

The Forget-Me-Not Letters: I

Pseudo-Tiresias

1 Prelude

Snow was general all over town. Last winter, I would garb myself in cashmere and yak wool and waddle my way to work, returning home nose numb and ears burning into the warmth of my apartment. I'd sit with my hands wrapped round my little, perfect mug—fire in the palms, in the pads of my fingers—and watch my own reflection in the window pane, that vision of myself wavering in the darkling, in the condensation on the glass and the steam. There is an oak, there, out in the yard which spreads a thousand, thousand groping branches over the wood-shingled rooves and the balconies and the prayer flags lately shredded by the wind, and her twigs carve jointed paths in my cheeks and in my eyes and in the constellations clustered vaguely amidst the clouds. The smudges of fingerprints occlude the smoothening of skin and the soft gradation of the curve of my chin, a movement subcutaneous and subtle as those rivers which for millennia run faintly, and faintly running shape the face of the Earth.

Those fine, dermal shifts have made it so that when I go out, I receive cat calls and wolf whistles; I get “hey beautiful”s and “where you going”s; I am followed down streets by men and hounded at the bars. I receive now a kind of sisterhood from other women; I am let in on secrets and confided in; I am turned to for comfort; I am entrusted with children and complained to about the idiocies of men. Yet, if they knew the little letter on my license, on my passport, on my medical records—we live in a world where these changes to the contours of my face, to the shape of my body, to the inflection of my voice have rendered me inhuman, a creature in the skin of a woman.

Yet, I know a better world is possible. It is waiting out there for us, latent, shivering under the surface. I want to believe that the worst of our looming climate catastrophes may yet be averted. I want to believe that we can build a future where all may live freely as themselves. I want to believe in love; true love; mindless, luminous love. I am writing these letters not to anyone else but myself—as a creed, a promise, a vow of love made to the world.

2 The Nature of Love

Love is a rather vague concept. We talk about it all the time, yet when it comes down to it we almost entirely rely on instinct. I love you not because I have sat and built up some notion of what it means to do so. I love you because I love you. I think, perhaps, it would be more effective to take a scalpel to love, to say what it is not.

Love is uncoerced. Love is rewardless. Love is vulnerable. If I told you at knife-point to love me, it would not be love of me but of your own wellbeing. If I handed you \$20, it would not be love of me but your own wealth. If I put on a mask, it would not love of me but an image. Love is honest, love is free, love is given without fear or requisite. Love must be aimed totally upon its object; it can have no other aim.

Faith is nothing but love, love nothing but faith. If it were coerced, it would not be faith but fear. If it were rewarded, it would not be faith but favor. If it were evidenced, it would not be faith but knowledge. Faith is a love of that which lies on the far side of being, for which we can have no words, no appellations, no titles. The thing we often call faith—faith in God—is almost always not faith nor even love but fear, greed, hate, all with a pretty veneer. We flee from Hell. We reach for Heaven. We think it will bring us prosperity. We think it will curse our enemies. But none of these are genuinely interested in the object of faith; they are all selfish. A real love of God would have no conception of damnation or salvation. It would not care for wealth or advantage. It would be inexplicable. True love can only ever be utterly unreasonable.

Nothing in this world may be taken apart from anything else. Nothing exists independently. To love, say, a sister is to love your parents, without whom she does not exist. To love them is to love their friends and their families. If I love my sister, I love the woman living in a highrise in Beijing, who I will never meet and whose life I cannot know; yet, she is as integral to the being of my sister as my mother is, as my father. There is nothing to love without her. There is no world without her. Love is boundless. To withhold love from one is to withhold love from all or else to love them incompletely. To give love to one is to give love to all. We mere mortals, not being bodhisattvas or saints, can content ourselves, if we are not able to love everything, at least with extending our compassion as far as we are able.

Real love is not-mind. It does not project. It knows no concepts. Love is boundless, luminous. Love is faith. The fullest embodiment of love is felt towards all things, including the self—unindividuated, inexplicable. Love reifies our bond with that which is beyond being.

3 The Movements of Love

On first blush, love seems impotent if it cannot discern, if it cannot be particular. Yet, love is a force just as gravity. Love confuses one's sense of self. The lover and the beloved cannot be divided one from the other. To love another is to love one's self as a stranger, to love all strangers as one's self. It is a kind of death.

As love has the natural tendency to percolate into all facets of one's life, so does hate. Yet, I will not tell you that all hate is evil. I am a victim of rape. Can I honestly look another in the eye and say that they should not hate their rapist? Can I look a mother in the eye and tell her she should not hate the soldiers who bombed her children? What kind of human would I be? An idiot, perhaps, or a zealot. But I hope, as has happened with my hate, that their love may submerge it, surround it, and keep them from despair.

