

Self Taut  
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**Abstract**

Self Taut

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What do you do when you aren't yourself? *Self Taut* is a collection of poetry and drawings in four parts explores the interstices of self-awareness. Through rhythmic and lyrical movements, emotions reveal themselves in spaces where they had disappeared, memories conjured out of amnesiac space through the body's reflexes.



# Self Taut



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**I.**

If the actions are not his real self, he is  
irreal; wholly symbolical and equivocal;  
a purely virtual potential, imaginary person, a 'mythical' man;  
nothing really.



I didn't understand what I was drawing,  
but it felt important.

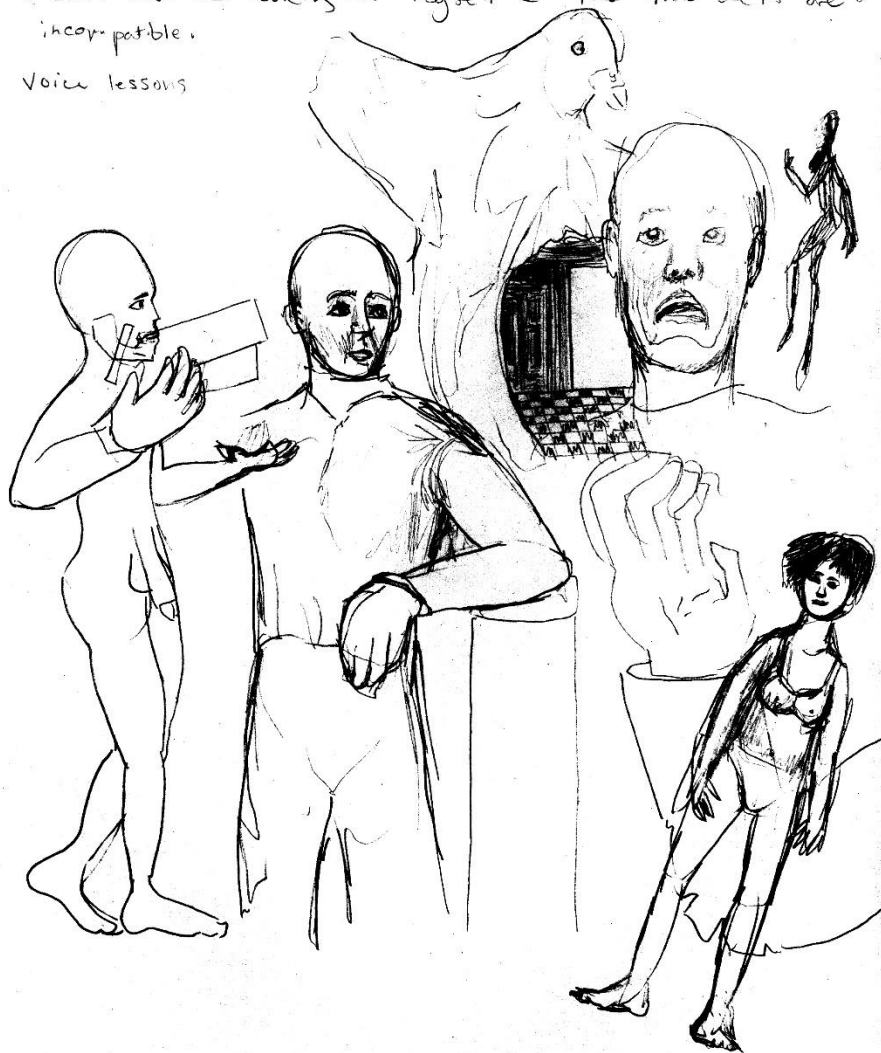
I hoped to find language that others could understand.

I wanted to say something but couldn't feel anything.

I loved, uselessly.

Drawing from the unconscious gives me a window into an otherwise difficult to reach part of myself. I can see this sort of thing in other people easily though but to be myself I can't also be looking at myself - the two acts are incompatible.

Voice lessons



Mammals fight to protect themselves.  
Failing vision cannot differentiate friend and foe.  
In practical survival, all unknowns equally threaten.  
Exposure to the unknown allows redefinition.  
What does a guarded heart know of love?



Only seeing fights excites  
him - he suffers  
conversation and  
bites his tongue

White light of LCD  
keeps night away  
until exhaustion  
steals his sight

In his gut he's happy—  
and feels sick—  
when his ex-lovers  
cross his mind

“I think my problem's  
feeling good makes me  
feel bad and I  
can't tell you why.

“I avoid  
excess of joy  
and play alone  
at home with toys.

“I keep my problems  
close to me  
to spare my love  
from all the trouble.”

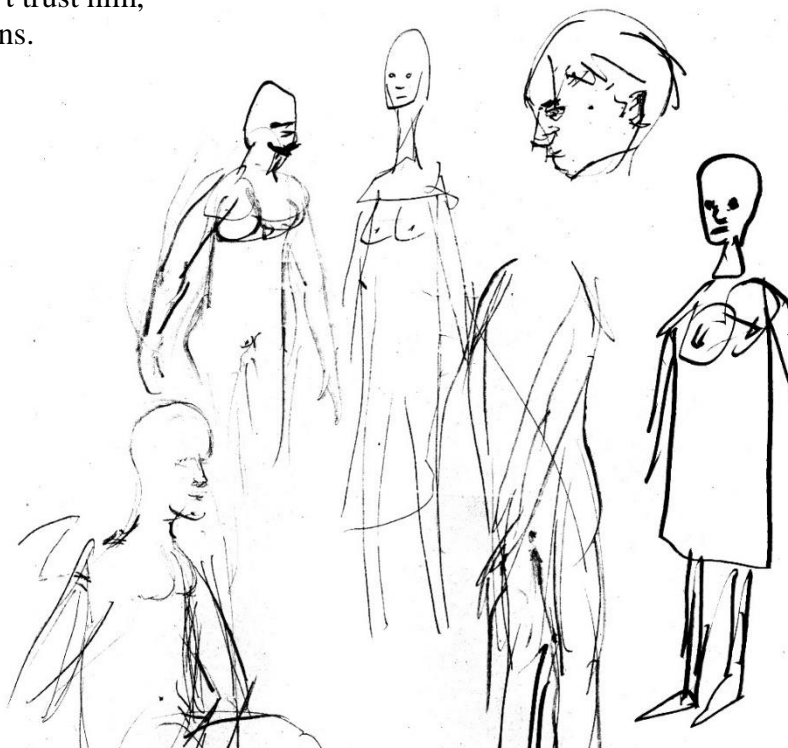
He has faith in her,  
faith he hates when reason  
keeps him from action.

Every time seems wrong,  
every word rotten with  
intent he can't root out.

He wishes he could speak  
as someone else, another voice,  
every time he sees her passing.

He hopes for love,  
but fears honesty  
means giving up the game.

He worries  
she still doesn't trust him,  
ruining his plans.



He plays the thief  
to steal his needs  
and stay unseen

With wicked edge  
he carves his luck  
and sweetly lies

Repetition keeps him  
rigid, then the show  
comes to an end

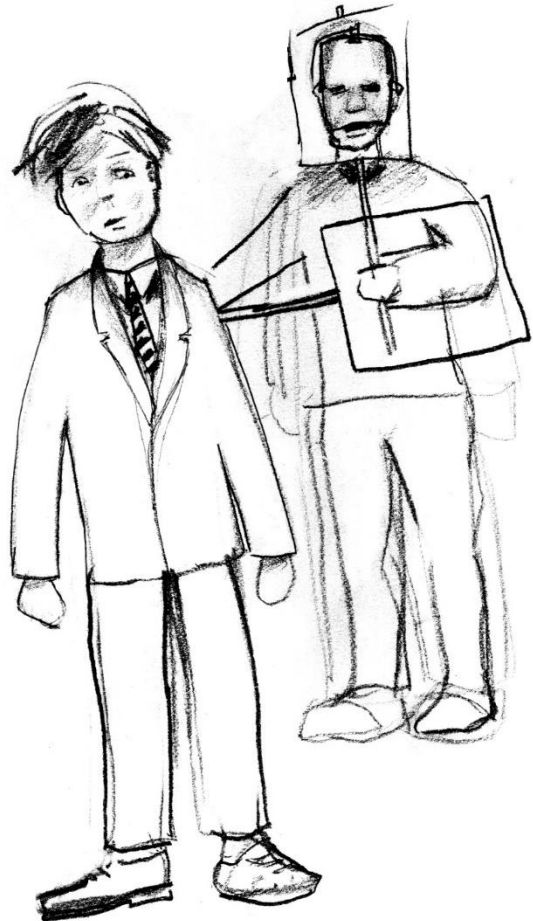


Every mission accomplished  
a compromise, every word  
meets editorial presence

Grassroots success  
spurs revolution  
and the campaign rolls over

Red tape cut, scripts  
unredacted reveal  
state-sponsored theater

Look into my eyes,  
lie with certainty:  
“We will win.”

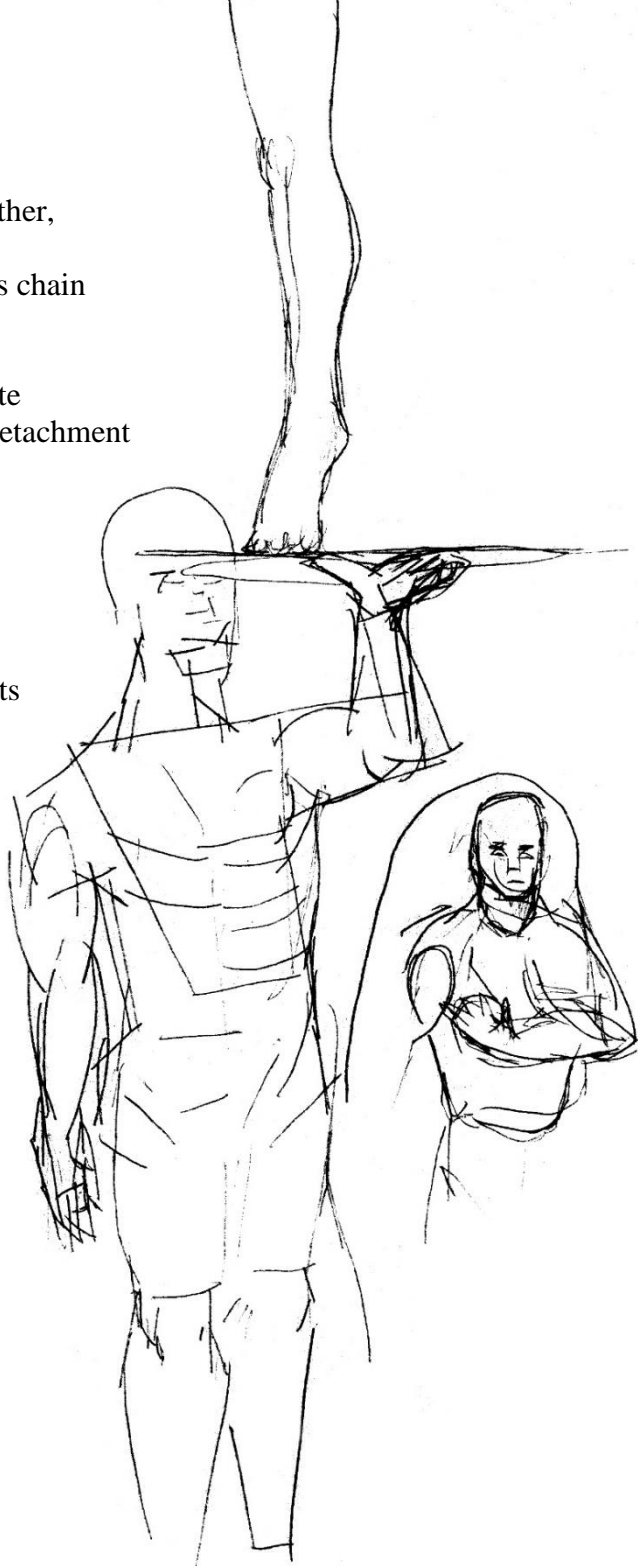


Instructions clump together,  
stashed before a stolen  
moment breaks the sales chain

