



The Mountain and I Contemplate One Another in Mutual Silence

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“And this slow spider which creeps in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself, and you and I in this gateway whispering together, whispering of eternal things—must we not all have already existed?”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

I sometimes have the overwhelming impression that there are two of me, or that I am somehow living two lives which are for the most part mutually unaware of one another. This is due to my preponderance of false memories, wherein I find myself reflecting on something I did in vivid detail, immersed in the remembered stimulus, until it occurs to me that it never happened. Occasionally, I have to actually subject the remembered circumstance to a deliberate evaluation and process of elimination to realize it isn't real.

Not too long ago I had some very fleeting insight, born out of an abstract contemplation of mathematics, which seemed of great significance before it vanished. I remember it happening as I walked down a certain road, despite that I have only been on that road on a bicycle. The memory is so agonizing clear; it forms a vivid picture filled with the deep hues of the dying red light of the setting sun off to my left behind the blackening mountain and the jagged silhouettes of trees. The road is very steep, and I feel small rocks grating against my feet and dust being stirred by each step. There are, however, telltale deformations, as in a dream: I have much longer and lighter hair than I actually do, falling in haphazard curls on my shoulders, and I am wearing a jacket that I lost some years ago.

Shortly after, another false memory. This one has a

positively magical character, and I readily realize that it has not actually occurred. I am sitting on the banks of a clear, fast moving stream. I am thinking about how close a salmon might be to the place it was born, and thus the place it must die, when it is plucked out of the water by a fisher, whether a human or some other animal. I am thinking, essentially, about how it is killed as it races to its death. There is a salmon in my hand that I have just taken out of the water and I look into its round eye and its mouth, which moves and gives the impression that sound should be coming out although it does not speak words I can hear. I say, “You're home now, brother.” Then I bash its head in with a rock. What's strange is that both of these memories seem to be *about* the same intangible thing, they seem to illustrate something I keep thinking I am becoming aware of before it evades me again. I am haunted by the sense that the salmon is saying something as its mouth silently moves. And I think – although I am wary of inventing details after the fact – that in this memory, too, I have longer and lighter hair than I actually do.

For a reason I can not exactly describe, I associate these two mental images of things that did not occur with something that did indeed occur some time ago. In September of 2009, I became extremely sick for a very long period of time. I was in Portland, without a permanent residence. I had been staying with friends or, when the occasional fancy took me, bicycling along the Columbia River until I found a suitably remote place to sleep outside, sometimes in the city limits and sometimes well beyond them.

My sister was out of town for a couple of weeks and graciously allowed me to stay in her apartment. I put the Carl Sagan documentary *Cosmos* on on her computer. I intended to lay on her couch and watch it, but I could not keep my eyes open. I drifted through a

fever delirium, the walls seeming to swell with the sensations coursing through my body. At some point, I briefly became aware of Carl Sagan's voice, amidst a wash of 70s synthesizer music, saying something to the effect that we are a means by which the universe has come to know itself. I thought about this, how matter had organized itself in forms of increasing complexity until it became us, capable of analyzing those most elementary forms of matter that had existed before life. How when we gaze on a carbon atom we gaze on another permutation of ourselves. We are mutually aware. Then my consciousness drifted elsewhere.

Throughout the course of the next couple of days, I repeatedly had the impression that a little girl lived in the shower of the apartment and that she came and visited me, hovering over my body. One night, my lover came to visit and she lay sleeping next to me. I was thinking perhaps the little girl was a ghost and I suddenly found myself wondering what it would be like to be a ghost myself. Then, terrifyingly, I thought I could see every room in the house all at once from every possible angle and I felt a great, shocking *rush* as I exited my body. The sensation of leaving seemed to emanate from my chest; my *self* seemed to be *rushing* out of it. I opened my eyes in alarm and my lover woke and grasped onto my chest, as if to hold me back in my body. She told me the movement – the rushing – had woken her. Later that night, she tells me I woke her up and earnestly implored her to move to the forest and have a child with me, although I do not remember it at all. I have no idea, really, what these few days at my sister's apartment have to do with these two false memories, but they are inextricably connected.

"Priests, professors and doctors, you are mistaken in delivering me into the hands of the law. I have never been one of you; I have never been a Christian; I belong to the race that sang on the scaffold; I do not understand your laws; I have no moral sense; I am a brute; you are making a mistake..."

Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell*

In *The Mirror's Heart*, I wrote about some of the unique attributes of instinctive behavior, having delved deep into the world of authors such as Konrad Lorenz. An organism has a certain amount of energy to perform instinctive behaviors. In the wild, this energy should roughly correspond to the amount of the behavior that is needed for the organism to be successful. The longer the behavior is not performed,

the more the drive for it builds. Sex is a readily familiar example from our own experience. In situations such as captivity, where there may never be an appropriate situation or environmental context for a behavior, it will eventually erupt *in vacuo*. Birds will build nests from nothing, and certain male fish deprived of other male combatants will simply turn on their female tank mates and kill them.

Obviously, civilization represents a situation in which much of the instinctive behavior that allowed our species to survive through the millennia is no longer useful whatsoever. On the contrary, characteristics that have typically been beneficial for us, or for a number of other animals, are precisely the characteristics that make one function poorly, or not at all, in a domesticated context. Self-reliance, courage, self-assertiveness and aggression toward individuals who have a higher social status, which they may maintain by force, are qualities that make many animals more likely to reproduce. In our present circumstance, however, they range anywhere from useless to precisely the characteristics that get you locked up in jail, or killed, or at least guarantee you'll always be broke.



