

# Machine Time

*Seth Price*

"The historian is in danger of forgetting that his subjects spent much of their time asleep, and that, when asleep, they had dreams."

Peter Brown,  
*The World of Late Antiquity*

I remember moments when I was listening to music and the sudden shift from one chord to the next stirred up feelings I couldn't name or understand. These feelings arose not from one chord or the other but from the transition itself, a fleeting synthesis, and as the music unfolded they lingered like clouds of silt kicked up underwater. When I was a teenager I thought of these unsettled feelings as *adult*, partly because they were triggered by the sophisticated chords of classical or jazz, but mostly because I didn't understand them. Young people often mark things that are hard to understand as signposts to further degrees of refinement, thinking "This will make sense when I'm older." Later in life, however, I learned that some things are simply not to be understood. I came to realize that these

moments of emotional revelation had nothing to do with any musical transition, rather they arose from what I, myself, was going through.

In those decades, we were all living through a chord change. This was not a quick transition; generations unspooled entirely within the lingering clouds of silt. The old world, based on five hundred years of empire, was yielding to something obscure and unknowable. Understanding this larger shift was not yet possible, of course, because a transition can only be grasped retrospectively. The task of understanding will fall to the people who come after us, the shamans and poets and singers, the ones who are simultaneously drunk and sober, the ones who choose to live at the edge of the settlement, where they can look from the light to the darkness and back.

\*

I remember a time when I made a journey away from my life as a New York artist, and into the unknown. In a speedboat,

hunched over to shield my tote from sea spray, I understood that the journey so far had been a slow detaching from modern life: the progression from New York cab to jumbo jet to prop plane to car to boat felt like a journey not across space but back through time. Exiting the tiny terminal had delivered me into the disinterested calm of a world in low gear, a world of thick darkness, tree frogs, and the click of a distant lighter. The island air was close and heavy, like breath coming across a pillow. The touts in the carpark couldn't be bothered to leave their front seats, preferring to sit with the doors open, a foot on the curb, thumbing their phones and smoking. I was oceans away from all the people back home who were presumably still fighting their way through wind tunnels of numbers. And my world continued to shrink, from the stasis of the carpark to the inside of a beat-up taxi as we traversed the island through disordered blackness, with something quiet playing on the radio.

But why had I come here? I knew that I had done enough Ashtanga in my life, and enough ayahuasca, and enough Qi Gong of the Fourteen Brocades Form. I had written plenty of poems, and made poetry by other means, and cast spells that summoned clouds of impurity and fragmentation. I had cooked meals according to vegan no-oil principles so strict that avocados and nuts were prohibited. I had built myself primitivist twig furniture in the manner of Gusto Gräser. I had designed business envelopes that could be slipped into and worn to a party. I had fasted a week in silent isolation, pondering over whether a person walking while wearing a single shoe would feel their left

or right footfall to be more correct. I knew that my natural progression was from silicon to carbon, and I knew I was emerging from the crystalline way and stepping into an organic way. I knew my ultimate ends were contemplation and surrender. I understood that anything could be anything because there was but one material in the universe: everything.

I also knew that we were in the middle of a drastic chord change. I knew that most people lacked ears to hear the new music, eyes to read the new writing, and senses to feel the new people. If a person was lucky enough to have the right ears, eyes, and senses, as I was, they could expect only discomfort, because an encounter with new art, science, or ideas was marked by groundlessness in the face of chaos. This was especially true as you approached middle age, a time when more and more of the objects lying around seemed to lack names. Heft an object and it bristled with unseen forces and obscure intent; to reckon with it, you'd have to maintain your grip through waves of darkness and coldness, all because you sought gnosis and transformation.

Art, however, was always a negotiation with the shift. Art was about change, whether it was a painting that affected your mood for four minutes or a body of work that changed the outlook of a generation. Octavio Paz wrote that "the vision of chaos is a sort of ritual bath, a regeneration through immersion in the original fountain, a return to the life before," and I was on this journey because I was chasing that chaos and groundlessness and not-knowing. I could sense the new world coming, and I wished to visit the party at

the end of time in order to say farewell to the old ways, the old art, the old people.

\*

At the far end of the island the taxi came to a halt, and I stepped on to a beach that was washed by wavelets I could hear but couldn't see. There was no moon and no artificial light, only the orange glow of the waiting boat-captain's cigarette. The beams of our headlights disappeared somewhere over the water, and beyond them I could infer the next island only from a hulking blackness, an absence of stars above the shoreline lights. The thing I sought lay somewhere on that island, within the Trader's compound. I checked my watch: it would be December 20 for a few more hours. Soon I'd be rousing the non-committal staff at the hotel and getting some sleep, before waking to do a bit of reconnaissance, and tomorrow night I would infiltrate the Trader's winter solstice party.

I had witnessed The Trader once before, in a New York hotel lobby where I'd camped for the opportunity. His family had crossed the room in advance of their wheeled luggage like four new coins rolling across the carpet. He was tanned, with a graying mane, and wore khakis, trainers, and a billowing linen Oxford. His stride was measured, but his face drew my attention with its aggressive focus. His mother might be an Argentine Jew who'd married a Swiss banker, but then again, he could be ethnically Lebanese, or Turkish, or anything at all. In fact, I thought, he

could have been a relative of mine. My own Greek and British roots certainly gave me an ambiguous ethnicity: Jewish? European? Italian? In his case the ambiguity really came down to wealth, for the globe-trotting classes had a talent for obscuring their origins under layers of refinement, painting themselves with taste and wellness and thereby hiding ethnicity and tradition. Poverty, too, could erase these things, of course. It was only the middle classes who were unable to hide their fundamental differences, which was why they were most anxious about the coming human similarity of universally middling heights, darker hair, coffee-colored skin, muted garments, bared teeth.

A step behind The Trader came two teen boys with high-tech outerwear and lavish curls, radiating useless vitality. Their dumb faces were, in the most masculine way, "honest." Bringing up the rear was Ilse, a petite lady with a honeycomb of hair and a grin like a bit lodged between her teeth. Husband and wife sniped in French as they walked, then switched to English at the desk. Every member of the family was fluent in three languages and charming in each.

The Trader leaned in to make the arrangements while his sons joshed each other. Ilse swiveled my way, brandishing her phone, and I looked elsewhere. A resin-topped coffee table had been bolted to the ceiling upside down and a coil of string-bulbs placed on top glowed through the layers of plastic. A spindly, very black man in an ochre windowpane suit was loitering just inside the entrance, speaking into his phone in a language of clicks and pops. He had a name tag, a phone-holster,

and a Purell-holster, and his monologue had not eased up the entire time I'd been here. Second-wave indie rock from the Aughts played at a subdued level. As the family bobbed and weaved against this bland backdrop, I realized that families were essentially gangs: possessed of simmering internal rivalries, to be sure, but ultimately bound by a circle-the-wagons mentality necessary to protect a fragile shared worldview. And what was this family's worldview?

The Trader had gone to great lengths to shelter everything from meddlesome regulation. He had supposedly made a fortune in the Nineties organizing tours of the Holy Land for right-wing Evangelicals prepping for Apocalypse. After a few years spent moving the family around for obscure reasons, he suddenly purchased land on this quiet West Indian island, a formerly British colony with high literacy rates and no interest in its landholders' finances. "Sooner or later," the Trader told a magazine at the time, "we all have to step aside to make way for young talent." So here they lived, year-round, in a Modernist fortress. The boys' tutor and his girlfriend came from Bern for ten months of the year and stayed in the guest house. The maids were also from Switzerland, but were Kosovar, and had trained as hair curators. From email skims, I was aware of a rumor among the wealthy ex-pats that The Trader and Ilse were intelligence agents. Supposedly the second floor housed a vast array of computers, and the roof hosted an array of satellite dishes too plentiful for family use. A pack of Wolfhounds roamed the grounds, an electrified fence enclosed

the compound, and a serious vegetable garden supplied most of the food.

I considered all of this as I headed up the darkened slope the next evening in a Jeep I'd informally rented from the hotel manager. The island was a thickly forested cinder cone one thousand meters high, almost perfectly circular at sea level. Human activity was concentrated in a necklace of settlements at the base linked by a coastal road primarily used to get people to town on market day. The locals avoided the impassable slopes, save a few intrepid or unhappy people who had hacked freeholds out of the jungle. It was only the wealthy expats who laid claim to the upper reaches of the volcano; for them razing hectares of undergrowth was not a problem, and it guaranteed views and isolation.

