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Everything I got away with

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Again and Again the Lake

The lakes by the university are small and grey at all times of year. A power plant thunders ceaselessly nearby. My family always walks by it first. These lakes are where I grew up. They are where my family of three comes to talk. We visit only when other people--students, faculty, football fans--are gone: summer recesses, brief breaks and long weekends. At these times there is nothing but the clear cold still lakes and the graceful swans and greedy ducks, who, like us, never seem to leave.

It's simple to walk the lakes at Notre Dame. Anyone can walk the lakes, just as anyone can visit Notre Dame, as long as they remember the mispronunciation of Notre Dame is the correct one. There's no need to use the full name, which no one remembers, except you as of now: The University of Notre Dame du Lac.

"Notre" as in our.

"Dame" as in dame (as in, "blonde dame walked into to my office").

"Du" as in of (not two).

"Lac" as in lake, as in the lake the French priests found while settling this Indiana land, but not lakes, as in the second of the two lakes of Notre Dame, which went unnoticed beneath the snow until the following spring, when the plural was too late to add.

Indiana is the sort of place that could hide a lake under snow, which is another way of saying Indiana has seasons. Under the seasons, Indiana is almost always beautiful, as well as at all times either too hot or too cold. The only months Indiana is not beautiful are November and February, the deadest of months, but both are ugly in beautiful ways: the stark leafless November and the slushy quagmire of February. And the lakes have more than just four seasons. They have seasons by the month, like the three summers: fresh June, brilliant July, and smoldering August. In Indiana, August is the funeral pyre that burns away the last of summer.

Then there are seasons we can measure by the weeks, or the days, like when we walk the lakes often enough in the spring to see the volume, and density and variety of green increase each day. On Notre Dame's lakes, we can pinpoint the seasons to the minute, especially in spring and fall, when the growth waxes or wanes in response to the smallest changes in temperature; we see it in the snowdrops of March and the red edges of August leaves. Even in winter and summer we can tell the time of year by the subtle variations in temperature as white grey winter and blue green summer climb and wane. The three of us watch spring come again each year, watch the daffodils and snow drops bloom in almost-the-same places, just off enough to remind us that they are not reborn: only the children of the generation that died forever last year.

In all and any season, the three of us walk the lake asking each other for answers. Will the next semester go well? Will we get the budget cuts? Will the football team win? Will grandfather make it through Christmas? Will the carrot cake be unburned? Will the cookies defrost by dinner? What will happen next? What will happen next?

In spring, the redbuds bloom. Flowers boil from their limbs and branches like a rash, in sticky red patches that look like a disease that would be beautiful to have. We find the redbuds beautiful, and nearly always say so. One of us will declare it so and the others will nod in agreement, in as few words as we need. The redbuds are obviously beautiful, reaching for the sky in the breeze as they do every spring, and there is no reason to describe again what we can each see. We simply nod to each other and remember our years talking of redbuds. Our conversations are short. We are only adding a sentence or two to a decades-old conversation started when we first walked these lakes. By now our ode to the redbuds is quite long, and only a few new words need be said aloud each year, added as easily and necessarily and predictably as flowers blooming from a new branch of a redbud tree.

We talk about the weather and the lake, and then we talk of everything else. Walking around the lake will solve our problems. Or they will feel solvable. My mother worries the most; on her desk there is a short

unattributed saying: "If the problem can be solved, there is no need to worry. If it cannot be solved, worrying will do no good." She tries to follow it. She worries about her husband and her son and her students. They are students of Saint Mary's, the college founded by the nuns brought to do the laundry and chores of the priests of Notre Dame. Times have too little changed. The students of Saint Mary's are not treated well by the students of Notre Dame. It will be difficult for my mother to be comforted by my father, who works at Notre Dame, but she will be, and our conversations about the redbuds will help.

My own problems are not so troubling, but together we talk about them. We have learned exactly how to give each other advice. I do not advise my parents but lightly, and there is a limit to how much my parents will be listened to by their child. My mother can slip real advice in with her jokes, and it is okay if I do not pay especially close attention.

On the winding grey gravel path we listen to the ducks and swans and each other. This helps when the advice does not. It is a curious thing; we do not know the answers until we talk about them. We don't need to say anything until it is our turn to speak. Despite difficulties--my parents fight more, worry more, forget more, while I slowly assemble a grown-up life--we return to this place, charting its course from fall to spring, winter

to summer, and all that occurs or has occurred or will occur will have its solution here.

In Notre Dame, Indiana, there are no hills, no oceans, no mountains, no visible horizons or topography, so that at the lakes of Notre Dame it is possible to imagine, even in winter when we can see far through the leafless trees, that our small universe extends infinitely in all directions.

I enjoy walking the lakes more than almost anything I do when I am home, as much as eating grilled chicken a la Diablo in the sunlit backyard or drinking cheap pitchers with my friends in dive bars. I look forward to shrugging off my problems and leaving them in the snow or by the chortling spring ducks, soon to replace their aging parents. Notre Dame may be at all times too hot or too cold but there are only a few days each year, the dead of winter and the dead of summer, which make a walk around the lake truly impossible. We can rely on the lake, and it will take us along the routes we know we must go, and we will wind our threadbare lives into something more manageable.

As I grow older, I worry more as well. I am young; I will not always be young. My parents still appear young to me until I am suddenly reminded, by some Christmas memory or a story told while lounging with their friends from work, that they are not. My parents are both small. Lately they seem smaller, but also brighter, their qualities magnified as if

they are being distilled into a more pure form. My father is more clever and argumentative; my mother is more worried and generous. As we circle the lakes now, I can no longer stop thinking of how my parents are changing, how they have changed, and the unimaginable certainty of their death.

Thirteen Numbers

I wouldn't say I miss God or anything. I wouldn't say it like that, but I understand the feeling a little.

1.

When I was born, my parents decided I would be Episcopalian. Neither of my parents were Episcopalian. My mother went through a lot of religions, and by the time she met my father, she was once-divorced and of vague denomination. This posed a problem in getting married to my Catholic father: the Pope would have to annul her previous marriage. My dad didn't want to wait, so he simply lied to the priest.

When I was born they baptized me in the religion they figured would give them the least hassle down the road.

2.

My father is a stubborn Catholic, but he is Catholic down to his bones. He will never leave the Church, though he does not attend. Catholic

is just something he is, and is so thoroughly he professes his faith only by living it, in ways that took me a very long time to understand. His foremost way of professing faith is by not asking for permission to profess. It has been over thirty-five years since his last confession.

3.

When I was fifteen my parents sent me to a high school with a conservative bent quite contrary to their own. It was a good school. We learned religious history, about both the winning and the losing philosophies, which (when they lose) become heresies, unless of course the idea catches on and everyone who believes it isn't killed, in which case they get to call everyone else heretics too.

We learned that all the arbitrary differences between our strictly Christian denominations were decided hundreds or thousands of year ago by a group of men at a table somewhere (such as my favorite, the Diet of Worms). None of us seemed to mind very much. Rather than their decisions seeming arbitrary, they began to matter to me for the first time. The men making these decisions took them very seriously and the more we read about them, the more clear it seemed why different definitions of the universe ended up being perfectly good reasons to kill each other over.

4.

" I still thought that it is not we who sin but some other nature that sins within us. It flattered my pride to think that I incurred no guilt and, when I did wrong, not to confess it... I preferred to excuse myself and blame this unknown thing which was in me but was not part of me. The truth, of course, was that it was all my own self, and my own impiety had divided me against myself. My sin was all the more incurable because I did not think myself a sinner." St. Augustine, speaking against his former beliefs in Manichaeism, a belief system based primarily around the philosophy that sprit is good and matter is evil, and evil is caused by the mere existence of the material world.

5.

The universe where matter is evil is very different from the universe where humans are evil. Augustine understood beliefs about the universe are so powerful and incompatible, so compelling to human thought, that they were worth getting fairly upset about. Augustine felt that it was better to feel guilty than believe sin's origin was external. How guilty one should feel is an interesting follow up question.

In my household we kept on a relatively low guilt diet. I like to think it was just enough guilt to be healthy.

6.

Learning about evolution and religious history didn't disconnect me from religion, but Hell did. For a lot of my friends the logical contradictions in religion bugged them--evolution and creationism cannot coexist, unless one sees the Bible as allegorical, not literal--but I had always been taught to understand religion that way. I was troubled by inconsistencies in the metaphors instead.

