



Through the Traffic of the American Imagination

Image and Sound

Axel Sverker

Notes and Dedications

I would like to thank Professor Amy Kind, Janna Shwaiko, and the Gould Center for Humanistic Studies for supporting my music and musing this past summer. It truly means the world to me.

*As this is a series of informal ruminations rather than a formal paper, there was too much grey area for me to engage in a serious citation process, but I can give credit to some of the specific philosophical and literary influences that shaped my ideas! I would like to thank Jean Baudrillard for many extended nights of self-reflection, W.S. Merwin's "Tergvinder's Stone" for the discovery of hidden subjects within the object, Béla Bartók for breathing life and music into the mystery of Bluebeard's folktale, and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* for uncovering an idea of the transcendent in the ordinary.*

*Music has been the truest form of transcendence for me during the Dunbar Fellowship however and throughout my entire life, and I just want to dedicate this project both to a movie that helped me rediscover my joy in music, *Orfeo Negro* (1959), and to my younger self, who never thought that I could make music again after everything that happened. After the addictions and assaults. And of course, to SGB who has supported me through everything, always 😊*

All photographs used in this essay were taken on a biking trip this summer through various local industrial towns in South-Western Massachusetts and on a trip to Beacon, NY. The included photography is a meditation on spaces, reflection, light, and transparency; images I took and included in an attempt to communicate with and clarify the concepts of my essay.



A series of doors stretch out before you in a dusty motel. Gazing deep into the dimly lit corridor, you pass your eyes from the chevroned carpet at your feet to a point in the distance where the floor and the ceiling meet and disappear together. Curiosity pushes you to turn the knob of the first door, revealing an empty room. You open the second door, stepping through its chipped wooden frame where you come across a group of men in bowler hats yelling at one another, completely oblivious and irresponsible to your presence. Thoroughly aggravated, you leave, opening the next three doors hoping to find something worthwhile. In the rooms there are pictures of familiar faces. Your curiosity gives way to uncertainty as you cannot recall how you had once known these people. Leaving the room, staring down that interminable corridor at the task ahead, something draws you in, as if there was a promise of meaning hidden deep within the collective possibility of all the doors. Besides, it is always better to stay moving.

