

Elegies for alternate selves

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epigraph

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers and queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.

—*Sylvia Plath*

How to read this book

This book is an exploration of life, of all possible lives that could be lived. Each of the poems contained herein have been written by a different person, with his own history, culture, and emotions. True, they are all related, but no more than any of us is related through our genetics, our shared planet, or our yearnings.

Fernando Pessoa wrote poems under four different identities—he called them *heteronyms*—that were known during his lifetime, though after his death over sixty have been found and catalogued. He called them heteronyms as opposed to pseudonyms because they were much more than names he wrote under. They were truly different writing selves, concerned with different ideas and writing with different styles: Alberto Caiero wrote pastorals; Ricardo Reis wrote more formal odes; Álvaro de Campos wrote these long, Whitman-esque pieces (one to Whitman himself); and Pessoa’s own name was used for poems that are kind of similar to all the others. It seems as though Pessoa found it inefficient to try and write everything he wanted only in his own self; rather he parceled out the different pieces and developed them into full identities, at the cost of his own: “I subsist as a kind of medium of myself, but I’m less real than the others, less substantial, less personal, and easily influenced by them all.” de Campos said of him at one point, “Fernando Pessoa, strictly speaking, doesn’t exist.”

(20 →

It’s not just Pessoa—I, strictly speaking, don’t exist, both as the specific me that writes this now and as the concept of selfhood, the ego. Heraclitus famously said that we can’t step into the same river

twice, and the fact of the matter is that we can't occupy the same self twice. It's constantly changing and adapting to new stimuli from the environment, from other selves, from inside itself, and each time it forms anew into something that's never existed before. The person I am beginning a poem is a separate being than the one I am finishing a poem, and part of it is the poem I've written has brought forth some other dish onto the great table that is myself. (31 →

In the same way, with each poem you read of this, you too could become a different person. Depending on which order you read them in, you could be any number of possible people. If you follow the threads I've laid out for you, there are so many possible selves; if you disregard those and go a different way there are quite a few more. However, at the end of the journey there is only one self that you will occupy, the others disappearing from this universe and going maybe somewhere else, maybe nowhere at all.

There is a scene in *The Neverending Story* where Bastian is trying to find his way out of the desert. He opens a door and finds himself in the Temple of a Thousand Doors, which is never seen from the outside but only once someone enters it. It is a series of rooms with six sides each and three doors: one from the room before and two choices. In life, each of these rooms is a moment, but where Bastian can choose which of only two doors to enter each time, in life there can be any number of doors and we don't always choose which to go through—in fact, I would argue that most of the time we aren't allowed the luxury.

What happens to those other doors, those other possibilities? Is

there some other version of the self that for whatever complexities of circumstance and will chose a different door at an earlier moment? The answer to this, of course, is that we can never know for sure, though this doesn't keep us from trying through the process of regret. We go back and try that other door in our mind, extrapolating a possible present from our own past. This is ultimately unsatisfying, not only because whatever world is imagined is not the one currently lived, but because it becomes obvious that the alternate model of reality is not complete: we can only extrapolate from the original room, absolutely without knowledge of any subsequent possible choices. This causes a deep disappointment, a frustration with the inability to know all possible timelines (coupled with the insecurity that this may not be the best of all possible worlds) that we feel as regret.

In this way, every moment we live is an elegy to every possible future that might have stemmed from it. Annie Dillard states this in a biological manner when she says in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, "Every glistening egg is a memento mori." Nature is inefficient—it spends a hundred lifetimes to get one that barely works. The fossil record is littered with the failed experiments of evolution, many of which failed due only to blind chance: an asteroid, a shift in weather patterns, an inefficient copulation method. Each living person today has twenty dead standing behind him, and that only counts the people that actually lived. How many missed opportunities stand behind any of us?

The real problem with all of this is that time is only additive. There's no way to dial it back and start over, with new choices or new

environments. Even when given the chance to do something again, we do it *again*, with the reality given by our previous action. Thus we are constantly creating and being created by the world. The self is never the same from one moment to the next.

A poem is like a snapshot of a self. If it's any good, it captures the emotional core of the self at the time of writing for communication with future selves, either within the same person or outside of it. Thus revision is possible, and the new poem created will be yet another snapshot of the future self as changed by the original poem. The page becomes a window into the past, a particular past as experienced by one self. The poem is a remembering of a self that no longer exists, in other words, an elegy.

A snapshot doesn't capture the entire subject, however. It leaves out the background as it's obscured by foreground objects; it fails to include anything that isn't contained in its finite frame. In order to build a working definition of identity, we must include all possible selves over all possible timelines, combined into one person: identity is the combined effect of all possible selves over time. A poem leaves much of this out: it is the one person standing in front of twenty ghosts.

A poem is the place where the selves of the reader and the speaker meet, in their respective times and places. In this way a poem is outside of time or place, because it changes its location each time it's read. Each time it's two different people meeting. The problem with a poem is that it's such a small window—if we met in real life the way we met in poems, we would see nothing of anyone else but a square the size

of a postage stamp. It has been argued this is the way we see time and ourselves in it, as well: Vonnegut uses the metaphor of a subject strapped to a railroad car moving at a set pace, with a six-foot-long metal tube placed in front of the subject's eye; the landscape in the distance is time, and what we see is the only way in which we interact with it. It's the same with a poem and the self: we can only see and interact with a small kernel. This is why it's possible to write more than one poem.

