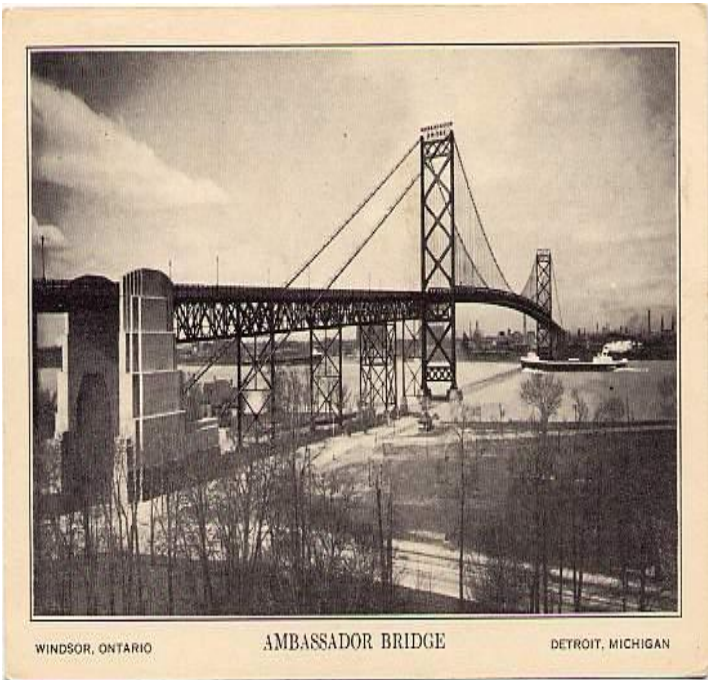


Hauntings and Frustrations



Jeff Noonan

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1. Struggle

How hard it is to persist in work without effect, to affect care once animating belief has flown. How hard it is to wake and concentrate. Sitting at the desk in the quiescence of coffee and cigarette.

How hard it is to admit that the stars don't look down upon us. Nothing is watching. Things combine, things disaggregate, things recombine. We were once combined; we will disaggregate, something new will be recombined in turn.

How long short periods of time seem

in a life. What a shock the thought of being young and then remembering friendships that have now lasted more than thirty years, jobs that have lasted more than a decade, multiples changes of city and house.

In the moment, consciousness is inertial; it wants to stay fixed. But moments are dynamic, one replaces the next replaces the next without notice. Young, middle aged, old, dead.

At some point the pleasure of the genuinely new becomes impossible. At some point, even if it cannot publicly admitted, routine sets in. At some point an algorithm of persistence is discovered. Life as a minor mathematician, generating new values from

the same operations.

Change becomes impossible even if desired. Principles cannot be abandoned. Face must be saved. This makes indifference all the more painful. Perhaps better not to have had any.

At a certain point – which does not coincide with death, unfortunately – comes the realization that everything has already been experienced, and henceforth all will be repetition and variation of the same. And then envy sets in, because others exist for whom this is not yet true. But then the freeing insight-- all that really awaits them is the same terrible realization.

Night comes, then day. ...

1. An Essay on the Banality of Coffee

... “I saw these amazing boots yesterday. I was going to buy them, but I had some time to kill so I went to

“I told him that he should get back into the market, because almost everything is undervalued right now

“No, I can’t because I have to go to my bank tomorrow to renegotiate because Trisha – you know her, from my office, awesome taste and always finds something with, you know, just a different twist – told me they had some really cool new stuff. So I went there and

“Right, that’s what I said. Can you believe that?”

“Where do you want to eat tonight?”

“Why do I always have to decide where we eat?”

“Pardon me? Yes, that’s right, yes and you can really pick up some bargains. But, you know how cautious my mortgage. What? Three. No, it’ll be too late. Why can’t we do that the following day?”

“She was ok, but I don’t know if they had just the most incredible boots, they were, like sexy, but, you know, not so much that you couldn’t wear them to work. So then I was going to buy them

“Umhum. Yep. Sure. Yes.”

he has always been. So he says that he’s sticking with bonds, because in his estimation we haven’t reached the floor yet. I think that he is

and guess what? Clark walked by. Ya, you know, the guy I met at that club. So, like I had “What the fuck is so sacred to you about tomorrow? Don’t you speak English? I can’t meet tomorrow I have to

“No, I’m sick of Italian. There’s a new Tibetan restaurant that got

“Yes. No. No. Yes, yes, that’s right. No to go talk to him, right. C’mon how could I not talk to this guy? I should have brought

him home that night, but I had yoga the next day.

misreading the market, but it's his money. In any case, how have

No one sees the dance above.

excellent reviews last week."

No. Pardon me. Yes, umhum. Say again.

Yes."

Anyway, I run outside and I'm like – "hey Clark, remember me?" He looked a bit dazed renegotiate my mortgage.

"Cappucino please. Hang on. Honey, do you want a croissant with your coffee?

Hang on. Sorry. Honey, I can't

"What? Of course Tibetans eat. Jesus Christ! C'mon, we need to

“Excuse me sir, could I
and thought I was someone else. So I’m like a
little

Undulating red and green
borrow this chair if you’re not using it?”

“I don’t think so. No. Yes. Yes. Is
that right?”
pissed, right, but anyway I reminded him and
then he was totally embarrassed. But anyway
we were talking and we decided
have you been? I haven’t really spoken with
you since, probably, when we were both in
the Bahamas, right?”

MORT-GAGE! Do you get it? I have to go to
my bank tomorrow. Look,

yes, and she'll have a croissant as well.

Thanks."

to go for a coffee. And that was so cool, like you know when you're totally relaxed with someone. And I'm thinking that this is great, we are SO

"Was it the Bahamas? Jesus Christ it has been awhile. And I have to go to London next week because there's a shareholder's You're driving me nuts. I'll call you later." into each other, and so I say that we need to get together again."

Sensuous coursing;

"I totally know what you mean and you know while you were talking I was thinking this is so weird, because the other

day I was leaving yoga and I wanted to look for boots too.

“Let’s sit over here by the window.

You don’t want

“No. I don’t think so. Yes. Yes.”

But you know my yoga studio is over on the east side, so there’s not much good shoe shopping over there. Except to sit by the window? What’s wrong? meeting. That would be ok, but of course I just got back from Frankfurt last week, and I’ve really wanted to spend

“Thanks. I really appreciate that.”

that there is this one place that I sometimes go to ‘cause they sometimes have some really funky stuff, you know, like you were saying,

sexy, ya, but not slutty, so you could go to work looking hot but still professional.

Anyway

more time with Mary and the kids. You know, Frank Jr. is about to graduate and of course there are crucial decisions to be made about

“Hello? Yes, hello. Shit, I can’t hear.

Text me instead. What? I said text me instead. TEXT ME I CAN’T HEAR.”

his future.”

I’m walking along the street and you’ll never guess, I run into like this old crush I had in college. He was always good

Ok. Alright. Ok. I’m going to let you go. Ok. Yes. We’ll talk. Ok.”

Spectral coilings;

I CAN'T HEAR YOU. TEXT ME INSTEAD.

"Richard? No, Richard is only
fourteen. So we have a bit more time

"No problem at all."

"That will be seventeen forty-five sir."

"*Seventeen* forty-five. Are you
serious?"

to mold him into shape."

looking but you know its college and
everything and I didn't want to get bogged
down with anything then. But I'm like you
and I know totally

silent,

"No, Lillian is fine. She was away for a
spa weekend and

“Ok. The Tibetan restaurant then.

Great, let’s go.”

what you mean, at some point I think you’re
right that its time to maybe start thinking
about a real relationship, you know,
something deep, like, with a spiritual
dimension, like I feel in yoga class.”

She’s always glowing when she gets back
from a spa weekend.”

sordid beauty, playing for no one.

2. Fashionista's Dog Takes a Shit.

Fading but not yet faded glory stared back from her mirror. She still had her sense of style—of that there could be no doubt—even if constant moisturizing was beginning to prove the law of diminishing returns. Pleased, nevertheless, she had just given herself permission to indulge middle age's secret pleasure-- savouring the belief that the world had more substance when you were young-- when her dog began to yip at the door. The fashionista's dog had to take a shit.

Shit he must, everyday at precisely 6,
so walk it she must, a fortuitous confluence of

necessity and freedom. The dog obeyed the laws of peristalsis, she freely gave that for which she once charged a fee – the highest fee of anyone, for a time. She may have long since left the biz, but what allowed her to dominate it she still possessed. It was never her body, or the clothes, or the spectacle of the runway. Rather, it was she herself as a unique point of synthesis of colour, movement, sound, design. An unrepeatable synaesthetic whole she would tell anyone, if anyone were ever to ask. Ask or not, her gift was undiminished, for what greater gift can there be to than to give oneself and ask so little in return, a gaze, however momentary,

which acknowledged the singularity that she was.

The day was cool and overcast, but dry, thank god, because she could abide anything except wet feet and the rotten burlap smell of wet dog fur. Rounding the corner and striding through the iron-gated entrance to the small neighbourhood park – our park, as she thought of it- she was invigorated, as she always was, by the activity within. There were the old men, sorted by ethnicity doing tai chi or playing chess or dominoes or cards, the middle aged jogging against entropy, the young dancing in flirtatious conversation. Her gift was without

limitation, for each and all, beauty freezing
life's swirl by its unannounced eruption.

The dog, however, was oblivious. It
twisted and spun, almost somersaulting in its
frenzy of sniffing at every tree trunk and old
stained patch of grass. His bright childish
eyes and pathetic 'yip, yip, yip' elicited
knowing smiles or purring complements, but
always directed towards *him*, who could not,
of course, appreciate them. He pulled at the
leash drawing her towards the fountain and
an old grey

picnic table where two young men and
a young woman sat in intense conversation.
They stared right through the ridiculous
woman and her dog who was taking shit

nearby. "I can't see it happening," said the first, "you cannot build an alternative on the basis of local action alone. Local actions are tolerated just because they are local, because they are not a threat. The sort of totalitarianism we are facing today cannot be beaten like that."

"But isn't it the case that because we can act in the interstices," the second rejoined, "that what we are facing is *not* totalitarian. If it were totalitarian, then even that wouldn't be permitted."

"You're missing the point," the first rejoined, but before he could finish the third jumped in.

“Hang on a second,” he cautioned. “I still don’t know what we even mean by totalitarian. What exactly is the problem we are trying to solve?”

“You know what the problem is, everyone knows what the problem is, there’s no great mystery. People know that the environment is in collapse, we know now that neo-liberalism is a failure, we know that culture is a money-driven wasteland where you either profit off of someone else or are ruled out, education is bullshit, pure programming or else totally abstract academic critique from people who we *know* won’t put their own asses on the line. That’s what I mean by totalitarianism- everyone

and everything is determined by the same ruling force – money – make it and live, don't make it and die."

"But *that* is the abstraction," the second responded. "We're proof that we can live the alternative right now. We are not totally dominated by money-value," she insisted, "we are growing our own food..."

"That's horsehit" spat the first. So you have a community garden, big fuckin' deal. Who made your pants? Where does the rent and food and tuition money come from..."

"Wait," the third pleaded again. "Let someone else finish their sentence for once."
"Why does everything have to be all or nothing with you? Do you think you're

saying something profound when you point out we're dependent on money. Everyone knows that, that's not the issue. The issue is how to overcome the dependence. Look at the world, politically, I mean, do you see revolution happening? You cannot really believe that there are any grounds for hope in that sort of change. So you're criticising the professors who don't support us, but what does all *your* talk amount to."

"Fuck off, that's nonsense comparing me to these academic arseholes. Who got fucking tear-gassed at demonstration 426 in City T? Who the fuck was that? You two were off getting high when you were supposed to be with me attacking the fence.

“No we weren’t” the second corrected.

“I told you we weren’t participating in that adolescent male posturing. What happened? Please, please tell us again. Oh, you threw rocks at the cops, provoking them, and then you got tear-gassed, and don’t forget that they beat the shit out of you, we’ll never hear the end of that, will we,” she said to the third. “But that’s what you fucking planned to do. I know it because I went to the meetings too and I said- you remember this,” she enlisted the third’s support. “I said this is all just dick-wagging for the media. You want to build the revolution through the media.”

“Ridiculous. That’s not what we’re doing.”

