



We Go Looking for Stories in Order to See

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Des fées aux pleureuses : les figures de l'accompagnement, du berceau au tombeau

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We Go Looking for Stories in Order to See

Maxime Fecteau

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We tell ourselves stories in order to live¹.

Joan Didion

Sometimes the magic in an essay will leave markings on my bones, and help me heal. With this one, we're in New York at twilight, in a passage of Joan Didion's *Goodbye to All That* (*GTAT*, hereafter). She's twenty-something and new in town, and above all, she's late to meet a friend. Yet, somewhere along Lexington Avenue, she enters a store. She comes out with a peach in her hand and stands on the sidewalk to eat it. "I could taste the peach and feel the soft air blowing from a subway grating on my legs and I could smell lilac and garbage and expensive perfume," she writes².

With time, and with every new reading, a connection's been carved somewhere inside me. Whenever I push the pivoting doors of a subway entrance in Montréal—large, heavy steel doors that sometimes exhale so much they'll make your eyelids flinch—there's a chance Didion's peach will spring into my thoughts. The scene has become the kind of flash cut that spends most of its time down in the depths, but that sometimes crops up to be caught in the spotlight of thought, breaching the current of consciousness. Just the way, some places along the St. Lawrence River, white whales will come up for air before slipping back below, briefly dazzling those humans who happen to be watching, and who know so little of what's going on in the deep.

¹ Joan Didion, "The White Album," dans *The White Album*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008, [1979], p. 11.

² Joan Didion, "Goodbye to All That," dans *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008 [1968], p. 228.

I, for one, had been ill for a while—and still I hadn't a clue what was going on in the deep.

“Consciousness is a wonderful instrument for helping us to focus,” writes Mark Turner in *The Literary Mind*, “but it is a liar about mind. It shamelessly represents itself as comprehensive and all-governing, when in fact the real work is often done elsewhere, in ways too fast and too smart and too effective for slow, stupid, unreliable consciousness to do more than glimpse, dream of, and envy³”.

So, the cognitive scientist invites us to be a little envious, and to look past the illusion of an all-embracing conscious attention. His theory then runs something like this: long before we humans could utter words, early members of our species would quite naturally interpret the world through the lens of “narrative imagining”—through stories⁴. A complex of interrelated actors, objects, and events was always, to our pre-verbal eyes and mind, appreciably at play. With generations of insistent imagining, a pool of narrative schemas began to form in the mind, schemas which our most ancient tropes now point to.

³ Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Take one example. Behind such a common saying as “When the cat’s away, the mice will play,” we find a skeleton of a story, an abstract narrative that informs us about the typical interactions of predators and their prey. Yet, there’s always a hunch within the human mind, an inkling that has us thinking: a story never ends there. In fact, a story might never end, *at all*. Once its spine is abstracted, a story can prove useful well beyond its plainest level of interpretation—beyond mice having a jamboree while the cat is out and about, teaching Alice a few life lessons. Taking up the adage again, we’ll readily *project* the narrative backbone of “When the cat’s away” onto another story we’re witnessing in our world, in a (quite effortless) effort to make sense of this new situation: “said at the office, [the narrative backbone] can be projected onto a story of boss and workers. Said in the classroom, it can be projected onto a story of teacher and students. Said of sexual relationships, it can be projected onto a story of infidelity⁵”.

This lightspeed ability to use one story as a template to understand another is a projection Turner calls “parable,” and the crux of his theory lies in the power of this cognitive trick, since he suggests that the mental process of parable makes up no less than “the root of the human mind⁶”. Thanks to it, us humans have grown to think, know, act, create, speak—and, of course, write. From this logic follows a fascinating retelling of our development of language: contrary to conventional thinking, our capacity to tell each other tales, whether tall or true, couldn’t have been “built up from the sober to the exotic,”⁷ meaning from the rudiments of grammar all the way through to the complexities of literary writing. “It works the other way around,” says Turner: “Story precedes

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁷ *Idem.*

grammar. Projection precedes grammar. Parable precedes grammar. Language follows from these mental capacities as a consequence; it is their complex product. Language is the child of the literary mind⁸”.

