Notes on the Pharmakon

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Why did I wax poetic about the man I saw step in front of a train? There was a sort of thud and a squish and a few cracks at the same time, a single sound that must have been much louder to him.

I was with the New Trier High School Track and Field Team. We were on a bus headed to an indoor meet, driving south on Green Bay Road, which runs parallel to the Union Pacific North Metra tracks. The old train tracks had been pried up in the 1930s as part of the New Deal. They were moved eight feet west for the new UP-N Metra line, which, for traffic, would use bridges to pass over (rather than through) the busiest intersections. The ground beneath the old tracks was paved and became the Green Bay Trail, where New Trier’s runners train. When I was on the team, we ran the same twelve-mile stretch between Highland Park and Evanston every day, sometimes twice, unless we were running speed drills on the track.

We had run by the Wilmette train station the day before, and many times before that; but, in the bus, we caught a red light just before the northbound train pulled in. The bus rolled toward the light and the anti-lock brakes stopped us with a few little shudders that slid us forward in our seats.

I had been intrigued by trains when I was very young. The intrigue was only moderate—I built, perhaps, a single model train as a child. Among my earliest memories is Jack Fitzpatrick’s fourth birthday party, for which we piled aboard the Metra UP-N and rode two stops to the Depot Diner, a greasy spoon breakfast spot with a miniature electric train that ran overhead, piping a tiny steam whistle. A similar miniature ran around the Fitzpatrick’s Christmas tree every year, and Jack and I would derail it with our fingers and army figurines. It never hurt when it hit your hand, but I was always nervous. A streak of vapid fear would fill my chest as I laid my fingers across the tracks and watched the tiny train get closer.

I liked to crush coins on the full-size tracks by my house and watch wheels taller than myself roll by. I would watch how the long, straight steel beams chugged back and forth, up and down, attached to a pivot on those steel trundles that reminded me of giant can-openers. I would map out, in a child’s terms, how this linear, repetitive motion turned into the spinning of a wheel, of many wheels all connected. An incalculable power moved something so grand so invariably forward. When I was older, I would try to calculate the collective weight of all the people on a full train. I imagined each packed car during rush hour, hundreds of commuters, each a hundred and some pounds; and I wondered if the train moved slower with all that weight. Or if the empty train itself was so heavy that no number of passengers could significantly change its mass or momentum.

My house is only three-hundred meters from the Union Pacific North stop in Glencoe. I can hear trains from my room. When I started taking the Metra to school, I would race the sounds of the approaching train. I could leave when I first heard it rumbling in, and I would
sprint the asphalt path to the tracks. Most often, I would get there as the doors opened, and it was
exciting and distracting to cut it that close.

So I watched when trains passed. Not obsessively, but reactively, like when the extras in
a movie scene accidentally steal my attention from center screen. *Ferroequinologist* is the term
for an extreme train-enthusiast, though they are also referred to as railfans, roamers, and
trainspotters. The most daring are called “gunzels,” and will risk anything for a unique train
photo. As fancy as it sounds, “ferroequinology” is a portmanteau based on the idiom “steel
horse”: *ferrous*: containing iron; *equine*: horse. The hobby is (intended to be) somewhat
legitimized by the scientificity of its title.

There is a child in Wilmette who, when it isn’t too cold, watches trains daily with his
father. They set up folding chairs on the corner across from the tracks and bring a cooler full of
snacks and drinks. They spend full days on that corner. The child watches the trains with
contagious excitement, the father watches his son, and each appreciates a different, unfathomable
power of the passing machines.

The meet was on a wet, gray day, blustery with the end of winter, and the child and his
father were not there when our bus pulled up to the corner. I was talking with one of the
sprinters, Derrick Troester, but I paused and glanced through the window as flashing red lights
and monotonous bells announced the approaching locomotive. Around 4:30 pm, the students
and teachers had already caught their trains. Those working nine-to-fives would take the 5:08 or
the 5:22. The platform was mostly empty but for those working odd hours or with odd plans. An
old man in formal, dated clothing stood at the south end of the platform, where the northbound
train would be moving fastest as it passed, even as it began to stop.

Watching a commute always felt to me like some sort of puzzle being completed. All
these routines running alongside another, set to the timing of the trains—people going to
different places from different places for different reasons, but everyone getting there the same
way. Whether people are getting on or off, there is a sense of completion, of synchronicity—a
calculated fit like a jigsaw, to the crowds that file in and out, mostly silently, of the Metra cars.

As the train pulled into the station, suddenly the old man was in front of it. He was no
longer next to the rails, but above them and then gone. The timing was such that he never
touched the tracks. The station platform is elevated about three feet, so that it stands even with
the train doors. The old man did not have time to fall to the ground before the train moved
through him and we heard him die.

An instant of silence, then we heard the gasp of those still on the platform; another instant
and the sounds of shock were inside the bus. The students who hadn’t seen did not believe those
who had. There was an awkward clash of incredulity and solemnity as we drove on.
I spent the next three days reading obituaries online, searching for the official version of events. Without one, I was free and forced to think of my own story of that instant. It is easy to think about other people dying. I feel something about my own death, but when I ponder dying, someone else is doing it. I have pondered it often. Under my comforter, with nothing to do but sleep, I can really get into it. My thoughts are eloquent, philosophical, even artful—the death of others is given value, beauty even, in the understanding it might afford the living.

I researched, too. Looked for clues as to what I had seen, or how to think about it. The U.S. Department of Transportation calculates an average of 750 fatalities per year by train. These deaths are categorized, graphed, and summarized by the DOT in annual rail safety pamphlets. Fatalities are fit to several categories that seem to aim for some relation of varied causes and their single effect: equipment malfunctions, human error, affected signal function, type of intersection where the accident occurred. Around 250 deaths each year are listed as “miscellaneous.”

It could have been a gust of wind, a very strong one for which he was not ready, that came while he was placing too much weight on his cane, while he was peering with a misbalanced squint at something on the track—just a shadow but a shape strange enough to catch your eye. It happens a few times every year; these deaths go toward the “miscellaneous” statistic.

If I live so long, I must remember not to chance a further look at a shadow on windy days. Perhaps I should test myself. When I stop getting fat with age and the weight instead slides off my bones and I begin to grip railings more tightly, perhaps I should go outside with a windsock each morning and lean into a gust or two—see how new folds in my skin catch the air, see in what torrent I can still take the train. How strange it is to inhabit this body that, if taken care of, might, if you’re lucky, last long enough to catch a draft like an auburn leaf that crunches lightly when sucked into the mulcher. Wind and shade and the weight of age, these are natural causes.

Maybe, though, the cause was some sinister figure with baseless enmity for elderly men. Perhaps he had lurked at the train station for hours, planning, looking for someone who would tip easily. It is not as rare as you would think.