“That’s exactly what you you’re doing,” said the third, gaining confidence.

“You want to create a spectacle. Look, that’s old news, that’s been talked about since the 60’s, and it didn’t work. If we’re serious we have to live the alternative right now, even if it means living with contradictions.”

“That’s the point precisely,” the second emphasised. “Wasn’t the whole point of Marxism to stress the contradictions of reality? Your problem is that you cannot bear the contradictions. You’re the one that hides in books – why don’t you give us a mathematical proof

of the immanence of the Revolution? Do you really think that shit makes a difference?

The only thing that makes a difference is how we live right now. Ya, I work, ya, I wear shoes that I didn't make myself, ya, I laugh, ya, I fuck, but guess what — so do you, you do the exact same fucking things, but *ignore your actual life* by reciting these abstractions. We *admit* our limitations and see how far we can overcome them, then we fuck up, then we try to learn and go further."

"I" hide in abstractions. Are you kidding? Where were you at the plant occupation? Oh, I forgot, you were planting your cucumbers that day, or were you weaving hemp, or some shit. You're off in

your fuckin commune, planting seeds like it's
400 hundred years ago and not standing up
when people ask you to."

"You're missing the point completely,
rejoined the third, "we're breaking from
the old model

continued past the conversation,
unhearing, silent in the knowledge that they
must have been talking about her. She
scooped the dog shit into a plastic bag and
returned home, affirmed for another day.

3. The Human Rights Philosopher and Four Celebrities Will Save all the World's Suffering Babies

... but that criticism was developed before we had the sophisticated models of fourth generation human rights that we have today. If a right is an entitlement that we have in virtue of being human, that is to say, an enforceable legal claim by which any individual can demand that which satisfies a fundamental human interest, then these rights just cannot be instruments of the ruling class. They cannot be, and that is just a

conceptual truth. Since humans as humans are not members of a class, or a gender, or an ethnicity, then, if there are human rights, these rights cannot be class specific. The political implication thus follows: by acting so as to demand one's human rights, one cannot at the same time be serving any more particular interest, since the particular is excluded by definition by the universality which is essential to the right being a *human* right

Ok, but what about the reality that humans are not abstract universals but concrete beings *with* a gender, *with* a class position, *with* a sexuality, *with* an ethnicity. Let's talk about this. The conceptual

sophistication of contemporary theories of human rights understands these points. It is just this conceptual sophistication which makes human rights the only viable basis for emancipatory political practice. Why? Because in acknowledging the rights of humans as humans to that which satisfies a fundamental interest, human rights necessarily cover the totality of what anyone requires to be a full and active member of society. Thus, if I face *special* exclusions, say, as a woman, then any comprehensive set of human rights will have to entitle me to all that I require in order to be a fully active woman member of the human species. As we can see, the stale old critique of rights that

they are *merely* negative, *merely* the egocentric rights of the powerful to exclude all others from access to the material foundations of their power, is today obsolete. If a right is an entitlement to that which I require to participate fully as a member of humanity, then rights are both positive and negative, and that necessarily.

Ok, but there is still another problem, and this one is real and not a function of dogmatic ideologies. The problem is motivation. We can sit here and discuss human rights all we like, and demonstrate their practical superiority to violent and insurrectionary measures, but the fact remains that in order to be efficacious,

people, whether ordinary citizens or governments, must be motivated to grant them where they are not yet institutionalised or respect them where they do have legal standing. This problem is particularly acute in zones of absolute poverty, totalitarian political oppression, or severe forms of cultural exclusion. Here, on the question of motivation, I think philosophy and political theory reaches its limits. Making a coherent case and making a *moving* case are distinct. Hence, if we are going to actually emancipate people by the extension and enforcement of human rights, then we need to solve the problem of motivation. As we are about to see, I believe that I have solved this problem.

Or, perhaps, to be more properly modest, I have discovered the first step in solving this problem.

Who do people in this society look up to and listen to? Let me be more direct. Who do *you* look up to and listen to? Celebrities, right? Of course, we all admire celebrities, maybe different celebrities, but everyone admires some celebrity. Hence – and this was my great insight – I concluded that if we are going to solve the problem of motivation we have to involve the people who have the social capital to make their voice heard. Fortunately, Granting Agency \$ saw the brilliance of the idea. Today – lucky you! –

we are going to see the first step be taken in real time.

In a moment we are going to watch four live web feeds of celebrities a,b,c, and d explaining four different fundamental human rights violations in countries who rank 184th, 185th, 186th, and 187th on the index of human rights-abusing nations. These web feeds are being broadcast not only to classrooms around the world, but more importantly on the websites of News Corporations ©, and ®, and ™ – and – and this is really novel- and the websites of alternative news collectives ≠, ≥, and ∞. This could not have been possible without the mediating power of celebrity. In fact, if the celebrities had not agreed to use

their voice then these countries would not have ever agreed to be part of the project. But because the country will now be associated with their spokesperson celebrity, their brand will improve. Win, win, win. Ok, I think we're ready to go.

The violence of small men came down, illuminated by the beam of the web-projector. At first, snickers, but then the recognition that this was a real boot-to-the-balls, truncheon-to-the-teeth attack. Country 186 exploded first, the iridescent smile of its celebrity perhaps compromised forever by a rifle butt to the mouth. The power of real time transmission! Humanity's indefatigable capacity to learn from example! Soon the hair

of the celebrity in country 184 was being brutally pulled from her scalp as she was dragged off to a waiting police van. Was that a shot? Indeed. Then the mechanical necessity of lead hitting flesh: a body on the ground. But it was not the body of country 185's celebrity, but of one of the school children who had gathered around him. But this enraged the crowd, who now blamed his presence for their fate, thus brutally sealing his own. Web-based learning synergies! Soon the erstwhile celebratory crowds in all the countries had begun to run amok, attacking everyone with the courage that only the essential anger forever being someone else's object can provoke. They struck at

anyone, the celebrities, their bodyguards, the army. But the result was the same as every other time unarmed anger confronted armed ruthlessness. Soon the dull concussions of tear gas canisters and stun grenades, then up an octave, to rubber bullets and then, the ruination of the virtual experiment, multiple fusillades of the real thing. In country 187 an army jeep appeared to drive deliberately into the crowd, while back in country 186 an exchange of shots had ended unfortunately for one of the bodyguards of the celebrity. Tears, blood, implacable animal wailing. The initial laughter became shock, became boredom. At 10 to 1, the class rose as one and went to lunch.

5. Fruits of Reflection

a) Philosophy

It takes time for light to travel from the object to your retina, be converted to electrochemical signals, and then processed by your brain. Knowledge of immediate reality is impossible. By the time you recognize that I am dead, I will already have died. Your grief arrives too late to console me.

b) Academia

Two minutes earlier he said that he has a Ph.D., he was pretty sure he could do housework. Now there was a gas leak and everything was fucked up.

c) Aging.

The flesh rounds outwardly. You become a character in your own stories.

d) Ego

In the distant overheard laughter of other people, one confronts one's own irrelevance.

e) Catholicism.

I said I was sorry. You forgave me. If I do the same again, why should you be upset?

f) Future

You are afraid because the fortune teller told you that something awful would happen. I could have saved you the thirty bucks.

g) Moralism

I know that you care about the world.

So do I. We're not like the others, we feel the burden of our success.

h) February

Some things must be borne in silence.

Complaining does not make it warmer.

i) Dawn

You arise each morning with

excitement and hope, but within twenty minutes it has become the same old shit.

j) Politics

If only words were deeds and

accomplished the aims of those who give

them voice. Who will be the first to give up

their own home to rectify the injustices they
decry?

k) Monument

One supposes the builders had
something in mind when they erected this
monstrosity, but it had become, like
everything else, merely a backdrop to the
tourists' photographs.

l) Contentment

To know that the whole world will die
with you; that you will never miss anything,
because nothing will ever happen again.

m) Sorrow

Regret for that which can absolutely
not be undone terrifies by opening the true
depths of isolation and loneliness.

n) Gardening

You know what flowers really are,
right? Do you not suspect yourself of a most
extraordinary perversion when you gaze into
their showy depths each April?

o) Retirement

Endings in life are necessary,
beginnings, not. All must learn to stand
aside.

p) Time

Given the terrifying brevity of life,
only the stupid can say that they are bored.

q) Solipsism

You doubted the existence of other
minds. Perhaps you even believed it, but the

blood running down your chin at least proves the reality of other fists.

r) Youth

Let's all do the same thing and call it fun! One never gets lost following the herd.

s) Death

Is there anything more absurd than wondering who will attend your funeral? But who can say that the thought has never crossed their mind?

t) Public Intellectuals

As the rocks began to fly, the friends stood off to one side to discuss where they should go for dinner. Sam, who had just returned from a sabbatical in France, was enlisted to choose the wine.

u) Forgiveness

Between your guilt and the other's
exculpating words lies an infinite distance
which only the other is strong enough to
cross.

v) Incommensurability

Camus wrote while standing. I must
sit.

w) Development

Joy! Even the most god-forsaken piss
hole now comes with a mall.

x) Neighbours

Everyone expressed shock after the
arrest. To a person they all said he was a
great guy.

y) Freedom

Son, people died so that you can cross
the street wherever the fuck you want!

Remember that!

z) Fear

One day, the ideas that have
tormented you for so long, will stop.

6. Pullulation

Awakening now, joyous pain, pressing
outwards. Stretching, unfolding, a paradox: I
grow upwards and downwards, breathe your
poison and produce your air. My space and
time are for you of unimaginable extent. I
live, I grow. I need nothing from you but
forebearance. I extend, I deepen, I abide.
Your noisy dramas unfold around me,
irrelevant. I've been here before your
grandparents and I will outlive your children.
You decay, I extend.

You look me as if I were inert,
unthinking and unseeing. But what would
you have me think or see? Yourself, of

course. But do you think you are that interesting or beautiful that I feel loss at taking no notice of you? Do you think your petty plans are of interest to me? I am fed *gratis* by sun and rain. I rest content in my place, unneedful, unenvious, unjealous. I respire. I branch. I am.

I neither cause nor wish harm.

Your philosophers have classified me as closer to rocks than angels. Consequently, you pity cows and eat my cousins. But it is you and they who lack imagination. You feel smug because *I can't think*. Perhaps, but it is you who cannot listen. Did you think my rustles are without sense? Perhaps I just choose not to speak to *you*. Could you believe

that my silence is

my answer to your inanities?

Some amongst you claim to desire roots. So grow them. I'll share the soil, there's plenty. But your thoughts get in the way. One moment you're content, the next moment your fingers begin to drum the table, the next moment you start to worry, the next moment you stand, then start to pace, then you're in the car, back to the office, click-clacking at your keyboard, then home to bed. Peace. But not lasting. Your exalted mind starts to think again. The economy, the environment, jobs, bills, repairs, groceries, family, lovers, friends, enemies, distant strangers, threats, danger, regrets, hopes,

fears, melancholy, dread, boredom,
excitement, anger, pity, indifference and
worrying that you are indifferent. Restless
sleep and then repeat. The endless boredom
of your activity.

7. Bus Ride

Some things are unavoidable, like renewing your licence or health card every five years. Once, I was at the Ministry office waiting my turn to renew my health card when a woman, a crack addict I would guess (skinny, jittery, explosive, as it turned out) took out her cell phone and called her father. At first I couldn't hear the conversation, but as it progressed she got more and more agitated. Finally she began bellowing into the phone "Fuck off! I didn't fuck up your fuckin' computer! I don't know who the fuck fucked it up!" Her diatribe was interrupted by the clerk calling her number. She closed

the phone and, smiling, went up to the wicket. She had her photo taken, stepped back, and then a thought struck her.

Apparently, she didn't like the way her hair was hanging in the first photo. She went back to the wicket and asked politely if she could have a do over. I don't think the clerk had ever faced such a request. After a quick discussion, she took another picture. You can't make this shit up.

Events like these are not unusual here. I am sure they happen elsewhere too, but I have never encountered anywhere near the concentration of insane/inane outbursts and, what is more,

there being tolerated and even acquiesced to anywhere else I have ever lived or even visited for a significant period of time.