As this mind-bending hypothesis goes, we might’ve had a hunch for the model plots behind folk tales long, long before we devised a first cluster of words, and began to line up these words into sentences. Small wonder stories that invoke archetypal heroines and villains would emanate from wildly different cultures, all throughout human history. In a way, the meaning supplied to every human life hinges on this mental sleight: our minds can project narrative over narrative as spontaneously as, say, bees figure out flowers. We don’t need to be taught the basic tricks of the trade.

Instead, some ancient, nonverbal faculty continually sends express mail to consciousness (as much as: to our nerves), a ready-rendered view on the world. And this world we perceive isn’t just a place where stories keep happening. It’s better than that. It’s a place where the stories we know are meant to help us decode what *has* happened, as much as what *might* happen. Each of us’ everyday attention is in every way *literary*, then—and vitally so. Since narrative imagining isn’t simply a feature of the human mind. It *is* our mind. “The literary mind is the fundamental mind⁹”. Stories, in other words, aren’t these exceptionally well-crafted things that the dreamers among us cook up on rainy days. Nor should the term be reserved for the sort of hauntingly beautiful prose some of us will recall while passing through pressurized subway doors, or while taking in the acrid

⁸ *Idem.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. V.

air of trash. Stories run through us, they keep us *alive*. And they've been doing this (for us) for much longer than we imagine.

Stories really are the lifeblood of our mind's magic. And Didion's, in my mind, revealed itself as a helping hand. A healing hand.

When something happens—clicks—between us and good writing, our insides sometimes ignite in a spark of our senses. This, science is increasingly allowing us to spy on: the brilliant blubber behind our eyes really does light up during powerful reads. Brain scans now show us that, as we read, our synapses can be awakened precisely as if we were *experiencing* what's described on the page¹⁰.

Sometimes, my mind will even blur the boundaries of that vicarious experience. Images from Didion's essay, I've noticed, have floated through my thoughts long enough to have been quietly photoshopped. She never mentions passersby getting around her, no more than she talks about the buzz of Lexington Avenue. Nor, even, does she say a word of the peach's trickling juice, and a drop reaching the edge of her wrist before she wipes it off. Yet these details, in my mind's eye, have come to make up the scene. To the point that I've found myself searching for words that

¹⁰ See, for instance, Simon Lacey, Randall Stilla and K. Sathian, "Metaphorically feeling: Comprehending textural metaphors activates somatosensory cortex," *Brain and Language*, vol. 120, n° 3, mars 2012, p. 416-421.

would describe these cuts, when I've gone back toward the piece a second and a third and even a twenty-fifth time. I could never locate them, of course. Something had imagined these words (for me). And what I'd find, instead, elsewhere, were the writer's particular cadences creeping up in some of my stilted sentences, like the way she often lets a long one be unfurled by *and*, and *and*, and *and*¹¹.

I've come to see this sort of oblivious appropriation as the highwater mark of literary experiences. When, over the span of years, I return again and again to the same pages this way, they give me an addictive feeling. The kind of feeling I've only otherwise experienced before watching one of my most treasured films with a new love. Good stuff, and so much of it, was eagerly expected. And yet, therein loomed, as well, a true element of surprise: *How might the story turn out? How different would it feel, this time?* As if to return to a beloved story was to return, not just to some sentences or images I love, but at the same time to a jumble of past selves. As if I could revisit a place where I could watch myself evolve, and at the turn of a page could see my old selves—every one of us—meaningfully coalesce into here and now and this improbable story. This improbable love.

A fairy-tale sort of happening that winds up, every time, feeling as real as real life. And it feels so real, not despite, but precisely because the story is still the same old beautiful thing. Because something about it still works on me like a charm. The peach, as we say, is in the eye of the beholder.

¹¹ See the sentence quoted on page 1.