The Trader's villa appeared ahead, a long, rectilinear structure of poured-in-place concrete designed on an open-air, tropical-Modern plan. The unlit second floor looked small and self-contained, hovering over the ground floor's larger footprint. As I parked the Jeep, other guests were beginning to pull up. We nodded at each other as we pocketed keys and headed for the front door, where somebody was waiting with a tray of glasses. I was nervous, but I reminded myself that I was a cultured, middle-aged artist from New York City. I had plenty of armor.

\*

I remember that I was always seeking scarier picture books. My mother would consult the librarians, who recommended a few (*The Tailypo*, *The Giant Devil Dingo*, and *Baleful Beasts & Eerie Creatures*, this one worth hundreds on eBay) but there weren't many books that were seriously frightening. It makes sense, because you need adults who like to shock children, and publishers willing to gamble on the impulse, and open-minded adult buyers, and children who enjoy the spark of alienation. That adds up to quite a fine sieve. In the end, I was forced to invent my own stories, which proved so popular that Ms. Thompson invited me to tell stories to the other first graders in a weekly session. The tales I told were improvisations, chopped performances of modulation and grasping, a weaving of my own fears into something approximating a public language. Much later I realized that my mature artwork was also a sort of chopped, impatient narrative of the present, told in many voices.

For example, if I reach into the future, I can tell you about being a young girl. Like most ten-year old girls, I've never been on a date. I haven't been out dancing or gone to the club, I haven't been to a concert or a Broadway production. I haven't picked someone up in a bar, I didn't go home with them, we didn't spend hours exploring each other's bodies, our lovemaking was not savage at first, then tender. I've never walked around in a haze cause I couldn't get you out of my head. I don't know anything the songs and poems talk about. I've never been obsessed with anyone but myself, and I dislike myself. To paraphrase Rick Owens, my best and

worst quality is that I'm a selfish cunt. I'm untouched by sex and, more than that, incapable of love. And this is exactly why older people prize my opinions, why they'll pay top dollar.

You might ask, how does that work? There's a dialogue in the Nag Hammadi manuscripts where Hermes Trismegistus advises that gnosis begins by looking within, and writing about what you find there. My task is to express without end, to open the gates so that every revelation might be shared. I may have been raised in a little box marked "Freedom," but a box is a good place to report on the inner world for my older clients. The requests I get are usually fairly simple, things like *What were the '00s all about?* You do have to be able to read weak signals, of course, and the signals seem to keep getting fainter, receding under waves of noise. But for people like us who are truly sensitive, the topography of the ocean floor is perfectly visible on the surface of the water.

To us, the new people, your life is nothing but a box of costume jewelry open for plunder. Soon we'll be able to lay eyes on a person and simultaneously grasp them as they are, as they were, and as they will be. Show me a newborn and I will know this lump as it was in the dim shape of nothingness, and as a middle-aged soul shipwrecked on a reef, and as a dying organism: the full person, in four dimensions, a deck of cards splayed on the baize. It's all there, it's all broken, and that's the love I'm holding out for.

There are a lot of us now. If you could put on a pair of special glasses and survey the crowd from a balcony, like Hitler or the Pope, you'd see red dots everywhere

like an infection breaking out. It's been coming for some time. In the Neolithic period every human could love, but by the Middle Ages many were no longer capable. This accelerated over the course of the dumb twentieth century, and soon there won't be anyone left who can love. But humanity will probably turn wise and calm. There's a tremendous calm in those who don't know love and sex, because for us, the new people, all the things that most of you want—money, power, luxury, service, social status—hold no interest. It's the main reason adults are scared of children. But we don't pay any mind, because we have work to do.

When I do this work I go by my other name, the true name, the random jumble of letters that constantly regenerates. Normal, functional human interactions are increasingly coming to resemble public performances, and all the old language is consequently being replaced by neologisms, nonsense, and hollow comedy. The manic flow is beginning to resemble art, where, as everyone knows, meaning is the enemy. By placing your output beyond meaning you situate it in the realm of the nonhuman, like the subatomic realm of quantum phenomena, which can never be fully recuperated for the humanist project. You know what's cool, too? Throw in random misspellings. Keep it weird, tho, be sure to stay ahead of the kids who "kind of" get it but call their housewares line something like BEOOKLYN. In this context, it makes sense that a random arrangement of signs is the best personal branding. As Stewart Brand noted way back in 1985: "Computers suppress our animal presence. When you communicate

through a computer, you communicate like an angel." And everyone knows the speech of the angels is unintelligible.

I had noticed that older people often thought of art as an intensely *human* activity, the essence of our messy subjective experience, the mingled breath of the *we*. Literature was seen as a way of building empathy for those who were different, and those literary expressions that seemed nihilistic or misanthropic were recuperated as celebrations of difference, the range of experience, and the possibility of communication from extreme states, and were thus more important to the humanist argument than works of genre fiction, which reflected mere market forces. The expression "arts and humanities" joined two unrelated terms in what was an apparently warm handshake, but we, the new people, knew otherwise. We knew that art was not human. This did not mean that art was separate from us. To the contrary, it was an important part of us, *it was the nonhuman part*.

The human condition had always been a point of intersection with other forces. You just had to examine the history of art, which was full of beings in which humanness mixed with the forms of goats, birds, reptiles, and insects. These chimeras were made iconic by Hieronymus Bosch, who portrayed what Raoul Vaneigem called "the conflict that goes on making and unmaking our very sense of the human, pushing 'humanity' back to its wild beginnings." And when you pushed all the way back to the Stone Age, you found the same half-human beings, like the antler-headed Sorcerer painted in the Cave of the Trois Frères.

The invention of photography reincarnated this ancient hybridity, and placed it at the center of the world. The earliest photographs are the first record we have of the encounter between human and machine, but beyond simply documenting a gaze meeting a lens, they blend two distinct temporalities: human time and machine time. Painting's power had always come from the way it offered up the one-to-one time of a hand moving through time and space: to regard a painting was to see a ghostly record of the workings of a body. To this, the photograph now added the processing time of the machine. A photo was both quick—in the bodily gestures of hand and eye framing the composition and releasing the shutter—and slow, since one then had to wait for the development of the negative, the illumination and enlargement of the image, and its printing onto paper. This strange new mix of temporalities was frozen there, forever present in the plane of the image. From now on, the human would be all mixed up in an uneasy relationship with the nonhuman. It was a shift that must have stirred strange new emotions in viewers.

These emotions, however, were twentieth century emotions. A century on, electronic cameras did away with chemical processing, only to reassert machine time through software and circuitry. With the introduction of editing software, processing became the signal artistic act, the "time line" its triumph over monkish, human time. By the first decades of the twenty-first century, art found itself newly empowered to address everything as so much dead material splayed out on the table. Writing, moving images, music,

gaming: an artist could raid these cultural forms without having to venture into the once-independent spheres of journalism and criticism, documentary film or underground video festivals, bands or music venues, computer science. Anything that could be laid out on the mortuary table was claimed for art. It sounds great, but the arts were only the vanguard of a wave that saturated the entire communicative landscape, superficially making everyone a creator as it sucked all of life into machine time. For millennia one had measured oneself against the cycles of the seasons and the heavens, or against changing social mores and geopolitical configurations. To now be compelled to measure one's life against the pace of machine time invited madness.

\*

In middle school, I continued to seek alienation. Henri Michaux thought that "the world is in fact heavy, thick, encumbering. To tolerate it, you have to reject much of it one way or another." I could sense this thickness and obscurity, and, in my own way, I was already turning my shoulder. Just before the onset of puberty, I discovered three artists who would become guides in this respect: J.G. Ballard, H.P. Lovecraft, and H.R. Giger. Immediately, I began signing my own stories as "S. E. Price." I pored over Lovecraft's books and letters and biography, noting how he used the unnamable and obscure (when I persuaded my father to read me Lovecraft at night he promptly fell asleep,

later complaining, “Why say something ‘transpired’ when you just mean it ‘happened’?”). I taped a Giger poster to my wall that depicted a diseased or decaying female lifeform erotically entwined with machinery. I puzzled over the yellowing Ballard paperbacks handed down by a cousin bound for college, particularly struck by a story in which a man ceases to understand anything in his environment and enters a rapture of non-comprehension that ends in murder and suicide.

This may have helped prepare the ground for a teenage revelation that nothing in the world had a name. While I could see that a class of object like “oak tree” might be useful in corralling some generally observed tendencies, I knew that there were no actual “oak trees.” There was no “sneaker,” no “building,” and no “Seth,” only an endless and interconnected expanse of creation possessed of limitless forms but no identities, indifferent to our signposts, carrying on with its mysterious busywork.

