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essay

this essay is about letting go or sleeping in bent light

The Context:

A playlist acts as a memory. The after-effects produce a sensorium that has already been felt and lived.

A memory to drench myself in, to feel familiar.

It has been months since this loop formed and now i don't know if the comfort is a sedative or a stimulant.

I i send the poem to a friend as a message. We share poetry with each other when we come across something resonant. She sends a smiley emoticon as a reply. i can feel her smile over my blue screen.

The Mise-en-scene:

Walking. Along the street, the park, while getting groceries; the rhythms of everyday life. Thinking of the 'what ifs' and 'perhapses'. i take a screenshot of a poem titled 'Small Sentence to Drive Yourself Sane' by Lew Welch¹ from my Twitter feed:

*The next time you are doing something absolutely ordinary, or even better
the next time you are doing something absolutely necessary, such as pissing, or making love, or shaving, or washing the dishes or the baby or yourself or the room, say to yourself:
"So it's all come to this!"*

The Gesture: An Incantation.

Close your eyes and feel the earth moving beneath your feet.

Think of the sky; it's night and the light makes it appear violet [read as violent]. The clouds move rhythmically, with soft changes in shape. And then there is volume. He tells me to look up as much as i can, and when he does that, i think he wants me to escape or he wants to escape, for those few brief seconds.

A self-recursive refrain that i keep telling myself: i am open to you because i can afford you. i think of you, all of you. i oscillate between affordance and attendance;² does my affordance to you translate into attending to you? Memory takes over at this point, the sky, your smile, the frown, the sharpness of your nose, your boyish gait in an old man's body, the old man's charm, the rush in your speech; his sense of certainty, the ease with which he moves, the assuredness of knowing who and what he is. i take all of this in, look at the sky, and say to myself: repeat the incantation for however long you want.

[This text is written at 37,919 metres above sea level; suspended. Flatness and depth dance in a mirage.]

Robert Ashley in *Private Parts: The Park* at 06:28, speaks, *the other side works with the things that are alongside us, the attachments*.³

For the longest, i thought i was bound to him and to the idea of him, bound in the ways he moves, how he sees the world, what he makes of it—all of it. *There was a madness to it*. And then i replaced 'bound' with 'attachment'. The attachment of being in relation, reciprocity, reconciliation, and resignation, with him.

i make a playlist for him and i call it: *fragments: i see you in shards*.⁴ The list of songs in it moves between joy, longing, hope, and what it might feel to hold power. There are five tracks in it: a two-part EP released by Parallax Editions, the tracks titled, *Ride* and *Flowers*; *the theme from Gay Man's Guide to Safer Sex*; *Japanese Planetarium* by Legowelt; and *IWD4U* by Prince interpreted by El Perro Del Mar.

The soundtrack is the genre of ineloquence most conventional to melodrama: it is what tells you that you are really most at home in yourself, bathed by emotions you can always recognize, and that whatever material harshness you live is not the real, but rather an accident that you have to clean up after, which will be more pleasant if you whistle while you work.

2 i would like to thank Shveta Sarda, for pointing me towards this shift from affordance to attendance. She speaks of attendance in the context of care-givers and the question of what it means to attend to a care-taker. See: "SEA Conversations - To Inhabit, With Care #8: A Collective Reading on Care." *YouTube*, 30 Sept. 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vS5_w5r9boY.

3 i first heard Ashley years ago, and like most music, i go back to it at points when i feel i need to slow down. The first track in *Private Parts: The Park* begins with a man in a hotel, trying to figure something out. What makes me go back to *Private Parts* is 1. Ashley's voice 2. the narrative structure: the loops and arcs he forms in telling this story, which are vague at best, but leave me with a sense of comfort. The album ends with Ashley describing various kinds of twilight, and then says, "Dear George, what's going on? I am not the same person I used to be." See Ashley, Robert. "Robert Ashley - Private Parts (1978) Full Album." *YouTube*, 7 Feb. 2018, youtu.be/QpHjWjNSL_k.

4 See: "fragments: i see you in shards." *SoundCloud*, soundcloud.com/arshad-hakim-193546503/sets/fragment/s-MF66beU9zFH?si=bb462e1eea9e405c8cd5dec9ccf4319a&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing.

The concept of “the soundtrack of our lives,” to cite a cliché that is also the ironic name of a great post-punk neo-psychedelic band and a growing category of niche marketing, is powerful because it accompanies one as a portable hoard that expresses one’s true inner taste and high value; it holds a place open for an optimistic rereading of the rhythms of living and confirms everybody as a star. Your soundtrack is one place where you can be in love with yourself and express your fidelity to your own trueness in sublime conventionality, regardless of the particularity of the sounds.⁵

⁵ Berlant, Lauren. “Cruel Optimism” *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, Duke University Press, North Carolina, 2011, p. 104.