Cut-up letters  
make a name subordinate  
to uniform smiles and detachment

Stuck in a confidence  
taken up at knifepoint,  
emptiness radiates

Only working the hours  
it takes 'til other deviants  
congregate respectfully



Talk's cheap  
and gets around  
until everyone  
knows enough  
to ignore it

Acting's better  
from a distance,  
costs too much,  
is too complicated  
and easily overlooked

Talk and action  
want to fuck,  
but their kids would  
turn out twisted, raw:  
North American.

“Wipe the playful filth away,  
'cause no one else will scrub you clean

“We can tell you came from mud,  
despite the fact the dirt's unseen

“Don't fuss about yourself—  
we all know who you'd like to be

“For us, unhappiness is normal:  
why do you deserve a scene?”

Ever mindful,  
as a comment cuts  
you shudder spinal

Comfort in fake  
embrace a buffer  
for the shock of day

Spiral pace folds  
inward, reining  
choked but honest face

A pill  
will balance  
out the jitters

Sudden trouble  
passes through  
~~you~~. calmly slip

away all day  
at ease, the pain  
now gone away



blow kisses to standees  
groped as disposable  
cameras flash

we bought props  
for all-night glamor  
to toss out tomorrow

caught 'grammin' over  
a trash bag  
swept up with empties

can't get by  
without a chance to  
spill your guts



Cooled on tile,  
thinking fades

Now I ache  
enough to fall sleep

Waking up  
I see

a hole  
in my vision

I always struggle  
to imagine you—

why try, as  
you stand near?

—instead, please  
lift my head

so I may  
see you

can you see me smaller  
let me slip away  
unnoticed  
not afraid just  
I want distance

like from here to horizon  
between us

I could thrive there  
in an unseeable place  
still resembling land but  
out of scale

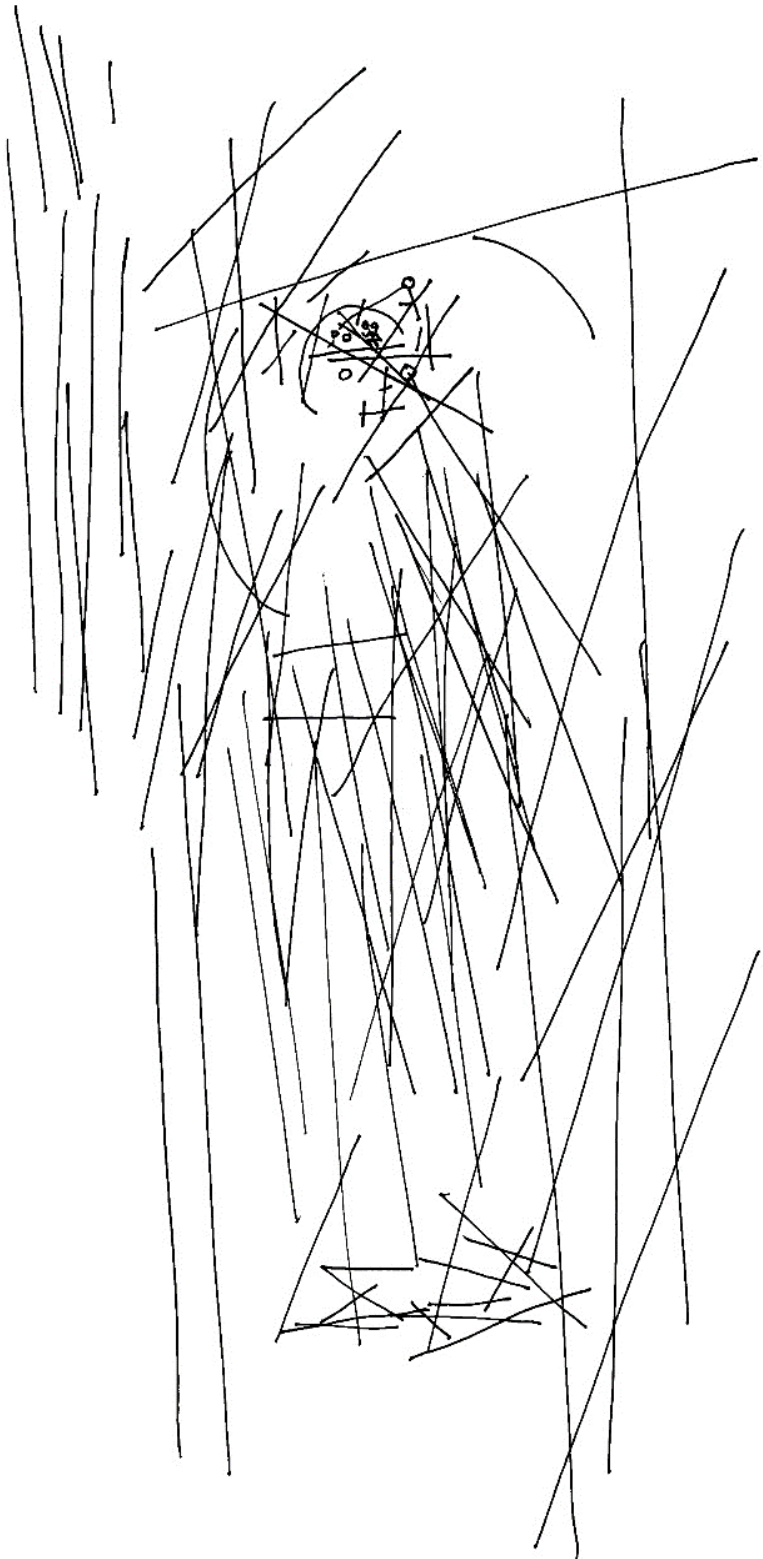
I'm in that picture  
with the warped glass  
hung away but still  
the sun was got me  
fading into white  
but still in outline  
there, there

hung with care  
to never leave

be always there

for me

"I love you."



parts of me  
hold others back.  
if i cut deep i will find  
answers to the pain,  
a key that unlocks  
parts of me

hold others back;  
if i cut deep i will

find answer to  
the pain,  
a key  
that unlocks parts

others hold me back

if  
i  
cut will,  
i  
find answers too:  
the pain, a key,  
unlocks,  
parts

others will hold me



**II.**

He learnt to cry when he was amused, and to smile when he was sad. He frowned his approval, and applauded his displeasure.

‘All that you can see is not me,’ he says to himself.



His hands started going a bit numb years before, from playing video games until he ached, and then finding even pain couldn't stop him from playing the game. And then he'd run out of money, and kept running out of money. Not enough he'd learned in college stuck, so began to work in service.

He'd never taken time to recover, so his pain got worse. Asking for more breaks at work seemed like it might push some unstated boundary, and was beyond legal guidelines anyways. He was afraid that other workplaces would be worse if he lost his job, so he had to man up.

The pain was constant, radiant, years into his career as a grocery clerk. Pain that started from his fingertips crept into his wrists, forearms, elbows, shoulders, back. If he kept his body moving and warm it was hard to notice one pain among all the others. But he preferred to work in the walk-in cooler - they called it The Box.

Because of the cold, managers would schedule workers in The Box for no more than an hour – safety requirement, for peoples' health. But he kept asking for longer shifts in there, and because he proved to be proficient at working alone, they were willing to bend the rules.

Normally, he bit his cheek to get through small talk without screaming – and in service, others expect to talk. He'd learned that if he endured the cold long enough, though, when he finally left The Box he could walk numbly among customers, employees, bosses, friends, family, for a few blissful minutes. He felt free, weightless, and then feeling always returned.



Chair-legged,  
root-rapt, diving down  
to chase a hunger  
undercover

Screen the light:  
too-hot will wither;  
shade is nurture,  
burnt-leaf shelter

Wet the toes:  
warm water soothes  
veins tapped by effort  
meant as glamor



Underneath the treble,  
organs drone, insistent  
beat rattles bone

Braced for impact,  
no scale or tuning  
informs beauty  
until first touch

Tremble tympanic,  
struck chord of gut  
reordered percussive

Eyes try to follow  
smeared time kept  
in the swing of baton,  
and the rhythm slips