Social relations mirror the decaying material infrastructure, a decay that no one seems overly perturbed by as they sit night after night after night after night after night on their front porches with their stupid friends drinking beer and this in all different sorts of neighbourhoods until you are driven to think that there must be something congenitally wrong with these people. And I mean every night.

Visitors generally miss this reality because if they are here, they are either ensconced in the Casino or with friends,

who – probably because they have moved from elsewhere and want to spare themselves embarrassing questions like, ‘how on earth could you live here’ – carefully supervise the visit so as to minimise contact with the locals (or at least the real locals; those who have lived elsewhere or have acquired some degree of cultivation through travel, education, etc. are ok).

But those who have moved here from elsewhere, and especially larger cities, cannot avoid being struck by the indifference to decay and the unselfconscious ejaculations of utter idiocy.

The first crosstown bus trip of such a person confronts them squarely with

the truth that in large part this place is a real shithole. Misery mass transit. On every block boarded up and collapsing buildings, or struggling restaurants in which you never see anyone eating, so they too will soon be boarded up. Garbage blows up and down the street like tumbleweeds. People never follow the calendar and so leave their garbage sitting beside the road for days on end to be picked over by vermin of all sorts (we even have opossums here), and then left to blow about in the thunderstorms that can strike in an instant.

However, the true depths of despair are reached only when confronted with the conversations of your fellow passengers.

The poor (working or unemployed) sit (exhausted or defeated) talking (loudly or quietly) in various states of dishevelment. Whatever the volume they have no internal censor. They will talk about anything – crimes they have committed or want to commit or their friends have committed, how wasted they were last night, who they have fucked or want to fuck or are going to fuck, what a cocksucker a, b, or c is, who has gotten clean and who has become addicted, who is sick and who has died.

But the saddest thing to hear is their hopes. You hear people talking about buying homes,

buying cars, buying boats, finding a solid relationship, you know, with someone who actually cares about them, getting a better job, saving money, leaving for a better city.

Banal, but still sad, because just by looking at them, and having a little knowledge about this city, and a little knowledge of how this world really works, you *know* (not opine or believe or suspect), but *know* that not a single one of these hopes will ever be realized.

If you ride the bus tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that, or on the same day next year, or on the tenth anniversary of your first ride, you will find the same people, or people just like them, hear the same hopes,

and feel sad again, because you *know* (not
opine, or believe, or suspect), but *know*, that
not a single one of these hopes will ever be
realized.

8. Questionnaire (After Max Frisch)

1. Does it bother you that your loved ones will get on with their lives relatively soon after your death?

2. Were it possible, would you choose immortality?

3. If you could live forever, how would you stave off unending boredom?

4. Is God just a name for unending boredom?

5. If it is true that the universe will end in

the heat death, is there any point to your mundane concerns and routines?

6. Must we ignore ultimate realities in order to care? And is it a sin not to care, in light of a negative answer to 5?

7. If we assume that consciousness ceases with death, and thus also consciousness of time, and therefore that once you are dead the length of your life will be a matter of indifference, is it irrational to concern yourself with health and longevity?

8. Is going to the gym a sign of heroic refusal of your mortality?

9. Is not going to the gym a sign of heroic acceptance of your mortality?

10. Have you ever had a thought that you

would under no circumstances

communicate to another? Why not, in

light of a negative answer to 5?

11. Are shame and embarrassment

incompatible with a materialist ontology?

Why not?

12. Do you think about how others view

you? Why?

13. Do you envy the young?

14. Do you feel that, at bottom, all exercise

of intelligence is really a matter of self-

justification?

15. If freedom is acceptance of necessity, is

truth acceptance of your own lies?

16. Is it reasonable to die for the truth? Is

it unreasonable to refuse to die for the truth? If death is inevitable in any case, is there a meaningful difference between these choices?

17. What would it say about you if you answered these questions dishonestly?

18. At what point would you feel at ease disclosing to the world that you answered these questions dishonestly?

19. Is consistency between principle and practice a sign of an impoverished imagination?

20. What do you fear more, your own death or the loneliness of outliving your loved ones and friends?

9. On the Possibility of Hating Everything

“Fucking toaster, piece of shit never works every goddamn morning burnt toast and then the coffee boils over on the stove because I’m trying to fork out the bread and the stove is filthy and I know I’m going to hear about that for the rest of the morning and then that’s on my mind so how can I work with those dog-fuckers who know that I can’t stand unfinished work so they leave everything till the last minute for me to do in that cramped office with suffocating heat in the summer and cold in the winter and damp in the spring and drafts in the fall stuck in the middle of a god forsaken parking lot on this

dreary stretch of road surrounded by soulless strip malls and fast food joints in this irrelevant city that no one cares about and never visits and that includes my family and so-called old friends who would never get off their asses to come down here but expect me to sustain the connection and me to incessantly inconvenience myself to attend their weddings that are going to end in divorce anyway and their birthdays that mean nothing and to buy them gifts that they don't need and to tell them how young they look even though it is clear and thermodynamically necessary that they look older as they get older and one day I suppose their funerals too even though it cannot

possibly make any difference to the dead that their over lives be celebrated because either they are dead and therefore aren't aware you came to their funeral and wasted money on flowers or donating to the cure of incurable diseases or you're not dead there is eternal life and so presumably you have transcended the vanity that always secretly drove you and which I always secretly abhorred but even worse I could never stand the fact that I could never tell anyone what I really thought because they would be offended even though assuredly they thought the same things because actually they are obvious but instead of speaking what we all know we are thinking we bullshit each other with these

transparent pleasantries and tell the same
fucking stories over and over again which
only the alcohol makes bearable but then
even that becomes old and stale and nothing
more than a hangover that gets worse with
each passing year as does the feeling of being
trapped in
car/house/relationship/neighbourhood/
career but the alternative is a different
car/house/relationship/neighbourhood/
career which is not a real change so you could
of course die but perhaps that is even worse
so you indulge in wild imaginings about
other planets and whether you would go if
the aliens offered to take you but do they not
have

cars/houses/relationships/neighbourhoods/
careers and if not what the fuck are they
doing here if not trying to escape the same
bullshit on their planet and unfortunately
they didn't land somewhere more interesting
but if everything in the universe is made of
the same shit then what the hell were they
expecting and surely they knew this when
they left because they can cross interstellar
space but still what a shock it must be to them
to find their fears confirmed that it's the same
nonsense everywhere they look and they've
looked practically everywhere so there's not
even any point to going with them even if
they asked which they probably won't
because we must appear as ugly to them as

warthogs to us in fact we probably would be
warthogs to them the main course at a
barbeque if they have them and why
shouldn't they since they must eat and
breathe the same as us and probably can't
stand anymore than I can trying to think up
new things for dinner on a limited budget
and limited culinary talents and you can't eat
out every night and even if you could
eventually you would exhaust the
possibilities especially in a small city and
even if you could eat in a different city every
night you would eventually exhaust the
options and thus begin to repeat yourself just
as you do every morning when you shave
and trim the same beard you have had for

two decades now which is an incredibly long time to look the same way probably a quarter of your life but if you change perhaps people won't like you anymore and that would be the worst thing of all.

10. Ant Colony

As he rose from bed the webcam snapped his picture. "Oh man, that's an awesome shot," he said to himself. "I've got to upload this to my wall."

9:56 am. Peter has posted a picture of himself getting out of bed.

Peter pissed with anticipation at the responses he would find when he got back to his laptop.

9:57. **Trey:**

Awesome shot dude!

9:58. **Apryll**

Aww, too bad I wasn't there waking up with you! LOL! It's Apryll. Check my wall.

10:00 am. **Jenna**

Nice pillows. Where'd you get them?

10:01 am. You have friend request from Melannie

10:02 am: **Trey**

Dude, where were you last night? You should've seen the hotties at this bar. Check my wall, I've got some great pics.

10:07 am. Peter has posted a picture of himself making coffee.

10:09 am. **Apryll**

That doesn't look like Fair Trade Coffee! Just kidding. Who gives a shit.

10:12 am. **Melannie**

Hey! You're hot. You look mysterious! Why don't you add me as a friend. I'm in Indonesia right now but I'd love to get to know you better!

10:25 am: Cerrah has poked Peter.

10:35 am: **Peter**

Hey Cerrah. Thanks for poking me. I haven't heard from you since yesterday. It's been awhile. What's up? Did you see my latest pictures?

10:36 am: **Cerrah**

Oh Yeah! Sweet.

10:47 am: **Peter**

Sweet. We need to hook up soon.

10:48 am: **Apryll**

It's Apryll. What do you mean, "hook up? I thought you were into me. Bastard!

10:52 am: Peter has posted a photo of himself changing shirts.

11:01 am: **Jenna**

Boy, you are haaaard. Have you been working out. Yum, yum, yum. Check my wall for some hot hot hot beach pics. I was just in Cancun, Sweet! See ya!

11:05 am: **Trey**

You still didn't tell me where you were last night. Didn't you check your site before you went out?

11:09 am: **Trey**

Really, dude, where were you. I thought you were supposed to come out.

11:11 am. **Tam**

Hey Peter its Tam. I like your shirt.

Wherdya get it. I really have to talk to Sam about his clothes. Sam, check out Peter's new shirt.

11:13 am: **Sam**

Nice shirt, fag!. Just kiddin.

11:18 am: **Eric**

Peter, check out my wall. We were at a party last night and I caught Megan pissing! Can't see much, but I gotter. Ya baby!

11:22 am: **Apryll**

Really, Peter, what did you mean by 'hook up.' You know I've got your pass word, so tell me. I'm not kidding.

11:33 am: Peter has posted a photo of himself opening a can of soup.

11:34 am. **Eric**

Do you know how much salt is in that soup. It's a death sentence bro. I'm out.

11:43. **Melannie**

How was that soup? Bet it was hot!
LOL.

11:49 am: **Trey**

Dude, what are you up to tonight?
Jimmy's having a party.

11:52 am: **Stuart**

Ya Dude, Jimmy's having a party.
What are you up to?

11:57: **Owen**

Did ya hear that Jimmy's having a party. Arrrgghh. Fuck. Let's PARTY!!!

11:59. **Apryll**

That slut Cerrah better not be there.

12:03 pm. Alyssa has thrown a sheep at Peter.

12:05 pm: Peter has poked Alyssa.

Hey Alyssa. Did ya see the photo of me changing my shirt.

12:07 pm: **Alyssa**

I wish you had been changing your pants. LOL.

12:09 pm: **Apryll**

Who the fuck is Alyssa? You're an asshole Peter.

12:22 pm: Peter just did his cardio.

12:26 pm: **Ellen**

What's your workout? Let's talk.

12:29 pm: Peter is going to take a shower.

12:30 pm: **Cerrah**

Hey sweetie, why not post some pictures of that sweet ass of yours.

12:32 pm: **Trey**

Do it bro.

12:36 pm: Peter has posted a picture of his ass.

12:39 pm: **Cerrah**

What the hell? I can't see the pics. Did they block it? Send it to my cell.

12:41 pm: Alyssa is painting her toenails.

12: 58 pm: Alyssa has finished
painting her toenails.

1:06 pm: **Sam**

Hey everyone. It's Sam. Should I skip
work tonight and go to Jimmy's party?

1:08 pm: **Tam**

Only if you buy a new shirt! Kidding!
Love ya! Tam. Sam, can you bring me a tea?

1:15 pm: Kevin has poked Peter.

1:17 pm: **Peter**

Ok everyone, I've got a problem.
Should I ditch Apryll for Cerrah.

1:22 pm: **Apryll**

Peter, we're done ASSHOLE. Hey
Sam, are you going to skip work and go to
Jimmy's party?

1:29 pm: **Caleb**

Hey, its Caleb. I just got in from walking the dog. Should I really collect his shit in a bag after he takes a dump in the park?

1:33 pm. **Jenna**

That's disgusting! How could you even think about grabbing a big dog turd.

1:36 pm: **Caleb**

But you have to, I don't want to walk in dog shit every time I leave the house.

1:38 pm: **Kevin**

No way man, I would never pick up dog shit.

1:44 pm. Peter has stood up to stretch his back.

1:49 pm. Cerrah has poked Peter.

1:50 pm: Apryll has poked Peter.