I had discovered that with a slight tilt of my head all the meanings flickered and vanished, and it filled me with a vertiginous, darkly ecstatic feeling. For years I was an unhappy materialist; by denying the power of the names in favor of a mute material world, I had evidently turned my back on meaning itself. Much later I came to see the potentially mystical qualities of this position, and was gratified to discover the *via negativa*, the way of thinking that begins with early Christians like the shadowy fifth-century figure Pseudo-Dionysius, who argued in favor of “the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing,” and condemned human names and

symbols as “pictures boldly used to represent God, so that what is hidden may be brought out into the open and multiplied, what is unique and undivided may be divided up, and multiple shapes and forms be given to what has neither shape nor form.”

In any case, the insight would prove useful in weathering the storms of making art, which mocks its creator by turning one way to refract the sparkle of meaning, then another to reveal itself as dull and senseless. I was equipped to carry on regardless, aware that while my art might have nothing to do with me, and was possibly meaningless, that was beside the point. However, other difficulties arose. If “oak tree” is not allowed, neither is “artist,” and it was an identity I resisted until well after my first gallery show. The term itself felt mortifying, like “husband” or “wife:” silly mantles that one dons only as part of a devil’s bargain. My position was that I made art, and when I did so I qualified as an artist, but that was an activity, not an identity. Others could wear the robe; I was content to carry on with my mysterious busywork. “You’re an artist?” “Well, I’ve done some videos, I’ve made some sculptures.” It was only when I quit my day job in 2005 and had to write “Artist” on my taxes that I got over myself and donned the robes in all their magical idiocy.

Donna Haraway writes that there are three important boundaries: human to animal, organism to machine, and material to immaterial. The works of Giger, Ballard, and Lovecraft need these boundaries, could barely exist without them, yet only to transgress them in a touchingly unguarded manner that invites parody. I

was fascinated by the rampant mutations and transitions in these books and paintings; they echoed my own becoming-dark and becoming-cold. Mutation and transition are the red thread running through my mature artwork, evident not only in the shifts between video, sculpture, photography, writing, and painting, but within the works themselves: vacuum-formed bodies, silhouettes of the negative space between human touch, decapitated heads printed on Mylar, photographs of liquefying human skin, machine-made tubes penetrating my own paintings.

The practice of divesting and reinvesting meaning might be good preparation for a life of art-making, but I can report that it’s dangerous for a teenager. Exploring the underground means you divert more and more energy to the parts that push blindly through the dirt, and if you aren’t wise—for instance if you’re going through puberty—you short change all the growth that should be happening up above, in the sunlight. When I revel in the knowledge that I am not only myself, Seth, but also a mere lump of nameless, undifferentiated nature that does not need or care, you know the nonhuman has a hand on my wrist. You can be sure that I pretend not to notice as I am pulled upward, outward, and, finally, apart.

\*

It was early in the evening of the longest night of the year. I roamed the Trader’s tropical modern house with a Mason jar of rum and ginger beer. The overall

architectural impression was of fearsome rationality and uptightness; supposedly the building had been put together by master craftsmen from Zurich, because no islanders—or Americans, for that matter—were capable of constructing a precise, Olympic-size pool from the shitty local concrete. Breezeways ended in portals to the Caribbean night, and all around was the insistent trilling of tree frogs. I passed standing brass censers of smoldering cardamom and basins of lemongrass oil. The floors were strewn with chamomile stalks. I gradually realized that almost every household good or object, no matter how functional and unremarkable—a shoehorn, a flask of olive oil, a thumb drive, a pencil—was a sly and rare artist’s edition.

The first guests were scattered here and there, checking out the villa, poised respectfully with hands behind their backs like museum-goers. Against all the stark concrete the wealthy partygoers made striking tableaux. There was a Chinese entrepreneur, and an ex-Mossad security consultant going on about Tora-Bora, and a nerdy writer from Lagos. A middle-aged white guy wearing a fleece quarter-zip and drivers was shaking his head mildly: Starbucks? You say it’s a coffee shop? There was a spirited debate about which was worse, the first or second day of jet lag. I’m telling you; he’s got it bad, and it’s the third day. Okay, but my thing is, I don’t care how wretched you are as long as you die like a holy man. My thing is, live every day like it’s your birthday. My thing is, make sure you live in a house full of good places to hide. My thing is, there’s no barber on earth so

expensive that you don't have to go back for a touch up—like, *really*? My thing is, seeing two kids having sex might be our culture's primal scene. My thing is, I'm finishing up first-round financing for a new soccer league, so far we got Eritrea, Palestine, Northern Ireland, Quebec, Kurdistan, Tibet, East Timor, Corsica... Oh, that's smart. There'll be a lot more, for sure. Very smart. Well, what can I say, I'm a Carrie and a Slytherin. No, you're more of a Samantha and a Hufflepuff, I feel. How dare you? My identity is very personal to me.

I left before the fight turned ugly and paused a bit further down the hall to grab a handful of snacks from a platter of lichen, ticks, and algae. An amused older white guy like myself was lurking by the kitchen wrapped up in rags and capes and hats, wearing beat-up espadrilles with no socks and a floor-grazing scarf. We know him by sight: he's the Dark Hipster, the Evil Hipster, the drugs all gone, the Electroclash dream shriveled. He was supposedly that one lucky guy who got in on that secret auction staged after Apple headquarters closed, full of vintage sterling candlesticks entombed in decades of wax, chipped signage in Basque, spindly faux bois lawn furniture, chunky amateur Lucite sculptures from the Sixties, mismatched pre-war cufflinks with inlaid lapis lazuli, and all lots branded with the Apple logo, for resale on the open market at inflated prices. But after he made off like a bandit, he plunged too deep into the mirror. As I moved on, I reflected that an empire in decline begins to gather its disparate artifacts into one jumble, recklessly mixing inside and outside. A Roman

aristocrat in 360 CE would garb himself in the raiment of the Barbarians, garments that had once been beneath regard: Saxon trousers, a woolen shirt woven in the Danube, a cloak from Northern Gaul. I smiled, nodding with recognition; just that afternoon I'd been tooling around the island in Supreme sweats, pumping Bladee.

I stepped through a doorway onto a balcony that jutted into the night and rested my drink on the balustrade. On this side of the property the volcano dropped away steeply, and I saw that I was perched sixty feet in the air. Far below, the compound's electrified fence tacked inward and nearly touched the steel stanchions supporting the line of cantilevered balconies. Beyond the fence, a bizarre parallel party had assembled on the descending slopes. Groups of islanders were milling around a series of open fires which they fed with bits of plastic and rubber. Directly below me, a knot of people were dancing energetically, or so I thought until a noise drew my attention to the next balcony where a group of guests were taking turns dropping scraps of food, inciting furious battle. My gaze wandered a bit farther down the hill. A teen couple whom I guessed were brother and sister were engaged in sexual acts while a circle of middle-aged people watched and lazily masturbated, and small children rifled through the couple's clothing. Further away was an older woman who seemed to be stretching lewdly. I realized that her lower legs had been burned away and she was using the charred stumps to draw symbols in the sand under a hooded man's direction. Far below, at the edge of the jungle, I could make out what might

have been pyres of burning human forms and people trundling laden wheelbarrows into the trees.

I returned to the party, and spent a moment with a bald, racially ambiguous giant in what looked like a toddler's onesie, which upon inspection was made of fine linen corduroy, paired with sarcoline Moroccan babouches: a portrait of a man sleepwalking through a drizzle of dividends. The giant had a halting reedy voice and he stooped slightly to make himself heard as he discussed a recent Chief Keef concert he'd been to, which recalled a Ja Rule show he'd seen in Chicago in the early aughts. Without yielding space for comment, he offered the nugget that rap music was a brilliant way of dealing with historical material, a tool for synthesizing events and writing history, an oral tradition that emerged from technology, all tied to the absolute contemporaneity of slang, race, and current experience, and this made it crucial for a community that had always been denied historical continuity. And then there was the poetry of disjunction, fragmentation, et cetera. But what was happening now, the giant wondered, nodding slightly at his cocktail, what was happening now? I said something about a Zen attitude. This inspired the giant to tell another soft-voiced story that could potentially crackle on the page. Apparently the early-morning prep guys in the falafel joint under the Ashtanga studio were disturbing everyone's practice with extremely loud music, causing all manner of bad vibes. People who spent ten hours a week cultivating goodwill were seething with class and race-based resentment. So the giant looked into it

and discovered that the prep staff was cranking the restaurant's front-of-the-house system because it was the only way they could hear anything way back in the kitchen, and he bought them a boom box, problem solved.