Due to this kernel nature of poetry, a good poem should focus itself to extract as much meaning as possible from that one kernel of identity to which it has access. It should be an atom of selfhood, irreducible and resistant to paraphrase, because it tries to somehow echo the large unsayable part of identity outside the frame of the self. It is the kernel (11 → that contains a universe, or that speaks around one that's hidden; if it's a successful poem then it makes the smallest circuit possible. This is why the commentary on poems is so voluminous: a poem is tightly packed meaning that commentators try to unpack to get at that universality inside it. A fortress of dialectic is constructed that ultimately obstructs the meaning behind the poem; it becomes the foreground in the photograph that disallows us to view the horizon beyond it.

With this in mind, I collect these poems that were written over a period of four years into this book. Where I can, I insert cross-references (like the one above, in the margin) to other pieces in the text where I think the two resonate in some way. You can read this book in any way you'd like: you can go front-to-back, or back-to-front,

or you can follow the arrows around, or you can work out a complex mathematical formula with Merseine primes and logarithms and the 2000 Census information, or you can go completely randomly through like a magazine, or at least the way I flip through magazines. I think writing is a communication of the self, and I think this is the best way to communicate mine in all its multiversity.

Chattanooga, November 2012

And

“What is your favorite word?”

“And. It is so hopeful.”

And you were there in the start of it all
and you folded your hands like little doves
that would fly away like an afterthought
and you turned to me the window light on your face
and you asked me something that I did not recognize
like a great throng of people who are not you
and I asked are we in a church
and you answered with the look on your face
of someone grieving something gone for years
but that they had been reminded of
by a catch in the light or in someone’s voice
and I think maybe it could have been mine
and I looked away thickly my head was in jelly
and I didn’t get an answer from you but I got one

(13 →

(25 →

I looked at the man in front of us with glasses
he was speaking and holding a book
and I didn’t understand him he was far away
and I could tell I was missing something important
and you nodded to yourself at something he said

Words and meaning

“How astonishing it is that language can almost mean, / and frightening that it does not quite,” Jack Gilbert opens his poem “The Forgotten Dialect of the Heart.” In a similar vein, Hass’s “Meditation at Legunitas” states, “A word is elegy to what it signifies.” These poems get to the heart of language, and express the old duality of thought: by giving a word to an entity, it is both tethered and made meaningful.

Words are the inevitable byproduct of an analytic mind. Humans are constantly classifying and reclassifying ideas, objects, animals, people, into ten thousand arbitrary categories. A favorite saying of mine is that “Everything is everything,” a tautology that I like, because it gets to the core of the human linguistic machine, and because every time I say it people think I’m being disingenuous . But what I mean by “everything is everything” is that there is a continuity to existence that works beyond, or rather underneath, our capacity to understand it through language. Language by definition compartmentalizes reality, sets this bit apart from that bit, sets up boundaries as to what is and is not a stone , a leaf, a door. Most of the time I think of language as limiting, as defining a thing as the inverse of everything is not. (29 →

In this way, “everything is everything” becomes “everything is nothing,” which is another thing I like to say and something that pisses people off. To me, infinity and zero are the same, two ways of looking at the same point on the circle of numbers, of the universe, whatever. Maybe it’s because I wear an analogue watch, and so my view of time is cyclical, or maybe it’s some brain trauma I had invitro, but whatever it is that’s how I see the world, because I’m working against the limitations that language sets upon us. I think that’s the role of the poet, or of any artist: to take the over-expansive experience of existing and to boil it down, boil and boil away until there is the ultimate concentrate at the center that is what the poem talks around, at, etc., but never of, because it is ultimately made of language and cannot get to it. A poem is getting as close as possible to the speed of light, to absolute zero, to God, while knowing that it can’t get all the way there, and never will. A poem is doing this and coming back and showing what happened as it happened. Exegesis is hard because a really good poem will be just that, it will be the most basic and best way to say what it’s saying, so attempts to say the same thing differently will fail. A poem is a kernel of existence. It is a description of the kernel. It is. (11 →

On seeing the panorama of the Apollo 11 landing site

So it's the fucking moon. Big deal. As if
you haven't seen it before, hanging in the sky
like a piece of rotten meat nailed to the wall, (25 →
a maudlin love letter (the i's dotted with hearts) (23 →
tacked to the sky's door like ninety-eight theses.
Don't stare at it like it means anything.

Don't give it the chance to collect meaning
from your hand like an old pigeon. Don't dare ascribe
it a will, or call it fickle, or think it has any say
in your affairs. It's separated from your life
by three hundred eighty-four thousand miles of space,
the same distance you stepped away from time that night
you said your love was broken, a crippled gyroscope
knocking in the dark. It was then that time fell apart,
had a nervous breakdown and started following you
everywhere, moonfaced, always asking where you're going.
You keep trying to get away from it but it nuzzles closer
and sings you songs that sound like the cooing of a dove
that will only escape again into an empty sky at dawn.