1:57 pm: **Caleb**

I still haven't got a clear answer to my question. Like I know it's disgusting, but isn't it irresponsible not to bag it? Hey, I've got another question. What do you guys think about argyle socks. Are they only for old dudes or what? Anyone want to go sock shopping with me? I need some new socks for Jimmy's party.

1:59 pm: **Peter**

It's hot today man, why don't you just wear sandals.

2:02 pm: **Caleb**

Good idea!

2:05 pm: Sam has brought Tam a tea.

2:07 pm: **Tam**

Sam, you didn't put enough milk in it.

2:09 pm: **Caleb**

Hey everyone, its Caleb again. Should I get rid of my dog?

2:11 pm: **Jenna**

I love that dog. He's so cute. And I think argyle socks are cool.

2:15 pm: **Caleb**

Now I'm confused.

2:23 pm: **Cerrah**

Hey, its Cerrah here. What's better, Tequila or Vodka? I can't decide what to bring to Jimmy's party. You guys are all going, right?

2:27 pm: Peter has gone to look through his sock drawer.

2:32 pm: **Jimmy**

Dude, you better not show up in argyle socks. It's Jimmy, I just wanted to remind everyone of my party tonight. And tequila is definitely better.

2:39 pm. **Jimmy**

Don't forget the party tonight – Jimmy.

2:45 pm: Peter has a friend request from Stanley.

2:47 pm: **Peter**

Hey everyone I've got a question. I just got a friend request from some guy. Is that weird? What do you think?

2:50 pm: **Trey**

What's weird about that? I'm a guy,
you have lots of guy friends.

2:53 pm: **Peter**

But I don't know this guy. Like we've
all known each other forever. But why would
a strange guy want to be my friend?

2:55 pm: **Caleb**

I think I might get rid of the dog and
get a bird. What's everyone think?

2:58 pm: **Kevin**

But then you'll have to clean the bird
cage.

3:01 pm. **Apyll**

Bird's are strange. They scare me.

3:03 pm: Tam has posted a picture of
Sam bringing her a tea.

3:07 pm: **Kevin**

How often does everyone vacuum?

3:09 pm: **Trey**

What's the point of vacuuming. It just gets dusty again anyway. That's about as useful as making your bed.

3:10 pm: **Cerrah**

I can't stand it if my bed is unmade.

3:11 pm: **Peter**

I've decided I'm going to wear socks to the party. I'll post a few different pictures so you guys can help me decide.

3:15 pm: Peter has posted six pictures of himself trying on socks.

3:17 pm: **Apryll**

Its Apryll. Why do we always wear matched socks? Like where did that tradition come from? Sometimes you see people with different coloured socks, and that's cool, I guess, but it looks kinda strange too.

3:19 pm: **Kevin**

Hey dude, aren't you important! How come you have so many different kinds of socks? What's wrong with tube socks?

3:26 pm: **Caleb**

Hey guys, I'm sending you all a link to the coolest video. It's of some guy with a chinchilla crawling on his head. That is the most amazing little animal. Fuck the dog and the bird, I'm getting a chinchilla. Anyone

know where I can get one?

3:36 pm: **Melannie**

That thing is sooo cute!

3:38 pm. **Stuart**

Are you kidding? It's just a rat.

3:39 pm: **Jenna**

Rat's have rights too!

3:40 pm: **Cerrah**

I think you should go with the red socks, Peter. That way I can find you in a crowd.

3: 43 pm. **Jimmy**

And it's going to be crowded kids.

This is going to be the party of the century.

3:47 pm. **Melannie**

I think that you have to go to a big pet

store, probably in the city, to find a chinchilla.

3:50 pm. **Caleb**

Where do they live, like naturally?

3:52 pm: **Jenna**

South America I think.

3:56 pm: **Caleb**

Could I order one over the web and
like have them ship it here?

3:59 pm: **Peter**

Why not?

4:03 pm: **Melannie**

Peter its Melannie. How come you
haven't responded to my friend request?

4:04 pm: Peter has added Mellanie as a
friend.

4:06 pm. **Caleb**

Hey Melannie! Cool name spelling.
Check out my wall. Do you think I should
wear red socks too? Do they wear socks in
Indonesia? Where is that anyway? In South
America?

4:10 pm: **Kevin**

I think Indonesia's part of China.

4:12 pm. **Peter**

Why doesn't someone google it?

4:14 pm: **Cerrah**

Google what?

4:18 pm: **Apryll**

I think Indonesia is a city, in the mid-
west of the States or something. Where the
hell are you Melannie? Why don't you come
to Jimmy's party.

4:20 pm: **Penny**

Is this Peter Sampson from Northville?

This is Penny, I think we went to grade school together. Isn't it amazing that I've found you? So, how have you been what have you been up to?

4:23 pm. Caleb has started a Chinchilla lovers group. Come and share your chinchilla related stories and pics.

4:26 pm: **Caleb**

Hey guys, how come you haven't joined my group yet?

4:29 pm: **Jenna**

OMG! You have to see this picture someone just posted on Caleb's chinchilla group. Wait. I'll send everyone the link.

4:36 pm: **Peter**

Hey Penny, I am from Northville, but I don't remember you. Or maybe I do. Add me as a friend and I'll check out your pics and see if I remember. I'm good, not up to much, the usual, you know.

4:41 pm: **Phil**

Hi Peter, this is Phil from Northville. Did someone named Penny just contact you?

4:43 pm. Peter is going to make another coffee.

4:45 pm. **Trey**

How many cups of coffee do you guys drink everyday? Hang on, I'm going to put a survey together. I think I might be drinking too much coffee. You guys have to help me

out.

4:58 pm: Trey has created a coffee survey. When you take it, add a pic of yourself with your favourite coffee mug.

5:03 pm: **Melannie**

If you guys could be clouds, what kind of cloud would you be?

5:04 pm: **Peter**

Are there different kinds of clouds?

5:07 pm: **Melannie**

Of course. There's fluffy clouds, dark clouds, wispy clouds, you know. Google cloud types and you'll see. Then get back to me. I'm going to tell everyone what their secret hopes are based on what kind of cloud they want to be.

5:12 pm: Penny has just posted a picture of Peter in Grade Two on her wall.

5:17 pm. **Alyssa**

Peter, you were sooo cute in Grade Two.

5:21 pm. **Alyssa**

Hey! Let's all post pictures of ourselves when we were in Grade Two. Check my blog. I've posted my old diary from junior high. OMG its sooo embarrassing.

5:26 pm. **Phil**

Hey Peter, it's Phil again. I just saw your picture on Penny's wall. Did you used to hang out in that park on Birch Street. I think I beat the shit of you once in there.

5:37 pm. **Trey**

Any of the chicks out there ever get into a scrap? Tell me about it!

5:40 pm. **Alyssa**

Trey, you are a real ASSHOLE.

5:43 pm **Peter**

Hey guys, I'm getting hungry. What do you think I should eat?

5:46 pm **Caleb**

Why bother eating. If you stay hungry, you'll get drunker at Jimmies.

5:51 pm. **Caleb**

I can't wait to get pics of everyone wasted at Jimmies tonight. You'll have to check my wall tomorrow. It's gonna be awesome.

5:53 pm. **Trey**

How come no one's responded to my coffee survey yet?

5:57 pm. **Melannie**

Because its stupid. I already have 26 responses to my cloud survey.

6:02 pm. **Peter**

Check this link out dudes. Its a cloud that looks like Jesus.

6:04 pm. Peter is thinking of ordering a pizza.

6:09 pm. **Melannie**

Hi everyone. Its Melannie again. I forgot to say where Indonesia is. I think you're mixing up Indonesia and Indiana. Thats so funny, because I'm originally from

Indiana. Indonesia is a country, in Southeast Asia.

6:12 pm: **Apryll**

If you ordered a pizza in Indonesia, what would you get on it.

6:14 pm **Melannie**

Its just like home, you get the same stuff on it. Except the meat has to be cooked some sort of certain way or something.

6:16 pm. **Jenna**

Hey Alyssa I was just reading your blog. You must be sooo embarrassed putting that stuff up there. How's Ricky LOL. OMG I think I know where MY diary from junior high is. I'm gonna post it too. Why don't we all do that? Then we'll have no secrets from

each other.

6:18 pm **Alyssa**

I think friendship is like really about having no secrets from each other.

6:21 pm. **Melannie**

That's what so great about this site. Like we can share everything about ourselves, even deep stuff, you know, like my cloud survey.

6:26: **Jenna**

You know, that's so true. In psychology class yesterday we were studying this, and the professor (OMG he's so hot) actually said that our generation is the most open and honest ever. Like I feel I can tell you guys anything and, you know, I won't be

judged, like everyone's so supportive here.

6:32 pm. **Trey**

Hey Jenna, can I get your notes. I slept in and missed that lecture.

6:37 pm. **Peter**

Man, that reminds me I have to get that text book.

6:42 pm. **Caleb**

Hey. I just bought a chinchilla on-line. I'm posting the link right now. What should I call him?

6:45 pm. **Cerrah**

He's soooo cute!!!

6:48 pm **Tam**

Awww, he is the cutest thing I've ever seen.

6:51 pm. **Cerrah**

Why don't you start a page for him?

Then he can talk to the other chinchilla's like your dog does on the dog pages.

6:53 pm. **Caleb**

Hey, that's a great idea. I bet no one has thought of chinchilla pages yet.

6:57 pm. **Peter**

Dude, check out this link. Its for chinchilla pages.

6:59 pm. **Caleb**

I gotta sign him up. I'll be back in a bit.

7:08 pm. **Melannie**

Someone else has just taken my cloud survey!

7:14 pm. Peter has just gone to the store to buy smokes.

7:17 pm. **Tam**

Hey everybody. Sam and I are just getting dressed for the party. We're gonna post photos of what we're wearing. Let's all do that. Post them on your walls.

7:24 pm. Peter is back from buying smokes.

7:26 pm. Peter has posted a picture of himself buying smokes.

7:29 pm. Alyssa has posted a picture of her outfit.

7:31 pm. Sam and Tam have posted a picture of their outfits.

7:36 pm. **Caleb**

My chinchilla page is up. Check it out.

7:38 pm. **Kevin**

Hey everyone. I've just posted a questionnaire about whether there are too many questionnaires on line. Check it out. Here's the link.

7:42 pm: **Jenna**

Hey Sam and Tam. I love your outfits. I'm gonna take the questionnaire now. I'll talk to you guys in a minute.

7:47 pm: **Caleb**

Holy shit! My chinchilla already has 23 friend requests. And everyone who has a chinchilla is a chick! I'll see everyone at the party. I've gotta answer these friend

requests.

7:53. **Jenna**

I just answered your questionnaire. I don't think there are too many questionnaires. Maybe I'll create one. Hey everyone, what should I create a questionnaire about?

7:56 pm. **Peter**

I still don't know about socks. Why don't you create a questionnaire about whether argyle socks are still cool?

8:00 pm. **Apryll**

I don't know about socks, but I like argyle sweaters

8:03 pm. **Peter**

For guys?

8:05 pm. **Jenna**

This is a really hard question. I think I will set up a questionnaire. But there's so many questions. Should I ask about socks, socks and sweaters, or just argyle in general.

8:08 pm: **Peter**

Don't make it too confusing. Just ask about argyle.

8:10 pm: **Jenna**

Just like that, or for guys and girls separately?

8:12 pm: **Cerrah**

OMG I just read Alyssa's diary from junior high!! Guess who she had a crush on in Grade Seven.

8:15 pm: **Peter**

I don't know. Who

8:18: **Apryll**

Should I quit school and go travelling.

8:21: Peter has responded to the cloud survey. He thinks he's a storm cloud.

8:23 **Melannie**

According to this cloud blog I'm reading 18% of people think they are storm clouds, and 56 % of people who think they are storm clouds secretly hope that others don't think they really think they are fluffy clouds, and 96% percent of that 56% are men. What do you guys think that means?

8:26: **Caleb**

I think it means you should join my

chinchilla club, 'cause 100 % of people with chinchillas are unbelievably hot women.

8:28: **Kevin**

You know you can ranch those buggers and make money off 'em.

8:31: **Caleb**

How? Can you milk them.

8:33: **Kevin**

Milk em? What do you mean man, you make coats out of them.