I understood Hell existed to punish sinners. But why do people sin? If people are born sinners, that would mean God makes people evil and therefore they are born to suffer torment for the crimes they were born to commit. If sin is caused by choice, though, that is no relief either. Choices are learned. I don't know what I would have become if I hadn't been taught by my parents what I was. How is it fair that I was taught how to be good while others were not? In any case, Hell felt terribly unfair.

7.

8.

I faced God at the end of a Gameboy game a bit before I started middle school (I'd later learn it's not uncommon; lots of Japanese games have the player killing God at the end) and when I did I turned the machine off and wandered through my grandmother's house, which was very quiet; the sun somehow seemed brighter and the inside seemed darker, the bathrooms and bedrooms for the guests were hazy and dark, and my eyes just couldn't quite see through them. I decided then if Creator

was the sort of person that would treat people like things then it wasn't God, couldn't be God, so I went ahead and killed him.

9.

I was interested in the creation of religion, so I began to read fantasy and science fiction novels. Their authors were interested in the same things I was. Actual inventors of new religions only disappointed me. Cults are supremely uninterested in the details of their belief systems. Cult leaders are experts of a different kind than authors. The individual details of their beliefs do not matter; it's the social execution that matters. They more closely resemble salesmen. Cults are frighteningly similar in structure despite depending on belief systems the average observe might generously describe as "wacky," so strange and contradictory that it becomes difficult to imagine anyone could fall for a mythology so absurd, though many do. Cults don't work through compelling explanation. They involve cutting ties with relatives, adherence to strict social practices, and other procedures that would force the adherents to no longer be able to work within the same society as their peers.

I don't usually find anything interesting about what cults believe, but their power is hard to look away from.

10.

"You'd feel cheated if it never happened. Without the grounding reality, it's just a trite bit of puffery, pure Hollywood, untrue in the way all such stories are untrue. Yet even if it did happen--and maybe it did, anything's possible--even then you know it can't be true, because a true war story does not depend upon that kind of truth. Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth." --I keep these words from Tim O'Brien close.

Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A belief system that does not feel true is not true. One that feels true is true. Whether or not it exists in reality is irrelevant. My parents instilled this one lesson in me completely: I have the freedom to choose which is which.

11.

"Did you miss God?"

"Yes, terribly. And I still do. And what I miss most is the sense of being connected to the whole of the universe."

I found it terribly sad as well, what Dr. Malone says here in *His Dark Materials*. At the end, when the heroes destroy the Judeo-Christian authority, the dead are released (literally/metaphorically) from the

constraints of the afterlife to become one with the universe. The loss of Dr. Malone, scientist and former nun, who misses the sense of being connected to the whole of the universe, is filled.

My mother and I read this book together. That's good, that sounds right, the two of us thought, because Philip Pullman's conception of secular philosophy felt--to me at any rate--completely in keeping with the version of religion I had been brought up with. I felt it more accurate in many ways, and not contradictory at all. That had always been it, all along.

12.

My mother likes the Catholic Church because she finds meaning in the rituals. I like rituals too because I also find meaning in them.

It's possible I used to have obsessive compulsive disorder. That's gone, don't worry about it, but I used to do these things:

1. Whenever I saw an addresses while passing by in a car, usually on the way to school or the bookstore, I would add up all of the numbers in the sequence until I arrived at a single digit. 47689 would become 4+7+6+8+9 would become 11+14+9 would become 34 and then 3+4 and then 7. One of the tricks of math is that no matter how or what order you add them up, the final answer is always the same. Nines and zeros were the luckiest results.

2. No stepping on cracks. If possible I would follow the direction the tiles or stones were pointing in. "Step on a crack, break your mother's back." I took this further than most. My most complicated step: look at the four corners of the table. Imagine an invisible line that extends from where the two perpendicular lines meet. I would not step on the ground where these invisible lines would occur. It was very challenging.

3. For a period of time lasting around a year, I would repeat in my head at all times, as frequently as possible, "I love god, I believe in god, I hate the devil, I renounce Satan." Those are certainly the words because it still feels extremely wrong and unsettling and violating to write them out. It's very troubling to see them out of my head like that. I'm not just embarrassed about it, or worried by writing it out that I sound really, truly, legitimately crazy. I'm worried about starting to do it again. About the consequences of having stopped. I've broken a powerful spell. I still respect it even though I have no use for it anymore. It ruled my life and terrifies me still. I try to forget about it.

13.

The truth is I don't really know why I did it. I was doing it, but it wasn't like I wanted to be doing it, but it wasn't like anything was making

me do it. I didn't want to stop though; doing these incantations made me feel better, and I wasn't sure how else to relax. I felt fairly sure that I would be okay by continuing to do these things over and over again. I don't really do any of these anymore. I have found new ways to look out for cracks and new cracks to look out for.

The Invention of Memory

The other day I tried to describe a specific moment from when I was four or five. It was spring, and there had been a fantastic storm, and the clouds were leaving so fast, so visibly fast, that everyone in the neighborhood had come out to watch. We were lined up on the brick street, and the clouds were retreating so suddenly that it looked as if they were being peeled off the blue sky. The sun came out; suddenly I felt I had to change into shorts. I left my parents to change, and while I was upstairs changing, I could see the tops of the clouds as they passed against the tips of the roofs of our neighborhood. Lightning flashed and struck across the street, in the lawn of my childhood friend's home.

Does this sound like it could have happened? I'm sure it sounds improbable, but until I began putting it down in words I was sure the storm had come and passed exactly as I described it. The memory had been with me for as long as I can remember, always fresh in my mind. But when I tried to describe the event it suddenly seemed absurd. Many of the details are physically impossible: the window of my bedroom in that house never faced the street, so I couldn't have possibly both changed my clothes and watched the clouds; at no time in the Midwest do clouds ever reach low enough to touch rooftops, and if lightning had struck our

neighbor's yard the damage would have been enough to overwhelm every other part of the memory.

But until early adolescence I was convinced that all this had happened. No matter how unreal my description sounds, to me it is still such a vivid memory that despite logical errors and impossibilities and contradictions I can recall every part of the memory intimately: the slow grey roiling clouds moving inch by inch through the sky past the roofs of the houses, the jagged blue of the lightning, the blur of rain giving way instantly to sunlight and warmth. I recall it often. I want to live in that place forever: perfect temperature, perfect light, perfect wind and water. I want to repeat it over and over again.

There are a few small memories, like this memory of the storm, that have become a fundamental aspect of myself. There's no clear meaning to the memory; it simply happened and was beautiful. Maybe if I describe it often enough, or well enough, its meaning will be become clear, and so I roll it over in my mind again and again, hoping and trying to get it right, without even knowing what that means.

It seems a bigger lie to write that it wasn't possible for the clouds to be three feet above the rooftops and slowly depart from our neighborhood. I remember the sight and sensation of it vividly. If someone had tried to convince me it was impossible for clouds to behave like that I wouldn't

have believed them. But I couldn't have seen it happen, because it did not happen.

It was while writing that I realized it was impossible. I went to change my clothes in the middle of the storm—which was very odd. I remember watching the clouds from my window, which did not face the street. The impossible window confirms with certainty that this memory is not a memory at all. Perhaps it was a dream. It wouldn't be the first dream I remembered as vividly as a memory. I still remember a nightmare in which I fell down the stairs of our old house in slow motion, which though it sounds comical, still terrifies me.

Dreams may seem real, but the instant I wake up the difference is clear. I've never been awake and wondered if I was dreaming. But I have woken up and been unsure, even a few hours after waking, if something actually happened or was just a dream. Did I really send that email? Did I really pick up avocados at the store? Bad dreams—especially ones centered on public embarrassment or oversleeping—are more easily confirmed as false. But dreams that are neither good nor bad are the worst, waking up to the disappointment of realizing resolution never came, and I'm going to have to buy produce from the store again.

Like those neutral dreams, the memory of the storm was close enough to being real that I couldn't be completely sure it had never

happened. So I asked my mother about it. I'm trying to tell this story, I told her, about how I imagined a thing had happened when it hadn't actually. Do you remember me talking about it?

She had. She told me she remembered the event vividly. I had left in the middle of the storm, she verified. Lightning had not struck our neighbor's yard and the clouds were not mere feet from the roofs but I had the gist of it. She said she would not have remembered the event so strongly if it hadn't been for the visible effect it had on me. She told me that parents remember the moments that shape their children. Though what it shaped in me is hard to know, since though the memory has changed so much, I cannot remember what it used to be. I do not know what it used to be, only what it has now become.

