



Pick's Disease

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Pick's Disease

i.

When I was 19 my father was diagnosed with Pick's disease, a form of early onset dementia akin to Alzheimer's. At the time I was a college junior living in Tokyo as part of a study abroad program. My sister

emailed me the news. At first it didn't mean much, a possible explanation for the strange and inconsistent behavior he had been exhibiting, but mostly it seemed abstract.

On Christmas day I got a call from my family, laughing about my brother's talking Darth Vader pen breaking the silence of a Christmas Eve church ceremony. "I want them alive!" it said. At first my dad tried to tell the story but his confused ordering of events got in the way. He gave up and gave the phone to my sister. That spring I received a letter, the first and last I have ever gotten from him, a single page ending in the line "I'm so proud of you."

I began to think about the past and make revisions to my memory and the logic of events growing up. We wrote emails until one day he wrote that if I wasn't going to write back he wouldn't write me any more goddamn letters. Later, when somebody showed him how to

check his in-box he apologized, and continued writing stories about the dogs and the farm, pouring gasoline down snake holes and his adventures with Susan. At the end of one of these emails, he concluded, "I hope you find something funny everyday."

ii. Easter

A man with blood on his head stumbles into the street.
Wind swept plaza at the corner of 34th and 7th.
Sadness.
I think I'm beginning to know what this is.

The corner of 42nd and 6th.
"It's not hard to leave you just do it."
Unless you miss the bus, I thought to myself.
A windy day.

It doesn't matter how you do it.
I thought I.
A man drinks his Coke.
The shadow of One Penn Plaza.

Between us, a young couple escapes into each other.
An old man wanders without bearing.
The pull of the moon.
The bus.

iii.

There is a connection between when I started to write poetry, or had at least become aware that I could wholeheartedly apply myself to writing, and my father's illness. How this connection can be made explicit is difficult to say. There were times during my sophomore year of college, before the diagnoses, when he would call to chat at five in the morning, or suddenly appear at my dorm room on a Tuesday afternoon. Later, watching him fold laundry, each item, be it a t-shirt or a pair of socks, was put into its own pile to the effect that the laundry room was completely covered in a single layer of neatly folded clothes. It seemed like he forgot what he had just folded, the category he had just created. Like reading a sentence so closely that you forget the beginning before you reach the end. "That's a good way of explaining it," said my mother.

iv.

Yesterday I finished painting early and took a long nap in the late afternoon. After about three hours I woke up, had an evening; made dinner, took a shower, did some submissions, and talked on the phone. I went to bed after twelve and woke up at seven. I dreamt of comforting my old friend in a grocery store. All of his friends had died and we were standing in line. His father was behind the cash register and my friend was crying. I paid, and when his father gave me my change, he held up a penny between his index finger and thumb, showing me: "One cent," he said, making sure I understood. I turned and gave it to my friend, believing it was lucky.

Pac-Man's Character

i.

Jobless in Seattle, I frequented a coffee shop named Solstice, not because I liked their coffee but because of its front porch like sitting section, slightly elevated but exposed to the flow of traffic. One night while I was reading a Harper's Magazine an older man sat down at my table and asked if I was an intellectual. We talked but he was hostile, taking me for someone I had no idea I was.

He told me he was a genius and a playwright, busy staging a major production in Seattle but stuck outside for the night, a day too early to start his residency. He told me about what it meant to be a writer, reading Shakespeare, and writing everyday. Hard work, and I asked questions. At one point, after I passive-aggressively challenged his genius status, he snapped at

me: “You’re the one who wanted to play chess.”

As it got late I offered him the couch where I was living. I didn’t like him, but enjoyed the attention and adventure of meeting a stranger at a coffee shop. We walked back and I asked him to read a chapbook that I had put together. Shaking his head, he said I needed a lot of work. He was tired and grumpy, and I suggested sleep. He let himself out in the morning.

ii.

Found a dead red tail hawk beneath a grey sky and power lines, driving with my father in the countryside. I was about five. We picked it up and put it into a trash bag in the trunk. The DNR told us, after affirming that we weren’t the ones who killed it, that they had no use for it, and that maybe a university or school could use it for research. We contacted my grade school and I fantasized about kids being awed by my discovery. They told us that they had no use for it unless it was stuffed. Why was it dead? It was probably killed from the power lines. My dad threw it away in a dumpster.