Ars poetica

What is poetry? Poetry is. Inasmuch as life is, so is poetry. Here is the problem: life is very big and complex. Human beings are neither. We are small, simple beings that don't want to know all of the myriad interactions happening all around us, within us, as a part of us, all the hours of every day. We much prefer knowing only that which is just in front of our faces, staring us back with a look of utter contempt. This is why many people are depressed. (← 9

Poetry is an attempt made by some to open up our field of view, to maybe check on something else that isn't staring us in the face so contemptibly. Maybe something else is smiling at us, we think. So we write poetry to force ourselves to look away from the mirror of our existence to see something else. (28 →

This is generally painful. To make it less painful, poetry compresses reality a lot to make it more consumable. It takes life, that seawater, and boils it down and boils it down until only the salt remains, the important parts that we can focus on and make some sense of the senselessness of life. Poetry is life bouillon, and to thoroughly enjoy a poem we must put that bouillon back into the seawater of life and make a delicious soup out of it. To make this soup, to decompress the poem into an emotion or life, requires a lot of brainpower. A good reader will have this brainpower. A good poem will not require it. (33 →

What this means is: a poem should be self-extracting. It should be a rare vanilla in the bottle, waiting only for someone to open it and sniff it and suddenly there they are, in the orchid that vanilla came from, in the tropical land where it grew next to its brothers and sister vanilla plants. They feel the pain of having their children taken from them. A good poem leaves a feeling of loss and of intense beauty. The reader does nothing to achieve this—they are merely the receptacle of the feeling that the poem forces onto them. In a way, poetry is a crime. But it is the most beautiful crime on this crime-ridden earth.

The ocean overflows with camels

We found your shirt deep in the dark water, (24 →
caught on the clothesline of sleeping pills.
Your head on the shore was streaming tears
like sleeves or the coronas of saints saved
from fire. The burning bush began crying
like a child who misses his mother. Traffic
slammed shut like an eye. God's mean left hook (25 →
knocked us out, and we began swimming.
Bruises bloomed like algae on a lake.
Your father beat your chest and screamed (15 →
for someone to open a window. The air
stopped breathing. Fish clogged its gills.
Birds sang too loudly, trying to drown out
your father's cries, but all their sweetness
was not enough. No polite noises will be made
anymore, he told us, clawing your breastbone.
He opened your heart to air again. Camels
flowed from you both like water from the rock.
God spoke up, but nobody listened to him.
We hung you up on the line to dry.

The Boar

Now the ticking clocks scare me.
The empty rooms, clock towers, belfries; (31 →
I am terrified by them all.

I really used to enjoy going to church,
singing in the choir, listening to the sermon.
Now the chairs squeal like dying pigs—

It was the boar that did it.
Fifteen feet from me that night (38 →
in the grass, rooting for God
knows what, finding me instead.

I ran, not knowing where or how,
not looking for his pursuit of me.
I ran to God's front door, found
it locked, found the house empty (21 →
with a note saying, "Condemned."

Dead man

A dead man finds his way into our hearts
simply by opening the door and walking in. (← 9
He pours himself a drink, speaks aimlessly
about hunting or some bats he saw
on the way over, wheeling around each other.
Look how they spin, he says, it's like the (28 →
ripples atoms make as they hurl past each other
in the space between their bodies.
We mention the eels at the aquarium, how
their bodies knot while mating. The dead man (34 →
was a boyscout once, and tied a lot of knots.
His favorite was the one with the rabbit
and the hole, and the rabbit going in and out
and around the tree. The dead man liked it
because he liked to pretend that the rabbit
was running from a fox, and the rabbit
always ended up safe, back in his hole.

The angel to Abraham

Abraham, Abraham, you are old and cannot hear:
what if you miss my small voice amongst the creaking
of your own grief, kill your son unknowing
of what he will be, and commit Israel to nothing?

Abraham, you must know or hope that God
will not allow your son to die; you must know
that this is a test, but then why
are you so bent on Isaac's destruction?
Look at your eyes; there is more than fear
there. I see in your eyes desperation,
a manic passion to do right by your God
whom you are not able to see or know.

(← 13

Am I too late? I will try to stay
your old hands, the knife clenched
within them, intent on ending life.

(21 →

Will you hear my small voice amongst the creaking,
or will it be the chance bleating of a passing ram?

Feeding the raven

You never can tell just when Charlie Sheen will enter your life. For me, it was last Thursday. I was reading some translation of a Japanese translation of “The Raven” in which the Poe and the raven become friends. At one point the raven gets very sick and Poe feeds him at his bedside and nurses him back to health. The story was very heart-warming and sad at the same time and my tears were welling up when suddenly I heard a knock on my door.

I shuffled over, sniffing but managing to keep my cheeks dry to open it. Of course Charlie was beaming on the other side, with a bag of flowers and a grin like a dog’s . He bounded in the room without saying hello and threw the flowers in the sink, opened the refrigerator and started poking around. I said “It’s nice to see you too” and went to my room to get a camera, as well as a notebook for him to sign. (27 →

When I came back he was on the floor, hunched and groaning. I looked on the table to see a month-old half-gallon of milk—now cottage cheese—half-empty and dripping. The remnants were on his mouth, and at once I saw my chance to become Poe in this translation of a translation of a translation . I knelt next to Charlie, cradled his head in my lap. He looked up at me with a stare full of terror. I returned it levelly, making cooing noises at him until he calmed down. (41 →

When he was calm he excused himself to be sick on my toilet. He wouldn’t let me follow but said he would sign whatever I liked when he got back. After half an hour passed and all I’d had for company was the ticking of the clock , I went to the bathroom door. I knocked carefully—once, then twice—to no beaming face, no flowers. I opened the door. There was shit on the floor and the window was open. There was a breeze blowing. (← 13

Problems

This is a section of the Book of Hezekiah, which is edited from interviews I conducted with a homeless man. The next section is on page 29. The previous is on page 36.