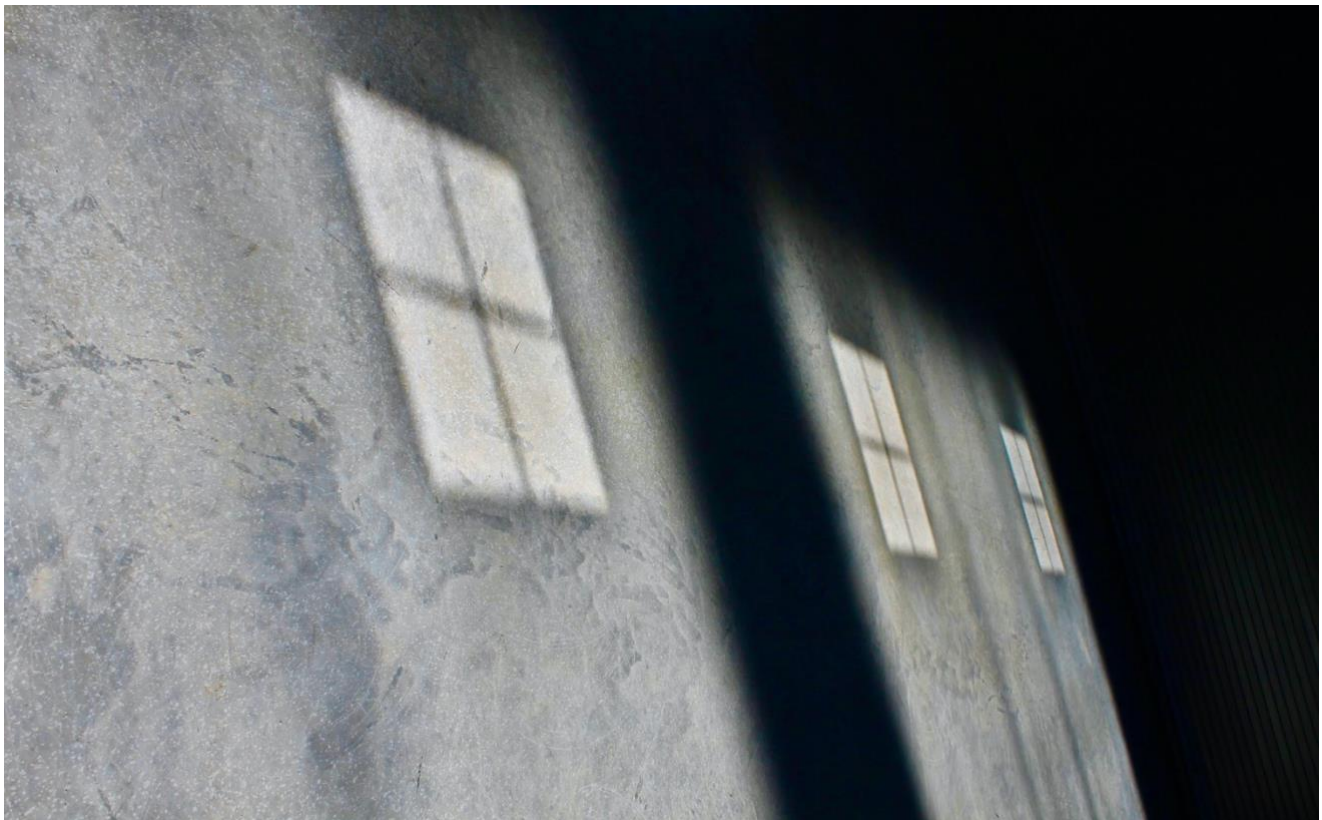
After what seems like many years, you have gradually forgotten everything that you have seen. There are no more recognizable symbols, no more recognizable faces; you can't seem to remember what a door is, what a door means. Some doors here open to the dead of night, and others hide something marvelous or horrific, in a form totally inconceivable to you. Most contain nothing. But you keep going, out of some existential inertia or simply just by muscle memory.

A door opens ahead. In it, you see yourself standing before a series of doors in a motel, looking towards the vanishing point of an interminable hallway. Behind you, a single door opens in which a figure, shaking, begins to run.

A lone in the forest for several months now, I seem to be moving closer and closer to my vanishing point. Days and nights are projected across the walls of this cabin, a shadow play that coerces me into an affectless dance that wrings me out of all my color. Transparent, I panic at times, running to the mirror to make sure I'm still there. Still, though I have yet to disappear, it's becoming harder and harder to tell where I begin and where I end.

I've come to know the size and texture of this cabin by hand. The grooves in the wood, each of the windows and the spiders that squat there, the paths the ants take along the floorboards. Colors, seen too often, detach themselves from their objects sometimes, disambiguating into their complex components. Floating like a powder in the air, I sometimes mix with the colors, disappearing into the walls, becoming a mere signified idea, discarding my consciousness as black liquid across my bedsheets. There is a critical distance required between you and your thoughts. Keep them too far, and you'll live in complete absence. Get too close and your metaphors will collapse into reality.

Gradually the idea of escape has dawned on me, not as a theorized method of consolidation and renewal, but perhaps as a method of controlled disappearance, to bathe in possibility of disappearance without the worry of ever arriving there. Because I've begun to realize that the concept of your own identity, severed from any external gaze, is not only arbitrary, but flimsy. The character of you is no more substantive than a secondary character in a script, never given enough time on screen to fathom out their internal space, defined only by what can be inflected from their relationship to the lead. Both via the deprivation of "other" and via a destructive intimacy of thought-presence, it is fascinating how far our memories move beyond the horizon, eclipsed by the interminable durations of the earth's rotation.