A hawk perched outside a fledgling bookstore. This one could have been a sign. Like a wolf falling from the sky into the arms of a child with a speech impediment. A sign of future glory. The store was in Brooklyn, owned by a friend of mine. I had helped him build the bookshelves and prepared the space, painting and repair. In the end

I felt somewhat edged out of the operation, not that I had invested anything other than my time, but I felt that I helped him and the bookstore a considerable amount and was hoping to be a part of the bookstore's future, to be included in some of the decision making. It didn't work out that way but the store is doing well.

An owl flew up from the middle of the road, a long night in a strange town ending with the key breaking off in the car's lock. Jake and I had been painting at Pam's weekend home in the Southwest corner of Massachusetts, a town called Ashley Falls. One night we were feeling stir crazy and went out to a town about thirty miles north. We wandered around, making our longest stop near a group of street musicians. They were just high school kids but sitting with them made us feel as if we were a part of something larger. Later, I turned the key too hard in a lock that was broken anyway. We called Pam and she came with an extra set of keys. Its wings were huge and startling.

iii.

“Pac-Man's character is difficult to explain even to the Japanese—he is an innocent character. He hasn't been educated to discern between good and evil. He acts more like a small child than a grown-up person. Think of him as a child learning in the course of his daily activities. If some one tells him guns are evil, he would be the type to rush out and eat guns. But he would most probably eat any gun, even the pistols of the policemen who need them.”

-Toru Iwatani, creator of Pac-Man

iv.

Late July, I was walking up the gravel driveway in the middle of the day, ten years old. The driveway followed along a ridge that lined a steep descent into a narrow valley; Christmas trees planted perpendicular to the incline, rows as far down the hill as the tractor could go without tipping. On the other side, across the tiny creek, an opposing hill rose not as steep, but higher, also marked with Christmas trees planted with the grade of the incline; chest high Frasier Firs and six foot Pines. The sky was blue and cloudless, hot and humid. Grasshoppers jumped out of the way with each step and there was a perpetual call of insects buzzing and clicking. I looked out from the ridge, the view, taking a break from the climb. I thought: "This is beautiful," or at least, I thought, "Folks older than me would probably consider this 'beautiful,' but I don't know anything about that. Maybe it will make sense to me when I'm older."

The Invisible Hand

i.

We found a place to drink, a small German themed pub not too far from the Shinjuku station, and sat at the bar. It was empty aside from a middle aged couple sitting at a corner table, and a gray haired man sitting at the bar. We each had a couple of beers and ate bar snacks out of the little glass dishes placed on the bar. We talked and joked with the gray haired man, an architect, about cardboard houses. After not too long we decided to go and got our bill, something like one hundred twenty thousand yen, which was something like one hundred dollars at that time. Alarmed and embarrassed that I led my friends here, the bartender explained she had to charge us extra for sitting at the bar and eating snacks.

This morning in the Travel section of the New York Times there is an article about tiny, back alley bars becoming increasingly popular in Japan. The article

quotes a bar owner: “If you are intruding on a close-knit scene, the proprietor will ignore you and maybe over charge you. You won’t be asked to leave, but you will want to leave.”

ii.

The town is empty because I have my headphones on.
Sitting in the cafe window two men with glasses eat
breakfast.
Intellectuals need their space.
The stoplight was green but there were no cars
to go. I walked across the intersection.
I reached into my pocket
and found finger nail clippers. I put them there
to remind myself. John
handed me a pear blessed by Buddha.
Surrounded by statues of the Buddha.
I had been feeling kind of disconnected, and thought
the pear
might help. By setting it on the counter at night
I remember to eat it the next morning. My face
is sweet like a teenager.

iii.

Adam was the first person I spoke to in New York.
Rain was the first weather I experienced in New York.
A Honda Civic was the first car I rode in in New York.
An apple was the first thing I ate in New York.
My brother is the first person I called in New York.
“Turkish Kitchen” was the first restaurant I ate at in
New York.
Barbara is the first person to not call me back in New
York.
Johnathan is the first person I wrote an email to in
New York.
The L was the first train I took in New York.
Grape juice was the first thing I bought in New York.
The first meal I made in New York consisted of
sausage, cheese, and horse radish.
My first breakfast was waffles and tea in New York.
Barbara was the first person who called me back in
New York.