The problem with people is this: we cannot be happy. No matter how hard or easy we try, it is not to be. It seems sometimes that, just as the dog was made for jumping in mud and sniffing out foxholes and having a good time all around, man was made for sadness, loneliness and heartache.

Being the observant and judgmental people they are, people have for a long time tried to figure out why they aren't happy. Some say it's because we're obviously doing something wrong. Some say it's because we think too much. Some insist that it's because other people have more stuff than we do. These people don't have a clue any more than any of the rest of us. At least I don't think they do, and that's good enough for me.¹ I think that the reason why people are unhappy (and this is a personal opinion) is that they realize on some level (for some it's a pretty shallow level, others it's way down there next to their love for women's stockings²) that there is no background to put themselves against, no "big picture" to get painted into. This makes sense, because on one level, the level of everyday life, the level of *observation*, there is always a background—look in a pair of binoculars sometime. But on another level, that of . . . shit, wait. There are no other levels.³

(26 →

What's more, people try to explain how to get happy again (although it's doubtful they were ever happy in the first place—people are very good at fooling). Some say standing or sitting in a building with a lot of other unhappy people helps. Some say that you can't stop there; you also need to sing with those other unhappy people about how unhappy you are, and how you wish someone would come along and help you out, I guess by giving you money or something. I say all you really need to be happy is a good stiff drink.⁴

(← 16

In any case, people have for some reason or another, and to some end or another, always been unhappy. And people have always tried to

¹This seems to be an attempt on Hezzy's part to set an example for mankind. It should be noted that he is an alcoholic, and not in any shape to be an example to anyone.—*Editor's note*

²It is thought that only the leg coverings of the female sex are here referenced—*Editor's note*

³You have hereby found the super special secret cheat code room. Yes, this is just like Super Mario Brothers—you can skip right to the end. Go and face the final boss already!

⁴See footnote, above—*Editor's note*

figure out ways to be less unhappy—one of the most important things to people everywhere is called “the pursuit of happiness.” I think that calling it a pursuit makes people feel more like dogs, who are the most happy beings most people can think of. By pursuing happiness, they’re like a dog pursuing a possum or a bone on a fishing rod: two activities that sound like a lot of fun to most people. I think most people wish they were dogs.

On formal poetry

I think that I could write formal poems
exclusively, or at least inclusive
with all the other stuff I write
I guess. Of course, I've already written
a few, this one included, though "formal"
is maybe a stretch. Is blank verse a form?
What is form anyway? I picture old
women counting stiches on their knitting,
keeping iambs next to iambs in lines
as straight and sure as arrows. But my sock
is lumpy, poorly made: it's beginning
to unravel. Stresses don't line up. Syl-
lables forced to fit like McNugget molds.
That cliché on the arrow? I'm aware.
My prepositions too—God, where's it stop?
The answer: never. I will never stop
writing poems, or hating what I write.

(25 →

(26 →

If you still think this formal thing is a good direction to go in, try turning to page 10. That should learn you.

Or if you've come to your senses, try rolling a D-20 or two to see which page to turn to.

Philosophy

This is a section of the Book of Hezekiah, which is edited from interviews I conducted with a homeless man. The next section is on page 23. The previous is on page 27.

Importance is important. But meaning is meaningful. Here we are at the crux of the matter, for both meaning and importance are also human-formed. So it would seem that nothing is important or meaningful, if importance and meaning are of themselves only products of the fallible human intellect. But here is the great secret: *so is the fallibility of the human intellect a mere product of the fallible human intellect.* The question here arises: Is anything real, and not a mere invention of a mistaken human mind? By real of course I mean “that which is *on its own terms,*” that is, without any modification on the part of mankind by observing it. But such a thing is impossible to be known, for if it be known it has certainly been observed by someone, and so it is not on its own terms but on the terms of the observer. So it cannot be known if anything exists on its own terms, for it exists on its own terms we certainly will not know anything about it. (21 →

By this it is possible to see that nothing is knowable without the mediating factor of our mind fucking up the “raw,” the “real” world. But by this time it would seem that this chapter is far far too philosophical, not to mention pretentious, so I must try again. (34 →

I am

I am a great pillar of white smoke.
I am Lot's nameless wife encased in salt.
I am the wound on Christ's back as he moans
with the pounding of a hammer on his wrist.
I am the nail that holds my house together.
It is a strong house, built on a good foundation.
In the winter, it is warm and crawling things
cannot get in. This house will never burn down.
It is the house that I built, with my body
and with my strength. I am the only one who lives
here. I am both father and mother to a race
of dust motes that worship me as a god. I have
monuments built daily in my honor in dark
corners around the house. I destroy all of them
before I go to bed, but in the morning
there are still more. I don't think I know
where all of them are. I don't think I can get
to all of them anymore. There are too many.