Can my memory as it is now still be considered the same as the memory I used to have? If this was a moment that shaped me, what am I to think about how I shaped it in return? Maybe it is like a photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy, or a VHS tape played so often the magnetic tape has broken down. Maybe when the memory was first recorded I was simply too young to understand what was happening, and the details were recorded falsely in my mind. I misunderstood the shape of the clouds somehow. Maybe I went to another room for a better view after changing.

I don't know how I was able to see the lightning strike the earth, though. It seems obviously invented, barely possible. But one way or another, the instability of this memory makes me question my stability as a person. If I am who I am mostly because of my memories, If I am shaped primarily by the events I have experienced, it presents the possibility that I could become a different person simply by remembering things wrong.

What this memory is the first moment I can remember of the world seizing hold of me and refusing to let go. It was beautiful, it was holy, it was powerful, overwhelming but also peaceful, without meaning anything specific, proving itself by its mere existence. I have seen nature look as beautiful as it did in that memory many times since then. I see it everywhere because on that one day I saw it for the first time. Even if it turned out my first memory was invented, no more than a dream, nothing would have changed; I would still be able to find and see that beauty in the world. The lesson of the memory held true.

That my memory of the storm was a mixture of fact and fiction is more unsettling than the idea that a foundational moment of my life was based on a memory of dream. It would have been easier to believe that memories were either true or false. Then the only work would be sifting each of my memories into those that really happened or those that were subconsciously invented, memories of dreams. When it became apparent

to me that all my memories were both true and false, however, every detail came under individual scrutiny. It's not so much the question of what is or isn't true that bothers me. It's why some parts of memories are true and some aren't. What explains the bolt of lightning? Why would I remember something like that? It's breathtaking but only because it actually happened, so real that I couldn't have possibly invented it (yet of course I did).

If I did it I did it. I just don't know how I painted a memory without even remembering that I did so. From the base coat of remembrance, I added layer after layer of vivid dream. The invention of memory is beautiful, but forgetting which parts I made it up is scary. Most of what makes me who I am is what I remember. How I was raised. What I learned and experienced. How I grew. How I was made fun of so much in elementary school that it still colors my difficulties interacting with people. If I could simply imagine a more happy childhood, then forget I imagined it, wouldn't that be no different at all from having a happy childhood? If it's so easy for memories to transform, why can't I control it consciously?

If I could control my memories you can bet I wouldn't say something like, "Well, those are my precious memories, and I wouldn't be the person I am if I didn't go through them." I'd say, there was no reason for me to go through all of that crap as kid, endure the eye rolls of teachers

and the taunts of children. It made being a person much harder and I'd be happier never having gone through it. The scar tissue has made me weaker, not stronger. So what's the key to controlling it? How do I gently slide my past into a more positive frame? How can I invent the memory of the person I want to be?

Or perhaps I am already controlling my memories. Already altering them on purpose, then forgetting it. Maybe I'm already editing my memories to be the ones I wish I had. The mistakes in my memory could be flaws in the machinery of the brain itself—the brain is an object, when you get right down to it, just like magnetic tape, that can be flawed, be prone to error, break down. But it could also be a semi-conscious act of creation, a mechanism to preserve how breathtaking the first memory of storm was, by with each remembrance adding more: every time the storm becomes more clear, more vivid, more sublime.

In which case, the memory is not precious to me because I am trying to return to or reclaim that moment. When it happened, that storm was almost certainly the most powerful moment of my life. I created a memory of raw, unexplainable beauty. What I remember is not the storm, but how the storm made me feel. So every time I remember it, I remember a storm that makes me feel a connection to the world that is beyond me. And what inspires this feeling to me at four or five does not at twenty-seven. The

memory becomes more and more sublime, without me even realizing it, in proportion to my growing understanding of the sublime.

When I first began putting this memory into words I had thought that this memory was chaining me to the past. But now I can see that though the memory is imperfect, it shifts as I grow older, continuously rushing into the future, becoming stronger and more vividly the memory I wish to have. Always responding to myself as I change. It is more honest than if the memory had stayed the same. It is always a memory of the sublime. It changes to stay unchanging. It is an unconscious invention of memory.

This wild growth frightens me. The memory moves towards something, but I cannot know what. If it is built on a false premise, nothing more than a feeling, it may be rushing towards nothing at all. Tilting always at a windmill. I do not think this memory makes me any more trustworthy. Not even my honesty about my on unreliability can be trusted by a reader. Instead, I can only continue to trust myself to be false and irrational always in the way that I most want to be, in the way that will invent myself.

Twitter and the Art of Trauma

Last fall I woke up each day on the verge of throwing up. I never found out why. By the time I was awake enough to make myself some coffee and something to eat the nausea would be gone. After my shower I would have forgotten the sickness had ever been there, but each day it would be that same sensation that woke me up. In time the pain became comforting: an excuse to stay curled in blankets for five more minutes, content, even satisfied by the sensation of my own misery. It felt painful but not uncomfortable. I lay on the verge of vomiting, in the lazy space between half and fully awake, waiting for the sunlight to get too bright or the alarm to get too loud or the clock to get too late. It was a paralytic sickness, and I wanted to be paralyzed. I knew with certainly the pain would pass. When it did I would pull myself out of bed and toast a bagel and boil some water for a pot of coffee.

Sometimes the nausea would persist into the morning and when it did I ate and drank as soon as possible, which took the edge off. While I waited for my stomach to calm down, I would check the news, the email, and my social networks to keep up on the happenings of my world but mostly to relax and get my brain moving again while my guts unknotted.

After I got the news out of the way I would check Twitter as I waited for my coffee to be done and my nausea to subside.

Twitter's small bites of information are easy to digest in the morning. I follow many people on Twitter for many different reasons, some for politics and others for friendship, some for comedy and some for poetry. There are people to follow for every mood or situations, so in the morning when I wanted to throw up the only tweets I wanted to read were Trauma-chan's, because Trauma-chan spent all day every day writing about throwing up and wanting to die, and I wanted to share in her misery.

She was literally nauseous with self loathing almost every second of the day, but somehow funny, deadpan, clever enough tweeting about the sick hole eating through her stomach that I felt, while certainly not any better, a certain sharing, a certain depth to my suffering. I wasn't able to express my loathsome insides better than she could, and I felt she articulated it meaningfully. It was like having my thoughts rewritten by an author with absolute expertise in depicting the exact sensation of nausea and hopelessness that I felt at the time.

Trauma-chan was whiny and needy, and no one was more aware of it than her. Lots of twentysomethings complain about their miserable financially dead lives, but Truama-chan managed to make herself sound

funny, foolish, and self-deprecating while remaining permanently unhappy. If she had played herself straight, I would have rolled my eyes at her agony. Instead she wanted her readers to laugh at it, earning her right to feel pathetic by not taking herself so seriously. Trauma-chan was me every morning, waking up nauseous and not understanding why, too nauseous to move, scowling at the clock with one half open eye and smushing a pillow against my ear to shut out piercing melody of the wake-up playlist programmed into my computer.

Trauma-chan was not my friend, personal or internet or otherwise. She was a stranger. Just a person who sent messages out into the world for anyone to listen or respond to. For her, it was the narrative of her own life but, though this may have been strange or intrusive, it was entertainment to me. Entertainment better than reality TV, better than paperback fiction, and just as scripted as either. The Twitter feeds of Trauma-chan was a carefully chosen story of insecure, pathetic honesty. A whine with a discomforting, hopelessness pain as complete as the shredding agony of wind on a molar's exposed nerve.

During this period of my life her tweets felt very real to me, more authentic than any book I had yet read at the time, but it wasn't because her experiences were any more authentic or raw due to being the spontaneous thoughts of an aimless twentysomething. Trauma-chan's

voice, her control of her sentences, were undeniable. Trauma's literary style is cyclical, a sick self-defeating thought loop that continues until her boyfriend gets home and barely relents then. He's a palliative but not a cure; she never got any better in the time I watched them grow close and move in together. She's got a problem. An irrational, unignorable itch, a twisting pain with no identifiable cause, a nameless, incurable depression. And she knows it. She knows it or she wouldn't be able to make fun of it. She dramatizes her situation in same manner a self-serious teen might, but end the same tweet with a smile or an exclamation point or a laugh, as if her gnawing pain or suicidal urges were the punchline to a joke she forgot to tell. And I could laugh along with her until my stomach hurt even more.