Drs. Daniel A. Martell and Park Elliot Dietz conducted a study titled “Mentally Disordered Offenders Who Push or Attempt to Push Victims onto Subway Tracks in New York City.” In this study, forty-nine such incidents were identified during a 17-year period. Of the perpetrators, only 69% were referred for psychiatric evaluations, of which 95% were diagnosed as psychotic. Many instances of homicide on the tracks are categorized as hate crimes, as immigrants are targeted disproportionately in such crimes, though the causal factor of this statistical anomaly remains unclear. One event included in the study was gang-related.
The articles about train-pushers always parrot the same sentiment: “such a heinous act of random violence is truly unthinkable.”

I don’t know about that. It is easy to think of racists we know, of stories of psychosis, of gang-related headlines. I’d certainly prefer not to, though. It is much easier to think of each ferroequine murder as an aberration rather than as a revelation, a peek at something unseen because it is unique, not because it is hidden.

It could have been a suicide. Statistics would suggest this, but I am free of fact until I find his obituary. Do old men kill themselves? They have as much a reason as anyone I suppose, just less time. But a train seems an awfully violent way to do it. I imagine he must have had some prescription that would have done the job a little more quietly. He made a sound we could hear over the engine and through the bus windows. I found myself searching for the right onomatopoeia, locked suddenly in ekphrasis. He made the sound a human makes when struck by a train.

The CDC indicates that the suicide rate in the United States is actually highest among men aged 75 and above. Between the eldest two age-brackets, 65-74 and 75+, there is a sharp increase from 32.5 to 42.8 suicides per 100,000 individuals. Suicide rates across all demographics have risen 24% between 1999 and 2014.

An average of 400 people each year commit suicide specifically by train. This represents roughly 50% of all rail-related deaths. The Federal Rail Administration notes that as many as half of these deaths occur on “open rail” as opposed to at a train station. As the DOT owns these tracks, and passengers are permitted only on official platforms, open rail deaths are referred to as “trespassers.” These trespassers are the most consistently successful suicides. In stations, only 56% of suicide attempts result in death, due to the varying speeds of trains and implemented track-safety equipment.

The FRA’s statistical analysis also calculates an average of six bystanders to each rail-related death, including the conductors and foremen aboard every train. These conductors and foremen are often the only witnesses, as most open rail is used for freight rather than passenger travel. Dr. Howard Rombom conducted a study with Behavioral Medicine Associates and found that 40% of rail employees witness to track fatalities develop depression, and 16.3% develop PTSD.

Everything I have learned from everyone else’s death abandons me at every fright. In the immediacy of my own physical fear, or even just discomfort, my thoughts become vacuous, numb, simplistic. I had hoped that all that time I spent thinking about people dying, time I might have spent sleeping instead, would have helped me out when(ever) I (thought I) was going to die. That my careful contemplations of death would offer some sort of comfort when it came for me.
I had imagined, assumed really, that this was why I did it. But perhaps this hobby is not as practical as I thought.

When a fear is real and my own, it saps my eloquence—negates any desire for it. When my car skids on unseen ice, I do not think about what it would “mean” if it were my final slide. No, my skin is just drawn tight, like the sheets on a hotel bed. My pupils just shrink like a dumbstruck cartoon. I let out a sound that is not a word, I let in something that is not a thought. My ears get hot.

The old man had been dressed up for the event: newsboy cap immaculate, for a while; tweed jacket; spotless slacks. At sixteen I had never see someone die before, but his seemed like appropriate attire. The back of his cap hugged the bald slope between crown and nape; his pale neck plunging into tweed shoulders, the rear vent of his jacket blown back as he stepped forward—this was the image with which I arrived, along with the rest of the track team, at the Evanston fieldhouse for the Kevin Richards Invitational Track Meet.

Grant White had been sitting next to me on the bus. Perfunctorily, we began our warmup laps. He would compete in the 880-yard dash, and our coach had put me in the two-mile.

“Do you feel like running?” Grant asked. I didn’t feel like not running. We continued into stretches, and I felt the ropy tendons behind my knees pull tight like catgut on a bow. I leaned into the resistance of my muscles and worked out a few knots.

I felt nauseated, common among racers. I knew that even a bad race would hurt. They all hurt. Every time a runner steps on the track, the only objective is exhaustion. Sometimes you run slow, but the realest failure is finishing with something left to give. Runners often vomit or faint at the end of a good race. Kevin Richards, a junior, collapsed and died on the finish line of his one-mile race in 2000. The athletics board named the meet after him.

As I stretched I felt my skin flush, and the dry air in the ancient fieldhouse rasped my voice. Evanston Township High School, like New Trier, did not have the space for a 200-meter indoor track. The 160-yard laps were one eleventh of a mile, the two-mile race twenty-two laps, 3,520 yards. It is, per track meet standards, the last event. Racers are called to the line at eight o’clock. I try to think through my intended splits and strategy one last time before I step onto the track. As the official raises his starter pistol, having strapped an orange plastic sleeve over his sport coat to keep the gunpowder off his cuff, I feel myself lean forward and wait for the sound.

The first lap is your only chance to run not tired, and it always goes out fast. The coaches yell out splits, but I cannot do the math for the twenty-one laps left.

By 440 yards I am winded, sucking on the dry air with new aggression. My sides are tight and they squeeze the breath from my throat before I can get it all down. My coach is stationed in the infield yelling at the track. Too fast. Too fast. I focus on pulling air deep.
My calves begin to ache at half a mile. They harden with each bound and, after a few more, threaten their elasticity altogether. I focus on staying long, reaching down the track with my steps. As the first mile ends, my feet begin to lose sensation. Slivery muscles in my ankles swell against intricately woven arteries. I think of numbers and I think of the end of the race. My chest aches as each heartbeat moves a little less blood.

I have a split heartsound, my doctor says. This is not harmful, he assures me. Most people can hear when their hearts move between diastolic and systolic states. Each of these states, though, actually has two phases, each of which happens to be audible in my heartbeat. Where most hearts go “gah-dunk,” mine goes “ga-ga duh-unk.” This has no effect on my health, but when my blood pressure rises, I hear my heart at double frequency. It is a hum in my ears as we come around one and a half miles.

Now I become dizzy. My gasps are painful and uneven, and a throbbing hypoxic headache has leveled off to hot pressure behind heavy eyes. My lungs are tight and vacuous, my spasmodic breath ineffective. A gauzy white creeps in at the edge of my vision. I know my sight might soon fade completely. Around again. A twentieth time. A twenty-second.