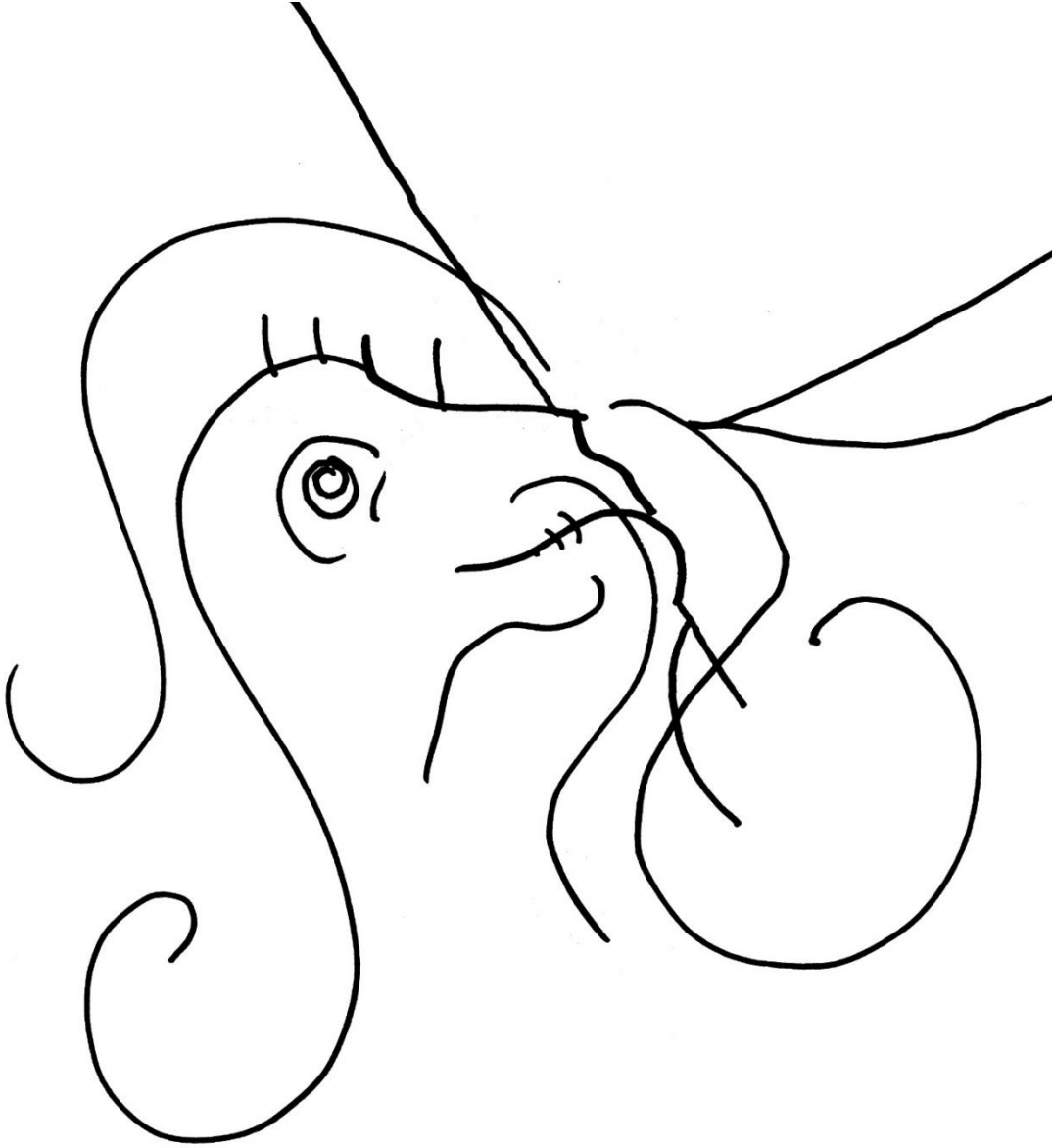
Tick tock  
Stick sticking  
Stop

Tip busy  
Stop

Rip quickly,  
Sick gimme,  
A twist a motive  
Stop

Slick spinning,  
Top spin giving  
Up I'm swimming  
Awk  
Stop Stimming  
Awk

Still think  
I'm winning  
Walk  
Get busy  
Stop  
Start slipping



TIRED.

We dance to rock  
tectonic thoughts  
to bed, and quiet  
roaring body's churn

The waves crash  
and our thoughts  
tune in to mercy  
waiting out collapse

We are adrift—  
cut powerlines  
lend deadly charge  
to once-safe shallows

We search for ground  
to quell the risk  
of losing life  
to fatal thirsts



Wind speaks as  
you float still  
on the water,  
wake behind you

By drumbeat we  
take up the line  
and tie it tight  
by strength of arms

Blank canvas raised,  
thrown to the wind,  
laid clean and taut,  
takes up the weight

The hold secure,  
ropes tighten, wringing  
eyelets burnished, brass  
wracked in a knot caress



When the lights change  
blare a trumpet

Flash of smartglass  
my arousal

Whose signal  
do I speak

Worrying trend  
alerts the reader



A restless spirit  
drives you into throes  
of frantic dance,

With every hop and  
spin you feed your heart  
electric pace,

Eccentric clamor  
shaky handle thunder  
bottle lucid space,

Molding matter, leeward  
laughter, does a daughter  
choose her face?

Does our case  
suppose a race foreclosed,  
disgrace foretold?

Our old lament: we  
act cold, heaven-sent,  
spent holding hands—

Can our ingratiating  
pain their spirit?  
Is it worth it?

Witless witness sits,  
lets heft press down  
upon all we hold dear



Distorted frame, cobbled pieces, disordered end, the background and foreground skewed. Awkward seat on the throne, leaning right heavily. Left hand, his left, curled on the armrest's edge, roughly claw-like.

The draft had a second, smaller throne in perspective — we were looking at the man occupying the oversized throne and would forget the real-seated seat that we, from our vantage point, high above, saw in too-full detail.

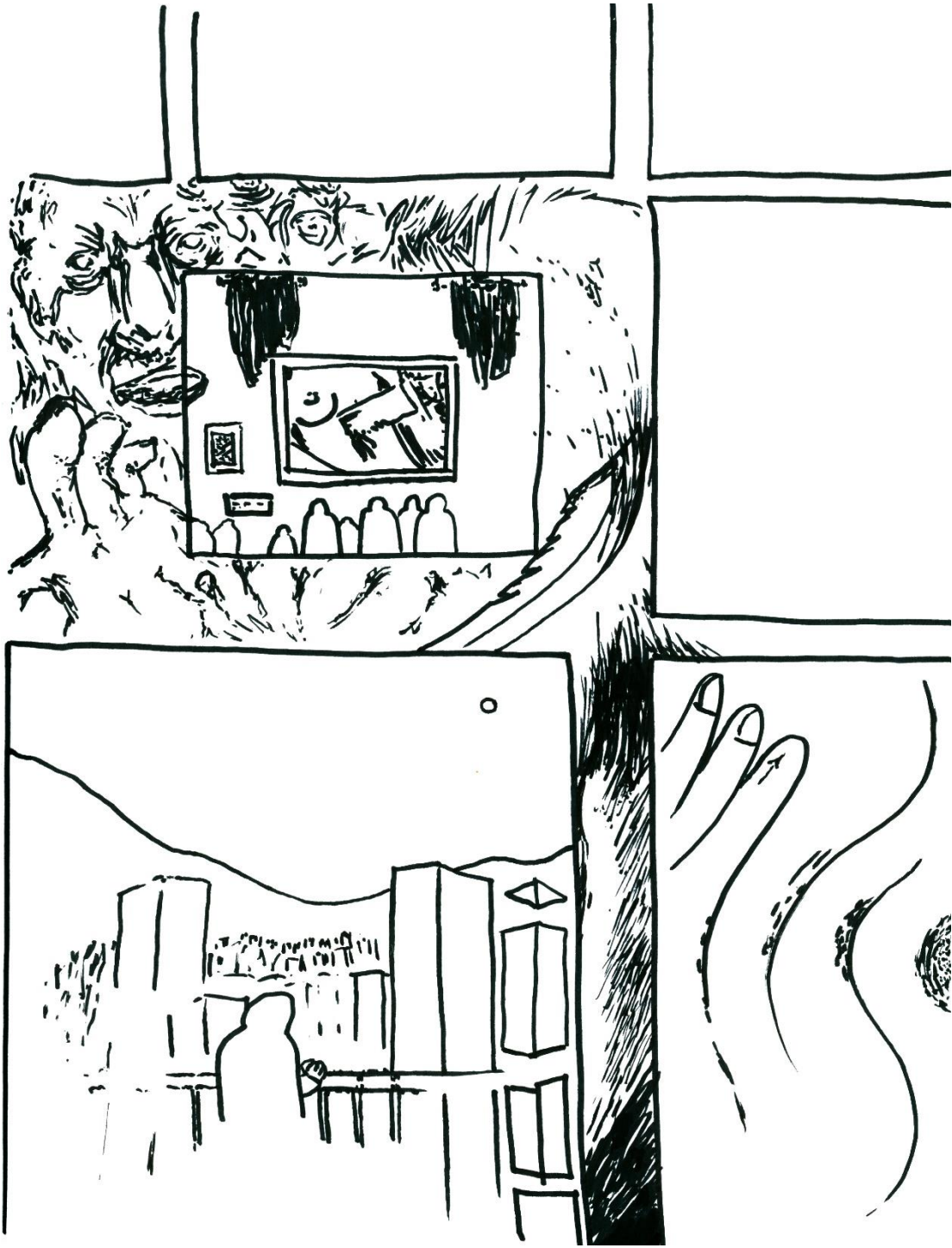
Leaning back into the seat, shoulder angled forward.