We cannot all be Siddhartha or Simone, we are bound to seek our own benefit from time to time. However, learning to love in this way—luminously—breaks down the egoistic boundaries we place between one another, the boundaries which allow us to ruin one another out of greed or hate or attachment to comfort. Your discomfort, your oppression, your suffering becomes mine. Mine becomes yours. The suffering of one child is the suffering of the world. Her salvation, the salvation of the world.

4 The Occultation of Light

Liberty is the desire of love: she who loves is compelled to bring about the liberation of all. A world in which all are able to love is one in which they are uncoerced, in which

no one is entitled to more, in which all are able to be themselves freely.

Love is anathema to the State. It has no tools but extortion, transaction, and obscuration. Love never happens within its frameworks: it is always done radically, in transgression of its claims regarding human nature and order. Capitalism has so deeply entrenched itself in our world that to love wholly without any hint of coercion, without any hope for benefit or advantage, and honestly as one's self is nearly impossible. These must be toppled, shown to be great engines of delusion, the antitheses of love.

Love is natural. It is there, in the inner hearts of all people, though they may by internal or external force be made ignorant to it. It is most readily seen—at least, in my own experience—between siblings. There is often less of the authority of parenthood, the conditionality of friendship. My own personal heuristic of love is to imagine myself everyone's sister and everyone my sibling. I have met certain Buddhists who hold that in the infinite lives preceding this one, we have all at one time been each other's mother, each other's children. We have held every conceivable relationship to one another. We have fought against one another and side by side. We have killed each other just as often as we have kissed. We ought in each act consider whether we would do the same to our mother, our child, our sister, our brother. Hate is material, transient—it obscures our view of truth. Love is light.

I cannot comfortably conceive of doing harm to my sister, not under any circumstance. It is tempting then to resort to pacifism. Yet, in doing so we reject any efficacy the alternative might have. It is repulsive to consider, yet necessary in the face of the contemporary world. Non-violence should be preferred where effective and violence only done out of sheer necessity. However, we frequently allow great violence to be done to others, justifying our inability to stop this as adherence to non-violence. We let one kill another, and we pat ourselves on the back and say that to do otherwise would be to become as evil as the murderer. But if we can act and we don't, or if we shun certain means because it makes us more comfortable to do so, we are valuing ourselves over the victim. We are obligated to do everything in our power to bring about a better world. Anything less and we are responsible for its ruin.

Our current society conflates the valuing of things with the valuing of people. Thus, people become things—a view often subconsciously held—which is the root of sin. We must devalue and decenter things as much as we are able so that we may re-value, re-center people. Attachment to the inanimate is obviously necessary to alleviate the base suffering which constitutes the majority of the world's afflictions; yet, attachment in excess, that is luxury, distracts us from people and obscures our view of the luminous.

We are as a society deeply immature—and I am guilty of this as any other. We need to content ourselves with less, to cease relying on luxuries brought to us by what amounts to (and often literally is) slave labor. Again: we must de-center things. Only in a more equal society, in a responsible society, can we seriously grapple with the network of connections which provide us with our material goods. It is immensely easy today to let the apparent ease of purchasing a new shirt or a quick meal distract us from the vast web of exploitation which we tie ourselves into. Every day, each of us turns a wheel which grinds away the lives of millions. Every meal, every toy, every convenience—our hand holds the wheel which breaks bones and wets the machine of industry with blood. Think about how many hands your clothes had to pass through to reach you; how many people toiling in terrible conditions, in poverty, in sickness; how many individual lives you tighten the vice on with each purchase.

If you take anything away, let it be this: let go of things. Let go of all your silly, spoiled comforts. We are killing people. We are causing incalculable suffering. We are all of us guilty, in greater or lesser degrees, but we let the glamor of luxury distract

us from our place in the machine. Or we delude ourselves into thinking that by raising our fist in solidarity, liking and sharing, we are even remotely absolving ourselves of our sins. Engage in the grave, courageous, and brutal act of pruning not just the worst but all aspects of your consumption. This is not one deed but a continuous perspective: a serious reckoning with your needs and your abilities. Replace the convenience of purchasing a manufactured good with the work of creating it. Make your own clothes. Prepare your own meals. Source as many of your needs locally as you are able. This requires time and the dedication to learn new skills, and I am aware that for many who are already struggling to make ends meet this may seem prohibitively difficult. A great potential for success in this endeavor would be to organize within your own community: find someone to sew for you and in return bake their bread, find someone to make your soap and in return grow their vegetables. At the very least, know the people who produce your goods personally. Be in community with them. And forgo what you do not need. To eat at the expense of another is far lesser a sin than to feast.

