembe identifies slavery as one of the first fields for the implementation of biopolitics. Furthermore, he points out that colonies have been spaces where necropolitical, colonizing governments have achieved the largest and most long-lasting establishment of a *state of exception*.

We agree with Mbembe in regard to his geopolitically- and racially-situated analyses of biopolitics; however, we will posit necropolitics in opposition to biopolitics, since it is inscribed in the same register as biopolitics, but radicalizes it. Necropolitics desacralizes biopolitics and commodifies the processes of dying. If biopolitics is understood as the art of managing people’s lives, capitalist demands have made it so that living and all of the

processes associated with it are converted into commodities, which includes what we understand as necropower, since this represents the management of the final and most radical processes of living: death itself.

Thus, our reading of necropolitics is situated in the contemporary moment, in a geopolitically-specific location and in a concrete case: that of endriago subjects, epitomized by the Mexican criminals and cartels that participate in the framework of gore capitalism.

Necropolitics is a reinterpretation and stark iteration of biopower and the capacity for upending it, based significantly on the logic of a *warlike clash of forces*. Necropolitics exercises a kind of freedom, “but it is a freedom that is constituted as the ‘power to deprive others.’ In effect, in war there are the strong and the weak, the clever and the naive, the victorious and the vanquished, and they are all acting ‘subjects,’ they are ‘free’ even if this freedom only consists of the appropriation, conquest, and submission of other forces” (Lazzarato, 2000). Necropolitics is important because it re-situates the body at the center of the action without any interference. The bodies of dystopian dissidents and ungovernables are now those which hold power over the individual body and over the body of the population in general—though outside of humanist and rational logics,

but inside rational-commercial ones. They have created a power parallel to the State without subscribing fully to it, while they simultaneously dispute its power to oppress.

Nevertheless, the practices utilized by endriago subjects enact a distinct and dissident application of the concept of biopolitics; they carry it into the territory of necropower that, as we can see, does not entirely translate into the context and exercise of necropolitics as Mbembe envisions it. It goes further, embarking on a dystopian reinterpretation of their condition as free subjects and, simultaneously, subject to economic dynamics. Endriagos embody ungovernability, though—due to their internalization of global capitalism's demands for hyperconsumption—they cling to power, while simultaneously internalizing a heteropatriarchal discourse as a way to legitimate their identity and their social belonging:

Because the modern State works, it seems, like a kind of de-subjectification machine: it's a machine that both scrambles all the classical identities and at the same time a machine that recodes these very same dissolved identities, especially in a legal sense: there is always a re-subjectification, a re-identification of these destroyed subjects, emptied of all identity. (Agamben, 2004, 116)

Identity itself is reconfigured and re-subjectivized through the media, publicity, technologies of gender, and hyperconsumption.

In order to analyze necropolitics and biopolitics in the Mexican context, we must begin with the fact that, in Mexico, there is no unitary State “but rather at least two: the insurgent state and the legal one, and both have traits, characteristics and logics, both formal and informal, classical and non-classical” (Maldonado, 2003, 235).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the characteristics of these parallel States have not been sufficiently studied within the field of biopolitics, in the sense that extreme violence and hyperconsumerism have not been considered structuring elements in the formation of dissident subjectivities that resist the State. Thus, this *parallel State* represented by national and international criminals reshapes biopolitics itself and uses necropolitical practices to seize, preserve, and capitalize on the power to *inflict death*.

The necropolitics of endriago subjects is a corollary of biopolitics with its goals of governing territory, security, and population, but extends it in a monopolistic way by exploiting three elements: 1) exploiting the territory’s natural resources, 2) selling private security to guarantee the well-being of the population, and 3) appropriating bodies from the civilian population as exchange commodities or as consumers of necromarket commodities. The

necropolitics of endriago subjects is advanced in ways that previously were unheard of, not because these practices are new but rather because in previous periods they remained below the surface. This new necropolitical exercise has managed to secure the power of the Mexican State by gaining control of its economy, as a result of the legal economy's dependence on the criminal economy.

Above all, the ascendance and radicalization of necropolitics is grounded in the reality that necropolitics appropriates techniques previously reserved for “legitimate” state actors. As we understand it in this book, necropolitics is unique in that it is enacted by endriago subjects breaking from their condition as subjects restrained by the State; thus necropolitics has a manifold character, since it is implemented both by illegitimate and legitimate biopolitical actors (the government, the State, hegemonic discourse) and it is legitimated through these. Nevertheless, the exercise of necropolitics by endriago subjects means that—despite the fact that it might have referents in State practices—these subversive and dystopian subjects transform and reshape it in its application. For this reason, it becomes a difficult phenomenon to address, one that demands a series of successive approaches since “after a while it no longer makes sense to refer to an initial context. The phenomena of

violence produce a new context” (Pécaut, 2001, 10). “The history of these phenomena does not coincide with their origins, and often that history has a logic that, while not indifferent to their origins, operates differently, in their own way” (Maldonado, 2003, 232).

We want to make it very clear that the endriago is not a hero; neither is he a resistant subject, nor does he attempt to be resistant. Rather, endriagos are businessmen who apply and synthesize the most aberrant neoliberal demands and logics.

The logic of criminal business, of the bosses, coincides with the most aggressive neoliberalism... You pay with prison or your skin for the power to decide people’s lives or deaths, promote a product, monopolize a slice of the economy, and invest in cutting-edge markets. (Saviano, 2008, 128)

We oppose deifying individuals who use dystopian strategies in opposition to biopolitics. We do not see these people as resistant subjects, since they use the logic of consumption and markets to legitimate themselves through violence and killing.

According to Agamben, drug users (among others) are encompassed by a type of movement that subverts or resists governmental biopower and their biopolitical management (see Grelet y Potte

Moneville, 1999–2000). In some ways, this relates to the entire chain of drug production and consumption; however, Agamben does not explicitly consider the different links in this chain—from producers to distributors and bosses—and how each level works to subvert biopower. These individuals also engage in a type of dystopian subversion of biopolitics, located as they are within the sphere of necropower, the site of their own resistance to biopower and where they dispute its hierarchy.

From our perspective, however, it is not clear how the reification of self-destructive behaviors—like drug consumption, for example—might lead to the creation of potent subjectivities and, additionally, to a real resistance movement. It's undeniable that by consuming drugs they are subverting state power, by infringing the social regulations of anti-drug policies. Their consumption can be understood as an act of civil disobedience, but not as an act of resistance, because it buttresses necropower through gore consumption. To understand drug consumption as an act of resistance is to acritically adhere to the logic of the gore marketplace. Drug consumers *per se* cannot be understood as subversive subjects since they reinforce a hierarchy of subjection (embodied by another biopolitical specter: criminals), perpetuating the chain of subjected subjects albeit by another of the system's specters.

In our view, it is both dangerous and acritical to celebrate all types of subjectivity that differ from the norm as resistant subjectivities. When we do this, we negate any chance we might have of formulating subjectivities that oppose biopower with a genuine resistance in a non-dystopian way. This is evidenced by drug consumers (as in Agamben's example) or by the *new subjectivities* formed in the favelas of Brazil (see Negri & Cocco, 2006). If we celebrate all subjectivities without accounting for the multiplicity of their variants, contexts, and their consequent oppressions and anti-resistance elements—as in the case of gender, as oppression against women and sexism are often seen as unimportant struggles by these subjectivities—we run the risk of creating a catachresis that depletes actual resistance movements of their contents and real force. We must forego the temptation to romanticize and exoticize the other. We know it is difficult; however, the on-going construction of an auto-critical discourse is the means of approach to attempt to “establish/recognize the conditions for the appearance of subjects able to act critically in the transnational world” (Lins, 2003, 27).

What we would like to do next is to present our ideas about necropower, necropractices, necro-empowerment and thanatophilia within gore capitalism. We understand necropower to be the appropriation and application of government

technologies of biopolitics to subjugate bodies and populations; its fundamental element is the hyper-specialization of violence, and its goal is to commodify the process of inflicting death on someone.

Necropractices, for their part, can be understood as radical actions that aim to create bodily harm. One necropractice is how these endriago violence specialists reappropriate State methods for eliminating enemies of the State in order to eliminate their own enemies. Other necropractices can be found in new and innovative technologies for killing. Over the course of recent decades, these necropractices have become more permissible, as they have given rise to new cultural understandings, allowing the use of exceedingly brutal and horrifying forms of cruelty that can be converted into spectacle through their consumption as televised entertainment.

Empowerment can be understood as the processes that transform contexts and/or situations of vulnerability and/or subalterity into possibilities for action and personal power, thus upending hierarchies of oppression. Empowerment is also used in the context of aid for social and economic development to refer to people who are the objects of development activities to strengthen their own capacity to control their lives. It can also be thought of as a political process in which human rights and social justice are guaranteed for a

socially marginalized group. In this book, we will designate necroempowerment as processes that are modeled on empowerment processes, but reformulate them through dystopian practices (like murder and torture) to acquire individualized power and, as a result, illicitly enrich and perversely self-affirm themselves.

When we use the term thanatophilia, we refer to the predilection for the spectacularization of death in contemporary hyperconsumerist societies, as well the taste for violence and destruction, its desire to kill, and its attraction to suicide and sadism. We prefer thanatophilia over necrophilia, since the latter is understood to be a sexual orientation that focuses attraction on corpses. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that Erich Fromm in his 1973 book, *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, refers to necrophilia in a non-sexual way as the consequence of living a life without ever really being alive. For Fromm, necrophilia is the opposite of biophilia and it is, along with symbiotic fixation and narcissism, one of humanity's three greatest problems. According to Fromm, the lack of love in Western society leads to necrophilia. The necrophilic person lives mechanically, converting feelings, processes and thoughts into things. The necrophiliac wants to control life, to make it predictable. Fromm argues that, because the necrophile feels that the only

certain thing in life is death, the person begins to long for death and to worship it. For Fromm, necrophilia is visible in the contemporary Western world in the facades made of concrete and steel, in modern weaponry and the nuclear race, in the idolatry of large machinery and technology (technophilia), the loss of resources through consumption and treating people like things (bureaucracy). Our use of the term thanatophilia is linked to Fromm's necrophilia, but differs in its application and context.

In conclusion, we ask ourselves the same question as Mbembe: is the concept of biopower sufficient in the present moment to explicate contemporary realities founded on necropower? The answer is that biopolitics has to be rethought contextually. In our case, we can say that there is a parallel between biopolitics as administered by the State and necropolitics as upheld by endriago subjects: in both instances, the preservation of power through the exercise of violence is fundamental. Nonetheless, the necropolitics of endriago subjects cannot be explained solely by comparing it with the State since the endriago subjects embody a tripartite condition. First, they appropriate the tools of power (managed by the State) through violence to necroempower themselves and thus fulfill neoliberal demands for hyperconsumption. Second, through necroempowerment, they question the

efficacy of disciplinary society as it has been previously understood. Finally, these subjects have arisen—each in their own specific geopolitical context—out of the population to which the majority of subjected subjects belong, which also encompasses those who forge non-dystopian strategies for resistance. Thus, we think that in order to comprehend the logics of endriago subjects' necropower, we need to triangulate 1) the dynamics of biopolitical power exercised economically and in the heteropatriarchy, 2) the active, though subjugated, subjectivity of the civilian population, and 3) the crucial role played by advertising and the media in societies of hyperconsumption, since “this [new] capitalism functions in reality thanks to the biomediatric management of subjectivity” (Preciado, 2008, 51).

## **Biomarket and Decorative Violence**

### *Biomarket*

When post-Fordist theorists like Negri and Hardt speak of *biopolitical production*, they use this concept—with its tinges of Foucauldian thought—to explain the complexity of contemporary forms of capitalist production. Here we take up the concept of *biopower* and we extrapolate from it to discuss *necropower* as a way to draw attention to the



## Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day <sup>21</sup>

Don't look now  
I'm fading away  
Into the gray of my mornings  
Or the blues of every night

Is it that my nails  
    keep breaking  
Or maybe the corn  
    on my second little piggy  
Things keep popping out  
    on my face  
    or  
    of my life

It seems no matter how  
I try I become more difficult  
    to hold  
I am not an easy woman  
    to want

They have asked  
    the psychiatrists      psychologists      politicians and  
    social workers  
What this decade will be  
    known for  
There is no doubt      it is  
    loneliness

If loneliness were a grape  
    the wine would be vintage  
If it were a wood  
    the furniture would be mahogany  
But since it is life      it is

Cotton Candy  
on a rainy day  
The sweet soft essence  
of possibility  
Never quite maturing

I have prided myself  
On being in that great tradition  
albeit circus  
That the show must go on  
Though in my community the vernacular is  
One Monkey Don't Stop the Show

We all line up  
at some midway point  
To thread our way through  
the boredom and futility  
Looking for the blue ribbon and gold medal

Mostly these are seen as food labels

We are consumed by people who sing  
the same old song STAY:

*as sweet as you are  
in my corner*

Or perhaps *just a little bit longer*  
But whatever you do *don't change baby baby don't  
change*

Something needs to change  
Everything some say will change  
I need a change  
of pace face attitude and life  
Though I long for my loneliness  
I know I need something  
Or someone  
Or . . . . .

I strangle my words as easily as I do my tears  
I stifle my screams as frequently as I flash my smile  
    it means nothing  
I am cotton candy on a rainy day  
    the unrealized dream of an idea unborn

I share with the painters the desire  
To put a three-dimensional picture  
On a one-dimensional surface

## The Season of Cartesian Weeping

The tears are automatic. They drip down cheeks, dampen books, keyboards, dinner plates, postcards, steering wheels. I don't weep from sorrow. I weep as a symptom. I don't want to cry, but I do because of a medicine. It is as if my body weeps on its own behalf.

My body has reason to weep—more reason than I do—but there are times I join my tears in their crying, adding to the tears of *side effect* the tears of *cause*. Disease has bullied me into Cartesianism, but the mixed tears undo division through liquification.

Can the tears of sadness, once shed, be extracted from the general waters? I said, about something else, “it is a mechanical problem and not a metabolic one.” I said to one friend, about the loss of another: *I miss this person more than I will miss [the important body parts I will miss]*. I intended this to be dramatic but of course it was matter of fact: of course the loss of a friend is worse than losing organs, limbs, or skin.

Can any particular loss be extracted from the general sorrow? All of the losing (of body parts, capacities, people or relations between them) compounds now into one elixir of loss, fume and irrevocable. It's as if in all its crying my body knows something about sorrow that I refuse.

The only thing sadder than existing is not existing, anyway, and everyone should have known already how impossibly sad existing is. I'd say “all that can go wrong” but the sadness of existing isn't anything gone wrong about it, only what is definitional: first we exist, then we don't.

## Woman Sitting at the Machine

**I**t's *eruption* that I think I hear when my daughter suggests I invent a symbol for my writing that marks an interruption in it. Interruption already has its marks: this one \$ and that </3. Those symbols amplify and eclipse all the other marks. On May Day I write a poem:

Cancer is work,  
but work is work, too.

You do the work of being sick, the work of trying not to be sick anymore, the work of going to work while sick, the work of what is unpaid work, also. One chemotherapy treatment costs more money than I've made most years of my life.

Could a poet on an alien earth explain how on this earth the sick body of a worker is the source of more profit than her healthy body at work?

I'm having trouble with categories. I probably require an alien economist. Do I mark what-I-don't-write-because-of-illness with the symbol of *interruption* or *eruption*? Audre Lorde started out her *Cancer Journals* by writing "each woman responds to the crisis that breast cancer brings to her life out of a whole pattern, which is the design of who she is and how her life had been lived." Who I was, if my everyday existence was, as Lorde described it, "a training ground," should have been someone who understood how this all worked. I could have been the poet-economist on the alien earth who could offer the explanation for how my pain creates profit, but I can't remember, can't visualize, can't focus, can't recall words because I am on this one.

But this is not true. I say *I can't* because the late effects of cancer treatment mean I can't do these things without a lot of effort, but that doesn't mean I can't try. It's always when you can't write that you realize your writing is more important than ever, when you can't understand that your understanding is vital to your life. It's always that the most important poetry is the poetry of the moment poetry isn't there.

## WOMAN SITTING AT THE MACHINE

In a suite of work poems from 1981 called *Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking*, Karin Brodine begins: “she thinks about everything at once without making a mistake. / no one has figured out how to keep her from doing this thinking.” *Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking* is about what occurs in the moment that interrupts poetry: work. When the poems were written and people could still get full-time jobs, the moment that interrupted poetry was from 9 to 5. Even then, though, work in the U.S. was seeping out of its forty hour container, spreading onto everything, and Brodine writes “some buildings never sleep / round the clock / three eight hour shifts/ seven days a week / centrifugal force irons us flat.”

*Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking* is about what work takes from workers, but also about what it can't take: intelligence, resistance, solidarity, action on the street, and dreams like “the buildings around us are plastered with hundreds of / red stickers that shout STRIKE STRIKE STRIKE.” Brodine describes management—suspicious, paternalistic—barricaded behind their desks:

we say—even if they stretched tape  
across our mouths  
we could still speak to one another  
with our eyebrows.

No one can stop the workers from all that thinking. But you can't think when you are dead. One summer in the middle of Kansas when we were young, my friend Jeff was working on a road crew, and his boss would say to him, "You rest when you die, boy. You rest when you die." And that song is always on the radio this summer, 2015, the one about *I got six jobs*, about *I don't get tired*. Before it was a song someone said that on a bus maybe, or on the phone while walking by. I might have said it at some point, too, and then I got tired, by which I mean I got cancer, by which I mean I still worked a lot just now I finally really made some money (for someone else).

Brodine was a revolutionary feminist poet: "woman as worker as revolutionary" wrote her friend Merle Woo. She died in 1987 from breast cancer. She was barely forty. In 1986 she writes about the chemotherapy that wouldn't save her, "What poison should I choose?" A person can die of cancer or die of treatment. When your illness is profitable, to stay alive would be doing *their* work, but to die when one ceases to become employable is a type of doing their work, too. Her friends said Brodine was "mad as hell at the medical automations who prescribed massive doses of poison." And Brodine wrote, about all of us:

well we know who makes everything we use or can't use.  
as the world piles itself up on the bones of the years,  
so our labor gathers.

## WOMAN SITTING AT THE MACHINE

while we sell ourselves in fractions. they don't want us all  
at once, but hour by hour, piece by piece. our hands mainly  
and our backs. and chunks of our brains. and veiled expressions  
on our faces, they buy. though they can't know what actual  
thoughts stand behind our eyes.

then they toss the body out on the sidewalk at noon and at five.  
then they spit the body out the door at sixty-five.

The symbol for how-nothing-appears-to-ever-interrupt-prof-  
it is nothing much, is a symbol called typography as a smear,  
and there isn't anything that you can do with it but mark ev-  
erything else as a double bind. I can't write well because of the  
late effects of breast cancer treatment, but having experienced  
the late effects of breast cancer treatment, I need to be able to  
write for my life. It's like how everyone I know who doesn't  
have a job needs one, and everyone who has a job needs to  
take the red exit out of there.

I'm thinking but not thinking very clearly, can't tell if a  
profitable illness is a type of work or a type of commodity  
or some other economic classification. I look for the proper  
economic term for a body as a sinkhole as a war wound as  
a poisoned animal as the saddest, most cut-open thing to  
ever exist. Brodine: "she had always thought of money as  
solid, stopped. / but seeing it as moving labor, human hours,  
why that means / it comes back down to her hands on the  
keys, shoulder aching." If a sick body is moving labor, its

movement is a gesture of acquiescence, is a full body grimace of pain.

Maybe a sick worker is more profitable than a healthy one because illness turns her into a hyper-consumer. Maybe a sick worker being sick isn't a type of work at all. Cancer consumes the body from the inside: the hyper-sick hyper-consumer consumes whatever medicine it takes to consume the cancer, also is herself consumed by medicine, too. Brodine writes later "I fight the chemo / more than the cancer." Maybe breast cancer isn't work, it's a work injury. Brodine's thinking in this poem is prescient, too:

when she sits at the machine, rays from the cathode stream  
directly into her chest. when she worked as a clerk, the rays  
from the Xerox angled upward, striking her under the chin.  
when she waited tables the micro oven sat at stomach level.  
when she typeset for Safeway, dipping her hands in processor  
chemicals, her hands burned and peeled and her chest ached  
from the fumes.

Before I got breast cancer I sometimes kept my iPhone—the one I bought so I could always be working, so I could stay up on my email, so I could write my Facebook posts or tweet—in my bra directly over the place where I grew a substantial tumor. That tumor, which was, unlike many breast tumors, non-hormonal and not genetic, was quite possibly a souvenir

WOMAN SITTING AT THE MACHINE

of how it was that I, like so many other people right now, seemed to always be at work.