Essays that lure me back like *GTAT*, I come to read them, not really with my focused attention, although some of that must be involved in parsing the words, but instead with a much earthlier part of myself. With, I might say, the crazy quilt of nerve strings that keeps me whole. Vladimir Nabokov, in his *Lectures on Literature*, speaks similarly about this sensation. Highlighting what true good writing achieves—“the merging of the precision of poetry and the intuition of science”¹²—he tells us that in order “to bask in that magic,” a wise reader should read “not so much with his brain, but with his spine”¹³:

Although we read with our minds, the seat of artistic delight is between the shoulder blades. That little shiver behind is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained when evolving pure art and pure science. Let us worship the spine and its tingle. Let us be proud of our being vertebrates, for we are vertebrates tipped at the head with a divine flame. The brain only continues the spine: the wick really goes through the whole length of the candle¹⁴.

If I’m lucky enough to get my hands on the right book, I’ll glow in the dark, of course. But the question remains: what is it, in the writing, that lights me up? No doubt, fusing “the precision of poetry and the intuition of science” has something to do with providing fuel for that lighter’s click. It’s also a word-perfect way of describing how Didion’s voice has always felt to me, in *GTAT*. Something I could say of many other honest-sounding essayistic voices.

¹² Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1982, p. 6.

¹³ *Idem*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

That's one remarkable thing about this form of writing, especially when it assumes a personal touch: it will admit a perfectionist's shot at the moon, literarily speaking. I'm saying this while staying clear of genre territorialism: the succinctness and intimate human quality of a well-crafted essay, when compared with the scale of narrative and imaginative ambition a novel allows for, gives the little autobiographical thing the allure of a philosopher's stone—it's pocket-sized, and it looks unassuming, but if your temperament suggests that you should believe in its mojo, it packs the power to alchemize your life.

"A novel has a story, a poem rhyme," begins a radiant question of Virginia Woolf's, in a small critical piece titled *The Modern Essay*, "but what art can the essayist use in these short lengths of prose to sting us wide awake and fix us in a trance which is not sleep but rather an intensification of life—a basking, with every faculty alert, in the sun of pleasure?"¹⁵ The essayist must "know how to write," Woolf answers, momentarily turning herself into a tautology. Only to then reappear sparking up the obvious, and letting me catch a glimpse of what lurks within the art: an essay, she says, "must be so fused by the magic of writing that not a fact juts out, not a dogma tears the surface of the texture"¹⁶.

GTAT abounds in factual details, when I read it with an eye for them. Didion talks about Xanadu, about meeting "the widow of the celery king of the Harlem market." She mentions that she wore, during those years in New York, a perfume called *Fleurs de Rocaille*, and another called *L'Air du*

¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, "The Modern Essay," *Collected Essays*, vol. 2, London, Hogarth Press, 1966, p. 41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

Temps. She informs the reader that, for a while, she cut herself off from everyone she loved, and that her days, during that time, were blurred up by tears:

I cried until I was not even aware when I was crying and when I was not, cried in elevators and in taxis and in Chinese laundries, and when I went to the doctor he said only that I seemed to be depressed, and should see a “specialist.” He wrote down a psychiatrist’s name and address for me, but I did not go¹⁷.

Looking through the kaleidoscope of facts that gives a diamond-cut feel to this essay, it hits me that Woolf’s “magic of writing” must be precisely the point, here: not a line of *GTAT* feels forced to me, or bluffed, or artfully contrived. Controlled, no doubt, but not contrived. The essay—to my nerve endings—feels like truth feels. Something I always recognize when it’s there, but can’t ever single out in a sentence. It has to do with a certain emotional honesty. Paired with some sort of intelligence. Didion’s fact-filled remarks are often pointed, yet perceptively funny. In a way that’s clever; considerate, even. Wit, I imagine, is a better word for that. But still, all of this isn’t exactly the point. The fact of her crying, alone, isn’t the point. Her quips, smart as they sound, aren’t the point. The point—the aura that lends itself to her words, and gives an air of authority to her voice—is that she’s *aware*. *Self-aware*.