(43 →

(22 →

How it happened

I was away on vacation when I heard—
someone sat at my desk while I was away.
They took my pen, while I was taking
surf lessons, and wrote the sun into the sky.
They pre-approved the earth and the waters,
and all of the living things, without even
having the decency to text me. It was not I
who was behind the phrase “creeping things.”
When I got back, of course I was pissed,
but it was already written into the policy.
I’m just saying: don’t blame me for Cain
killing Abel. That was a murder. I’m not a cop.
The Tower of Babel fell on its own. The ark
never saw a single drop of rain. I’m the drunk
sitting on the curb who just pissed his pants,
holding up a sign asking where I am.

(33 →

(← 17

Proverbs

This is a section of the Book of Hezekiah, which is edited from interviews I conducted with a homeless man. The next section is on page 36. The previous is on page 20.

Nothing matters; everything is sacred. Everything matters; nothing is sacred.⁵ This is the only way we can move forward: by moving sideways. Life is a great big rugby game, and the entire field has to be run for a goal. The fact that the beginning two verses of this chapter have the same number of characters proves that they are a tautological pair, that is, they *complete each other*. Sometimes life seems like a dog wagging its tail, smiling up at you and wanting you to love it, just wanting that, simple simple love, oblivious to the fact that it just ran through your immaculately groomed flower garden and tracked all the mud in onto your freshly steamed carpet. Life is not life in a suburb. There are no rosebushes, groomed never. There is no carpet, steamed (24 → at any time. The dog looks at you wanting you to love it. It wants to know that you know that it's there. *It wants to be observed.*⁶ (← 9

⁵Thank you Tom Stoppard. Ha ha ho ho and hee hee.

⁶Ah ha! I knew this was going to happen at some point. Now things are going to get more interesting because the dog wants what we thought was a bad thing, right? Right? Didn't we go through that part about how observing made it impossible to really know anything, and I had to start over because it's really hard to figure out what you're talking about when reality slips out of your hands like a fish, but you're not a cat with claws so it just flops right outta your hand back into the lake. (By the way, Nirvana is thought to be what a drop of water feels upon flopping into a lake—doesn't that seem important? Doesn't it seem like a fish and a drop of water here are connected? It helps, of course, that the fish represents Reality here.)—*Editor's note*

Love Song

Walking along in the dark is a good way to begin a song. Walking home in the dark after a long day chasing criminals is another. Running away from an imagined evil is no way to begin a story.

I am telling you this because you wanted to know what it's like to tell something so beautiful everyone will cry. I am telling you because I want you to know what it is to keep everything inside of you. I am telling you.

Can you see? Can you see into me and reach in your hand and pull me inside out, like an old shirt ? Will you wear me until I unravel on your shoulders, will you cut me apart and use my skin to clean up the cola you spill on the floor when you're drunk? (26 →

I want you to know that I want you to know. Do you want me? To know is to know. I, you want we. We want. That is why we're here. To want is to be is to want and I want you. Do you also? Check yes or no.

There is a way to end every story, every song . Every criminal must be caught. Even those who cry dry their tears. I cannot tell you all I want because I want to tell you everything. There is no art because there is no mirror big enough. We wake up every day. Sometimes we sleep. (37 →

Rough gloves

I lost my hands & knit replacement ones
from spiders' threads, stronger than steel but soft
as lambs' wool. Catching as they do on nails
& your collarbone, you don't seem to like
their rough warm presence on your cheek or thigh.
I've asked you if you minded, you've said no
(your face a table laid with burnt meat, bread
so stale it could break a hand). Remember
your senile mother's face above that table?
I'd say she got the meaning of that look.
You'd rather not be touched by these rough gloves,
the only way I have to knit a love
against whatever winters we may enter
like a silkworm in a spider's blackened maw.

(← 16

(40 →

(32 →

Ronald McDonald

When Ronald McDonald takes off his striped shirt,
his coveralls, his painted face: when he no longer looks
like anyone or anything special, sitting next to women
in bars or standing in the aisle at the grocery,
is he no longer Ronald? Is he no longer happy to kick
a soccer ball around with the kids in the park,
is he suddenly unable to enjoy the french fries
he gets for his fifty percent off? I'd like to think
that he takes Ronald off like a shirt, hangs him
in a closet where he breathes darkly in the musk.
I'd like to believe that we are able to slough off selves
like old skin and still retain some base self.

(← 12

Of course we all know this is not what happens.
The Ronald leering at women drunkenly is the same who
the next day kicks at a ball the size of a head.

He is the same that hugs his children at night,
who has sex with his wife on the weekends when they're
not so tired to make it work, who smiles holding

a basket of fries in front of a field. He cannot
take off the facepaint or the yellow gloves. They are
stuck to him like so many feathers with the tar

(← 25

of his everyday associations. His plight is that
of everyone's—we are what we do who we are.

This poem is in many ways antithetical to the thesis of this book as a whole. Compare it, for example, to the pieces on pages 32, 21, 2, or most of the rest of them actually. I include it here to play with an alternative version of my thesis, which is what this book is all about anyway.

The purpose of dogs

This is a section of the Book of Hezekiah, which is edited from interviews I conducted with a homeless man. The next section is on page 20.