The innate drive toward aggressive behavior is, of course, occasionally considered useful by a civilization, in cases where that society decides to make war on another. It is actually an articulate illustration of the inherent energy we have for an instinctive behavior, like aggression, that war requires far more violence of the combatants than they really have the drive for. Soldiers enter wars filled with a fervor for battle, having been deprived of opportunities to release the innate aggressive drive in their civilian lives (after all, we intuitively begin to pretend to fight when we are children, much as a kitten stalks and kills a stray piece of string), and they leave wars fatigued and insane, having seen far more conflict than we have a drive for. Neither the settled life, where aggression is expected to not exist at all, nor a war zone, where an individual is expected to be a ceaseless font of it, correspond to the amount of aggressive instinct we have developed over the course of our evolution.

War can also really only be understood by reference to what Lorenz calls the social defense instinct, the drive to identify as part of a group to which one has allegiance, and defend it against threats from other groups. This makes sense, as in earlier times of course it must have been fairly common for small

bands of our ancestors to come into conflict with one another, much as territorial troupes of chimpanzees do today. The fact that this social defense drive is truly innate, and not just a behavioral inclination that comes up as a response to rational evaluation of a situation, can be best illustrated by the simple fact that wars are chronically fought all over the world for no good reason whatsoever, with great enthusiasm on the part of massive segments of the warring population, to deter entirely nonexistent threats to the wellbeing of a nation.

But of course, these are just the cases where a civilization deems aggression, and social defense, useful. To participate in a nation's war, you would have to either genuinely believe the cause was just as a result of some deliberation, or you would, as is more typical, have to allow your aggressive and social defense instincts to be used by a social order to which you are subordinate. But insubordination is also an inherent biological tendency. In our species and many others, conflict to establish dominance is a primary tendency. What happens when all three of these drives occur simultaneously? What if one identifies with a group their nation happens to regard as the enemy? What if they happen to see their nation itself as the enemy? What if they are willing to fight it?

In domesticated animals, aggressive behavior, and the drive to fight for dominance, can be bred out, along with just about everything else one may think of as useful or beautiful in a creature (like the parenting drive, the capacity to form meaningful social bonds with other members of the species, and all the basic instinctive behaviors by which an animal might find food or avoid predators or generally look after itself). Birds are rendered unable to fly. Rats lose their mating dance. Canines lose the complex language of dominance and submission by which they establish a pack. In experiments, wild foxes have been selectively bred to lose their aggressiveness towards humans, and have in short order become highly submissive, retaining essentially a juvenile state throughout their lifetime, physically and behaviorally (many adult domestic animals share a set of features only found in juveniles in their wild counterparts). Something along these lines has clearly happened in the civilization of humanity, as well. Much of what would have previously been thought of as useful, noble, or beautiful in us has clearly been bred out, replaced by terminal submissiveness and dependency. But humans have not exactly been subject to the same program of selective breeding as the animals we have domesticated. One can not help the sense that in some cases lineages that are genetically disposed to more characteristically wild behaviors have managed to survive, engendering people who, simply put, feel like they do not belong here.

There is a ceaseless restlessness that haunts my being. My instincts drive within me a storm of relentless, intrepid intensity, a storm that rages against all the behavior necessary for success in the modern world. I hate the docility, I hate the safety and convenience, I hate the narrow definition of wellbeing, that seems to take into account only the accommodation of immediate desires, that characterizes the modern world. I hate it. I can't stand it. The comforts we are supposed to take for granted make me feel like I am not a real person when I take advantage of them for any sustained duration. My life has been a jumble of confused, painful, and often pointless circumstances. When I look back on it I can think of no other thing than the *in vacuo* eruption of instinctive behaviors of animals in captivity. I *must* prove myself courageous and strong. It is in my nature. I have ceaselessly subjected myself to trials for no other reason than to endure them.

I stand behind the bar at work on a quiet night and find myself repeatedly imagining someone coming in and threatening some harm to me or someone else and physically *feeling* myself leap over the bar to do combat with them. I get off of work in those latest hours of night when no one is around, and I walk up the hill and I look down over the Budd Inlet of the Puget Sound, the reflected lights from the buildings shimmering on its dark surface. Everything seems insane; there seems to be a maelstrom of possible catastrophes beneath every surface I gaze upon, at any moment there may be some threat that I will have to rise up and *fight*. I look at the cranes on the docks, their hooks hanging silently from their massive metal arms, and I imagine this machinery coming apart and hurtling to earth and me dodging the metal gargantuans as they tumble from the sky. I imagine grabbing someone and carrying them to safety. I imagine silently standing waist-deep in water beneath one of the docks, a gun drawn, waiting for some unknown assailant, in some deadly conflict whose origin I do not bother to imagine. I am longing for great trials, for the red flower of my courage, which is blood, to blossom on wounds inflicted on my body in combat.

But I realize none of this is happening. In fact, what I am looking at is by a more objective standard an extremely tranquil scene, a city sleeping by the water. I try to imagine what the world would look like if it were not for my instincts; if only the rational part of my brain were in operation. Would I even look on the same sky, and would it be reflected in the same black water? Would this particular night, bathed in all of these city lights, seem to have the same faint reddish tinge to it? I can't really say.