I wouldn't have been satisfied with anyone else's tweets about pain. I wouldn't have believed her if she hadn't been funny about it. That's not exactly fair, is it? But it is difficult for me to take seriously pain which is taken seriously, including my own pain. The only thing I can imagine worse than rolling around in bed with my guts knotted up is feeling sorry for myself on top of it. Usually I can't stand to listen to anyone else do it either. I'm selfish because I want them to entertain me with their pain, and I'm guilty because I can't see my honest pain as anything else but a burden to myself and everyone around me.

Trauma-chan felt the same way. I can tell from the way she described herself: a baby, an infant, emotionally helpless, foolish, hopeless, mad at others, but most upset with herself. Trauma-chan deliberately overestimated her own immaturity and helplessness, but did so to convey her insecurity in her own maturity and stability as a person. "I'm an emotionally sick infant," she would say. She may hate herself, but when she calls herself an infant, she told me exactly what she hated about herself.

If she's anything like me, the jokes come without even trying. It's just the only way to talk through the selfishness and guilt, to earn the right to talk about your own pain. I wasn't laughing at my stomach pain because it was funny, but because I didn't feel like I had the right to think about it. I wanted someone to talk about their pain in a way I could understand so that I could think more clearly about my own pain. It was less the story of her life that I was interested in, and more the story she told about my life that I was interested in.

Here's what I know about Trauma-chan: She has done enough ecstasy to carve two ice cream scoops worth of brain cells out of her skull. She has a degree in graphic design or something else that is entirely useless to her. She is very skinny but wants to lose weight and everything but junk food makes her want to throw up. She works three jobs, left a

family she hated, and lives with a boyfriend she loves. I don't know what she's like when she's waiting for her boyfriend to get home, just that she dotes on him so much she tweets about how much she wants a kiss, knowing he can see them. She wants to brag about him, because she tells everyone. But she also doesn't think she deserves love, doesn't think she's earned it, thinks that any moment she could lose it, or she wouldn't say as much every day. She thinks that she is a drain on everyone around her, and if she didn't think she was a burden she wouldn't call herself an infant. I have read between the lines.

Trauma has 843 followers, so I know that I am not the only one reading between the lines. Only a fraction of that number knows her personally. Most of those followers follow her for no other reason than to listen to her complain about her life, in the funniest way she knows how. I've been following her for a while and I've watched her get a boyfriend, move in with him, and move away from the family she can't stand. She doesn't hate herself much less but she's happy about her boyfriend and happy to be free from her family. However purposeful and accidental her popularity, she is accomplished at making her life and suffering fun to read for others.

She might also be one of my favorite writers, doing by accident what I've tried to do my whole life. Her emotions feel more real than mine, so

clear and funny and sad that it's like her tweets are me in hyperfocus, in high definition, the movie version of my emotions. Her tweets are better than my thoughts. The tweets are crafted even though she's not a "writer" or artist and doesn't give a shit. She's much better than me at expressing what it's like to want to throw up everywhere and hate yourself, and sometimes I want to throw up and hate myself.

If literature teaches us how to live, what Trauma-chan writes is not unlike it. I don't expect her tweets to work for everyone. Perhaps if I had been reading better books at the time I would not have needed her. I don't think her tweets even stand on their own particularly well. But over time, after constant effort, a picture of a person emerged that I found necessary to continue living, if only to understand why I, like her, couldn't deal with my pain without joking about it.

Like Trauma-chan, I also want to make my life and suffering fun for others. I learned quickly how hard this was when I began to understand just how difficult it was to get someone to care about my personal problems. There is a trick to it: to make one's own personal problems so close to and relatable to your audience's until, when they read it, it captivates, because it's all about them. For my part I have used humor as my way to talk around my guilt about talking about pain.

I developed this as one of my habits of conversation, both for the purpose of getting other people to like me, and for the purpose of being, if only by accident, somewhat honest. It is effective at eliminating anxiety in others. Being funny, but dourly funny, allows me to sneak a bit of myself into a conversation, without being obtrusive. I envy my friends whose life and problems I could listen to for hours; I would never give myself the same consideration. They have honed different skills and to my eyes they are better for it, though I am proud in a way of what I have. I don't have to worry so much about being an emotional drain, though that is what I am most afraid of.

Trauma-chan truly hates herself, but she too is using her voice to expel an unpleasant side of herself. She is consistent, and when I was feeling sick consistently, that was exactly the rhythm I needed. I am both fascinated and disturbed by her repetitiveness, knowing that there's nothing I can do as she relives the same trauma every day. It seems like she's never going to get better and she's just going to say the same things over and over again. I stopped following her tweets when I got better. She never did.

I Am the Lizardman

It was on the first day of the last job I would have in Boston that I noticed the bruise-purple shadows beneath my fingernails. If someone else had shown me nails with such a sinister discoloration I would have told them to seek immediate medical attention. Instead, I immediately did not seek medical attention. For the next six months I tried to ignore the purple spots that hurt faintly within my nail beds. I was hoping for them to go away, but with each passing day that seemed less likely. Minute by minute, I lived my life with the same kind of terror that drives the first five minutes of an episode of *House MD*.

The first five minutes of *House MD* are the best part of the show, and at this time of my life I was watching a lot of it with my girlfriend, to avoid talking with each other. In the first five minutes, someone is going to have some sort of dramatic seizure or blood will pour from their eyes or a tractor will crush them from above. These first moments kept me watching, forced me to guess when and how this week's medical horror would visit the latest victim, usually a charming young professional or some other overtly healthy and lovely person with a promising career ahead. What would strike her down? Would it be an ocular hemorrhage

over breakfast or would she start seizing in five lanes of traffic during her morning commute?

Part of me thought the purple shadows on my fingers would clear up in the next few weeks. Another part was fairly certain that at any second, particularly seconds of emotional vulnerability or when the security of my employment was in question, blood would begin gushing out of my fingernails and I'd wake up in a hospital to Hugh Laurie diagnosing me with *finger disintegration syndrome.*

"If we'd started treatment sooner, we wouldn't have had to amputate his hands," House would say, his voice thick with disappointment.

It took me six months to see a doctor because I could not stop imagining this scene. I wasn't afraid of dying of finger disintegration syndrome so much as I was afraid of a doctor guilt-tripping me for not seeing him earlier. I was afraid that the doctor would be horrified that I had gone for so long without seeking help. I was afraid that the disease would somehow become my fault, my responsibility, my guilt.

I should not feel guilty around doctors. I know they are only there to help. But they seem to take it so personally when I do not brush my teeth, or I smoke, or drink, or weigh a certain number of pounds. I feel more guilty around doctors than I do around priests. This is probably

understandable since I was raised Episcopalian, which, appropriate for a tradition founded on Henry VIII's twin vices of divorce and decapitation, is light on guilt. For those who have lost what little fear they once had of the clergy, the medical community provides a comfortable sort of replacement for an institution based on absolution and guilt. The body is a temple and all that, making the doctor a sort of priest, and describing symptoms a sort of confession. Both doctors and priests are sworn to secrecy about what they hear; there's a lot in our bodies (not just our souls) to feel guilty about: cholesterol levels, fat, blood pressure, and especially diseases of the mind. Consider the frightening tenacity with which teens, children, and adults refuse to take medication for depression, bipolar, and ADHD; it's not just because they fear their brains will be altered in ways they cannot control, but because in taking that pill they feel to have in some way confessed that they are not strong enough to be human without help.

I did not, and do not, believe that medication makes patients weak, and yet I still did not see a doctor about my fingernails. I would have called myself an idiot if I'd been someone else. When you're sick, you see a doctor, and if any of my friends had been in the same situation, I would have told them so.

At the same time my fingernails began to deteriorate, so did my relationship with my girlfriend. We fought over little things, small habits and irrationalities that go unnoticed until one spends three years together in the same space. She placed what I considered a disproportional amount of faith in a purported cure for the common cold called Airborne, a foul green tablet of snake oil sold at drug store checkouts that stained our glasses a cloudy puke color while providing essential vitamins and minerals that had as much power to cure the common cold as a dream catcher. "Created by a schoolteacher!" the label proclaimed, as if it couldn't be prouder of its own bullshit.

I was a temp with an English major, but my girlfriend was a lab technician, spending her days quietly mourning the mice she sacrificed to science. I expected her to know better what was real and what was junk. Eventually Airborne's schoolteacher ended up on the business end of a class-action lawsuit whose prosecution provided me with enough evidence to convince her those gross green tablets were a scam, but I only persisted in argument because I hated cleaning the glasses afterwards, and because I always had to be right even when it did not matter. If she had known about my irrational avoidance of doctors, she would have had enough ammo to shut me up, and perhaps our relationship would have disintegrated less quickly than my fingers.

