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Untitled

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“The sentence is ruined as soon as I enter it.” That sentence floats to the surface of my thoughts as I fall asleep on the couch. Drunk.

In March, I was invited to Chicago to talk about the book I published last year. At the heart of that book are works of art that have something to do with sadness, grief, alienation, and despair. What to read from that book at such a time? I marked out a section in which I work through Rei Terada and Sara Ahmed’s critiques of expressive/possessive ideologies of emotion—they are important to understanding the politics of the creative practices at the book’s core. (*Feeling in Theory*: José told me to read that.)

Sitting in a Comfort Inn suite high above Michigan Avenue, practicing for the lecture and hearing a voice that was mine and not mine—the choice of those passages felt wrong. It was a decision to speak about emotion, to take up emotion as an object of analysis, and to do so in the voice of the Critic. It was also a decision to read one of the few sections of that book that *isn’t* centered on art. Normally, I read the book’s introduction, which is about a performance by the artist Adrian Howells.

But not even two weeks earlier, Adrian died. He took his own life. His work is all over the book. Adrian’s practice was open, kind, and intimate. He was unspeakably generous as an artist. Adrian read Walt Whitman to me; he held me in his arms. Cried in front of me, made the most compelling confession. He held my hand, in a spiritual sense, and held me in conversation. He did this for so many! His practice explored the carrying capacity of the self—the capacity for the self to carry the other’s weight, actual and emotional. A practice that appears to be turned inward to the artist’s self was, always, the opposite. Adrian practiced deep listening.

If I reached for writing about emotion, it was to avoid speaking with it. One form of grief layered over another. How to read from a book so

centered on sadness when one feels so sad? How to share that sadness out rather than stage it? All I can do is point.

Here, I cry. But that crying—it's not much, really. How or what I feel? It isn't the point. The point seems to be something about showing up for each other.

The first time I confessed that my writing doesn't feel personal to me (especially when that writing is going well) I was rebuked. My interlocutors did not believe me. I said it again in Chicago and was questioned: Why did I feel the need to say that?

It was not to disavow feeling. And it was not a confession that the book is dishonest. That book was, as it happens, written inside the space of a loss—a romantic love. I have little sense of where the traces of that loss appear in my writing. The feeling of writing and the feeling of reading are not reducible to each other. One movement is not the mirrored image of the other. Why do I want so much to separate them? Why suggest that I write for but not to the reader?

I have been reading. For months—it feels like forever—I have been reading Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy. It is the only thing I've read since I got the news. I am reading it so slowly. Was it the last book I told José about? I can't remember. The last book that José recommended to me: Michel Serres, *Variations on the Body*.

In the fall, a friend gave me *Gormenghast* after we saw John Akomfrah's installation *An Unfinished Conversation*—a cinematically gorgeous, moving (very moving) appreciation of Stuart Hall's life and work. I was in London, living right across the street from the museum where it was on view, and took every opportunity to be enveloped by it. Hall must have loved Mervyn Peake's writing because it is all over the sound track. He—Stuart Hall—was at Akomfrah's opening, frail but glamorous, surrounded by people who loved him deeply, people who were so grateful for his lifework. That was also moving; I was so lucky to have been there. (I told José about that.) I saw *An Unfinished Conversation* four times in the fall, before José died. Before Stuart Hall died. I could not bring myself to go after. Since.

So, I keep reading Peake's sentences, slowly. A few, about the love of place:

The love of the diver for his world of wavering light. His world of pearls and tendrils and his breath at his breast. Born as a plunger into the deeps he is at one with every swarm of lime-green fish, with every colored sponge. As he holds himself to the ocean's faery floor, one hand clasped to a bedded whale's rib, he is complete and infinite. Pulse, power and unity sway in his body. He is in love.¹

His love for language, for words that carry worlds, is almost embarrassing.

Peake's writing is also ruthless. The appearance of a body is an occa-

sion for semantic violence. In an early chapter, a fugitive exiled to castle rooftops spies a figure in a distant window—that figure recites a poem, and then, “For some time after the long head had emptied itself of a slow, ruminative soliloquy it stared motionlessly into the sky.” That sentence insists on its own rhythm in defiance of your sense of syntax. After the long head. No, after. After something that happens sentences above: “The mouth opened and a voice as strange and deep as the echo of a lugubrious ocean stole out into the morning.”² After *that*.

That sentence describes a character identified only as “the Poet.” The mouth “which dipped downwards across the chin, a remorseless twist.” The head: “It was a long head. It was a wedge, a sliver, a grotesque slice.” The eyes “small as marbles.” The body. The exact sum of its parts. The Poet. The Critic.

The diver at home under an ocean is not a sum of parts; he is a part of his world, a fish, a speck. He is not a poet; he is poetry.

That night in Chicago I read my writing about Adrian Howells’s practice. And I ended the talk by recalling a conversation that we had in the fall of 2012. Adrian and I were supposed to be onstage together at a conference in London. As the date approached, however, Adrian let organizers know that he couldn’t be there physically. He had sunk into a terrible depression a few weeks earlier and was only just emerging from *The Deep*. He wasn’t ready to appear on a stage in front of people, but he could handle a phone conversation.