Shoot the wad  
but spare the lead—  
the heaviness  
sticks in your head

Stay at home  
and see the world  
on screen—no  
contact guaranteed

Sideline urges—  
sharp edge inward  
gets the blood  
up to no good

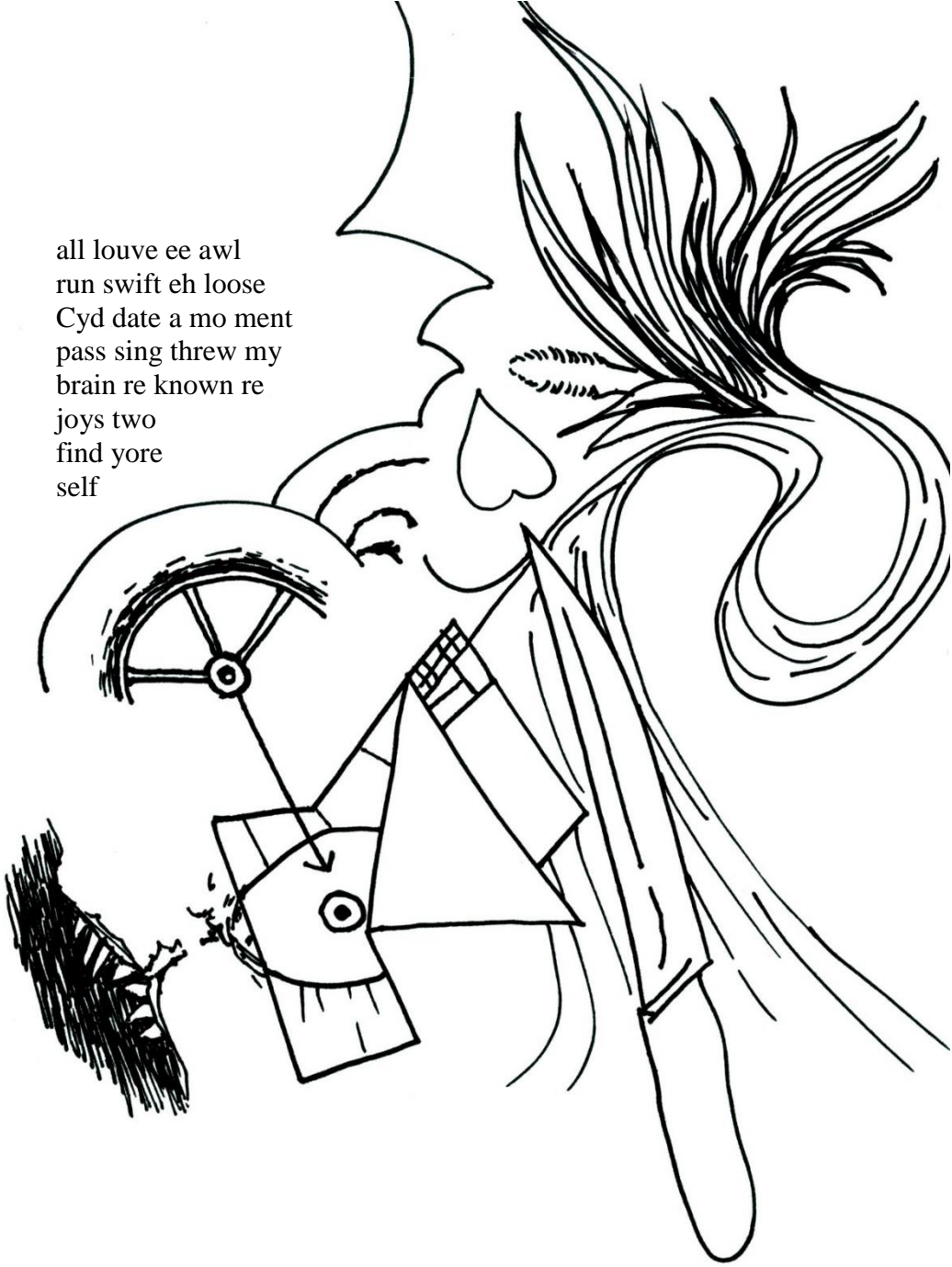


Apoplec-  
Tic Ache-  
Key Moored-  
Dent Stiff-  
Fend Would-  
Din Bray-  
King:

“Release  
my home!  
You stole  
my king!  
My me--  
mory's  
my pri-  
vacy!  
I hold  
the key,  
don't fright-  
in me!”

And that  
was all  
it took;  
without  
a look  
the spir-  
it left  
and nev-  
err would  
return

all louve ee awl  
run swift eh loose  
Cyd date a mo ment  
pass sing threu my  
brain re known re  
joys two  
find yore  
self





**III.**

If he stops pretending to be what he is not, and steps out as the person he has come to be, he emerges as Christ, or as a ghost, but not as a man; by existing with no body he is no-body.



No schematic—  
 nervous surgeon  
 peers across  
 a mirrored eyeline

Housing layers  
 scalpel-parted—  
 charged end  
 touching open socket

cross wire hot line brains stick chatter  
 gimmick crack whip bulb same tick shatter

rolling shut-  
 down timing inter-  
 rupture serve-  
 err time out-  
 urgent-

see

rest be-  
 for the  
 next

day comes,  
 ok

to-  
 morrow  
 will  
 be-better



1<sup>st</sup>

the dark always  
contains your life

2<sup>nd</sup>

a mask is a face

3<sup>rd</sup>

words must be  
allowed power

4<sup>th</sup>

the world persists

what is a truss—  
holds constant?

in tandem taut  
bears a weight

under balance  
negotiated

at terminal  
ends secure

suspension  
upheld

Unstrung, hollow:  
soundless instrument  
lacking tension

Off-pitch, buzzing,  
frets worn, come apart  
where old bonds fail

Stretch gut taut to  
form the tone, achieve  
clarity through pressure

Well-orchestrated,  
properly arranged,  
the body plays itself

When I uncross  
myself, lush feeling  
overwhelms  
all sense of me

As I let the rush pass  
I return, and  
search my senses  
for awareness

Even feeling cold  
means feeling  
what once slept  
awakening

Hibernation lasts  
until warmth finds  
a footing deeper  
than our skin



Single strands  
weave together,  
leveraging  
strength and position  
to generate force

The elasticity  
of bodies  
is as marvelous  
as their capacity  
for regeneration

Always remember:  
maintain tension  
in working systems  
for adequate operation,  
uninterrupted contact

Dredged up from archives,  
newfound records detail  
years of missing changes

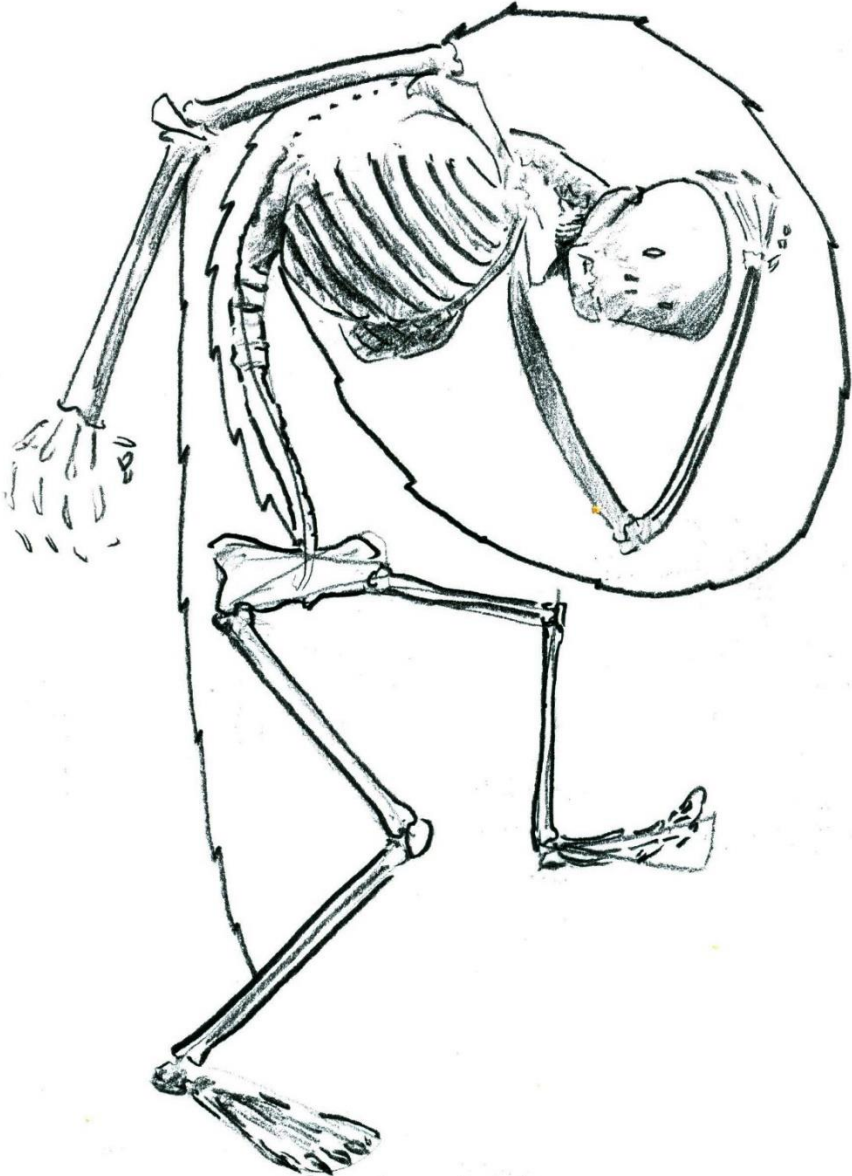
Estranged from updates,  
system defect unaddressed  
rendered the world invisible

Anger-Error siren always  
sounding, routine signals  
never lent their meaning

I'd made my way towards  
apparently open rewards  
and earned painful feedback

Under repairs I see now,  
meaning well, I tried to help  
myself before each fall

System powered, patched,  
hotfixed, I tore the cover  
free to thresh my innards



He actually played a very important role in the first days we were in the mountains. But what he said was basically, 'Hold on, we are going to get rescued very soon.'

We weren't rescued. And when he said, 'Hold on, we are going to get rescued soon,' he was preventing the group from doing the real adaptive work that we had to do.

What we needed was a leader that would make the group conscious of the problem that we were thrown into, you know?

He died. And that was possibly for the best, because from there on each one of us, with our own strengths and relative weaknesses, started to work for themselves and for the group. Every activity, everything that any one of us had to do, was important for the group to evolve.

We had discussions, we had a lot of tension, we were not all friends. We had to fight for our ideas to be heard, for our positions of authority within the group, for not being a scapegoat, for being near where the decisions were made.

The dynamic that we had up there in the mountain, you will see with any other group—  
you fail or you're right—  
and you learn.

We were hungry, we were weak. We didn't have time for too much rational planning—the planning and conversation, everything, was related to how we were going to survive each day in the mountains.

We were just thinking about surviving.

Since then we have been dealing with that and we don't feel different. We have been able to live with it and are at peace with the mountain.

**IV.**

What is required of us?  
Understand him?

Beyond his body,  
he still has to know  
who he is.