Okay, so as we said in the Prelude to God, there either is or isn't a God. This has been one of the main past times of humanity, ever since . . . since the first man (or woman) climbed out of whatever slime or swamp he thumbed his way out of. What humanity has failed to realize is that an incredibly plausible third, and heretofore unknown, hypothesis also exists: There is a dog. (42 →

In fact, there are many dogs, and not only that. There are also many types of dogs; these are called breeds, and each breed was created by man in order to fulfill some use that man thought he needed. Some dogs are for chasing birds, and some are for chasing badgers. Some are for laying in your lap and being petted all day. Some dogs don't seem to be really for anything, besides being fucking stupid and chewing up your one-of-a-kind collectible individually-numbered King Kong figurine from the Peter Jackson film. But the important thing is, (and here we go with important things again) all dogs have been bred by people for performing some certain function that we think is important.

Note: *Just because we think it's important doesn't mean it is important.* But it might as well be, because what we as humans think is important is important. But be careful! just because something's important doesn't mean it means anything, or that it actually makes anything happen. Even though just because something makes something else happen doesn't mean it's important. Shit. Let me start again. (← 16

The moon is gone and in its place a mirror

The moon is gone and in its place a mirror. Looking at the night sky now yields nothing but the viewer's own face as viewed from a million miles, surrounded by the landscape he is only vaguely aware of being surrounded by. He believes that he is alone, surrounded by desert and mountain, but behind him—he now sees it—someone is sneaking up on him. He spins around fast, but no one is there on Earth. He looks back up and they are yet closer in the night sky. Again he looks over his shoulder but there is nothing, not even a desert mouse. As he looks up again he realizes it's a cloud above him, which due to optics has looked like someone else. The cloud blocks out the moon which is now a mirror, and the viewer is completely alone.

(← 10

(32 →

Liking Things

This is the last section of the Book of Hezekiah, a collection of interviews I conducted with a homeless man a few years ago. The previous section is on page 17.

The definition of happiness is *doing stuff that you really like*. That stuff can be eating soup, going to the bathroom, walking the dog, playing Dungeons and Dragons; whatever keeps your mind off the fact that you're so goddamn unhappy all the time. That, incidentally, is the definition of like: *that feeling you get when you forget how miserable you are for just a little bit*. Thus people like doing stuff they like all the time, as often as possible; because if they remember how horrible they really feel at not having a background to put themselves against, they will want to hurt themselves and those around them.

The funny thing is that something we people really like to do is hurt ourselves and those around us. We do this by thinking other people are more unhappy than we are. We convince ourselves that we are truly happy, ecstatic even, while they merely plod around life half-heartedly, or, if they're lucky, incorrectly. We take it upon ourselves (seeing as we are so happy, and can spare a little bit of happiness) to help them become happy as well. We fail to realize that the people will probably not appreciate our thinking that we're better than they are somehow, for that is what we do even if we don't mean it. We forget that we are also unhappy, and that we are just doing things we like in order to cheer ourselves up a little bit, which really means that this cheering is working; but there is such a thing as working too well. So in a sense what I'm doing here is cheering myself up by reminding you that you are unhappy; I'm trying to keep you honest in your unhappiness; and I admit this is usually called a dick move.

In fact, the best way to overcome happy-hungering (this is the term as I dub it) is commit as many dick moves as possible, to keep people remembering that unhappiness abounds. If you see someone smiling like a little dog who knows it's about to get pet or get a treat or go to the vet to donate doggy sperm, smile back. Grin toothily (a little too toothily for a little too long). Their smile will start to fade if you're doing it right. Saunter to them, slide as if you're an Olympic quality ice-skater, as if you're a really good bowler who knows he's playing against twelve year olds and'll win by a hundred. Get really close. Far too close for what most people would call comfort. And remind them of how awful life can be: "I really like your shirt —really only children chained to looms can get that tight of a weave," you can say, or "You're not really going to recycle that coffee cup, are you?" They

(← 12

will probably get angry, but that's what's supposed to happen. By making dick moves, you can overcome what may be the biggest evil on this earth: Happy-Hungering.

Mountain

The other side of this mountain
is not the mountain. This side
is honey-golden, sticky-sweet,
full of phone conversations with mother.
The other side is a bell,
ringing in the church-steeple
the day mother died.

The other side of the mountain
is not a mountain. It is a dark
valley crossed by a river.
There is a ferry at the bottom.

(← 10

This mountain is not a mountain.
I walked to the top, but it turned
and was only a shelf halfway up.
I felt like an unused Bible
sitting on a dusty pew.

(← 8

A hawk soars over the mountain.
She is looking for home.

Serengeti

The self is a serengeti
a wide grassland with baobab trees
reaching their roots deep into earth
like a child into a clay pot
A wind blows there or seems to blow
if he holds it up to his ear the air shifts
like stones in a stream uncovering a crawfish
it finds another hiding place watching you
Its eyes are blacker than wind
on the serengeti they are the eyes of a predator
they are coming toward you or receding
a storm cloud builds on the horizon
Are you running toward the rain or away from it
Do you stand still and crouch hoping for silence

(← 19

(35 →

Shipwright

He builds a ship as if it were the last thing
holding him together, as if, when he stops,
his body will fall onto the plate-glass water
and shatter into sand. To keep his morale up
he whistles and sings, but the wind whistles louder (← 10
and taunts him: Your ship will build itself
if you throw yourself into the sea; time
has a way of growing your beard for you.
Soon, you'll find yourself on a rocking chair
on some porch made from your ship's timbers.
The window behind you is made from a sail, thick
canvas, and no one inside will hear your calling
for milk or a chamberpot. Your children
will have all sailed to the New World and left you.
But he tries not to listen, continues to hammer
nail after nail into timber after timber,
but the wind finally blows him into the growling ocean (← 12
and the ship falls apart on its own.