I lived for a time with a family of refugees in poverty. Out of necessity, they made their own food. They knew the tailors of their clothes. Much of what they owned was locally made, and I could not in any case fault them for what was not. I won't mischaracterize them as noble or somehow more deeply moral than anyone else; they were just people living within the material realities of their situation, in large part a consequence of their geography. They lived in a place that had not been stripped of its manufacturing, as many countries have, and in a region with much in the way of agriculture. But it is hard to say living that same life in the United States or Europe would be more demanding; it would certainly be less comfortable than what many are used to. These people labored equally to any American or European I have ever known. They ran shops. They raised families. It is precisely the ways in which we convince ourselves that we cannot do more, that we are doing enough—by these, we perpetuate the current state of affairs. You tell yourself that your vegetarianism or your preference for biking or your disdain for fast fashion or your purchasing organic or your attending protests is all you can do. If you did what you must, your life would fall so outside the norms of society that you would be considered strange, deranged, perhaps even a little mad. You choose social acceptance over justice. You choose convenience over human lives. You pick the easy over the right. You are not doing enough. You must do more. You can do more.

5 A Community of Compassion

The ideal habitat, in the world as we know it, may be an anarchist, eco-friendly, self-sustaining community where the material and social conditions are most conducive to freedom. Yet, the establishment of such a place might divert efforts away from movements for broader, societal change. Still, it seems that many are incapable of imagining any alternative to the world as it is, so evidencing one may yet have some use. The importance would lie in raising public awareness of its success, making it easier for people to see what their own lives could look like. The purpose of such a society would be the production of hope.

We are all willing to subject others to suffering because they are remote from us, in time or space. We exploit workers in distant countries because, to the consuming mind, they are not really people. We sit on our hands with regard to climate change because the children displaced by it are not real children; they are abstractions. It is for this same reason that most do not reconsider their meat-eating—it does not really come

from a living thing to them. We strip the fur and the skin and the hooves so that we can maintain the illusion that it sprung up from the earth ready for our plate. Or we say “I’ll get to that soon,” “I’ll get around to it,” “I’ll make the change when my situation is better” and then it never gets done. The right time is always tomorrow. We are always just about to become good people. Do it now.¹

A politics which deals only with abstractions is not really politics; it is a game. That is why so many are easily able to treat politics as sport. It is fundamentally performative. This is a primary function of representative democracy, of bureaucracy, of colonialism, of capitalism: making remote and abstract all elements of governance and consumption. The State is a great machine, and in order to function it must render all things in machine language: waivers, appeals, contracts, endless abstractions. The goal of the truly moral society would be to minimize these: to operate on consensus, to use as its medium genuine, human connection. The mechanisms of organization remain accountable so long as they remain grounded. Abstract a system and it becomes capable of wielding terrible power to destroy the lives of those it operates upon.

The minimization of abstraction may seem impossible: the organization of billions from the top-down requires that you smudge all their specific lives into vague generalizations, that you weed out those who cannot be made to fit. However, bottom-up organization flourishes in diversity. Control subsists on conform. Liberty thrives on difference. All ethical organization begins between a small group of people, often just two or three. The roots of a better world are already set in the earth of your local community, of your friendships, of your family.

6 An Ontology

To avoid inundating the reader at the very beginning of this work with a drab little ontology, I have opted instead to thrust it on you now that you are several pages deep and less likely to flee in terror.

The world is a singular, indistinguishable, ultimately inexplicable surface onto which we project mental objects—all things for which we have names and descriptions. This is clearly true for macroscopic things like chairs or tables; they are just names we give to arrangements of particles. However, this holds for the microscopic, for the seemingly elementary: even electrons, even quarks, even the most fundamental aspects of the universe which physics may drudge up from the depths are all projections. That is not to say they are not real. However, we (each of our “selves”) imbue them with value. The self is the origin of meaning, of value, of clinging and craving. We create objects in order to think. Frameworks, mindsets, beliefs—these all have value only in so far as they allow us to achieve certain ends. Nothing has value intrinsically, separate from the mind, because nothing specific really exists separate from the mind.