Union Square was the first place I met someone in New
York.
“The Cellar” was the first bar I went to in New York.
Talking about pulling skin off my lip was the first time
I felt awkward in New York.
To buy fabric with my brother was my first outing in
New York.
“American Ape” was the first book title I misread in
New York.
Adam’s black hat was the first thing I borrowed in New
York.
Janet was the first person who referred to me as a poet
in New York.
My brother was the first person to tell me their dream
in New York.
The first snack I ate in New York was peanut butter
and crackers.
“Who gets to call it Art?” was the first movie I went to
in New York.
The “Foxy” was the first gallery I went to in New York.

Barbara was the first person to tell me "We're not getting back together" in New York.

14th and 1st was the first corner I tried to change somebody's mind in New York.

Adam's apartment was the first place I was bummed out in New York.

Molly was the first person I called for comfort in New York.

Adam's desk was the first place I wanted to cry but couldn't in New York.

Adam's sublet was the first apartment I rearranged in New York.

My zipper was the first thing to break in New York.

The 19th was the first time I didn't care that I was in New York.

Fort Greene was the first place I went jogging in New York.

H_NGM_N was the first journal to accept my poems in New York.

Kafka on the Shore was the first book I finished in

New York.

Nate was the my first visitor in New York. I showed him around.

iv.

I was invited to stay in Leeds on my way up to Scotland for a family gathering. On the last day there Molly and I accompanied Barnaby to a conference where Barnaby and his fellow performers were invited to participate. While they set up, Molly and I wandered around the massive sculpture garden and park located on the grounds. It was a nice afternoon talking and playing around the sculptures.

After the performance, during a question and answer portion, I snuck off the bleachers and found a good spot outdoors and waited for the event to finish. I lay on a steep slope introspecting or whatever it is one does on a steep slope. After a while Molly and Barnaby came out of the building, along with the other performers and started up the hill in my direction. I stood up to greet them, a little nervous as the group approached I began to think about all the things I could possibly say. Things

like, "Hello how are you"; "Nice Job"; ask a question; prepare for the question of what I was doing in England; what I do in general.

Sensing my unease, Bob, a larger man with hair almost to his shoulders reached out his hand, palm down, and said softly but pointedly, "You're alright, you're alright" and instantly I fell out of anxiety. We chatted briefly and excepting Barnaby and Molly, the performers got in their cars parked behind us and left.

Jung's Dream

i.

There is a trail of events within the dream, passing through friends and places, uniforms and roles, but these didn't stick in my mind. Instead it's the falling through sky, away from everyone, into a quarry like canyon filled with water so clear it did not distort the odd, fluorescent light that filled it. I had no problems breathing, and in looking around I saw jagged rock outcroppings ascending high up the sides in addition to smaller, human size boulders. Aquarium like greens swayed on top the white sand where I was standing, amazed to be okay after the fall. But in looking around I felt fear. Not at the rocks but what was behind them.

What I remember most is my reaction to the fear: I decided to wake up. I got a sense I would see things I didn't want to see. Not because they would be horrible,

but because if I saw them I would have to deal with them. Fear. I woke myself up and returned to the comfort of bed.

Recently I've been reading a kind of autobiography by Carl Jung (*Memories, Dreams, Reflections*), and in it he goes into intense depths of analysis within his own dreams, his interpretations almost acting as plot points within his story. In the prologue he writes:

Outward circumstances are no substitute for inner experience. Therefore my life has been singularly poor in outward happenings. I cannot tell much about them, for it would strike me as hollow and insubstantial. I can understand myself only in the light of inner happenings. It is these that make up the singularity of my life, and with these my autobiography deals.

ii.

Saturday night I had a dream: on a train like an Amtrak with curving atrium like windows that were easy to look out of. I had a seat at the very front, not as a driver but as a passenger looking to my left at great gray clouds churning above the plain. It was not raining or nighttime, but the clouds were dense and it was dark and it seemed like it had been forever since we'd seen the sun. There was a sense in the dream that at any moment the clouds could turn apocalyptic, that the world would just end and there was no knowing if or when it would happen.