Spittle

My body is attached to your body by a thin spittle of
thought.

When you turn away from me, my thought is broken
and forms anew with something else. Ideas are drool.

Beauty has been slobbered over far too long. God
is a tidal wave of bodily fluid. Even the flea has some
vestigial wetness. We live in a world fleshy and dark,
and moist as a nostril. Is consciousness only a watery-eyed
romantic, crying softly into his shirt-sleeve? Is not reason
a square-jawed businessman with a briefcase full of mem-
ory?

(← 22

(← 24

I want to kiss the world to make it mine. I want to become
a Judas to reality, betray it with the wetness of emotion.

Squirrel

He is so full in himself: (← 32
how far down the branch to run,
how long to jump, when to grab the air
and catch in it and turn, and land on branch
so gracefully it's like dying, alone
and warm in a bed next to a summer window
and the birds singing. And on that branch there (← 31
is the squirrel dancing among the branches
and you think What if he fell? but he won't
because he's a squirrel and that's what
they do, dance and never fall. It was erased (36 →
long ago from the squirrel, even
the possibility of falling was erased
from his being by the slow inexorable evolution
of squirrels, that is why all squirrels
are so full in themselves, full in who they are.

Moving Sideways

This is a section of the Book of Hezekiah, which is edited from interviews I conducted with a homeless man. The next section is on page 17. The previous is on page 23.

A dog moving sideways is sick; a man moving sideways is drunk. Thus if you want to be mindful of the movings of the universe sideways, become either drunk or sick. By doing this you remove yourself from the equation, and are able to observe, without being observed, the universe as it dances sideways drunkenly.

Shit wait. The problem is not that by observing you are observed (although quantum mechanics may disagree⁷), because obviously dogs don't know we're observing them when we watch them through cameras in their little yard while they play and eat and poop—who poops knowingly on camera? The problem is *the actual act of observing that distorts the world into what we want it to be.*

What I want to know is this: Why is this necessarily a problem? The dog is made, by mankind, to frolic and poop and sniff and growl and dig. Why cannot the man be made to observe the world incorrectly around him, and worry about it? Men have always wandered about the earth; does it not make sense that also they should wonder in their minds what makes it all work?⁸ In fact this is the very center of the creative being: the ability to move sideways, to dance with reality and judge it as it judges you, much like teenagers at the junior prom.

Of course, reality doesn't judge us back. But that doesn't mean that it doesn't! If you think it's judging you, then *observe in your surroundings your own insecurities.* It is obvious that this way of doing things is far from vogue; usually projecting inner pain onto the outer world is classified as pathology. However, this is because it is assumed that the outer world is *on its own terms*, which it obviously isn't, as far as we know. It follows that as there is no backdrop against which to judge our quirks, the quirks must not exist. Thus all is right with the world.

(38 →

(← 20

⁷Quantum mechanics, as is well known, are the most hornery and least agreeable of all mechanics. The cost to get one quantum serviced is usually at least eight times more expensive than the cost of an average automobile tune-up, for reasons not clearly known. The quantum mechanics themselves claim it's the smallness of their work that justifies the price, but it doesn't really look like they're doing anything, and besides, my quantum always seems to break again within six months—maybe I'm just driving it too hard.

⁸I attempted to strike this terrible pun from the account, but Hezekiah demanded I keep it if he were to continue the relation of his prophecy-slash-advice column—*Editor's note*

Swan song

Swans fly overhead singing goodbye
to we walkers of the earth. You point
to them in formation, you tell me
you are not you. You are the air the swans
walk on as they journey like pilgrims
to a temple in the south. A curtain
there separates me from you, swans
from the air they fly through. I say
that you are no longer the temple,
that you have been through fire
and are now less than ash. You are
a mirror of me, the air without a swan.
Together, we are each other. You
and I have both nothing and everything
at once. We own the world and nothing in it.

(← 22

(43 →

Telemarketer

It was one of those nameless gray buildings that could be seen from the street only if Larry craned his neck to almost vertical. He never had, of course, having heard when he first arrived in the city that only tourists unaccustomed to tall buildings did so. He'd never thought about it until he'd heard the social injunction against such a thing; it was now one of the things he thought about almost every day as he rode to and from work in gritty blue buses.