To reiterate, the world is everything that physically is, without distinction. We build up a web of objects and relations which we project onto the world, and these may be useful towards certain ends, but they don’t exist out there in reality. This is not an entirely accurate way of framing it; there is no “out there” and “in here.” The “self” is an object which the mind projects onto itself; but given that we all more or less operate under the delusion that this self decides things and directs our thought and isn’t just a sheet draped over a collection of subprocesses and sensory experiences (the ghost in

1. I actually have few qualms with meat-eating so long as one is willing to raise the animal themselves, to kill the animal themselves, and to prepare it themselves. But the remoteness of it allows people to ignore its frequent brutality and the burden it places on other people and the environment.

our mental machine), it is difficult to talk about without lapsing into dualistic language. I don't want this to sound like hippy-dippy woo-woo stuff; I am not saying that the self doesn't exist or that it is evil or that notions of scientific accuracy are "lies." However, they are nothing more than useful mental objects. It is in building up the web of mental objects and relations which the Self does in order to achieve its ends that it stumbles into other phantasms like science, morality, aesthetics, and so on. Again, these are useful and they can provide a lot of predictive power, but they are not impersonal truths separate from the human mind, existing in some ideal realm. There is only undifferentiated being, but part of this being finds it useful to project distinctions in order to achieve particular goals, usually ultimately related to the biological imperatives of survival and reproduction.²

The trouble is that we become attached to higher-level mental objects. As children, we create objects to classify our sensory experiences (which are the only mental objects with direct connection to the external world). From these, we build subnetworks of objects and relations which model how the physical world operates: what happens when we throw a stick, what happens when we clap our hands, etc. Eventually, we begin to grapple with other people: we model their thought processes, their worldviews. The mind (usually) realizes it is useful to build social cohesion, and as a heuristic it develops models of justice and morality. These are only frameworks that are useful for survival; they have little connection now to the sensory foundations of our mental network. Somewhere along the line, we lose sight of the ground, and we begin to imagine that these objects which we have built up to serve our survival have value in themselves. We elevate our mental objects to ends in themselves and build up further branches of our mental map in order to achieve these phantasmal goals.

It can be useful, in thinking, to ask yourself: what root does this have in my sensory experiences and how useful is this in predicting future states? What predictive power does a concept like morality have? Actually quite a lot, in so far as it allows you to predict the actions of others who hold particular beliefs regarding right and wrong, but it isn't necessarily useful for you to hold it in the same way that they do: as having value in itself, as an end in itself. Instead, as much as you are able, divest mental concepts of intrinsic value. There is only usefulness.

This is obviously only possible to a certain extent. You could, hypothetically, become an ascetic and live in the woods, detached and undesiring, but this offends the sensibilities of those of us who have already invested much into notions of right and wrong. To them and to myself, I offer the following:

The realization that everything, including the Self, is unitary, undifferentiated being allows us to conceive of ourselves as inherently tied into everything else. By projecting objects into the world, we come to believe in a dualistic distinction between subject and object, between experiencer and experience, between the Self and the World. This puts us in tension with all that is perceived to be "not Self." We place ourselves in opposition to others, we resist the course of things, and these give rise to suffering. By decoupling objective sensory experience from subjective reaction and by accepting things as they come, wanting but not resisting wants unfulfilled, we can mitigate suffering. Doing so naturally gives rise to compassion for all: no longer mediocre, contingent, mortal. Humanity is invested with natural empathy and the desire to be rid suffering, so that

2. I cannot stress enough how much I do not want this to be interpreted as equating science with other, less predictive frameworks or otherwise casting doubt on common notions of "truth." Science is, by all metrics, the best tool we currently have for predicting outcomes in the physical world. All I am saying is that it is situated entirely within the human mind. Its formulas, equations, and so on do not literally exist. They are just incredibly powerful tools for describing the relationship between different aspects of the physical world.

seeing clearly ourselves as extensions of others (and them as extensions of ourselves) we are driven to love.

7 All is Burning

By our every act, great or small, we are guilty. The glamor of luxury lets us forget the ocean of blood into which we have dipped our hands. Strip yourself of excess. Bare yourself to the essentials. Take only what you literally cannot live without.

Billions of people are going to suffer and die in the ecological catastrophes of the coming centuries. The world as you know it will break and burn. And the only things which we can do right now are research to minimize the looming tragedy and sabotage the machine which propels us towards it. Anything less is cowardice. Anything less is collaboration. Every day that we content ourselves with trivial pursuits, we are holding the weapon of their murder in our hands. We excuse ourselves as artists and academics. We tell ourselves that we are baby-stepping towards a better future while ignoring the fact that the historical circumstances for that potentiality are eroding under our feet. A better world is contingent upon there being a world. You cannot build anarchism from the ashes.

So, what is to be done? Every day, materially pursue the mitigation of climate catastrophe. Build consciousness and dual power. Let go of excess. Treat all others as those closest to you. We are, after all, passengers together on this one Earth.