Would I, my friend Gavin asked, be OK with doing that? Of course I was, but I didn’t want to coerce Adrian to talk, if talk was too difficult, which it can be. So as soon as I got to London, the artist and I talked on the phone. One on one. We talked about what was possible, we talked about talk. We talked about love and long distances. We talked about missing each other. (I missed a performance encounter with him, and he was missing one with me—in both cases, our misses were also hits, productive disconnects.) It felt OK, we decided, and we made the phone date—I’d sit onstage at this conference and Skype with him. We would have just his voice. Which was a lot.

In that conversation, we talked about how other people have experienced us as having a certain kind of openness, as people, and how people can experience our work as personal. If it feels like it’s about us, it does so in a way that feels like it’s about them. The space of emotion that we described, the space that unfolds through feeling, holds pockets of alienation and loneliness. Space within space. A “remorseless twist.”

Other people’s experiences of a writer, a teacher, or an artist’s emotional availability do not necessarily line up with that person’s sense of boundaries. Maybe that’s a thing: people who, for whatever reason, experience feelings as both “me” and “not-me”—people less interested in their

feelings than in the sense of feeling, a feel for feeling, a sense of how and where we dissolve into each other. Intense feeling can instigate a kind of depersonalized form of intimacy—it can, most certainly, be a state of dispossession. It can take on the aspect of the body.

It was good to read that writing about Adrian’s work, but it was also hard because to talk about Adrian was to replicate and tap into the shock and sadness of his passing. It *is* difficult to speak and, worse (for me at least), to write from the space of grief. I could read the words on the page, but my voice cracked at the last sentence. Something leaked out, just as I stopped talking. The body. The throat. Which of course had a dramatic effect. Uncanny.

It was exactly what happened at a memorial event a month earlier—I read my script, words about our friend, and just at the end there was a crack. One crack, an echo of another.

A few months later I taste the edge of a panic attack while lecturing on Monique Wittig: “For if there is something real in the ideas of Rousseau, it is that we can form ‘voluntary associations’ here and now, and here and now reformulate the social contract as a new one, although we are not princes or legislators. Is this mere utopia?”³ Did anyone notice me leave my body?

The talk in Chicago was intensely performative—reading those sections of the book mandated an on-the-spot working-through of the difficulty of the situation. I wept, but I didn’t sob. (“You have to understand, I don’t feel any more or less vulnerable when I am crying than when I am not.” Something like that was said.) It did not feel like getting something off my chest, because I cannot talk in such a context about José. And of course, that is who I am holding onto.

But talking with people about Adrian’s work—about his interest in scenes of intimacy and love, of failure and disconnection, about the intensely reparative dimension of his practice, the urge he had to give people a sense of being held—it felt like channeling something that never belonged to me. And that was OK.

Even so, something was let loose in telling the story of Adrian’s work and in sharing the news of his death with people who didn’t know him. The news of his work and death arrived at once. That something hung onto me like a Familiar for a solid week. Sharing my conversation with Adrian felt like the right thing. I am just one of the many who loved his work, and who knew Adrian to be a marvelous person. But we hardly knew each other, and what feelings might circulate through me exert no claim on him, or his memory. It is harder for me to address José’s way of thinking and being without feeling the claim of that thinking and being on me and mine. We did know each other.

One loss is haunted by another.

• • •

“José should not have died.” The truth of this is unbearable. José read Bloch out loud to us. He knew when to be uncompromising. He left the diagnostic language of trauma on the table. He was listening to Silvia Rivera and Jean-Luc Nancy. We read to each other. We wrote for each other. He wrote for everyone. We trusted him.

Well, now that you’re gone, I see how little you really copped that I thought you copped. (Things still keep disappearing.) I think of your leap a lot, the elegance of it, your brilliant fall to earth: “Let it come down”—our words, four days before.⁴

I let myself ride a wave of grief. It came from somewhere else, a memory of writing alongside a friend. Writing this is painful, and I do it anyway. Because I can’t stand not being where other people are. We shared that, too.

Peake, again: “Lingering is so very lonely / When one lingers all alone.”⁵ And so it is. A sentence pitched into empty space.

Here, in grief, so many of us confront a problem of relation.

What were we, what are we to each other?

Not what. How. Not to. With.

A sentence can carry, hold a world—it can be a fist or an open hand, palm up. In writing one can feel like that diver, perfect and at home under an ocean, holding onto the whale’s rib. But now, around this?

A sentence arrives. Some kind of wreckage, floating up from the deep.

Notes

1. Mervyn Peake, *The Gormenghast Trilogy* (London: Vintage, 1999), 53. (The trilogy was originally published in 1946.)

2. *Ibid.*, 89.

3. Monique Wittig, “On the Social Contract,” in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 33–45, 45.

4. Diane DiPrima, “November Poem,” in *Freddie Poems* (Point Reyes, CA: Eidolon Editions, 1974).

5. Peake, *Gormenghast Trilogy*, 99.