I wondered about the guests at this remote stronghold: what was their connection to one another, or to anything at all? I wouldn't have been surprised to learn that the soft-spoken giant was born and raised in the West Indies, on these very slopes, to impoverished local people, i.e., that he was a Black man, but money had synthesized and re-wired all that difference. Take nothing for granted, I concluded, not this far out in the most distant reach, at the edge of the map of money. On the one hand, it was absurd to contemplate a billionaire in a onesie gifting a radio to a group of Ecuadorian kitchen staff, with a Namaste dip and a Hamza hand. On the other hand, the story was actually impressive: he had solved the problem in an easy, selfless way that hadn't required threats or raised voices. We were definitely going to need a smaller map.

The Trader's family had done a good job of departing from the social, I thought, or at least had oriented themselves so that all contact with the outer world was entirely on their own terms. I knew, of course, that the rich were now detaching themselves from our unworkable wreck on all levels—financial, legal, geographic, philosophical, cultural—and if they supported the system it was not because they believed in it but because granted them the freedom to opt out. The family juggernaut was hunkered down for

the apocalypse, in a residence like the set for a video game crawling with militarized undead. A scenario built for little white girls who come back to school from island vacations with beaded cornrows, maybe just four, nice locks, yeah, we're thinking they might be hair curators, back we go to a house full of good places to hide.

\*

Something from the before-time?

"What about having someone who's always drinking soda, just, like, various local brands of soda, like Hunnecker's Strawberry Soda?"

"Oh word, so, not Coke? Feelin'."

We were speaking in school, in the hall, in low tones. Me and my friends had a friendship like a conversation between marketers. A proper adult conversation was supposed to feel like sparkling water, but marketers' spit-balling sparkled so hard there was no water left. But that's what we "kind of" liked, the way a living trilobite slowly turns into a demon of stone.

"So, the easy satire here would be to exaggerate existing traits, e.g., you have a person who drinks hyper-sweet, hyper-caFFEinated soda, but we wish to instead go lateral and weird."

"That's kind of stoolin', I feel." (Like many people now I said "I feel" instead of "I think.")

Class let out with a rustle, because we'd all started wearing nylon capes. We didn't understand them, but they were basically a shapeless coat, an easier coat, easier to fabricate, easier to don and doff,

hide your crappy self and send it aloft. They went well with the music we were listening to, those crowd-sourced Black Box Recorder mixes of hundreds of non-language sounds emitted by people at the moment of impact.

Under my friend's cape you'll find a vintage hoodie emblazoned with "Prop. Fitch Ath. Dept. '89," vintage "Gap 1969" jeans, a baseball cap that said "Polo LXVII," and a splash of Inez and Vinoodh's classic fragrance "1996." What's under my cape? I might handwrite a random phrase on my clothing. Violating a commercially produced garment was a signal far more antisocial than any tattoo. Societies had been known to outlaw it. I'd maybe cut holes in my clothes under the armpits, or up front by the side-seam pants pockets. As with any sufficiently ugly sartorial gesture, cutting holes so people glimpse your skin places you in the realm of far-seeing couture and mental illness. Go ahead and slice up your shirt so your pits show, scrawl "Minal Wanjer" on your pants in Sharpie, and see how they stare on the subway.

The young have always rediscovered abstraction, mutation, and psychedelia, because these represent the perverting force of forms in revolt. This is what lent the elusive and lucrative quality to, say, classic 2010s streetwear design, where someone on the street would be wearing a hoodie with an all-over print of skulls and crossbones, and you'd notice the skulls were actually SpongeBob wearing a Monopoly top hat, and it wasn't crossbones, it was a dildo and a mortgage contract. Idiotic and tired, but highly reproducible. In those days the chief mandate was to make oneself into a maximally

reproducible component. It was the young who wore five subcultures in one outfit and got away with it, because they knew how to stack the codes motherfucker, you learned it from them, and now they had to forge ahead into even more occult realms, and by the time you got around to wearing streamer cat-ears and hoodies that said "I hate my life" they were back on vintage Gap and defunct 2010s mall brands. The closest you got was high-tech outerwear, where you paid a premium to juxtapose rugged epaulets with breathable performance liners.

I quickly found my phone and posted: *Like people who think Helmut Lang pioneered special rinses, when point of fact native son Ralph Lauren done it in the early nineties, those antique industrial washers he stumbled on down South, the Carolinas or something. And he was just catching a ride on some slipshod denim folkway.*

\*

After college I bought a point-and-shoot and started taking pictures. In the hundreds of photographs I took around the turn of the century, New York City appears empty and lonely, but in fact it was me who was lonely and who wished to be empty, because the city felt over-full, and so did I: brimming with desire, fear, and confusion. My photographs captured some of the mess and off-to-the-sidedness that lay within, and which I couldn't face. Within each of us lie unfulfilled urges that are never expressed, because we lack the social means to do so. It is futile to seek

the expression of these urges in our work or career, family or friends, love or sex, so we must turn to art for the feelings that exist nowhere else. Art shows us how to mix inside and outside, self and other, private and public, material and immaterial. Art reveals our nonhuman part.

In high school I discovered the literature of anxious surfaces and eagerly read my way through a neurotic, anti-psychological current that wells up in Kafka and courses through authors like Ballard, Patricia Highsmith, Graham Greene, and the *romans dur* of Georges Simenon. Here the eye is directed outward, away from the seething center, which we glimpse only in brief reflections. I learned that laughter and happiness were as generic and smooth as high use public surfaces, as impersonal and indestructible as the partitions in an airport bathroom: a finger might leave a greasy smudge but the experience was otherwise unrecorded. Joy, on the other hand, was different. Joy was a small, sharp puncture where the inside had attempted to emerge and then receded. Joy might poke through in a moment of melancholy, or even terror. Joy was an *ecstatic injury*.

When I was three years old there was a kid on my block with a thick monobrow that shrouded him in inscrutability. I was impressed, and began practicing my own frown. This looked insane and was promptly questioned and ridiculed, so I stopped. Next, I tried to purge all expression from my face. Looking back, I recognize in this the severity and impassivity of religious iconography, from pre-Columbian tablets to Catholic decor. In ritualistic art forms like Yupik masks and Mayan carvings, the grin of the spirits

and the animals is not happy or friendly, it is simply another way to bare teeth. But even if it lacks laughter, the smile of the spirits is a kind of ecstatic injury.

In kindergarten, Raymond Vega and I were sitting on beige plastic chairs, him on my right with his hands on his knees, when suddenly his left arm opened mechanically and landed a fist in my gut. I always filed this under “unprovoked cruelty.” Recently, however, I realized that I must have insulted him, and my understated delivery made it sting, and my distanced curiosity—the provocation as experiment—made it cruel. We didn’t talk about the incident, and were friendly afterward. Raymond was big and sweet and dense. By sixth grade he had a trademark shabby mustache which I envision even when I picture him in kindergarten. He was not the hairiest in the sixth grade, though, because no one had more preternatural manliness than Pedro. It was an achievement that deeply embarrassed him, and it’s a testament to Pedro’s good nature that he never weaponized his shame. If you declined to weaponize your shame, however, we were happy to turn it against you. A group of us hunted down a freakishly tall transfer student who had the nerve to be chipper, pinned him to the dry grass of the playground, ignoring his shrieks, and forced those long legs apart until he wept. Only then did we scatter, mumbling and shrugging. He never mentioned the incident. We all hung out like we always had.

In that same playground: an older boy on a bike hoisted a plastic bag and decanted snack crumbs onto my scalp and mushed them around while I stood

there helplessly. My mother had to wash and wash. I can still summon the cloying smell of processed peanut flavoring.

In that same playground: a friend laughed when I committed some tiny failure, probably a bike trick that didn’t come off. Enraged, I snatched the cap from his head, stuffed it deep into a municipal trash can, and pedaled away. My mother let me know that his mother was upset because that cap meant the world to him. I understood that his mom was a single white gay lady without much money raising an adopted Black kid who was often ridiculed. I knew that to retrieve the hat she would have had to plunge her hand through a heap of sickness.

In that same playground: a group of teenagers taunted my sister and me, sending us racing home, and then my father ran out to confront them, seizing a dead branch from the ground, and I followed into the twilight and watched him wield the stick, and this was more frightening than whatever it was the teens had said.

Second grade: “I don’t trust you, Seth.” Third grade: “Seth, you talk about things you don’t know about.” Sixth grade: “What’s the matter, man, you’re, like, dead.” Seventh grade: “Seth, you’re not weird, you’re *odd*.” High school: Karen made a spastic joke, noticed me sitting there expressionlessly, and combusted: “What the fuck Seth, you’re so arrogant!” I was informed that I was aloof, and I was. I cannot explain the impulse except like this: Do not reveal the secret. There must be quantities that cannot be measured. There must be feelings that cannot be expressed. There must be words that cannot be said. I want my expressions to

be empty of me. I wish the art that I make to have nothing to do with me. The goal is to capture something beyond the human.

