

To Veronica's memory...

...and the live Walker, Brady, Hannah, and Eleanor

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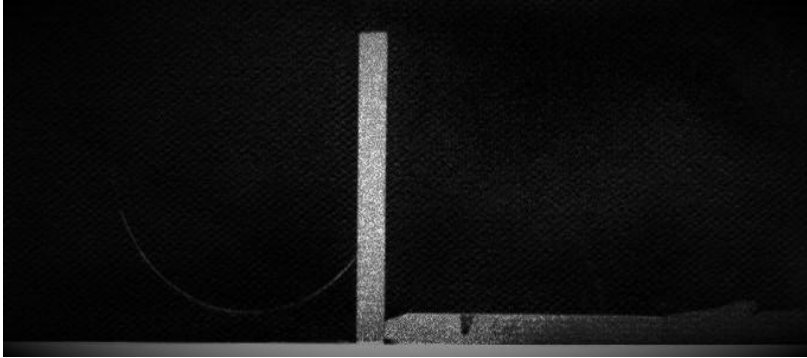
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PROLOGUE

INSUBSTANTIAL EMANATIONSⁱ



[Fig. 1. *Colorado Nocturne* (1995)]

For my part I know nothing with any certainty,
but the sight of the stars makes me dream.
—Van Gogh

1972: a hitchhiker's guide to non-self

A high-school friend of mine, Adam C., and I set out to hitch-hike across the United States starting from our hometown of Rochester, New York, destination Los Angeles, California, where an uncle of his lived and where my sister lived. He was 19. I was 18. The idea was adventure, of course, inspired by (as were many then) the *On the Road* escapades and attitudes of the time. A few memorable events made for decent party stories—a job offer to pick peaches from, plausibly, serial killer Juan Corona near Yuba City, California; police throwing cherry bombs at us from a highway off-ramp in Buffalo, New York; a pile of rocks in the high desert outside of

ⁱ Minor edits and revisions have been made to this edition.

Reno, Nevada, that turned out to be the dead body of an elderly black man; a maniac drunk driver screaming “TURKEY BUZZARDS!!” over and over, who wouldn’t let us out of his car; and a few other tales of similar nature. And some history happened, too: an assassination attempt on, then Alabama Governor, then presidential candidate, George Wallace, if I remember right; and a nasty riot took place at the state prison in Attica, New York. Of course, Neil Young’s *Heart of Gold* and *Old Man* still stir in me considerable nostalgia; yes, but, overall, the trip to LA and eventually back to Rochester was mostly uneventful. Let’s just say that neither Adam nor I discovered the Holy Grail of self-knowledge, which, though unspoken between us, was probably the wandering Romantic’s hope, if only vaguely.

However, one experience in our journey did affect me, and in a profound way, but it wasn’t self-knowledge I discovered so much as *non-self-knowledge*. And that experience is one reason why I wrote these essays.

It’s strange to me, in hindsight, that during the entirety of the experience I will soon describe, which lasted maybe an hour—an experience that took place out on the Colorado-Utah border, proverbial middle-of-nowhere, high desert, scrub, desolate and lonely (see Fig. 1)—and even for years thereafter, that I never told Adam about it, with whom you can imagine, after a few hot and dusty, cold and wet, and wind-blown and otherwise weather-beaten vagabond weeks together along the shoulders of a couple thousand miles of unfamiliar highways and backroads of America, I had forged a close, if not necessary, bond; a bond acknowledged as much through knowing gestures, nods, sighs and grins, as by any talk, though we had plenty of time for that, too.ⁱⁱ But the truth was, nothing I could say could communicate what I had experienced. I realized from the minute it subsided that any attempt to describe what had happened, even to a trusted and open-minded buddy, much less a stranger, would come across as eye-rolling, mystical nonsense. It was better to defer any inquiries to Rumi.

And yet—here I write.

Back to the Colorado-Utah border, high desert, 1972.

Late one afternoon, a couple weeks or so into our trip, hitch-hiking somewhere in the Rocky Mountains west of Denver along the shoulders of Rt. 40, a pale blue, dinged and dented, late ‘50s, International pickup truck pulled over and offered Adam and me a ride. Two blond-haired, blue-eyed

ⁱⁱ Yes, we all offer Zen-like transmissions daily, though we seldom consider them such.

young men in identical denim jeans and jackets sat in the cab. The one in the passenger seat gestured with a thumb for us to hop in the truck bed. The driver leaned forward with a friendly smile, nodded, and said something in a foreign accent. It turned out that these two brothers hailed from Germany and like us they were on a summer road trip across the USA. Adam and I threw our gear in the truck bed and hopped in.

At dusk, a couple of hundred miles later up the road, the sun leaving an angry red streak across the horizon, and it getting damn chilly between the falling temperature (though it was the middle of summer), and constant wind blowing on us from our exposure in the open bed, the truck suddenly slowed and pulled over on the shoulder of the road and proceeded up a pair of barely discernible tire ruts in the dirt and scrub, up and over a bumpy hill, and then down and out of sight from the road. From my view looking backwards out of the truck bed, I watched a spooky-looking shack recede across the highway: what was once a roadside café, long-abandoned and dilapidated. A rotting sign hung ajar out front. The faded letters read: The Blue Moon Café.

We were now on rough but relatively flat ground—though the Rockies (I'm guessing the La Salles; maybe around Ouray, Utah?), loomed majestic in the distance, white-capped and massive and still. But this was uneven, hard ground, barren, mostly dirt, tufted here and there with sage in the rapidly dwindling light.