People say that time alone in quarantine gives us the possibility to work on the self, but in America, this seems impossible without motion. In Sweden (a place that has become a kind of “fiction” for me; a story I tell now as vacuously as one would recount a recent meal), people generally believe in a kind of sylvan transcendence. Coming out here is meant to be a metaphysical escape into one’s ideals, a resuscitation of spirit away from all the ills and pressures of society. A harmonious, reconstitution, produced using the natural world as a foil to recall and reconstitute history. Looking into the forest, there is a belief that this is where we came from. We see trolls in the rocks, stories in the moss. But it is only now in quarantine that come to understand the American ideology that has seeped into me. Now “action” carries all the weight of my spirit. It’s the triumph of effect over cause: where one comes from only has relevance in situating you here, now, as a successful individual who does so and so, likes so and so: A.K.A. it is only in the direct manifestation of self, the manifestation of your current reality that meaning is found. So, as with many things, the pursuit of “depth” seems to have been taken too literally here. Depth is here a kind of physical preoccupation. I see it when I scroll through Facebook, a never-ending depth of content, maximizing the use of our ever-expanding RAM chips—RANDOM ACCESS MEMORY (the memory used in the running of processes, rather than permanent hard drive storage). All things held as equal, this conception of memory creates a temporary remembrance out of a necessity of operation, something produced only to be destroyed in the next manifestation cycle. This is for me a unique kind of American fascination: the constant creation and destruction of memory. It’s pure desire, raw speed. It’s a deep American urge to pummel the gas pedal and drive 100 miles-per-hour on the freeway west; an activity that seems to be the purest form of self-realization for Americans. A transcendence reached at some point of pure amnesic intoxication where one can see reality unravel into a dream, an objective simulation of purpose in the destruction of space, as it flies behind the signs passing you on the road. Progress, we might think.

Gradually, the line between escape and enlightenment in quarantine has blurred for me. The four corners of my room have become oppressive. Escape is, in some way, necessary. Yet, in the cabin alone on my phone, sans plot arc or general motion, enlightenment seems to figure itself at the bottom of my endless feed. Just a million more taps away.

The most successful means of escape from reality in American society often figure themselves with a kind of post-hoc rationalization of a material benefit that can be reaped from the process. We are obsessed in America with not only the production of new realities for ourselves but the constant need to produce a greater productivity within this new reality. It is a kind of control exerted upon our imaginary pursuits. Advertisements show us a dream in which getting a cup of Starbucks™ coffee will create greater productivity at work while supplying us with a healthy social life. Our Instagram feeds offer ourselves intoxicating projections of possibility, complete with a healthy avocado toast graphically enhanced by a Harvard graduate working full time to discover the best starved model to bite at it enthusiastically. A transcendent goal to manifest a certain image that, however banal it may be, still is somehow an impossibility for the consumer to attain and manifest themselves.

Perhaps I’m being a little overly critical. Let me step back and think of escape less as a motivational production of “desire” and more in terms of its ability to produce endless space. A church offers us a package of escape and community: stories and music, vocalized, and of course, God: the unattainable infinite. In delivering us from evil in a physical space that is dripping with its own