\*

Looking around from my vantage in the boutique hotel lobby I could see men everywhere in pairs or small groups, sharing earnest opinions, arguments, and evidence, attesting as to what is the best, the most practical, the most reasonable, most sensible, most lucrative. Who will benefit, what will win? Meanwhile, another logic ruled. Over in Frankfurt Airport, men in their forties were rocking slightly on their Mephistos and debating the best route to Dortmund while above them and through them flowed the voice of Rihanna. It needn’t be her; it could be nearly anything, and that’s the point: just as these men find new topics, another logic will remain in what they think of as the background, omnipresent and overriding and interpenetrating. I knew that our world of reasons and sense was endless but horizontal, like the surface of the earth itself. Around it we went, year after year, round and round, and all along there was another mad realm of waves and forces, shooting through us from all directions, radiating and ceaseless, penetrating without touch, and we sensed it just enough to keep trying to represent it through our feeble diagrams.

I followed the progress of two men in their thirties as they made their way to the elevators. They were well fed but elegantly scrubby, and obviously relaxed according

to a rich cultural heritage that allows one to rest on the laurels of cultured forebears. Belgians, I intuited. They were discussing their Brooklyn friends, the ones who had hosted them for dinner last night, and wasn’t it funny how the metropolitan, cultured Americans were a bit try-hard? All the right music, books, and political consciousness, but everything a bit correct. The wine served always in wine glasses, the parmesan grated extra-fine, the meal plated before it heads to the table because you’d never plop a bowl of steaming vulgarity down in the middle of things, the right blend of appreciation and resentment for French thought, the lighting all warm and wonderful because all lights should be on dimmers and ideally positioned below eye level, no down-lights, please. They weren’t people who rinsed the pasta in the colander, they weren’t people who put the tomatoes in the fridge, but they were only one step above.

In a way, the Belgians concluded, they had more respect for fusty American WASPs. The edges there were worn to a perfect fault: the disdain for trends, the longstanding summer house in poor repair, the dotty aunt who was a plein-air painter, everyone in the family glazed and agreeable because they didn’t judge it *necessary* to air their disagreements, everything running on fumes. Thank heaven for people who scanned menus for a fixed roster of timeless foods: asparagus, caviar, risotto, quail, langoustines, turbot, oysters, sole, filet. Forget about venturing into greens, too volatile; kelp or sorrel was hot one year, awkward the next. Better play it safe and have a Cobb salad. “What? Is that that African miracle

grain? Fabulous. No, no, I'm sure it's very good, but I'm all set with my boring old skate wing."

A pair of middle-aged white dads had settled into a nearby seating group, one of them holding his phone up to his face like a pocket mirror. They were dressed like a pair of walking, talking military tote bags. I certainly understood why so many men were attracted to high-tech outerwear: tech spoke a rich and versatile symbolic language, even as it retained genuine street cred. Tech gear announced that a guy was, first of all, a "guy," and was financially comfortable, and basically rational, and a team player, and possessed a modicum of fashion sense, but not in a frivolous way so much as in a utilitarian way. Depending on how he accessorized he could invoke rugged frontierism, business, or the playful vigor of sport, or all three in combination, and also the more abstract value of fatherhood, insofar as parenting was fundamentally a management issue. However he chose to steer the codes, this guy spoke the holy language of modern consumption and modern production. When he traveled, the codes were sure to translate, because tech was a global language. The South Koreans fabricated tech outerwear exceptionally well, as did the Italians and the Japanese. It took special talent and drive, and the manufacturers had to keep up with the equipment, had to acquire the latest computer-controlled additive machines to stitch up some new-new. Can just anyone 3D-print on neoprene? No. It helps to be a 22-year-old Korean designer right out of school who gets subsidized by Samsung to burnish the corporate portfolio.

In composition, tech outerwear was often assembled from multiple fabrics and textures: Kevlar-bonded mesh, suede facings, dangling straps and buckles, sleek synthetic liners, steely snaps, removable hoodies, and useless touches like tweed epaulets or odd-shaped micro-pockets for nonexistent pill stashes. With all this material variety tech outerwear almost met the benchmark for *Patchwork*, although in the last analysis it was too functionalist. Because the essential thing to recall about sportswear and streetwear—that is, the majority of what we mean by menswear, and leaving aside traditional tailoring—is that it descended directly from military gear. The nameless government tailors who crafted all that standard-issue clothing surely could not have imagined that their bomber jackets, cargo pants, trench coats, and chinos would become pop staples, endlessly reinterpreted by couturiers and department stores alike. Given guys' predilection for techy, utilitarian clothing, I realized, they would soon be persuaded to don skirts with little cognitive difficulty. One need only reframe the skirt as a kind of high-tech apron: run it down the back leg to mid-thigh but cut it shorter up front, craft it from finely perforated gunmetal gray nylon, add functionless loops and drawstrings, and finish it with a fluorescent logo reminiscent of the graphic design of mid-nineties skate gear. A recontextualizing move as simple as renaming dolls for boys "action figures."

Across the lobby was a wealthy Swiss man in his seventies who clearly owned a thirty-thousand-dollar HiFi. I knew that he was not simply an expert on Black

American musical idioms like jazz and the blues, but could also speak with deep empathy on the subject. What an amazing thing it is, he communicated to me silently, that we humans have constructed a system like jazz, which exists entirely within a tradition of standardized units within which one may play endlessly, bending the rules and breaking them and enacting a delicate play with ritual and tradition and the future, and within which all of human emotion is possible, especially the unnamed emotions that fill a listener with questions, and linger like clouds of silt in water. This wealthy European man might actually understand this music in intimate and complex ways, with a warm and nuanced and humanist understanding that he could never bring to his own marriage or children, let alone himself.

So you come back at this eminently rational, sympathetic, and intelligent man, who has made his money by being rational and careful as a trader, and only lets his imagination run wild in open fields staked out by lovingly catalogued LPs by dead Black men, saying, yes, but isn't that also the condition of techno music? It sets up an even more brutally standardized system: the steady, machinic pulse of the drum, and only the drum, and then, when you have that, you pour all creation in there—noise and industrial chaos, soul and harmony, Hawaiian guitars, you name it—and it still qualifies as techno. Another Black American cultural product, another twist to the string of beads. What about that? In return you are treated to a brief smile and a shrug. I'm sure that's all very interesting, too, but it's not the same. Maybe for your generation, I don't know.

Cicero wrote that if you have a garden and a library you've got everything you need, because you can develop an appreciation for the achievements of the past by steeping yourself in the archive of human accomplishment, and also cultivate dumb things with your own hand, pledging your soul to a messy and transient beauty. He proposed a life that looks backwards and forwards in order to be fully in the present. All I can say is that this might have suited the ancients, but today things are more complicated. The business mindset says, *hey, this guy is definitely on to something, but if a garden is good and a library is good, how do we take it to the next level?* Answer: encapsulate garden and library into a single structure; reduce the variety and compress the symbol. What do you get when you cross a library with a garden? It could mean you construct a diminutive library structure within a walled garden, a place to peruse the achievements of culture and civilization in beautiful surroundings. This was the Western cultural ideal for many years, yielding the classical research university, manicured tech company campuses, shopping malls, and so forth. But the reverse is potentially cooler: place a garden inside a library by hybridizing them, splicing them, plotting them on the same coordinates. Don't simply place a bed of flowers and a potted fig in the lobby, rather force nature and culture, the nonhuman and human, to coexist in the same plane. Moss swallows the tomes, vines buckle the rolled steel shelves, roots swell and crack the limestone pavers, streams infiltrate the foundation. This is the now-familiar image of Gaia reasserting herself in the post-apocalyptic

city, an image that captures the state of media today: an absurd extension of the old logic, one form of cultivation running riot within another, a perfect summation of Cicero's vision because it is also a perversion of it.

\*

One time in high school I was sitting on our front stoop, which was at a busy corner. Two older boys pulled up to the light not more than ten feet away. The kid in the passenger seat looked out the open window and raised his middle finger. He held it, motionless, and I stared, and fifteen seconds went by. Neither of us said a word or altered our expressions. The light changed, and as they pulled away his finger rose in the air like he was leading the charge.