I held out hope that my nails would heal as suddenly as they had darkened, but soon the fingernails weren't my only problem. A few months after I noticed those bruises, the skin just above my hairline began drying to a silver-white and crumbling off while my underlining scalp flushed angry and red. Despite the painful, raw skin underneath, the physical sensation of removing the dead skin was pleasant, rhythmic, like ironing or vacuuming on a Sunday morning with nothing else to do, but watching my skin crumble and slough off from dawn to dusk felt wrong and strange as if I was turning to dust. There was so much dead skin peeling from me that anywhere I stayed for any length of time would acquire a light dusting of myself.

As my relationship disintegrated, more and more white dust fell from my hairline. Faced with the possibility that both my fingers and head might fall off during the opening sequence of *House*, I was out of excuses to not see a doctor, especially given the itch in my scalp, just above my ear, had a terrifying similarity to a story in *The New Yorker* I had heard about but refused to read which profiled a woman who scratched at a sore on her head until her fingernails reached into her own brain. There was an episode of *House* about this, too.

My girlfriend and I broke up before--or because we couldn't---talk about the ways we weren't rational. I moved back home and not long after

found myself with enough courage to sit in a brown and paisley waiting room for a doctor blond and bristly from his head to his mustache to give me his diagnosis. He was friendly and laconic and I showed him my fingernails and he said, "Pits." He brushed back my hair and inspected my scalp and he said, " I think the scaling here looks a great deal like psoriasis."

And that was it. He wrote me a prescription and told me to Google the disease. If that makes my doctor sound lazy, it probably should, but because psoriasis has no cure, I think his silence was an invitation for me to get familiar with my illness.

As I found from further research, the scales on my head did indeed look a great deal like psoriasis, though whether or not they looked like scales was debatable. Was it necessary to resort to metaphor to describe the patches of dry and flaking skin? Wasn't dead skin descriptive enough? The shriveled silver-white jumble of dead flesh on my forehead did not resemble the orderly green rows of scales that adorn reptiles.

I love a good simile, don't get me wrong, and I'm even willing to put up with a bad one that sounds clever, but using "scales" to describe me comes just short of calling me a lizardman. Maybe scales sounds different to those who did not grow up with Dungeons and Dragons, but I do not appreciate an adjective that is better suited to describe creatures with cold

blood. If I was a scaled humanoid, that did not bode well. My doctor thought he was describing a symptom when in fact he was describing a monster I had been killing in video games since I was nine.

Before I saw the doctor, I was worried that I would be victim of the opening sequence of a weekly medical drama. Instead, he revealed I was living out the scene of the horror movie where the protagonist realizes it wasn't an ordinary wolf that bit him, and that shaggy hair is only the beginning of his problems.

I would have been more rational about my transformation if I hadn't seen the pictures. The most difficult part of Googling psoriasis, which I do not recommend, is finding a website that describes the symptoms in detail but does not have any pictures of psoriasis. Images of raw, desiccated flesh haunt the stern descriptions of prevention and treatment on the National Psoriasis Foundation website. Even the mildest cases look terrible, worse than anything I was currently suffering from. I was ten times as terrified after Googling the incurable disease than I had been beforehand.

In others, but not yet in me, psoriasis attacks anywhere and everywhere. The disease comes in many different flavors and in every picture the disease looks like it is spreading. Tiny red splotches nuzzle beside huge angry ones, and the threat of creeping disease, even in a static photo, seems present. In each picture the subjects look less human.

Psoriasis eats their bodies and turns them into scaled monsters. Even though it's just the light, the angles, the carefully cropped out human faces, everything about the photos seems to make a monster out of a human.

I managed to look away from the pictures long enough to read the text around them, and in so doing learned that psoriasis is an autoimmune disease in which the white blood cells, for reasons that are still generally unclear, undergo a genetic betrayal, and give their lives to destroy healthy skin cells. The body, panicking, sends skin production into overdrive to replace the lost cells, cutting the normally month-long life cycle of skin growth in half. The microscopic slaughter leaves millions of cell corpses in its wake, a mass of silver-white dead skin that, in the imagination of the medical community, resembles a lizard's scales.

By examining the dead skin researchers found the millions of dead white blood cells that were the clue as to who was responsible for the cell death. Specifically, macrophages are the culprit, from the Greek, meaning "big eater." Macrophage stretches itself to engulf the dead flesh of the human body, clearing away debris lest it poison healthy issue. Once ingested, the dead pathogens and flesh are dissolved in peroxide. The macrophage can absorb about a hundred dead pathogens before succumbing to its own bleach. The ultimate fate of the macrophage is to eat and eat until it has digested itself, so perhaps the macrophages in my

body are just looking for revenge on the host that forces them to kill themselves for the body's greater good.

Scientists and doctors do not understand what inspires the body to turn traitor on itself. Autoimmune disorders and their triggers are generally not understood, which is why the list provided by the US National Library of Medicine is amusingly unhelpful. Any one of the following could have began my skin's death spiral: dry skin; injury to the skin, including cuts, burns, and insect bites; some bacteria or viral infections; some medicines; stress; alcohol; too little sunlight; too much sunlight.

The only guaranteed cure for psoriasis seems to be a conversion to Zen Buddhism and living in a mesh cage in northern California. I cannot avoid both alcohol and stress, so I can only wait for it to get worse, and for the scales to grow.

When I was still uncertain, my greatest fear was that I would die. This is no longer a worry for me, but instead I am left with an answer to my ailment that isn't really an answer at all. I was expecting the doctor to hold the judgment of life and death in his hands but what I received instead was a mutation of life, and along with it much more uncertainty than I had before.

If the problem was fixable I would live, and if it wasn't I would die. I had discounted living with an illness, something almost imperceptibly mild that had literally no solution, just a stopgap in the form of a clear liquid that temporarily calms the skin on my scalp. It won't fix anything, won't make it good as new, won't solve it forever. Now I simply pour some on each morning if it gets bad, and it has become part of my daily ritual, replacing what presence my ex-girlfriend once had brushing her teeth by me each morning.

There is the frustration of worrying about risk factors--too much sun, too little sun--with the knowledge that so little is known I would not know how to alter my behavior or what I should alter it to no matter how obsessively I monitored my condition. I check my patches of diseased skin regularly. Nothing I do makes a difference. I can reduce the appearance of a problem, I can monitor the status of the problem, and I can learn everything there is to know about the problem. Nothing I do will cure the problem or reduce it.

The relationship between me and my ex-girlfriend in Boston suffered similarly. Eventually, we both knew there was no cure. We spent a long time knowing that and still continuing to play video games on the couch together, completing daily rituals together, cooking together, knowing there was nothing we could do and continuing anyway. We

waited simply for the relationship to die slowly rather than ending it right away, but ended it did, and when it ended the disease between us was gone forever. So too do I wish I could cauterize the parts of my body that have also gone astray from me.

How to Sell the President

In 2008 I worked as a telephone fundraiser for Barack Obama. I took the job because I loved Obama and thought he was awesome. It was the worst job I ever had. I quit after four months, which is one month longer than the average employment length for a telephone fundraiser. For those four months, each day would go something like this:

I would call you on the telephone in the middle of the day. If you weren't in a bad mood, or having dinner, or waiting for a phone call, or good at making excuses, or able to stop me from getting a word in edgewise, I'd read to you a sheet of facts about Barack Obama and you'd say wow, those are great ideas, here let me give you all of my money.

Most of the responses to my inquiries fit into a series of distinct and predictable categories. Either people definitely wanted to donate or, much more likely, definitely did not want to donate. Fundraisers who loved their job seemed to have the magical power of talking anyone, no matter how angry or resistant, into donating, but for the rest of us, which was most of us, especially me, nothing we did seemed to turn refusals into pledges of donation. We, the losers of fundraising, had little faith in our words and couldn't bring ourselves to impose on strangers for money.

Most of our prospective pledges responded in the negative or affirmative immediately, but there was also a third category: the ones who wanted to talk. Whether they gave money or not, they were the most memorable. "I don't give money to environmentalists that sound like fags," one told me. Another screamed "SARAH PALIN IS THE HANDMAID," after a very inaccurate discussion of Margaret Atwood's novel. (She didn't give any money).