In my mind, this awareness is the beautiful thing (her literary mind’s peachy trick). It’s what allows her to line up the facts of her life in ways that reveal what she’s getting at, instead of explaining the heart of her message away. It’s what allows her to make connections, arresting connections, and to show a kind of clarity of self-understanding that I, as a reader, get to just *get*:

All I ever did to that apartment was hang fifty yards of yellow theatrical silk across the bedroom windows, because I had some idea that the gold light would make me feel better, but I did not bother to weight the curtains correctly and all that summer the long panels of transparent golden silk would blow out the windows and get tangled and drenched in the afternoon thunderstorms. That was the year, my

¹⁷ Joan Didion, “Goodbye to All That,” *op. cit.*, p. 237.

twenty-eighth, when I was discovering that not all of the promises would be kept, that some things are in fact irrevocable and that it had counted after all, every evasion and every procrastination, every mistake, every word, all of it¹⁸.

And if I get *her*, it's because, in a way, she gets *me*. She may not know a single fact about my life—who I am, what makes me tick, whistle, scream, or tingle at the nape of the neck. What makes me cry... Yet she knows this: I haven't come here to watch the Empress strut around in her new clothes. I can see that the Empress knows very well how to weave with words. Surely she can *write*. But her writerly skills, it turns out, have very little to do with her telling me that, on occasion, "some Veblenesque gorge would rise in my throat¹⁹." That adjectival sin, "Veblenesque," is absolved as quickly as it's read. Because the Empress—I felt this as soon as I first saw the last period on the last page—is naked. She's naked, *and she knows it*. Which I guess is what makes her, in point of fact, not an Empress, but a Sorceress. She's so aware of having no clothes to show for, in the end, that I, as her reader, can't help but hear her out. Can't help but believe every pondered thing she's come to say, here, in this essay. I even come back, believing again every word of it. As if any word of this story could, any second now, unscramble the story of my own life.

I first read *GTAT* during a time when I often cried, alone in my apartment. I cried because I was sick. *More and more sick*, in fact. Some weeks after a stream of microbes had left a tick's body and gotten under my skin, a whole list of neurological symptoms had kicked in. Which was

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 232-233.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 236-237.

something I was the only one to know about. Something I wished I could forget. Yet I knew I'd soon have to say something about... well, about *all that*.

I knew I'd soon have to find the words. And it would be Didion's awareness that would lead me toward my own.

“Our human environment contains not just food and shelter, enemies to fight or flee, and conspecifics with whom to mate,” writes cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett in *Consciousness Explained*, “but words, words, words.”

These words are potent elements of our environment that we readily incorporate, ingesting and extruding them, weaving them like spiderwebs into self-protective strings of narrative. Indeed, [...] when we let in these words, they tend to take over, creating us out of the raw materials they find in our brains²⁰.

A word I ingested as soon as I heard it coming for me was *hypochondria*: an anxiety disorder in which someone has a strong irrational fear of becoming ill or believes that they have illnesses despite a lack of evidence. Three months after my symptoms appeared, this word came screeching out of a doctor's mind. For the third time in those three months, I sat in the fluorescent light of this doctor's office with the same pixelated visual field, the same foggy brain, and the same compounding case of health anxiety. And right after he said it out loud—“hypochondria”—he made it clear that this would be the last time I'd see him about these troubles I'd been imagining.

²⁰ Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, New York, Little, Brown and Co., 1991, p. 417.

Then came a pep talk. Which—I'll admit—was respectable enough that I felt I could go on believing it: I was *young*, he told me, and undoubtedly *healthy* (“in the prime of life,” is what he said), and I'd do myself the biggest favour if I could just focus on living up that youth again. My mind, split up in self-confusion as it was, proved to be just the kind of place where a word like that could take root, and thrive. I helplessly needed a self-image I could cling to, and now I'd found the narrative backbone of “Hypochondriac Me.” So I let this story spin itself around the nervous mess of my days, and for a while it tied my sense of self up quite nicely.