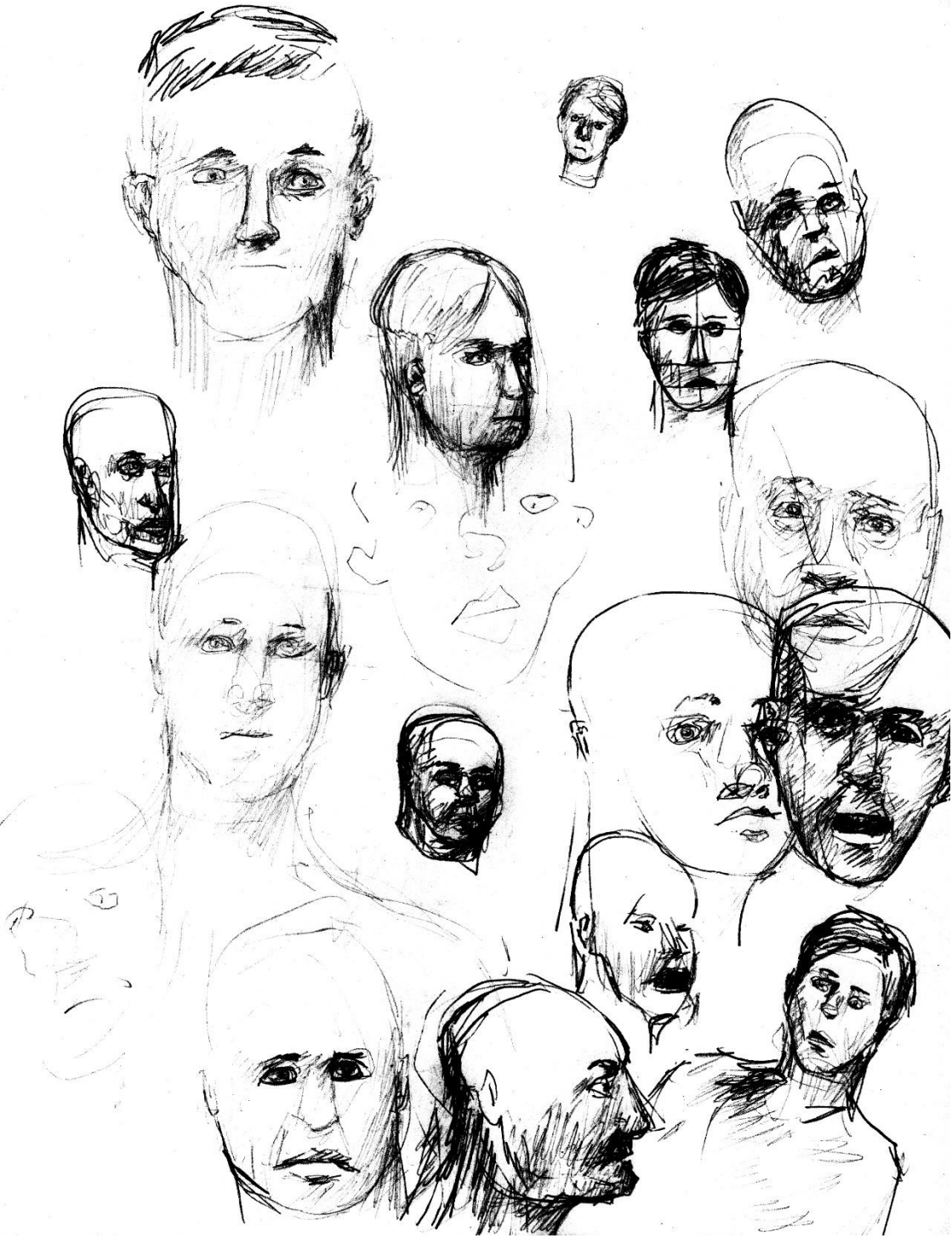


Whenever I left home  
my act was contradiction,  
far from my intention.

The left hand didn't care,  
The right hand wasn't there.  
Miscalibrated instruments:

every handshake, misaimed  
by some cousin of accident,  
collapsed into sucker punch.

I practiced love  
on myself. Lacking feedback,  
i stared into the mirror.



The correct face  
lingers memorial  
in features picked  
from lifelong notice

Glancing similarity:  
an isolated contour  
resembles an arch  
of ancient brow

Muscle ripples,  
the eye follows  
a cascade,  
flush of red

Shown in starlight  
bursting, patient  
darkness lifts to join  
the other recollections

self?  
portrait



my father?  
younger.

↑  
wrong scar

S/P



I'd crossed my feelings  
thick to wit myself up,  
stuck to farce  
and clear-cut schtick

Forced to listen  
through the shifting  
tension, heard words  
hung together wrong

Common flaws  
emerge from copied  
defects, from smudged  
instructions followed

Pendular transitions  
between meetings of  
outstretched arms and  
gaps in toothed wheels

Break the whole  
machine down: unitary  
functions, timed precisely  
with respect to others

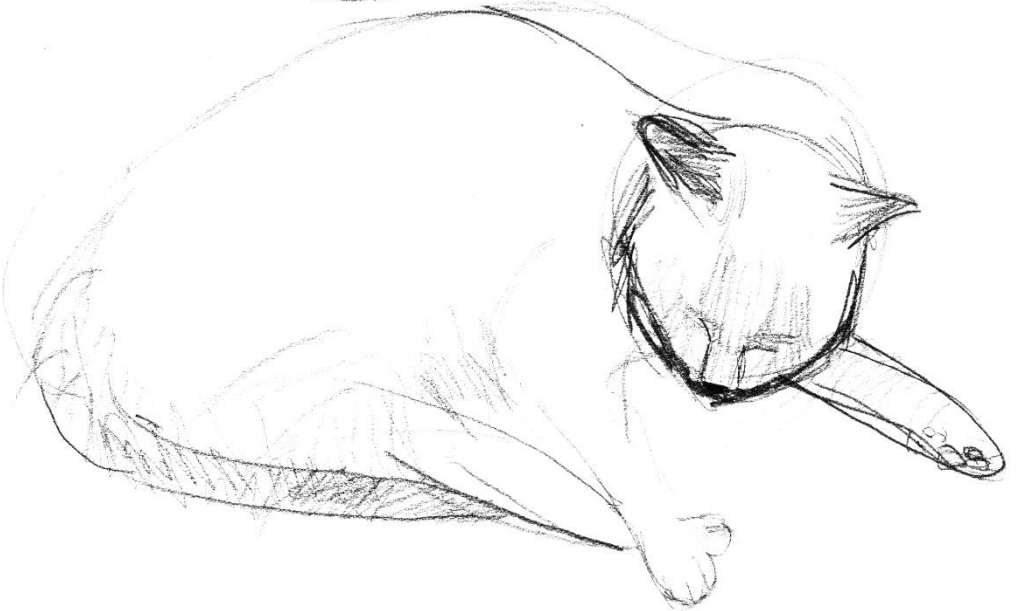
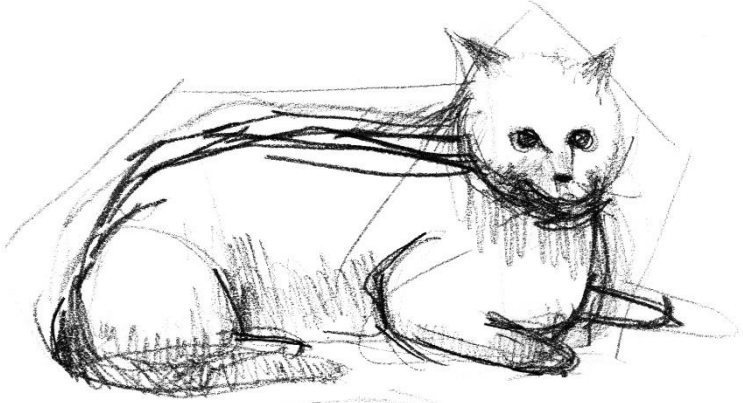
All according to a  
plan: through every  
revolution, we secure  
a moment's contact



Sit still; I will too  
I feel you. Let's eat  
Don't look me in the eye

Did you...see. It moved  
I'll end it, hold on  
Quiet...closer

All very interesting  
Exhausted. More later  
You're warm. Let's touch



Fat, sweet Siamese  
warming in lamplight,  
eyes closed against  
incandescence

Such weight you'd  
rather not carry,  
preferring to sit  
or hide under covers

A long-lost animal  
in want of safety  
could find solace  
in predictable slowness

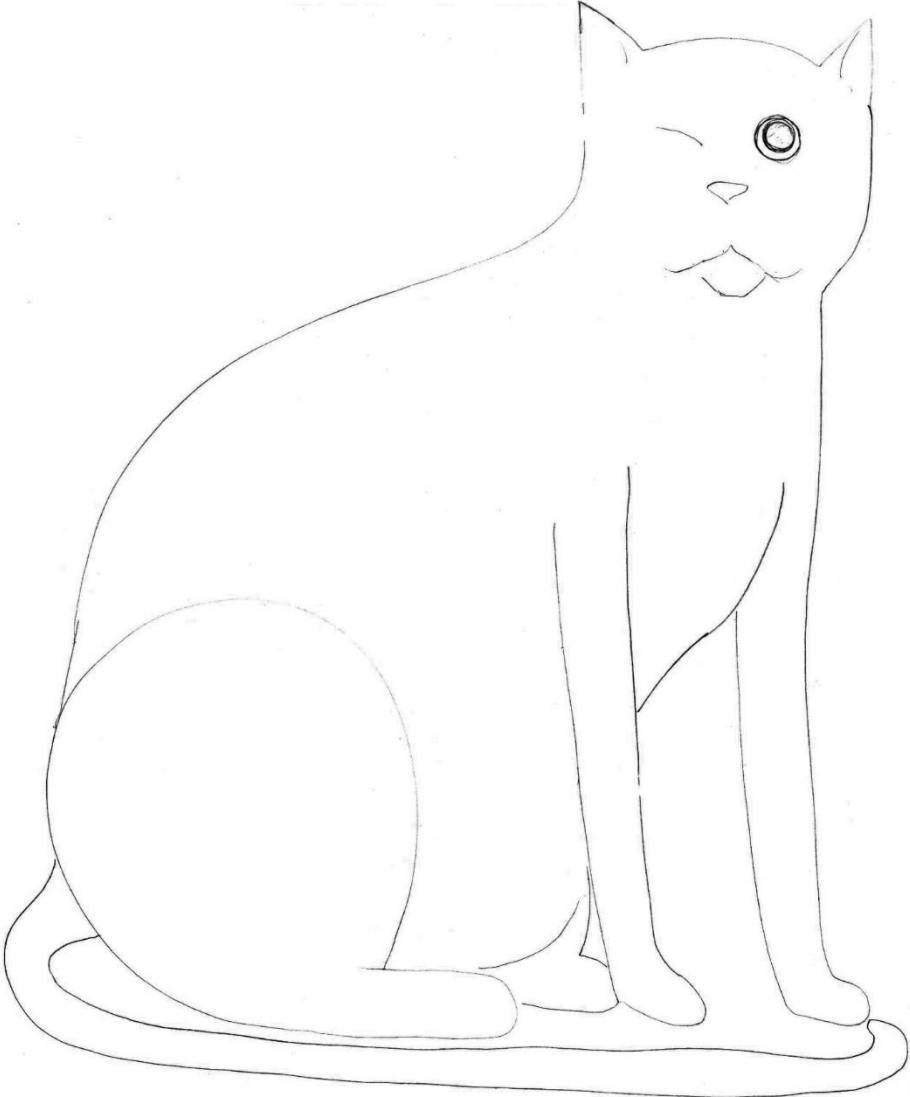
When it was your time,  
I found you finally,  
outstretched, eyes open,  
comfortably shaded

Lily lost one eye  
to hoarder squalor,  
price paid long  
before I knew her

She tilts her head  
to look straight on,  
like the lilt of an accent  
or a turn askance

She's blind to walls  
which sometimes hurts—  
only seeing one side  
comes with limits

Still, she knows  
her freedoms well,  
enough to play  
her way to glory



Afternoon cold wind,  
night's blueness falling  
quick as sand

Through an open door  
my pet, uncaged, took flight  
and went to meet his nature

Suburban more than boy, I thought  
a winged pet would come back  
if its cage stayed open, overnight

But if my common parakeet  
found perch with other errant pets,  
I know he'd find a way to love



Growing up,  
local bowling alleys  
offered field-trip exoticia:  
your name and score onscreen,  
soft drinks, cheese pizza, smoke-stink

I bowled  
in my twenties,  
drunk on friendship,  
and threw a gutterball  
across three lanes

Back to school  
again, by bus, passing  
an old alley still open,  
and I wonder, "Could I bowl  
with friends and not get drunk?"