My friend reads something else I've written and says

precisely the same thing to me, that my life has been largely defined by instinctive behaviors that would have been a lot more useful in some other context. I want so badly to be of use to someone, or something. Increasingly I have been thinking of my life not in terms of a vast set of possible things I will do in the future, but in terms of what I've actually already done. Not that my life is almost over, but it is also not just beginning anymore. I'm really not certain I've ever done much good for anything at all. I am just some guy who at the age of 32 has no resume and has a uselessly vast repertoire of stories involving hardship and depravity.

I feel so old. Not just chronologically, not just in the mid-life crisis sense that apparently I am indeed experiencing (although it is worth noting that my mid-life crisis seems to be the inverse of the more typical one, where someone who has spent their life functioning in society wishes that they had occupied their time playing in rock 'n' roll bands or going on reckless adventures). But also in the sense that I feel like I belong to some archaic order of existence, an order of existence the world utterly forgot about a long time ago, leaving me without a viable course in life.

I have spent much time raging against the civilization that apparently usurped the mode of existence I imagine myself belonging to, but right now I don't really feel rage. I wonder if I am, quite legitimately, just sort of obsolete. Is the tendency toward greater and greater docility and dependency in humanity bad? I don't know. It seems like, honestly, it involves a set of trade-offs. Greater behavioral sophistication, which does seem like a good thing, is basically being exchanged for all of the qualities I've already mentioned we're sacrificing along with our domestic animals. If I could assess myself, and society, purely rationally, beyond the influence of any of my instincts, would I decide that I am wrong, and it is right? The question is ultimately a stupid one. What would it mean to assess anything as good or bad outside of the context of your biological nature? Is there some absolute, objective reason that certain women should make my throat constrict and my heart flutter when I see them, other than the intrinsic character that defines me as an organism? Really and truly, is there some external, objective reason that it would be better for me to live than to die screaming in pain right now? I can't think of any real reason I would make this judgment other than the biological drive I share with all other creatures to exist. Attempting to conceptualize



thought without its biological foundation is like conceptualizing a tree without the trunk, branches, leaves, or roots; there simply isn't anything left. I find the modern life absurd and abhorrent because that's just how I am. I find people relaxing in front of the television after work, who have never endured even a few nights of cold or hunger or uncertainty or peril, pathetic; because that judgment is built into me the same way that laughing or breathing is.

I didn't really get better from whatever illness I contracted that fall until next spring, but it would come and go, and it seemed after awhile like it was attenuated to my various circumstances, so that I could function if I absolutely needed to. Life went on, and at the beginning of October I traveled to California in search of work. I got off the train in Dunsmuir and as I began to travel by road, climbing up the Trinity Alps, I felt a thrill I had not felt in some time. A ride I had gotten dropped me off seven miles before Weaverville as the sun set and I walked the rest of the way into town and then beyond it and slept on a grassy mountain high above crisscrossed with numerous game trails. My water bottle froze in the night, and I felt at peace. After a couple of weeks of travel I found a few weeks work on some land at the base of a mountain. In the morning, I would walk up the trails to a high point on it and watch the October fog burned off of the valley by the morning sun. I found a mountain lion track in some mud on the trail.

I had to return to Portland in mid-November, and when I got there I had difficulty adapting. I felt awkward and out of place, confined by the city. Shortly thereafter I left again with little destination in mind, despite that it was the rainy season and I could have been looking for a place with the money I'd just made. I traveled in the direction of the ocean and slept in a muddy field on Highway 26 in the last few hours of dark, having walked the night through. My friends and I had chosen that night to attempt to find one another while we were sleeping in our respective locations and communicate with each other in our dreams. I dreamed we were all standing at the site of a bomb test and singing as the bombs rained down on us, causing them to harmlessly explode in the sky above our heads. Nobody else dreamed anything remotely similar, but if I recall correctly three of the people had strange dreams about eggs right around this time.

When I got to the ocean I traveled up Highway 101. I

was not aware that it split into two different routes, and so to my surprise ended up hitch hiking to Olympia, far east of the ocean, on Thanksgiving day. I stayed with some friends a few miles to the west of the city. As I would come and go, I would notice a mountain on the north side of the road whose presence struck me in a way I could not describe. I left Olympia at dusk and walked up Highway 101, looking at the other side of the mountain, drawn to it. I walked nearly to Shelton, and toward the end of the night I slept for awhile in a grove of trees. I woke at some point and two or three deer scattered from my vicinity the moment I opened my eyes. I had not moved; so far as I can tell, they sensed me waking. Their movement away from me seemed like an extension of the *rushing* of my consciousness back into the world. I could think of nothing other than the rush out of my body, my lover holding me down in my frame.

"Mystery-filled in the light of day, Nature; won't have her veils stripped away."

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*

I have already declared myself a savage; I have already resolved that my animosity with society is inborn. Fair enough. But this does not prevent me from wishing to bring rational thought to bear on this apparatus of blood and bone and instinct that generates my perceptions, to see if I can understand it, and to see what of my experience is generated by reason and what is created by something I have never stopped to give thought to. The question remains. Would I even look on the same black sky, would it, bathed in all of these city lights, possess the same reddish hue this evening, if it were not for these instincts? It is a little like Descartes' horrifying speculation that there is an evil demon tricking him, generating all of his perceptions while he remains oblivious to the world as it actually is. This led him to formulate what is arguably the best known dictum of western philosophy ever written. *Cogito ergo sum*; I think, therefore I am.