Finally in my string of *cants* that come with chemotherapy's cognitive losses, I begin to feel the necessary damage it takes to recover: *I can't care*. It takes six months of chemotherapy, five months of painful reconstruction, and two major surgeries to get me to stop caring, but all that seemed important before, ideas and art, the socialities and politics I'd lived for, finally couldn't matter, at least not more than surviving each hour. The interruption symbol for this is probably just a blank sheet of paper, or a hand pretending to be a sheet of paper smothering a rock.

To say, of everything that mattered before, *take this job and shove it*, fuck writing-thinking-trying-health. *I don't get tired*, is all that's left to think exhaustedly, along with the radio, when I start flaking on medical appointments—or writes Brodine, at work, “when I see the boss, I hold / my face clear and solemn, thinking / pig, pig. it's true, too. / not rhetorical.” If my can't-caring is an *eruption*, it's one of a new clarity and proportionality. Cancer may not be work, but it feels enough like it that it is no longer necessary to search for its exact category. It is enough to know that our cancers make the rich richer and so does our debt. Our work, both paid and unpaid, does that, too. And I know what it means to live through this. From Brodine's poem *Survivors*:

## A HANDBOOK OF DISAPPOINTED FATE

Survival is a repetitive process, days revolving  
tasks completed or not, new ones streaming before you,  
each day centered around food and sleep and wake  
and talk. You follow this pattern of living set by  
the dark and the light. Or break into pockets of  
humming night, awake, catching up, getting ahead,  
if only all the time could be used.

That *if only* of survival will kill you, too, if you get stuck  
there, but a step beyond it is the knowledge of what is hidden  
in the moment that interrupts poetry: poetry.

## This Imaginary Half- Nothing, Time

**D**uring cancer's *longue durée* my impulse has been to mark a calendar with black X's or the wall next to my bed with a prisoner's tallies. I looked for any accounting system that would be a way to wrangle the days, many of which I can't remember. But, like generations of sick people who like to read, I passed my time instead by reading Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*:

...for now it is enough for us to remind everyone how quickly a number of days, indeed a great number, can pass when one spends them as a patient in bed. It is always the same day—it just keeps repeating itself.

## A HANDBOOK OF DISAPPOINTED FATE

Although since it is always the same day, it is surely not correct to speak of ‘repetition’. One should speak of monotony, of an abiding now, of eternalness. Someone brings you your midday soup, the same soup they brought you yesterday and will bring you tomorrow. And in that moment it comes over you—you don’t know why or how, but you feel dizzy watching them bring in the soup. The tenses of verbs become confused, they blend and what is now revealed to you as the true sense of all existence is the ‘inelastic present’, the tense in which they bring you soup for all of eternity.

*The Magic Mountain’s* sick time is achingly *bourgeois*—in the “unavailable” sense of the word. If only there were luxurious alpine chemo-spas full of philosophizers for any of the twenty-first century ill to recover in. But there aren’t compliant *someones* to bore us with regular nourishment: this is because we are those *someones*. I have cancer, but that doesn’t mean that I don’t have to work. I’m sick in *the inelastic present imperfect*—the tense in which you have to pay the rent for all of eternity.

My time in the time of illness has been unmeasurable or ir-measured or a-measured. Yet despite how this time can no longer steadily or predictably submit itself to clocks and calendars, for survival’s sake I still have had to try to measure it. Sick time is always escaping the institutional technologies invented to contain it, and it remains immeasurable despite the

## THIS IMAGINARY HALF-NOTHING, TIME

measure of treatments, the measure of lab work, the measure of diagnostics, the measure of the work day, the measure of arriving bills, the measure of electronic communications, the measure of deadlines, the measure of paychecks, the measure of an employer's measure of sick leave, the measure of caring for dependents.

Chemotherapy is as difficult as you think, and it isn't as if sickness abandons its temporal weirdness just because bosses have refused the sick worker enough time to rest. Pain continues to stretch out the seconds while also obliterating them as it has for the human forever. And for the very ill, death still feels, as it apparently has for centuries, both much too near and sometimes too far—like walking through a blizzard to a warm shelter which you know to be the jailhouse to which you are finally turning yourself in. Sick time, despite all of Capital's inventive temporal bullying, is its own stubbornly and uniquely distorted experience. It is just that in these days, along with sickness' regular deformations, there is also contemporary life, which is incongruous with living, also with staying alive.

I began this cancer while reading Ingeborg Bachmann's *Malina*, which began: "But I had to think long and hard about Time, since 'today' was an impossible word for me." I read it in a lot of waiting rooms, waiting to find out what was wrong with me. Diagnostics are their own timefuck,

particularly when you know the tissue-based insights which you anxiously await are going to be some version of doomed: where can a person be anxious to know what she doesn't want to know? Only drowning in a stream of fast-slow minutes. Later, in my apartment, which has become more than any waiting room *the* waiting room (or the place to which one is sentenced to always begin sentences "When I am done being ill..."), I read Christa Wolf's *The Quest for Christa T.*, about Christa T., who will eventually die an untimely death from cancer: "She was reading *The Magic Mountain* and making efforts to sink into the same kind of vague time-flux: otherwise, I couldn't stand it, she said."

"Time is not so!" John Donne declares in a work he wrote in what he believed was his death bed during December of 1624. He sets off to prove against "this imaginary, half-nothing" time, yet even in its title *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* has an argument that illness is, among other things, a set of temporal events. What occasions have emerged are a symptom, two symptoms, a physician, two physicians, a panic, a death, or a cure, all in the due time of the twenty-three days Donne was ill. These twenty-three days are marked by twenty-three prose sections of three (marking, among other things, morning, noon, and night), each concentrated on another horrible and interesting time-event of being really ill. To argue time's inexistence in a work semi-about time and structured straightforwardly on the passage

THIS IMAGINARY HALF-NOTHING, TIME

of days is the sort of tangle one can get into when spending all of one's time horizontal, glancing over at death who sits upright and attentive in a nearby chair:

All things are done in time ... but if we consider time to be but the measure of motion, and howsoever it may seem to have three stations, past, present, and future, yet the first and last of these are not (one is not now, and the other is not yet), and that which you call present, is not now the same that it was when you began to call it so in the line (before you sound that word present, or that monosyllable now, the present and the now is past).

What is clear enough in *Emergent Occasions* is that time acquires a compelling texture for the sick: perhaps the literary among us like, in particular, to keep stroking it. As “the body,” Donne writes in the famous bell-tolling passage, “which scarce three minutes since was such a house” is abandoned by life, the spirit, if one is hopeful, is removed from time (“a short parenthesis in a long period”) into eternity (“when time shall be no more”).

There are, then, at least two literary eternities for sick people: Thomas Mann's, in which a nameless *they* always bring you soup, and John Donne's, in which you will never again be cursed enough to have to eat it. But perhaps there are three if we include *our* eternity, the one in which you really need

some soup but fear you are always going to have to work to pay for it.

There's a completely different book to be written, the one about the fixed temporal extraordinariness of the unfixed temporality of extended illness as experienced under current conditions. It would be better titled *The Banal Valley of The Shadow of Capital* than *The Magic Mountain*. It would last for the twelve weeks of federally guaranteed FMLA leave: that is, it would take that long to read it, and then it would abruptly cut off, whether or not the story had reached a satisfactory end.

This book would have a duration of twelve weeks but a focus of twelve seconds or twelve centuries: there would always be a precarity to the rate at which it would unfurl. There would be the temporal experience of every medicine, their half- and quarter-lives, their infusion drip rates, the time it took for the pharmacy to compound them, the spacing of the iPhone alarms going off to indicate when each new medicine is due. here would be the time that medical bills go to collections, the time-sense of being cared for in a special way in particular, or of a long night worried about death, or the temporal uniqueness of the experience of how to be ill is often to be abandoned—abandonment being a feeling which makes for the longest night of all nights—and also the time-sense of waiting for someone to do for you what you have always just done for yourself.

“Can one narrate time—time as such, in and of itself?” Mann asked, and answered, “Most certainly not, what a foolish undertaking that would be. The story would go: ‘Time passed, ran on, flowed in a mighty stream’ and on and on.” Time passed, ran on, flowed in a mighty stream, and on and on. Since I have become ill, some friends have advised me not to think too much of the future, in case it is dreadful or in case I don’t have much of one. The “on and on” of time’s narration is, for them, unbearable worry: the poet Dana Ward more than once has quoted the poet CA Conrad to me—“The future is a lie!” But the present has its own peril. As Bachmann wrote in *Malina*, “I’m just afraid ‘today’ is too much for me, too gripping, too boundless, and that this pathological agitation will be a part of my ‘today’ until its final hour.”

There is the other today of being ill, that one which scaffolds the biological: this is the now of era. An individual illness always occurs in the indifferent grip of history—*neutropenia in the time of Ebola*, I’d say, when neutropenic in the time of Ebola. Because my diagnosis came a day before Mike Brown’s murder by police in Ferguson, I paid fervent attention to struggle-time as it unfolded around the nation and the world. The people on the streets are an entirely different calendar. *The Quest for Christa T.* captures this sensitive calibration of the biological and the historical, and at the end, the narrator says of Christa, “She carried many lives around with her, storing them in herself; and in herself she stored many times as

well, times in which she lived partially unknown, as was the case in her 'real' time; and what is not possible in one time becomes real in another. But she called all her various times, serenely: Our time."

Our time, like our life and our history, is both too much and never enough. Donne says to God, of days, "thou leaves them for assistances, and for the exaltation of our devotion, to fix ourselves, at certain periodical and stationary times." There are dawns and noons and night falls, diseased interludes and riots and political turns, seasons of tumors and cures and poisons, and along with these the daily need to reproduce oneself as a living person ("We study health," writes Donne, "and we deliberate upon our meats, and drink, and air, and exercises, and we hew and we polish every stone that goes to that building; and so our health is a long and a regular work"). These are assistances to fix ourselves, too, as what is mercifully tiny, temporary, and more than sensation. The last time Wolf's narrator sees Christa alive, she writes of her:

If I were to have to invent her, I wouldn't change her. I'd let her live, among ourselves, whom she, with uncommon knowing, chose as her companions in life. I'd let her sit at the desk, one morning in the twilight, noting the experiences into which the facts of real life had crystallized in her. I'd let her stand up when the children called... I'd have let her live. So that I could sit, as I did that morning, again and again at her table...

THIS IMAGINARY HALF-NOTHING, TIME

Then the sun rose, red and cold. There was snow on the ground. We took our time over breakfast. Stay a while, Christa T. said, but we drove off. If I'd been allowed to invent us, I'd have given us time to stay.

Time is merciful, but that does not mean it is not heart-breaking.

## The Dead Woman

A dead woman was found in a tomb in Siberia. Her tomb held horse meat, mutton, yogurt, cannabis, and a horned cup. She wore a yellow silk blouse and a headdress decorated with eight cats made of gold. On her left shoulder was a tattoo of a deer with a griffon's beak and a Capricorn's antlers. The dead woman was bald and wearing a wig made of horsehair. She was probably a witch or an oracle or a poet. The scientists who found her said she died young of breast cancer or of being so weak from it she fell off her horse and broke her bones. When her body was removed from its tomb, the people of the region said the forests started to burn, the earth began to shake, the winds would not stop blowing, and the living began to want to die.

## THE DEAD WOMAN

I am not surprised that the dead woman made the forests burn. The Siberian dead woman could not have been happy that the world is as it is. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, when she died, she had responsibly anticipated the necessary objects for the afterworld she expected—a cup, a set of clothes, drugs for any pain—but could not have anticipated the malignant eternity of the now, the anatomized and quantified future in which she is scrutinized and pathologized with an MRI machine.

But women become dead women every minute and always have, so I'm more surprised the whole world is not on fire every minute, that the winds are not roaring, that the earth hasn't shaken open, that everyone hasn't felt like they could die. There's a line in Alice Notley's epic poem *Alma* that I can't find now but remember and need: something like "women are born dead." Women and girls are death's proximates even by just appearing: even by just appearing *as women*, no matter who we think we are, people sometimes want to, or do, kill us or work us or impoverish us or poison us to death. And in *Alma*, there is death, and there is death, and there is death. Meaning here is death, the utility (death the tool) who speaks to Alma, saying "i am greater than you. men use me as power but not you," to which Alma mutters, "the centuries of such shit." But there is also death, the act of dying, and death the condition, and to be a dead woman is the condition from which vengeance can finally be had, including against death

the tool, who placates with a faux-solemn universalism: “i am going to remind you of your common humanity. we will observe some minutes of silence for the newly dead now.”

Death, in *Alma*, is made of specifics, not the world’s obscene generality:

i have control of the story not the political men i will  
contaminate them if they come near me isn't this a met-  
aphor not if im sick she says and not if we are all some-  
what radioactive and not if we're all electromagnetic  
and not if we wouldn't contaminate them if we could.

Cancer cells refuse to die, proliferate wildly, take over every territory they can: brain, lungs, liver, spinal fluid, bones. Some tumors, like mine, are necrotic, growing so fast that their insides die as their borders rapidly spread. These cells, if they can be said to look for anything, are aggressively looking for immortality, but the immortality they are looking for is one that is faithful to death. Necrotic tumors expand without limit but create no self-sustaining infrastructure. Their expansion—that wild, horrible living—has as its content only the emptiest death. “Like capitalism,” I tell my friends, and mean, by capitalism, “life as we know it,” and I mean, with “like capitalism,” that among other things, “it’s dead inside.”

## THE DEAD WOMAN

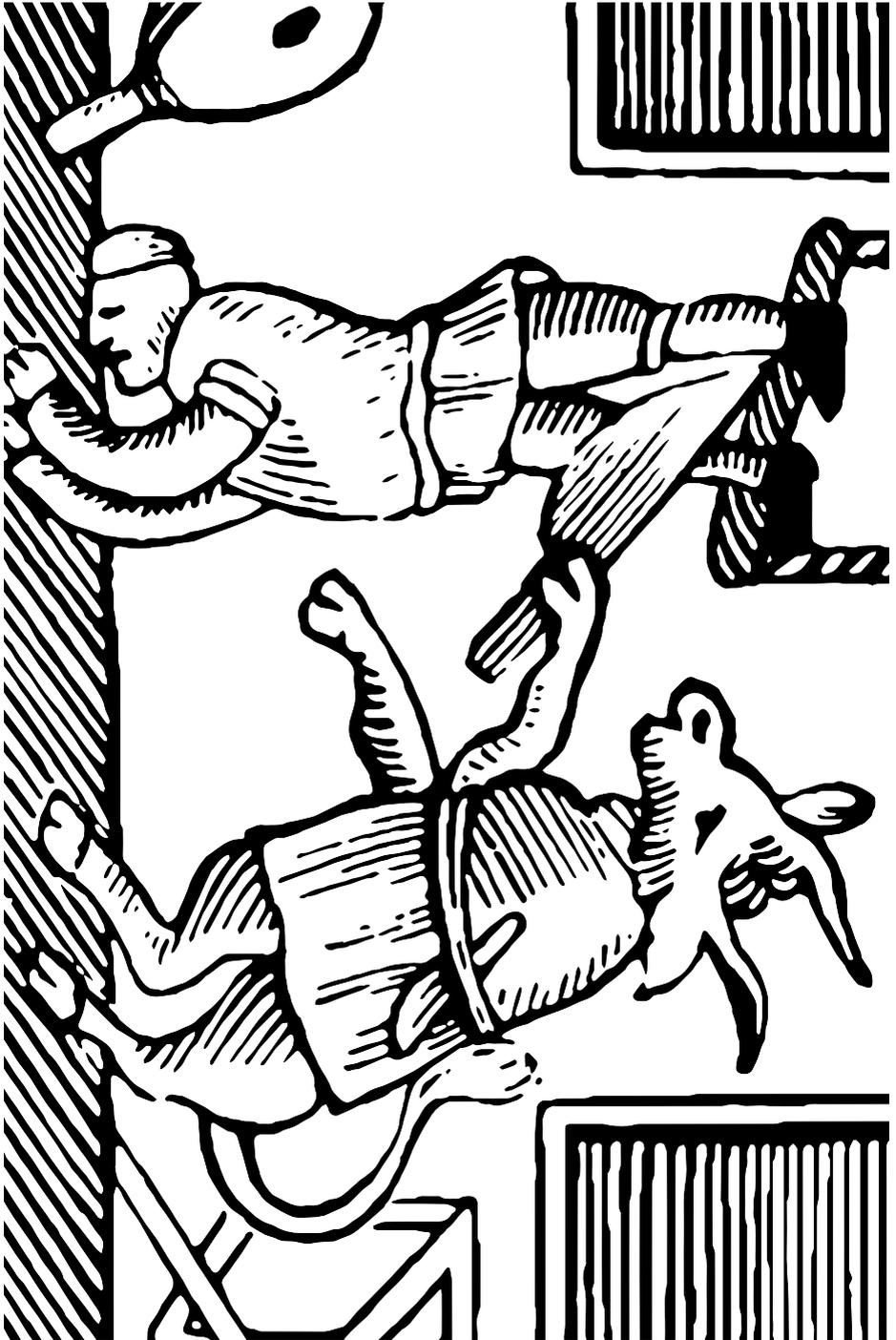
*Alma* is a poem about death, but it is a funerary text, not an elegy. An elegy marks what was known and has passed, but a funerary text predicts the unknown: a complex, sometimes hostile, always populated world of the dead for which one must study and prepare. A funerary text is an instruction. It requires the careful attention of a reader who needs to get through some trouble to save her soul. *Alma*, as a funerary text, is a poem as a spell as an open mouth, a needle to the head, the mark of the hole we know is open but can't quite look into that is the abyss that allows for what is previously unconsidered possibility. This negative allows for the kind of freedom that is only able in what hasn't even been found in precognition, that can only be found by a kind of falling into what wasn't known before it. As a woman with cancer reading *Alma* the one thing that is certain about the negative is this: *it is ours*.

When I take my wig off, my gender isn't human. I am assigned, instead, to the mutilated. When the texts of *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* were written on the walls of tombs, the hieroglyphs representing animals were left incomplete or drawn with missing parts so that the animals wouldn't cause harm in the underworld. *If I have to die young I want a beautiful death*, I think, but when I put my wig on, it squeezes my head so much I can't even think that. I take my wig off. As one of the mutilated, as a person who has been disarmed of whatever beauty she once had and who might be joining

the incomplete animals in the world of the dead, I continue to write about Alma.

Then I drive myself to the suburban outpost of a cancer pavilion named after a financier. I read *Alma* in the lab, open to “i don’t remember stretching my arms out to you, it is contained in the syntax of marks” as the phlebotomist tells me to extend my left arm and inserts her needle. The technician says “I know you don’t like to look, but I need you to look at this” and places a sticker on a vial of my blood. I look, and I don’t like it. My blood looks heavy in her hand.

I have just *read* in Alma “survival is not the right word for living on afterwards” and am required to say, “Yes my name is Anne Boyer, and I was born on July 26, 1973” to confirm that what they took from me is mine. I am here to learn about the new drug I will get which is made from yews suspended in castor oil and that has a one in one thousand chance of immediately killing anybody the first time it enters their body. If I live, my nails might fall off and the nerves in my fingers and toes will begin to die, and I am reading *Alma* in the living body that is being told it is right now the refuge of so much proliferating death. “I am discredited by lament” says *Alma*, and “anything is discredited which refers to how one survives the rigors of enslavement to the vacuous money making world.”





# NOBODY RIDING THE ROADS TODAY

Nobody riding the roads today  
But I hear the living rush  
far away from my heart

Nobody meeting on the streets  
But I rage from the crowded  
overtones of emptiness

Nobody sleeping in my bed  
But I breathe like windows  
broken by emergencies

Nobody laughing anymore  
But I see the world split  
and twisted up like open stone

Nobody riding the roads today  
But I hear the living rush  
far away from my heart

# 1.

## CHRISTMAS IN A CAGE

*January 1982*

Shortly before 6 a.m., the speaker in this tiny, barren cell blares a message, said to be from prison superintendent David Owens:

“A Merry Christmas to all inmates of the Philadelphia prison system. It is our hope that this will be the last holiday season you spend with us.”

A guard reads Owens’s name and the speaker falls silent for a half hour. I wonder at the words, and ponder my first Christmas in the hospital wing of the Detention Center.