I could never  
hear the crack  
of every throw again,  
the clack of borrowed shoes,  
without wanting to wander back

Instead I trust that memories  
will keep alive that constant  
steady thunder, rapt  
in moving rhythm,  
endlessly in frame



**Notes**

Language introducing numbered sections (“I.” “II.” etc.) appropriated from R.D. Laing’s “The Divided Self” and lightly edited.

Language from pages 67 & 68 (beginning “He actually” and “...we were hungry”) appropriated from a *VICE* interview with Pedro Algorta, “Meet the Man Who Survived a Plane Crash by Eating Human Flesh to Stay Alive.” Thanks to Joel Golby for allowing this use.

## Afterword

One of my first projects in graduate school was a prose account of a fantasy world. About halfway through, that effort dissolved into a tangle of worries and questions, which I wrote down so I'd have something to turn in.

This January, something similar happened: I'd written around a hundred pages of prose, the beginnings of a long story about a man returning to online fantasy games after taking multiple years' hiatus, and then my belief collapsed, and the project with it. When I put pen to paper again a few weeks later, intent on writing *anything* that I could hold onto, poetry emerged.

As a child, I spent many years as a gymnast. Delicate balance and comprehensive strength meant translating my intentions into action came easily and fluidly. I couldn't recognize it happening, but this changed, and eventually I recognized the emerging latency between my thoughts and action. As I grew familiar with that feeling of distance, I began to wonder, 'is this me?'

My poetry is a sustained reaction to feeling divided from myself. Considering how and why that division happened, what I could do or could've done differently, I came to think I'd never truly *missed* the critical differences between my intended self and who I'd become – I had witnessed these changes taking place, but struggled with belief.

My own priorities for what to say and how it should be said come unsettled, as my internal contradictions unknot

themselves. Everything that I communicate endures these reverberations.

The language of these poems shows signs of a struggle – awkward, unhappy, saying too little or too much, subordinate to inadequate representation, refusing meaning, failing to follow obvious rhythms or joining them awkwardly. These are also signs of life, unmistakable, transcendent.

**Poetics**

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## Seeing Inside *The Cage*

### 1. The Cage

“The cage stood as before...  
...immune to chaos and decay.” (p. 78)

In Martin Vaughn-James’ own account, taken from the introduction to his 1976 experimental comic masterpiece, *The Cage* is the “final presentation” of an “image-producing train on rails,” fueled by

murdering the ‘character’ and ... recreating or disposing of the evidence, the engine ... cranked up and set in motion. It plunges forwards and backwards through space and time, consuming its own tail (or tail), spitting out pages and pictures in ever more complex combinations as it glides or lurches down labyrinths of its own making, lending us all its optical and perceptual paraphernalia in the hope that we might see different, as if through a pair of four-dimensional spectacles.

Yet Vaughn-James is not sure what there is to see: he claims “no satisfactory answer” to his own work. Indeed, in reading *The Cage* it strikes me as incommunicative, withholding, even painful - if Vaughn-James understands his own work, he cannot communicate its definitions. And yet meaning comes across.

Reading *The Cage* is painful, frustrating - it eludes patterns, disrupts its own growth, substitutes signals, starts and stops inconsistently. Its movements add up to disorder, dissatisfaction, incoherence, repetition. This set of feelings, if not painful to all

readers, certainly reminds me of pain, and its weight in the balance of life.

Expressing pain presents an extraordinary challenge. As Elaine Scarry describes in *The Body in Pain*, communication through language is difficult while feeling pain. The clearest expression of pain is after the fact. To communicate pain after the fact entails a reconstruction; to experience fidelity in pain requires a reconstruction of painful conditions - pain is specific, exacting. Pain also overwhelms the senses, so a specific pain can occlude all other feeling. The mere feeling of pain often prevents expression.

Language is a medium of expression, but modes of thinking can arguably surround and extend language itself. E.g. philosophy can identify violence as problematic through propositional logic, and communicate ideas about violence to other people through language without resort to violence.

The problems of violence exist prominently in firsthand and secondhand experience – even without language to identify it as wrong, we can account for it as wrong through feeling as well as witness.

What do we witness, in reading *The Cage*? Vaughn-James wants to “murder the ‘character’” and falsify the account, by “recreating or disposing of” any evidence. There are no characters, but there is evidence of human activity: binoculars, microscopes, sheets, ropes, furniture, buildings; frames for art, windows, mirrors. Is this what the world without character looks like, with no evidence of people but their secondary traces?

Under what conditions would signs of humans - their objects, activity - remain, as humanity itself disappears?

With our eye upon it, the entire scenario seems deeply wrong, violate. Yet, without a human commenter, without any human victims, action, culture...without any humanity to speak of, these objects and scenes, etiolated by a lack of the human light to activate their purpose, are neither wrong nor right.

No trustworthy human judgment remains here: captions refer to events “As if” they were happening, or to features that don’t exist, like “...the folds, running laterally across the bundle...” (100) when no bundles, no folds, can be seen in the accompanying image. Those objects have appeared, in other parts of the record in *The Cage*, but not in time with the narration – latency sometimes separates subject and object. Throughout the text appear gaps, substitutions, aporias, ellisions; sudden changes in place and setting, both announced and unannounced; the disappearance of the words, their reappearance.

Knowing one lacks understanding, how do we acknowledge the lack? What truth is available, without understanding?

## 2. Considering Ignorance

In Michael N. Forster's 2007 paper "Socrates' Profession of Ignorance," he notes "[a]mong those who knew him personally, both Plato and Aeschines of Sphettus depict this profession of ignorance, and a generation later Aristotle reports it as well," and asks what philosophers and students of Socrates, widely considered an originator of Western philosophy, should make of this claim. Challenging the three more common notions of Socrates' ignorance as an argumentative trick, a self-acknowledgement of limitations, or position of skepticism, Forster presents a fourth "version" of the professedly ignorant Socrates: the saint.

Forster's propositions roughly break down as such:

1. Socrates proclaims ignorance;
2. yet he makes ethical judgments,
3. because ignorance is a condition of no knowledge,
4. and ethical judgments require no knowledge,
5. because ethical judgments are divinely inspired.

Thus, Forster says, Socrates makes his arguments from a divine source, accessible without knowledge, accessible in ignorance; a resource beyond human capability.

The Oracle at Delphi told him "no man is wiser than Socrates," and Socrates challenged the prophecy itself.

The Oracle ... said that there was no one wiser than Socrates, which puzzled him because he was aware both that he knew nothing and that the god of the oracle could not be mistaken. His eventual

interpretation of the oracle, to the verification and dissemination of which he henceforth devoted his life, was that, god being really wise, human wisdom was worth little or nothing-- Socrates being taken as a mere example to make the point that that human being was wisest who, like Socrates, recognized that he was worthless in respect of wisdom. (Forster)

From this position of understanding, recognizing the worthlessness of whatever human wisdom he might have held, Socrates was able to abandon the pursuit of wisdom, and instead interrogate it as he saw it in others. And he offered an account of his pursuits to generations after, for our consideration.

What if Socrates had come to this same position late in life, having accumulated a typical lifetime's worth of knowledge, in the era of the push-button pocket bookshelf? Might he be tempted, if not to ignore the world's relentless turning over of ideas and information, then to reject codified and structured articulations of what was the wise and right thing to do? to observe the world without recourse to the wisdom of others?

### 3. Lacking completion

All human beings must make ethical judgments. What is “the divine” to those who disavow religion? If human wisdom has no worth, how can we help others help themselves? What help is available?

“Available,” literally:  
 able to be “Usable, helpful, beneficial.”  
 Is *The Cage* helpful? Painfully honest

How to reconstruct pain, communicate truth?  
 without reiterating the injury?

Trying to tell a truth you  
 lack the language for;  
 or:  
 had language for, now negated by pain;

*Unforgettable Fire: Drawings by Atomic Bomb Survivors*  
*Night and Fog*  
*Hiroshima Mon Amour*

Language as a referring function; what are analogous modes of reference? If, in classical language, sound / marks refer to idea, object, act, then in abstract or valueless communication, value is more provisional; momentary; only relevant to the immediate needs of contact.

*The Cage* demonstrates lost contact between language and meaning.

### 3. The TSA

In a clip of Conan O'Brien interviewing Norm McDonald in 2003, McDonald tells a story about the TSA and invasive searches, and not wanting to go into Canada enough to get his ass searched. I felt uncomfortable reacting, a feeling I mulled over in the moment, and watched the video again to experience, uneasily: I thought he was borderline homophobic, for refusing to go into Canada strictly out of discomfort over anal searches.

*What a coward*, I found myself thinking. Talking about this to a friend later, she observed a more immediately reasonable objection: that any sort of anal probing is wildly intrusive in the course of a routine border crossing. In that moment though, by myself, what I saw was someone who wanted to go to Canada enough to have traveled to the border, only to be swayed against it by what I thought of as his flimsy sexual security.

Given the tangle of assumptions on my part, I wanted to break down where my reasoning came from, in order to see where it goes wrong:

1. My first assumption was that Norm's disinterest in anal probing was rooted in homophobia - a presumption on my part, playing off white masculinity in a deliberately challenging but unanswerable way. The powerful logic of homophobia derives from the paranoia of uncontrollable attraction, and the inaccessibility of others' thoughts and feelings - the desire, unfulfillable, to know others' thoughts, so as to protect oneself, while still accepting the drive of love.

- a. But it's in the grips of this paranoia that homophobia takes root; without an accompaniment of fear, the desire to know others and to remain safe folds into the rest of experience, so that as a man, loving fellow men bears no markers of taboo or the forbidden. Exalting over a love of men is exalting in triumph over fear of men - and where there is no fear, no exaltation.
2. I connect homoeroticism and anal sex - a reductive understanding on my part, at best, as if the only possible relationship one could have to anal contact was to both want and deny it, and that it could only come from another man.
  - a. The biology of our nethers, the function of fine nerve endings, allows anyone to experience erotic pleasure through anal stimulation, so it's not exclusively homoerotic. (Cf. "pegging")
3. I defend invasive searches, implicitly, as having some value. Somehow, this notion appears most reasonable, of the few assumptions I'd initially left unchecked. At least, I have to dig deeper to make a case that the formation of the TSA is, like my uncomfortable reaction, justifiable on *some* grounds.

9/11 scared me, I can now admit, although at the time I'd brushed off what it meant to see terrorist acts in my home country. A lot of privileges I'd contentedly ignored - products of a special, unsustainable pride of place on the world stage -

attained explosive prominence, in the backlight of terrorism enacted instead of implied.