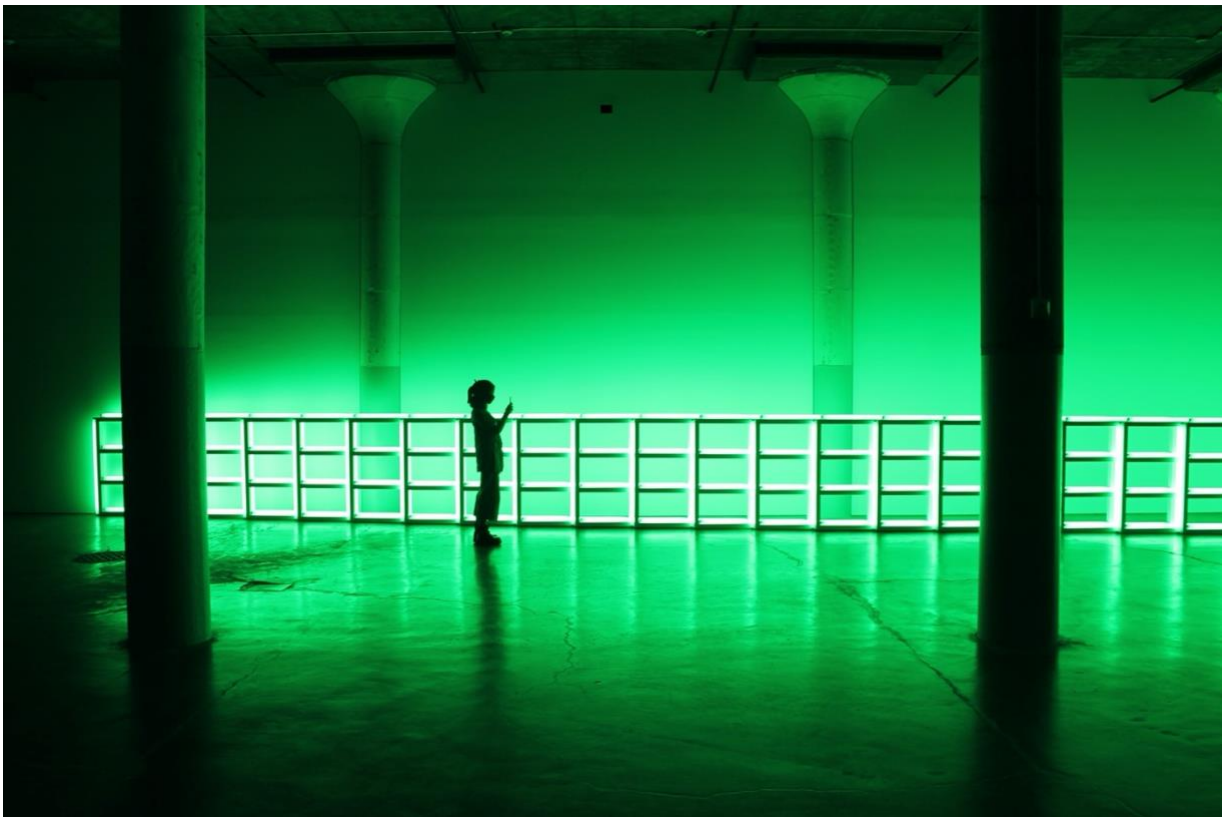


semiotic system, we can safely store, “stash” our religious consciousness under the church’s dome, in the church’s prepackaged system. It is a system in which we are made in the image of god, a fact never able to be forgotten, as Jesus’ limp body hangs from the cross on the altar—even if American men create themselves in the image of Brad Pitt the second they step outside of the church’s doors. *The ability to subdivide and control the space in which we can dream and “escape” allows for a freedom of belief and movement outside of the semiotic system that it projects while one is contained within it.*

But what if you could find the same, unattainable infinite, everywhere, constantly? What if the simulated semiotic system represents not just the ancient world of religious belief, but the entirety of civilization as it figures itself within the modern world? What if one could disappear down the American highway, that wind-blown simulation of self-realization, disappearing into pure motion while never leaving the confines of the screen? Well, look no further, our pure objective need for the current moment, our fascination of escape, our crusade against the past, has assumed its fastest possible trajectory via the internet. We can travel those infinite depths now completely on our phones, never leaving its purview.

All my classes this next semester will be on Zoom. I will see the virtual creation of the entire institution of “college” within the borders of my screen. It will come packaged with all of my friends along with all of America’s fucked up institutional problems and pedagogical perspectives. Yet, in its soft glow, I am somehow not lonely. Even if, by the very real standards of location and place, I am immobile, and completely alone in a desolate space. It is a useless and glorious form of existence. Stuck in a never-ending process of instant lucidity and gratification. Without immanence of spirit, this method of escape rules my entire world out here in the forest. I am travelling around the edges of this infinity while moving between tasks, living in an all-consuming virtual space, and yet it is a trip without any objective, and thus something best done through nothingness, a trip that resists and suppresses any motivation I might have to recreate reality for myself here in real time. So, I remain here, swimming in a stream of average content. To reach what? Where? Well, quite frankly it doesn't matter anymore. The greater the mobility something inspires, the greater the ability to jump “right in,” the less I am forced to stop and look around to see where I am going. I am not engaged in some divine, lifelong teleology towards a transcendence into the kingdom of heaven, away from the suffering of my earthly reality. The infinite here is literal. Infinite, endless space. And I am driven now immediately by the impulse to remain safe within my simulated structure of reality. One that offers me the complete and direct manifestation of my entire world. So, here I am, with the whole of space before me, and yet I settle on watching a terrible sitcom.