### **Christmas in a cage**

I have finally been able to read press accounts of the incident that left me near death, a policeman dead, and me charged with his murder. It is nightmarish that my brother and I should be in this foul predicament, particularly since my main accusers, the police, were my attackers as well. My true crime seems to have been my survival of their assaults, for we were the victims that night.

To add insult to injury, I have learned that the forces of “law and order” have threatened my brother and burned, or permitted the burning of, my brother’s street business. Talk about curbside justice! According to some press accounts, cops stood around the fire joking and then celebrated at the station house.

Nowhere have I read an account of how I got shot, how a bullet happened to find its way near my spine, shattering a rib, splitting a kidney and nearly destroying my diaphragm. And people wonder why I have no trust in a “fair trial.” Nowhere have I read that a bullet left a hole in my lung, filling it with blood.

Nowhere have I read how police found me lying in a pool of my blood, unable to breathe, and then proceeded to punch, kick and stomp me—not

question me. I remember being rammed into a pole or a fireplug with police at both arms. I remember kicks to my head, my face, my chest, my belly, my back and other places. But I have read no press accounts of this, and have heard tell of no witnesses.

Nowhere have I read of how I was handcuffed, thrown into a paddy wagon and beaten, kicked, punched and pummeled. Where are the witnesses to a police captain or inspector entering the wagon and beating me with a police radio, all the while addressing me as a “Black motherfucker”? Where are the witnesses to the beating that left me with a four-inch scar on my forehead? A swollen jaw? Chipped teeth?

Not to end prematurely, who witnessed me pulled from the paddy wagon, dropped three feet to the cold hard earth, beaten some more, dragged into Jefferson Hospital, and then beaten inside the hospital as I fought for breath on one lung?

I awoke after surgery to find my belly ripped from top to bottom, with metallic staples protruding. My penis strapped to a tube, and tubes leading from each nostril to God knows where, was my first recollection. My second was intense pain and pressure in my already ripped kidneys, as a policeman stood at the doorway, a smile on his mustached lips, his name tag removed and his badge covered. Why was he smiling, and why the pain? He was standing on a square plastic bag, the receptacle for my urine.

Am I to trust these men, as they attempt to murder me again, in a public hospital? Not long afterward, I was shaken to consciousness by a kick at the foot of my bed. I opened my eyes to see a cop standing in the doorway, an Uzi submachine gun in his hands. “Innocent until proven guilty”?

### **High-water pants and cold**

Days later, after being transferred to city custody at Giuffre Medical Center under armed police guard, I was put into room #202 in the basement’s detention unit, which is the coldest in the place.

After I was transferred to what’s laughingly referred to as the new “hospital wing” of the Detention Center, I found out what “cold” really means. For the first two days, the temperature plummeted so low that inmates wore blankets over their prison jackets.

I had been officially issued a short-sleeved shirt and some tight high-water pants, and I was so cold that for the first night I could not sleep. Other inmates saved me from the cold. One found a prison jacket for me. (I had asked a guard, but he told me I would have to wait until an old inmate rolls, or gets out. So much for “using the system.”) Other inmates, and a kind nurse, supplemented my night warmth.

The prison issued one bedsheet and one light wool blanket. When I protested to a social worker, she told me defensively, “I know it’s cold, but there’s nothing I can do. The warden’s been told about the problem.” Why am I concerned about the cold? Because the doctor who treated me at Jefferson Hospital explained that the only real threat to my health was pneumonia, because of my punctured lung.

Is it purely coincidental that for the next week I spent some of the coldest nights and days of my life? Is the city, through the prison system, trying to kill me before I go to trial? What do they fear? I told all this to my prison social worker (a Mrs. Barbara Waldbaum), and she pooh-poohed the suggestion.

“No, Mr. Jamal, we want to see you get better.”

“Not hardly,” I replied.

Miraculously, after my complaints, some semblance of heat found its way into the cells on my side of the wall. Enough to sleep, at least. Is it coincidental, too, that the heat began to go on the night I was visited by Superintendent David Owens?

“It is our hope that this will be the last holiday season you spend with us... .” Owens’s words ring through my mind again—*is there another, grim meaning to this seemingly innocuous holiday greeting?*

### **Echoes of Pedro Serrano**

There is another side to this controversial case that people are not aware of. My cell is reasonably close to the place where Pedro Serrano was severely beaten and strangled to death. I have talked to eyewitnesses—some of whom I knew in the street. These brothers, at considerable personal peril, have told their stories to police and to prison officials, to city Managing Director W.W. Goode, to the Puerto Rican Alliance, and to

me. Some have been threatened by guards for doing so, but they have done so despite the threats.

According to several versions, Serrano, who had already been beaten by guards, was shaking his cell door, making noise to attract attention. Guards, angered at the noise, ordered all inmates into lockup. Most complied. One, a paralyzed, wheelchair-bound inmate, did not. He drove his chair near a wall and watched in silence.

The guards opened Serrano's cell, dragged him out, and proceeded to punch, kick and stomp him. He cried out in pain and terror, but the other inmates, locked up, were helpless. One guard, well known for his violence, reportedly whipped him with his long key chain, producing thin red welts in Serrano's white flesh.

Before this latest assault on my brother and myself, I had covered a press conference called by the Puerto Rican Alliance and members of the Serrano family. I saw photographs of Pedro Serrano, his face swollen even in death. I saw a body riddled with swellings, bruises and welts. I remember the thick, dark bruises beneath his neck, and I remember calling David Owens for a comment.

"Mumia, Mr. Serrano was not beaten to death, according to all the reports I've received. The Medical Examiner concurs," Owens said authoritatively. "Mr. Serrano was not beaten by any members of my staff," Owens would later proclaim to my radio listeners.

Remember the dark bruise around Serrano's neck? Owens told me he apparently strangled on a leather restraining belt, by exerting pressure until death. Inmate eyewitnesses said a guard wrapped the leather strap around Serrano's neck and pulled him back into the room, where he was again beaten and placed in restraints. Serrano, arrested for burglary, was described by his wife as being in love with life, and surely not suicidal, as prison officials have suggested.

Why have I recounted these intricacies of a case that is now public knowledge? I'll tell you why:

*Because my jailers, the men who decide whether I am to leave my cell for food, for phone calls, for pain medication, for a visit with a loved one, are the very same men who are accused of murdering Pedro Serrano.*

Remember the DA's claim that police had enough evidence to charge me with murder? How much more evidence do they have on Serrano's accused murderers? Yet every day they come to work, do their do, and return home to their loved ones ... while others sit in isolation and squalor. Consider the scenario—accused murderers guarding accused murderers! How insane—yet how telling it is of the system's brutality.

### **Justice for who?**

What is the dividing line? That Serrano was a “spic,” a “dirty P.R.,” and thus his life is subject to the depredations of a system that talks justice yet practices genocide. I am accused of killing a policeman, who was, moreover, white. For that, not even the pretense of justice is necessary. “Beat him, shoot him, frame him, put fear into his family,” is the unwritten but very real script.

I have been shackled like a slave, hands and feet, for daring to live. Those who have dared to question the official version have been threatened with dismissal from their jobs, and some with death.

Why do they fear one man so much? Not because they loved his alleged “victim”—but because they fear any questioning of their role as accuser, and occasionally executioner. Who polices the police?

The DA is well known as a character whose only interest is higher political office—obviously he would oppose a special prosecutor, for he wants his office to have the glory of hanging murder on “the radical reporter.”

Where was [then-DA] Ed Rendell when Winston C.X. Hood and Cornell Warren were summarily executed, their hands shackled behind them? What credence did he give the witnesses to these murders? Or the outright, cold-blooded killing of 17-year-old William Johnson Green? Or the intentionally broadcast beating of Delbert Africa? Where was his unquenchable thirst for justice then? Need we mention Pedro Serrano?

Make no mistake, Jake! For a nigger or a spic, there is no semblance of justice, and we better stop lying to ourselves.

Who are we to blame? No one but ourselves. For we condone it and allow it to happen. We are still locked in the slavish mentality of our past centuries, for we care more for the oppressor than for ourselves.

How many more martyrs will bleed their last before we wake up, stand up, demand and fight for justice?

And justice, true justice, comes not from the good graces of the Philadelphia Police Department, the District Attorney's office, the court system or your friendly neighborhood lawyer. It comes from God, the giver of your very life, your health, your air and your food.

## 17.

# NEVER AGAIN

*August 12, 1992*

When millions of Jews, gypsies and other assorted *Untermenschen* (German for “subhumans”) were herded into Europe’s concentration camps for slaughter, the Western world, man’s so-called “civilization,” stood by in almost blithe indifference, until the Hitlerian task of making Europe *judenrein* (“cleansed of Jews”) was nearly two-thirds completed.

The resulting Holocaust of much of the world’s Jewry left a world in shock at its depth of evil and spawned the growth of the world’s human rights movement, moving Jew and Gentile alike to saying in heartfelt unison, “Never again.”

It is 1992, and 50 years have passed since the ovens of Bergen-Belsen smothered scores of Jews.

In the region of Bosnia, Eastern Europe, concentration camps are once again filled with thousands of suffering humans, their gaunt, starving, skeletal forms macabre mirror images of the living dead of Dachau and Treblinka.

In Bosnia, tales of mass murders, gang rapes, systematic starvation emerge, part of a depraved political program by Serbian militias to have the area “ethnically cleansed.” In an ironic twist of history the victims are now not Jews but Muslims, ethnic brethren of the Serbs who dog them, descendants of the ancient Ottoman Empire that subdued the Balkans in 1453, bringing it under Islamic dominance.

There is a familiar ring in the terms *judenrein* and “ethnic cleansing,” the same racist tendency separated by languages and half a century in time. After the Muslims of Bosnia are eliminated, will we once again hear the pledge “Never again”?

When the Bosnian-Serbian region was incorporated into the now-defunct state of Yugoslavia, inter-ethnic and regional conflicts were

sublimated in favor of the larger entity, the state, or crushed under the iron fist of Marshal Tito, an anti-Nazi partisan who took power under the Communist Party and established the nation-state in 1945.

In 1980, Tito died, and in 1991, the Soviet Union died. Nominally within the Soviet orbit, Yugoslavia was largely independent, trading with the United States and Britain for years while COMECON crumbled.

Today, Yugoslavia is no more, and centuries of religious, class and “ethnic” hatreds fuel the Balkan sprint into barbarity.

Concentration camps, “ethnic cleansing” and liquidation campaigns all reveal how little humans have changed in a half century.

The German-born American philosopher Hannah Arendt, a spectator at the infamous Nazi war crimes trial, said she was struck by “the banality of evil.”

Five decades later, the same fiendish passions from the bubbling cauldron of hatreds boiling in the human breast reveal how truly banal such hate remains.

For even in the darkest hours of 20th-century humanity, “never” never means never.

25.

## WHEN A CHILD IS NOT A CHILD

*November 19, 1999*

When is a child not a child?

When he is a Black child, apparently.

The spectacle of Nathaniel Abraham sitting in a courtroom, his life in the hands of 12 strangers, is a stunning indictment of the American “justice” system, where youth is no mitigator. A troubled youth, to be sure, he was less an individual than an opportunity. An opportunity for some political animal to make his mark, not on a young, tender life, but on someone’s future career. In a remarkable compromise verdict, the jury in the case acquitted the boy of weapons charges while simultaneously convicting him of second-degree murder, a charge that may result in his banishment to the netherworld of America’s prison-industrial complex for the very rest of his life.

America, which preaches to the world of its vaunted “human rights,” is also the world’s leader in incarceration rates. It is creating and sustaining one of the most repressive prison systems in the Western world, and increasingly becoming much more repressive for juveniles. But more and more, a juvenile is just another commodity, a body to be caged, for longer periods of time. Not a person in need, not a youth to be rescued, not a life to be transformed. Nathaniel Abraham was such a one. When he was charged in the accidental shooting of a Detroit neighbor, the state mobilized its anti-life forces to capitalize on the case and to secure careers. After decades of fierce and unprincipled demonization by the elite media, the lives of Black, Hispanic and poor youth, once they are exposed to the “tender mercies” of the system, are in direst jeopardy. It is in this spirit that a boy like Nathaniel became more than a boy; he was, and is, projected as a dark symbol of social pathology, with little or no hope of his renewal.

If there is some constant in the psyche of the young, it is that they are in a constant state of growth and development. Their essential nature is that they change; that is perhaps what they do best. But Nathaniel Abraham, a little boy of 11 at the time of the shooting, and a little boy of 13 at the time of his trial, will not be allowed to really change, for legally he is an adult, and any change is irrelevant.

At the very least, young Nathaniel will be held in Michigan confinement until he is 21 years of age—10 years. At most, he will be caged forever, frozen like a small museum exhibit in a block of time, no matter how long he lives nor what he may achieve, no matter who he later becomes as a man: he will be a symbol, a relic that denies his essential reality as a living, growing being.

It is an irony of American history that where once grown Black men were seen as boys, now boys, of no matter how tender an age, are seen and treated as men. The constant feature in this social and historical process is the projection upon the eternal “other” of values of worthlessness and powerlessness—a relic of our dark and tragic past that we drag along into the future. The astute writer James Baldwin once noted:

It comes as a great shock around the age of 5, 6 or 7 to discover that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you.<sup>1</sup>

Young Nathaniel Abraham, if denied the natural right to be seen and treated as a child, unwittingly serves as another form of social symbol: he is the canary in a cage, and as he is carried deeper and deeper into the bowels of the earth, he warns us of an impending catastrophe.

42.

## ANALYSIS OF EMPIRE

*January 1, 2003*

*To sit in darkness here  
Hatching vain empires.*

—John Milton (1608–1674) *Paradise Lost*

There is something quite quaint, and faintly disturbing, in hearing Americans speak of their nation as a “democracy.” America, given its richness, its diversity and its complexity, is many things, but a democracy it ain’t. This is especially obvious if one considers the true imperial nature of the modern American nation-state. This is not a rabid call of the wild radical, baying at the pitted moon. For perhaps the first time in almost a century, leading voices of the elite and the corporate press admit as much. In the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* one finds scattered references to the imperial nature of the U.S. Empire, even if there is no overt recognition of it in the platforms of the political parties, or the alleged history taught in grade schools these days. But if history teaches us anything, it is that nations may describe themselves one way, and be another. When I hear nativist propagandists speak of the United States as the “Birthplace of Freedom” or some such, I feel compelled to ask, how can the “birthplace of freedom” be built on slavery—the very antithesis of freedom—the heart of *unfreedom*? (Why not call it “the birthplace of White freedom”—or is that too revealing of those who weren’t free?)

Of such fictions histories are born.

It is in this light that we must view the newly announced Bush Doctrine, as recorded in the recently published document National Security Strategy of the United States of America. It calls for and justifies (or tries to justify) preemptive strikes all around the globe, against anybody, anywhere, who even thinks about posing either a threat to or

parity with the Empire. To make a long story short, the document calls for the canning of the Cold War strategies of “containment” and “deterrence.” Using its supremacy in the technology of death, the United States reserves to itself the right to preemptively attack and even overthrow any nation-state in the world it deems threatening, attempting to acquire WMDs (you know, weapons like the U.S. already has), harboring terrorists, or failing to sufficiently suck up to the Big Dog on the street (U.S.A.).

The UN is but a minor annoyance (as has been shown in the Iraq war example). Neither is the European Union much of a deterrent to U.S. hubris, for while it may possess an inordinate amount of wealth and economic strength, it is, at present, no match for the martial power of the American Empire—and it knows it.

As long ago as 1991, when the late French President François Mitterrand and former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl announced their plans for a joint Franco-German “Euro-corps”—an official military arm of the EU—Bush the Elder issued a thinly veiled message to his European “allies”: “Our premise is that the American role in the defense and the affairs of Europe will not be made superfluous by European union. If our premise is wrong, if my friends, your ultimate aim is to provide individually for your own defense, the time to tell us is today.”<sup>1</sup> The “Euro-corps” idea was quietly shelved, and the Cold War relic of NATO has been edged into its place—under continued U.S. strategic and command dominance, of course. Indeed, even NATO has its limits, as scholar Michael Ignatieff noted in a recent *New York Review of Books* article:

Britain’s prime minister can shuttle usefully between Islamabad and New Delhi, but the influence that determines outcomes in the region comes from Washington. This is a painful reality for Europeans, who like the Japanese believed the myth that economic power could be the equivalent of military might. Events since September 11 have rubbed in the lesson that global power is still measured by military capacity. Having rallied to the American Cause after September 11, the NATO liaison officers who arrived at CENTcom in Florida had to endure the humiliation

of being denied all access to the Command Center where the war against Osama bin Laden was actually being run. *The Americans trust their allies so little—the same was true during the Kosovo operation—that they exclude everyone but the British from all but the most menial police work.*<sup>2</sup>

An empire neither has, nor needs, allies. It is sufficient to itself. It has subject powers. It has vassals. It does not have, nor tolerate, equals. The Bush Doctrine is replete with threats for the rest of the world, to keep it that way.

Forever.

## KATRINA: ONE YEAR LATER

*August 24, 2006*

The evocative power of one word is amazing: Katrina.

It resonates like a klaxon in the dark of night, an alarm that quickens the pulse, forces sweat from the armpits, and causes the heart to beat at a rapid pace.

It is as much name as it is nightmare; but it is more.

It is revelation, the brief moment when lightning turns the night sky into brightest day, until the ears echo with the roar of thunder.

For decades, at least since the high points of the Civil Rights movement, or the heyday of the Black Liberation movement, U.S. Blacks were able to live with the illusion that while things were far from perfect, they were getting better.

We were (to quote the theme song from the situation comedy *The Jeffersons*) “movin’ on up” to places of power, respect, prestige and responsibility.

There were hiccups, of course, but racism, that great monster, Leviathan, was receding into its dark cave—perhaps for good.

Then came Katrina.

In a flash, in an hour, in a day, in a week, we saw with our own eyes the loss, the waste, the death, and perhaps worse, the dismissal of Black life by virtually every agency of local, state and federal power, and the media as well. For if the state was deadly by ignoring Black suffering, the media was deadly by its poisonous attention, and its perversion of the truth.

The media gave the state license to ignore, to disappear, to downplay and to discard Black life, for, in its twisted, racist coverage, Blacks were savages, and thus unworthy of saving.

If U.S. Blacks had any illusions, the dark, fetid waters of Katrina washed them away. Nationalism, citizenship, belonging to the White

Nation were lies. The waters of Katrina cleared the crust of sleep from our eyes, and taught us that if you're Black and poor, you're utterly on your own.

With the death of this illusion of nationalism, we learn that we are Rwanda, we are Burundi; we are united in our Blackness, our social isolation, our savage distancing from the very definition of humanity.

We are them.

A year has passed, and yet disaster remains.

Over half the city, over a quarter of a million people have not returned to the Crescent City. The Lower Ninth ward, the hub of Black poor and working-class New Orleanians, has neither running water nor electricity today.

Between fighting the government and fighting the insurance companies, tens of thousands of people are still fighting for money to rebuild their homes and lives.

And lest we trip about whether Katrina unveiled differences of class or race, scholar Michael Eric Dyson addressed the conundrum in his book *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*:

Class certainly loomed large in Katrina's aftermath. Blacks of means escaped the tragedy; blacks without them suffered and died. In reality, it is how race and class interact that made the situation of the poor so horrible on the Gulf Coast. The rigid caste system that punishes poor blacks and other minorities also targets poor whites. Concentrated poverty doesn't victimize poor whites in the same way it does poor blacks. For instance, the racial divide in car ownership ... partially reflects income differences between the races. However, as if to prove that not all inequalities are equal, even poor whites are far more likely to have access to cars than poor blacks. In New Orleans, 53 percent of poor blacks were without cars while just 17 percent of poor whites lacked access to cars.<sup>1</sup>

Katrina, standing alone, is a beautiful name. But it may be many years before it stands alone again.

For it is an event now of historic proportions, one that impacts all that flows from it, like a war, like a massacre, like a hurricane that transforms terrain, that shatters landscapes, that explodes myths of who we thought we were.

**EBOLA***October 14, 2014*

With the death of Mr. Thomas Eric Duncan shortly after his arrival from Liberia, West Africa, the Ebola crisis has burst onto millions of news screens, generating deep levels of fear and xenophobia.

The African term “Ebola,” named for a river in Congo following the first known outbreak in 1976, evokes the fear and anxiety of the foreign, but it is a tropical disease best known as hemorrhagic fever. The virus causes internal organs and systems to break down and leads to massive bleeding.

To be sure, Ebola is a serious health concern, for it has a 70 percent mortality rate. But to beat back the fear, public officials have been playing down the threats posed by the virus, often armed with little more than hope and false confidence.