Americans all around expressed themselves in the wake of tragedy with proclamations of love for our country, for our neighbors and our communities, our nation. Faced with a loss, we wished to knit ourselves together, to keep anyone from being torn away by the new possibility for violence we saw in our world.

We Americans cannot say how afraid we are of terrorism. The words would rip apart whatever meaning we cherish in the world: to even think that another terrorist bombing *could* happen would mean surrendering so much mental freedom - the privilege to ignore the consequences of state policies that we held in place for our benefit, at others' expense.

If we were to remain the greatest nation in the wake of 9/11, we needed to redefine our freedoms. We wanted a way to search people that scared us, but who eluded the sort of proof that comes from evidence. How could we explain Middle East terrorism in our country, and maintain a stance that we needed to go to war against them? When our only sign was one terrorist act? But we could not allow a narrative where terrorists could bomb our country; to allow another bombing would tell a story where citizens needed to fear for themselves.

The TSA is security theater - it makes the airport a stage to enact *mis-en-scene*, place actors. This is the new theater of war: art. War on the ground is a second act, the irreconcilability a

climax. No wonder most movies, big popular movies, nowadays are sequels: we're always trying to move on with the same story, hoping it changes, rather than accept the dissatisfaction inherent in what's already on offer. The modern act of violence is to communicate threat.

How many people threw shadows that looked like monsters, in the light cast by Homeland Security and rhetoric about immigrants? How much did our totem cost, the ones we built to ward away anxiety? What danger did the TSA stop - the danger that we'd tear each other apart?

#### **4. Using violence**

I ask these rhetorical questions as a way of exacting my own violence on the flawed order that binds our country into an unhappy bargain. At our best, humanity channels its violence into art, because anyone who has experienced violence can acknowledge its destructive potential

**What if we wish violence – the marked and powerful effect – on ourselves? Can we then will it?**

**When violence arises in us, is it because our will fails us, or because our will is violence?**

**Is our own body ours to destroy? Who is violated by self-destruction?**

**When we emphasize our freedoms, we can lose sight of what binds us. In society, we all hold some influence over others, and hold a tenuous agreement on how to manage our collective influence.**

**Any substitute for language -- language being accepted, acknowledged, meaningful -- *is art*: a form that attempts to mean; a way to attempt saying what cannot be said.**

**Language is technique: a way of moving the body, coded in aural, visual and textual cues.**

**The brain grounds the body. We owe our brain the flexibility, the ability to generate and evaluate new acts, that defines human innovation.**

**We owe technique a debt: we must remember that devising methods to explain, codify, and communicate acts allows those acts to become repeatable even when we can't be there, in our bodies, to see each**

**other and guide each other through difficult moments, as all humans wish for those they love.**

**Rhetoric steals attention from technique; rhetoric is elision of technique within the mode of expression, offering belief without any buildup.**

**Rhetoric is a means of infiltration, a placing of a portal whose unlocked door can allow other ideas through. It establishes a reference point in another person.**

**We ought to be more skeptical of rhetoric, endeavor to understand it. As much as rhetoric is essential to art, it's also the essence of how we're misled: rhetoric can imply meaning, structure, and foundation where none exists. We can easily invest faith in rhetoric when we like the outcomes it suggests, but we'll be hard-pressed to change our mind once we've acted on faith and found the outcome wanting.**

***The Cage*, if it's transfiguring ideas and manipulating meaning, does so under the constraint that even freshly constructed meaning breaks down quickly, that any developing pattern will shatter in time. Yet the work comes with a hope from its author, that through its undulate motions, its strange optics, "we might see differently."**

but some violence, even as it disrupts order, suggests new possibilities for production.

The jack pine<sup>1</sup> is serotinous, relying not on maturation to open its seedcones, but the heat of forest fires. Only fire allows this species to propagate. This tendency becomes a valuable ecological niche: when other species can be terminated locally by the ravages of forest fires, the jack pine rises again and again. And its cycle of life provides a home for the Kirtland's warbler, whose nesting habits require this particular pine variety.<sup>2</sup>

We may need new ecosystems – may have already developed them, out of sight of the dominant narrative. Could humans, too, be serotinous? Could we adapt that way – to hold onto our futures, to withhold growth until after expected disaster? What fires will come?

The world is heating up through climate change, and the excitation of matter through energy leads inevitably to movement. People moving into civilization crowds available space, and that movement shakes the streets, and people wake from their slumber.

Fears and hatreds eat up the will of troubled people. They will hunger, they will thirst, and there will be many of them. We will hardly know what to do with them all, and we will lack for things to give them. And because they are fellow humans, we will want to give all the same, and it will burn us up.

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<sup>1</sup> Michigan Department of Natural Resources' "Jack Pine Ecosystem" article, online.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

The symbol of the phoenix has recurred since its inception in Greek myth, for its evocation of cleansing through conflagration. As with all of today's surviving antiquities, continued relevance and resonance gives the old story value: there can always be some value found in fire, to heat, to pain.

We will need, urgently, excoriating critiques that challenge inhumanity and hatred in the rising temperatures, communicated in a way that can reach all people. Passions: visions, commitments, loves – these warm the heart from within. Those people who keep their passions stoked never need other recourse, and those who kindle the passion of others with tenderness and love shed their own warmth and light.

## Body troubles

### 1.

We weave together the best story we can to justify ourselves, but narratives only bear so much weight, compared to the resiliency of the body. Our body contains our story because only it can contain so much, coordinate so many strands and threads. Our same body, and its same story, can choke out so many details.

I've started this essay over time and time again. The important details always seemed too distant from each other, too disconnected: I'm afraid to assert things that aren't true, so I'm reluctant to state too much. But I'm afraid to remain in a flawed version of the present, when I see opportunities for meaningful correction.

I feel great urgency in writing, but I also believe urgency is a flawed qualification – if urgency demands attention, then everything creeps towards urgency in an effort to be heard, and urgency itself loses its value. I don't want to participate in an arms race of shock and awe.

Still. Our world is burning up. This is not the typical argumentative mirage, part of a generational cycle of blaming the past generation while anointing saints in the current, but an actual crisis of climate change. We have implemented changes, but they may not come fast enough.

To participate in flawed politics is to justify that state of affairs implicitly; yet we cannot turn away from the issues we'd seek to solve through the political form. If we cannot change the system

and overturn the definitions that bind us, then we have to find some other way to make changes.

We should change our bodies first, so we can better act for change. What follows are pieces of an argument around bodily change: how and why we might change, where we have room to change ourselves.

Perfection offers false promise; for the human being, correction is a nobler goal, if only because it allows visions with achievable scope. I invite others to fit the raw ends of the essay pieces that follow up to other fragmented meanings. My art anticipates compromise, and a movement towards a more complete whole. These ends cannot be achieved alone.

**2.**

I was four years old, and I had to pee. I was told there was no bathroom at this store coming in, and I was asked to hold it. I wandered away from my brothers deeper into the store, trying to ignore the rising urgency with privacy. I couldn't hold it. But I was a gentleman – part of the code of conduct I'd agreed to with my mom in entering public space was to behave as one. I believed I was bound by my word to play the part. Gentlemen did not, as I understood, pee their pants. I faced a conundrum.

In the end, I was incapable of acting in a gentlemanly way. With that amount of language skill, at that age, I couldn't ask a stranger for help, couldn't express my distress, would not violate my promise, could not hold it much longer, felt it hurting deep inside me, wracked, twisted, still I held it, hid, ached, then I couldn't, the will held but the body broke, and while I'm not sure you could call my feeling humiliation or defeat, with no witnesses, but the distress has remained with me.

Because I never spoke of this incident; because no one noticed; because there was no record but my own experience, it was as if it only ever happened to me. What wasn't told at the time, what I speak to now, is that I hurt myself. I suspect, decades later, that I adapted my behaviors around a hidden injury. The effect was an inexplicable distance forming between me and others, and an orderly sorting of my idiosyncracies into what we call personality, “just him being weird.”

We forgive children their incapacities, incontinences, oddities - expect it, as a developmental stage, because we know their have

bodies and minds are undergoing extensive and necessary revision. But how accepting are we of adults with the same experiences? Not very, I think: the trope of adults disturbing other adults by acting too childish, or simply outside of our range of expectations, offers a lively range of common judgments, some benign and others damning.

What happens to people when no one is there to witness does make a difference; trees do fall without humans around to see. A variety of fascinating ecological consequences derive from this innocuous event; a falling tree can crush other plants and animals, and in its death it makes a new home for other species. Whether we're around to see it or not, trees fall, and accidents happen.

In our Western society, because so much of society pivots on how we treat difference - whether the sick go to hospitals or jail, whether the gender-troubled are comforted or cast out, whether queer means happy or strange - we face an imperative to reassess our views of body troubles, and the variety of novel solutions on offer in human society.

**3.**

We're still far from knowing the contents of other minds enough to suggest what "typical" represents, so evoking neurotypicality at this point would only confuse the issues at hand, but I'd like to consider ways in which contemporary thinking reflects an emerging sense of differences between minds.

The gate control model of pain suggests that some sensations are "gated," to prevent them from reaching the brain. Differentiated fibers that form the nervous system interact based upon strength of stimulus to generate this control. A signal must be sent, in order to feel something, but the model suggests that excessive stimulation will close the pathways to sensation.

Consider ADHD: recent research suggests that ADHD kids need to move and act in order to think<sup>3</sup>. In the past, to keep order in the classroom, anxiously ambulating and disruptive kids got pills; according to the CDC, the preferred course of treatment still involves a combination of behavioral therapy and medication for children 6 and over. Adderall is one of the leading prescription drugs for treating ADHD, and it's chemically very similar to methamphetamines<sup>4</sup>, which casts the

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<sup>3</sup> Sarver et al, "Hyperactivity in Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): Impairing Deficit or Compensatory Behavior?"

<sup>4</sup> Zaitchik, Alexander. "The Speed of Hypocrisy: How America Got Hooked on Legal Meth" as well as Kuczenki et al "Hippocampus norepinephrine, caudate dopamine and serotonin, and behavioral responses to the stereoisomers of amphetamine and methamphetamine."

efficacy and the ethics of prescribing these drugs to children in a damning light.

If mental health experts are starting to move away from medicating these problems, that response may only be due to a sort of crisis of overprescribing drugs. Opiate use has become an American crisis; in 2014, thirty-thousand of the year's forty-seven thousand overdose deaths were opiate-related<sup>5</sup>, and overdose rates quadrupled from 1999 to 2008.<sup>6</sup> Medical marijuana, as a pain management tool that comes without the possibility of overdose, could become an essential medical development – but we're not moving to adopt it at a pace that reflects the crisis at hand.