Sometimes the conversations were more grounded, and I enjoyed when that happened, because I like to talk. Talking about politics does not get any pledges though, so we were discouraged from doing so. The ones who wanted to talk could be the meanest, but they could also be the nicest, and they were usually the most interesting and always the least profitable. They wanted to engage with the politics they cared so much about. I learned very quickly I did not know enough to satisfy them.

They wanted to know and understand where their money would be going and they wanted to make sure it was going to the right place, but because they already knew so much about the place their money was going, and because I didn't know anything that wasn't printed on the script in front of me, there was little I could do for them but listen and agree. They didn't want to talk to me anyway; they wanted to talk to

Obama. I thought my job was going to be to convince people that Obama was going to do a good job. My actual job was to pretend to be him.

Every single human being who picked up the phone knew more about Obama's policies than I did. Knowing about Obama was the worst method for selling Obama. The good fundraisers, the ones who enjoyed their jobs and excelled at selling Obama over the phone, did great because they knew exactly how to steer the conversation away from the policies and onto the money. Successful fundraising is not about knowing what you're talking about.

Robin, a quiet and wispy man with a white mustache who spent every day listening to democratic talk shows on his thirty year old radio, knew more about politics and policies than anyone in the office or on the phones, was the only person worse at sales than me. The best salesmen didn't know anything about the aspiring president, and they didn't have to. They knew how to become perfect mirrors for the desires of the people on the phones, perfectly agreeable, and perfectly able to also interject that just fifty dollars could ensure Obama's victory and put all their fears to rest. The best salesmen just listened until their prospective pledges told them exactly what they wanted to hear, then sold the pledges back their hopes and dreams and fears of the future.

The best salesmen made it sound like a perfectly reasonable request, while those of us who thought too much about it were eaten up by our own fears and insecurities. Robin and I didn't get it. We didn't get what we were selling so badly that they threw us out for the day when we couldn't get a sale in the first hour of work and when that didn't motivate us they had us in the back room almost every week with the rest of the losers, who, like us, didn't get what we were selling no matter how many times they called us in, even when our boss would tell it to us exactly, in that smooth and lispy drawl that'd go right over our heads: "We sell dreams here." We weren't selling them sheets of facts about Obama's policies, we were selling them the future they wanted for America. We weren't selling them a plan, we were selling them hope. We weren't selling them Barack Obama: the person, whoever that was. We were selling them a dream of Barack Obama: the president.

Maybe some of the people who took the job really thought they were going to work for Barack Obama. The job ad didn't say I'd be working directly under him, but it heavily implied that Obama would be involved somehow and I allowed myself to trick me into thinking Obama would be closer to me than he'd ever be. It didn't say that Obama would be my best friend forever if I took the job, but it made me think if I ever did meet him and tell him what I had done for him, he'd probably smile and shake my

hand and buy me a beer. As impossible as the thought of actually meeting him was, I felt able to imagine him being a decent, hang-around-able sort of guy. I had just graduated from college and was coming out of eight years of W. Bush's interminable haze of oil, Texas and war, anxious for someone I believed in. Even back then, I mostly knew better, but after so many cynical years I was longing to try out sincerity for a change. By Obama's reelection, I swore off the stuff forever.

The reality of fundraising was unimaginably unromantic. We were on the bottom floor of an office building, crammed together in one room, each of us facing a computer. The computer automatically dialed the numbers of people who didn't want to talk to us while our bosses listened in to make sure we never stopped talking. We were supposed to ask for three hundred dollars on the first attempt--not a penny less, or you could expect to get tossed out for the day. You might think it's crazy that someone would give a stranger on the phone three hundred dollars, and you would be right, but once I got six. Most of the time, though, it went about how you would expect if a stranger asked you for three hundred dollars.

Our superiors were not concerned with offending our potential pledges. If they had been, they would not be running a call center. They were unwilling to entertain the slightest possibility that

money was being left on the table. A lead that instantly agreed to fifty dollars might have been willing to donate more with some cajoling. Children and relatives and friends often picked up instead. A surprising number of households were married couples of opposing parties, one a fierce Democrat and the other a committed Republican. Often they hid their donations from each other and treated fundraisers like their contact with MI-6. I wondered how they could stand the turmoil every four years, but maybe the drama was what kept them together.

Getting a call from a fundraiser is a minor but memorable annoyance. Working as one means feeling the other side of that annoyance every minute for a full workday. After an hour in an outbound call center, you can clearly distinguish the tone of voice that indicates the speaker on the other end of the phone wishes you were dead. After two hours of understanding this, you will wish you were dead too. After three hours, you will begin to ask yourself if there is anything in the world that will make them stop talking. At the beginning of each call you will try even harder to convince them of your sincerity and love for the cause, your eye on the clock as you realize you'll be sent home if you can't make a sale. And then the man on the other end of the phone will sneer and call you a faggot.

On lucky days the calls will be mostly boring and weird. A common request from would be for me to "let Obama know" about whatever was on their minds; they might be worried about Republicans blowing the tops off of houses in the Virginia mountains or Sarah Palin trying to bring about the Republic of Gilead. They might suggest Obama consider a stronger policy about spaying or neutering pets, as if the man himself was two doors down from my office.

That's what I would have imagined before I worked for him at the call center. This delusion does not come from a lack of understanding how the machinery of democracy works but from the delusion that Barack Obama is as physically close to us as he is emotionally close. Both of us expected Obama to be just around the corner, when even cursory reflection should tell us that the likelihood of him stopping by with donuts was minimal at best. However, those of us who were working for him or donating money to him or planning to vote for him felt a connection to him. Some of us, me included, had come to believe that this entitled us to some kind of relationship with the man, when in fact we had no relationship at all. Still, I felt strongly, if only subconsciously, that I really did have a relationship with Obama, even if it was only a potential, barely existent relationship.

My Obama was an awesome sort of dude, a nice guy, a smart guy, an unpretentious guy, but not a plain spoken guy so I appreciated that he didn't pretend to do that. Not that he wasn't practiced and coached to sound sincere and whatnot, but there was a sincerity there, and it didn't hurt he was young and pretty hot, and not yet another terrifying old white person with a hideous smile.

My Obama wasn't a whole lot different from anyone else's Obama. In fact he was more of a bland amalgamation of the Obama on the TV, the Obama on the fact sheets, the Obama the potential pledges on the other end of the line saw. I barely knew more about Obama than the average person. I trusted in the wisdom of others instead. I wanted an Obama that was an indistinct angel that would somehow solve all the difficult problems of our world without forcing me to think too much about them. My relationship with Obama in 2008 was with a cardboard cutout.

I am political in a vague and exhausted sort of way, a person who says "I don't care about politics" when what I mean is that I care so much about politics that I cannot bear to look at them. I was born tired and worried. I can't watch the news or listen to the radio. I wasn't convinced any president could make the world less terrible but I believed that Obama could reel it in a little. He wouldn't eviscerate LGBTQ rights, and he might possibly end the war. This was more than I had ever expected from a

political candidate, and at the time, I thought it was important, vital, or at the very least mandatory to pick and support one. Sick of choosing between the lesser of two evils, I hoped this to be one I could believe in this time.

Obama was the full package: the radiant Hope, and the elderly and the youth and everyone in between came together to celebrate him on Boston street corners, celebrate his photogenic face, and even though we sensed that "Hope" was about as empty as a message as any other, it was just so sincere, and if you looked at that poster of him from the right angle he looked like he actually believed it a little bit. I was the worst sort of believer, barely following the campaign, only somewhat aware of his actual policies, really just infatuated with the idea of him, the picture of him, the people loving him.

I let myself be tricked. I made up the image of him in my mind. I invented Obama. Barack Obama was not Democratic hope angel, but a human being from Hawaii who has never met me or any single person I conned into giving him money. My four months working for him were a result of me and my pledges forgetting over and over everything we knew about politics, to instead indulge in an imagined connection to a man we never met.

I'm not mad I was tricked; I let myself be tricked. I was okay with being tricked. I tricked myself. And for a while it was great. The election was exciting. There was yelling in the streets of Boston when the results came in, and I could hear them from the seventh story of my apartment building. I felt like I was part of it. That I personally helped push the country in the vague direction I wanted it to go in.

Though some of my naiveté was genuine, it was mostly willing. Sincerity became a thing I wanted to try so much that I allowed myself to not look to closely at what I was believing. It seemed to me like the only way to engage with politics and emerge happy. Sincerity through forced ignorance. A laughable approach.