For politics, often more imagery than reality, is a poor barrier against the seriousness of viruses, disease and death.

This isn’t about the Ebola crisis, it’s about the American health care crisis, made possible by a flawed business model that prioritizes profit above all other things: even life itself.

Consider this: When Mr. Duncan first entered Texas Presbyterian Hospital, he was interviewed by a screener, prescribed antibiotics, and sent home. That screener was likely not a medically trained health care professional, but a receptionist, perhaps armed with a checklist to cover. Chances are that the worker was among the lowest-paid staff, unless one considers the janitorial workers.

This business model, one followed by most institutions in America, is now exposed as ineffective, dangerous and the least health-conscious one possible.

That was a business decision, driven by the bottom line of money, not life.

Similarly, the recent crisis has exposed how vulnerable nurses are in this system, for the business perceives them as less valuable than doctors. Hence, they are paid less, trained less, protected less and worked more.

Who spends more time with ailing patients—doctors or nurses? Who has the closest physical contact with patients?

But according to published accounts, nurses had their necks exposed, and when they complained, they were told to use tape to protect themselves.

This is a system that protects profits and prestige, not people!

For doctors get the most protection—nurses, the least.

When this latest Ebola outbreak first struck West Africa, the U.S. mobilized soldiers to go there.

Cuba, which has advanced biotechnical medical experience with tropical diseases, sent more than 1,000 doctors, to help heal people.

Cuba, little, socialist Cuba, has sent more than 135,000 health care professionals to 154 countries, more than the UN's World Health Organization (WHO).

Their Latin American Medical School in Havana trains thousands of poor medical students, from all over the world—*for free*.

Not much of a business model.

But one hell of a human model.



*THE NIGHT / 1*

I can't sleep. There is a woman stuck between my eyelids. I would tell her to get out if I could. But there is a woman stuck in my throat.

人と自然が輝く森づくり  
春の訪れと山菜、自然の恵みと、森の恵みと、  
見守る森と、  
冬菜

# 自然観察の森と清流

(桂川源流域)

人は自然の中で生かされて  
太陽に感謝を

水、空気、土を大切に



松葉樹の輝く針葉樹林  
山頂を中心に、山菜と山菜林、マツの森、と山菜と

記念樹  
杉林  
松林  
マツの森

マツの森  
松林  
マツの森

共生の森

森

*Conjuring time,  
Kyoto Prefecture.  
Mr. Imoto's map of  
revitalizing. This is his  
matsutake mountain:  
a time machine of  
multiple seasons,  
histories, and hopes.*

# 1 Arts of Noticing

I am not proposing a return to the Stone Age. My intent is not reactionary, nor even conservative, but simply subversive. It seems that the utopian imagination is trapped, like capitalism and industrialism and the human population, in a one-way future consisting only of growth. All I'm trying to do is figure out how to put a pig on the tracks.

—*Ursula K. Le Guin*

IN 1908 AND 1909 TWO RAILROAD ENTREPRENEURS raced each other to build track along Oregon's Deschutes River.<sup>1</sup> The goal of each was to be the first to create an industrial connection between the towering ponderosas of the eastern Cascades and the stacked lumberyards of Portland. In 1910, the thrill of competition yielded to an agreement for joint service. Pine logs poured out of the region, bound for distant markets. Lumber mills brought new settlers; towns sprung

up as millworkers multiplied. By the 1930s, Oregon had become the nation's largest producer of timber.

*This is a story we know. It is the story of pioneers, progress, and the transformation of "empty" spaces into industrial resource fields.*

In 1989, a plastic spotted owl was hung in effigy on an Oregon logging truck.<sup>2</sup> Environmentalists had shown that unsustainable logging was destroying Pacific Northwest forests. "The spotted owl was like the canary in the coal mine," explained one advocate. "It was . . . symbolic of an ecosystem on the verge of collapse."<sup>3</sup> When a federal judge blocked old-growth logging to save owl habitat, loggers were furious; but how many loggers were there? Logging jobs had dwindled as timber companies mechanized—and as prime timber disappeared. By 1989, many mills had already closed; logging companies were moving to other regions.<sup>4</sup> The eastern Cascades, once a hub of timber wealth, were now cutover forests and former mill towns overgrown by brush.

*This is a story we need to know. Industrial transformation turned out to be a bubble of promise followed by lost livelihoods and damaged landscapes. And yet: such documents are not enough. If we end the story with decay, we abandon all hope—or turn our attention to other sites of promise and ruin, promise and ruin.*

What emerges in damaged landscapes, beyond the call of industrial promise and ruin? By 1989, something else had begun in Oregon's cutover forests: the wild mushroom trade. From the first it was linked to worldwide ruination: The 1986 Chernobyl disaster had contaminated Europe's mushrooms, and traders had come to the Pacific Northwest for supplies. When Japan began importing matsutake at high prices—just as jobless Indochinese refugees were settling in California—the trade went wild. Thousands rushed to Pacific Northwest forests for the new "white gold." This was in the middle of a "jobs versus the environment" battle over the forests, yet neither side noticed the mushroomers. Job advocates imagined only wage contracts for healthy white men; the foragers—disabled white veterans, Asian refugees, Native Americans, and undocumented Latinos—were invisible interlopers. Conservationists were fighting to keep human disturbance out of the forests; the entry of thousands of people, had it been noticed, would hardly have been welcome. But the mushroom hunters were mainly not noticed. At

most, the Asian presence sparked local fears of invasion: journalists worried about violence.<sup>5</sup>

A few years into the new century, the idea of a trade-off between jobs and the environment seemed less convincing. With or without conservation, there were fewer “jobs” in the twentieth-century sense in the United States; besides, it seemed much more likely that environmental damage would kill all of us off, jobs or no jobs. We are stuck with the problem of living despite economic and ecological ruination. Neither tales of progress nor of ruin tell us how to think about collaborative survival. It is time to pay attention to mushroom picking. Not that this will save us—but it might open our imaginations.



Geologists have begun to call our time the Anthropocene, the epoch in which human disturbance outranks other geological forces. As I write, the term is still new—and still full of promising contradictions. Thus, although some interpreters see the name as implying the triumph of humans, the opposite seems more accurate: without planning or intention, humans have made a mess of our planet.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, despite the prefix “anthropo-,” that is, human, the mess is not a result of our species biology. The most convincing Anthropocene time line begins not with our species but rather with the advent of modern capitalism, which has directed long-distance destruction of landscapes and ecologies. This time line, however, makes the “anthropo-” even more of a problem. Imagining the human since the rise of capitalism entangles us with ideas of progress and with the spread of techniques of alienation that turn both humans and other beings into resources. Such techniques have segregated humans and policed identities, obscuring collaborative survival. The concept of the Anthropocene both evokes this bundle of aspirations, which one might call the modern human conceit, and raises the hope that we might muddle beyond it. Can we live inside this regime of the human and still exceed it?

This is the predicament that makes me pause before offering a description of mushrooms and mushroom pickers. The modern human conceit won’t let a description be anything more than a decorative

footnote. This “anthropo-” blocks attention to patchy landscapes, multiple temporalities, and shifting assemblages of humans and nonhumans: the very stuff of collaborative survival. In order to make mushroom picking a worthwhile tale, then, I must first chart the work of this “anthropo-” and explore the terrain it refuses to acknowledge.

Consider, indeed, the question of what’s left. Given the effectiveness of state and capitalist devastation of natural landscapes, we might ask why anything outside their plans is alive today. To address this, we will need to watch unruly edges. What brings Mien and matsutake together in Oregon? Such seemingly trivial queries might turn everything around to put unpredictable encounters at the center of things.

We hear about precarity in the news every day. People lose their jobs or get angry because they never had them. Gorillas and river porpoises hover at the edge of extinction. Rising seas swamp whole Pacific islands. But most of the time we imagine such precarity to be an exception to how the world works. It’s what “drops out” from the system. What if, as I’m suggesting, precarity *is* the condition of our time—or, to put it another way, what if our time is ripe for sensing precarity? What if precarity, indeterminacy, and what we imagine as trivial are the center of the systematicity we seek?

Precarity is the condition of being vulnerable to others. Unpredictable encounters transform us; we are not in control, even of ourselves. Unable to rely on a stable structure of community, we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our others. We can’t rely on the status quo; everything is in flux, including our ability to survive. Thinking through precarity changes social analysis. A precarious world is a world without teleology. Indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is frightening, but thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible.

The only reason all this sounds odd is that most of us were raised on dreams of modernization and progress. These frames sort out those parts of the present that might lead to the future. The rest are trivial; they “drop out” of history. I imagine you talking back: “Progress? That’s an idea from the nineteenth century.” The term “progress,” referring to a general state, has become rare; even twentieth-century modernization has begun to feel archaic. But their categories and assumptions of improvement are with us everywhere. We imagine their objects every day:

democracy, growth, science, hope. Why would we expect economies to grow and sciences to advance? Even without explicit reference to development, our theories of history are embroiled in these categories. So, too, are our personal dreams. I'll admit it's hard for me to even say this: there might not be a collective happy ending. Then why bother getting up in the morning?

Progress is embedded, too, in widely accepted assumptions about what it means to be human. Even when disguised through other terms, such as "agency," "consciousness," and "intention," we learn over and over that humans are different from the rest of the living world because we look forward—while other species, which live day to day, are thus dependent on us. As long as we imagine that humans are *made* through progress, nonhumans are stuck within this imaginative framework too.

Progress is a forward march, drawing other kinds of time into its rhythms. Without that driving beat, we might notice other temporal patterns. Each living thing remakes the world through seasonal pulses of growth, lifetime reproductive patterns, and geographies of expansion. Within a given species, too, there are multiple time-making projects, as organisms enlist each other and coordinate in making landscapes. (The regrowth of the cutover Cascades and Hiroshima's radioecology each show us multispecies time making.) The curiosity I advocate follows such multiple temporalities, revitalizing description and imagination. This is not a simple empiricism, in which the world invents its own categories. Instead, agnostic about where we are going, we might look for what has been ignored because it never fit the time line of progress.

Consider again the snippets of Oregon history with which I began this chapter. The first, about railroads, tells of progress. It led to the future: railroads reshaped our destiny. The second is already an interruption, a history in which the destruction of forests matters. What it shares with the first, however, is the assumption that the trope of progress is sufficient to know the world, both in success and failure. The story of decline offers no leftovers, no excess, nothing that escapes progress. Progress still controls us even in tales of ruin.

Yet the modern human conceit is not the only plan for making worlds: we are surrounded by many world-making projects, human and not human.<sup>7</sup> World-making projects emerge from practical activities of

making lives; in the process these projects alter our planet. To see them, in the shadow of the Anthropocene's "anthropo-," we must reorient our attention. Many preindustrial livelihoods, from foraging to stealing, persist today, and new ones (including commercial mushroom picking) emerge, but we neglect them because they are not a part of progress. These livelihoods make worlds too—and they show us how to look around rather than ahead.

Making worlds is not limited to humans. We know that beavers reshape streams as they make dams, canals, and lodges; in fact, all organisms make ecological living places, altering earth, air, and water. Without the ability to make workable living arrangements, species would die out. In the process, each organism changes everyone's world. Bacteria made our oxygen atmosphere, and plants help maintain it. Plants live on land because fungi made soil by digesting rocks. As these examples suggest, world-making projects can overlap, allowing room for more than one species. Humans, too, have always been involved in multispecies world making. Fire was a tool for early humans not just to cook but also to burn the landscape, encouraging edible bulbs and grasses that attracted animals for hunting. Humans shape multispecies worlds when our living arrangements make room for other species. This is not just a matter of crops, livestock, and pets. Pines, with their associated fungal partners, often flourish in landscapes burned by humans; pines and fungi work together to take advantage of bright open spaces and exposed mineral soils. Humans, pines, and fungi make living arrangements simultaneously for themselves and for others: multispecies worlds.

Twentieth-century scholarship, advancing the modern human conceit, conspired against our ability to notice the divergent, layered, and conjoined projects that make up worlds. Entranced by the expansion of certain ways of life over others, scholars ignored questions of what else was going on. As progress tales lose traction, however, it becomes possible to look differently.

The concept of *assemblage* is helpful. Ecologists turned to assemblages to get around the sometimes fixed and bounded connotations of ecological "community." The question of how the varied species in a species assemblage influence each other—if at all—is never settled: some thwart (or eat) each other; others work together to make life possible; still others just happen to find themselves in the same place. As-

semblages are open-ended gatherings. They allow us to ask about communal effects without assuming them. They show us potential histories in the making. For my purposes, however, I need something other than organisms as the elements that gather. I need to see lifeways—and non-living ways of being as well—coming together. Nonhuman ways of being, like human ones, shift historically. For living things, species identities are a place to begin, but they are not enough: ways of being are emergent effects of encounters. Thinking about humans makes this clear. Foraging for mushrooms is a way of life—but not a common characteristic of all humans. The issue is the same for other species. Pines find mushrooms to help them use human-made open spaces. Assemblages don't just gather lifeways; they make them. Thinking through assemblage urges us to ask: How do gatherings sometimes become “happenings,” that is, greater than the sum of their parts? If history without progress is indeterminate and multidirectional, might assemblages show us its possibilities?

Patterns of unintentional coordination develop in assemblages. To notice such patterns means watching the interplay of temporal rhythms and scales in the divergent lifeways that gather. Surprisingly, this turns out to be a method that might revitalize political economy as well as environmental studies. Assemblages drag political economy inside them, and not just for humans. Plantation crops have lives different from those of their free-living siblings; cart horses and hunter steeds share species but not lifeways. Assemblages cannot hide from capital and the state; they are sites for watching how political economy works. If capitalism has no teleology, we need to see what comes together—not just by prefabrication, but also by juxtaposition.

Other authors use “assemblage” with other meanings.<sup>8</sup> The qualifier “polyphonic” may help explain my variant. Polyphony is music in which autonomous melodies intertwine. In Western music, the madrigal and the fugue are examples of polyphony. These forms seem archaic and strange to many modern listeners because they were superseded by music in which a unified rhythm and melody holds the composition together. In the classical music that displaced baroque, unity was the goal; this was “progress” in just the meaning I have been discussing: a unified coordination of time. In twentieth-century rock-and-roll, this unity takes the form of a strong beat, suggestive of the listener's heart;

we are used to hearing music with a single perspective. When I first learned polyphony, it was a revelation in listening; I was forced to pick out separate, simultaneous melodies *and* to listen for the moments of harmony and dissonance they created together. This kind of noticing is just what is needed to appreciate the multiple temporal rhythms and trajectories of the assemblage.

For those not musically inclined, it may be useful to imagine the polyphonic assemblage in relation to agriculture. Since the time of the plantation, commercial agriculture has aimed to segregate a single crop and work toward its simultaneous ripening for a coordinated harvest. But other kinds of farming have multiple rhythms. In the shifting cultivation I studied in Indonesian Borneo, many crops grew together in the same field, and they had quite different schedules. Rice, bananas, taro, sweet potatoes, sugarcane, palms, and fruit trees mingled; farmers needed to attend to the varied schedules of maturation of each of these crops. These rhythms were their relation to human harvests; if we add other relations, for example, to pollinators or other plants, rhythms multiply. The polyphonic assemblage is the gathering of these rhythms, as they result from world-making projects, human and not human.

The polyphonic assemblage also moves us into the unexplored territory of the modern political economy. Factory labor is an exemplar of coordinated progress time. Yet the supply chain is infused with polyphonic rhythms. Consider the tiny Chinese garment factory studied by Nellie Chu; like its many competitors, it served multiple supply lines, constantly switching among orders for local boutique brands, knock-off international brands, and generic to-be-branded-later production.<sup>9</sup> Each required different standards, materials, and kinds of labor. The factory's job was to match industrial coordination to the complex rhythms of supply chains. Rhythms further multiply when we move out of factories to watch foraging for an unpredictable wild product. The farther we stray into the peripheries of capitalist production, the more coordination between polyphonic assemblages and industrial processes becomes central to making a profit.

As the last examples suggest, abandoning progress rhythms to watch polyphonic assemblages is not a matter of virtuous desire. Progress felt great; there was always something better ahead. Progress gave us the "progressive" political causes with which I grew up. I hardly know how

to think about justice without progress. The problem is that progress stopped making sense. More and more of us looked up one day and realized that the emperor had no clothes. It is in this dilemma that new tools for noticing seem so important.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, life on earth seems at stake. Chapter 2 turns to dilemmas of collaborative survival.



*Conjuring time,  
Yunnan. The matsutake  
embroidered on this Yi  
market goer's vest  
performs the promise of  
wealth and well-being.  
The vest codifies (Yi)  
ethnicity and (fungal)  
species, making these  
units available for a  
moment of action within  
shifting histories of  
encounter.*

## 2 Contamination as Collaboration

I wanted someone to tell me things were going to be fine, but no one did.

—*Mai Neng Moua, "Along the Way to the Mekong"*

HOW DOES A GATHERING BECOME A “HAPPENING,” that is, greater than a sum of its parts? One answer is contamination. We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. As contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds—and new directions—may emerge.<sup>1</sup> Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option. One value of keeping precarity in mind is that it makes us remember that changing with circumstances is the stuff of survival.

But what is survival? In popular American fantasies, survival is all about saving oneself by fighting off others. The “survival” featured in U.S. television shows or alien-planet stories is a synonym for conquest and expansion. I will not use the term that way. Please open yourself to

another usage. This book argues that staying alive—for every species—requires livable collaborations. Collaboration means working across difference, which leads to contamination. Without collaborations, we all die.

Popular fantasies are hardly the whole problem: one-against-all survival has also engaged scholars. Scholars have imagined survival as the advancement of individual interests—whether “individuals” are species, populations, organisms, or genes—human or otherwise. Consider the twin master sciences of the twentieth century, neoclassical economics and population genetics. Each of these disciplines came to power in the early twentieth century with formulations bold enough to redefine modern knowledge. Population genetics stimulated the “modern synthesis” in biology, uniting evolutionary theory and genetics. Neoclassical economics reshaped economic policy, creating the modern economy of its imagination. While practitioners of each have had little to do with each other, the twins set up similar frames. At the heart of each is the self-contained individual actor, out to maximize personal interests, whether for reproduction or wealth. Richard Dawkins’s “selfish gene” gets across the idea, useful at many life scales: It is the ability of genes (or organisms, or populations) to look out for their own interests that fuels evolution.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the life of *Homo economicus*, economic man, is a series of choices to follow his best interests.

The assumption of self-containment made an explosion of new knowledge possible. Thinking through self-containment and thus the self-interest of individuals (at whatever scale) made it possible to ignore contamination, that is, transformation through encounter. Self-contained individuals are not transformed by encounter. Maximizing their interests, they use encounters—but remain unchanged in them. *Noticing* is unnecessary to track these unchanging individuals. A “standard” individual can stand in for all as a unit of analysis. It becomes possible to organize knowledge through logic alone. Without the possibility of transformative encounters, mathematics can replace natural history and ethnography. It was the productiveness of this simplification that made the twins so powerful, and the obvious falsity of the original premise was increasingly forgotten.<sup>3</sup> Economy and ecology thus each became sites for algorithms of progress-as-expansion.

The problem of precarious survival helps us see what is wrong. Precarity is a state of acknowledgment of our vulnerability to others. In order to survive, we need help, and help is always the service of another, with or without intent. When I sprain my ankle, a stout stick may help me walk, and I enlist its assistance. I am now an encounter in motion, a woman-and-stick. It is hard for me to think of any challenge I might face without soliciting the assistance of others, human and not human. It is unselfconscious privilege that allows us to fantasize—counterfactually—that we each survive alone.

If survival always involves others, it is also necessarily subject to the indeterminacy of self-and-other transformations. We change through our collaborations both within and across species. The important stuff for life on earth happens in those transformations, not in the decision trees of self-contained individuals. Rather than seeing only the expansion-and-conquest strategies of relentless individuals, we must look for histories that develop through contamination. Thus, how might a gathering become a “happening”?

Collaboration is work across difference, yet this is not the innocent diversity of self-contained evolutionary tracks. The evolution of our “selves” is already polluted by histories of encounter; we are mixed up with others before we even begin any new collaboration. Worse yet, we are mixed up in the projects that do us the most harm. The diversity that allows us to enter collaborations emerges from histories of extermination, imperialism, and all the rest. Contamination makes diversity.

This changes the work we imagine for names, including ethnicities and species. If categories are unstable, we must watch them emerge within encounters. To use category names should be a commitment to tracing the assemblages in which these categories gain a momentary hold.<sup>4</sup> Only from here can I return to meeting Mien and matsutake in a Cascades forest. What does it mean to be “Mien” or to be “forest”? These identities entered our meeting from histories of transformative ruin, even as new collaborations changed them.