Our team still trains on the Green Bay Trail. A train passes every fifteen minutes or so. Their whistles startle me for a while after that meet. I don’t think of that man when I hear them, though. It turns out he was eighty-two, a local resident, who had recently lost his sick wife and inherited her healthy medical debt. The obituary mentioned no surviving relatives. I don’t think of that man when I hear train whistles. I just flinch.
Isabella II, Veiled

By Camillo Torreggiani

Her cold, stone hair folds softly upon itself where it disappears into her braid and under her crown. It looks as though it has fallen there just now. I see it about to move, and I stare to keep it still. If I come back, her locks will have tumbled through her crown, the veil will have blown aside. Nothing so alive may stay the same. A dimple peeks through the veil. Or rather, it is chiseled into the veil as to appear underneath it. Hard lines and deep folds in marble that seem to run like rain streaks and soften her cheeks strike through her eyes and my own. The veil is impossibly solid. A visceral unease, a sensory dissonance that I cannot actually see through the tulle. I expect to peer through this carving at a milk white world, but the veil stops my vision at Torreggiani's hand. My mind becomes more malleable than the marble to Torreggiani's touch. In a few strokes, he clears more debris from the raw stone, that grey matter, than I might with a thousand pages.

Tethered umbilical to this bust, I fear I might break my gaze prematurely. Somewhere in between seeing the sculpture and understanding it, I must remind myself I am not seeing through anything, though my eyes remain convinced. Everything that is there is on the surface of the stone; I will never see past that veil, but the tricks Torreggiani has carved convince me that I might. The lines fall so naturally in the tulle, so much gravity rests in those ridges, it is impossible to see the veil as anything other than resting on her face, added after, on top. This, though, is not the nature of marble, of sculpting something perfect. Every chip Torreggiani took from his raw block was permanent. There could be no underneath or on top to his work,
only the absence he worked into the stone where a face and a veil wouldn’t be. I look for more to notice, more to explain this arrest.

The Prado Museum website states that Torreggiani refused to valuate the bust himself, claiming it was not his place to “justify a work that I dedicated to the Kingdom of Spain... done for the sole purpose of meriting the acceptance and appreciation of His Majesty first, and then that of the worthy professors of the R. Camara.” History also suggests that he was dissatisfied with the 34,000 reales (about $10,000 USD today) that he was compensated for time and material. He completed, along with the bust, two pedestals for it, three feet and five feet tall, each equally ornate as the sculpture it was to hold. The figure sits on the smaller of the two in its current exhibition, and weighs 441 pounds in this configuration, though the raw stone for the piece would have weighed over 3,000 pounds. Wholesale, Carrara marble sells for $1 to $2 per pound.

The veiled face calls upon traditional Spanish images of Peace, Virtue, and Religion; often depicted as women behind a distance of tulle. Only now, nine months since I stood in the Prado, do I read of this explicit symbolism; do I discover the peace and virtue and religion within this bust are meant to be capitalized. At the time, I felt those qualities only in the minuscule.

What is this essay worth?

The upper limit must be 34,000 reales. But I suspect it is much less. Perhaps drop the thirty-four. But, ultimately, its value is not for me to say. Tapit, a retired racehorse sired by Pulpit, has a “stud fee” of $280,000-$350,000. Yearlings sired by Tapit sell for $400,000-$500,000. I read a few of these numbers recently on a website devoted to “surprising facts”, and I followed up on Wikipedia.

A yearling, having aged out of its foalish clumsiness, is a safer investment than unborn or infant horses of the same bloodline. As foals, even soon-to-be-champions can tire easily, or stumble over small clods on the track. Most lack the drive a racehorse needs, and only some develop it. It is clearer in a colt’s adolescence if he has a few wins in him, or if he is a weak issue of a strong stock. While this affects the value of a yearling to a certain degree, a horse’s racing record ultimately has little to do with the value of their “crops”—the foals sired by a single stud in the passing of one fiscal year. Tapit only ever ran six races. He performed poorly due to lung infections in multiple outings. He was retired after the sixth race to stud exclusively. Here his near infinite value was found. Starting with a modest fee of $15,000 per sired foal, Tapit’s first crop included Stardom Bound, a filly who, as a late yearling, won the 2008 Juvenile Fillies Breeders’ Cup. The promise of Stardom Bound created enormous interest Tapit’s stud services, for which the fees were doubled during his second crop in 2006. Tapit’s
next three crops were less impressive, but he sired another Juvenile Fillies winner in 2009 and
began his steady rise to current value. Thereon, Tapit’s stud fees doubled biennially as he sired,
among other champions, Breeders’ Cup Dirt Mile and San Fernando Stakes winner Tapizar,
and Belmont Stakes winner Creator.

American Pharaoh, one of only twelve Triple Crown winners in the history of horseracing, has a stud fee $100,000 cheaper than Tapit’s. With his Breeders’ Cup Classic win in 2015, he became the only racehorse to have won the “Grand Slam,” a title invented for his unique dominance of the field. Forbes estimates American Pharaoh’s value at $50,000,000, having produced only two crops. Tapit—whose annual stud earnings top $20,000,000—is valued at over $140,000,000.

Students petition the Prado for special permission to practice in their halls. They return
daily, often for months at a time, crafting meticulous imitations of innovative and classic works
as part of their technical development. Trying to learn through exact replication the production
process of a masterwork. More advanced students paint their own versions, responses even, to
the greats interred in the marble halls—Velazquez, Tintoretto, Durer. These students approach
their practice with the confidence to eschew others’ genius where they insert their own. I am
not sure if students need to pay for this access, nor do I know if students are free to sell their
replicative work. Photographs are not allowed in the museum.

I don’t want to write about this—I can only fall short of the hollowing inspiration this
veiled woman carved in me. I don’t want to write at all. I can only fall short of the magnetic
awe that pulses through the Prado—that pulse that resonated in some membrane of my own,
and let me imagine it was mine. To recognize awe at another’s work is to recognize beautiful
thought that will never be yours. That could never have been yours. Inspiration is indebtedness.
My writing, at least the thought that fuels it, is born to me, born into me, but owes its existence
to the seed of a donor. This owing is not bound by time or depth or distance. It is my hidden
lineage. It lurks in my work, hinting that to call myself the origin of these carved thoughts is to
not go back quite far enough.