The Incantation: let it all go, but make it a song.

Enter: The Invoker.

[He has a soft voice, when he speaks you want to lean closer towards him and in doing that, you notice his lips and the various shapes they make when he speaks. He speaks with his hands because he thinks the mouth and throat as organs are not enough for speech. He lives amongst the clouds in a home high above and watches the moonrise whenever he can. In the background, there are soft synths, a piano, and a deep hum, playing constantly.]

The temperamental Invoker reads out a list to him.
Here is an unedited and unabridged version.

An unstructured and inexhaustive list
of associative anxieties.⁶

Air

A phoenix flying into the sun

Electro-magnetism

Radio waves

Boeing 377

Cosmic dust

Carbon

A protective membrane

Orange, lilac, purple, yellow, blue, mixed with grey

The three types of clouds

Borders

Lightning: the goddess fighting

Rain: the goddess loving

Night

Hypnosis

Water vapour

Wanderer above the Sea of Fog by Caspar

David Friedrich, 1818

An endless, expansive hollow

A blanket made of fluff; buoyant:
ice cream clouds

Slyrak, the dragon, the father of fire (After Dota 2)

An axis

Shapeshifting forms

⁶ My thanks to Aastha,
Ankit Ravani, Likla
Lall, Rohina Thapar,
Sarasija Subramanian,
and Stuti Bhavsar
for helping me
populate this list.

A prism

Turbulent

A trickster

The bodhisattva *Vajrapani*: the carrier of thunderbolts,
the god of storms

Mirrors, of varying densities

Cloud-cover; the same as a cataract in the eye.
A cloudy lens

Pyrocumulus, a fire cloud and the title of
a comic a friend is making

Ether

An edge to another realm

Accessions and descensions

A depositor

A witness

Venus

The haze of Delhi winters

Mushroom cloud

Shu, the Egyptian god of wind and air

Tefnut, the Egyptian goddess of moisture
and mist

Fog, and then brain fog

The Seven Skies in Islam; *Jannat-al-Adan*, *Jannat-al-Firdaws*, *Janet-al-Naeem*, *Jannat-al-Mama*, *Dar-ul-Khuld*,
Dar-ul-Magaam and *Dar-us-Salam*

The moment when you realise how blue
the sky is while walking on a crowded street

Iblis: the faculty of imagination

An optic recalibration when you realise the moon isn't
flat when seen from the earth

Reflections of the sky in puddles, or in contained water
bodies, or on buildings with glass facades

Fluctuating pressures and densities

Ice clouds

Birds flying on trans-continental
migration routes

A stairway to heaven

Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds

Murmuration

The south-east monsoon winds over
the Malabar coast

A flipped umbrella blown by a strong wind

A red helium balloon that a child lost,
now high up in the sky

Vertigo

Ear pain

The seven kinds of rainbows

Aurora borealis

Zeppelins

A temple

Apsaras

Fire

Oxygen

In 1775, Carl Wilhelm Scheele proposed a theory that air consists of two fluids: *Foul Air* ("verdorbene Luft") and *Fire Air* ("Feuerluft"). His *Chemical Treatise on Air and Fire* begins with the purpose of chemistry, which is to break things down to their constituents so that their properties are discovered, and "to compound them in different ways." A series of experiments explain his discovery of *Fire Air*, while constantly defining air as elastic and possessing weight, and capable of transforming one quality of itself into others. To begin with, he lays out general properties of air, the most intriguing being: *air strongly attracts to itself the inflammable part of substances and deprives them of it...but it is at the same time evident that on the transference of the inflammable substance to the air a considerable part of the air is lost-and-the law of double affinity: the alkalies and lime attract the vitriolic acid, and the air attracts the phlogiston.*⁷

⁷ Scheele, Carl Wilhelm. *Chemische Abhandlung von Der Luft Und Dem Feuer*. Trans: Chemical Treatise on Air and Fire. Bokförlaget Rediviva, 1970.

[Phlogiston; noun: a substance supposed by 18th-century chemists to exist in all combustible bodies, and to be released during combustion. The word "phlogiston" is written 38 times in his treatise.]