Oregon’s national forests are managed by the U.S. Forest Service, which aims to conserve forests as a national resource. Yet the conservation status of the landscape has been hopelessly confused by a hundred-year history of logging and fire suppression. Contamination creates forests,

transforming them in the process. Because of this, noticing as well as counting is required to know the landscape.

Oregon's forests played a key role in the U.S. Forest Service's early-twentieth-century formation, during which foresters worked to find kinds of conservation that timber barons would support.<sup>5</sup> Fire suppression was the biggest result: Loggers and foresters could agree on it. Meanwhile, loggers were eager to take out the ponderosa pines that so impressed white pioneers in the eastern Cascades. The great ponderosa stands were logged out by the 1980s. It turned out that they could not reproduce without the periodic fires the Forest Service had stopped. But firs and spindly lodgepole pines were flourishing with fire exclusion—at least if flourishing means spreading in ever denser and more flammable thickets of live, dead, and dying trees.<sup>6</sup> For several decades, Forest Service management has meant, on the one hand, trying to make the ponderosas come back, and, on the other, trying to thin, cut, or otherwise control flammable fir and lodgepole thickets. Ponderosa, fir, and lodgepole, each finding life through human disturbance, are now creatures of contaminated diversity.

Surprisingly, in this ruined industrial landscape, new value emerged: matsutake. Matsutake fruit especially well under mature lodgepole, and mature lodgepole exists in prodigious numbers in the eastern Cascades because of fire exclusion. With the logging of ponderosa pines and fire exclusion, lodgepoles have spread, and despite their flammability, fire exclusion allows them a long maturity. Oregon matsutake fruit only after forty to fifty years of lodgepole growth, made possible by excluding fire.<sup>7</sup> The abundance of matsutake is a recent historical creation: contaminated diversity.

And what are Southeast Asian hill people doing in Oregon? Once I realized that almost everyone in the forest was there for explicitly "ethnic" reasons, finding out what these ethnicities implied became urgent. I needed to know what created communal agendas that included mushroom hunting; thus I followed the ethnicities they named for me. The pickers, like the forests, must be appreciated in becoming, not just counted. Yet almost all U.S. scholarship on Southeast Asian refugees ignores ethnic formation in Southeast Asia. To counteract this omission, allow me an extended story. Despite their specificity, Mien stand in here

for all the pickers—and the rest of us too. Transformation through collaboration, ugly and otherwise, is the human condition.

The distant ancestors of Kao's Mien community are imagined as emerging already in contradiction and on the run. Moving through the hills of southern China to hide from imperial power, they also treasured imperial documents exempting them from taxation and *corvée*. A little more than a hundred years ago, some moved farther out of the way—into the northern hills of what are now Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. They brought a distinctive script, based on Chinese characters and used for writing to spirits.<sup>8</sup> As both refusal and acceptance of Chinese authority, the script is a neat expression of contaminated diversity: Mien are Chinese, and not Chinese. Later they would learn to be Lao/Thai, but not Lao/Thai, and then American, and not American.

Mien are not known for their respect for national boundaries; communities have repeatedly crossed back and forth, especially when armies threaten. (Kao's uncle learned Chinese and Lao from cross-border movement.) Yet, despite this mobility, Mien are hardly an autonomous tribe, free from the control of the state. Hjørleifur Jonsson has shown how Mien lifeways have repeatedly changed in relation to state agendas. In the first half of the twentieth century, for example, Mien in Thailand organized their communities around the opium trade. Only large, polygynous households controlled by powerful senior men could keep hold of the opium contracts. Some households had one hundred members. The Thai state did not mandate this family organization; it arose from the Mien encounter with opium. In a similarly unplanned process in the late twentieth century, Mien in Thailand came to identify as an "ethnic group" with distinctive customs; Thai policy toward minorities made this identity possible. Meanwhile, along the Laos/Thailand border, Mien slipped back and forth, evading state policy on both sides even while being shaped by it.<sup>9</sup>

Those cross-boundary Asian hills have known many peoples, and Mien sensibilities have developed in engagement with these shifting groups as all have negotiated imperial governance and rebellion, licit and illicit trade, and millennial mobilization. To understand how Mien came to be matsutake pickers requires considering their relationship with another group now in the Oregon forests, Hmong. Hmong are

like Mien in many ways. They also ran south from China; they also crossed borders and occupied the high altitudes suited to commercial opium farming; they also value their distinctive dialects and traditions. A mid-twentieth-century millennial movement started by an illiterate farmer produced a completely original Hmong script. This was the time of the U.S.-Indochina War, and Hmong were in the thick of it. As linguist William Smalley points out, discarded military ordnance in the area would have exposed this inspired farmer to English, Russian, and Chinese writing, and he might also have seen Lao and Thai.<sup>10</sup> Emerging from the trash of war, this distinctive and multiply derivative Hmong script, like that of the Mien, is a wonderful icon for contaminated diversity.

Hmong are proud of their patrilineal clan organization, and, according to ethnographer William Geddes, clans have been key to forming long-distance ties among men.<sup>11</sup> Clan relations allowed military leaders to recruit outside their face-to-face networks. This proved relevant when the United States took over imperial oversight after the French defeat by Vietnamese nationalists in 1954, thus inheriting the loyalty of French-trained Hmong soldiers. One of those soldiers became General Vang Pao, who mobilized Hmong in Laos to fight in behalf of the United States, becoming what 1970s CIA director William Colby called “the biggest hero of the Vietnam War.”<sup>12</sup> Vang Pao recruited not just individuals but villages and clans into the war. Although his claims to represent Hmong disguised the fact that Hmong also fought for the communist Pathet Lao, Vang Pao made his cause simultaneously a Hmong cause and a U.S. anticommunist cause. Through his control over opium transport, bombing targets, and CIA rice drops, as well as his charisma, Vang Pao generated enormous ethnic loyalty, consolidating one kind of “Hmong.”<sup>13</sup> It is hard to think of a better example of contaminated diversity.

Some Mien fought in Vang Pao’s army. Some followed Hmong to the Ban Vinai refugee camp Vang Pao helped to have established in Thailand after he fled Laos following the U.S. withdrawal in 1975. But the war did not give Mien the sense of ethnic-political unity it gave Hmong. Some Mien fought for other political leaders, including Chao La, a Mien general. Some left Laos for Thailand long before the communist victory in Laos. Jonsson’s oral histories of Mien in the United States suggest that what are often imagined as innocent “regional”

groupings of Laotian Mien—northern Mien, southern Mien—refer to divergent histories of forced resettlement by Vang Pao and Chao La, respectively.<sup>14</sup> War, he argues, creates ethnic identities.<sup>15</sup> War forces people to move but also cements ties to reimagined ancestral cultures. Hmong helped to stimulate the mix, and Mien came to participate.

In the 1980s, Mien who had crossed from Laos to Thailand joined U.S. programs to bring anticommunists from Southeast Asia to the United States and allow them, through refugee status, to become citizens. The refugees arrived in the United States just as welfare was being cut; they were offered few resources for livelihood or assimilation. Most of those from Laos and Cambodia had neither money nor Western education; they moved into off-the-grid jobs such as matsutake picking. In the Oregon woods, they use skills honed in Indochinese wars. Those experienced in jungle fighting rarely get lost, since they know how to find their way in unfamiliar forests. Yet the forest has not stimulated a generic Indochinese—or American—identity. Mimicking the structure of Thai refugee camps, Mien, Hmong, Lao, and Khmer keep their places separate. Yet white Oregonians sometimes call them all “Cambodians,” or, with even more confusion, “Hong Kongs.” Negotiating multiple forms of prejudice and dispossession, contaminated diversity proliferates.

I hope that at this point you are saying, “This is hardly news! I can think of plenty of similar examples from the landscape and people around me.” I agree; contaminated diversity is everywhere. If such stories are so widespread and so well known, the question becomes: Why don’t we use these stories in how we know the world? One reason is that contaminated diversity is complicated, often ugly, and humbling. Contaminated diversity implicates survivors in histories of greed, violence, and environmental destruction. The tangled landscape grown up from corporate logging reminds us of the irreplaceable graceful giants that came before. The survivors of war remind us of the bodies they climbed over—or shot—to get to us. We don’t know whether to love or hate these survivors. Simple moral judgments don’t come to hand.

Worse yet, contaminated diversity is recalcitrant to the kind of “summing up” that has become the hallmark of modern knowledge. Contaminated diversity is not only particular and historical, ever changing, but also relational. It has no self-contained units; its units

are encounter-based collaborations. Without self-contained units, it is impossible to compute costs and benefits, or functionality, to any “one” involved. No self-contained individuals or groups assure their self-interests oblivious to the encounter. Without algorithms based on self-containment, scholars and policymakers might have to learn something about the cultural and natural histories at stake. That takes time, and too much time, perhaps, for those who dream of grasping the whole in an equation. But who put them in charge? If a rush of troubled stories is the best way to tell about contaminated diversity, then it’s time to make that rush part of our knowledge practices. Perhaps, like the war survivors themselves, we need to tell and tell until all our stories of death and near-death and gratuitous life are standing with us to face the challenges of the present. It is in listening to that cacophony of troubled stories that we might encounter our best hopes for precarious survival.

This book tells a few such stories, which take me not only to the Cascades but also to Tokyo auctions, Finnish Lapland, and a scientist’s lunchroom, where I am so excited I spill my tea. Following all these stories at once is as challenging—or, once one gets the hang of it, as simple—as singing a madrigal in which each singer’s melody courses in and out of the others. Such interwoven rhythms perform a still lively temporal alternative to the unified progress-time we still long to obey.



## REVOLUTIONARY LETTER #3

store water; make a point of filling your bathtub  
 at the first news of trouble : they turned off the water  
 in the 4th ward for a whole day during the Newark riots;  
 or better yet make a habit  
 of keeping the tub clean and full when not in use  
 change this once a day, it should be good enough  
 for washing, flushing toilets when necessary  
 and cooking, in a pinch, but it's a good idea  
 to keep some bottled water handy too  
 get a couple of five gallon jugs and keep them full  
 for cooking

store food — dry stuff like rice and beans stores best  
 goes farthest. SALT VERY IMPORTANT : it's health and energy  
 healing too, keep a couple pounds  
 sea salt around, and, because we're spoiled, some tins  
 tuna, etc. to keep up morale — keep up the sense  
 of 'balanced diet' 'protein intake' remember  
 the stores may be closed for quite some time, the trucks  
 may not enter your section of the city for weeks, you can cool it  
 indefinitely

with 20 lb brown rice  
 20 lb whole wheat flour  
 10 lb cornmeal  
 10 lb good beans — kidney or soy  
 5 lb sea salt  
 2 qts good oil  
 dried fruit and nuts  
 add nutrients and a sense of luxury  
 to this diet, a squash or coconut  
 in a cool place in your pad will keep six months

remember we are all used to eating less  
than the 'average American' and take it easy  
before we  
ever notice we're hungry the rest of the folk will be starving  
used as they are to meat and fresh milk daily  
and help will arrive, until the day no help arrives  
and then you're on your own.

hoard matches, we aren't good  
at rubbing sticks together any more  
a tinder box is useful, if you can work it  
don't count on gas stove, gas heater  
electric light  
keep hibachi and charcoal, CHARCOAL STARTER a help  
kerosene lamp and candles, learn to keep warm  
with breathing  
remember the blessed American habit of bundling

## 1. YOUR DEATH

**O**ctober 5: Tim tells me you've died. He's crying. He loves you. However, in your last books, you didn't treat him with generosity. He says, "It's William." He's crying, repeats, "It's William, it's William. We found him dead in his new apartment in Paris. We don't know. It happened two days ago, on the third. We just don't know."

Until now, no one was aware of your death. You rotted for two days in the same position in which you had fallen. It's better like that. No one came to bother you. They left you alone with your body, the time necessary for abandoning in peace all that misery. I cry with Tim. It can't be.

I hang up, and the first thing I do is call VD—I don't know why. We've seen each other twice. Once, alone. You're the one who pushes me to dial her number. You listen to our conversation. Your mind unfurls and forms an electromagnetic layer from which our words flow. Your ghost is a wire transmitting our voices. As we talk about your death, her voice awakens the life in me. *The strongest is his voice, I think*,<sup>1</sup> you were saying. I don't dare cry when talking with her. I hang up, and then I cry, alone. Because you didn't want to keep living and because, as your godfather would say, "a dead poet writes no more."<sup>2</sup>

1. Guillaume Dustan, *Nicolas Pages* (Paris: Editions Balland, 1999), 17.

2. Michel Houellebecq, *Rester vivant et autres textes* (Paris: Libro, 1997), 19.

That same day, a few hours later, I put a fifty-milligram dose of Testogel on my skin, so that I can begin to write this book. It isn't the first time. This is my usual dose. The carbon chains, O-H3, C-H3, C-OH, gradually penetrate my epidermis and travel through the deep layers of my skin until they reach the blood vessels, nerve endings, glands. I'm not taking testosterone to change myself into a man or as a physical strategy of transsexualism; I take it to foil what society wanted to make of me, so that I can write, fuck, feel a form of pleasure that is postpornographic, add a molecular prostheses to my *low-tech* transgender identity composed of dildos, texts, and moving images; I do it to avenge your death.

## VIDEOPENETRATION

*I'd rather go blind than to see you walk away.*

—ETTA JAMES

8:35 p.m. Your spirit comes through the window and darkens the room. I turn on all the lights. Put a blank cassette in the video camera and screw the camera to the tripod. I check the framing. The image is smooth and symmetrical; the black leather couch forms a horizontal line at the bottom of the frame. The white wall easily follows that line, but without creating any feeling of volume or relief. Play. I move to the sofa. Off camera, on the coffee table, I've left electric clippers, a small mirror, a sheet of white paper, a

plastic bag, a bottle of hypoallergenic glue for use on the face, a dose of fifty milligrams of testosterone in gel form, a tube of lubricant, anal-dilator gel, a harness with a realistic rubber dildo (9½ x 1½ in.), a realistic black silicone dildo (9¾ x 2½ in.), a black ergonomic one (5½ x ¾ in.), a razor and shaving cream, a plastic basin filled with water, a white towel, and one of your books, the first, the sublime one, the beginning and end of everything. I walk into the frame. Get undressed, but not completely. Keep my black tank top on. As if for surgery, I expose only those organs on which the instruments will be working. I stand the mirror up on the table. I plug in the electric clippers. A sharp, high-pitched sound, the voice of a cyberchild trying to get out of the motor, spitting in the face of the past. I adjust the blades of the comb to a width of one centimeter. Your spirit sends me a discrete sound of approval. I sit on the couch, and one half of my face—looking expressionless, centerless—appears in the mirror: my short black hair; contact lenses, whose edges create a thin halo around the iris; patchy skin; very white in places and flecked with bright pink in others. I was labeled a woman, but that's imperceptible in the partial image reflected in the mirror. I begin shaving my head, starting at the front and moving backward, then from the middle toward the left, then toward the right. I bend forward so that the locks drop onto the table. I open the plastic bag and slide the hair into it. Turn off the machine and adjust the comb to zero. I place a sheet of white paper on the table, then turn the clippers back on and move them again over my entire head. Short, very thin hairs rain onto

the white paper. When my head is completely smooth, I unplug the machine. I fold the sheet of paper in two, so that the hairs collect at the center, forming a uniform line. A line of black cocaine. I'm doing up a line of hair. It's almost the same high. I open the jar of glue and add a streak of it above my upper lip with the moistened brush, then take a strand of hair between my fingers and set it along the streak of glue until it sticks perfectly to the skin of my face. A fag's mustache. I check myself out in the mirror. My eyes have the same halo around the iris. Same face, skin. Identical yet unrecognizable. I look into the camera, curl back my lip to show my teeth, the way you do it. It's your gesture.

The silver package containing a fifty-milligram dose of testosterone in gel form is the same size as a small packet of sugar. I rip into the aluminum-coated paper; out comes a thin, cold, transparent gel that disappears immediately into the skin of my left shoulder. A cool vapor remains, like a memory of icy breath, the kiss of a snowwoman.

I shake the can of shaving cream, deposit a ball of expanding white lather on my palm, then cover the hairs of my pubes, the lips of my vulva and the skin surrounding my anus with it. I dip the blade in water and begin to shave. Hairs and cream float to the surface. A few splashes fall onto the couch or the floor. This time I don't cut myself. When all the skin on my crotch has been shaved, I rinse off and dry. Slip on the harness and buckle the straps at the side of each hip. In front of me, the dildo is super erect, forming a right angle with the line of my vertebral column. The dildo belt is high enough to allow me to see two very distinct orifices when I bend down.

I coat my hands with transparent gel and pick up the two dildos. I rub, lubricate, warm them, one in each hand, then one against the other, like two giant cocks twisting against each other in a gay porn film. I know the camera is filming because I can see the red light blinking. I dangle my silicone cock over the paragraphs tattooed across the pages of *Dans ma chambre*.<sup>3</sup> It's your gesture. The dildo conceals part of the page, creating a barrier that allows certain words to be read and hides others: "We laughed. He went with me in the car. I looked at him. His hand signaled me before / night fell. I know that I would have had to / I'll never be in love with him. But how wonderful it was that he loved me. It was good."<sup>4</sup>

Next I slide the dildos into the openings at the lower part of my body. First, the realistic-looking one, then the ergonomic one, which goes into my anus. It's always easier for me to put something into my anus, which is a multidimensional space without any bony edges. This time, it's the same. On my knees, I turn my back to the camera, the tips of my feet and my head pressing against the floor, and hold my arms behind me so that they can manage the two dildos in my orifices.

You're the only one who could read this book. In front of this camera, "for the first time I'm tempted to make a self-portrait for you."<sup>5</sup> Design an image of myself as if I were you. *Do you in drag*. Cross-dress into you. Bring you back to life with this image.

3. *In My Room*, the first novel of French gay writer Guillaume Dustan.—Trans.

4. Dustan, *Nicolas Pages*, 155.

5. Hervé Guibert, *L'Image fantôme* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1981), 5.

From this moment on, all of you are dead. Amelia, Hervé, Michel, Karen, Jackie, Teo, and You. Do I belong more to your world than I do to the world of the living? Isn't my politics yours; my house, my body, yours? Reincarnate yourselves in me, take over my body like extraterrestrials took over Americans and changed them into living sheaths. Reincarnate yourself in me; possess my tongue, arms, sex organs, dildos, blood, molecules; possess my girlfriend, dog; inhabit me, live in me. Come. *Ven*. Please don't leave. *Vuelve a la vida*. Come back to life. Hold on to my sex. Low, down, dirty. Stay with me.

This book has no other reason for being outside the margin of uncertainty existing between me and my sex organs, all imaginary, between three languages that don't belong to me, between the alive you and the dead you, between my desire to carry on your line and the impossibility of restoring your sperm, between your eternal and silent books and the flood of words that are in a hurry to come out of my fingers, between testosterone and my body, between V and my love for V. Looking into the camera again: "This testosterone is for you, this pleasure is for you."

I don't watch the mini-DV I just filmed. I don't even number it. I put it into its transparent red case and write on the label:

October 3, 2005. DAY OF YOUR DEATH.

The preceding and following days are marked by my ritual of testosterone administration. It's a home protocol; it would

even be a secret and private one if each of these administrations weren't being filmed and sent anonymously to an Internet page on which hundreds of transgender, mutating bodies all over the planet are exchanging techniques and know-how. On this audiovisual network, my face is immaterial, my name of no significance. Only the strict relationship between my body and the substance is a cult object, an object of surveillance. I spread the gel over my shoulders. First instant: the feeling of a light slap on the skin. The feeling changes into one of coldness before it disappears. Then, nothing for a day or two. Nothing. Waiting. Then, an extraordinary lucidity settles in, gradually, accompanied by an explosion of the desire to fuck, walk, go out everywhere in the city. This is the climax in which the spiritual force of the testosterone mixing with my blood takes to the fore. Absolutely all the unpleasant sensations disappear. Unlike speed, the movement going on inside has nothing to do with agitation, noise. It's simply the feeling of being in perfect harmony with the rhythm of the city. Unlike with coke, there is no distortion in the perception of self, no logorrhea or any feeling of superiority. Nothing but the feeling of strength reflecting the increased capacity of my muscles, my brain. My body is present to itself. Unlike with speed and coke, there is no immediate comedown. A few days go by, and the movement inside calms, but the feeling of strength, like a pyramid revealed by a sandstorm, remains.