The term “origin” may be traced back to the Latin verb oriri, “to rise”. Its etymological
 treatment often assumes “to rise” as synonymous with “to arise,” or “to arise from.” But in
 such definitions we lose the base. A fixed point, foundational, marks the beginning and forever
marks the progress of a rise. As something arises, it is created as something new. To arise is to
come from, not to be bound to. To rise (which, with a reversal of consonants, easily becomes
“to sire”), one must move, or be moved, upward from the base. A rise must never lose its
connection to—its reliance upon—that place from which it rose. A rise is built upon something
preexistent and larger than itself. The higher that one rises, the more important the origin
becomes to the structural integrity of the rise—to any capacity to rise higher.
Humans carry their origins in their names. We gain these taxonomic connections to base when the umbilical connection is snipped from our bellies; when your blood becomes your own, though you'll always remember where it flowed first. Some time later we can walk. Even later, we can fly (provided you can afford a ticket and get a ride to the airport). And the further we travel, the more specifically our names point back toward something before. Our names say, "I came from somewhere. I am not the first."

There are hundreds of paintings with the same names in the Prado. Fra Angelico painted The Annunciation in 1450. El Greco painted The Annunciation in 1603. Rubens painted The Annunciation in 1628. Murillo painted The Annunciation in 1655. John William Waterhouse painted The Annunciation in 1914. Each of these painters has also an Immaculate Conception somewhere in the Prado. There are even more Echo and Narcissuses.

These are not the works of studio art majors: not their explicit responses to classic pieces, undertaken to learn something in and about the process. Most of these painters had already done that. Francisco Goya, whose surreal and eerily evocative "Black Paintings" chill the entire, cavernous rear hall of the Prado, famously copied every Velasquez he could get his eyes on in his early career. When asked of his teachers, Goya explained that he had learned from "Nature, Rembrandt, and Velasquez." Yet Goya's work eschews Velasquez's Golden Age realism, and he paints implied narratives that oppose the suspension of time in Rembrandt's portraits. When Goya painted The Annunciation in 1785, he used a canvas shaped differently than those in Annunciations he had seen prior. It has a rounded top edge, towards which the angel Gabriel points, though both he and the Virgin Mary look down at the written prophecy of the inevitable conception. A radiant gold warmth dominates this upper curve, implying the ultimate grace and infinite nature of God and the heavens, though a hint of shade eclipses one corner. Gabriel points toward the light, identifying the Author of the words that Mary reads. This glorious light is contrasted by the dull beige rag in the geometric center of the painting, on which smudgy writing expresses the inspiration and will of God. There are Echoes of other Annunciations in this piece, but Goya's remains something conceived individually, immaculately, and with the purity of genius. Mary's eyes, permanently cast toward the humbly written prophecy, are joyless—her face is set with pious acceptance, though her mouth is pursed and suggests veiled shock.

Torreggiani took a sketch of Franz Xavier Winterhalter's royal portrait of Isabella II, which he used as his model for the bust. I try to imagine his first blow to the raw marble. I cannot see, though, what the beginning of such a piece looks like. I do not know, I never will, where to begin chiseling, or how to excavate genius from the surface of a stone. I have not the sculptor's vision beyond time to know the first strikes against bone-white ore, nor the last. I imagine creating a masterpiece, but only someone else's. Even in fantasy, the process is no less opaque than a marble veil.
When asked how he carved David, Michelangelo replied, “It’s easy. You just remove what does not look like David.” The stone that is left is only half a sculpture; a block of marble takes its form and meaning from the emptiness chiseled therein. Architect Tadao Ando told Robert Ivy in The Spirit of Modernism, “If you give people nothingness, they can ponder what can be achieved from that nothingness.” This is certainly true. But, Michelangelo’s claim—that it is “easy” to rend such nothingness in marble—is considered apocryphal by most historians.

One braid rises and ridges subtly through the veil. It does not seem to ripple on the surface of the marble but underneath it. I had never noticed a veiled woman’s hair, though I had also never noticed that selective blindness. Neither in writing nor in sight had I paid adequate attention to the delicacy of a curl. And so I will never describe a lock of hair without deepening my debt to Torreggianii. It will never be my own observation, but rather my best guess at what Torreggianii, the master, would have observed. My characters would have been bald had I not seen his work. I wouldn’t have noticed. Luckily, twenty years and a few months, for me, led to a series of random turns in the Prado that, in turn, led me to Isabella Il Veiled. There I was given new sight, but the vision is not my own.

I cannot imagine this sculpture being made, I can only imagine it being. I cannot divorce myself from the idea that a face comes first; the veil, on top, after. I cannot see her as a woman, only as the work of a Master who lived long ago. As a masterpiece. As a rag with the smudgy writing of his divine inspiration, one that I happened to find and that told me, prophetic, what I would produce. Though the form of the statue inspires independently, it inspires equally as the enacted vision of an artist who is simultaneously within and without the piece. A labyrinthine heritage emerges here, Isabella as mother of my thought, but also (and separately) as daughter of Torreggianii’s skill. Just as Mary was a daughter of her Creator, and was made a mother by His hand, Torreggianii and Isabella are linked in a perfect, self-contained cycle of inspiration into which I entered, but where I remain inessential as Joseph—most remarkable for not having sired his own son.

This sculpture offered me early nourishment as a writer. My words and Torreggianii’s Isabella are not one, but they were linked some time before this essay could walk on its own. As a writer, I am my words, and so, though only their surrogate father, I am also product of the immaculate connection between Torreggianii and his work. Inspiration is a state of nascence. In being there and being what it was, this bust nursed my thoughts until they could speak. Until I could write. Until I could look away and articulate something about what I had seen. But it remains a remote, broken translation of a language of mastery.

Camillo Torreggianii’s birth was to a poor family in Ferrara, Italy in 1820. His family had been serfs prior to the revolutions of 1804. Torreggianii left Ferrara to find work in 1840.
He began an apprenticeship in Florence with Luigi Pampaloni, a regionally renowned sculptor. Torreggiani’s royal and commercial success would eventually be far greater than Pampaloni’s, though this would speak to Pampaloni’s ultimate success as a teacher. Torreggiani was always stardom bound, but this trajectory traces back further than colthood. Pampaloni’s workshop was the origin of Torreggiani’s rise to renown. In 1847, Pampaloni died in Florence. Torreggiani remained there for five more years. In 1851, he returned to Ferrara, where he opened his own studio. For a few years, he found work only in graveyards, crafting memorials and monuments for the important local dead. Searching for variety, Torreggiani then travelled Europe, sculpting in Paris, London, Vienna, and Madrid. In 1855 Torreggiani submitted *Isabella II, Veiled* to the crown. It had taken him thirteen months, and he submitted it to the king of Spain without commission. Torreggiani intended the piece to be his entrance to royal work; his assertion that he was an artist the Queen would want to know about. Isabella’s veil clings to the crown like Torreggiani’s own hopes.