Before I had ever heard of Descartes, when I was thirteen years old, I smoked weed for the first time. Sitting at my desk in my high school classroom, I had the same metaphysical terror that he did. I realized that my perception was, owing to the drug I had consumed, vastly different than those of my classmates around me. As the teacher talked about Shakespeare I looked over at one of them, who seemed to be far away and possessed of an indefinite shape, although bathed in overly-bright light. I realized with horror that since we did not agree on the nature of reality at this moment, and since there was no external third party who was not subject to the unique vicissitudes of their own perception to mediate our dispute and give an objective verdict of what was

going on, that there essentially was no reality. (Obviously, this conflict is negated if you believe in god, but for someone who is fundamentally uncertain if his desk is really there in front of him, feeling confident of something so remote and abstract is a bit of a stretch).

That night at home I more or less resolved the conflict, at least from a practical standpoint. I realized that, at the very least, *my perception* did, in fact, have parameters. Simple experiments revealed a key detail. If I held an object in my hand and said it would not fall to the ground, then let it go, it still plummeted. I didn't actually try, but I imagined that likewise I could decide that a window on the tenth story of a building was not high, but that if I jumped out of it I would still hurt myself. The fact that what I perceived as the world remained constant, and could defy my expectations if I chose to change them, or surprise me if there was something about it I did not know, was enough for me. I was able to at least close my eyes that night assuming that my room would still be there when I woke, despite that I would forget all about it in my sleep.

But while there are similarities, there are important differences between Descartes' famous philosophical construction, or the weed-induced metaphysics of my adolescence, and the question I am asking about instincts. For in the study of innate behavioral drives, we can begin to *actually* see the demon, so to speak, that Descartes was only speculating about. It ceases to be an unresolvable philosophical exercise one would do best to simply get over and begins to be an inquiry with tangible results.

Humans are adapted to adaptation itself. Our evolution has involved a profound increase in our capacity to respond to our environment, to affect it and solve problems within it, based on general intelligence, the means by which all animals modify their inborn instincts to be suited to the specific situations they find themselves in. This can lead to an unconscious, sort of half-formed assumption that our fabulously complex perceptual worlds are the products exclusively of the critical, methodical, reasoning parts of our minds. Konrad Lorenz wrote that humans exhibit by far the least instinctive behavior of any animal. But the transition from our early primate forebears, who doubtlessly exhibited more fixed motor patterns for things like food-collecting and fighting than we do, to modern humanity has not exclusively involved a diminution of instinct. We have acquired at the very least one new instinct fundamental to our definition of humanity: the language with which Lorenz communicated his insight into our lack of instinctive behavior.

flood of words and thoughts responds immediately. And one can't quite be certain the voice that is answering in their head is really theirs, or that they have a total grasp on what it's saying or why; that 'they' truly and unquestionably control it.

Taking for granted that I do not understand the unconscious rules by which I construe language, it is also true that *what* I say often just seems to be some completely spontaneous construct, springing fully-formed from my head like Athena from Zeus, only making itself apparent to me once I've said it. This can have an uncanny, vaguely disquieting significance, as I often find myself stating fundamental beliefs for the first time in the course of conversations, and articulating complex justifications for them. To be certain, I do give much thought to what I think about the world when I am not talking to people. But it always seems to be the case that everything I think coheres into something far more decisive, far more fully-realized and actionable, at the very moment I start speaking about it.

"And yet we had no ideal Mistress stretching her form up to the clouds, nor yet a cruel Queen to whom to offer our corpses twisted into the shape of Byzantine rings! No reason to die unless it is the desire to be rid of the too great weight of our courage!"

F. T. Marinetti, *The Futurist Manifesto*

It is a subtle and readily misunderstood statement, but I don't get the sense people really think about where their beliefs come from. It is a fact of the modern condition that it engenders a greater and greater diversity of belief. This situation to some extent contrasts with the human situation in less technological eras, wherein a group of people sharing a region and a language shared a cosmology of some kind, so that in a very fundamental sense there was agreement about what the world was and how it worked. People in modern culture have the novel task of having to decide what to believe. People living next door to one another, speaking the same language and sharing a material culture, may believe utterly disparate things about reality. One may think that the world was created a few thousand years ago by an omnipotent, albeit terribly insecure, deity, prone to incessant fits of wrath against his creation for various transgressions real and imagined, while the other may believe that extraterrestrials came and gave us psilocybin mushrooms, which gave birth to consciousness, or they may think language is the only reality and there is no such thing as truth, or they may believe physics has proved there is no such thing as god.

When truly given a moment's thought, it is a somewhat curious circumstance that so many people, exposed to

the same external world from which to derive information, come not just to differing hypotheses they favor, but to fervent *convictions*, which they profess absolute certainty as to the validity of, that are so radically at odds with one another. It seems the more information we gain about the world the less we can come to any sort of agreement on what is true about it. In his story *The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim*, Jorge Luis Borges writes of a man who "reflects that he has shown himself capable of killing an idolater, yet incapable of knowing with any certainty whether the Muslim possesses any more of truth than the idolater does". The man then goes off in search of truth, eventually seeking out a prophet whose word is disseminating among the people, and who seems to have the answers he seeks, only to eventually realize he is the prophet. I think it is safe to say that most people who've killed each other in a Hindu-Muslim riot, or any other such scenario where ideology has come into deadly conflict, did not have this moment of subsequent introspection.

On the contrary, people will make much effort to justify their beliefs, but I can not dispel the overwhelming impression that any evidence they might garner in favor of their paradigm is a sort of *post hoc* effort to justify something they decided to believe without much conscious deliberation, because of something inherent in their nature. I will most assuredly confess this about myself. I have, and I mean this quite literally, always had the same basic attitudes about the world I possess now. One could say I was a precocious child, or one could say that I've suffered very stunted development.