Why? The whole goal of this system is to offer us an instant portal into enlightenment through the complete disappearance of self in nothingness. Video, light, pixel, serves only this end: it is a screen of imaginary suicide. It demands of us none of the traditional engagement one has with theatricality, a smirk is enough. Its purpose is not to display events or prompt self-contemplation; it merely forces onto us a dream of “other” that keep subjects hooked up to nothing but itself. It is a jealous mistress, that needs constant attention, yet one that keeps you in a constant state of deliverance. The deliverance of a spirit that truly has nowhere to go. And so we will follow these grooved, well-worn pathways of information, evaporating into each passing moment upon encountering such a soft, ephemeral form of contact.



However, I am weary in examining this new form of ephemeral contact as a substitute. The singular consumption of this infinite produces no critical “density” in any particular end: it is a journey of consumption that endeavors to destroy its end: a weightless, horizontal imprint. Art, when performed inside this space, is located in a swirling vortex of reaction and reproduction. Memes are the perfect example. It’s a mode of depthless, constant refraction. The experience of its message and meaning weaponizes reference to kill subjective interpretation and historical relevance, sucking you along on an endless stream of ironic and knowledge-based puns that are dead long before you have had enough time to understand them fully. They’re fantastic, don’t get me wrong, but the multiplicities of connection are no longer drawn to self or god, but are drawn as points within the same infinite horizontal system. Transcendence is not found within the location of higher ideals but in the complete knowledge and mapping of reference points over a great distance. It’s as though this great system of synapses has formed a consciousness of its own, attempting to realize its own pursuit along the endless highway of nothingness. And, in the process, reached a knowledge of its own meaninglessness that can then be used to fuel the next (meta) layers of its reproduction. We are all pulled forward less by our own step but by a kind of vacuum that absorbs all substance into its nothingness.

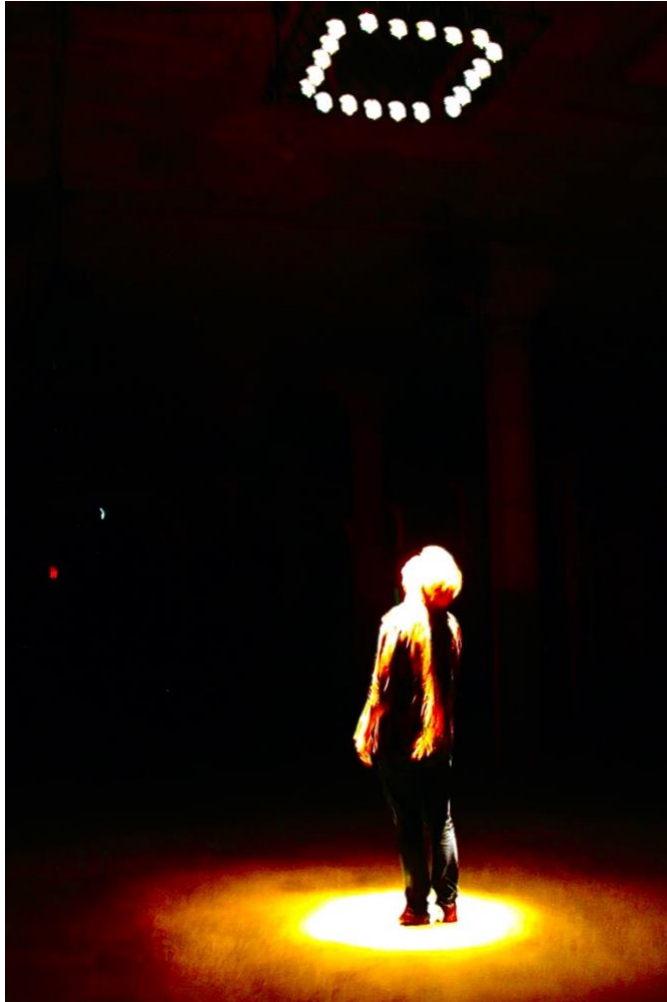
The Greeks in creating the modern stage, formed a kind of subdivision of reality in which the drama of life is performed in enclosed space. Living in America, I’ve come to realize that the drama of my life has been packaged and performed in the same way through television, integral to the infinite semiotic reflection of reality that we see online today, and the complete and absolute simulation of reality within the four walls of our quarantined experience. The OG simulacrum. The OG hyperreality, in which reality is informed and produced from simulation in a system of spacial control. Indeed, part of the entire desire for “movement” in America comes from the dream