Though Torreggiani was disappointed with the capital value of the bust as determined by royal assessors, he was ultimately given the Cross of Charles (Carlos) III for this work. Created by the eponymous king in 1771, this Order was founded as a military distinction with the motto Virtuti Et Mérito, Virtue and Merit. Despite its classification as a Military Order, the Cross of Charles III has, in practice, become the most distinguished civil award offered by the crown. Other notable recipients include Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, and Arthur Wellesley, First Duke of Wellington. The website emedals.com sells precisely detailed replicas for $300-$550.

I write this essay haltingly. Testing each word against what I saw. Measuring my language, looking for the turn of a phrase that will fall like an impossible veil. This wonder has begun a rise that does not resolve. I can no more abandon my obsessive inspiration than I can express anything real about what it means to stand in a chilled hall in the Prado and try to see marble move.

The first time I realized, consciously, how sad great art makes me, I was at The Clark Museum in Williamstown, Massachusetts. I worked there this last summer, immediately after my study in Madrid. Walking through the Williams College campus, I saw a poster for The Clark’s new exhibition, a series of nudes on loan from the Prado. I wondered which artists The Clark curators had chosen, and, among those, which the Prado was willing to loan.

I made the short drive to the small museum. The building is situated in a large clearing surrounded by the Berkshire mountains. Cows come down to graze the well-kept fields and the walking paths nearby. A few contemporary sculptures punctuate the greenery, works spreading miles from the Clark’s central building. The cows don’t notice.
Behind the building, there is a patio area with some minimalist lounge-chairs and three cascading Zen pools. The patio, along with the building, was strikingly designed by Tadao Ando. Ando taught himself architecture, having never had access to technical education. He became a pioneer of “critical regionalism” in structural design. Prior to his architecture, Ando worked briefly as a truck driver, and then as a professional boxer in local Japanese circuits. As an architect, Ando typically uses slick concrete and curious geometry in large, open spaces. Active emptiness, a productive kind of nothingness, defines his architectural style.

On Ando’s patio sits a series of four marble benches crafted and donated by Jenny Holzer. She is a “neo-conceptual” artist who experiments with the design and delivery of words in public spaces. The benches are neoclassical in style, reminiscent of imposing Doric columns, though these rise a fraction of the height. They are inscribed in an archaically formal font with exaggerated serifs. The marble is veinless—pure and natural against Ando’s smooth, sweeping concrete. The benches are little pockets of breath in the inarticulable architecture. I am moving toward them before I notice there are words carved in each one. It seems the benchtops are designed to look like old Latin tablets, or the inscribed dedications on presidential memorials. The slabs’ chiseled edges imply history and requisite deterioration. The inscriptions demand solemn respect, screaming authority with their discreet design. The typeface itself inspires reverence—it is one used exclusively for important matters. Holzer could have fit much more text on each massive tablet. But, surrounded by space, carved in that smooth emptiness, her few words read with booming resonance.

The first bench reads,

**CONFUSING YOURSELF IS A WAY TO STAY HONEST**

And next to it,

**SLOPPY THINKING GETS WORSE WITH TIME**

A few feet away, another bench says,

**ENJOY YOURSELF BECAUSE YOU CAN’T CHANGE ANYTHING ANYWAY**
The final bench remarks,

**IT'S NOT GOOD TO HOLD TOO MANY ABSOLUTES**

Though Holzer’s diction seems basic, and her voice is often passive, she lets the physical form of her words suggest their value. It asks us to consider their simplicity as a kind of insight. The pieces’ value is discovered only as Holzer convinces us to rethink her words—to search for the complexity of thought that validates the carving of these specific phrases in that specific form. As the virtue of her work reveals itself, it is bolstered by and inextricable from the banality that initially seems to define it. The temptation to discount Holzer’s work as trite gives greater weight to the ultimate revelation of its unique value.

As I revealed on the patio, I wanted every one of Holzer’s thoughts. But they would never be mine. Each was an essay I could now never write. But I was still excited, inspired. I tried to think of something I had ever thought that was so true as those inscriptions, or at least interesting, but I just became aware that I was sad. I had perhaps thought versions of these truths, but I was sure they had been stilted, graceless, nothing worth carving into stone. I had spent hours walking the museum and my legs were tired but I could not sit there.

In stiff bounds I walked up “Stone Hill,” which rises behind The Clark and hosts a few their outdoor sculptures. But I passed these without stopping too long. At the top of the rise was a herd of cows, indifferent. They knew why they were there. A few calves trotted awkwardly, still learning about the bodies they’d inherited. The older cows watched them, but offered no example. Most just chewed their cud. I sat in the grass.
Three months after her husband left for the trenches, Marjorie Carr wrote to him of his departure: “I shall never forgive the powers that be for taking you off on such a heavenly day. Really, it wouldn't have seemed so bad if it had been horrid weather, but I shall always feel we were cheated out of a wonderful trip to someplace.”

Private Robert Jamison replied, "You will never know how much your letters mean to me in this environment. They are a link to all the best in my life and a daily reminder I have something more than my present duties to look forward to. They are a breath of fresh air in an overwrought and stupid atmosphere." He and Marjorie were among the few whose letters ended with the writers' reunion. The young couple wrote incessantly during Robert’s deployment and, following the armistice, Marjorie Carr became Marjorie Jamison in 1918. But Robert would always call her “Pidge”. She and Private Jamison both saved every letter the other wrote, each parcel having once had the potential to be their last. In 1926, the couple welcomed Marjorie Jr. She grew up in Rockland, Pennsylvania, in the house her parents had purchased after the war, with 1,200 of their love letters floating above in a drafty attic she never explored. The Jamison parents spent little time discussing or remembering their time apart.

Eventually, though, sometime in the early seventies, Marjorie Jr. found those boxes in her attic, cardboard sagging with age and the weight of the words they held. She had never known her parents to be so romantic. Some of the letters were very long. Some used words she had never heard her parents speak. Nothing lewd, at least nothing overly so, but still nothing like those discussions of the forecast, or of the day’s banal headlines; conversations that had filled the house she knew. Marjorie Jr. spent decades sorting those letters. She transcribed them all and organized a collection, adding some of her own writing about her parents. The collection was finished in 2016, though a few excerpts of letters had already been printed in the Valentine’s Day edition of a local history publication. Marjorie Jr. titled her work *Pidge and Jamie: Two Lives Transformed by Love and War*. By the time of its publication, she was ten years older than Pidge had been when they rediscovered those dusty boxes of old romance.

MJ and I text each other every day. We started eight years ago, when one of us began the awkward flirting that lasted most of our freshman year. The texts changed a little when we finally agreed that we were dating, but not much. There is a strict, yet undiscussed etiquette of texting—even stricter in text-flirting—an agreement to substitute depth and intensity for quantity and frequency. Even at fourteen, I loved MJ as I do now—with a vacuum in my gut; a constant, nauseating, exhilarating breathlessness. With an intensity that might have inspired Ovid. When his *Heroides XV* was discovered in the fifteenth century, it was first thought to be an authentic letter to Phaon by Sappho, “The Poetess” herself. The differences in style between this poem and those actually written by Sappho now seem obvious. But even so, the urgency of the love that
Ovid wrote as Sappho’s, the “passion like Etna’s fire,” bore resemblance enough to be recognized as Sappho’s own.

