

Chronic

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This is the time/ because there is no time.

Lou Reed

1

You get used to it. At first you think ‘not me, not now’. On your first admission to A&E, you want to say ‘Me? No thanks, I’m just passing through. My case is different’. You’d like to think you’re different from the woman on crutches shouting abuse on her mobile, from the muted couple staring in the distance, from the elderly husband & wife fussing away their terror. You get used to it, though at first you ask in disbelief: ‘Why me?’ The flat answer from the hollow heavens is ‘Why not?’. Moments after your precipitous fall among ailing townfolk, flesh among septic flesh, in mid-flight you realize there’s no cord tied to your ankle and that like demigods and dogs and humans you too are subject to the injuries of fate. You’d like to feign wisdom and calmly hum that line, *he not busy being born is busy dyin’*, but you just can’t do it and resort instead to vague reflections: We are all chronic, exposed to the incontrovertible laws of Chronos – the clock on the wall of this waiting room presaging a dénouement or an ultimatum as in suspenseful moments in a movie when the camera zooms in on a clock. We’re busy dying from the moment we’re born, but before you start mouthing all the existentialist clichés in the book, a doctor calls out your name.

2

Admission is granted to the first portal of tests, to a moving landscape of green and blue uniforms and plastic curtains. The second station of your *Via Crucis* is a corner in the bustling noisy passageway, the only shield your resolve to be-with-whatever – despite the pain, despite the dread. By the time two nurses show up it’s 2.30am; my god where did Saturday go, the room of men talking fragility, conscious sex and authenticity, the lunch overlooking Hammersmith Bridge, bright brisk sun at the zenith. All a memory, and the future too is fading fast. The first insight is that you are meat under the medical gaze, an assemblage of unpredictable cells and organs parked for hours in deep-night limbo then stretched on a table and frequently perforated under the neon light until a kind doctor wearing a hijab is

summoned from the third floor at four in the morning. She treats you like you're human, even asks about your job, and it is to her that you surrender, yielding to come-what-may.

3

4.30am, Sunday after the resurrection of our Lord who unlike you is now safely afloat, the man-god for whom the vagaries of the flesh in this vale of sorrows and high creatinine are a mere piffle. It's 4.35am when the cheery nurse wheels you up five floors closer to the heavens (just think of how many souls land and depart from this building every day). It's 4.38am and you landed here on the fifth floor on a wheelchair by an empty bed in a darkened sleepy room in a semi-abandoned ward at the end of the world. The beginning of your internship of pain, you who've never been admitted to a hospital before and never bragged about it. Welcome to the Badlands of the Real where all is still, the hum of the air-con sanitizing the toss&turn of bodies asleep, sterilizing your very thoughts. All is still as Chronos ambles on, pacing the dark room hands behind His back, He who was engendered by earth and water, He who is a Titan, forever clipping Cupid's wings, humming a song from Mount Olive, Alabama: *no matter how I struggle and strive, I'll never get out of this world alive*. This is no dream you've asked to be in. Even then, you fancy conjuring up the cheerfulness of the shipwrecked, but you just can't do it. All is still, you are shivering like a baby left out in the cold, and the only sensible thing to do is to climb in bed with your clothes on and bless the dread of a dark morning in spring.

4

On 23 April 1849 a young revolutionary of twenty-seven was arrested by Tsarist police alongside thirty-five members of the Petrashevsky Circle and led to the St. Peter and Paul Fortress – a highly fortified St. Petersburg prison. His name was Fyodor Dostoyevsky. He lived imprisoned for eight months in the St. Peter and Paul Fortress in dire conditions, and on 16 November was condemned to death with another twenty-one members of the revolutionary group. On 22 December they were brought by carriage to Semyonov Square—now called Pionerskaya Ploschad. There they were ordered to kneel and kiss the cross; their ranks were stripped from them, their swords broken over their heads. In groups of three they were then led into the square and blindfolded. Dostoyevsky waited in the second group of three. Just before the execution, he turns to Nikolay Speshnev (who twenty years later would resurface as the nihilist character Stavrogin in *Demons*) and says, 'Soon we shall be with Christ', to which Speshnev replies, a strange smile on his lips: "A bit of dust". Turns out it was a mock execution

to teach them a lesson: at the last minute the sentence is revoked to hard labour in Siberia, an experience which will be transformative for Dostoyevsky, to put it mildly. That moment too – being certain of imminent death and seeing the sentence revoked – had life-long impact on him.

5

‘This ward is a marketplace’, whispers the specialist nurse who came to escort you to your biopsy. You keep calling it autopsy by mistake. You’re not dead yet, c’mon, you didn’t attain that level of authenticity, even though you do your best to look good for the Reaper in every sense just in case of a rendezvous. If it’s true what Ingmar Bergman implied, echoing medieval lore, that the Angel of Demise in full medieval garb will invite you to play chess, then you’re screwed. You never learned the brainy game, despite the appeal of Marcel Duchamp becoming good at it aged thirteen. After you’ve donned the white gown that turns you for the time being into a demighost, she specialist nurse leads you by the hand two floors down along long corridors and the elevator, a sight to behold, aspirant ghost in white gown and petite Japanese specialist oncology nurse smiling and talking to you softly like the bodhisattva of compassion that she truly is, come to think of it.

5

It's not so much that we are hurtling down to the final end on a being-towards death train. That's too obvious; you don't need a Black Forest geezer with the pathetic Hitler moustache to spell that out for you. Besides, there is wisdom in snubbing the royal seat of authenticity and choosing to trade it for an ordinary seat in the gods a.k.a. upper balconies and from up there indulge the modest pleasures of the inauthentic for a while longer. Put the kettle on, let's brew some decent coffee; we don't know what the ostrich sees in the sand.