Twenty feet down the sidewalk was the house of twin daughters, one of whom babysat me and my sister. When I was ten years old, I passed their stoop and an older boy standing there muttered something in my direction that made the group laugh. I said, "Shut up, you vagina." This riposte made them laugh harder. When I was in eighth grade and he was a high school senior, we found ourselves working the same after-school job, as assistants in the town library. One afternoon the two of us were stationed in the basement, sorting returns. The boy I had identified as a vagina was now awkwardly large and pock-marked, and wore an army jacket. There was another senior there who had a Mohawk and wore a black trench coat and

knee-high Doc Martens. I was working quietly in a corner, and when their conversation hit a lull they asked what "year" I was. It was a term I didn't understand, but when they realized I was still in middle school, they were surprised and respectful. Historians are in agreement that this era was the height of discrete, authentic subcultures, and the punk senior embodied a fierce eighties DIY hardcore ethic; for example, he had recently mounted an independent campaign for representation on the town council. Such purity was intimidating, and reinforced my bond with the vagina kid.

Six years later, I found myself in the basement of a house party in Providence, and the punk kid's band was on. He was playing a guitar that he'd evidently made from scrap steel and saw blades. Standing by the furnace I bumped into another guy from high school, a depressive goth who looked like Droopy the Dog. When he confirmed that I was going to college, he said "Good for you" with real feeling, because he hadn't made it, plus his industrial band The Wake had broken up. Goth kid and I had once made a Saturday-night trek via multiple trains and buses to the Somerville apartment of two art-school-dropout punks with fake English accents and a new baby. Scant booze, no drugs. These were exhausted, boring people trapped in a shitty circumstance and I soon took the bus home alone. I had gravitated to this scene because I was listening to cold, dark music, bands like Throbbing Gristle, Einstürzende Neubauten, and Skinny Puppy, but as far as I could see the Boston goth scene was built on a bleak solidarity of alcoholic rage and

working-class desperation. Michelle Tea wrote about that scene in an essay I read many years later in a bookstore, standing up, grinning because I knew many of the places she mentioned and some of the people, though not the good people, rather people like the nasty bottle blond skater who came to school flaunting a switchblade and bragging that over the weekend he'd peed on homeless men.

When we visit the past, we find ourselves chilled and discomfited. We see that people centuries or millennia removed from us are not worldly, are not literate, and do not know our codes. They've aged ahead of schedule, their bodies are scarred and bent. They grin creepily when they are not supposed to, or stare impassively when we expect to be hailed, they fight with invisible forces, swell with horror, are raised high by mania and flattened by voices. They mutter like a dog, exhale the breath of a corpse through chipped teeth, falter unsteadily and pitch to one side, are submissive and blank. They wander off in their heads, shrunken inside, then inexplicably follow us, maybe because we're hateful. They are opaque to themselves and transfixed by revelation, or wracked by tics and shakes. They grow limp and passive. They are sly and violent. They possess unnatural charisma. They are not themselves, they are not sane, they are not what we understood as human.

Scientists have recently demonstrated that because so many of us have lived and died, it is statistically impossible to envision a face that has not existed. Like everyone in this crowd, I am a body moving through space and fighting the nonexistence of time. Like everyone, I am

a body that is called by a name. But surely in the sweep of time there were bodies who were not given names, or who were deprived of names? What horrible things were done to assert the bounds of the humanist, the humanities, the human? Were these nameless people known by sounds; did they answer to anything at all? It is not possible to understand what it would be like to pass nameless through this existence, and yet nearly every one of us who has ever lived is now nameless and unknown.

\*

The fall just before everything changed, the entire elementary school embarked on a serious research project. Having lost our imagination for the future, we were naturally turning to the distant past, a realm just as opaque but apparently real. We had noticed that due to misogyny, cultural taboos, and indifference, folkways and official histories alike omitted any consideration of the great variety of devices women had invented to stanch menstrual blood. So far, we had completed preliminary sketches of some of the major designs, and we expected the final document to encompass tens of millennia. On the face of it, the most striking aspect was the sheer breadth and variety of materials that women had employed: leaves and vines, moss and lichen, dirt and sand, animal eggs and larvae, fur and hair and sinew and tissue, stones and fabrics, bark and wood, animal horns and tusks and teeth, paper and plastic. You would have

had an easier time establishing which materials had not been used for the collection of menstrual blood. We were still chasing down the names of some of the earliest inventors of particular designs. In steadier moments I had to admit that it might be impossible, given the staggering timespans and the scanty record, to establish the originator of a given model. On the other hand, it had been relatively simple to identify groups of early adopters, typically the older women in a clan. Hunter-gatherers proved crucial to this study, as expected, since the neolithic era was the wellspring of human *techne*, as well as the last moment that all humans were capable of love.

On the one hand the historical blindness around these devices was surprising, considering how central they had been to birth, death, and the measurement of human time against the cycles of nature. On the other hand, it was not surprising that such devices were unknown to history, because the body was always located at the center of the machine, gazing outward from the blind spot. As Foucault observed of sickness: “Four or five thousand years of medicine in the West were needed before we had the idea of looking for the cause of the malady in the lesion of a corpse.” It was millennia before people overcame religious and social taboos and attempted elementary dissection. The ancient Greeks, with all their wisdom and prescience, never bothered to open a human up and see how it worked. Leonardo labored into the night by candlelight, bent over his illicit cadavers, and was lucky to escape with his life.

Do you ever wonder how you might

have fared in another time, a more brutal time? Could you have held up? Would you have met the challenge when frightened menfolk came for advice? There is plastic gently pushing through our soft tissues, they explain. And the spirits of the air made the blood go bad. And the evils slipped the leash. And the names lost meaning. What about that time you were hastening back to the village alone on a forlorn track through the wasteland, with just enough light in the sky to make out three men carrying sticks coming across the fields? What about the time you awoke to a flush of fever and a burning in your joints, your eyes red and your skin blotchy, stretched on a pallet at the rim of a muddy world with no cure but leaves and prayers, plus vague encouragements murmured from the threshold of the room, but no closer?

Only five hundred years ago our world was a place of wretched, filthy settlements, lawless wilds, illness and insanity, disfiguration and death, suffering and disorder, malignant magic, cowed belief. And it still is. When my ten-year-old self asks if magic is real, I tell her, Oh lovie, go ask the people who believe in God, they believe in the power of faith, so heaven and all that actually exists for them, with material effects on their lives. Belief makes reality, hon. Consider lawyers and doctors, those contemporary shamans steering wealthy people through slaloms of bumps and bruises, the kind of folks for whom conversation eventually settles into: “Oh, I know a great guy,” “I’ll put you in touch with my guy,” “Oh, you have a guy?” “My guy’s the best,” “My guy doesn’t take no for an answer,” “I’ll talk to my guy,

but I don’t know if he’d have time for you, he’s super busy, but I could try. But you owe me.”

It has taken a while, but now I love all of my different selves: the strong, charismatic self and the weak, loathsome self, the proud masturbator and the sniveling flatulent loser, the ten-year old girl, the middle-aged artist, the hustling Trader, the blithely clueless Euro, the dead animal.

\*

The first opportunity we had to sit down, I managed to irritate the Trader. I had said something affirmative about the villa’s architecture and he couldn’t hide his pleasure, which manifested as a raised palm and a series of nods. But don’t you wonder what happened to all the wealthy eccentrics, I continued, I mean, they don’t commission residential architecture the way they used to, do they?

He frowned and replied, irrelevantly, that it was all numbers-driven. Taste, he said, was conditioned by the dominant technologies. The math of a century ago lived in the world of the steam engine, so it preferred to describe thermodynamics and entropy. Today’s math follows the problems of Big Data: behavioral prediction and analysis. It’s just numbers, he said.

I’m not talking about that, I said. What he’d said was deeply aggravating. I knew that everything immaterial existed beyond the power of quantification, and was therefore irrational, and that the irrational was only allowed in forms and conditions that were tightly regulated: love and desire,

ideas and dreams and mysticism, commonality, solidarity, art.

It’s taste and style I’m talking about, I said, nothing else. I’m talking about all the things that don’t make sense. Everything that is dirty, old, chaotic, senseless, ugly, repellant: this is what is being designed out of sight and out of existence, and that’s why it must be embodied in art, or architecture, for that matter.

I could tell he was irritated, but he said nothing and looked at me expectantly. The business mindset cultivated an admirable wisdom about when to go in for the kill and when to make room so your opponent can step in a hole. I thought of the poet H.D.’s observation that while Hermes Trismegistus may have been a mystic, he very much needed his clients: “orators, thieves, and poets.” I smiled with pleasure and uncrossed my legs.

If you could travel back to the architecture of the Sixties or Seventies, I said, you’d be surprised to discover a wholly different design culture. The wealthy, men such as yourself, commissioned young architects to build singularly bizarre residences. A well-to-do doctor, aristocrat, or businessman of the period considered architecture and design to be a form of self-expression. Even in the mid-Eighties you’d have been able to open the pages of *Domus* magazine and see a person’s splendidly rash commitment to full-on Memphis design: a pad in Paris, Milan, or Los Angeles that was less a home than a ritualistic arrangement of glyphs and magical objects whose geometries and patterns were supposed to hasten the onset of late-capitalism.