How can I explain what is happening to me? What can I do about my desire for transformation? What can I do about all the years I defined myself as a feminist? What kind of

feminist am I today: a feminist hooked on testosterone, or a transgender body hooked on feminism? I have no other alternative but to revise my classics, to subject those theories to the shock that was provoked in me by the practice of taking testosterone. To accept the fact that the change happening in me is the metamorphosis of an era.

## 7. BECOMING T

**V**ictor, the lover I left for VD, has been working for six months for a phone sex chat line. He goes out every day at 7:00 p.m. and comes home at one in the morning. We get up around eleven, eat breakfast while reading the paper with MTV playing in the background, then take Justine for a walk in the park; when we get back home, we have sex until five in the afternoon. We've taken to being two guys as far as we can. Two gay guys, except for the fact that we don't have a penny, or regular jobs, or a house; we've got nothing, neither back-rooms nor dicks; but there are more dildos where we live than there are cocks in the saunas of Paris. During these three months in 2004, the issue of the structural lack of public space for lesbians, drag kings, and trans guys in Paris doesn't bother us—even if it does pose a real problem. We fuck each other all day. As soon as we have a moment free. The process of adapting to silicone can take a long time. At the beginning, I'm the one who fucks him. He has the beauty of an Arab smuggler, the elegance of a rogue who reads Artaud, and the calm of a pharaoh's dog. With black eyes and a freckled face, he's the best thing since sliced bread. His drag king vagina swallows everything. Without regard to size. No need to begin with size M; why not go directly to XL.

Victor is an impassable “bottom.” He can take everything I find. He smiles when he comes and never tires out. Every day, at 5:30 p.m., bus 69 takes him to his work as a linguistic masturbator. When he leaves the house, his skin is hyperoxygenated, but his legs are trembling. He dozes on the bus before arriving at the job, then spends six hours on the phone doing his whore routine. This has been working particularly well since he began to specialize in sadomasochistic clients. His arrangements with me in private end up serving to soothe the sexual deprivation of a gang of masturbators who spend the day stuck on the telephone. It’s what the Negrists of the radical Left call “biopolitical work,” or, in other words, jerking off the planetary cock. It consists of the transformation of our sexual resources into work, of our sensitivity into an object of commerce, of our erotic memory into text paid by character count, of our sexual arrangements into anonymous scenarios performed repetitively by indifferent actors. During the seven hours in which Victor “works biopolitically,” I write. Paid by the French state just enough to eat and take care of bills, I’ve accumulated nearly a thousand pages on the impact of feminism on contemporary aesthetic and political discourse. The philosopher’s minimum wage. Ensclosed at my work table like a pilot in his cockpit, with Enrique Morente playing in the background, I read Foucault, Sloterdijk, or Buckminster Fuller, or write an unpaid article about sexual segregation in public space. It calms me when sex and philosophy approach each other. These are precious hours, enveloped in translucent silence, the peace of isolation. A balance composed of two equally drifting masses

that achieve equilibrium in my brain; reading flows toward writing, and the other way around. Without anxiety. I'm on the point of finishing *Anus Public: An Interview with Nobody*, a conversation in which no one asks me the questions that I answer about the reasons that led to my giving up queer politics. I have no intention of publishing this text. I think it's still inadequate, too tender for the brutality of the century, too obviously selfish in the face of the impending collective suffering and the gradual disappearance of the living. Television helps me get away from the island of reading-writing. News from the heterosexual world: i-Télé. P in a leopard shirt and black sunglasses, and BB, looking like a pop Jesuit, discussing the life of Janis Joplin. Obviously, she was a lesbian. At this moment, I don't know that Mr. Leopard Shirt is the person who broke the heart of my future lover. That is what allows me to continue to lead a normal life, in an automatic way, without concern. When Victor comes home, I get ready for dinner. Sometimes there's enough energy left for us to fuck for thirty or forty minutes. Or else we fuck only with our mouths, endless fucks, emitting electric signals received everywhere else in the body. Sometimes we fall asleep immediately after having dined with Justine. These months form a long tunnel of sex, drag king days, tantric rituals, soft-packing, days of incest and vampiric sleep that I go through in a semiconscious state, with the certainty that something or someone will end up taking me out of this infernal paradise. I would have never imagined that VD, your death, and testosterone would be waiting at the end of the tunnel. In this case—and who knows if it was only this one, or more generally the

case—complete ignorance of the future was the condition that provided the possibility of continuing to live in the present. Just as it is necessary to forget to keep living, it is necessary not to know the future to wait naively for time to pass. At the height of his career, the architect Adolf Loos burned all his drawings, letters, diaries, fetish objects. He burned everything. With fire, he built an archive made of smoke, a dense mass of forgetfulness from which it would be possible to begin to live again. If there were a precise psychosomatic memory of the previous breakup, no one would fall in love again; nor would we if we knew in advance the exact circumstances of the end of the love we were about to begin having. If I'd known that your death, the love of VD, and addiction to T were at the end of the tunnel, then excitement, fear, and an irrepressible desire would have prevented me from living. It seems that not having certainty, not knowing, can be confirmed as a condition of biopolitical survival.

In the meantime, I enjoy what I have. The unique pleasure of writing in English, French, Spanish, of wandering from one language to another like being in transit between masculinity, femininity, and transsexuality. The pleasure of multiplicity. Three artificial languages, expanding as they become entangled, fight to become or not become a single language. Blend. Finding their meaning only in this blending. Production among species. I write about what matters most to me, in a language that doesn't belong to me. This is what Derrida called the monolingualism of the other;<sup>1</sup> none of the languages that I am speaking belong to me, and yet

1. Jacques Derrida, *Le Monolingualisme de l'autre, Ou la prothèse de l'origine* (Paris: Galilée, 1996).

there is no other way to speak, no other way to love. None of the sexes that I embody possess any ontological density, and yet there is no other way of being a body. Dispossessed from the start.

## **STATE-COUCH-BODY-MOLECULE**

During the two months before your death I wake up consistently every night at four in the morning, the hour when cows give birth and the owls go hunting. The history of life is revealed before me night after night with the slowness of insomnia. It calms me to think that I was once bacteria and that someday I'll become it again. My bacterial self helps me sleep. For more than two thousand years, it rained on earth until these empty pools that had become oceans and evaporated after the explosion of a giant meteorite filled up with water again. I tell myself that if the oceans could dry up and then refill, my heart as well can purge itself of politics and be filled again. What I don't know yet is that soon my heart will be filled with your death and, almost at the same time, VD's love.

During the day, I swing between frenetic activity and total emptiness. In the periods of emptiness, I spend the majority of my time sitting on the couch. I don't search for a comfortable position, try to make it an elegant gesture; I merely flop shapelessly on the rectangular surface of the couch, and wait. During these recumbent hours, I sweat, tremble; sometimes, but rarely, I cry, and from time to time, I manage to fall asleep. I go out only to walk Justine.

Buy the paper, but don't read it. Buy something to eat, but don't eat it. The dog eats, though. This couch could be a bed in a psychiatric hospital. Yes, that's it, a home office for the medical and legal institutions of the Republic of France, a country in which I'm not even a citizen. The couch is a tentacle of the control system, an installation within inner space in the form of living room furniture. It's a political device, a public space of surveillance and deactivation that presents an advantage in comparison with other classical institutions, such as the prison or the hospital. Its purpose is to uphold the fiction that this apartment, its fifty-five square feet, which can be locked with a key, is my private territory. A slippage of paranoia from the sofa to my skin. My body could be a lifelong center of imprisonment, a mechanism that is conscious of the system of control implanted in my biological structure, an avatar of pharmacopower with my name attached to it. My body, my cells are a political appliance par excellence, a public-private space of surveillance and activation that affords an advantage compared with other classical institutions such as the school or army and that upholds the fiction of my subjectivity and its biochemical support, its cells, its supposedly impenetrable fifty-five square feet as my unique and ultimate individual possession. I stop the paranoia and kiss Justine. How can I escape from this cozy prison? What can I know? What am I supposed to do? What am I allowed to hope for?

I look for keys to survival in books. I cling to Foucault's published seminars, Guattari's *Trois ecologies*, the biography of Walter Benjamin, his writings, Butler, Violette Leduc, Genet, Haraway, Wittig again, Susan Stryker, Edmund

White. But, more than anything, there are your books. I don't think about calling you when I'm at my worst. From time to time, you leave a belligerent message on my answering machine. "When are you going to write something that's worth the trouble?" "It's you or me." "Stop attacking me." I don't answer. Ever. I don't understand what you're talking to me about. I don't know what to say to you. If you only knew what was happening to me. But you don't have the slightest idea. Your stupid messages calm me down because they allow me to dodge the question: I don't call you so that I don't have to tell you that I'm going to start taking testosterone. I should speak to you about it, inform you of it. Now that I'm going to transform myself into one of yours, we'll be able to fulfill the old dream of fucking each other. I don't know that these days are the last before your death, and I don't call you.

I spend entire days reviewing the archive of American feminism in the 1970s. Certain voices are engraved permanently in my memory. Others are disappearing for good. Faith Ringgold remains, as does her way of saying eye to eye to a journalist that the only way to survive the colonial and patriarchal enemy is to laugh in his face. She's not kidding; on the contrary, she's shouting right at him, interrupts him when he speaks, doesn't pay him the slightest attention. Laughter is a form of resistance, survival, a way of mustering forces. Shouting, too. When you belong to an oppressed group, you have to learn how to laugh in the face of the enemy, says Ringgold. The problem is that things aren't so clear anymore. You end up not knowing anymore who's the oppressor and who's the oppressed; or rather, it's difficult

to see yourself as both the oppressor and the one who is oppressed. I guess that in that case you have to laugh at yourself.

Jill Johnston's voice is imprinted in me: "As long as all women aren't lesbians, there will be no political revolution." Nancy Angelo and Candace Compton: "Listen closely. You don't believe that I'm going to end my life within these four walls? No one can force me to. Listen to me. I've had it up to here with living locked inside my body. I'm sick of it." My mind is a sexual sheath in which my body is huddled, a shut case, a tomb, a trap. I'm a fascist political message that is drifting. My body is the message, my mind the bottle. Exploding. It's the only thing that makes me get hard.

Every day, I try to cut one of the wires attaching me to the cultural program of feminization in which I grew up, but femininity sticks to me like a greasy hand. Like my mother's warm hand, like the oceanic sound of Spanish in my dreams. Like Faith Wilding in her performance in the *Womanhouse* project, I keep waiting to be taken into someone's arms, waiting for life to begin, waiting to be loved, for pleasure to arrive, waiting . . . But I'm also a trans man. With or without T. To the list of feminine waiting, I must add the endless list of ways of hoping for the advent of masculinity: waiting for my beard to grow, waiting to be able to shave, waiting for a cock to grow from my loins, waiting for girls to look at me as if I were a man, waiting for men to speak to me as if I were one of them, waiting to be able to give it to all the little sweeties, waiting for power, waiting for recognition, waiting for pleasure, waiting . . . I wonder when it will be too late to undo this program of gender

production. Maybe beyond a certain threshold, the process becomes irreversible. What are the temporal parameters of this production? What are the contours of its construction; what is its direction?

In her 1967 *SCUM Manifesto*, Valerie Solanas had seen things with a certain precision.<sup>2</sup> More than forty years have gone by, and one element seems to have changed: all the grotesque characteristics that Solanas attributes to men in capitalist society at mid-twentieth century seem to have spread to women today. Men and women are the bioproducts of a bifurcated sexual system with a paradoxical tendency for reproduction and self-destruction. “To be male is to be deficient, emotionally limited . . . egocentric, trapped inside himself, incapable of empathizing or identifying with others, of love, friendship, affection, of tenderness.” Men and women are isolated units, creatures condemned to constant self-surveillance and self-control by a rigid class-sex-gender-race system. The time they devote to this brutal political arrangement of their subjectivity is comparable to the whole extent of their lives. Once all their vitality has been put to work to reduce their own somatic multiplicity, they become physically weakened beings, incapable of finding any satisfaction in life and dead politically before they have taken their last breath. I do not want the female gender that has been assigned to me at birth. Neither do I want the male gender that transsexual medicine can furnish and that the state will award me if I behave in the right way. I don’t want any of it.

2. Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (New York: Verso, 2004).

## BECOMING MOLECULAR

When I take a dose of testosterone in gel form or inject it, what I'm actually giving myself is a chain of political signifiers that have been materialized in order to acquire the form of a molecule that can be absorbed by my body. I'm taking not only the hormone, the molecule, but also the concept of hormone, a series of signs, texts, and discourses, the process through which the hormone came to be synthesized, the technical sequences that produce it in the laboratory. I inject a crystalline, oil-soluble steroid carbon chain of molecules, and with it a bit of the history of modernity. I administer myself a series of economic transactions, a collection of pharmaceutical decisions, clinical tests, focus groups, and business management techniques; I connect to a baroque network of exchange and to economic and political flow-chains for the patenting of the living. I am linked by T to electricity, to genetic research projects, to megaurbanization, to the destruction of forests of the biosphere, to the pharmaceutical exploitation of living species, to Dolly the cloned sheep, to the advance of the Ebola virus, to HIV mutation, to antipersonnel mines and the broadband transmission of information. In this way I become one of the somatic connectives through which power, desire, release, submission, capital, rubbish, and rebellion circulate.

As a body—and this is the only important thing about being a subject-body, a technoliving system—I'm the platform that makes possible the materialization of political imagination. I am my own guinea pig for an experiment on the effects of intentionally increasing the level of tes-

tosterone in the body of a cis-female. Instantly, the testosterone turns me into something radically different from a cis-female. Even when the changes generated by this molecule are socially imperceptible. The lab rat is becoming human. The human being is becoming a rodent. And as for me: neither *testo-girl* nor *techno-boy*. I am a port of insertion for  $C_{19}H_{28}O_2$ . I'm both the terminal of one of the apparatuses of neoliberal governmentality and the vanishing point through which escapes the system's power to control. I'm the molecule and the state, and I'm the laboratory rat and the scientific subject that conducts the research; I'm the residue of a biochemical process. I am the future common artificial ancestor for the elaboration of new species in the perpetually random processes of mutation and genetic drift. I am T.

## THE DEVIL IN GEL FORM

After the fifth dose of Testogel, I began to make out variations in the range of excitation, muscular tension, the tendency for outward expressions of my body. All drugs are poisons. The only difference between a poison and a medicine lies in the dose. But what is the right dose of testosterone? The one that yields my body, or another? What would hormonal justice be? And if there is a hormonal justice, should I apply that justice to myself?

Testosterone is the devil in a colorless gel. The cutaneous administration of fifty milligrams of testosterone in gel form twice a week for three months isn't easy to detect with

the naked eye in the body of a cis-female, in my body. It is changing the hormonal composition of my body substantially. *Modus molecularis*. It is a matter of a potential transformation of my own endocrinal ontology. The changes are not purely artificial. Testosterone existing externally is inserted into a molecular field of possibilities that already exist inside my body. Rather than rejection of it, there is assimilation, incorporation. *Mit-sein*. Being-with-testosterone.

Testosterone does not radically alter the perception of reality or the sense of identity. This particular dose of testosterone isn't strong enough to produce in the body of a cis-female identifiable exterior changes labeled as "virilism" by mainstream medicine (beard and mustache, noticeable increase in muscle mass, changing of the voice . . . ). It does not change the way others decipher my gender. I've always had an androgynous body, and the microdoses of testosterone that I'm giving myself don't alter that situation. However, they produce subtle but decisive changes in my affect, in my inner perception, in my sexual excitation, in the odor of my body, and in resistance to fatigue.

Testosterone isn't masculinity. Nothing allows us to conclude that the effects produced by testosterone are masculine. The only thing that we can say is that, until now, they have as a whole been the exclusive property of cis-males. Masculinity is only one of the possible political (and nonbiological) by-products of the administration of testosterone. It is neither the only one nor, over the long term, the one that will dominate socially.

The consumption of testosterone, like that of estrogen and progesterone in the case of the Pill, do not depend on

any ideal cultural constructions of gender that would come to influence the way we act and think. We are confronted directly by the production of the *materiality* of gender. Everything is a matter of doses, of melting and crystallization points, of the rotary power of the molecule, of regularity, of milligrams, of form and mode of administration, of habit, of praxis. What is happening to me could be described in terms of a “molecular revolution.” In detailing this concept in order to refer to the revolt of May 1968, Félix Guattari certainly was not thinking of cis-females who self-administer testosterone. On the other hand, he was attentive to structural modifications generated by micropolitical changes such as the consumption of drugs, changes in perception, in sexual conduct, in the invention of new languages.<sup>3</sup> It is a question of becomings, of multiplicities. In such a context, *molecular revolution* could be pointing to a kind of political homeopathy of gender. It’s not a matter of going from woman to man, from man to woman, but of contaminating the molecular bases of the production of sexual difference, with the understanding that these two states of being, male and female, exist only as “political fictions,” as somatic effects of the technical process of normalization. It’s a matter of intervening intentionally in this process of production in order to end up with viable forms of incorporated gender, to produce a

3. Félix Guattari, *La Révolution moléculaire* (Paris, Recherches: 1988). See also Félix Guattari, “Plan sur la planète. Capitalisme mondial intégré et révolutions moléculaires,” in *Minorités dans la pensée*, eds. Jean-Pierre Faye, Marc Rombaut, Jean-Pierre Verheggen (Paris: Payot, 1979); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 232–309.

new sexual and affective platform that is neither male nor female in the pharmacopornographic sense of the term, which would make possible the transformation of the species. T is only a threshold, a molecular door, a becoming between multiplicities.

For a body accustomed to regulating its hormonal metabolism in terms of the production of estrogen, the intentional increasing of the level of testosterone in the blood constitutes an endocrinal reprogramming. The slightest hormonal change affects all the functions of the body: the desire to eat and to fuck, circulation and the absorption of minerals, the biological rhythms regulating sleep, the capacity for physical exertion, muscular tone, metabolism, the sense of smell and taste—in fact, the entire biochemical physiology of the organism. None of these modifications can be qualified as masculine. But of all the mental and physical effects caused by self-intoxication based on testosterone in gel form, the feeling of transgressing limits of gender that have been socially imposed on me was without a doubt the most intense. The new metabolism of testosterone in my body wouldn't be effective in terms of masculinization without the previous existence of a political agenda that interprets these changes as an integral part of a desire—controlled by the pharmacopornographic order—for sex change. Without this desire, without the project of being in transit from one fiction of sex to another, taking testosterone would never be anything but a molecular becoming.



## This Morning

Waking this morning,  
a violent woman in the violent day  
Laughing.

Past the line of memory  
along the long body of your life  
in which move childhood, youth, your lifetime of touch,  
eyes, lips, chest, belly, sex, legs, to the waves of the sheet.  
I look past the little plant  
on the city windowsill  
to the tall towers bookshaped, crushed together in greed,  
the river flashing flowing corroded,  
the intricate harbor and the sea, the wars, the moon, the  
planets, all who people space  
in the sun visible invisible.  
African violets in the light  
breathing, in a breathing universe.      I want strong peace,  
and delight,  
the wild good.  
I want to make my touch poems:  
to find my morning, to find you entire  
alive moving among the anti-touch people.

I say across the waves of the air to you:  
today once more  
I will try to be non-violent

one more day  
this morning, waking the world away  
in the violent day.

**The Wandering Kowlis Perform / The Barn Owls Watch**

*Days without any plans /*

*Lost and disoriented /*

*Minds still caught up in the waves of the ocean /*

*Searching for peace of mind on new plains /*

*But the prison's plains are like a corridor leading to a fighters' gym /*

*And the smell of warm sweat everywhere is driving everyone insane.*

One month has passed since I was exiled to Manus. I am a piece of meat thrown into an unknown land; a prison of filth and heat. I dwell among a sea of people with faces stained and shaped by anger, faces scarred with hostility. Every week, one or two planes land in the island's wreck of an airport and throngs of people disembark. Hours later, they are tossed into the prison among the deafening ruckus of displaced people, like sheep to a slaughterhouse.

With the arrival of newcomers, the prison reaches peak tension; people stare at them like invaders. They are mainly taken to Fox Prison because it is large and tents for the newcomers can be assembled in that isolated corner. On the western side, two prisons stand opposite each other: Delta and Oscar. But from Fox Prison only Delta Prison is visible. It looks like a cage, like a hive full of bees. There isn't the slightest room to move within these two adjacent prisons. The prisons are a confrontation of bodies, a

confrontation of human flesh. Friction from their breathing, breath that smells like the sea, smells like the deadly journey.