that this country tells of itself through the studios of Hollywood. The signs, symbols, and religious fanaticism with which the American public consumes and manifests the world that appears on the screen scares me. It is as though everything is endowed, simply by its position on the screen (*a space that feels more real than real life right now during the coronavirus pandemic*), with an indulgence towards its own banality, creating meaning in its stimulatory ripples over its substance. Metaphysics can be as simple as reaching and quoting a character from the screen. Indeed, there is a complete lack of need for God here, for we can find complete unearthly detachment simply by plugging into the screen. Power and divinity rendered as special effect. Deus Ex Machina.

To discuss one last method of escape, the question of “death” has become romanticized on screen, and thus “mortality” has been completely obliterated. The death of a character in a show is often just a useful plot device which, at best, strives towards the manifestation of a lesson or of some heroic western ideal, and at its worse, is used simply to generate affect, “drama” in a viewership when a television show is on its last legs and needs more funding to generate several more seasons of lifeless drama. Everyone knows that the show sucked after the second season, and yet you still watch the next seven seasons, getting some minor satisfaction in reaching a story’s “completion.”

Now imagine a character from any sitcom. Imagine that character has gotten lost from the light of the screen. Imagine him isolated, away from the cameras, away from his viewership, plugged into an environment without costars, without comedic foils or love affairs. Imagine watching this image playing in the television of your mind, your own personal control screen, a character completely empty, devoid of meaning outside the light of “other.” And now look at yourself in your room and tell me whether you can see any difference. Who is the character, who are you? Yes, it’s an apocalyptic form of banality, just a simulation created in the hyperreal enclosed space of mind.



But can you really hammer in the rationalized wedge of “reality” between you and him? If fiction truly creates and presages the real in America, creating the world in its image, what does one do when one is forced to simulate the self in such a deprived setting?

When the plot stops moving, when all events are simulated, delivered to me from the other side of a screen, with newsreels of a plague and successive critiques of world leaders lighting up my notification bar, I find myself simply waiting for Godot, waiting for some dramatic action that never seems to arrive. And yet, what keeps me going? Why do I click from show to show, consuming what seems to be nothing at all? Perhaps there is a hidden possibility of transcendence in each and every TV show: a hope, and a stupid one, that one might pass into the screen completely. Perhaps then we can reframe “escape” not as a negative escape “from” but as a positive journey “into” the vanishing point. For, there is always and always has been a wish to transcend the self, transcend into not a dream of self, but into a dream of self in a complete state of “other” (avatar), a dream

of becoming a monument in American society, an eroded piece of respected cultural memorabilia as part of a TV show, to plug your brainstem into the tree of the world, and to simply get lost within its possibility. And when you realize that you are bathing in all things bright and beautiful, once more in the limelight, it would feel as a contained utopia, a hidden paradise, just for you...

A group of moths, gathered by my window, wake me from my dream of milkshakes and Chevrolets. They tap their bodies desperately, again and again against the clear screen, trying to reach the shadows behind the lights inside. I’ve always wondered how they feel when they reach their goal. When they are bathing in the light’s shadow. What is that sensation?