I paused, holding a rhetorical torch to my chin. The Trader regarded me stonily.

In the late Eighties and Nineties, though—and I was careful to periodize so the Trader’s island villa might hover beyond history, since that’s where wealthy white guys found themselves most comfortable—most architects abandoned quirky residential projects in favor of corporate clientele. The pages of *Domus* and *Architectural Digest* filled with atriums and headquarters. Museums were now the de facto way to prove your architectural worth. The shift wasn’t only on the side of designers, but customers too. There were few residences worth featuring in the magazines because the wealthy had seized on the neutered templates of corporate minimalism, a style where everyone wanted the same look: inoffensive luxury spa. This was a matter of taste and trends, but it was also financial good sense because such a home retained value for the inevitable flip. All buyers at these price points expected the same details: a huge tub in the master bath, an open-plan living room based around a massive coffee table, a cook’s kitchen with an island, hardwood floors, skim-coated walls, aluminum-frame picture windows, and so on. A residence was no longer an extension of a wealthy owner’s id, merely of his ego.

The coveted architects for these residences were designers of actual super-luxury hotels, only coaxed out of their Singapore planning offices by a Texas oil-billionaire constructing a “beach house,” a structure which would feel, in its coldness, like an empty hotel. This had a perverse genius, because you’d live in a constant revelation of, hold on, where are the other guests? Oh yeah, they couldn’t afford it.

“Bravo,” said the Trader.

“Yes,” I said, but now the same sickness that altered the homes of the wealthy had afflicted the garb of middle-class metropolitan people the world over: the old kaleidoscope had been replaced by a host of muted, smooth, pseudo-options, each promising to remake the wearer as a sophisticated, discerning, in-the-know *professional*. A maximally producible component. And don’t get me started on car design!

“Okay,” said the Trader. Ambitious in its scope.

“Well,” I said, “the thing to remember is how leveraged buyouts pioneer Teddy Forstmann described his most famous deal, reviving an ailing private jet company: ‘I’m an artist, and Gulfstream was a big canvas.’”

The Trader shook his head and put down his empty glass. Well, he said. With relief I saw that he couldn’t bring himself to react positively because he was admiring. Men are conditioned to want the approval of powerful men, I thought, specifically the power to share in ritualized transgression: the breaking of taboos, the invitation to violence, the abuse or removal of those outside the circle, and the clear-eyed analysis that everything is going to hell. The Trader stood, smiling faintly, and invited me to accompany him upstairs.

\*

I have one thing to say, a word of caution before we dive into even colder water. The fact that you think some things are meaningful, immortal, classic, and timeless is exactly how you know they’re passing from relevance, rolling steadily away, down the slopes, into night country. The Bible and Shakespeare, the Russians and rock ’n’ roll, contemporary art and fashion, radical philosophy and rap, graphic design, social media, video games, love and mutual care and solidarity: all are gone and dead. The fact that they are important to you only underlines their slide into the past. We applaud effort alone. We clap for the broad smile of the dancers as they take their bows after hours of exertion: this, in fact, is the performance we’ve been waiting for.

\*

I remember a time after school when my friend and I spent some time aimlessly walking around downtown making wheezing noises and tossing our arms in the air. My friend was wearing a hooded robe, his hairless ankles strapped into Hellenic sandals grown from cultured mushroom funk. New York appeared to be a medieval settlement: rude lean-tos on muddy haughs, smoky wood fires, grimy palms. Insanity and disease were on full display. In a way you could say that we’re finally returning to the pagan era, whispered my extra part, why do you think there is so much sickness and death right now? The medieval era is rolling over us like a heavy pall of smog, you

don’t even realize it’s here. Masked and hooded passersby were wheeling out of the dark like dancers and rotating away, storefronts were telescoping into assemblages of flat surfaces joined inexpertly, threatening to burst. I saw people with missing limbs, sprawled on blankets, rolled in rags like jelly donuts. I couldn’t tell if I was standing in a pricey neighborhood or a miserable ghetto. People around me were coining words at a furious rate as if they wished to break the language, and they were, it was fracturing into iridescent splinters like glass underfoot. A teen passerby murmured, “That’s flee, son,” but it could have been “flea,” or “fleet,” or maybe he said, “That’s fleecin” in a faux-Southern drawl. Someone else muttered “Do you have service? I can’t get a signal.” I smiled: these very words, or versions of them spoken across the globe, would be the first, innocent signs that would usher in the new age. A banal and minor lack, situated securely in the realm of the personal insult, would mark the threshold over which we would step on our way to understanding that an apocalyptic event had occurred and everything had changed.

But everywhere, people were smiling. Smiles to go with imagined families and partners and children, and smiles for meals and exercise and clothes, smiles emanating from store windows and bus shelters and the sides of buildings, from screens and phones and plastic surfaces, smiles like a playlist for pleasure, nonspecifically perfect for all activities: chilling, working, cooking, gaming, chores, party, workout, driving. The problem with valuing pleasure is that pleasure is too easily

turned into profit, and profitability allows for identity creation, and identity is the absolute worst.

We considered love, and smiles. Some of the last century's most iconic images of passion and love and fierce intensity were produced by artists like Picasso. Picasso—obviously obsessed with sex and love, he made enough randy work to confirm it—was notoriously undersexed, a proto-incel if you believe the reports, which include a close read of his mistresses' correspondence and several of his biographies, though not John Richardson's, that social climber. Anyway, it's clear that Picasso either could not or would not have sex regularly, even going up to two years without. When he did have sex, it correlated with periods of inactivity and artistic frustration. Contrariwise, he was at his most productive when he was basically celibate. Get the picture? Like a nightclub seen in the daylight of a propped door when it's mopped out.

I knew that the best images were those that people wish to reproduce themselves, the images that had the power to briefly turn people from consumers into producers: rashes, blistering skin bubbles, people leaking inside out, people sucked through holes, people flayed, people liquefied, people topologically morphed into acres of organic film the width of a single cell and visible only as a slight tint to the surroundings. The perfect image was a calculated, scientific redistribution of the human, a clinical impulse applied to the unruliness of the organic.

*What is flaying?* When the skin is removed. *Who would be flayed today?* Someone smiling. *Who smiles?* Someone

valuable. *Whom do we burn?* The one who does that which is not allowed. *What is disallowed?* It is not allowed for a thing to become other than itself, to depart from itself, or to be itself and something other than itself.

I knew that if I plucked a discarded foil wrapper from this pagan street and sent it to the Neolithic Era, it would become a magical token carried close to a body, over decades, through generations, evermore worn and creased, an amulet of power that would lead to the spilling of blood. At a young age we learn that ugliness is punished; it takes longer to grasp that the world cannot abide beauty.

\*

I awoke to find myself bound and gagged, with hooks in my nipples and belts digging under my ribs. My body burned, as if the currents of air were currents of flame, and I understood that I was newly stripped of my skin. A low chuckle issued from the darkness at the center of the room. I heard the Trader's voice rumbling from somewhere close, possibly inside of me. "The last two thousand years have unfettered us," it said. "There are no predators. Most diseases and other threats to our health have been minimized. Humanity has rid itself of all restrictions. *There are no longer any limits.*"

I could feel him moving slowly within me as he spoke, a fruiting body sprouting in the darkness of a rotting tube. I was calm. I remembered Schelling's paradoxical secret of true poetry: "to

be simultaneously drunk and sober." I understood that I must submit to possession by invisible forces, yet somehow retain sovereignty.

I smiled. "Yes," I said. "Now we are our own limit."

The Trader smiled. "Yes. The test of a true orthodoxy is whether it can build a church. Not just a sect or some random group of gnostic individuals, a church, which needs to be simple and accessible to all. And to do this you need to find ways of sanctifying the basics of life, so that together we can take part in the rituals around eating, sex, birth, illness, and death. The thing is, the Internet, meaning social media and decentralized life, does all of that."

I smiled. "Yes. But the problem is, there's no sense of time on the screen. Everything is new, bright, and contemporary. Sure, there's no sweat, no rot, no stink of decay. But neither is there mystery. Mystery needs a time and a place, and on screen there is no place and no time, only an endless present. And if you remove our sense of time, the world ends."

The girl was here, too, and she also smiled. "Yes. The sense of time is a reflexive invention designed to give meaning, much the way that our mind corrects the upside-down vision of the world transmitted by the optic nerve. In creating a continuous present, we blind ourselves to the ceaseless play of transition. For us there will be no flash of gnosis, only the dim glow of faith."