8:36: **Cerrah**

OMG! How could you kill something so cute. Fur is disgusting. Should I wear my leather boots tonight, or my suede boots?

8:39: **Stuart**

Hey Trey. Could you stop at the liquor store and get me three bottles of malt liquor. It's on your way right?

8:47: **Trey**

Why do I always have to go to the liquor store?

8:51: **Cerrah**

My boots, people, my boots. What boots should I wear? Hey Trey, if you're going to the liquor store could you get me a bottle of vodka?

8:55: **Melannie**

Man, I wish I was going to that party. Indonesia is soooo boring.

8:59: **Peter**

What are you doing there then.

9:03. **Melannie**

I don't know, I thought it would be cool so I just kinda went.

9:04: **Cerrah**

That's cool, but I can see how it would be boring.

9:07: **Melannie**

Tell me about it. I don't know what I'd do without my friends.

9:09: **Apryll**

Don't you have any friends in Indonesia?

9:11: **Melannie**

Ya, like lots of people are on-line here,
but they don't use English all the time, so its
hard to connect to people.

9:13: **Jimmy**

Tough, man, who cares. Its time to
party. Are you guys coming or what?

9:23: **Tam**

We can't go yet, not everyone has
posted pics of their outfits.

9: 25: **Cerrah**

I'm putting mine up

9:27: **Jenna**

I'm putting mine up ...

And so on.

11. Shards

An opening, a glimpse? Maybe. For me, there was/is no ordering to what follows. All I can tell you is that the idea came to me while I was reading an interview with Betty Goodwin, and she was talking about Joseph Beuys' influence on her.

"They do not think we are human beings." James Kelman, *Translated Accounts*.

"Try again. Fail Again. Fail Better."
Samuel Beckett, "Worstward Ho," *Nohow On*.

"My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;" Shakespeare, Sonnet 130.

You are of course free to think that there is some order, or to impose one. I

assume there will be differences of opinion between those who know me and those who do not know me. What those differences might be, I am not in a position to say.

“It was to tell you this that I asked you to come, because hatred must not dwell with you.” Ousmane Sembene, *God's Bits of Wood*.

“I say it is the part of a wise man to refresh and recreate himself with moderate and pleasant food and drink.” Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*.

If all that you come to know of me lies in the arrangement of these quotations, what would you know? The usefulness or otherwise of biography lies in an answer to this question.

“So to peaceful Nature, though it
grieved him,/ on he went to do the
unallowed.” Rainer Maria Rilke, “The
Raising of Lazarus.”

“De vieilles au miroir et d’enfants
toutes nues,/ pour tenter les demons ajustant
bien leurs bas.” Charles Baudillaire, “Les
Phares.”

“And the history of this, their
expropriation, is written in the annals of
mankind in letters of blood and fire.” Karl
Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*.

“They would inevitably grow to love
the earth and life as they gradually became
aware of their own transitory and finite
nature ...” Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *A Raw Youth*.

And now, you who do know me. Do you know me better? Or is it just repetition for you? For if you really know me, you have probably heard me refer to many of these quotations already.

“Prudence is a rich, ugly old maid courted by Incapacity,/ He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence.” William Blake, “Proverbs of Hell.”

“What if in reality my whole life has been wrong?” Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*.

“What counts is the most living, not the best.” Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

To speak for myself, these quotations

are like found objects, their persistence in memory perhaps as accidental as finding an old machine part on the street that, for whatever reason, one finds beautiful.

“... this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence.”

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

“The Form of freedom is not merely self-determination or self-realization, but the determination of goals which enhance, protect, and unite life on earth.” Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*.

“We can never ripen to reason except

through our *own* efforts, which we can only make if we are free.” Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*.

Why did I remember these of all the possible other parts of other books, poems, arguments that I could have remembered? Did they conform to an already set personality, or did they produce it?

“She’s sorting out/our library,/her book,/my book,/and now and again,/we exchange a touch,/for old times.” Milton Acorn, “Parting,” *I’ve Tasted My Blood*.

“You can’t eat prayers. How do you think we’re going to live? Did you ever stop to figure that out?” Morley Callaghan, *Such is My Beloved*.

If you came into this room, and found me slouched, dead, over the computer, and I had erased all the other files (please don't force me to go into all the contingencies, that would be endless) would you find this one worth preserving? Or, for the sake of the others' who do not yet (and now never will) know me, would you erase it?

"We come from the dark, and we go into the dark again, and in between lies the experiences of our lives." Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*.

"The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the limits of laws prescribed by us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own

free will, in whose hand We have placed thee,
shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy
nature." Giovanni Pico della Mirandola,
"Oration on the Dignity of Man."

"... an animal to produce an animal, a
plant a plant, in order that they may take part
in the everlasting and divine, in so far as they
can, for all desire that, and for the sake of that
they do whatever they do in accordance with
nature." Aristotle, *On the Soul*.

"Woe to men who add house to house,
who join one field to another, 'till there is
room for none but them in all the land." The
Book of Isaiah.

"Take care that when you leave this
world, that you were not only good, but are

leaving a good world.” Bertolt Brecht, *St.*

Joan of the Stockyards.

Perhaps you would erase the file in the hope of sparing me some embarrassment?

Do you think that the dead care about what the living think of them? Or maybe you fear for yourself, for if what I have written is an embarrassment to me, and you knew me and perhaps called me a friend, you perceive it as an embarrassment to yourself?

“There are infinite things upon the earth; any one of them can be compared to any other.” Jorge Luis Borges, “Averroes’ Search.”

“Think of the multitudes I buried! Yet there is always fresh blood in circulation.”

Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust*, Vol. 1.

Do I contradict Myself?/ Very well
then, I contradict myself./ (I am large, I
contain multitudes). Walt Whitman, "Song of
Myself," *Leaves of Grass*.

Perhaps you found this list
uninteresting, unworthy of what you thought
of me? It warms me, to imagine that you
care enough to worry that this final thing that
I have written, does not measure up. Perhaps
you think I should have stuck with
philosophy. Perhaps you would be right.

12. Potatoes Are Something Baby, but
They're Not Everything.

His carotid artery began to swell.

“Why are you forever making excuses for these people? I’m telling you, there is no way this is the Autumn Potato from Culinary Region 6. There is just no way. Those potatoes have thin purple veins running through their horizontal plane and they taste earthy- don’t fucking say it, NOT like a truffle but like a proper, well-cultivated and cared for potato.”

“The wisdom of in-flight magazines again. And I, trapped, having to listening again.”

“And did you hear how that asshole pronounced the wine. Did you *hear* that? How can I be expected to pay that price for an exquisite wine when the server can’t even pronounce the name? What is going on here? People used to make a profession of serving, now every restaurant is staffed by smiling young imbeciles who’ve never eaten anything besides peanut butter and potato chips. This is appalling, just appalling.”

“The same indulgent women again, never having eaten enough shit. ”

“Look at that stupid asshole over there, daydreaming about the bartender when he should be at home learning what the goddamn menu means. You watch, the longer we stay here the more he’s going to start to hover around “How is everything sir, would you like anything else.” “If I want something else I’ll fucking well call him over. He’s a goddamn *waiter*, doesn’t he know what that means. It means he *waits* on me-- literally, wait over there and when I need you I’ll call you and then you better move your arse and you better goddamn well know what I’m asking you about and how to pronounce the fucking wine.”

“The real mystery is that this does not destroy me, that the ideas return with the time and space to follow them. Where are they when I am not present? How is it that they await me and forgive me these interruptions. One must let them be in order to find them.”

“Hey, get over here. The problem, though, is not these twits but that everyone and their goddamn uncle is a chef now. They actually have courses in community college on how to be a chef. A Chef! It’s an art-form people, wake up. You can’t learn to create in community college. If you want to be a welder go to community college. If you want to be a chef you work your ass off in a kitchen

under someone who worked his ass – what, don't even fucking suggest that, you know goddamn well the greatest chefs are all men, you've said so yourself so don't give me any of that feminist horseshit now – anyway, who gives a shit. What was I saying? Right, you work your ass off, you do what you're told... See, no one knows how to do what they're told anymore. Everyone knows everything and no one corrects anyone else. I'm not putting up with this shit any longer, these fucking potatoes are going back and that useless sonofabitch is going get me what I ordered if he has to fly over there and bring those sublime tubers back to me himself.

“Angry, miserable little man, trivial *gourmand*. Only patience can liberate.”

“Excuse me. Can you get over here? And don’t give that ‘please don’t make a scene look. The scene, the obscene, really, is that they tried to trick me with this shit. Where the fuck did they get these things anyway, the goddamn grocery store? “Market price!” Market price my ass, who the fuck went to any market, they got these thing from the goddamn supermarket. Can you believe this nonsense, market price. Who the fuck went to the market? That little asshole? He can’t even read. The chef? He probably can’t read either. He sure as hell can’t cook.

“Patience to read and tarry with the thought and let it lead. Force is without effect. One day the sought after connection appears. One must wait.”

“How’s your risotto? It looks like glue for Christ sake. Why did you order risotto anyway, it’s hot as hell outside. In fact, why is risotto even on the menu? No one pays attention to anything. You don’t serve risotto on a day like this. Does the chef even bother to *think* about the interplay between seasons and his menu? I knew this place was going to be awful, I knew it. You can’t find a restaurant reading trendy newspapers. What the hell do those people know about food? They can’t afford a decent meal on their

wages, and they're going to tell me what to eat? I should never have agreed to come here.

"If it appeared now, could I just leave?"

"Come here you little prick. "What are these?"

"They are potatoes, sir."

"Yes, they're potatoes, but your menu clearly states that they are supposed to be Autumn Potatoes from Culinary Region Six. Have you been to Culinary Region Six or had an Autumn Potato?"

"No, I have not sir, but the chef assures me..."

“You have not, so why are you standing there telling me that these are what they clearly are not. *I* have been to Culinary Region Six and *I* have had the Autumn Potatoes from one of its finest restaurants, and I don’t care what the chef says, these are not Autumn Potatoes, and I am not eating them, and certainly not paying for them. Take them away.

“So much energy invested in so little. The effort these people put into producing shit and cancer.”

13. Phase Six Rationality

Robert was most pleased when he saw above the entrance to the office the banner he had been demanding. In bold red letters between two biohazard symbols it read: Don't Be A Transmission Vector. He was even more pleased when he saw that the disinfectant stations he had been demanding had been installed at 2 meter intervals in every corridor. But his pleasure turned to elation when he went into the washroom and saw the Sign. Beneath a stark warning: "Most people wash their hands for five seconds. Another fifteen seconds could save

their lives.” were six efficiently illustrated panels. They sequentially explained and graphically illustrated proper handwashing hygiene. In order to obviate all ambiguity it included directional arrows so that even the illiterate could follow the appropriate steps. “Finally,” Robert thought to himself, “people are starting to take this pandemic seriously.”

After relieving himself Robert stood at the sink and dutifully followed the instructions. “One thousand one, one thousand two...” he timed his technique. Precisely twenty seconds later he turned off the faucet and took a paper towel from the rack. He carefully dried his wrists, his palms, each finger and especially the spaces in

between. He discarded the towel and turned towards the door.

Just before opening it, however, a thought struck him. "What if there was a virus on the towel? I might not have time to get to the disinfectant station in the hall before absentmindedly infecting myself. Better wash my hands again."

"One thousand one, one thousand two...."

After another twenty seconds he again turned off the faucet and reached for another paper towel. Concentrating like his life depended on it (and it might!) he dried his hands again. But as he turned his foot slipped ever so slightly (some water had

splashed on the floor) and he had to steady himself against the sink.

“Damn,” he muttered. “I’ve got to wash my hands again.”

Again he soaped up and rhythmically washed his hands. Again he dried himself with a paper towel. Again he turned and stepped towards the exit. But a thought distracted him and instead of pulling the door with his hand wrapped in his sleeve, he pulled it with his unprotected hand.

“Argghh.” Back to the sink he went. “One thousand one, one thousand two.” He hummed his mantra this time. After twenty seconds he turned off the faucet and dried his hands once again.