I know that passion—Etna’s and Ovid’s and Sappho’s—I know that I love MJ as they loved. But no one could confuse their words for mine. I need not fear that my texts to MJ might be discovered some day under an archeologist’s spade, much less that they would be misattributed to any historically eloquent lover. Even in the palmsweat infatuation of young and first love, I stuck to text etiquette. I knew not to clog up MJ’s inbox—not just to tell her how I felt every day, sitting behind her in Ms. Waring’s physics class, gliding my eyes along the slope of her neck and feeling my breath catch—feeling heat and tension and goosebumps rise between my shoulder blades. Texts are so easily overwrought. It is a medium best for small thoughts, not novels—nothing novel. When MJ and I want to text something romantic, we quote e.e. cummings: “you are my sun, my moon, and all my stars.” He did a pretty good job with that line, we thought, and it is short enough to tack on the end of most messages.

After Franz Ferdinand’s catalytic assassination, and before Armistice Day four years later, the British Army Postal Service delivered over two billion parcels. This was before drone deliveries, before even cargo planes or radio communications. Every single day, nineteen thousand mailbags were boated across the Chanel and carried to the front lines—siblings, spouses, parents leaving nothing unsaid. In analog warfare, the distance between loved ones was difficult to navigate. Pre-internet, absence was more present in the lives of lovers. One’s absence was never diluted by their Snapchats or tweets; distances were not bridged by the invisible signals that now cover the countryside in Unicode. That uncompromised absence, which we have since (and gratefully) lost, provided both the setting for and a valid reason to write letters worth saving, worth having inked, even if they get forgotten in the attic for a while.

Soldiers carried with them a final letter, as war movies love to show, and their battalion mates would fish it off their dead body and send that last thought to whom it may concern.

Private Albert Ford considered that his distance from his wife could become permanent, greater than the Post could navigate. The Chanel between them grew Stygian. And so he wrote a letter, addressed it, kept it in his fatigues: “Dear heart I will bid you all farewell hoping to meet you in the time to come if there is a hereafter. Know that my last thoughts were of you in the dugout or on the fire step my thoughts went out to you, the only one I ever loved, the one that made a man of me.” He died in 1917 as he was ordered over the top of his trench. His letters were preserved and donated this year to a war museum, where they went on display as a depressing (though eloquent) part of the Valentine’s Day exhibit.

In eight years, MJ and I have had only one significant lapse in our daily digital dosage of one another. It was also the last time I wrote her a letter. I was in Kenya, and my brick of a SATphone cost $2.25 a minute for calls. I cannot remember if the phone lacked texting
capabilities, or if texts were just prohibitively expensive. MJ and I were fifteen. The town in which I stayed, Iten, was transitioning from private to public energy utilities, which caused rolling blackouts that prevented a full charge.

I was there that summer teaching English; MJ was at home in Chicago working for an online consumer information bank. She organized information that had been collected about internet users' age, region, religion, race, marital status, income, vehicle ownership, property value, education, family structure, employment, criminal records, etc., all as it correlated to their social and shopping habits online. She constructed identities from these statistics, ones that could be fed into Microsoft Excel; consumers that could be faxed around, stuck on graphs, analyzed instantly, and targeted with more specific advertisements. She did not like it, but it paid well.

I wrote to MJ almost every day. I had a lot of time to miss her, and to think about how it felt to miss her, and what I missed most about her, and so on. I wrote about how time stopped when we held each other, and how it slowed, insufferably, when we could not. I came to fear I was rambling; I never ran out. Our distance was a consistent muse.

I never sent those letters. I collected them in a journal that I gave to MJ when I returned. It was in part for a lack of knowledge of the Kenyan postal system. It was also because, despite constant low battery, MJ and I managed to spend $50 talking on the phone each week; and even that twenty-minute fix sapped any urgency I might have felt to take the long bus ride to the post office. MJ kept the letters in their journal form, and looks back to them sometimes when we miss each other. She and I go to different colleges, only two and a half hours apart. One of us makes the drive each weekend. The days of the weeks are just days in between.

In 2014, a box of letters was found containing the complete correspondence between Private Frederick Key and his fiancée Zen Hall. They were put up for auction in London. The selling price was undisclosed, but had been predicted around $1,000. Key and Hall had written each other almost daily. Sometimes Key wrote Zen of her excruciating absence, or of the garden he hoped to tend with her after the war. At times he detailed the stench of the dead ungrounded by new trenches. In his last letter, Key writes prophetically: "our parting would no doubt be long for you but very short to me, still I hope that we shall live together on this earth many years yet, and that when the parting does come, it will be very short; I love you my own sweet darling, with every fibre of my being, I just love you." Zen received this letter on July 3, 1916, and wrote him each of the next five days. On the eighth, she received notice of his death in the first wave of The Battle of the Somme, July 1, 1916. Her unopened letters were returned as undeliverable two weeks later.

I once texted MJ something that perhaps ought to have been a letter. We were juniors in high school, and she, half-seriously, asked me to tell her a story as we texted from our beds. I
wrote the story of our mutual rescue as a fairy tale. The writing was cheap and clichéd, though I hoped to disguise that as the requisite conventionality of romantic tales. Given character limits, the story took forty-three texts and two hours to type on my phone’s slide-out keyboard. She had fallen asleep part way through, but she read them and smiled in the morning. She saved the messages, or rather “locked” them. On our early flip-phones, we would have to delete old messages when storage ran out. Smartphones do this automatically now, though the messages remain somewhere on a server. Locked messages were exempted from the phone’s delete all function. But, eventually, MJ had to replace her phone, and the texts failed to transfer.

At this point, MJ and I have unspokenly developed a bedtime script, and with it we send each other the same simple love each night. We think of one another constantly, just for fun, mostly, and we text to say so. We text to say “miss you <3” and to ask the best part of each other’s day. And so we keep apprised of one another and our affections without need for much more than 140 characters.

In 1996 Aaliyah released her classic slow jam “4 Page Letter.” In it, she talks about contacting “a particular guy” that she has liked for a while, but “was too shy, so [she] decided to write… a four-page letter, and seal it with a kiss.” There are things that we will not say aloud, that we cannot text, that make no sense to fax—things we only write, if we do. The song was immediately popular, and it was quickly sampled in an impressive number of hip hop and R n’ B tracks.