I smiled. "Yes. And that was the problem with Christianity: it was fantastic at creating a structure that allowed it to win out over the rival sects skirmishing at the

feet of Christ on the cross, but by banishing gnosis and mystery it guaranteed that it would wither in the face of capitalist technomancy."

The Trader smiled. "Yes. The water has been muddied, and the clouds of silt make it hard to see what lies ahead. However, I think we can agree that we are heading into a new world: *new world, new people, new self.*"

The girl smiled. "Yes. We gain an advantage, by establishing an open position. Seize the moment of blood."

I smiled. "Yes. Nietzsche had an open position. He was always mutating and moving. People from across the political spectrum continue to find things of value in his work, often contradictory things. To maintain an open position means becoming and dissolving, over and over, in overlapping waves."

The Trader smiled. "Yes. A lot of the fashion we associate with the Nineties had a kind of open position, didn't it? It wasn't about specific *works*; it was about the proposition that a new path might be possible."

The girl smiled. "Yes. Margiela demonstrated how to be a certain *kind* of artist, he showed that things could be done differently. For years, his brand wasn't really about garments that people actually bought. It was only in the 2000s that he began to market jeans and accessories in a more conventional, mass-market way, and even then, he remained strongest as an idea."

I smiled. "Yes. In an age when the poet can no longer write poems, he must do so by other means: a fashion career, an art career."

The Trader smiled. “Yes. But now we look back on all of this, restless and impatient.”

The girl smiled. “Yes. I tilt my palm and all the worldly things tumble away, mingling as they fall, a distended jumble of clothes, architecture, design, artworks, advertisements, foodstuffs, trends, traditions.”

The Trader smiled. “Yes. Jeans, accessories, hotel lobbies, tech gear, cinematography, artist editions, HiFis, photography, athleisure, WASPs.”

I smiled. “Yes. Bosch, Lovecraft, Haraway, Highsmith, Cicero, Margiela, Picasso, H.D.”

The girl smiled. “Yes. All these treasures pale in comparison to our new luxury: the infinite book.”

The Trader smiled. “Yes. The Internet changed everything, but not for the reasons most people think. The reason the Internet ushered in a new age was that it confirmed something we had suspected for millennia, the thing we’d feared and prayed for, the wager on which we’d built our mightiest institutions: the idea that our world is composed of invisible lines of force which connect everything in webs of power that cannot be meaningfully touched, identified, or manipulated.”

The girl smiled. “Yes. And now we have embarked upon a communal writing of the final spell.”

I smiled. “Yes. Toward the end we became a society ruled by things we didn’t understand. Of course, in some ways that was always the case, like with church and science, but after the end of the age of empire we realized that empire and colony lived on inside of us, for we were now split between a dematerialized life and a material life.”

The girl smiled. “Yes. I am the hand, and the handheld.”

The Trader smiled. “Yes. For fifty years the level of social abstraction steadily increased, thanks to electronic markets and their alien instruments, and the sloughing-off of unnecessary objects like books and records and stores, and burgeoning surveillance, and social media, and virtual life.”

The girl smiled. “Yes. And this pyroclastic flow of abstraction had physical and material effects, the growing severity of which were commensurate with the degree to which people were distanced from any real understanding of them. Most people found themselves forced to adapt to the supposed inevitability of distance, risk, and instrumentalization.”

The Trader smiled. “Yes. The problem was not that people were ruled by abstraction and alienation, since, as you point out, they were always ruled by things they didn’t understand. The real problem was that there was no longer any ruling cosmology: no vision, no past, no future. Only endless growth and takeover.”

The girl smiled. “Yes. The hallmark of a cancer.”

I smiled. “Yes. Recent history has seen a widespread corrosion of social structures, dressed up as a gift to social structures. Art lost its power in this age and retreated a bit, and turned its shoulder. Writing gained something, but was exhausted and scattered.”

The Trader smiled. “Yes. The twentieth century was a dark and bloody time, and writing was made safe by driving it into the walls of the meritocratic private university, an institution built specially for

the purpose. But this library in a garden turned out to be best at financial accumulation. And where did that leave the written word?”

The girl smiled. “Yes. The spirit of academic scholarship was utopic and deeply communal, based as it was upon the weaving of a fabric of interlocking research and reference. Groups of scholars wove thickly braided ropes that were eventually fashioned into ladders. But when all those ladders hung for too long inside the institution they began to function like nets, entrapping us.”

I smiled. “Yes. If something goes too long unchanged, it destroys itself. Art must go beyond where the narratives reach, to where nothing *is*, rather where things are becoming. As Montaigne said, ‘Unremittingly we begin our lives anew.’”

The girl smiled. “Yes. Consider a healthy forest: it can go on and on, because organisms are constantly dying and birthing, over and over, in ceaseless and messy transition. Nature continuously dismembers and re-members itself.”

The Trader smiled. “Yes. Human history is similar, because it is not fixed in a stratified record that can be easily studied, as with geologic history; it is the actual process of re-membering and dismembering.”

I smiled. “Yes. But ask a child to draw a forest and the child will express a vision of culture, not nature, by drawing an array of tall, straight, evenly-spaced trunks of the same species. That is not a natural forest, it’s a tree farm. A healthy forest is a mess of wreckage and rampant heterogeneity, with life choking death and decay feeding young shoots. The child has expressed a

vision of ordered culture, in which inside and outside are separate and intact.”

The girl smiled. “Yes. But this affliction is not limited to the young. Many of the certainties of childhood seem to be carried over into the tools of adulthood. The U.S. Senate looks less like a healthy forest than it does a tree farm: ranks of taller, older, well-fed specimens, of more or less the same varietal, repeated in lifeless rows.”

I smiled. “Yes. The thing is, a tool does not function properly if it cannot separate itself from itself, and exist at once inside and outside. It must work against itself. If you can’t misuse a tool, it’s a bad tool.”

The Trader smiled. “Yes. I recently bought a Babylonian seal of the sort used to legitimize the earliest written transactions. I placed it in a vitrine in my study. Thousands of years ago it was commissioned by some powerful, wealthy man, every trace of whom has been erased. It was lost for eons, and now it is once again owned by a powerful, wealthy man. I, too, will soon be erased. The seal continues to make its mark, and its purpose remains intact.”

The girl smiled. “Yes. Culture, in fact, is a perversion of the tools. Culture means writing in a book—whether that means annotating it, vandalizing it, or personalizing it—and giving it to someone else. But today we find that our books cannot be written in, and they cannot be shared, and it turns out they’re not even ours. They are artifacts that cannot in any meaningful sense be possessed, circulated, or altered.”

I smiled. “Yes. And that is unfortunate, because when it comes to culture,

the highest goal is to hand off the codes to younger people for total perversion. Hindu cosmology tells us there are four stages in life: the student, the householder, the forest-dweller, and the renunciant. As a middle-aged artist, I am transitioning to *vanaprastha*, the stage of forest-dwelling. Now, this doesn't literally mean moving to the woods, or to a volcanic island. It means turning away from world-building in favor of more spiritual pursuits, thereby ceding space to a newer generation. It means dismembering in order that someone else may do the re-membering. It means becoming a mentor or guide: handing off the codes, passing the book."

The girl smiled. "Yes. You won't be able to put this book down until the very last page!"

As we finished our conversation, the beat of a TR-808 drum machine faded in on the soundtrack. The image "morphed" into an endlessly rippling CGI ocean with the lustrous texture of ray-traced graphics, where every solid volume was rendered as a softly appealing packaged candy from a distant land. The vast thunderhead on the horizon revealed itself to be a wise female alien one thousand years old, smiling enigmatically as she turned her back on the future with a toss of her tentacular dread locks, which belied her otherwise Caucasian features.

We smiled. All three of us were finally integrated on all levels: the self that is, the self that was, and the self that is to come. We sensed the horrors of the unknown and senseless, and the horrors of the well-known and commonsensical. We welcomed the age-old implications of vegetal time, where life endlessly feeds on

life, and death is necessary to ensure the continuation of the universe: translated into human social terms, this yielded the logic of the sacrifice.

"Yes," we said. "Thinking comes from the body. We have increasingly allied ourselves with the machine and the idea of infinite, mathematical thought, where one proposition builds upon the next and we may know the weight of every brick. But thinking comes from the body. You reply, 'Yes, of course, because the body represents passion, movement, spontaneity, and it's only natural that thinking flows from vitality.' This may be true of the body, but it's not what we mean. We mean to say that thought comes from that which dies, from the thing that belongs to soil and rot. As much as human thinking may suggest the infinite, and promise all that lies beyond time and space, it emerges from the bounded space and time of dying."