But even now, with the end of the war still so delayed I often forget it has been going on most of my life, with assassin drones darkening the sky in Pakistan, with steps forward towards protecting LGBTQ rights so trivial as to be patronizing, it's hard to think of supporting Obama as the wrong decision. It was quite obviously the right one, the barest step forward yet tragically worth it.

I tried sincerity as a cynical experiment in novelty and was rewarded with exactly what I deserved. At this point in my life there would have been no other options for me; cynical or no, the fundraising job would have been the only one for me. Since the call center was only

bearable because of my imagined connection to Obama, it is hard to even say this was the wrong decision. For a while I was able to sell Obama to myself. It was a greater feat than any pledge I acquired over the phones.

A History of Violence

On the summer after I graduated from high school, I spent a few weeks at a writing camp in the Midwest with a kid who had managed to make it to the age of seventeen without ever seeing someone murdered on television. The rest of us in the boy's wing of the dorms were fascinated, like we had met a young man from another world--maybe one of those space utopias from 60s and 70s like *Barbarella*, a place where no one wore clothes and their only guns were kept in museums.

We felt a kind of pity and a kind of envy for this kid, a combination of guilt at not feeling really all that envious of his innocence, and pity that he was doomed to not know how to deal with a bucket of fake blood.

In him, we saw a challenge, a problem to be solved. We needed to cure him of being lame. So of course we went and found the most blood-splattering movie we could think of and compiled a shortlist of its bloodiest scenes to satisfy both his curiosity and ours--what would happen to a young man when he saw his first murder as a teen? He was wary, but he was as curious to see a fictional murder as we were to see the reaction of someone who had never seen one before.

As luck would have it, *Kill Bill* had just come out on DVD and it contained a scene in which Uma Thurmond murdered several dozen

masked men in a row with a katana while fountains of blood spurted every which-way. We believed the most efficient method of crossing the distance between his innocence and American cinema. We inserted the DVD and skipped to the chosen scene, breath held in anticipation.

He began screaming almost instantly. We stood back, fascinated, regretting that we weren't holding clipboards and taking notes on the reactions of this rare specimen. If any sociology camps had been going on nearby, they would have surely envied us.

We thought his reaction was hilarious, and conducted the experiment mostly for laughs, but there was an undercurrent of genuine curiosity. We knew--we had been told--that murder was wrong, that watching murder was bad, and that our generation was probably damaged irreparably because of it. We didn't buy the claim, not completely, but we heard it so often from so many different places that we had a hard time dismissing it, though we desperately searched for evidence that would let us.

As soon as we learned he had never seen a murder, we knew we couldn't let this opportunity go. But what the experiment was for or about we were only semi-conscious of. It would have been a prank, except for our curiosity. We knew, from what we had been told, that someone who had never seen a murder was a rare beast, but also a pure one, somehow

elevated above the rest of us, free from the corrupting influence of TV and cinema and all the guilty pleasures we had been consuming since we were old enough to comprehend them.

When we were young our parents did everything they could to minimize our exposure to murders, but keeping us away from them was as impossible as hiding us from oxygen. Murders were everywhere, violence was everywhere, sex was everywhere, and eventually we saw enough that protecting us became pointless (how that kid managed to escape exposure so long, we just couldn't comprehend). We knew we weren't supposed to watch murders, or watch so many of them, but all we wanted to do was watch as many of them as we could. If our parents expressed concern we would listen very patiently, then lie.

Not long before I attended this summer camp, I had done a research project with my classmates about the effects of violence on children and, with no sense of irony, we decided that though young children might be impressionable, watching violent cartoons wouldn't cause them to be violent in the real world. Many of my friends were exactly the sort of kid the TV kept telling us was going to shoot up everyone at school one of those days: the geeky, withdrawn, cynical teens who listened to creepy music and were fascinated with murders. We both did and didn't get that we were the kids they were talking about, and that anyone older than us

might have found it absurd that we were acting like we were way too grown to worry about being affected by violent media.

We were passionate about murders, and defending murders. This shit doesn't affect us anymore, we assured each other, and furthermore, they were what made the movies great. We cared about things like plot, but we cared about the action more. Hollywood wowed us with shock, and we were hooked so early we needed to see more and more, freakier and freakier murders. For us, the murder, by which we meant the Hollywood murder, the fictional murder, was an aesthetic experience, nothing more. We marveled at the craft, the special effects, the ever-increasing realism in pursuit of more and more disturbing violence. And the more of it we watched, the cooler and tougher we'd become, through murder osmosis.

The first murders we watched freaked us out, we weren't ashamed to admit. We all had good stories about them, and we laughed at each other's stories, mementos to the foolish children we once were. We were tough now. We had outgrown the shock. We were no longer terrified victims of entertainment, but connoisseurs of it. In the screaming static of a TV screen, such sentimentality did not exist. In a world of VHS and DVD, becoming accustomed to violence was a necessary survival skill. How

pitiful would the life of someone unprepared for the harshness of reality be? And what a loser!

If we were conducting an experiment, we also needed to have a hypothesis. We would not have said it quite like this, but when we had discussed the situation we had decided that we were better off, much better off, than our poor victim. We were prepared for the world. He was not. We were cool. He definitely wasn't. When our test subject began screaming, and we got our expected reaction, and our hypothesis was proven. His high-pitched screaming was pathetic to our ears, babyish, naive. We knew then, with some subliminal relief, that we had not been ruined, or if we had, we were ruined in a way that was essential for survival in a world that contained television.

In fact, we came to think of ourselves less as theorists and more as practitioners. By the time we stopped the clip, less than a minute in, we had promoted ourselves to doctors. The child had been suffering from a case of naiveté, possibly terminal, and we had intervened just in time to save the patient. Too sensitive for the world; what would have become of him without us?

He forgave us, we congratulated him on his late entry into adulthood, and we went to bed for the night. We were in great spirits, we had proved ourselves right and had a good laugh out of it. For a minute

there, we had been afraid that it would turn out there was something wrong with us, some horrible behavior lurking within. How we laughed in relief when we found instead that it was simply that something was wrong with him.

We laughed at him because we were hoping we were better than him. The kid talked with a lisp. He was high strung. He was nice but kind of a pushover. We felt we were doing him a favor, as we had done each other similar favors, all in good fun of course, a gentle, necessary bullying to prepare each other for the real world. We knew, without anyone telling us, that boys didn't have the right to cry or scream over murders.

It was not unlike the favor the television had done for us. Murder was wrong, of course, and who had taught us that better than television, with its glorious murderer-murdering heroes? In fact, movie murders had taught us more than that.

Who always gets murdered, in the murder movies? The villains, the ones who deserve it, but then there's the collateral damage. The extras, the henchmen, the naive swimmers on the beach, the teens exploring the haunted mansion, the cowards who run at the first sign of trouble. None of us ever felt bad whenever any of these people got murdered. They didn't do anything wrong, but they deserved it, somehow, for not being strong enough, for not being smart enough, for not being cool enough.

The kid reminded us of an extra in a movie. Good for a few laughs, sure, but he was the sort of kid who'd let the zombies in the house, who'd blow our cover, who'd cut the wrong wire on the ticking time bomb. We weren't dumb. We knew being smart and strong and cool wouldn't save us from death forever, but we also knew it made us a little less expendable to the world. The movie stars, they were the sort of people you could imagine that happening to. You could imagine them living damn near forever, and deserving it too. Movie extras, they only seemed like they were alive because by some miracle nothing had killed them. They didn't deserve the spotlight, so whether they lived or died was really no big deal. If it took a little bullying to get the kid to understand that, it was a sacrifice we were willing to make.

Yes, our experiment was correct, we thought, laughing at the scared, shrieking child. Television does not cause violence.

Sports for the Uninitiated

I don't so much watch the Olympics as I am vaguely aware that they are happening, but every two years I watch them, since they are inescapable. While watching them along with my friends and family, I typically try and fail to find a reason to enjoy them. As a quiet bookish sort I feel an obligation to dislike sports as a form of solidarity with my fellow nerds, but at family gatherings and football weekends I tried a number of half-hearted approaches over the years to enjoying them with everyone else. I followed the personal stories of the athletes. I tried looking at them from a political angle. I followed the marketing and merchandizing. I tried enjoying everything except for the actual sports, as if they were the one thing that could never, under any circumstances, be interesting.