Change came when AOL provided their first personal email service in 1993, but it was not until 1997, when they abandoned the pay-per-hour system for a flat monthly fee, that usership began to grow exponentially. But letters had been around for a while; email was slow to take off. In 2001, USPS spokesperson Susan Brennan confidently maintained that “Email is not a threat. Postal mail is universal; the internet is not.” In 2016, hundreds of different songs were released that mention using Instagram “direct messages,” or “DMs,” to casually reach out to a potential partner. Dozens of these songs received significant airtime. On the title track of his 2017 Wheelin’ and Dealin’ mixtape, Troy Ave makes a modern reference to Aaliyah’s classic: “got a girl keep asking me to meet her, / four pages and all, she wanna be Aaliyah. / I ain’t looking for a letter, I stay checking the DMs.” In the first two lines, Ave’s mocking tone makes clear the perceived excess of what was once a romantic gesture. Having something faster in our pockets transforms letter writing into, at best, an act of naivété—at worst, one of pretension. I admit that I chuckled when I heard that line.

Napoleon Bonaparte wrote beautifully for his wife, Josephine, during his multiple campaigns. They met and married quickly, racing to have their ceremony before Bonaparte’s departure for the Italian front. They could not honeymoon then, but planned to meet up in Milan when they could. The Napoleonic army was the first to employ an official army postal service.
Bonaparte's soldiers claimed that he would write ten letters for every hour of battle he commanded. His military carriage included a fold-out mahogany desk and a custom inkstand that remained steady while the carriage moved. In April, 1796, he wrote to Josephine,

*My happiness is to be near you. Incessantly I live over in my memory your caresses, your tears, your affectionate solicitude. The charms of the incomparable Josephine kindle continually a burning and a glowing flame in my heart. When, free from all solicitude, all harassing care, shall I be able to pass all my time with you, having only to love you, and to think only of the happiness of so saying, and of proving it to you? ... I thought that I loved you months ago, but since my separation from you I feel that I love you a thousand fold more. Each day since I knew you, have I adored you more and more. This proves the maxim of Bruyere, that 'love comes all of a sudden,' to be false. Everything in nature has its own course, and different degrees of growth.*

This is a long passage to quote in the middle of an essay, but I do not know what I would cut. Bonaparte longs for a day with Josephine when the distance between them does not require a letter. Any letter writer does. Bonaparte would have preferred to say this in person, which would have not been saying it at all. He would not have chosen the same, urgent words, nor as many. Would Josephine have gotten the gist without the absence? I would not have, two hundred years later in seventh grade social studies. There was no dialogue in the back of my textbooks, no transcribed phone calls, only essays and letters.

MJ and I are getting married. We assume. We are moving to Spain at the end of the year. We have been in love nearly half of our lives, but that still isn’t much time. That we would get married became our working assumption when we were fifteen. We had been dating almost two years. There is no proposal story. Is this less romantic? More? Our love is so undoubtable, to us, that we mention it more as ritual than revelation. This is comfortable. I would never choose a love less self-evident, or to spend months many miles from MJ. But I think I ought to revel, at least once in a while.

I see as a writer, though not one of letters. I see MJ through the veil of signifiers. Her beauty is translated into language as I witness it, into the sentences that I do not write when I text her instead, "ur so cute." I use that as a stand-in. I hope it really is the thought that counts. If so, MJ knows that, by “cute,” I mean her hair spins sunlight into gold. I mean that the weight of perfection rests in the ridges of her collarbones. That her smile, with its slight leftward skew and asymmetric dimples, still makes my palms sweat—perhaps even more now than at fourteen. Her beauty is beauty itself. It moves through me in sentences I have never thought before, and will never find the time to write.

I am scared that the things I have not said do not go without saying. When I text MJ, "I adore you 😍" I am calling upon Napoleon’s adoration, on Private Key’s, on every letter that has made it online or in a book. I think. But is that still there? after so many translations? Input to
binary to program code to display text to binary to satellite to her phone to program code to
display text. I am not sure it ever was.

MJ says those “letters” from Kenya are the first thing she would grab if her apartment
caught fire. They are poorly written. We both know so. Those letters have a forgettable quality, a
youthful simplicity; I am sure she would have left them in Chicago, or forgotten them entirely,
had I written her any letters since then. But I have not. In their unfortunate exceptionality, those
ineloquent, platitudinous letters remain worth saving. MJ’s phone has thousands of photos on it.
More texts. It would melt as she searched her desk for those letters that I never actually sent. But
maybe it would already be in her pocket.

Most of the time, I am glad I do not have to write a letter. To anyone. In the most formal
of settings, an email will suffice. These need not be packed with personal significance. Emails
hassle a recipient if they are too long. People used to write that word as “E-mail.”

My parents bought me personalized stationary in seventh grade so that I could formally
RSVP to bar mitzvah invitations. It was cream-colored, with a Bauhaus-Industrial design.
Centered at the top was my name in circumscribed letters. In a black bar at the bottom was my
last name written and repeated in a negative space, typewriter-like font. My parents bought
enough that I could write other letters on it, too. I think it was something their parents had done
for them at thirteenc.

Minus the number of bar mitzvah invitations I received, I still have every sheet of that
stationary. I brought it with me to college. I thought that the full box on my desk might inspire—
or perhaps remind—me to use it. Sometimes, seeing that box full reminds me that I owe
someone an email or a quick text. In the box with the stationary is a near-complete book of
unused stamps. The few letters I have written since seventh grade are on Hallmark cards or
cheap lined paper, and most I delivered by hand.

My grandfather wrote a private memoir that he sent around to our family. In part, he
wrote it because he worries that his stories—his side of them—will fade as quickly, and at the
same time, as his health. But it was also to say something new—though the thoughts were old.
To put down what had gone unsaid at family reunions, in toasts, in emails. To give a few more
details. There was nothing revelatory in the memoir, but there were a few things he had not said
before. He was happy that people were excited to read it.

The final letters that soldiers carry with them—those collected with the dog tags of the
dead and sent to families that do not yet know they should be grieving—vary surprisingly in
length. Soldiers choose differently as to what they cannot allow to remain unsaid. Many of these
letters are very long, and intend to capitalize on this final chance to make the writer’s thoughts
and affections known. The shorter letters seem to recognize that as impossible. Most of them,
regardless of length, demand somewhere in the text that the recipient know the writer loved them. The pithiest ones make other memorial requests of their grievers. Eric Lubbock, 24, wrote only a few sentences, and finished by telling his mother, “I now say goodbye, just in case. Try to forget my faults and remember me only as your very loving son.” Private Neil Downes wrote concisely of his wishes for his girlfriend, “I am sorry I had to put you through all of this, darling. Just thought I’d leave you with a last few words. I hope you have a wonderful and fulfilling life. Get married, have children etc. I love you forever.” These desires were likely known in the lifetimes of these soldiers. Most humans hope to be remembered fondly, and most wish general fulfilment upon their loved ones. But few people put it in writing. Most never know the need to do so.