When I figured out, a good ten years down the line, that the ones that had been toying with my health were the bacteria that cause Lyme Disease, I pulled myself up and started to see my symptoms for what they were: *real*. Yet, at the same time, the more I considered the possibility that these tiny beings had nested in my body's tissues, and that they were the ones scratching my nerves from the inside, the more I felt the patched-up story of *me* unravelling, and head off script. The centre of my mind was not holding. I'd oscillate between the determined mania of research and the insecurities of needing to prove to everyone (starting, of course, with myself) that there'd actually been something going on with me all this time. I wanted to remedy the “lack of evidence,” and clear any mention of “hypochondria” off of my health resume. So, not only did I start to talk about the disease with friends and family, I also decided I should make the case for it in front of doctors. Which, given how dismissive most of them were, proved to be my worst idea yet. That is, until the idea came to me that I should *write* about the disease, and rewrite history.

My default setting as a sentence-maker had always been: *cerebral*. But nothing could make a Scrabble-32-pointer such as “incomprehensibilities” more attractive than the thought that no one around me would believe what I was telling them. My focus was thus on matters of “style.” But this “style” I was so focused on had no connection with the awareness and emotional honesty—the truthful stuff—I personally loved to find in essays. It had instead everything to do with convincing incredulous people that they should believe the story of “Perfectly Sane Me.” (In this story, before telling a doctor how it had all began, I’d mention I could go through my “anamnesis” for them, from the “onset” of my symptoms onward, and a few minutes later, Lyme Disease would reveal itself as “neuroborreliosis.”) And last but not least there was the thorniest, and most synapse-crippling literary problem of all: *How can I convey my symptoms so that they feel as real to them as they feel to me?*

To “hinder the description of illness in literature, there is the poverty of the language,” Woolf tells us in “On Being Ill.”

The merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare, Donne, Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. There is nothing ready made for him. He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other (as perhaps the inhabitants of Babel did in the beginning) so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out. Probably it will be something laughable²¹.

Decidedly it was something like that. My symptoms, on the page, first came out as shady incomprehensibilities. And my story? I think what I envisioned—to put it in a narrative backbone—was an edge-of-your-seat dramatic recounting of “My Journey through Medical Hell

²¹ Virginia Woolf, “On Being Ill,” p. 44-45.

and Back.” I sensed and savoured the possibility of a heart-skipping personal essay that would highlight, at last, one resoundingly relevant fact: *Max wasn't crazy after all.*

But my first few drafts turned out not so much dramatic as *melodramatic*. The drama wasn't provided by the facts themselves, but instead by yours truly (and his highbrow friend the thesaurus). In the deepest part of this rabbit hole, I was picking out the prettiest words, but hearing them only as sounds. I was being cajoled by glitzy adverbs and titillating adjectives into typing them... and letting them drive my story off a cliff. I wrote a whole lot more melody than meaning this way, until the whole thing came out as a rather wordy bore to read. And in the end, what I feared most still happened, of course. Doctors—even as I took care to use their lingo—knew I was scared. Readers of my first drafts knew I was scared. Everyone could see through the “style,” and through what I wanted the “style” to say about me. Everyone, that is, except *me*.

If I did a few helpless things when first confronted with the self-confusions of chronic illness—things like writing preciously impenetrable prose—I did them, deep down, for the sake of my story. I did them hoping to find again a place where to live inside of me. A place I could feel would make sense. But there's always—remember?—this ancient thing happening in the human mind, whereby a story (and maybe especially a story of *me*) can be known, and truly *felt*, long before it shows itself. Before it can finally emerge from the facts of a life, and be fleshed out in writing. *Self-aware* writing.