I was a little nervous about the uncertain timing, but was resigned to the situation and life on the train. It was full of international students. No names, but they were the kind of students I work with a lot at my job. I walked to the back of the train into a kind of supermarket brightly lit by florescent lights and spoke with Dr. Chang (the

scientist from the television series *Lost*). He didn't have much to add to our situation other than "wait and see." There was also a sense that there was nobody left to ask for help, that if the clouds had not already over taken others then they were in a situation similar to ours. Before I woke up the clouds lightened just a little and I remember saying to a group of students, reassuringly, that maybe we'll see the sun again, but it was still obscured and I didn't really know.

On Sunday I told my roommate about the dream and he said he'd had the same dream, half jokingly. He suggested that it was about the self dying. That didn't exactly sound right to me. Once in a graduate school workshop another student asked why I was always invoking the end of the world. My newspaper horoscope on Tuesday read "Your idea of 'realistic' can come across to others as apocalyptic."

iii.

Before I went to sleep, my roommate and I attended the second half of a symposium on poetry and medicine. The first speaker was a somatic psychologist specializing in sound. She lead us through some sound/song exercises and spoke about music being capable of more than entertainment. She also spoke about a particular interest of hers: Alzheimer's, how it runs in her family and the fact that she has done a lot of work around it and other forms of dementia. I approached her afterward and told her about the sound my father's been making for the last three years at Clearview, one of the "care facilities" he's been in; a kind of guttural chanting sound that he repeats over and over:

garh...barh...varh...arh...carh...barh...garh...barh...varh...arh...carh...barh...garh...barh...varh...arh...carh...barh...garh...barh...varh...arh...carh...barh...garh...barh...varh...arh...carh...barh...

The first time I heard him do this was in the summer of 2006. Amy and I had taken him outside the facility for a little fresh air, and while standing on the little patch of lawn on the hospital's hill overlooking farmland, he strung together about four of these sounds and then stopped. Almost like a conversation, he would start and stop sporadically, with space in-between. "It sounds like he's saying car, doesn't it?" Like some kind of mystery. "Dad, do you mean car?" He would start again. We took him back inside.

Over the past three years he's come to do it more and more. So much so that his voice has grown hoarse: garh...barh...varh...arh...carh...barh... like a broken toy. I imagine the frontal lobe dissolving to reveal a lizard mind, or a cracked and broken skull leaking liquid the color of brake fluid, or a brain exposed like a cartoon zombie. I told a brief version of the above events to the speaker, waving a hand over my face to signal "no cognition." My question: what does the sound mean? "Whatever it means, it's not for you."

iv.

I felt strange walking to the BART after the talk, a little bit out of body, reminiscent of my first year in Providence during the Winter of 2003, goofed up on anxiety and panic attacks, and in serious need to speak; seriously paranoid and unable to open my mouth. A kind of psychedelic nervousness that all of a sudden came up after the talk. I felt strange but couldn't put my finger on what exactly the feeling was.

How the dream relates to all this I'm not sure, other than the fear that my mind is closing as well, the clouds are coming. But if most people I knew didn't also think there was something uniquely wrong with them I might be able to present this theory with more confidence, that there's nothing particularly unique about a writer with a death wish. Anyway, on Sunday, after a morning of reading and feeling weird, I struck out for the grocery with my headphones on and in the middle of "That's

That," an MF Doom song, I cried and the strange feeling disappeared.

"Can it be I stayed away too long....did you miss these rhymes when I was gone." The clouds. Like the ones I watched over the Wisconsin hills steaming towards the farm. Dark clouds, storm clouds, and when the tornado warning would appear in the bottom left corner of the TV I would look through the long narrow rows of windows to confirm the fear. The house on top of the hill rattled and shook, the lightning struck our weather vane. One night, after one of these storms had passed and the moon came out, full and bright enough to wake me up, I stumbled outside in the middle of the night and found my dad too, staring at the moon, standing in the yard. It's really bright, I said. It woke me up.