For instance, I confess my hatred of the police exceeds all reason. There are many good reasons to hate the police, but when I see a cop, and rage courses through my body and lurid thoughts of violence flood my mind, it is automatic, preceding any analysis, and it has always been there. I hated the cops when they picked me up when I was eight years old walking down the interstate in southern California with a backpack on. I wasn't even really trying to run away from home, exactly; I just wanted to be free. It seemed strange to me that everyone should have to drive everywhere, and live in houses, and I just wanted to walk out into the world and experience it on its own terms. I have no idea how many freeways I have since walked down, how many times I've decided to walk some great distance, navigating the ceaseless perils to foot travel people have made, crossing interstates and circumnavigating golf courses and housing developments, since then. And the police have always been there to fuck with me. I can provide no more or less articulate an objection to them now than I could then: if I want to wander on my own way, what business could it possibly be of theirs?

Something more fundamental, something purely biological, is going on in my deep animosity with the established order. I hate this civilization because it is has lost its understanding of, and humility before, the nature it is a part of, and it is ravaging all the other parts of nature. And I hate the cops because they protect this civilization. That is the logical part of my animosity. But I also hate the dominant order because it is precisely that, and it simply is not in my nature to submit to a social order. I am an animal with a born aversion to anything that holds power over me, and a need to fight against it, just as a wolf is compelled to rise up and assert itself against the dominant members of its pack. Perhaps I simply disliked too greatly the way authority was exercised over me by adults when I was a child, perhaps it is just the blood with which my veins sing, but even if it were not abhorrent and destructive in and of itself, I don't think I could ever accept an authority imposed on me.

I remember being taken out on a hike in the Anza-Borrego desert, also when I was eight years old, and seeing a rattlesnake devouring a rodent, and thinking that all our buildings and roads and neon signs were intrusions on the land we had no right to make. I remember my violent clashes with adults when I was younger still, the frenzied contortions of my body and the twisted rage of my face, and I think of myself singing in punk bands, then later in life speaking at protests, then later still employing various menacing, grotesque, and savage postures in my performance art career. It is all the same language of movement and expression. I have looked at photos from some of these things spanning fifteen years; despite that what I was doing ostensibly came from different places, or had somewhat different intentions, in many of them I am making exactly the same enraged face. Pablo Picasso, looking at the breathtaking murals of Pleistocene animals on the walls of a cave, said, "We invent nothing." I certainly haven't. I am the same man I ever was. The thousands of books I have read and the countless hours of observation and contemplation apparently only further develop, elaborate, and refine what I've always been. But never change it.

I said that I hate this civilization because it is destroying the nature of which it is a part, and that is the logical part of my animosity towards it. But I suppose it's a fairly surface sort of statement. Why, exactly, do I hate something for destroying the rest of nature? Here, too, it seems like innate aspects of human biology come to bear. Much as with language, we develop a fabulously complex intuitive

understanding of nature very early on in life that would utterly evade us if we were bringing only general intelligence, rather than an innate module for understanding, to bear. In experiments, infants already have a solid grasp on the distinction between animate and inanimate things. If an inanimate object is invisibly manipulated by experimenters, so that for instance a ball starts rolling without being propelled by a person, the infant reacts with much greater and more sustained attention than if a ball is simply propelled by a collision with something else. Likewise, they pay far more attention if people begin to act like inanimate objects, going on indiscriminate trajectories until they bump into each other. This understanding is so familiar to us that we take its magnificent perceptiveness for granted, but clearly the baby has not come to a definition of the animate and inanimate by a conscious formulation of their distinct properties. It just knows that some things move on their own, and modify the course of their actions according to the conditions of their environment, with an individual will, and some things don't.



Likewise, experimenters show young children a picture of a toy bird. They tell the children that the bird has been given real feathers, a motor that makes it fly, and the ability to chirp. They show them a picture of a real bird, saying that it looks like this now. The children are adamant that, despite these changes, the entity is still not a real bird. They have no difficulty whatsoever, however, accepting that a coffee pot can be made into a bird feeder, or that pennies can be melted down into keys. There is an innate understanding there of some irreducible biological identity within an organism that pennies and coffee pots do not have. There is an innate understanding of a difficult-to-define *essence* of life. I once read a biology textbook that began with a definition of life, acknowledging that it was actually quite difficult to provide a decisive and concise one, but that children somehow intuitively know that a tree or a spider is alive and a rock is not.

We have an innate understanding of nature, an innate communication with and connection to it, because this is how our species has survived to this age. By knowing the track of the hunted, feeling the mountain lion stalking through the trees when it can not be seen or heard, by mapping a mountain in our minds and knowing its moods and habits. The same inborn communication and connection by which we hunt and gather is brought to bear when we study biology. When we decide that life on earth is a precious thing we wish to defend against attack, it is perhaps the

combination of this irrevocable connection to all the rest of nature, a connection which is not so much a part of us but ultimately completely defines us, and the social defense instinct discussed previously. The social defense instinct compels us to identify as part of a group and defend it against attack. History shows that the group is a highly variable part of the equation, however. People might identify as third world, or black, or heterosexual, or capitalist, with concurrent antagonism toward everyone who isn't. But these are vastly larger scales than people ever would have thought on until recently. For instance, white racists, eager to reclaim the lost utopia of white civilization uninhabited by people from other regions, would find little precedent for their dream in European history. It would have been far more typical of historic Europe for people to think of themselves as Franks or Burgundians, and fight among themselves accordingly, than to think of themselves as white people united against the rest of the world. For someone who sees the attack on nature as abhorrent, the group with which one identifies is simply all of nature. This makes a pretty fair amount of sense, as we are after all related parts of a single thing that is life.