In Fox Prison nearly four hundred people are kept in an area smaller than a football field. The spaces between the rows of rooms and the corridors are streams flowing with disenfranchised men, coming and going from all directions. The atmosphere in the prison is made up of scenes of famished people, provocative and deafeningly boisterous. No-one knows anyone else. It is like a city in which a plague has sent everyone into a frenzy. The crowd is frantic. It seems that if one stood still, one would be carried away by the motion.

—

Appearances reflect extreme nervousness, gazes perpetually examine the faces and eyes of their counterparts. Among us is a group of men who, far from their days in the busy markets of their homelands, still reduce everyone to commodities – objects worth barely anything. The prisoners wander in all directions, lost. Time will be necessary, a long time, before all these male bodies, all rooted in their particular homelands and cultures, can get along together.

The prison is like a zoo full of animals of different colours and scents. For a whole month these animals – these men – have been crammed side-by-side in a cage with dirt floors. There are so many people in the prison that it feels like they are sitting and talking on tree branches and on the roof of the toilets. People are in every corner of the prison – even near the small slough behind the toilets. At sunset, when the weather cools and the coconut palms begin to dance, the prison compound becomes a good space for meandering. Most prisoners prefer to leave their rooms. During these periods there are always some young lads looking to build credibility by dominating the noise in the enclosure by chatting and yelling. It is a jungle full of people who band together in peculiar ways.

The simplest way to gain status is to identify with a group. That is, to

affiliate yourself with other individuals who you think share your identity; people who are going through the same set of circumstances as you. Just one motivation: escape from the void and the horror that has the power to crush and pummel you. Depending on a group or a collective identity masks loneliness. It's a kind of escape route, a shortcut. This sort of collectivism first took shape through the shared experience of the boat journey. The fear and pain from a difficult journey affects those involved so much that they instinctively link themselves to a group identity with their fellow travellers. With time, this group identity based on the boat experience shifts towards other identifiers, such as language and nation. After some time, groups become based on a single criterion: where one is from. Afghan, Sri Lankan, Sudanese, Lebanese, Iranian, Somali, Pakistani, Rohingya, Iraqi, Kurdish.

Room swapping begins after a few months; prisoners are drawn to their compatriots and those with whom they share a common language. A kind of internal migration takes place in our tiny prison. Slowly, gradually, the significance of the shared boat experience gives way to the importance of shared language. (However, in all the years in the prison, people who experienced the boat journey together will insist on their bond. They constantly remind each other to not forget the brotherhood created by the experience: 'remember that we are GDD, MEG or KNS'. The collective trauma from the journey is in our veins – each of those boat odysseys founded a new imagined nation.)

At times the creation of these communities leads to bad fighting, but usually reason prevails, tensions are quashed, and everything returns to normal – things never get too intense or dangerous. The delusions and anger from the dangerous sea trip still plague the prisoners and a wild aggression still runs through their blood when interacting with each other. Conflict is mainly between Iranians and Afghans; the roots of the feud between them originated a long time ago and run deep, carrying a lot of

history. The Iranians express a form of nationalistic superiority, and Afghans won't put up with being patronised. The developments over the months slowly but surely prove to everyone that the principle of The Kyriarchal System<sup>6</sup> governing the prison is to turn the prisoners against each other and to ingrain even deeper hatred between people. Prison maintains its power over time; the power to keep people in line. Fenced enclosures dominate and can pacify even the most violent person – those imprisoned on Manus are themselves sacrificial subjects of violence. We are a bunch of ordinary humans locked up simply for seeking refuge. In this context, the prison's greatest achievement might be the manipulation of feelings of hatred between one another.

Over time, the incidents that occur in Manus Prison prove to everyone that a prisoner is a being with no solace other than brotherhood – a brother in whom to confide one's pain. The more time that passes in the prison, the deeper this feeling becomes – it is a pillar of the prison. Here, people are subject to more intense scrutiny. A prisoner notices the tiniest change like a blind mouse that has only its sense of smell.

*We are four hundred people /*

*Four hundred lost souls in a tightly confined space /*

*Four hundred prisoners /*

*Anticipating the nights /*

*. . . so we can leave /*

*. . . and enter our nightmares.*

We are bats in a dark cave that react to the slightest vibrations. Every day we repeat, overcome with fatigue, an aimless walk of approximately one hundred metres. It seems that they are forcing us to traverse the length of a putrid, foul-smelling pool by repeating only one impractical and futile swimming stroke. Hopeless visions worse than monsoon winds blow away

our dreams in the nights and everything becomes tainted by bitter nightmares.

In addition to the torment produced by the oppressive enclosure of the prison fences, every prisoner creates a smaller emotional jail within themselves – something that occurs at the apex of hopelessness and disenfranchisement. Most prisoners evaluate their health and vitality through regular close examination of their bodies, developing fragmented and disrupted identities, and a warped sense of self, that makes them cynical of everyone else. This is the objective of the prison's Kyriarchal System, to drive prisoners to extreme distrust so that they become lonelier and more isolated, until the prison's Kyriarchal Logic<sup>2</sup> triumphs with their collapse and demise.

---

During this period in the prison, there is nothing to occupy our time. We are just thrown into a cage and made to wear ridiculous loose-fitting clothes. It is even prohibited to play cards. In Corridor L, a few people were able to get hold of a permanent marker and draw a backgammon board onto a white plastic table. They began to play, using the lids from water bottles as counters. Almost instantly, a group of officers and plain-clothed guards entered Corridor L and crossed out the game. They wrote over it in bold letters, 'Games Prohibited'. It seemed that was their only duty for the entire day: to shit all over the sanity of the prisoners, who were left just staring at each other in distress.

Imagine a community of four hundred people, neglected in a boiling hot and filthy cage, still traumatised by the terrifying sound of waves ringing in their ears and the sight of a rotting boat fixed before their eyes. For how long can they simply talk to each other? How many times can they walk up and down the same hundred-metre distance? An unwritten law: whoever enters the prison has all their belongings confiscated. There is no chance of getting a notebook and pen. It is extremely distressing for people who

have not experienced prison before – it drives you to the edge of insanity.

The heat is debilitating. By noon our bodies begin to show signs of the impact of the sun's rays as they sliver through the open passages of the prison. The sun seems to be in cahoots with the prison to intensify the misery of the prisoners . . . it uses its rays like shafts to violate us. Sometimes the intensity of the heat increases so much that even looking at the prison fences is frightening. One can sense how hot the metal has become. However, the mind has the power to leave the prison and imagine the coolness under the shade of a bunch of trees on the other side of the fences. One can even feel the pleasant, cool temperature. All the while, I can feel sticky sweat running down into all the deepest crevices and cavities of my body.

*Sweat that creates small rivers /*

*Sweat that has a mind of its own /*

*Sweat that flows naturally and aimlessly /*

*Sweat that enters cracks and gaps around and within one's backside and joints /*

*Sweat that keeps running /*

*Everything winds up in your ass and in your head.*

For me, isolation and silence are the greatest gifts I could ask for. Faced with prisoners who reach out to their mates by yapping, yelling pointlessly and laughing loudly, I long to create, to isolate myself and create that which is poetic and visionary. I realised early that I was a stranger in this community, an alien community I have to put up with, and this feeling sparks my retreat. It is a conscious decision to leave them. They get on my nerves.

Years later, I will look back at this time, and I will see myself like a coconut tree with roots deep in the ground and my hair taken by the wind.

*I am alone /  
Surrounded by human traffic passing in all directions /  
Arriving . . . departing . . . and over again /  
A cycle of absurdity and bewilderment /  
Totally lost /  
I am like a wolf that has forgotten it is a wolf /  
I retain only a perspective /  
That tender sense, that tranquil intuition /  
That flame within my being /  
When someone violates my solitude, I carry the hatred in my veins.*

I have reached a good understanding of this situation: the only people who can overcome and survive all the suffering inflicted by the prison are those who exercise creativity. That is, those who can trace the outlines of hope using the melodic humming and visions from beyond the prison fences and the beehives we live in.

What else could a prisoner desire other than a moment of silence, solitude, and to feel as though one were standing stripped naked in the middle of a lush jungle?

What else other than to have a cool breeze pass through the thousands of nets made up of knotted hair?

During these days, this is my greatest dream.

One place where I hope to be alone for a moment is in the toilets. But even there some bastard always appears in the adjacent stall, singing with his awful voice. Or there's someone at the front of the queue, on the other side of the toilet door, waiting to trade places with you. And no doubt there are others among them waiting for you to finish, waiting to dump their filth on your quiet moment of peace. Sometimes someone bashes the toilet door with punches and kicks, holding on to his penis: 'Hey man, get

out, my guts are exploding!’ There is no escape, not even one moment without sensing the presence of another person. But I learn over time how to stand alone, like the coconut trees inside the prison – how to exist in seclusion like them.

In the first days, there was always a gadfly getting in my ear, some person annoying me. They’d get in my ear, do a round within my quiescent mind, exit through the other ear, do another round outside, then re-enter through my ear to circle my mind again. Numerous gadflies would perform their rounds continuously – this form of torture was always present. When I’d put my feet up on the prison fences, one of these gadflies would immediately jump in and interrupt my quiet time. Like sharp thorns, they’d tear my dreams apart. Perhaps these kinds of people become unnerved when seeing someone sitting on a chair and they feel that they have to plonk themselves down and shatter the beautiful moment of solitude by saying pessimistic things. With time, the others have come to understand my way of thinking and my temperament – my need for isolation.

In the final hours of the evening the prison disappears into the darkness of the jungle and the silence of the ocean. A terrifying, awe-inspiring woman from the East shrouds the prison compound with her hair.

We are all transformed into dark shadows scavenging for scraps of light. I discover freedom in the ember of my cigarette. When the darkness of night sets in, I walk the hundred-metre distance to the prison fence, put my feet up on the barriers, and from behind the prison fences dream of freedom while engulfed in my cigarette smoke. Sometimes the liberation in a cigarette involves imagining a woman with almond-shaped eyes to counter the violence of this militarised jail. These kinds of illusions come from nowhere and have no purpose but to occupy my mind as I sit around freezing, my body drenched with cold sweat. I look upon these stupid thoughts of physical gratification with disdain, kicking them aside. I throw

myself again into my own world of introspection – a world full of mystery and joy that takes me by surprise.

I am stuck in a balancing act, existing between two different worlds. The violence of the prison is bizarre and novel. We have been thrown onto a remote island. We are still plagued by memories of the traumatic boat journey that stank of death. We are distraught and can't do a thing to recover. I feel that I am being taken over by multiple personalities: sometimes blue thoughts parade through my head, and sometimes grey thoughts. Other times my thoughts are colourblind.

I feel that the only thing I can count on is the calm, melodic sound of chanting, the quiet singing of folk ballads that absorbs me back into the cold mountains of Kurdistan. The amazement and horror felt during the nights on Manus has the power to thrust everyone back into their long distant pasts. These nights uncover many years of tears deep in our hearts and open old wounds; they plough into every dimension of our existence; they draw out the bitter truth; they force the prisoners to self-prosecute. Prisoners are driven to crying tears of bitter sorrow.

Since his daily routine is a meaningless cycle of repeated struggles, a prisoner has nothing else to do but recollect his childhood. This searching and battling immortalises the dusty remnants of the past. These forced conditions of loneliness make everyone endure scenes of an internal odyssey that would ruin any man. The odyssey summons dark angels and secrets relegated to the unconscious; like a magical curse it positions before every prisoner's eyes the most long-standing issues and bad blood tied up in the soul. Difficult pills to swallow that would be too much for any person, let alone taking them on a stomach suffering with heartburn.

*More than anything, prison makes one terrified of loneliness /*

*This is the most shocking paradox in the life of a prisoner /*

*Time dissolving before you /*

*And perhaps the wedding of eternity with the thousands upon thousands of faces /*

*Smiles, sobs, tears /*

*And bitter dreams.*

The prisoner is a piece of meat with a mind that is always moving between the darkest, dullest and most worn-out scenes. In some moments, a particular image will suddenly emerge from his mind's most profound labyrinths. At this stage he must face this both strange and familiar scene and clarify things for himself. At this very point he begins a battle that may take months to settle down, for the vision to be subdued or eliminated. The mind of a prisoner is a brew of images that are sometimes contradictory; scenes constituted by his own philosophies and histories. The prisoner is captive to his own life history, and all these isolated occurrences take shape in the unconscious during periods of solitude and silence. However, they also destroy his sense of self.

*Probably the life most worth living is a solitary one /*

*A quiet life, a lively existence, and a glorious one /*

*But what a bitter life that is /*

*Life is such a magnificent thing /*

*Life is such a terrifying thing /*

*When a prisoner steps onto foreign territory and sees loneliness reflected on the fences of a forlorn prison /*

*He sees himself . . . the one who is alone /*

*The world with all its beauty and marvel comes crashing down over his head /*

*Perhaps the world stands still then /*

*And the prisoner must determine his destiny /*

*Come to terms with this life and the thousands of faces and images before  
his eyes /*

*Loneliness creeps under his skin /*

*Until he suddenly realises that it has enveloped him /*

*It seems he represents the last human being /*

*Naked and laid bare /*

*He must answer the difficult questions of life /*

*He must reveal who he is, what he is /*

*He must answer why he is lost, why he is bewildered /*

*Why he is silent, why he does not answer /*

*This realm of the mind is itself a prison /*

*His existence is splintered like a dry piece of wood /*

*Bashed on the ground of a barren and vast desert /*

*He is a small and rotting boat /*

*A frightened boat – without a paddle and unmanned /*

*He is a boat on the silent ocean /*

*An ocean the colour of milk /*

*Millions of stars dispersed into the depths of the universe /*

*All over the sky /*

*They glimmer /*

*They challenge him /*

*The horizon is the colour of blood /*

*It's a landscape full of wonders /*

*Full of mystery, questions and challenges /*

*It's a place that seems to move the prisoner unconsciously /*

*Till he finds sanctuary with others who have shared the experience of*

*suffering.*

It's a case of safety in numbers and producing noisy, ear-splitting nonsense to escape the solitude and, more than anything, to distance oneself from the horrors that few have the strength to absorb or come to grips with. Fear persuades people to hide beneath commotion and noise. They themselves know all too well how fake it really is. It is prison, and coming to terms with its paradoxes requires solitude. There is no solace in yelling, screaming or distraction. What we yearn for are the joys of childhood, for mystical movement, for freestyle rhythms, for liberation through dance.

On these nights there is always a stage set up for dance performances at the end of Corridor L. Most nights after eating his dinner, an Iranian guy in his twenties – Maysam<sup>8</sup>, known as The Whore – gathers a bunch of his friends together and dances for hours. He plays a *tombak* drum made out of a piece of wood, and he sings upbeat songs. He has acquired his moniker 'The Whore' from being a farceur and dancing around and showing off his physique. It is like a badge attached to him by others, people we don't know.

Maysam The Whore has a special talent for gathering people around him. I think his spirit could be part of a legacy, inherited from the soul of the *kowli* peoples of Iran, peripatetic people who conduct street performances and dance along the roadsides of strange cities. His friends drag a large white plastic table from the corner of the prison until it is in front of his room in Corridor L. This announces to everyone, scattered, bored and wandering all over the prison, that tonight the stage is ready again for dance and entertainment. Like professional circus performers, or the sidekicks of a street theatre troupe, accompanied by clapping and eccentric but sometimes comedic antics, they invite everyone. All are welcomed to what is happening at the end of Corridor L. All gather around the white plastic table. In this format, performances are directed with extraordinary skill. The performers know exactly what sounds to produce,

on which part of the table, with which part of the hand, and which point of the drum to hit to make the most raucous and loudest sound.

These people are born into the world to make others suffer. I'm sure they are the kind of kids that would smash the neighbours' windows with rocks for no reason, or would ring the doorbells of homes along the street during the heat of summer and then run away. But in prison this unique and boisterous spirit acquires them a kind of amicability and provides inspiration to others. Their creativity increases until their ear-splitting and polyphonic sounds reach throughout the forlorn and isolated prison. They have only one duty: to drag out the communities from all of the prison corridors towards Corridor L. Everyone knows that the only purpose behind all the ruckus is to set the opening scene for the entrance of Maysam The Whore.

Their main style is original: a combination of clapping and rhythmic beating on the table, then crying out and proclaiming. It is a collaboration between three or four people, all whipped up into a frenzy. Then they perform that same quick rhythm on the table and, finally, one or another of the members announce, using the language of the street, 'Gather 'round my people, my prison-mates . . . hurry up, hurry up and . . .' They repeat this a number of times in unison.

In the space of a few minutes, a significant crowd gathers in Corridor L. They look on enthusiastically, all eyes on the three or four individuals. Whenever the crowd gathers around, a kind of competition begins of who can show off the best. It ends up such that the harmony of the group during the initial part of the performance falls out. All members try to project their individual style and become the star of the show. The sounds fuse together – we can't distinguish one voice from another.

There are even some moments when the passion involved in this fooling around also takes hold of the audience, inspiring some to jump up with the performers and start beating the table, or to try to draw attention to

themselves with hilarious dancing. People fool themselves by drowning in the joy of these situations; they lose control of themselves and their behaviour is like that of people at a party who've been drinking too much. It is as though they are conning themselves into thinking this is a real festival, set up for a real purpose. Prior to the performance, everyone with the desire to visit Corridor L had been Iranian, but now others have arrived. Many develop the courage to join in the partying and dancing, and with these experiences they realise something – they start to see the show as a reflection of themselves.

Some Sri Lankans or Sudanese people enjoy the events and show keen interest; they follow what is going on as they stand at a distance. They are like people standing at the end of the street watching a family celebration that has spilled out of a house. They don't appear to feel a close personal bond until they are involved in the action up close.

In the meantime, the Australian officers watch over the excited community with contempt. This is the social dynamic between the Australians working in the prison and the imprisoned refugees. The Australians' perspective is a mixture of abhorrence, envy and barbarism – the crowd is aware of that. At times this even encourages the audience to cheer louder. For them, this pretend celebration is a good opportunity to get on the officers' nerves, to mess with those who hold them captive, a kind of childish spite that expresses a desire for revenge. This is one of the only forms of power available to the prisoners.

The Kyriarchal System of the prison is set up to produce suffering. These celebrations are a form of resistance that says, 'It's true that we are imprisoned without charge and have been exiled, but look here, you bastards . . . look at how happy and cheerful we are.' But this is the same old simple trick habitual to all humans – escape from fear by lying to oneself. The performance plays out so naturally that the prisoners themselves forget that there is no logical reason to celebrate.

Humans always find any excuse to gather together; these celebrations are enacted in relation to marriages, birthdays and graduations to such an extent that they have been crystallised in everyone's collective consciousness. They are almost mandatory.

In the minds of the prisoners it is unnecessary to explain why they are happy and why they want to celebrate; it is unnecessary to answer to anyone. Maybe, if someone came up to them and yelled, 'You idiots, why are you so cheerful? Why are you dancing and why are you singing at the top of your voice?' that person would get no answer other than, 'We are celebrating for exactly the same reason that others celebrate.'

The prisoners dance because they have to dance, to spite those people who exiled them to the prison. This infuriates the Australians. Sometimes the officers chatter through their communication devices, confused because they don't know why these imprisoned and humiliated refugees are partying and dancing. What infuriates them more is that they have no excuse to break up the festivities – ruin them just like they did with the backgammon table, spoil them by writing, 'Games Prohibited'.

Everything is interconnected: joy, fear, hate, envy, revenge, spite, and even kindness. All these moving pieces revolve around Maysam The Whore, and he revolts against everything. There is no secret underlying his popularity other than an accumulation of suffering endured by all the prisoners, which shines through his rhythmic movements. Like a mirror, the prisoners see themselves reflected in him. Someone who is so brave and so creative; he flexes these attributes through his muscles, muscles he uses to challenge The Kyriarchal System of the prison. He employs a beautiful form of rebellion that has enormous appeal for the prisoners. A man with boyish features who uses them to peddle poetry and to satirise all the serious aspects of the forlorn prison. The spirit of Maysam The Whore contrasts with the desert of solitude and horror of the prison. This is like a reward for the prisoners; a gift in the form of a collective

response, a collaborative effort among men who have been banished. A gift that is grasped at, a gift they will hold onto.

When the spectators reach a climax of enthusiasm and anticipation, Maysam The Whore appears in supreme fashion like an epic hero, completely confident in the power of his muscles, as though he has previously crushed and bloodied his opponent in a stadium in front of an amazed audience. He is a popular tightrope walker or a magician, mesmerising all who watch. He comes out of the last room in Corridor L and into all the pandemonium, into the ruckus that is transfixed on him and only him, to dance until he wins over the hearts of the crowd. He knows exactly when to appear, and in which style – he is a master at work. He dances with such artistic prowess that with each step he draws louder and louder cheers. He is the spirit of the community, a heartwarming and appealing enigma.

