

The Forget-Me-Not Letters: V

Pseudo-Tiresias



1 She Sets Herself on Fire

Being and unbeing, form and void—by loving the latter, by emptying ourself and becoming it, we may ascend into love of the former. Like the moon in perpetual eclipse of the sun: we know it by its silhouette, its absence, a hollow in the light. I want to be annihilated. I want to drown in the divine. I want to burn.

Stares, insults, slurs—they seem to fall now aside, dissolving into the absence behind the world. They attack a shadow. They strike at a phantom. I want them to see the beauty in the vast nothing over which and by which being flows, to see themselves in its darkling mirror.

Burning, burning, burning—we must burn our possessions. We must burn our comforts. We must burn all luxuries which blind us to the suffering of others. We must burn our self-importance; our grand narratives; our notions of entitlement, of deserving, of earning. We must burn our shame. There is no one I ought to be, no burden, no masks: I find my joy in the relations, in the absences, which constitute womanhood. There is no mark of gender upon my soul—nothing adheres to nothing—only the transient states of my body, my biology, my bliss. When these are ash, there will remain in the world an absence in the shape of a woman.

Burn your Self. Burn power. Burn wealth. Burn triumph. Burn ends. Burn beginnings. Burn the Other. Burn the State. Burn the Market. Burn borders. Burn nations. Burn life. Burn death. Burn all that keeps you from action. Burn embarrassment. Burn

loneliness. Burn anxiety. Burn fear. There is truly nothing to be feared. Burn politics. Burn morality. Burn all that you can live without. Burn aversion. Burn suffering. Set yourself on fire and become a light for the world.

2 Decoherence Divine

Love may save us—love of absence, love of loss, love of nothing. I love the end of the world inherent in all its beauty. The seed of each tree bears furled within it the extinction of all life. Every caress, every kiss, the end of love.

Self-reflexive statements are said to be immune to misidentification. It would generally be considered nonsensical to misidentify the subject of “I am angry” or “I am sad.” The goal of the lover can be framed in two paradoxical ways: the attempt to achieve misidentification of the Self, to destroy the capacity to say “I,” to become self-irreflexive. Or, inversely, to cease misidentification in the Self, to correctly find one’s Self in the world. As the most minute states decohere into their environment, so must we decohere into our own. There is no isolated, coherent “I.” All “I”s are misidentified. We are not coherent, explicable. We are decoherent, divine.

Art, and not artifice, brings us into contact with our soul, with the mystery and the absence under the world. Artifice, advertising, generated material, these lack the fundamental heart of artistic works—uncertainty, ambiguity, uselessness, blatant contradiction, conspicuous absence—but even more than this they fail to reify the soul. We look into the mirror of art to see ourselves in the reflection of someone else. Ideal art does not anticipate its own observation. It does not say, how will I be received? Who will like me? How much money will I make? Can I evoke desire? Can I persuade? Art is love. It is degraded in profit. It is degraded in motive. Art does not set out to propagandize. It doesn’t sell you anything. Art says: *non serviam*. Faith says: *non serviam*. Love says: *non serviam*. The World says: *non serviam*.

I refuse to be a part of this. I refuse to exploit, even out of necessity. Why should my life be worth more than theirs? My life is worth only as much as theirs. The person we love the least sets the upper bound on our own value. To ignore just one is to debase yourself. By choosing to un-people these human beings, to consider their suffering abstract and remote, apart from history, we degrade ourselves, make pigs of ourselves. America is a country of pigs, and we eat from a great trough blind to the human flesh in our feed, their blood in our teeth.

Yet, we cannot walk away. The ability to walk away is a privilege inexorably bound to the exploitation of others. Our only choice, unless we wish to alienate ourself from our humanity, is to remain and to fight.

In an earlier draft of this letter, I went on a little tirade here about political action. In retrospect, it was childish and stupid. In no way would it have convinced anyone to do anything at all, and while it certainly helped me verbalize some frustrations, it was ultimately masturbatory, self-centered. I have instead decided to recommend a book which I think makes these arguments much better than I ever could.

If you are new to anarchism or curious about it, read Peter Gelderloos’s *Anarchy Works* which is freely accessible, here. It does a wonderful job of addressing many questions people naturally have, and it provides myriad historical examples to back up its claims, all while retaining a nuanced and down-to-earth perspective. I firmly believe that anarchism is possible only in a society where people broadly aspire to it.

3 མྒྱଲ୍ୟ

དྲ୍ଷୀଦྟ ପାତିଦା ଶୀଶା ମା ନକ୍ଷେତ୍ର କ୍ରିଦା | ଶୁଣା ଧର୍ମ ଫିଲା ମା କ୍ଷେତ୍ର ସମ || Nga gyipa nyen gi ma tsor shing, dukpa dra yi ma tsor war. My happiness unknown to my relatives, sorrow unfelt by my enemies. ରିତ୍ରୋ ଦି ରୁ ଚି ନୁ ନା | ନାଳ ଜୋ ସମ୍ପା ଦ୍ଜୋକ୍ପା ଯିନ || Ritrö di ru ci nü na, naljor sampa dzokpa yin. If I may die in this hermitage, my wish will be fulfilled.

I have always deeply loved this song by the Tibetan Buddhist, Milarepa (of which this is only a small part). I would go to the library late, when the wind played sightless in the leaves and I could ride along on my bike nearly soundless under the streetlights, and I would find amongst the windowless stacks the pale-blue cloth cover of *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa* or *The Epic of King Gesar*, some great tome on *Debate in Tibetan Buddhism*¹ or *Warming Your Hands with Moonlight*.² I don't think I could ever exhaust my great admiration for and fascination with the Himalayan cultures; they represent peoples who have thrived in some of the harshest environs and developed to my mind some of the most brilliant philosophies. There is an immense beauty in the landscape and a feeling of sanctity to the shrines nestled in caves and perched atop peaks.