And the obesity crisis: despite a massive industry of diets, foods, guides, apps, schools of thought, spectres of new causation, etc. and despite a significant drop in obesity among the very young two years ago, rates of obesity held steady. As we discard bad ideas about obesity -- that it's a function of laziness, that it's about overeating, about too much fat, too much sugar, a sensitivity to gluten, to carbs, purely genetic, purely behavioral – there's less and less left to say, except that people are still fat

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<sup>5</sup> CDC's "Injury Prevention & Control: Opioid Overdose" page

<sup>6</sup> From "Vital Signs: Overdoses of Prescription Opioid Pain Relievers --- United States, 1999—2008" a report in the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Nov 4 2011.

and unhappy. In pursuit of a cure our culture has invested in tiger-repellant rocks<sup>7</sup>.

These crises all seem to begin in the body. What pains these bodies?

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. The Simpsons s07e23 “Much Apu About Nothing”

**4.**

Pain is a universal wrench-in-the-works. As the body's way of signaling and managing energy use, informing the body of its needs for repair, pain is incidental to most physical activities. In a healthy body, nervous signals are distributed in a way that they're comprehensible and distinguishable in the brain, giving us tactile feedback. But the way we use our bodies doesn't always respect the model of our nerves; we overuse certain parts, underuse others.

For example, we connect to computers through the keyboard or the touchscreen, and so our hands and fingers work more and hence undergo strain.

Our bodies change to reflect our behavior: through fatigue, certain subtleties in muscle tone and arrangement can collapse.

Our culture of sitting subjects the body to particular patterns of wear. Sinking into a comfortable chair after a day of back-breaking labor, we'd like to be excused from worrying about the slight discomfort of poor posture, like a slight lean to the side; and in exhaustion, the strain of our imbalance compounds.

**5.**

Every incident's disputable: who was there to witness what happened? What did they see?

Argument by anecdote's considered fallacious for a reason; *Rashomon* demonstrates among other things the challenge in reconciling the truth through first-person accounts.

If we haven't shared stories, what can we talk about? I don't know who you are, as I write this to you.

But I suspect you've been hurt.

Beyond that suspicion, I'm ignorant: maybe you only hurt once, and never again; or maybe you've always hurt, never known another life.

If you've ever been hurt, you understand pain draws attention. Can you tell when something's wrong with your body? Is something always wrong?

**6.**

Though pain circumscribes our existence, we can still treat it. I'm trying to lay out the ways our bodies fail, because these are the ways we fail each other: when our bodies don't work, we can't engage in rationality, and we can't form civilization. We're doomed to tear each other apart when we're in pain and unhappy.

Pain alone doesn't stop the body. The biggest problem in pain, I think, is that we can grow numb to it: we can continue moving, force ourselves to act, even if the pathways to sensation close and we grow numb. Drugs could also be a problem: they palliate pain so we can keep acting without the distraction of painful feedback, but we need that feedback to guide recovery.

To solve chronic pain requires rehabilitation - skip that step, and the source of pain remains, so the drugs become a requirement for day-to-day life.

**7.**

In one of the *Hitchhiker's Guide* books by Douglas Adams, a spaceship's computer sends a diagnostic robot to investigate a sensor failure in part of the ship, and the diagnostic robot discovers, as it flies into space, that the section of the ship in question had blown up. The computer, missing the organ of its senses, was aware it had a problem but lacked the apparatus to understand the extent of its problem.

**8.**

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Carruth writes of the “double-telling” of trauma narratives, through a simultaneous crisis of life and of death. She suggests that to live through a traumatic experience forces the survivor to ask, “if this happened to me and I lived, then what of the others?” The dawning of awareness that life persists through traumatic conditions reshapes the individual; the dramatic personal upheaval is a universal possibility, and its traces underlie human surfaces.

Carruth suggests a latency to traumatic experience: not that we forget a reality that can’t be fully known, but that the experience cannot fully be known immediately, and that awareness always takes time until its dawning. We may not know our trauma until long after it happens.

The title of her book refers to Caruth’s idea of trauma as an unclaimed experience. To claim our trauma is, by my understanding, to acknowledge its effects and integrate them into our life, so we can move beyond trauma. Otherwise, Caruth says, we’re fated to relive our traumatic experience.

**9.**

After losing an appendage, some patients find themselves able to “feel” the missing limb as though it were still there, a condition known as phantom limb syndrome.

V.S. Ramachandran invented a novel way to resolve the disparity between sensation and reality: constructing a mirrored box that would allow a patient to raise and lower their good limb and see a whole and working limb reflected on the side of their missing limb:

In a mirror box the patient places the good limb into one side, and the stump into the other. The patient then looks into the mirror on the side with the good limb and makes "mirror symmetric" movements, as a symphony conductor might, or as we do when we clap our hands. Because the subject is seeing the reflected image of the good hand moving, it appears as if the phantom limb is also moving. Through the use of this artificial visual feedback it becomes possible for the patient to "move" the phantom limb, and to unclench it from potentially painful positions.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> From Wikipedia's "Mirror box" article, 6/9/16.

**10.**

What if, still mired in our pain problems, we reproduce? What if our children us and follow our lead, not understanding how we've adapted ourselves to pain? What if coping mechanisms we develop to ease our pain end up causing pain themselves? What if our children follow our lead?

**11.**

Each person has a mandate towards their own happiness, because each person must bridge the gap between how they feel and what they express. We need to empower everyone to pursue that happiness.

In light of the considered body, that means declining fights, abhorring violence, not tearing other people apart for any reason – other people tear apart enough on their own.

We might be able to help other people recover, but to apply our own standards to them is to assume a common experience where none might exist. Better to assume no commonality, and allow values to emerge in the confusion of human life. We should prepare not our standards, but our humanity.

**12.**

Common values, human values, exist. But identity politics fracture common values. I'm going to talk about fetishism and fetish communities here, as I think the mechanics of fetishism represent a way well-meaning people can discriminate against themselves.

In personal writing I've considered that fetishism is a means to control; I have memories which feature fetish objects, but a lengthy examination of the earliest memories and those which follow suggests to me that the erotic component of those encounters was only vaguely related to the object itself. So, in a sense, the fetish object offers a neutral signification - it evokes those erotic memories without being itself erotic. The male gaze operates under these same confines: a female form can evoke an erotic memory through sheer resemblance. This is a process of objectification. Erotic trouble arises when a scheme of objectification fails - as is inevitable when applied to humanity. Eros without ritualistic mediation skews animalistic.

Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow* talks about two ways humans have of thinking: the fast way of thinking draws from intuition, default responses, and requires relatively little willpower - it's more reflexive; slow thinking requires tremendous willpower, but allows derivation from instinct and reflex. The Israeli parole board study - which Kahneman brings up in his book - has been written about widely, and illustrates some practical implications of willpower as a finite resource.

My hypothesis is that fetishism is a control mechanism related to managing reflexive behavior as a way to conserve willpower.

Especially in contexts where sexuality's cultural value is leveraged to manipulate behaviors or coerce behavior, a fetishistic sexuality can interrupt instinct - but the resulting polarization of drives alter value and signification, and fetishism is doubly occluded within the already-veiled sexual discourse, consequently stifling conversations about how fetishes relate to, and form in response to, normative sexuality.

Under this hypothesis, fetishes present a conundrum: adopted for their usefulness as a workaround for systemic sexual oppression, they also suppress knowledge that would allow life outside that fetishistic context. I've encountered the idea that fetishes can in a sense be "cured," but most people suggest it's a difficult or troubling process and not worth the undertaking unless the fetish itself causes significant harm. But a fetishistic relationship to sexuality can present harm - R.D. Laing speaks to this in *The Divided Self*.

Speaking of an eccentric young man whose tutor worried about seeming hallucinations and odd behaviors, Laing noted his eccentric and mannered clothing and behaviors, and "could not escape the impression that this young man was *playing* at being eccentric." The boy reports that, until his mother's death, "I had simply been what she wanted.' Of her death he said, 'As far as I can remember I was rather pleased. Perhaps I felt some sorrow; I would like to think so anyway.'"

Laing writes the boy "was always playing a part [for his mother]. Usually, in his mind, he was playing the part of someone else, but sometimes he played the part of himself: that is, he was not simply and spontaneously himself, but

he *played* at being himself. His ideal was, *never to give himself away to others*. Consequently, he practices the most tortuous equivocation towards others in the parts he played."

The veneer of performance became troubling for the boy when he played out parts in front of the mirror, where he could become absorbed in the performance, because the parts he played in front of mirrors were always women's parts. After his mother's death he began wearing her clothes, rehearsed female parts, and could not stop himself from enacting the part of a woman in his every aspect. The eccentric clothing and mannerisms the boy had adopted were to prevent this feminine aspect from overtaking his everyday existence - he could not understand his drive to act eccentrically, but the feminine aspects that bubbled forth threatened, in Laing's account, to diminish the control and mastery the boy otherwise exercised throughout his life.

Laing goes on to write that "in all this [self-relationship to false identities] there is an attempt to create relationships to persons and things within the individual without recourse to the outer world of persons and things at all. The individual is developing a microcosmos within themselves; but, of course, this autistic, private, intra-individual 'world' is not a feasible substitute for the only world there really is, the shared world."

**13.**

A fetish object itself is harmless; objects possess only the power inherent to their particular configuration of matter. It is the relationship to a fetish object as if it were human, to derive erotic pleasure from objects rather than humans, that causes trouble.

Susan Sontag wrote in “Regarding Pain” that the mind is a theatre of images, and that remembering through photographs is not a problem, but *only* remembering through photographs is. The fidelity of photographs, the amount of detail they retain, “eclipses other forms of understanding and remembering.”

Humans are not objects. As much as we can know and predict about other human beings, all people contain an unknown element – thoughts. Each person’s thoughts remain theirs alone, to be expressed or not. Humans remain ultimately undefinable in a singular sense and thus cannot be object.

Thoughts may be objectified, and shared. They may remind us of people, or resemble people. But they cannot ultimately replace people, for objects only exist to serve.

**14.**

Our ideas about other people can scare us into avoiding human contact entirely.

**15.**

In a mortality study, feeling lonely came with a 26% increase in mortality rate. Social isolation increased mortality rates by 29 to 32%.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Holdt-Lunstad's "Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review"

**16.**

The causes of mental illness and depression are still not well understood.

**17.**

American mass murderers, after their rampage ends, often leave behind a trail of isolation, extremism, obsession, and long-term planning. Most if not all show diagnostic signs of mental illness. Family members often report a long history of untreated symptoms in their mentally ill kin, or the treatment shows no sign of curing the patient's disease.

If measured by death count, American mass murderers have waged the bloodiest civil war ever fought on our soil.

These men are our friends, our family, our brothers, and they murder us.