It soon grew pitch black. Exhausted, I unrolled my sleeping bag and tossed it to the ground. I wasted no time crawling into it. All I remember of significance before descending into the netherworld of sleep are the following three things: 1) One of the Germans said to me: "Be sure to zip it tight to your chin. The rattlesnakes like to climb in with you to get warm". I couldn't see if he was smiling or not. I wasn't sure if I should be, either; 2) I was so tired I didn't spend time considering the lay of the land, and after I crawled in, I realized my feet were elevated above my head. It was a little uncomfortable, but I was too exhausted to even bother to switch around. I have often wondered since if my elevated feet over nine solid hours of comatose sleep flat on my back had supplied my brain with extra blood and that this somehow triggered my soon to be described transcendence; 3) Eerily dark, immensely still, you can imagine, space-fans, out there in the high desert desolation, before light pollution, not a sound or a soul within miles (maybe a few rattlesnakes), how bright the stars shown above. I gazed straight up in silent awe and wonder at the sheer immensity of the universe, the vast net of glittering stars cast across the zenith: The Milky Way, that

brave ore-hanging firmament, that majestic roof, fretted with golden fire,ⁱⁱⁱ thinking about all the transitory pain in the world, and all the transitory tenderness, too. A heavy sigh, a sudden leap into hyperspace, and I fell into the deepest, most satisfying sleep of my life.

*

I didn't notice it at first, rolling up my sleeping bag the next morning, a cool, sunny morning—but then I *did* notice it: an inexplicable, super-pristine, clarity of mind like nothing I'd ever experienced before in my life. I looked around at the others, heard a few remarks about breakfast, a place to eat. But I had somehow awakened into a profoundly altered state of consciousness: I was no longer Paul Powell, a *thing*, an *object* in the world, I was now an empty vessel, invisible, devoid of thought and emotion, and incredibly *at peace*; an *insubstantial emanation of sensations* that seemed to hover ephemeral in the cool desert air. Voices floated, far off it seemed. I had no words. I scanned my surroundings, the sere desert scrub, the distant mountain peaks, my animated companions, the beat up old International pickup truck, at all the *insubstantial emanations of the world*. My mind was absolutely *blank*. But at the same time, something deep inside me sensed that the slightest utterance, *or passing thought even*, would violate this fragile and unaccustomed tranquility; this undisturbed equilibrium in the mind that somehow felt both infinite and eternal. Suddenly, and unexpectedly, I was completely at home in the universe: just an eddy in the stream, actions without an actor. And unlike other mornings, the usual cacophony of mentation did not rush in to colonize my consciousness.

How? Why?

Once you really commence to see things you really commence to feel things
—Edward Steichen

I sensed activity. I was part of it—and not part of it—the packing, the loading, the small talk—I nodded and smiled, full of silent and wonderful joy. Frankly (I'll go ahead and say it), it was *bliss*. Adam and I hopped back into the truck bed and we bumped and bounced along the rutted tracks, back onto Rt. 40, and again headed west. I watched Adam as he leaned back against the side of the truck bed, arms folded across his chest, taking in the scenery. He looked over at me, satisfied with the world, confirmed it with a nod. I could only grin back, a happy fool, high on my bliss. Everything was

ⁱⁱⁱ My apologies to Shakespeare.

perfect as it was. In fact, *it could not be otherwise*. I had nothing to say. Certainly, no words would add, and would only detract, from the ongoing perfection of each moment, the desert landscape sliding by at 50 mph, the pristine Colorado sky arching above, the incessant drone of the tires, the highway rushing away behind us; yes, and the fact of my own existence suddenly struck me as so inexplicable and preposterous that I spontaneously burst out laughing in sheer awe and wonder at it. Adam laughed, too, for no other reason than I laughed (another Zen transmission), shaded his eyes with one hand, squinted up at the sky, and got out his sunglasses.

A few miles down the road we came upon a roadside, log cabin-style restaurant and we pulled onto its gravel parking lot and hopped out of the pickup and went inside and gathered together, with a couple of somber truckers, around a massive community table constructed from hewn logs. I ate in happy quietude, witnessing the morning discourse from some remote aspect of myself. Shunyu Suzuki Roshi says: “Leave your front door and your back door open. Allow your thoughts to come and go. Just don’t serve them tea”.^{iv} Yes, my front door and back door were wide open. I did not serve tea to any thought. Thoughts passed through my mind like a summer breeze through a gateless gate.

We ate, paid up, and left the restaurant. Walking across the parking lot to the truck, I had a strange hallucination: I began to visualize a wall being built around me, a wall made of glass blocks; they were stacking themselves up, across and on top of one another, an invisible mason at work: my mind, stacking my thoughts, one-by-one, enclosing me, separating me from the seamless flow of existence.^v “*No. No*”, I pleaded in my mind, and with each “*No*”, another transparent brick materialized and set itself into place. But I understood what was happening, and I resigned myself to my great loss.

^{iv} A brief aside: Obviously, one problem we humans suffer from is that we habitually serve tea to our thoughts, distracting the natural flow of our perceptions with a gang of noisy guests. One might wonder if a kind of a neurotic split results if the tea party assumes its own, relative, self-sustaining existence. And if many of our mental health issues (if not many of our societal issues), might be proportionate in dysfunction to the distance between the open *doors of our perceptions* and the obliviousness of our crowded tea party. “*What is real?*” one of the more philosophical party guests exclaims in panic. A fight breaks out over tea, tea cups smashed, tables turned over. Does this sound familiar? Dukkha.

^v I can guess what you’re probably thinking. The answer is adamantly, “No. No mind-altering substances involved”.

“I am an insubstantial, transitory *process*”, I thought, “empty, in a way”. A semiotic murmuration of signs within a lexical field of consciousness. In Self Organized Systems Theory the organizing principle for this semiotic murmuration could be called an *attractor*, in Zen, *anatta: non-self*.

For the listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds /
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

—Wallace Stevens