There are many problems with the kind of escape that the coronavirus world offers us, within our small quarantined islands. Upon the realization that we really have nowhere to go, and upon the complete and total objectification of our subjects in the constant materializing motion of television and the internet, the realization might dawn on you that you have passed completely into the hyperbolic, inhuman character of a universe that has been artificially produced, one that is beyond us, outstripping any moral or ecological circumstance that landed us there in the first place. An inhuman universe to which we have long since seceded control. For our simulations of television and the internet are completely indifferent to us. Cable TV will run for ever and ever in that empty

bar down the street, playing that soap opera for absolutely no one. Millions of Reddit bots will continue to converse with each other in an endless rehashing of language, neither party understanding each other, for eternity on an old Game of Thrones thread, long after all life has left the chat. For the fact of the matter is that none of it was made for you. Sometimes I struggle to imagine what intention lies behind the screen; it is hard to do so, unless one breathes life into conspiracy. Somehow, with the screen involved, it is easier to believe in the subliminal messaging of a deep state than it is to believe that this whole artistic orchestration came together by some common economic motivation. Indeed, it was made in a profit driven enterprise created to keep you entertained long enough so that the slightest of hopes could begin to register in your subconscious... a hope that if you travel far enough along these interminable durations, you might find something at the bottom of your feed, that slightest of possibilities that enlightenment lies at the end of that infinity. It doesn't, it never will. We are catered to as a sea of glazed eyes, complete with immobile, expressionless faces. Long since having forgotten our motivations for watching. All facing one another in the mirror of the screen. Stuck in neither dream nor reality, we live in these liminal spaces from the insides of our home. Even my body, prompted by pure undernourishment and muscular deterioration, takes on a transparent form. And yet, I still hold onto that hope that I can pass out of this reality altogether, and move from door to door, in pure motion, escaping the trees that bare down upon me, entering into the hypothesis of self alone. Because as an American now, I suffer in the slow death of my memory. The slow death of my roots. For America lives by the total metasocial fact of an accepted transcendence, delivered via icon and sign, of Coke and Pepsi, of Star Wars and Westerns. And so, I grind my teeth and squint like Clint now at Europeans. And I have accepted that I have already become a dream, a character in my own story, a complete and total refraction of this society. I am the simulation and I can no longer escape it. And so despite the artificial centrality and congruence created by the intimacy of the internet, despite the indifference upon which the simulation of American life is based, the fact of the matter is that I would rather experience theoretical grandeur, theoretical love, theoretical resolution, theoretical involvement, than the existential weight of solitude in a world that is falling apart. The interminable duration of my feed feels more attainable than the interminable duration of quarantine's loneliness. Because some part of me understands that this imperfect form of American transcendence, a transcendence in which the whole universe is brought against a more perfect idea of itself, can be more real, more beautiful, than anything that could possibly exist right here in this cabin.

Of course, it is hard to describe my current position within a mode that is so limited by another stimulatory system, that of language. One cannot adequately encompass a life from within the set in which one has been trapped. And there is a deep fear in me, that of the caveman sleeping in the dead of night next to his fire, that the light of the television will soon die out for me, and reality will dawn on me, as the blinding light of history descends on my forest abode. Watching discretely over the whole of this simulation, I've found another mode of escape. One that supersedes the internet in its transcendent capabilities and truly exists apart, and higher, than the American dream machine. Away from the static form of territory, away from the palpable form of substances. Music has been for me a dark mirror, in which I am surprised to see my reflection. The songs written in this time are not all complete, but I included a folder with their rough sketches, offering access into an emotional and spiritual state of mind, and an attempt of mine to create a sense of purpose, and motion, and self in an otherwise barren landscape.

Chasing after the reflection in the door, you step through frame after frame, attempting to reach the figure behind you. Yet no matter the spaces you cross in the endless procession of mirrored doors, there would be no unification of the two bodies. Your ragged breath slows; your movements are mere streaks of light now, as the doors morph and collapse their splintered frames. You begin to disappear. There is only a vague idea left of you now. An imperfect image poorly rendered. Until gradually, all things lose their definition.

Someone called “you” puts their phone down on the table, moves to the bathroom, and looks in the mirror.