Like I have said, rather than negate my convictions, this biological perspective seems to reinforce them. I can ultimately think of no better reason to be a certain way, to believe a certain thing, than because it is my inborn biological identity to do so. Of course, one may readily say that everything else, or much else, that other people do and believe also has some intrinsic biological basis. This is doubtlessly true; insatiable and rapacious desire for material wellbeing, concern for one's own interest at the expense of others, and cowardice are entirely legitimate biological phenomena. All of the characteristics that I perceive as deficiencies that make an animal, human or otherwise, suitable for domestication are all valid aspects of biology. But if this puts the world in a position of insoluble conflict, so be it. We are all nature, raging in whatever inner conflict would contort one's limbs into a posture of agony as they writhed against the opposing forces within themselves, we are all a single thing contorting in a great conflict where the limbs of our tortured trees rise up to meet the metal teeth of our machines. God's body – nature – is fighting god's body.

"Nature is life and life is Nature. I love it and I know what it is. I understand it because I feel it and Nature feels me. Nature is God and I am Nature. I am alive."

Vaslav Nijinsky, *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*

Still unsettled in Portland, my friend invited me to come to Olympia and live in that same space I had stayed in, a large performance venue, sometime in December. When I would walk on the road I would see

the mountain to the north, but more often, I would walk through the ceaseless rain on the railroad tracks. We left the space from late winter to mid-summer while it was being worked on, but in spring I rode my bicycle out and made my first trip up the mountain. The sun was warm and the hillsides were green with grass and purple with a torrid eruption of foxglove. I wandered past an enormous open pit mine and up in elevation until I could see Mount Rainier off in the distance. I began to make frequent visits. I listened to great-horned owls at night and wrote songs based on theirs. I watched red-tailed hawks drift high above during the day.

It begins to hold some increasingly greater and greater allure; the promise of something I can not express. I am driven to it by something I am not conscious of. I begin to realize that I repeatedly imagine myself on the mountain as I travel by it, not in the simple sense that I imagine being on it, but I have the uncannily vivid impression that another me is up there wandering around through the night, a restless creature. It is him that is experiencing all the things I think I remember before realizing they never happened. He has blond curls of hair falling onto his shoulders. He belongs to the mountain, or perhaps he rules it. There is no difference; he is of it. Sometimes, I see his blond hair curling into the stems of flowers, a great mane of daisies and trillium, his head surmounted by branches, a profusion of ferns and grasses emerging from his skin. If I were a little more insane than I apparently already am, perhaps I would do him reverence. Perhaps I would walk up the logging roads and build him an altar in the heart of a madrone.

In winter, I move to a new house, which I select because it is directly at the base of the mountain. I can walk out of the backyard and onto a logging road and walk up it. The day after I move in, I do so. As I go up the road, I feel as if I am gliding, propelled by some external force. I walk to a high point and then I find the track of a large animal I can't quite recognize in the mud. I sit down and stare at it. Much time passes. I seem to have entered some sort of reverie; it seems odd that I am sitting here staring down at the ground for quite this long, but then I quickly stop thinking about it.

When I get back up, I am disoriented. I don't know which way I just came from. I want to walk back home, and I came from the eastern end of the mountain, but suddenly I do not know which way is east or west. I can think of no experience in my adult life that resembles this. My sense of direction was immaculate for years. I once woke up in a forest I did not recognize from an alcoholic blackout and realized that, despite not remembering getting there, I still knew my

directions. It has deteriorated a little since then – it is not as if I do nothing but constantly hop trains anymore – but I can't remember ever losing my bearing this completely unless I was in a car someone was driving. I look around for the sun, but it is low and so obscured by the trees. The sky is glowing red and peach and orange on numerous horizons. Which horizon contains the sun, and which, like a mirror harboring an illusory world, only contains a reflection?

I strike out in a random direction. Something exceedingly strange is happening, some shift just occurred in my mental state. I feel driven, but also overwhelmed. I am walking rapidly, urgently. Perhaps I feel a little like I am confronting a truth that is more than I can comprehend, and I have thus been rendered incoherent, just as too much light, rather than illuminating more, makes one blind. I find the sun, but the day is somewhat overcast and I somehow manage to literally convince myself that it is not the sun, but just diffused light from the other side of the sky. Thus, I walk towards it while convinced, in my delirium, that I am walking east. I imagine my other self, my mirror image, and think perhaps only he can know this place, where I must see everything in reverse. I truly think this. Perhaps I am only the reflection, and he is the real me. I am not concerned or frustrated with this apparent breakdown in my mental faculties; indeed, for some reason, I am ecstatic. I end up essentially in someone's backyard and on a road I do not recognize. I walk up and down it. I eventually find a sign with the road's name and realize I am on the wrong side of the mountain, but I am still in this state. I do not know which way is north or south.

After some wandering, I promptly exit my reverie. I realize I am on a road that I know perfectly well, and have always known perfectly well, is on the western side of the mountain. I therefore know which way to walk to get home. I am back, as precipitously as I departed, in the waking world of cars, roads, motion, and knowable directions.