But then the thought occurred to him once more. "What if *that* towel had a virus on it. I'm so absent minded that I just can't risk trying to make the disinfectant station before touching my face or mouth. These are different times and I really have to take every precaution." So back to the sink he went. This time, however, as he pressed the lever to release the soap nothing came out. Mild panic, but then he saw that there was a second dispenser. Relieved, he pressed the lever but again nothing. Less mild panic. "Oh Christ," he thought, what if that towel had the virus on it? What the hell am I supposed to do? I can't leave here, I'll be a transmission vector."

He began to sweat now as he paced back and forth in the small cinder-block room. Did he hear footsteps? Someone was approaching the door. Panicked now, he shouted out: "Don't come in here! I might be infectious and there's no soap left!" But his call went unheeded and he saw the door begin to open.

"Didn't you hear me! I might be infectious. Stay the hell out of here!"

"Open the door, I need to go to the washroom," the other replied.

"I can't risk it. No one can come in here until I get some more soap. Get the hell out of here for your own safety. You have to find another washroom."

“Open the damn door! I don’t have time to find another washroom. I’m gonna piss my pants.” The push from the other side of the door was more forceful.

“Are you insane?” I said I could be infectious. I can’t wash my hands and everyone has to stay out.”

“I’m not kidding pal. I’m gonna piss myself. I don’t care if you’re infectious or not I have to use the bathroom.”

“You’re a lunatic. You can’t use this washroom.” Pushing back with even more force.

“Open the fuckin door!” The most insistent shove yet.

“If you don’t care about yourself then think about others.” You can’t wash your hands either. You’ll become a transmission vector.”

“I don’t care what I am I need to piss. Get the fuck out of the way!” A booting sound now resounded down the corridor and a powerful even force was applied to the door.

“I cannot let you in here. I have to wait. Now stop pushing and find another bathroom.” He pressed his shoulder to the door, braced himself as best he could, and leaned with all his strength into the door.

“I’m done fucking around here. Open this door or I’m gonna tear it off the hinges.”

“You are a complete madman. You could infect the entire building.” But at that moment his foot slipped on the terrazzo and he fell off to the side. The door flung open just as the other person took a run at it. He flew through the door, tripped over the splayed body, and hit the sink with his chin.

Robert pounced on him with fury. “You idiot! You’ve completely contaminated yourself!” He dropped to his knees and began to assail the collapsed stranger with both fists.

Momentarily dazed, the stranger took three solid blows to the face before he realized what was happening. Larger than Robert, he shook off the punches and,

grabbing Robert's lapels, flipped him onto his back and drove him hard in the mouth.

Blood spurted from the Robert's lip and he moved to cover his head. The blows continued to rain down.

The power of his duty emboldened Robert, however, and he fought back, driving his knee into the groin of the second. The other's hands stopped beating Robert and moved automatically to cover and shield himself. Robert seized the opportunity to push the intruder off, stand up, and grab the other's hair. As he prepared to drive the other man's skull into the porcelain sink, security (who had been alerted to the

commotion by someone in the office down the hall) arrived and restrained Robert.

“What are you doing in here!” Robert shouted. I could be contaminated! The goddamn soap ran out and I couldn’t wash my hands. This fool barged in here and despite my warnings tried to use the bathroom. Do you understand! He was going to use the bathroom even though he knew he couldn’t wash his hands. This man is a murderer!”

“Do you mean that you used the bathroom and didn’t wash your hands?” asked the security guard, mild alarm in his voice.

“Yes, yes. I was going to wait here until someone could bring a soap refill. But this ...”

“Oh man, Phil, this is just what we were preparing for at yesterday’s training session” the second security guard said. “Ok. Everyone sit tight. I’m going to radio base for further instructions”

“Base, this is unit 451. We’ve got four potential transmission vectors in bathroom 2-b. I need you to contact public health and find out what we need to do.”

“Roger 451. We’re calling public health right now. Sit tight and try not to touch anything.”

“Roger base, we’ll sit tight and try not to touch anything.”

Within three minutes the faint wail of sirens could be heard. Three more minutes and four people in bio-hazard suits arrived at the threshold to the bathroom. Behind them were two armed police in N95 respirator masks. The people in the biohazard suits immediately began constructing a vapour seal over the door.

“We’re going to have to evacuate this building. If

there's a transmission vector in there he
might have sneezed or coughed and
we could have virus
throughout this building. Jimmy, you're
going to have to canvas the
neighbourhood. If anyone
has seen anyone leaving this building in the
last half hour they need to be tracked
down and
quarantined."

"Ok doc. I'm on it."

Within ten minutes of the arrival of the
public health officials the vapour seal
was

complete. Roger, the intruder, and the two
security guards looked at each other, at
the plastic
seal separating them from the world, and
then back at each other. A trail of
urine snaked across
the floor.

14. Golden Boy Enmeshed in Scandal

“Did you see the paper this morning.”

“Oh ya. Quite a set of developments,
no?”

“The PR department must be in chaos
this morning.”

“Hey Roger, did you hear?”

“Are you talking about ...”

“Absolutely. The great award winner,
exposed as incompetent.”

“I knew those awards were bullshit.”

“Payment for compliance with
prescribed routine.”

“Exactly, nothing more than a
transmission belt for whatever product was

being hawked.”

“That’s why one wins awards. That’s what they’re for. Where else would the money come from?”

“Good things come to those who wait; awards come to those who obey.”

“But the real scandal is the degree of laziness that it exposes. I mean, how can one approach the task like that and expect something like this not to happen?”

“No thought whatsoever given to what this job actually requires.”

“If thought were given to the problem it would generate opposition to the programme, but compliance with the programme is the condition of success, by the

system's measures of success. Hi Rachel,
have you heard?"

"Yes, I heard, and you three seem to be enjoying it. But shouldn't you be supporting your colleague?"

"Why should I support him? Has he supported anyone else? He's allowed himself to be used as a tool to pressure those of us who are guided by the principle of the vocation"

"Is it the principle of the vocation that moves you, or just *schadenfreude*."

"Ha ha! "It's not enough to win, it is necessary that others lose."

"Who said that?"

"I think it was Gore Vidal."

“I love it, but I don’t care about winning and losing in those terms. I care about being allowed to do my job as I decide, on the basis of my experience and reflections, and not lectured by so-called colleagues who are selected as ‘innovators’ but who in reality are nothing more than shills, and now exposed as such.”

“So why have you never criticised him before?”

“I have publically opposed every attempt to impose these external criteria on our jobs.”

“But to little effect. People don’t listen to you, they listen to him. They’re voting with their feet, it seems to me.”

“Whether people listen or not is beside the point. All I can do is make the argument, if people want to undermine themselves, there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“So you feel that your duty is discharged by making the case, even if the results are the same as if you had not made the case? And might it not follow that if the results are indifferent to whatever case you make, there might be a problem with your case?”

“It no more follows from the lack of results that the case that I make is wrong, than that people are too dumb or cowardly to accept the truth.”

“Spoken like a proper Stalinist!”

“It’s not Stalinism, it is called understanding the nature of the job and deriving the principles of your practice from it, and being thus able to determine fundamental deviations from those principles.”

“But Jim I just think you are full of shit, I’m sorry, but you were up for one of those awards and lost.”

“So because I have some personal stake in an issue it is impossible for me to take a principled position? If that is true then principled positions are impossible, because everyone has a personal stake in one’s professional standing.”

“But the problem is we have nothing

more to go on than your assurance that you are arguing on principle and not envy.”

“That’s it Rachel, give it to the bastard.”

“I’m not asking you to take my word for it. Go get the minutes of every meeting I’ve ever attended. There’s the evidence.”

“Evidence of what, that you confuse arguing about a problem and opposing everyone else with achieving something?”

“Not every principle can be achieved in the short term. If no one defends the principles, keeps them alive, then the principles cannot ever be realized.”

“But I’m unclear on the principles.”

“The principle, as I said, is that I

should be able to develop my practice on the basis of my own experience and reflections on experience, within the limits established by the principles of the vocation.”

“But you don’t think this is a vocation, you bitch incessantly that it is a job, and that if you could afford to, you would cease doing it.”

“The job destroys the vocation, hence the need to struggle against the job for the sake of the vocation.”

“But Jim that is utter bullshit. If you believe that quit and carry on your vocation without pay.”

“I would, but I need money in order to live.”

“You don’t *need* anywhere near the money you make in order to live. What you mean is that you need money in order to live as you like which, if I am not mistaken, involves considerable indulgence in things that are in no sense necessary, to life or your vocation.”

“I do my job, I only have one life, is it impermissible for me to enjoy it, once I have made my contribution?”

“I don’t deny that you are entitled to enjoy your life, my claim is that all that you really do is enjoy your life, and that what you enjoy has nothing to do with your so-called vocation. I know you, I’ve seen you operate.”

“You’re confusing the personal and the

political.”

“No I am not, I am saying that all you really are about is the personal, and the political is invoked only to justify your preferred mode of doing things.”

“I don’t know what I have done to justify this attack on my principles, my beliefs, my commitments.”

“Nothing, you have done nooo-thing. This is what you don’t understand. You don’t understand because you delude yourself that you are prosecuting some valuable political agenda. You don’t understand, so let me make it clear. You have no principles, you believe only in being left alone to do as you please, and your

commitments are exclusively to your own
peace and comfort.”

15. Fragments of an Epic Poem Which
Will be Found in 10 324 years

The text below is a transcription of what appears to have been a long, perhaps epic poem, found at various sites in what our explorers believe to have been a city called "Windsoria." Our literary critics have rightfully dismissed the work as amateurish and crude in style, but it contains useful historical content. It appears to be an account of some catastrophe whose precise unfolding we have not been able to fully reconstruct.

Found, 42 degrees, 21 minutes North

Latitude, 83 degrees 5.2 minutes West

Longitude.

... to me that the river and the land sustain us

But I replied that it is the car and the
corporation.

And you looked at me with forlorn longing,
as if

You had already seen what was now befalling

As the sky turned crimson evening one last
time,

While we gathered our things for the Great
Leaving.

And I wept but you said

Found, 42 degrees 21.1 minutes North

Latitude 83 degrees 3.1 minutes West

Longitude.

... tales of old battles won, but the war was
ultimately lost

As were our homes, our hopes;

Our heroes now dust,

(two lines of text undecipherable)

As predicted by those we did not or would
not listen to

Found, 42 degrees 18.4 minutes North

Latitude, 83 degrees 3.7 minutes West

Longitude.

... Garbage

(three lines of text undecipherable)

And you remember the summer heat,

The fertile fields close beyond,

But not really ours

(one line of text undecipherable)

A frontier of sorts

Found, 42 degrees 19.5 minutes North

Latitude, 83 degrees 1 minute West

Longitude.

Do you remember the links that bound us

Two into one, sad Windsoria?

Severed now forever,

Our blood mixing one last time

As the River

(three lines of text undecipherable)

Sea

16. The Mathematics of Celebrity

Affairs.

It has long been assumed that the probability of celebrity A having an affair is inversely proportional to the percentage of gossip articles in which the celebrity is mentioned in the preceding twelve month period. In other words, the less frequently a celebrity is mentioned, the more likely it is that that celebrity will have an affair in the next year. At least two teams have been working to give this intuition a mathematical and therefore rigorous basis.

A team led by Dr. Y.K. Chan of MIT conducted an extensive survey of on-line and

print gossip magazines. Their empirical research found that celebrity d was mentioned in 29 % of articles, celebrity e was mentioned in 48 % of articles, while celebrity f was mentioned in 58% of the articles. They then converted these percentages into real numbers with values ranging between one and zero. Hence $P_d=.29$, $P_e=.48$, and $P_f=.58$. These values were then used to calculate the probabilities.

To calculate the probability they first displayed the values P_d etc., graphically, (x axis ranging from 0-1, y axis intersecting at .5). Since we are dealing with an inverse proportion, this graphic representation solved the problem of converting a low percentage

of mentions into a higher probability. The symmetry relation between low frequency and high probability was discovered by subtracting the value of P_x from one.

Symmetry means that the second number is the same distance from the 1-pole of the x-axis as the first is from the 0-pole. For example, $P_d = .29$, $1 - .29 = .71$. The probability of celebrity D having an affair was thus .71, quite a high probability. The team predicted that within twelve months of the study, celebrity d would have an affair. His subsequent divorce proceedings established the soundness of the prediction.