Every night he wears a different style of costume. Clearly he contemplates all the production aspects of his performance, including costume design. And no doubt, the few other individuals in charge of livening up the party help out as his artistic assistants. There are messages of joy and excitement glowing on their faces; and when Maysam The Whore enters with gestures and expressions he merges into the vibrant camaraderie among the troupe; they all encourage him to let loose and perform in more liberated ways.

One night he is in character as a religious leader, adorned with religious headgear. He enters the set wearing a long *abā*<sup>2</sup>. Using a blue bedsheet, the troupe has designed this *abā* with a few beautiful slits down the side. He also has a white *amāma*<sup>10</sup> made of the same material and wrapped around his head. It is a total caricature of an *ākhūnd*<sup>11</sup>. But in contrast to a religious leader who usually has a long beard and elicits fear of hell, Maysam The Whore's face is smooth and hairless like a real-life angel.

The place erupts with cries and cheers. The chaos is extremely powerful;

the audience can hardly make sense of the way his body is moving and dancing between the room and the table, which stands in the middle of the crowd. Even though he is mostly covered with that ridiculous yet amazingly beautiful outfit, we can still see parts of his body. Maysam The Whore's artistic method involves dancing beside the table with amazing speed. He shakes his hips and backside with skill. It is clear why Maysam The Whore chooses to dance to a fast-paced song: to bring the audience with him and conquer the hundred ills they have suffered. Three or four individuals in the troupe embody all their talents in their hands and voices till they are one step ahead of the audience; that is, closer to Maysam The Whore's movements and in closer collaboration with him. They improvise and contribute to the song; they even attempt to take control of it. They try their best to harmonise, to share the limelight, but Maysam The Whore is the star of the show. They follow him by beating on the table or by singing. Once he has the audience completely in the palm of his hand, The Whore suddenly jumps on the table in one move. The scene of a religious leader dancing on a platform, surrounded by an enthusiastic audience whipped into a frenzy, is full of nuances and contradictions.

After a few minutes of dancing, Maysam The Whore takes on a role resembling a preacher requesting silence from a congregation. He proclaims, 'Because we are incarcerated men and there are no women in this prison, from this moment on I hereby ordain gay sex completely permissible<sup>42</sup>.' This sentence hits like a typhoon and the scene erupts with laughter and cheers. Joy reaches a peak and once again Maysam The Whore dances at a fast pace, and the audience follows, clapping and cheering.

The performance is not over yet. Maysam The Whore slowly removes the *amāma* from his head with a flourish and tosses it into the crowd. Then he throws the religious *abā* in the corner and leaves everyone looking in amazement at his near-naked body. On this particular night his underwear

is particularly spectacular. He is wearing men's underwear, red, with the sides cut out. Like a style of women's underwear, he wears them tucked between his buttocks. This move sets the place off and raises the roof. This is how he becomes known as The Whore; he carries the moniker with him for the whole time he is in the prison. He is a man who ridicules everything, and his presence, his dancing, his singing, helps us forget the violence of the prison for a moment. He is the superstar of the prison.

Doing night-time shows isn't enough. You can also find him in the long mealtime queues in the role of his *ākhūnd* character, which he enacts so beautifully. He can be seen preparing hilarious props and making the prisoners burst with laughter. Just imagine a religious leader, beardless and wearing the clothes of a cleric, standing in a long queue. He doesn't even need to utter a word. Just being there like that is enough to engage the others. More than anything, he diverts the attention of the detestable officers towards himself. He stands in direct opposition to a system that wants to fatten up lambs for slaughter. With just one word spoken by him, we experience the essence of life.

---

In addition to prisoners bustling between the fences and the hallways, others prowl the prison. Parts of the prison are under the surveillance of a group known as G4S, a security company with the responsibility of keeping the prison secure. The officers of the company keep a number of prisoners under close watch. It's better to refer to G4S by its real name: Bastards' Security Company. I could think of so many ways to refer to the officers, but this one is most apt. Perhaps I could refer to them as watchdogs or attack dogs. Each one of them has a walkie-talkie on his waist. Every now and then, these nosy officers write things in their notebooks, which they always carry in their pockets. They note things about everything and everyone. Their approach to work is based on being a bastard. You need to be a total bastard to work in a place where you detest



## Choices ❧

if i can't do  
what i want to do  
then my job is to not  
do what i don't want  
to do

it's not the same thing  
but it's the best i can  
do

if i can't have  
what i want then  
my job is to want  
what i've got  
and be satisfied  
that at least there  
is something more  
to want

since i can't go  
where i need  
to go then i must go  
where the signs point  
though always understanding  
parallel movement  
isn't lateral

when i can't express  
what i really feel  
i practice feeling  
what i can express  
and none of it is equal

i know  
but that's why mankind  
alone among the mammals  
learns to cry

*September 17*

Vision in my right eye is shot: difficulty reading. Listen to music: not yet deaf.

*September 18*

A young woman with a very beautiful, made-up face, who looked a little Asian, lying unconscious on an abandoned stretcher in a radiology corridor, very red lips, and something on her uncovered neck which I at first thought was a wound, as if someone had tried to cut her throat, but which apparently turned out to be a long smear of lipstick.

Waiting behind a window before the abdominal ultrasound: you can see the hospital visitors descend the escalator and move toward one ward or another. Many men of all ages talking to themselves, agitated. The old ones in pajamas and robes. The young ones often bare-chested under an open shirt or jacket.

Cytomegalovirus! Hospitalization.

Lenses right on the retina.

I'm afraid they'll make me sleep in paper sheets, under a synthetic blanket.

*The will to live—marvelous or sickening?*

They used to tell me: “You have beautiful eyes,” or “You have beautiful lips”; now, nurses tell me, “You have beautiful veins.” The doctor, a young woman with a foreign accent who took the abdominal ultrasound, tells her assistant, who is leaning over her shoulder in front of the screen: “Look at how beautiful that is!” And to me: “You have a truly exceptional and very rare interior configuration. We are also going to take some pictures for ourselves.”

*September 19*

The sheets are not made out of paper, the blanket is not synthetic: good, old, used hospital sheets, a real wool blanket, from a hospital or barracks.

No shower in the room (now I realize that this terror of a communal shower, one which has no privacy, stems from my childhood), no towels in the bathroom. H.G. tells me that the nurse's aide almost choked with indignation when he asked for one. Paper towels. B. and H.G. insisted on buying me a real towel. They also brought back a small spoon, a little box of sugar (my Briard whole milk yogurts in glass jars, which are in a refrigerator with my room number—365—on them, in a small room next door, “the best in the world,” says B.). They also brought me black grapes, my good friends.

The window allows permanent viewing from the corridor into the room. I don't say anything. B. says: “All you have to do is push the closet door.”

Young, vaguely Asian intern, extremely kind and competent. She says she knows Claudette Dumouchel, I tell her, laughing, “I promise I won't write *Le protocole compassionnel #2*, so you can relax, we can have a nice relationship.” We joke. She asks me if I have written lately, and I say yes: “Something which has no connection to AIDS and which I've never done before, a very physical love story between a man and woman, what's more, a very exotic novel, that's why I went to Bora Bora!” We ask each other what we like about our respective professions, that's good. I ask her: “If, for one reason or another, they hadn't detected the cytomegalovirus right away, how long would it have taken me to lose my eye; would it have taken months, weeks, days?”

“Days,” she answers. We may not be able to save it as it is, we’ll see!

Weakness, fatigue, I leaf through the papers, no desire to listen to the radio that I asked H.G. to bring. No time to get bored, always a caregiver passing by, or the telephone.

T. asked what I see from my windows, I move around the room telling him: “A beltway on the outskirts of town, a little forest, a truck rental and repair shop, the hospital parking lot, some trees. And, in the distance, Paris.”

Dietitian (I asked to see her when I arrived) also kind and competent. A half hour of back-and-forth questioning. I gorged myself this evening, on the tray I found the menu typed on the word processor, I hid it under the dish of grapes so I could copy it. Better than Air France.

Start an intravenous line. They hook me up to an old crock that doesn’t even move. This severely reduces my ability to move around the room. I try to do a lot of things in the same place (pissing and brushing my teeth, for example) so as not to have to make too many trips. But I’ve already asked two nurses to scrounge up an IV pole that moves. I’ll keep asking until I get it.

At dinner: only one spoon for both the soup and the farmer’s cheese, I ask, on principle, if they expect me to clean it with my tongue? Special treatment.

Obviously can't find the buzzer, always been awkward. And—I don't know how—I tangle the intravenous tube around the pole, soon I'll only be able to move a few inches.

They warn that it will hurt, they prick a very large needle in a painful spot, almost at the wrist, to leave the upper veins free for blood draws. I asked the intern to have the kindness to instruct that they only draw blood if absolutely necessary, and not on the slightest whim, as they often do in hospitals.

Writing is also a way of giving rhythm to time and a way to pass it.

I'm waiting for them to do the IV (I love adopting the pro lingo—with cytomegalovirus, they won't do an LP, lumbar puncture, on me), I'll get it lying down, it is eight in the evening, I'm tired. It's been a long day. Till tomorrow.

I get up to jot down some phrases that swim through my head, or else they'll haunt me until tomorrow. The cries of suffering which come from nearby rooms are almost more heart-wrenching than one's own suffering. The neighbor screams, the nurse tells him, "Open your mouth wide," I wonder what she can possibly be doing to him.

Today, I may have made the acquaintance of the room in which I will die. I don't like it yet.

You have to wait between five and ten minutes after buzzing, you have the impression that the nurses go on a one-shift wildcat strike so they can steal away on roller-skates to party at the *La Rumba* nightclub in the Auchan superstore.

The room hasn't been disinfected or even swept: old bandages under the bed. Proof. The nurse to whom I mentioned it hurries to gather everything to throw it out. She says, "It's disgusting." And I say, "You're not going to mark it as evidence."

D. always said that M., who was going to die anyway, died much more brutally because he was hospitalized in a room that hadn't been disinfected so as to keep the hallway clear. Hospital illness.

When a nurse installs my IV, I can't help but think it may be water, "since in any case, he's going to croak," and remember the three lesbian nurses of Tübingen who liquidated old geezers by sticking a little spoon under their tongues and flooding their lungs.

The sleeping pills seem like amphetamines!

Z. told me that she would bring me a soft light; personally, I love this leaden, blinding white neon.

The War Diary of Babel: if I lose my eye, it will be one of the last books I opened. This diary should also be a war diary.

On the admission form this afternoon, three options: “stretcher,” “wheelchair,” “can walk.” I still can.

Midnight. I got up to pee, they would have woken me up anyway to take my temperature, my blood pressure. The kindly nurse, the one who deplores my non-moving pole and with whom I can relax and have a nice time, installed a hep-lock in me (after the “vein protector”), the instrument I needed so I could move around, that I had been asking for since six o’clock of the little crabby blond nurse, who told me it didn’t exist here. The heroes and villains, just like in fairy tales.

There’s an eye at stake.

“Open your mouth! Did you hear me?” asks the big nurse. “Yes, what are they doing?” Answer: a mouth rinse. The Tübingen nurses.

They gab away all night without lowering their voices in the room next to mine, about salaries and the cost of living. I’ll have to call my accountant one of these days.

A hospital stay is like a long voyage with an uninterrupted parade of people, of deliveries, or of rituals, to pass the time. There isn’t even any more night.

Hospitals are hell.

Much later at night, they lower their voices a little, even they are tired.

Screams in the next room, like bellowing cows. No way to get some sleep.

*September 20*

They always wake you up at seven o'clock in the morning to stick a thermometer under your armpit. At eight, five tubes of blood taken through the hep-lock. The morning nurse seems nice. There are pearls, and there are swine. Yellow sun through the window.

One could write a humorous dictionary of AIDS term: the candidate is a fungus that declares he's running so he can take over your throat, your esophagus, your stomach, and eat them.

Beautiful sunshine. The IV pole does not move around, of course, the breakfast table is broken, and the toilet flush takes five minutes to stop its racket, everyone knows that.

Alarming news from V. yesterday before leaving for the hospital. His Brazilian girlfriend tells me, "Wait, I'll go see." She comes back whispering, "V. is in no condition to talk. But call back, it'll make him happy, he needs it

so much." I say, "Is it his morale?" She says: "You know, he pops so many pills, he's in horrible shape." I think he's started to shoot up, he mentioned it to me the last two times we saw each other. A long time ago, I was the one who wanted to shoot up, and he's the one who didn't want to. When he proposed it the last few times, I'm the one who said no.

I ring the bell again because in the hall I heard a nurse who had just left my room tell a colleague (in a mocking tone) "He said that his IV doesn't flow quickly enough and that it was starting to hurt him." I call back just to say, "I never said that."

The neighbor's howling. Either he's very delicate, or it's very painful. I'm unfortunately leaning toward the second hypothesis. Maybe soon I'll be the one screaming.

The IV didn't flow because the kind and pretty intern made a prescription error.

No time to go down to buy the paper.

I snitched to the authorities about the state of filth in my room after they told me it was "ready." This morning the intern, a rather young man, told me, "I assure you that the person here before you didn't have anything serious, just a little vascular trouble."

Nighttime here: fighting against a steam-roller advancing, I dare not say blindly, without its driver. If you don't resist, if you don't run, it will crush you. Under the circumstances, it's better to remain a human being than a bloody pancake.

At first, you get a big punch in the gut, it's sadness, despair, you forbid yourself to cry. Then, you try to find reasons to sustain the will to live. Getting euphoric is dangerous, because from there, you risk falling apart.

They just discovered that the IV also did not flow because the needle, which had been poorly inserted last night, had come out half way, producing a small hematoma that has already practically resorbed.

This risk of destroying someone, of causing someone who really needs their job to lose it (if they didn't need the job they wouldn't do it, or they might do it only out of a sense of vocation), not even the notion of vengeance, but simply the ethical notion that everyone is expected to do their jobs well. The writer also can be destroyed, if suddenly he starts writing shit or stuff that's unacceptable.

These planes taking off: I try to see them through the window.

I must admit I have trouble reading even a newspaper article. Writing, less difficult.

The nurse who came, almost clandestinely, to install the hep-lock at midnight dropped it on the dirty floor. Since she wears gloves, she can't really grasp objects. She brings back another one, or at least I hope it's another one, and she says: "This time I better not drop it, it's the last one on the ward."

Professor D., assistant head of the ward, came by; I ask him: "So, would you like my wife to send a registered letter to the head of the ward?" "No, not now," he answers without trembling. I am growing to like this bear better and better with every visit.

I can't easily tell the time on my watch; I must admit I'm having trouble despite my eye because this Swatch was already pretty illegible.

Since childhood, this obsession with eyes, like a backward premonition. And the novel written in '83 and '84: *Des aveugles (Of the Blind)*!

Today: "Lunch—1 normal (I write it down). Greek style mushrooms. Skate fish sautéed in butter. English style taters. Farmer's cheese 40% fat. Plums. Bread 50 grams." We all know about this mysterious, imperious and boring mania that hospital patients have of describing for their already sickened visitors everything they stuffed down (promise, you won't know tonight's menu, unless it's something really extravagant). Yesterday's first menu that I hid

so I could copy it has disappeared: either someone stole it from me—but I believe in a less paranoid cause—or I hid it too well and I can't find it anymore (under my blue hat?), or a nurse took it by accident when she opened the curtains.

HHC: home health care, but at the earliest in two weeks.

Tuesday they'll surgically insert a port-a-cath [*porte-à-cath*] in my torso, to give my vein a rest, because the antiviral is very toxic.

“What, no hep-lock in the ward?” the professor asks the nurse, more pale than before. “Did you ask in pulmonary?” “Yes, they don't have any either.” “So call cardiology.”

You have to make them respect you right away, it's exhausting, a test of wills that lasts one or even several days and nights. They want you to lose, they count on wearing you down. Then, according to the situation, they respect or they flatten you.

They are an army of poor women who stick together. The men, the minority, are either bosses or flunkies.

What's more, on a whim, July 13 (two months ago) I stopped taking the antidepressants. It just kept getting worse: dry mouth, palpitations, stronger and stronger

doses, I told myself: Let's try, it's now or never. I'm on the island of Elba, I'm not writing (writing for me is always also a kind of antidepressant), but there's silence, the ocean, the presence and screeching of the birds, they should be my tranquilizers. In any case, if it's hell, I'll take some right away because I have enough to last my entire stay. Not only was it not hell, but, after a little paranoid attack, my morale was better.

This evening I'll leave the window open to hear the noise of the traffic on the beltway, in the hopes of muffling a bit the neighbor's screams and the night nurses' idle gossip.

Actually, they aren't airplanes, but helicopters that land on the hospital roof with seriously injured patients. Between two weeks and three months ago I flew in a helicopter, in good health, to Bora Bora. Takeoff and landing were sublimely smooth, unreal, not to mention the blue and green hues from above.

I called my parents, happy on vacation, to tell them I'd be hospitalized for a few days, "to take care of some crap," without going into the details, refusing to tell them where and forbidding them to call T. and C. every day, as they threatened to do.

This diary, which should last two weeks, may stop any day due to absolute discouragement.

Left the curtains open this evening to see the twilight, in blue and pink tones, during the IV, and the moon, veiled with a halo, hypnotic.

I ask the orderly what the difference is between an orderly and a nurse, and she tells me: "The nurse deals with all the drugs, IV, blood draws. Me, I'm here to change your sheets, or if you want a 'pistolet.'" I ask (with false innocence): "So I can shoot myself?" And she says, thinking I'm crazy, "No, if you want to pee without getting up." I say, "I can still get up."

There are airplanes after all, and even bats, night has fallen, I'm still waiting for the IV. The psychologist just told me, with a diabolical smile, motionless, made up like the mask of a Japanese Nô performer: "But one doesn't sleep in the hospital, one doesn't rest in the hospital!"

For the last few minutes, there's been a massive yellow Temesta (2.5 mg) and a capsule of Prozac, an antidepressant, on my table. I don't know if I'll take them.

The nurse who came to give me my IV sings the praises of eye injections, saying, "What's better, an injection in the eye (personally, I know I could never stand that), or to become completely blind?" So I can dream sweet dreams? See you tomorrow?

The moon moves slowly from one window to the next. A zone in-between where it becomes invisible.

The sheets stained with blood. The hep-lock is disgusting when it's pulled out after each use: a long, very fine and flexible plastic tube stained with black, half-coagulated blood. But it's better than that immovable pole. Pain in the lower back. Bruised vein.

*September 21*

Beautiful sky but it won't be beautiful for long, unless it's too early for the sun. Even roosters! It's almost like being in the country! They didn't wake me at seven like yesterday. I woke up by myself, despite the yellow Temesta. I slept, I feel rested, it's a nice feeling.

The big, friendly, gawky made-up woman, who's always lucky with men, stubborn as a mule: she programmed my IV to stop at midnight for reasons of convenience. It stopped at midnight on the dot, even though they still pretend not to be able to control it. The open window worked relatively well, but around three in the morning the traffic slows down, and my neighbor screamed again. I waited for the waves of trucks.

I don't know if, with this hospitalization diary, I'm doing any good or harm. I have the impression that there are writers who do good (Hamsun, Walser, Handke, and even

Sayak Valencia  
Necropolitics (2010)

Anne Boyer  
The Season of Cartesian Breathing & Woman Sitting at a  
Machine & The Imaginary, Half-Nothing Time & The Dead  
Woman (2018)

Mumia Abu-Jamal  
Christmas in a Cage (1982) & Never Again (1992) &  
When a Child Is Not a Child (1999) & Analysis of Empire  
(2003) & Katrina: One Year Later (2006) & Ebola (2014)

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing  
Arts of Noticing & Contamination as Collaboration (2015)

Paul Preciado  
Your Death & Becoming T (2008)

Behrouz Boochani  
The Wandering *Kowlis* Perform/The Barn Owls  
Watch (2018)

Hervé Guibert  
Cytomegalovirus: A Hospitalization Diary (1992)

---

James Baldwin  
Untitled (ND)

Eduardo Galeano  
The Night (1991)

Nikki Giovanni  
Cotton Candy on a Rainy  
Day (1978)

Diane di Prima  
Revolutionary Letter #3 (1970)

June Jordan  
Nobody Riding the Roads  
Today (ND)

Muriel Rukeyser  
This Morning (1944)

Nikki Giovanni  
Choices (ND)