I have spoken of language, I have spoken of beliefs, but what of the very sky? My initial question is not satisfactorily answered. Is the world I perceive ultimately the result of a fairly selective module? This line of questioning could readily deteriorate into trivial absurdity. Of course, I would not see the world were it not for the eyes our species has evolved, nor would I hear it were it not for our ears. But can we learn anything from examining our aggregate senses about

how ultimately circumscribed they may be? I can't imagine they're *wrong*, or we're back into the utterly abstract and ultimately fruitless territory of Descartes and weed. Not wrong, but I can readily imagine that our senses provide us with a picture of the world that, from the perspective of another observer, would seem very incomplete. In this case, I can't find a great deal of evidence from within human biology along the same lines as that for the intrinsic understanding of nature or the construction of language. Nonetheless, my suspicion is steadily growing, perhaps based on nothing more than a persistent sense that there is more to the world than I am aware of.

The summer I spend at the venue demands much of me, exhausting my body's capacity for work. I work constantly on the space. I work at a day labor agency. I live far from everything, and ride my bike many miles



in the predawn hour to carry boxes up and down stairs. I am cold, and then hot, and thirsty, and my body is always aching, although it is also growing stronger each day. I have little time to read, but when I do, I read a book called *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality*, detailing the baffling nature of quantum physics, string theory, and inflationary cosmology. I have exerted myself to a point of feeling disembodied, and so these moments when I manage to read a few pages of this work, with its description of a reality so lavishly endowed with properties that utterly defy the appearance of the world, are always utterly disorienting. I can't say I necessarily have moments where I think I'm not really laying there reading it. It is more that I have moments where it seems just as likely that this book is in my hands, telling me particles decide what properties to have only when we look at them, as it is that an infinity of other things are happening instead of this, or simultaneously. Why not, really? The behavior of the universe seems to be beyond the bounds of our senses or our capacity for reasoning. The more we *learn* about it, the more completely it seems to throw our *understanding* of it into utter chaos.

To me it seems that three basic events can basically account for the seemingly ever-increasing complexity of reality, and its ever-increasing amount of content. These are the initial moment of creation of the universe, the emergence of life within it, and the emergence of consciousness. What I find so interesting is that as much as we may have fairly copious detail about these phenomena after the point of their origin, their actual coming into existence remains a place of stark and fundamental mystery,

unassailable by our inquiries. We can discuss how they work in detail, but *what they are and why they came to be* are beyond us. In other words, why did something come from nothing, and bring about matter and energy and all the behaviors and dynamics it possesses? And how did, out of these materials with their governing dynamics, did life emerge? The answer given to this question in a biology textbook does not seem false, but inadequate, giving an account of an astonishing complexity of very ambiguous physical processes all occurring in concert to produce from mere molecules a system as sophisticated and organized as a living one. Apparently, this process, which happened spontaneously four billion years ago, has never occurred since. Surely there must be something else to know about this. And how did, out of these living systems, consciousness emerge, matter coming to be aware of itself?

Each one of these things, emerging out of one another in the order I just stated them, creates an entire new echelon of reality, with a greater degree of complexity and interrelationship than would have before been possible, which has no discernible precedent or mechanism in the universe as it existed before. What is this essential *impulse*, this seemingly spontaneous initiative to create these new orders of reality? Where does it come from and what exactly does it do? If we could meaningfully define something like existence (in the sense of being vs. non-being) or consciousness, perhaps we could begin to hazard answers to these questions. One may even ask if consciousness is, indeed, the final term in this series, or if there is some whole new order of reality that is waiting to emerge. Because every other unprecedented development of this nature has proceeded from the previous one (nothing to something, something to life, life to consciousness), one would be tempted to suspect that consciousness would be the origin of this unprecedented thing. Perhaps this mysterious mechanism for the creation of new elements of reality comes into play every time its medium reaches a certain stability, or density, or prevalence, or something (I am using these terms randomly, since I imagine it is quite clear there is no way I or anyone else could really know anything about the thing of which I am speaking). If consciousness were the medium for something new, I suspect we'd be the species in whom its seeds would blossom. I suspect it would have something to do with the worlds of complex symbolic thought we are presently engendering.

This is a true memory; I could date it with only a day or two margin of error. Indeed, when I think about it, I am fairly certain this is where my false memory of killing a salmon as it raced to its death came from. I

encountered a dead salmon lying on the stream bank as I was walking along a busy highway. I think of the salmon rushing along their course and the cars rushing along theirs. It feels like I am thinking of the movement of the two as the primary event, rather than the individual cars or salmon, or any of the attributes that distinguish them. That the primary phenomenon I am perceiving is the underlying pattern of motion, the *rushing*, and so the two are cohering into a single category of reality. That is not really all that noteworthy, when I give it a moment's thought. Or at least, it doesn't count as a whole different echelon of reality that has never before been perceived. It's the best I can do at describing it, though. It is simply as if there is a greater *continuity* to things, rendering their broader patterns and properties more visible.

I suppose the idea is that one can always subdivide reality into smaller categories, or expand it into broader ones. In the end, of course, the impact of the crater that ended the age of dinosaurs, the beautiful curvature of a mouth crying out during orgasm, the trembling appendages on a peacock's tail feather, Hitler's suicide in his bunker, the naked dancing of Isadora Duncan, and the masked dancing of the Hopi are all part of the single entity that is reality. I imagine the cognition of an insect, the world it perceives the direct function of the neurological system that has developed to perpetuate the survival of its species. I imagine that, while some parts of the world are apparent to this insect that are doubtlessly not apparent to me, that ultimately I can process more information and therefore perceive echelons of reality fundamental unavailable to it. The next step of this argument is obvious. How much of reality can really be accounted for by the neurological system that has developed within our species? Are there larger scales we could perceive things at? When things change scales, sometimes, rather than simply having more of something, fundamentally new dynamics emerge.