Our wedding vows will be the closest thing to a letter that I have written for MJ in years. So I hope I make the most of them. They ought to have everything I would have written to her but haven’t; what I have put versions of in texts; everything we are trying to say with our semi-scripted bedtime love u’s, but that we don’t notice isn’t there. I will finally put in writing what I have felt in reverie. I will write these vows by hand, in cursive that looks good on display. Maybe I will quote Napoleon.
Pharmakon

Writing solves the problems of writing, but not of the writer. The problem of writing, simply put, is not writing, a block. But nothing really blocks someone from writing. The act of writing—even poorly, and without knowing what comes next—dissolves that would-be block; perhaps suggests it was never there. “Writers’ block” emerges as a false obstacle to a true desire; it is psychosomatic. That true desire—to write, to produce something worthwhile—is the only real part of the conflict between writer and writing. And so it becomes the only real problem of the writer, for which the only real solution is writing.

Without that desire, not writing wouldn’t be so uncomfortable. Thoughts, observations, questions would each arise (and resolve) as just that. But, colored by a desire to write, these instead occur as the prompts and conflicts of unwritten essays. Of an essay, the metrics of success are the same as those of an essayist: clear expression of self, the exhaustive exploration of relevant concepts, originality of thought and/or style, and appreciation by an intended audience. Even the most beautiful unwritten essay fails these across the board. A desire to write becomes an addiction to articulation—a refusal to leave anything unwritten.

Addicts consider their pharmakon a necessity. Their substance of choice is both cause and perceived cure of their condition. In FDA studies, mice that had been exposed to cocaine repeatedly choose to dose themselves rather than eat their next meal. Withdrawal presented as a more immediate type of suffering than even starvation. In all studies; though, after near-fatal weight-loss, mice will universally quit the nose candy, cold turkey, and gorge themselves on food. After returning to a healthy weight, roughly fifty percent of mice begin the cycle again. Human addicts demonstrate the same tendencies, though some do not quit when mice would. I quell my desire to write by submitting to it. I avoid withdrawal at nearly any cost. In tuition, I spend more than I will ever see on a paycheck, just to get a little better at my addiction.

In ancient Greek, the term “pharmakon” signified three modern concepts: cure/remedy, poison, and scapegoat. Structural linguists claimed that ancient Greeks would have contextually determined the intended meaning of a given usage. In the sixties, though, Jacques Derrida and his fellow Poststrucuralists argued for the simultaneity of these apparently exclusive definitions. The structuralist understanding of pharmakon assumes a human capacity to know objectively the subjective nature of an object: whether it heals (cure), hurts (poison), or has been only been misattributed culpability for such effect (scapegoat). Derrida demonstrated that these distinctions are no clearer than the fate of Schrödinger’s Cat. Pharmakon, as he saw it, refers to the inherent unknowability of the nature of its referent. We cannot say objectively if something is a force of “good” or an agent of “harm”—not when we have also constructed the metrics by which such values are measured. Something may have the objective effect of prolonging one’s life—say, avoiding driving or junk food or certain neighborhoods—but, even so, it is an assumptive leap to associate this effect with the subjective judgments implicit in the word “cure.” And so pharmakon does not mean “cure” or “poison” or “scapegoat” depending on the context; it means “cure” and “poison” and “scapegoat,” just as Schrödinger’s Cat is alive and dead. In use,
“pharmakon” does not refer to the objective nature of an object, but to the unknowability of that nature for any artifact.

I choose to consider writing a cure, most of the time. I would not do it if I did not think it was helping me in some way. I do not know how I would live in a world that I did not understand, and writing is the medium of my understanding. And so it seems I am helping myself when I write, the same way I am helping myself when I eat or sleep. I am giving myself something that I need to survive. I think. If this is the case, then to call writing my “addiction” is a misnomer. We do not call someone that takes daily vitamins, or even antidepressants, an addict. They are helping themselves, using a type of cure. Only when a pharmakon is known to be poison is its habitual usage considered an addiction.

Perhaps, though, in the perceived progress I prescribe the act of writing, I allow myself to stagnate, or even regress in more important metrics of my humanity. Perhaps writing acts as a poison by convincing me of its value as a cure. I avoid sleeping and eating when I write; I drink unhealthy quantities of coffee; I deny myself any “unnecessary” contact with peers or with fresh air. I grow irritable and unempathic toward the end of my writing benders. Words become more important than the people who read them. I cling to the inherent sense of progress in drafting, in challenging my own thoughts. Then, eventually the thrill of producing fades, and left in the foreground is the impossibility of perfection. I begin to wonder if the value that I find in writing, that I attribute to my writing, is only my unwillingness to consider that time wasted—a desire to justify the sleep and pounds and friends lost. I allow writing to eclipse everything else; I do not even shower, and it feels worth it. If you can convince yourself that some poison is saving you in some way, you will let it kill you; and you will call it progress.

It seems equally likely that writing has neither such drastically negative nor positive effects on my survival. For my fear of withdrawal symptoms, I have never allowed myself not to write when I have felt writing necessary. As such, I cannot really know if writing cures the dissonance I feel, or merely fills the time until it fades. Perhaps I would still be irritable and prefer hermitude if I had never written a page. Perhaps I write just to have something on which I can blame erratic emotions. When I feel content, having recovered from some psychic woe, I often attribute it to having written. When I feel cynical and antisocial, I blame that, too, on writing. Perhaps writing is only my scapegoat for these psychic oscillations, providing an illusion of my agency in such waves.

I can never know if writing is my cure, my poison, or my scapegoat. I only know that I am a writer—that writing will continue to seek me out and I will welcome it. But, I also know that each time I finish a piece—which is only a decision to leave any remaining errors and incompletions as they are—a part of me hopes it is the last one. I hope that I never have another thought that demands an essay. I get excited to laze around and watch TV and ignore anything that I cannot do thoughtlessly. There is a reason I no longer run, why I have never written letters, why I do not go to museums more often. There is a comfort in avoiding such stimulation.
But I always know that I will return to old ways. I know that, sometime soon, the virtues of writing will again seem irresistible and undeniable, and complete passivity will grow less enticing. The promise of the curative nature of writing will eclipse its potential toxicity. Ignorant of anything objective or transcendent or otherwise unknowable about writing, I know only that I will continue to write. But, in Derrida's own words, I "know this a priori, but only now and with a knowledge that is not knowledge at all."