Inside the building, the constant sound of recirculating dry air made Larry feel as though he were at some beach in hell, listening to the ocean, or more accurately at a gift shop in a landlocked state in hell listening to the ocean as represented by the sound a conch shell makes when he holds it up to his ear. The buzz of the fluorescent bulbs overhead sounded like the hot sun bearing down all day in this metaphor, a favorite of Larry's. (← 12

His cubicle was made of that cheap, grayish-blue plywood that cubicles are made of; inside it, his computer sat on his desk as Larry liked to think an eagle perched on a mountainous crag much like the crag that was his desktop wallpaper. The walls were unadorned except for a few tacked-up papers in report covers explaining his script. When Larry made a call to a potential customer it always went the same way: (← 31

“Hi, Mr/Mrs (customer's name). My name is Larry and I'm with (client's name), and was just wondering if I could have a minute of your time?”

“Oh, no, sir; I don't want whatever it is you're selling.” (customer terminates call).

Larry had only ever read the first line of the script on the wall. Sometimes he had an urge to read more of it, to be ready when a customer expressed interest in whatever it was Larry was selling, but something in him—he liked to think it was an actor's intuition that told him it was best to improvise, though he worried it was the futility of it—kept him from reading further into the script. So when Jane said, “Sure, I have nothing better to do,” he was thrown completely off guard.

“Um, alright Mrs. . . Mrs. Loring, I was wondering—”

“It's Ms, not Mrs. em ess. Miz. No 'r,' Larry.” She sounded patient, as if she were used to correcting people about the particulars of her title. But how often can that happen? Larry thought, and he was suddenly deeply confused.

“Oh, sorry, ma'am, uh, Miz Loring, but I wanted to know whether you'd like to, ah, buy some. . .” Larry put his head in his hand and

started twirling his hair in his finger, a nervous habit he'd had since childhood, and closed his eyes tightly. "Why don't you have anything better to do?"

Immediately he knew it was the wrong question. Even before the silence on the other end moved past impatience and into stunned, Larry had a mini-drama written and staged within his mind: she would call customer service and complain loudly into the representative's ear. The rep would send a memo to the head of telemarketing requesting disciplinary action, and the head would delegate the action to Larry's immediate supervisor, David. David would saunter over to Larry's cubicle sometime within the next week, depending on when he got the memo and when he felt like crossing fifty feet of office space, and have one of what David liked to call "chats" but what Larry knew were lectures. After about half an hour of "chatting" David would give Larry a warning and ask him to come in for overtime to make up for the discretion, and walk back slowly to his office, making small talk with the cubicled workers on the way. The world suddenly felt too small for Larry, or he too big for it.

Quietly, with the same patience but with a bigger pain, Jane said, (← 11
"My husband just left me and I thought you could take my mind off of him for just a minute," and hung up.

We played those games too

I saw two Eskimo girls playing a game
blowing on each others vocal chords to make music
on the tundra. I thought about how
once we played the same game
and the sounds blowing over the chords of our throats
was the same as a wind over frozen prairie.
We are the Eskimo girls who played
the game that night to keep ourselves warm.

I run my hands over my daughter's
voicebox as she hums a song
about a seal and about killing the seal and about
skinning it and rendering the blubber
into clear oil to light lamps.

I remember you are my lamp. She remembers
you although you left before she arrived.

I can never tell her about you.

I will never be able to express that taste of your oil
as we pushed our throats together.

I will never be able to say how
we share this blemish like conjoined twins.

I will fail you always to remember you.

(← 8

(← 34

**To Daniel:
an elaboration of a previous comment**

There are more modern ideals of beauty
than yours, young padawan. Jessica has
some assets, that I'll give you easily,
but in my women I prefer pizzazz.

I don't want to bring you down, or make you think
that your perfected woman isn't so.
It's just that, like Adam said, 2006
has come and gone. What did she do

(43 →

in that year anyway? IMDB
has, surprisingly, none, though in '05
she's in four titles. Sin City
I've never seen, although from many I've
heard it's good. But it's still irrelevant—
no matter how comely, she lacks talent.

If you think this sonnet works, turn to page 19.
If you think it's awful and self-indulgent, turn to page 29.

Prelude to god

This is the beginning section of the Book of Hezekiah, which is edited from interviews I conducted with a homeless man. The next section is on page 27.

Of course, there is a God. Of course, there is no God. Of course, what's really important is that these aren't important. No, they are; but not really important. All that's important is the relative importance of non-important things. Shit. Never mind; let's start over.

Death's Trumpet

So Death plays his little fucking trumpet. So what, says the boy. (← 10
—Lerry Levis

He didn't have any polish so he spit-shined the whole thing,
top to bottom. It gleamed like maybe a tomato on the vine
begging to be picked and thrown on some caprese. Death
loved caprese.

He stood up and put the horn to his lips, imagining
it was a woman he loved. He blushed as he realized
it was a terrible metaphor.

He practiced for six hours a day—what else to do?

Death looks at himself in the mirror as he plays. (← 28
The trumpet is suspended in midair. Damn vampire rules.
Death is always worried he might have missed a spot shav-

ing
but he'll never know unless a stranger is polite enough.
Not that he ever goes out or meets anyone.

He wakes up late these days. Stays in bed later.

He thinks he might be depressed. The caprese has gotten
soggy

since he made it, maybe three days ago or maybe just two.
The sun streams through his kitchen blinds like smoke.

He decides to go to the arcade. When he gets there,

there's only a little boy with dead eyes. So far so good. (← 15
He's playing a first-person shooter. Death walks past him
and watches out of the corner of his eye. The kid's good.
Death wants to congratulate him. His trumpet is in his
hand.