After all, it was less than 80,000 years ago that art did not exist, giving the strong sense that before this leap our forebears lacked a great deal of the cognitive complexity we possess. (Actually, I should briefly acknowledge that it is extremely perilous to try to directly associate a cognitive development with material artifacts – we're more or less cognitively identical to stone age peoples – but the more general point that *some* time in fairly recent evolutionary history we lacked our present mental sophistication is certainly safe). The vast panoply of knowledge we take for granted, in all its rich detail and interrelationship – our heads cluttered with lines of Ezra Pound and an understanding of how leaves affect photosynthesis and tactical observations on the Algerian independence movement – just wasn't possible until fairly recently. It seems absurd and

arbitrary to assume we have reached a final state, simply because we can look at subatomic particles or encode our thoughts into symbols and transmit them via electromagnetic waves to people on other continents, any more than people huddled in caves in South Africa 80,000 years ago should have thought they possessed a total knowledge because they knew how to make fire and stone tools.

At every moment in the history of our species, we have been at the vanguard of new evolutionary territory, and we continue to be so. Does it seem unreasonable then to assume that we should be experiencing things that have no precedent, and therefore are not typically regarded as possible? What would it have felt like to be one of the people who had language, the innate capacity for vocabulary and grammar that allows deaf children to create sign languages together, developing within you? Who was the *very first* person to etch lines into a piece of red ochre, or perforate and arrange some shells on a string, purely for aesthetic purposes - the first person to make art - and what did it feel like to be them? I try to recall that perception of the salmon and the stream and the cars and the road, with its uncanny continuity, in all of its detail, to try to see if there's anything there I haven't already accounted for. I note with interest that there was much less color, it was practically all shades of gray. There was an insistent murmuring sound in the background. The flesh of the salmon was rotting away a little, revealing some white bones, and everything else was the same; their surfaces seemed to be peeling away to reveal hidden structures of unknown significance beneath them.

I walk up the mountain late one night and the impression that there is another me is tremendous. He seems very proximate, like he is somewhere behind me, just around the corner. Just before the top, I look out on the lights of the city to the east, through the foliage of a hemlock tree that is in the perfect shape of an enormous bird. I build a debris hut, a structure of branches just big enough to accommodate a person lying down piled with enough foliage and sticks and whatnot to stay warm and dry, up on a ridge that looks down on the Puget Sound. My friend and I walk up there and she lies down in the hut and I sit next to it, and despite my ceaseless aimlessness and restlessness, despite being gravely concerned about a friend of mine to the south, despite living with the burdensome knowledge of all the seemingly irreconcilable wrongs that the modern age contains, I feel content.



This moment most certainly happens, and it has no mystical character to it whatsoever: I am walking home and, just before my driveway, I feel like I understand something I'd been getting at for a long time. But now that I do, I can't think of a way to express it linguistically that would really distinguish it from anything I've already said. I think about how when I read something, it is the same as if I look at the subtle and delicate structure of a leaf. It is all nature speaking with one voice to anyone who will listen. Nature speaks through the leaf, and nature speaks through the symbols that creatures adorn the flesh of a tree with, after it has been pulverized and pressed into a thin sheet and bound with many other such sheets into a book. Didn't I already know that? Some greater continuity has become a part of my perception, some clearer understanding that subject and object are part of a single continuous circle. I can not find a way to express it linguistically to make it sound less passe. Maybe everyone else already understood this, but I have come to some new understanding.

"I am God. I am God. I am God."
Vaslav Nijinsky, *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*

I've had a job for over five months now. I don't cease to be the absurd bundle of impulses that utterly resist the relative safety and tranquility of domestic living, but I think this time is probably good for me in many ways. I am congenial. I pay attention to detail. I read books of cocktail recipes and ask people their opinions on different drinks. Then I get off of work and imagine killing police officers, escaping from prison, hitch hiking to the coast to find an abandoned building and salvage its lumber in order to build a seaworthy craft and launch it into the Pacific Ocean. I am trying. I open a bank account. I make a big deal of little transitions, like buying a bath towel and trying to make myself use it after I shower. I get the towel but often forget to bring it with me into the bathroom. Virtually anyone would have to find my present state at least a little bit funny. I'd be inclined to argue for outright hilarity.

Who knows? Perhaps the revelatory encounter with the unknown will come while I am working. I serve someone who has recently had brain surgery. With great difficulty, he explains to me that he knows what he is trying to say, but since the surgery lacks the neurological capacity to physically say it. Every time he comes to a word that he can't make himself say, he says 'fuck' over and over again until it comes out, or until he settles for trying an alternative formulation. He does this so much that 'fuck' begins to seem like an

all-encompassing term, subsuming within itself all that ever has been or ever could be. If I were Borges, perhaps I would speculate that this man was, in fact, god. For if a definition of god had to be hazarded, that which encompasses the incomprehensibly vast and

wildly multifarious infinitude of reality into a singularity would not seem like a bad one. But I am not Borges, and so I must continue to trudge through the difficult and uncertain mire of my own philosophical terrain.