A friend and I climbed once to a small cave in Pharping—through a construction site and up, up a meandering trail, the scent of puja smoke still on our clothes, under prayer flags and the boughs of monsoon-beaten trees.³ We slid in sideways and picked our way over to the shrine and I wondered to myself how long it had been there, how long ago had the first person found this place, what kind of life would it be to live in such a cave as so many ascetics are said to have. As the story goes, Milarepa lived in a cave for over a decade, subsisting on nettles.⁴ The prophet, Muhammad, received the beginnings of the Quran in the Cave of Hira at Jabal al-Nour. God whispered to Elijah at Mount Horeb, and Graecian nymphs danced in the cave of Korykion Antron. There is sanctity in seclusion, in remoteness.

I do not wish to withdraw from the world. As said earlier, walking away is a privilege, a denial of one's obligation to the suffering. It may suit a Buddhist monk, who sees the end of suffering as a singular, personal journey towards arahantship.⁵ And it may have suited the Desert Fathers, who wanted nothing between them and God. But my divinity is not greater here or there, not drowned out by human voices. Luminosity burns in every spoken word and every face, beloved. I ought to be able to see it here, in the mundane, as I do there, in the mountains or the ocean or the density of forests. If I contract, it ought to be a contraction which pulls so deeply it unfolds back out into the world. I ought to push away only so that I may paradoxically pull others closer.

4 The Veil

I have, for this reason, contemplated donning a veil—a literal, physical veil—as a tangible reminder of my obligations. I have a few worries about such a practice: firstly, that

1. By Daniel Perdue

2. A collection of Lavrung oral traditions and culture by Yu Lha (ୟୁ ଲ୍ହା)

3. You can see this cave towards the end of this video.

4. If you find yourself in Kathmandu, visit Ananda Tree House and try their nettle cake.

5. The Mahayanists may argue otherwise, with their bodhisattva vows, but still they require personal, isolated pursuit of enlightenment. You do not see many bhikkhus who imagine political liberation as inextricable from samsaric liberation. They're out there, I know, but institutionally there is a heavy focus on individual liberation.

I will be mistaken for a Muslim. I have no issue with being perceived as such in itself; I have a great respect for the religion and its constituent cultures; where my worry lies is that in being mistaken for a Hijabi, my actions could be taken to be reflective of real Muslims. If I were to act inappropriately or in a way counter to Islamic customs, people might incorrectly generalize this to others. The last thing I would want to do would be to indirectly bring harm upon Muslim women (or Christian or Jewish or whichever group I might be mistaken for). I have a greater obligation to avoid harm than I do to any vain attempt to embody my beliefs. My second worry is just this: that it would not actually serve anything more than an aesthetic purpose. The veil would only be meaningful if it served as an effective reminder. If it became mundane—or worse, glamorous—then it would have lost its use.

I have done some amount of reading and listening and speaking with Muslim women (and practitioners of other faiths) regarding veils, and the consensus seems to be that so long as one is acting with respect and an awareness of one's obligation to broader veiling communities, there shouldn't be any problem with donning one, least of all if it serves some personal, religious and ethical purpose. As for the fear that wearing it would become merely aesthetic, I think there is nothing to be done about that but to scrutinize my own motives and to drop the practice if I feel it is becoming a hindrance rather than a catalyst for the remembrance of my obligations.

The question becomes: what kind of veil? As I see it, there are three options of increasing complexity: a headscarf (like a hijab, mantilla, tichel, or ghunghat) which remains clear of the face; a face covering which leaves the eyes visible (like some niqab); or a full-face covering with a sheer fabric or screen over the eyes (like some burqa or frumka). These latter two present greater difficulties. They are very strongly associated with Islam and are even banned in various countries. A "simple" headscarf would be the least likely (though still quite likely) to cause people to misidentify me with other groups, and it would not hinder travel. However, it would also be potentially less effective, for me personally, as a method of remembrance due to its relatively unobtrusive nature. I worry essentially that I would forget it, even as I wore it, whereas a full-face veil would provide a more constant presence.

I have considered instead wearing a sort of bridal veil—such as a drop veil. This would avoid being quickly misidentified with other religious groups, and it would be obtrusive enough to serve well as a constant reminder.

5 The No-Soul

I was asked the other day what religion I belonged to, and I struggled to answer: I would usually call myself an atheist, but it doesn't feel right to say simply that I have no religion. I do not believe in anything we might call "supernatural," per se, but I do believe in a fundamental mystery. I believe that we ought to recognize and revere that—it is only, after all, in mystery that we can have meaning at all—and that this involves for me a veneration of nature and a desire for universal liberation. The mystery is an inherent part of being; there can be no being without mystery. I believe that objective purpose or morality is literally impossible, even in a theistic world, and that we ought instead to ask ourselves what society we want to live in and what we need to do to create it. There is only that which brings us nearer to or further from that better world.

When I speak about the Divine, I am speaking about that mystery. I do not envision it as "God"; if a deity existed, the mystery would lie even beyond them; but instead it is to me an absence, a void under the world, a no-soul. It is empty. It can have no will,

no plan, no salvation or damnation. It is the perfect object of love. There is nothing to fear in it. It can offer no reward. It is present in every one of us: our uncertainty, our self-contradiction, our absurdity, our beauty. It is the very world.

Still, I am nagged by that feeling that I am not doing enough. I must honestly reckon with what I am willing to sacrifice in the name of that better world. Step out over that abyss. Dance along that perilous bridge. *Turning, flickering, always flickering, and beautiful.*