Scheele published his discovery of *Fire Air* around 1777, two years after he wrote the treatise. *Fire Air* later came to be known as oxygen. Scheele shares the discovery of oxygen as an element with Joseph Priestly, who independently discovered the element in 1774. The amount of oxygen in air was measured by how much it could burn, and to think that we breathe fire...

The Invoker: breathe fire and be consumed by it.

Exit: The Invoker.

Enter: The Seductress.

[He stands before me wearing all black, an inquisitive stare, holding power over gravity. Outside, the evening sun shines upon him, drenching him in golden light.

It's 5:55 pm. He is a vampire, the undead, and i am always unsure if he is there before me...]

He says:

Among the four fundamental forces of the universe, gravity is considered to be the weakest since it cannot be measured on subatomic particles. However, gravity as a force is used laterally to find galaxies and star clusters, through a system called gravitational lensing. This effect is produced due to the gravitational force of massive objects in the universe that wrap space-time, and as a consequence, light travelling around these objects starts to bend. Scientists used this system to catch glimpses of galaxies and star clusters that are too distant for even the most powerful telescopes on the planet to observe. They do this by noticing background galaxies that are lensed by the cluster, images of which appear as short, thin, lensed arcs on the periphery.⁸ The distortion created by lensing effects is used to map out the quantity and location of unseen matter. In some cases, when lensing approaches perfect symmetry, a circle—which is called an Einstein ring—is formed, named after the father of the theory of General Relativity.

Seduction works like gravity—amass enough force to propel people around you, make them a cluster of promises.⁹ Your gait, a smile, how you look at them, the way you make them feel, all compounded. When seduced, the world starts to distort. Is seduction an extension of being attened to? And if being attended to is to start distorting one form of the world, what does the distortion reveal? What are the images of being seduced and being distorted at the same time?

He said: by bending gravity around me, i give you the gift of expanded vision.

i look at him with an uninterested gaze, to tell him that i am not interested in his explanation of what gravity is; rather, i want him to distort me.

⁸ The first gravitational lens was found in 1979 by Dennis Walsh, Robert F. Carswell, and Ray J. Weymann, who identified the double quasar Q0957-561 as a double image of one and the same distant quasar, produced by a gravitational lens. (See: https://www.einstein-online.info/en/spotlight/grav_lensing_history/). Since then, technologies of generating images of bent light have progressed to produce seductive and surreal images. A repository of images of gravitational lensing is on the Hubble telescope's website, which is how i found out about this lensing system. The most intriguing images are titled, 'Cosmic Snake Pregnant with Stars' (see footnote 11) and 'Cosmic Leviathan' (see footnote 12). The images produced by such systems point towards a perceptorial shift to make visible that which remains hidden and debunk the theory that light travels in straight lines. A weak force, like gravity, is enough to do so.

⁹ Berlant writes, "To phrase 'the object of desire' as a cluster of promises is to allow us to encounter what's incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmation of our irrationality but as an explanation for our sense of our endurance in the object, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises, some of which may be clear to us while others not so much." See: Berlant, Lauren. "Cruel Optimism" *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, Duke University Press, North Carolina, 2011, p. 93.

He said: i want he who can bend gravity, and when he bends light, he shall see me.

i told him:

The world has to survive the long episodes in which one or one's people do not know what to want, apart from something vaguely affective; then there are episodes in which crisis threatens survival norms and everyone's scrambling to find an anchor and the resources seem limited, except for those of aggression, which are unlimited; and then there is the ordinary in which incompatible needs and fantasies are always on the table, related to structural crisis or the singular chaos people bring to relationality. My point here is this: incompatible needs and fantasies induce ambivalence. Internal chaos produces external chaos, that expresses it without copying it. Any social theory worthy of its ambition requires a space for enigmatic, chaotic, incoherent, and structurally contradictory attachments; it needs a way to assess the attachment needs that put people in relation without promising to deliver "a life" that feels cushioned. There is no cure for ambivalence. This is what it means to move within an object world.¹⁰

Exit Seductress.

10 Berlant, Lauren.
"A properly political
concept of love:
Three approaches in
ten pages." *Cultural
Anthropology*, vol. 26, no.
4, 2011, pp. 683–691.

11 *Cosmic Leviathan*,
NASA/ESA Hubble
Space Telescope image
(open source)
See: www.spacetelescope.org,
[https://www.spacetelescope.org/
images/potw2319a/](https://www.spacetelescope.org/images/potw2319a/).
Accessed 22 Nov. 2023.

12 *Cosmic Snake
Pregnant with Stars*,
NASA/ESA Hubble
Space Telescope image
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www.spacetelescope.org,
[https://www.spacetelescope.org/
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