Despite these initially promising results, Allan, Borschowitz, Leung, and

Mallory objected to the one-dimensionality of the Yan equation. They argued that a multidimensional analysis would yield far more complex and useful results. Their more complex equation added to the frequency of mention (F_m) dimensions of gender (C_g) age (C_a), geographical location (C_l) and profits from their most recent film (C_p). Thus the Allan et al. equation reads: $P_{af} = F_m + C_g + C_a + C_l + C_p$ Weights for $g, a, l,$ and p (which we must simply state here, as the statistical analysis by which they were determined would occupy too much space) are always above .5 when the celebrity is a male, when he lives on the West rather than the East coast, when he is over 45, and when his last film failed to make

money.

A problem with this equation was soon discovered independently by Jackson and Ramananthpillai (*Mathematica*, Vol. 39, No.1, 2007, pp. 345-67) and Juarez, Smith and Laughlin (*Annals of Mathematical Logic*, Vol. 56, No.3, 2008, pp. 598-601). The problem is obvious – the equation can yield values higher than 1, even though 1 expresses the highest degree of probability. Hence the equation was rejected on the grounds that it can generate absurd results (probabilities higher than the highest possible probability).

Subsequently the Allen team responded, (Allen et al., *Axiomatics*, Vol 26, No 2, 2009, pp. 210-220). Their solution is a

model of elegance. In cases where the sum exceeds 1, we simply divide by ten and then multiply by two. Since there are only five variables and no individual weight can exceed one, the maximum value for the equation is one. Hence this method will always give us a valid result. Hence, where values >1 are achieved in the initial summing of weights, we simply do what is necessary to ensure a non-absurd result.

To take an example, the Allan team found that the probability of celebrity g having an affair was:

$$P_{af} = F_m (.67) + C_g (.75) + C_a (.75) + C_l (.8) + C_p (.75) = 3.72/10 = .372 \times 2 = .745, \text{ a high probability.}$$

Again, this equation enjoyed

great predictive success.

Non-mathematicians may feel this correction is arbitrary. However, it is permissible by the Furedi convention, according to which the difficult work that goes into constructing a multidimensional equation should not be ruined if the equation initially generates absurd results. (On the Furedi Convention, see Abramowitz and Schere, *Mathematica*, 1982, pp. 190-217).

Current research is now focussed on examining the adequacy of the five-dimensional analysis. The editors look forward to new branches of inquiry which can shed even more clear light on this most pressing social matter.

17. A Time Before Boredom

To be you is to be immersed in kaleidoscopes and symphonies made of the most ordinary materials. To be you is to not know that they are ordinary. To be you is to be blessed with not having any knowledge at all. To be you is to be capable of openness without precondition. To be you is to be incapable of embarrassment. To be you is to be capable of joy in every molecule. To be you is to feel everything for the first time. To be you is to not know that things repeat themselves, again, and again, and again, until you become insensate. To be you is to be capable of laughing in the sheer exuberance

of being here, wherever here might be. To be you is to not understand that your time is limited. To be you is to exist in the sacred state of unbounded possibility. To be you is to have not yet damaged others' love for you. To be you is to awaken to the human face, strangely there as soon as you begin to focus. To be you is to stretch and bend without purpose. To be you is to have not yet hurt others. To be you is to feel neither guilt nor debt. To be you is to have not yet been disappointed. To be you is to have not yet disappointed someone else. To be you is to be incapable of making a mistake. To be you is to be not yet burdened by others' expectations. To be you is to be capable of

being loved without at the same time feeling weighed down upon. To be you is to be able to touch for its own sake. To be you is to be present and not a reflection back upon yourself from an imagined future. To be you is to not know the difference between shameful and honourable. To be you is to live in ignorance of all rules. To be you is to be in a state that precedes wonder. To be you is to not feel the weight of history. To be you is not having to choose. To be you is to be free, if only for a fleeting moment.

18. The Original Idea: A Parable

One fine morning in leafy spring an excited young woman strode with confidence into her professor's office. A sun beam streamed through the window, illuminating the great man in beatific light. He saw his young student's enthusiasm, and he remembered many times when he too strode with confidence across the quad to share his latest insight.

"Good morning, Ms. Rachels. And how can I help." He smiled broadly.

"Good morning Professor. I was working on my paper last night and, well," she looked shyly at the floor and twisted a

lock of her long hair.

“Yes, share, don’t keep your light under a bushel.”

“Um, ok. Well, I was working on my paper last night and I had this idea. I don’t know where it came from, it just sort of struck me, and it was exciting, because I remember what you said in class, that people don’t think up ideas, ideas just arrive, and the key is to be open to them when they come.”

“Indeed, that is the key. Openness and then dogged pursuit, constant focussed attention.”

“I know what you mean now. So I could hardly sleep, I wanted to rush over here and tell you this new idea I had for the

paper.

“By all means. But first, tell me, did you read the secondary sources that I provided in the bibliography?”

“I read quite a few, but they weren’t exactly helping. So I just began to think of the problem from my own perspective.”

“But the discipline is the literature. If you have not surveyed the literature, how can you be sure your perspective is your own? In fact, the literature I listed was only a very small sample of all that has been written on this subject.”

“Of course, professor, I realise that I don’t have as much experience as you but...

“One could even ask whether you are

in a position to establish *that* you have your own perspective, much less determine whether its content is unique. We must avoid the cult of easy novelty, Ms. Rachels. This is a culture that masks its stupidity by calling every banality a unique insight. The truly novel leads to new directions, and it takes many decades to steer a discipline as old as ours in new directions.”

The young woman reddened, and twisted uncomfortably in her seat.

Staring across the room, through her, the great man continued. “Let us assume for the sake of argument that your idea really is original. Do you feel yourself in a position to competently defend it? If it contradicts the

established conclusions, how would you be able to adequately refute them, especially in a short paper? Remember, the essential job is to convince me of your conclusions, and, as you know, *I am not an easy man to convince.*”

“No, of course not, but I thought that maybe I could just...”

“Why do you say ‘maybe?’ I assume that your purpose in coming here was not to ‘maybe’ share the idea with me, but to actually share it. Confidence, Ms. Rachels, have confidence in yourself. Now, let us hear your idea”

“Ok, well, you know the passage where ...”

“I know every passage in that text. Do you know how many times I’ve read that book? But why are you prefacing your idea with a question? It can only serve a rhetorical function. Have I not cautioned the class against rhetorical questions? Of course, for someone with great experience and some standing, rhetorical questions can be employed to great effect. In fact, let me give you this paper of mine. I don’t think I have distributed it to the class. You will see there how to use rhetorical questions to very powerful effect. One moment, I know it is on this shelf somewhere. Yes, here we are. Ok, as you were saying.”

“I’m sorry ...”

“No, no, you’re apologising for yourself again. Do you know the etymology of ‘apologise?’ From the Greek, it means to render account. But you came here to share an idea with me, not to give account of yourself, am I right?”

“No, I didn’t know the etymology.”

“Why are we talking about etymology? Your idea.”

“Ok. Well, it came to me while I was reading the key argument, I think it was on page 46.”

“You *think*. Certainty! This discipline requires exactitude, Ms. Rachels. You must *know*, not *think*.”

“Of course. Let me just check my

notes.”

“No, no. Use your brain, the brain is a powerful recording device. Forget about your notes. Reflect and retrieve. Do you know who taught me that?”

“No.”

“Well, it’s an excellent story. However, I am afraid it will have to wait. My office hours are over. Feel free to come back next week.”

“Could I email it to you, because the paper is due...”

“Email! One does not communicate *ideas* by email Ms. Rachels. All great ideas are eternal, a week, therefore, is of no consequence.

“But ...”

The great man was already putting on
his coat.

19. First Law of Thermodynamics

I fear loneliness, not death. I do not mean that I fear being alone. To sit with cigarette in hand, perhaps sipping a gin, watching the summer storm, lights out, by myself, is blissful. Loneliness is not being alone. It is the thought, unshakeable, that one might be separated by uncrossable distance from everyone one loves and who make one feel, even if only for a moment, whole, because cared for and needed.

It is strange to observe how people relate to mundane things that they think have been dignified by age. What is the

fascination of an Etruscan fork? All it proves is that the Etruscans ate and shat the same way we do. No one lines up for an hour and pays good money to see twenty-five year old forks in the Goodwill. But people will push and shove to get a clear photo of a twenty-five hundred year old fork, even though, from a practical perspective (and what other perspective can one really take vis-a-vis forks) there is no difference at all.

I feel calm only when I could, under my own steam, get back home, no matter what effort would be required. If I had to, I could walk from Tierra del Fuego to Windsor, but no amount of effort could help me swim

across the sea. You say that that would be a long walk, for all intents and purposes impossible. I reply that so long as I could eat I could keep walking. People have accomplished more extreme tasks. For example, I once saw on TV a yogi who rolled the entire length of India. And he was very old.

What is so magical about millennia when it comes to artefacts? Observing things older than one thousand years elicits reverence in people that I don't understand. I don't understand it because natural things are so much older, and yet no one goes to see them just because they are old. Where I grew

up some of the rocks of the Canadian Shield were a billion years old, but they held no particular fascination for me. And if you go to the coast of Labrador you can stand on some of the oldest rocks on the planet – about three billion years old. But nobody goes there to video tape old rocks. Give them a twenty five hundred year old fork, however, and they will video tape it for fifteen minutes and perhaps even get aggressive if you suggest that they move on so you can get your money's worth.

Whenever movement is required, problems can arise. To get home I need to get to the airport. Should I take the train or

should I take a cab? Trains breakdown,
engineers or track workers can go on strike
unexpectedly. Cabs might not show up.
Cabs get in accidents. Perhaps you get on the
wrong train. Perhaps the cabbie decides to
rob you. Don't tell me these things don't
happen, because I know that they do.

If we want to get serious and scientific
about things, everything is the same age.
Every constellation of matter you can
observe – Etruscan forks, old yogis, Tierra del
Fuego – is a permutation of the energy
unleashed by the Big Bang. I employ this fact
not as an argument against particularities and
qualitative differences, but only against age

as grounds for taking an interest. Everything is old, as old as everything else, 13 billion years and counting.

Airports are a nest of troubles.

Anything imaginable can go wrong.

Computer problems at check in, power going out or a fire in the terminal, mechanical problems with the plane, unfavourable weather, either at the destination or the point of departure, air traffic control restrictions, accidents, security threats, bogus or real.

Drink helps quiet my mind, but I've been to quite a few airports and I know their (more or less invariant) routines. Even while enjoying the drink every cell is attuned to detecting the

slightest deviation from the norm in the patterns of movement. As soon as one has been discovered, my neck and back tighten, the quiescence of alcohol gone for good.

People claim to learn while travelling. I suppose this might be true, in both particular (acquiring new facts) and general (learning how to get along across linguistic and cultural divides) cases. Thus, I do not dispute the claim. But I think that the real reason people travel is to acquire named experiences that can be efficiently communicated to one's friends upon return. In this way, that is, by being able to say "oh yes, we saw x, y, z" in the knowledge that

your interlocutor will immediately know what x, y, and z are, you can give the appearance of knowledge and sophistication and at the same time confirm the knowledge and sophistication of your friends, without having had to do a whole lot more than keep enough space on your credit card to pay for the trip.

I used to be terrified of flying. No amount of booze and valium could prevent that cold sweat as soon as I crossed the jetway and entered the aircraft. I would squeeze the armrest with every little bump of turbulence. In this way I would ruin not only my own flight, but also the flight of whomever had the

misfortune of sitting next to me. And that is a shame, because some people really like to fly. Maybe it was my sensitivity to the effect I had on others that caused me to reflect upon my fear. Gradually, after much thought, I realized that it was loneliness and not death that I feared. (See above). And then I was no longer afraid of flying.

Because the primary motivation of people when travelling is to acquire named experiences, and the only reason others listen to their travelling stories is to ascertain whether their list was the same or (the secretly desired result) their list was not as extensive, little of consequence ever

transpires, either in the travelling or in the relating. Where both parties play by the rules there is rarely any danger of discussing genuinely moving encounters with the unexpected and not-named. Woe unto he (or she) who has not only had such an experience, but has the temerity to describe it to others. The effort will be met with eye rolling and open scorn. Friendships can be lost over such transgressions.