The first dictum young writers are told to follow is usually: *Write what you know*. But for a while, all I knew were facts, situations. *This and that happened. This and that was painful and confusing*. Although I quite *affectedly* wrote these facts, they weren't giving me anything true and transformative enough to make a story. The day I figured that out is the day I saw that my hands were covered in self-conscious writing. And most importantly: that no amount of writerly trickstery would change that.

For a while, then, I imagined I'd never had anything to say. Which, in a way, I was right about: one of the few things I was stone-cold certain of, back when I began to write about myself and my troubles, was that I hated the disease, and I hated the life I was living with the disease... and I knew I didn't have the guts to see any of that on the page. I'd obsess over my sentences, and would try to make them ring just as beautiful as Didion's, only because hers were among the few things that still made me feel alive, and understood—and, just, wonderful.

“You can read the life you're living, but you cannot change a word,” Leonard Cohen said, in one of his last interviews. For some reason I'd scribbled this line in a notebook, even without really knowing what he meant. But just now, as I write this, it hits me. What he meant is that you don't get to choose the truth about yourself. You only get to look for it. And, if it so happens that you care to find that truth out and let it be heard, you get, also, to root around for the words to tell it. The gift, if there is one, is in the compulsion to track down the ones that will feel like the truth feels.

The day I discovered *GTAT* was also the day I discovered that someplace inside, a part of me was crazy about the truthful, human kind of writing that I find in essays. It was something like the way Didion felt, from the first, about her beloved New York: “I was in love with the city, the way you love the first person who ever touches you and never love anyone quite that way again²²”. This literary obsession, it turned out, was a seed. I felt it take root in me. I wanted to read more pages with intimate voices like this one, so many more. Which I did. And still do.

An old, abandoned idea also began to come up for air around that time. Weeks went by, and then months, and the same white whale of a thought would show itself, *more and more* insistently. As insistently as I felt the need to reread the same essay. As if to say to me: *Can't you see me? Don't you want to do something about me?* I hadn't tried my hand at personal prose in a long, long time. But there I was, slowly wanting to see something of myself on the page again. I wanted to write an essay just like that one, and I wanted to do it just because it seemed something inside insisted that I do so. The whole thing, let me say, was as sweet as thrusting my tongue through the fluff of a mid-August peach.

GTAT, on the surface, is Didion's au revoir to a city that transformed her. But as a parable (in Turner's sense of the word), there's of course more. The essay is a story of disenchantment, and

²² *Ibid.*, p. 228.

then of growth. It's an elegy for a past self. This narrative backbone is what I took in with a shiver, the first time. Then its magic slowly made its mark along my spine. Which, I'm reminded, is precisely what was happening to Didion, as she wrote the opening lines of the essay: "I can remember now, with a clarity that makes the nerves in the back of my neck constrict, when New York began for me."

Every time I went back toward the piece's words, they'd wake up an ancient wisdom; one that lives on stories and breathes beneath every human mind. Every time, something would light up. It was in this light that I felt I needed to look at myself, and my life, a little more clearly, a little more *honestly*.

I call this kind of bright-white magic *wisdom*, but I use the word more radically than we're used to. Wisdom, for me, is just what happens when I come to *see clearly*. Which often has to do with coming across the right story. And also, sometimes—as I peek, through resonant writing, into the mind of another—with being lucky enough to spot a white whale in there. One that will keep coming back up for air (for me). An experience which, as the anthropologist and essayist Lewis Hyde explains, is quite a transformative gift:

Most artists are brought to their vocation when their own nascent gifts are awakened by the work of a master. That is to say, most artists are converted to art by art itself. The future artist finds himself or herself moved by a work of art, and, through that experience, comes to labor in the service of art until he can profess his own gifts. [It is] when art acts as an agent of transformation that we may correctly speak of it as a gift²³.

²³ Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*, 3^e éd., New York, Vintage Books, 2007, p. 59.

If I've received any magic from the labour of Didion's hands, it's a kind of spine tingle that has me insistently wondering, as I write every next sentence: *How will you let this one speak truthfully about yourself?*