Sure, there were some things in sports that I could appreciate no matter how little I understood them. Like the bodies. Even to my eyes their strength is apparent. While I prefer watching the Olympics with NBC's coverage muted, their cameras are very good; they zoom in to the muscles so close it is possible to see their individual movement. When the replays happen again and again in slow motion, every possible angle of the human form is captured in such a way that it is impossible to not be awed by the full display of power of the human animal. But even the breathtaking awe

of the human form in motion couldn't get me interested for more than five minutes at a time.

My entire strategy was a losing one. Everything surrounding sports was exactly what I despised about them. The merchandizing irritated me, the hero worship made me uncomfortable, and the politics were depressing. Until 2012, when I was stuck at home and with no other options sat down and asked my dad to explain the damn games to me, rule by rule, that I considering trying to like the game for the first time.

I didn't learn to love the rules, but I did learn to love it when the athletes nearly broke them. While I watched the 2012 Olympics, I became fascinated by the way that athletes bent and broke the rules. There is a beauty in the Olympics I can recognize of more than just human bodies in motion, but of human beings engaged in the human art of solving problems, of winning not against each other, but beating the game itself. This is a sport even I can appreciate.

Sometimes when the athletes break rules, it looks just like cheating, almost really is cheating, but is still technically not cheating at all. I don't mean the drugs and the steroids when I say cheating; these are not fun to watch. What is fun to watch is the beauty of cleverness, not just the human form. It is less common, and much more subtle, than the display of bodies, but I find these displays of cleverness even more beautiful. Sometimes this

rule-bending is very, very clever, and sometimes it is so clever and subverts the rules so completely that the cheat becomes the new standard. It takes a clever body, not just a strong one, to find the way through the rules to victory.

In my limited experience, cleverness comes in two forms. First, there is momentary cleverness, the flashes of brilliance that winners in an instant. As I watched the Olympics with my father, I saw a cyclist decide a race with the movement of his eyes. We were watching cycling because my father enjoys cycling. It's his personal hobby. He spends three weeks each year glued to the Tour De France, and though it is hard for me to understand the subtleties that make its endless hours entertaining, someone who knows it backwards and forwards, like him, can find so much in it, and my father is good at explaining what I can't see.

During the men's event in the 2012 Olympics, there were two cyclists neck and neck nearing the finish line. One of them turned his head, for a moment, to see if anyone is behind them. The other saw his instant of hesitation and bolted forward, deciding a three hour race in an instant.

Perhaps it seems a little cheap for him to win like that, taking advantage of his opponent's distraction, but there is also a bit of cunning cleverness in it. The Olympics are a celebration of honed flesh, but no matter how beautiful or uniquely sculpted, no matter how stunning to

watch in motion, the body is still a machine with a driver, and it is the cleverness of the driver that creates the drama that I appreciate in the Olympics. Watching the most perfect machine win is beautiful, of course, but it feels predetermined, inevitable, gorgeous but without drama.

It had never really struck me before, that when bodies are equal, it is the most clever human who wins. Like watching children make towers from legos, like listening to Carl Sagan lecture about inventing the universe, watching cleverness makes me feel a bit cleverer myself, more appreciative of my own abilities and those of my species in general, in much the same way as watching human bodies. Taking advantage of his opponent's distraction made me think for a moment, as someone without much appreciation for sports myself, that this was really what made it all so interesting.

Taking advantage of his opponent's distraction was cunning, even a little clever, but true cleverness doesn't just happen in a moment. The second form of cleverness is even more fascinating to me, but it rarely occurs while the Olympic events are in progress. They are the moments when cleverness becomes genius, when an athlete discovers how to improve their performance not just for a moment, but for all time. There is a powerful, clever science behind the rules that govern sports and the

ways their practitioners find ways to exploit those rules. A clever athlete bends rules in the moment. A genius changes the sport forever.

Take, for example, the long jump, with these simple rules:

1. A jumper must take off on one foot.

2. A jump is failed if the jumper touches the ground before clearing the bar or hits it in midair.

That's it, though I also assume there are rules against jetpacks. What is most fascinating about the high jump is not the jump itself, or the bodies that jump, but the invention of the jump itself. Once the plateau of peak human physical jumping power was reached, all further incremental increases in the records held in the sport have come from a drama that occurs far from the Olympics itself: the creation of a superior way to jump.

If I was going to jump over a bar, I would mostly likely attack it head on, throwing myself face first over it, arms outstretched. This is inefficient in almost every respect, and high jumpers have been figuring out better ways of jumping since the late 1800s. The best method for jumping is not intuitive. It is a science. The earliest recorded professional approach to the high jump was a scissoring technique that involved throwing the legs over the bar one right after the other while approaching the jump diagonally. This is not something I would have ever believed actually worked, but there it is, and it did. It was followed by the Eastern

Cut-Off and Western Roll, which force the bodies of jumpers into even stranger and more unintuitive contortions.

The technique with my favorite silly name, and the one that dominates the sport today, is the Fosbury Flop. The technique came from a student at Oregon State practicing by himself, and it worked because it was a bad (near suicidal) idea that had, while no one else was noticing, became a good idea.

If you have seen high jumping at all, you have most likely seen this technique, and it looks as strange as it sounds. To execute it, the athlete flings herself over the bar headfirst and lands on her back. The reason no one had attempted this sort of jump before was quite pragmatic: landing on solid ground this way might kill a person. But Fosbury was clever enough to see what no one else had yet noticed--the landing pad on the other side of the bar had over the years changed from a pit of sawdust to a buoyant cushion, soft to the point where even near-suicidal jumps like his would be safe, and clearly the better option even if they only increased the maximum jump height by the tiniest amount. Fosbury himself never broke records like the athletes to come after him would, with stronger, more refined bodies, but they never could have done it without his technique. He was not the best jumper. He merely invented the jump.

It is so close to cheating I wonder if it is a bit unfair. After all, the jump depends entirely on modern padding to be effective. It doesn't work unless except under carefully controlled conditions. However, the point of the sport is to break records, push athletes and inspire innovation and cleverness. Fosbury came right up against the edge of the rules, and he won with his own cleverness. Though the bodies are kinder to the cameras, and cameras are kinder to advertising, what I most love about the Olympics is watching athletes who have to be clever to win.

There are so many sports at the Olympics, each with their own unique rules, inspiring humans to do sometimes simply ridiculous things in the most effective ways they can dream up. It is the rules that make the games so interesting, coupled with human beings who are able to do whatever it takes to win. This is what the Olympics values, and the results of it are beautiful to watch. The rules determine the shape that will takes, and it can be sculpted in limitless and beautiful ways.

The line between bending the rules and breaking them is not always clear; during the 2012 Olympics, several women's badminton teams were disqualified for intentionally losing, which, due to the structure of the tournament brackets, became a winning strategy. Unlike the Fosbury Flop, badminton is unlikely to recognize losing on purpose as a valid technique to incorporate into their sport. The Olympic Committee responded by

disqualifying all teams they observed losing on purpose, but have not, I can see, disciplined the Badminton organizers for making it in the team's best interest to do so. If the rules make losing the clearly winning option, why should the athletes treat the tournament bracket any differently than the racket and net?

If cyclists could attach rockets to their bikes or high jumpers could use jetpacks, they would. And anyone who didn't would be clearly choosing the inferior option, and the old ways would die out just like the scissor jump technique did.

To me, who only watches badminton once a year, the cheating was the most exciting thing to happen to the sport, if not the entire 2012 Olympic games, but it is understandable that fans would be frustrated, because it does admittedly defeat the entire purpose of watching badminton, which is to force human beings to do everything in their power to hit little balls encased in doilies as hard as they can at each other. When you think about it, the activity seems absurd, pointless, a silly way for human beings to amuse themselves, but no matter how absurd and useless a sport is, humans will continue inventing better ways to excel at it.

No matter what the rules are, the Olympians will continue to obey them while doing everything possible to overcome them. In a way it is almost frightening that any activity, no matter how strange and pointless

or minute, can be perfected without end if codified as an Olympic sport. The fear in this case is a sort of sublime terror, as it is probably more or less the exact reason humans are so good at city planning, italian food, pornography, and chemical warfare. While the Badminton association was eager to blame the athletes, rather than the rules they set in place, most fans rightly blamed the tournament format, clearly understanding that the rules trumpeted all. The athletes were helpless against it; they were correct to blame the game, not the players.

We can hardly expect them to be human and act any other way, and thus must be careful of what rules we give them. But give a person a beautiful set of rules, and something beautiful will certainly come to be.

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