All the same, what happens to you when your days, hours and minutes are counted? Surely you are offered an opportunity to put aside frivolities. Chances are, you'll love them all the more, the trivialities of this stopover among the living, all those tender ontic ties that weld you to dear life and make you now weep with gratitude.

Wait a minute, why on earth are they wheeling you to another room? Ah, never mind, it's late afternoon and from your new abode the sky sketches a heavenly landscape of grey and white clouds against the blue, while a man opposite talks loudly to himself and to God, another in the corner paces around his bed answering every hour his mobile with the Shadows' *Apache*

loud ringtone, and a young man next to you dictates an erotic novel to his phone. It rained and now the sun is out. *It's not dark yet but it's getting there.* The man opposite though is unrelenting in his complicated faith, cursing God and pleading with Him in equal measure. At this point you think of Antonin Artaud interned in Rodez, subjected to electroshock, and the other detainees pouring ink over his paper as he persists in wanting to write. *Only art can see you through, only heart can see you through.* You wave at Artaud but his gaze is blank. His physical pain must be unbearable, his mental anguish all the more, and if you had any sense you'd be terrified too. He doesn't stop shouting and weeping day and night except for brief spells when he's asleep. When he gets moved elsewhere after two days, the nurse informs you he'd been diagnosed with schizophrenia. A new patient is wheeled in; he's in a bad way, multiple injuries, unable to sit or lie down, his mouth contorted by an accident. His name is Dan and he must be in his late thirties; it's very hard to understand what he says to you given his wound and a strong Irish accent, but you two manage to have regular conversations every day. For instance, every time you drag your feet to the toilet you pass by Dan's bed and have a chat. One day he says, 'you'll be alright, don't worry, I prayed for you, I said three Hail Marys'. *Pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death, amen.* It comes out of the blue, this overwhelming feeling; it comes from a deep spring and you sob the tears of a child. 'I'll pray for you too Dan' you say and you both embrace and your heart expands just like it did when you were singing and dancing and meditating in the Buddha Hall in the India of your youth. Back in your bed you chant the invocation to Kanzeon Bodhisattva, the only words you know in Japanese apart from *sushi* and *sayonara*; homage to the one who hears the cries of the world, *thought after thought arises from the mind; thought after thought is not separate from mind.*

6

While injecting you with radioactive glucose, the Portuguese nurse engages in friendly banter during which you learn that she is well versed in the work of Fernando Pessoa. As an adolescent she played the young Fernando in a biographical play written by her teacher. She leaves a mark on your left arm after the needle is taken out. Her story too leaves a mark. If Pessoa is part of the school curriculum anywhere, then there's hope, then it's not all business management, how to become an oligarch, or learn existentialism on *PowerPoint*. You wanted to ask her what the Portuguese education system makes of Pessoa's heteronyms Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos, Ricardo Reis, Maria José, to name a few, but there is no time.

Chronos speeds up the tempo again on his chronometer. He does it all the time (*sorry must dash*), He does it at leisure, and before you know it you're ushered in the radioactive chambers where all past virtues & transgressions will be detected by the machine.

7

In the dream you're in hospital. You get up and walk out of the building. You fall asleep outdoors, in the rain and the cold, next to a faceless friend. You realize breakfast is being served and hurry back but it's too late. You try to go back to your bed but it is occupied by a wide family of foreigners in their Sunday best. It's late at night and you're outside walking with your father. He will help you. You are lost. He is jovial but fragile. I'm here on holiday with the rest of the family, he says, and really enjoying the sights. You're walking past a busy fairground, all lit-up and then you're in the vast basement of the hospital; dark corridors and graffiti on the wall. Together you look for the exit. You trust him; Dad, help me. At that moment he magically vanishes. You are alone and on the ground; lying on your side you drag your wounded body forward with difficulty, and you know you've lost all hope.

8

Wide awake most of the night with stomach cramps and headache, then staggering in the sanitized half-light you think 'Surely my enemies are singing a jolly tune of Schadenfreude, surely they're dancing a groovy jig celebrating my comeuppance, surely they must think all of this heart-on-your-sleeve stuff is nothing but attention-seeking, self-pitying victimhood'. All the same, you can't help smile a distracted smile: their dance is goofy, their singing out of tune, for there's no real dance or tune when one's soul is steeped in spite.

These idle thoughts fade when you look out of the window, they disperse in the light of love for in the evening she brings you little honey cakes and tells you how she spent the whole day fiercely chasing doctors and nurses to follow up, show up, and not abandon you on a dismal bed; she gives you her infinite love despite your countless litany of flaws.

9

More than careering down a steep slope on a being-towards-death tricycle, with death-as-event unduly raised to a plenary session of consciousness, it seems to you that what truly matters is the presence of death-in-life. Heraclitus, fragment 21: *Death is what we see awake. Sleep is what we see while sleeping*. This deathlife rumbles on, rain or shine. Not being-

towards-death then, but death-in-life, nonlife in life as the condition for life. Life is but inhibited death; the overbrimming life of an organism relies for its unfolding on suicide cells. *Oh no, no, no, you're a rock'n'roll suicide*; Ziggy Stardust still sings to you from those innocent mornings when you whistled along before school aged fifteen instead of learning chess. But maybe you can say wait, give me some time learn how to play, your beloved suggested. Maybe the Reaper will grant you an extension.

At night your gaze drifts towards the sky and at this you feel a strange joy creeping up and you wonder, Is this the cheerfulness of the shipwrecked? How unmistakable; how truly undeniable these tears of gratitude for this sad and beautiful world.