The problem with not being afraid of flying, I realized, once I had overcome it, is that transoceanic flights are incredibly boring. The sea and clouds look more or less indistinguishable, so there is literally nothing

to look at. Watching movies on a flight of six or eight or twelve hours is insane, because if you know how long the movie is, you can easily infer how much longer you have to sit strapped into an aluminum tube, and the flight seems to take forever. You have to almost hypnotise yourself and suspend your time-consciousness, and hope to Christ that no one sitting next to you checks their watch and announces the time every fifteen minutes.

When travelling, people seem to treat smells the same as they treat them at home, but sounds completely differently. Smells that they find offensive at home they find

offensive elsewhere. It is a common complaint of travellers to New York City, for example, that it stinks like piss. But no one complains that the city is too loud. No one goes there to go to bed at ten pm. Hence they delight in the sounds of raucous parties which, if they were being produced by their neighbours, would have them on their porch making extraordinary threats about the consequences if they don't shut the fuck up.

Movement generates anxiety, stasis, peace. In a decent hotel room, at a restaurant, or having a drink, I can delight in my new surroundings. Imagination can be indulged. I think, "why should I even want to go back."

But you can only sleep and fuck in a strange bed for so long, eat out and drink away the afternoon so many times, before that essential restlessness returns. Perhaps anxiety is just a function of an overly practical attitude towards life-- the knowledge that after a month or two they would figure out that I haven't been working, and then the money would run out.

Even more captivating for people than Etruscan forks is the weather wherever they happen to be. You see people who look like Mother Courage, carting around three or four different jackets, alternative pairs of shoes, all manner of hats and umbrellas, readying

themselves for any climatic eventuality.

Stranger still, I think, is that people check the long range forecast at their destination.

Would they cancel the trip if it were going to rain?

The most haunting thing, when you get right down to it, is not the possibility of loneliness in the abstract, but the realization, born of deep thought and experience, that the others at home will not miss me for very long. For they are not away, they are where they are needed and cared for and have things to do. Quite soon they would stop even wondering what happened to me, and get back to their lives, as is both necessary and

just.

20. Wound.

You are not supposed to see beneath the flesh. No sooner has it been cut than it seals itself. A chemical knitting restores the secrets of blood and nerve. Genuflecting to the occult reality of the beneath-flesh, eyes avert themselves from blood, hands rush in with bandages and salves, collective effort is mobilised to safeguard the body's truth. The pain fades, the wound is healed.

Our bodies come from other bodies, our words from our own depths. The wounds of speech cannot be cured by flesh. Helping hands do not gather around the verbal cut. Lascivious ears demand more

explicit accounting. Other tongues are seduced, begin to speak, open other ears, caress other tongues, widening the circle in which one stands, humiliated.

The body dies. At some point it is over and done with, buried, burned, eminently forgettable. It returns to its elemental roots, the quiescence of unconscious being, the inert happiness of having no weight to bear. Its scars decompose along with its matter. The earth accepts it lovingly, and gives it peace.

The word is not flesh, and does not die. Our inner torments, once spoken, linger forevermore. The energy that carries them across time is not subject to entropy.

Judgments shall be rendered, and rendered
again, and again.

21. Theme and Variations

Chelsea rolled another joint and
scrolled through her playlist. She hoped to
concentrate eternity into this moment of
respite:

from this basement apartment she must
share;

from her roommate's asshole boyfriend;

from having to flirt with ugly old men for
tips;

from her suspicion that there are more
interesting places she will never be able to
afford to live;

from the debt she owes the banks;

from the hardening realization that the
“intrinsic value of education” is negated by
the reality of having to pay to exist;
from her feelings of incarceration in a world
that makes no room for the young;
from the platitudes of successful people
trying to “help her find her niche;”
from the cults of superficiality, hyper-
conformity, and mass stupidity;
from the terror of already being bored with
what life offers;
from her real talents;
from what she had to offer the world;
from the world’s indifference;
from the length of days;
from the future.

“Have a nice day, sir.”

“You too!”

He uttered it with such sincerity that the young woman behind the counter doubted his sanity.

“Me too!? How is sitting in a boiling hot glass booth taking gas money supposed to turn out good?”

Only two hours into her shift her ass was already numb but she could not get up and stretch her legs because the line of customers never shortened and she was the only one on duty and there was no one to talk to—beyond the usual transactional inanities-- and no time even to day dream,

the only alteration of environment occurred when the door opened and then the roar of traffic and the gas and diesel fumes would produce a momentary disorientation and nausea, but minimum wage left no time for the luxury of going home sick and each exchange had to be transacted with an affected pleasant demeanour.

The monotony stretched work-time to unbearable lengths and the dread of repetition shockingly foreshortened the passing of her off-hours. Before she was conscious of having escaped her cell she found herself in the shower preparing to return.

“Have a nice day, sir.”

“You too!”

People from the south did not understand. The north wind, when it blows in January, is not ice but fire, burning the exposed flesh. Red turned his face away from the wind, away from the scrubby birch trees and scraggly white pine. He shouldered his picket sign once more. He was apart from the others. They were huddled around a burn barrel, probably drinking rye by now.

Over their shoulders the monstrous smelter stood inert against the wind. An edifice built of time and gravity, the geometry of curved space, of a trajectory, a hurtling mass 300 million years ago, of hand and machine, of melting points, and gravity again,

separating the elements, and of money.

The wind made him think of his childhood. Happy days sliding and skating, and then the trauma that marked everyone who lived here then – the last great strike. Would they have to move to Elliot Lake or Timmins? Would his friends have to move? Would there be any presents for Christmas? But then a deeper stirring, not a memory but a feeling, the traces of a deeper togetherness, of an entire city mobilised, and others reaching out from across the continent to help. A December night in the Steelworkers' Hall. Turkey and presents for the kids, matter and spirit sent from the steel cities of the south and the States and all the mining

towns of our vast northlands that we share as brother and sisters of the wind and water and ice and rock.

And then a shudder, a sense of something missing now. Then there were fires, and fights, and rallies. Then his mom was never at home because she was working with other moms to support the strikers. Then there was the reflected glory of winning, the exhausted smile on his dad's face when it was over, a drunken barbeque at their camp with curses and high fives and also relief.

Now he felt alone.

The Steelworker's Hall burned down last year. Now it is just a gravel lot on Frood Road. The city went on about its business.

Everyone seemed to have forgotten what this place once achieved together, what it once stood for, that people from across the continent once knew its name, and uttered it for inspiration. This time, it barely made the local newspaper.

Red hunched his shoulders and turned again into the north wind.

Phil looked across Drouillard Road to the junkies in front of the methadone clinic. He neither empathised nor judged. He had ceased to feel any emotion at all. His wife had finally left him a month ago because he refused to move. She was right, of course, there were opportunities elsewhere, but this was his home and why should he be forced to leave because of other people's mistakes, or maybe not even mistakes, maybe that's just how it is now, and things had changed, maybe forever, but still, why should that mean that he should have to pick himself up and leave? He flipped aimlessly through the channels, sipping a discount beer, taking a

drag on a discount smoke. The EI would run out soon and welfare would not cover the costs of drink, smokes, and cable. There was no one to borrow money from – all his friends were in exactly the same boat – and the union was clear that there would be no call backs this time. The plant was gone, shuttered, and soon to be demolished. Perhaps he could have moved on himself, if he had known that at least someone else somewhere else would be working. But the plant wasn't moving, it was just disappearing. In a few years it would be an empty lot, or a park, or another building. The spot would not become a world heritage site. It would not be marked by one of those blue and gold signs the

province puts up sometimes.

Unfocussed malt liquor addled eyes strained across 3rd Avenue. Along Warren there was traffic but few cars ever turned south. They would take the Lodge or I-75 to the opera or a ball game, and take the Lodge or I-75 back. They would never see this ghost wandering back and forth from the soup kitchen church to the empty field and his sleeping bag. The people in the cars might quickly glance down 3rd as they drove past. The woman would tell the visitors from out of town what nice homes used to be there, but no, they should stick to the main routes and expressways.

The ghost is still burdened by matter,

feels a pang, crosses the street. Others gather before the metal door, expectant, both summoned and shut out, welcomed and excluded by the heavy steel door. No words are exchanged, just vacant eyes peering through each other but still dimly alive in the memory of what it felt like to be lonely. Cut off from hope, but unlike Virgil they did not live on in despair. They just lived. Empty like the field across the street, empty like the city they haunted, confined to this block and to this moment as a discrete prison. Someone tried to bum a cigarette, but here all sharing was out of the question. Between those with nothing no alternative currency can evolve, no ties of any sort emerge, and the

person

asking knew this before she even formed the
words.

“Is that it then Stan?”

“That’s it. Can’t compete no more.

Forty seven years. That’s it.”

“Not gonna be the same without you”

“Why not? Stores come, stores go.

Look at street, nearly empty now. Remember Marconi’s over there. Good vegetables those were. And Alina’s Shoes. And who ran the hardware store? All gone. You see tears from people? People sell their soul now for deal on toilet paper. They don’t regret. They don’t remember.”

“Ya, but still.”

“Ya, still.”

“Still, its sad, you know, you not being

here.”

“Someone take my place, or store will stay empty. You stay open or you close.

That’s life, eh?”

“I guess.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“I know, what are you gonna do. You work hard.”

“What’s hard work got to do with it? I work hard, I close. Marconi work hard, he close. Hard work don’t mean shit anymore.”

“Sure, but still, it’s not gonna be the same.”

“But nothing stay the same. What’re you gonna do?”

“Move to Florida I guess.”

“Move to Florida! I barely got pot to
piss in, forty-seven years.”

“Ya, what’re ya gonna do?”

Xiao returned to the task at hand –
breaking apart the foundations of a building
(he could not remember which) to clear his
ancestral city for the great deluge to come.
The men from Beijing had come two months
ago, ordering the removal of the city by
swinging of sledgehammers and pick axes,
the pushing of wheelbarrows of rubble from
small piles to larger piles, demanding
absolute commitment to the taking apart of
their lives and the erasure of this town from
geography. Hillsides of broken concrete
surrounded him, scrambling his ancient
mental map.

He could no longer tell which way was

north and which south, where his house had been or where his grandfather had been born.

Here and there more mundane reminders that people had once lived here – an old shoe half buried under the remnants of a wall, a chest that had rolled halfway down the hillside, a blackened pot laying upside down atop a heap of plaster. In the distance he could see the cranes ever-swinging with their loads, erecting the bulwark against the timeless river. His – their-- river had once flowed into the past, linking life to life across immemorial generations. But now it would be turned. Reversed by force of mind and will, it would sever all connections, swamp the past, open the future. Suspended

between past and future the tenuous present of drudgery and still struggling life. Now and again a chicken or a cat scampered past, frightened by the din, perhaps, but since they lived without memory or foreknowledge they carried on without nostalgia. They would happily adapt or die. Xiao envied them. Sometimes, while pushing the wheelbarrow to a rubbish pile, he thought of his daughter. She had left four years ago and now worked in Guangzhou at a factory, living dazed in a comfortable, antiseptic misery beyond the smell of poverty.

Then one day it was over. The company was bankrupt, his pension was gone. His wife was dead, deceased twelve years now (thank god she didn't live to see what was to become of him). His children had moved, one was in Victoria, the other in Fort McMurray. They wouldn't be coming home. In any case, there would no longer be a home to come back to. CPP would barely heat this place, and with his medication costs and hydro and food, there was just no choice.

Larry's footsteps reverberated in the now mostly empty house. He watched as the Goodwill people took the last of his furniture out the back door. His eyes lingered over his garden, thirty five years in the making and in

spectacular late spring bloom right now. He thought he would have seen Clare and Bill from next door, but since news had spread around the neighbourhood they had kept their door closed and blinds drawn.

Larry put his suitcase down on the front porch. He sat and waited for the cab, his eyes panning up and down his street. But it wasn't his street, and soon someone else would sit on this step. The new person would casually inquire of the real estate agent, "who used to live here," and then imagine how the place would have to be redecorated while the woman told a story he didn't want to hear in the first place.

The space of our lives expands and

contracts. From womb to house to the whole
wide world, to workplace and house, to
house, to room, the warehouse where we wait
to die.