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## Here Now and Later There

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I am in a state of constant fluctuation. Cycles of sleep and waking, breathing in and breathing out, blood carrying oxygen through the body, blood carrying carbon dioxide out. There is a balance there, and it is based in something solid. Rules, matter, biology: things that while not fully understood are nonetheless real. I am constantly remembering and forgetting myself, pushing myself to be present and in the moment. I am working to remove the feeling of separation from my physical being and the one in my mind. Words that come out of my mouth belong to me, but it's so easy to forget that. The scar on my abdomen belongs to me, but it's easy to forget that as well. I am constantly oscillating between 'there' and 'here' and trying to stay here and present.

In my efforts to remain here, I've taken to doing a few things:

1. You may find me recounting my day by scribbling in the margins of my notes. These are thoughts that I come back across when studying, lists and scribbles like little landmarks that help to navigate my way through the day and offer evidence that not only am I here, but I was here as well.
2. I ask others about events that may or may not have happened. I am careful not to ask leading questions so that I arrive as close to reality as is possible for a reconstruction.
3. At times I try to remember names, and I do my best to associate them with faces, because I've read somewhere that all the people in our dreams steal faces from people we have seen, people in crowds, people in restaurants and bars. I believe that my dreams steal primarily from classes, as that is where most of my time outside home is spent. I have a lot of dreams in which I meet with many people. Some of those dreams seem more real than memories. I get embarrassed at the thought of someone remembering my name and theirs being lost to me - if it were me, I might think myself unimportant to that individual.
4. I try to contribute more to a conversation when I begin to feel lost. If I stay involved it is easier to remain within the moment and my grasp on reality strengthens. Sometimes I ask redundant questions because the question has lingered with me, and I figure that it might work in the way a song does; where you have to listen to it in order to get it out of your head.

5. Sometimes I must maintain focus on something in my physical space. I must find an anchor of sorts to make sure that I remain here. I focus hard to push away the mental fog that takes me out of the moment until it's gone and I'm here. I'm doing this now, focusing on the rhythm of typing and the travel of keys on the keyboard. I keep adjusting the speakers under my monitor and straightening my back in this desk chair. I must focus on the way that the corner of my wall is a little uneven, or the small spider in the corner.

This constant reorientation is, in a word, distracting. It can make conversations difficult to follow. It can lead to feeling as if you have no personality, no desires. It can make active consumption of a movie, a book, or a painting more difficult because often reactions to the material are delayed. I used to hate it when my dad would ask me how I felt about a movie. I simply did not know and only enjoyed it because I wasn't thinking about it - I just happened to be in the theatre and the movie just happened to be playing in front of my eyes. When I answered, it was usually a variation of:

"I really liked it." And my eyes would glaze over.

Or

"I did not like it." And my eyes would glaze over.

Often, he'd leave it at that, and he'd talk about the movie at length; prodding a closed-off boy with open questions. He probably still thinks about tossing footballs and the child's inability to catch, attempting to extract something with which to latch onto and discuss. I'd nod along, helping the conversation progress with a series of brief laughs and practiced acknowledgements. There were other times, though, when his frustration with my aloofness was too much for polite, one-sided conversation to handle, and so he'd ask with all the venom of a joke;

"Are you here, space cadet?"

Sometimes once, sometimes twice, and we'd both laugh about it. It was not rare that he might laugh first and I'd laugh along once I'd landed back in the conversation. I wasn't there. I was piloting a jet through canyons and performing dangerous maneuvers through cracks in mountains. I was walking the surface of the moon, laser pistol in hand, eyeing the horizon for shiny aliens with two tongues. Or I was simply relaxing on the beaches of Atlantis, wading into the Ocean's waiting maw. The motion of car rides used to lull me to half-sleep.

While I could escape to my thoughts and sometimes dreams on the bus, the car was more conducive as it was often quieter or at least more stable. The motion of the vehicle—that of moving forward while remaining still—is dream-like. It proved easy to bridge the gap between the waking and sleeping worlds. That bridge where I remained. I would hear songs on the radio, and the roar of air rushing from the AC provided a nice steady contrast. I'd carry along the road until I was just floating.

Here are some other moments where I'd float:

1. Bus rides. I'd try to stretch my perception of time on bus rides to and from school. I learned to filter out the sounds of other children by way of putting in my earphones. I'd listen to all sorts of stuff, but mostly old Billy Idol rips and selections from my Dad's U2 albums. My efforts to stretch time did not work as planned and instead time compressed.

2. I used to listen to music and stretch out in bed. I'd make it a point to listen to the lyrics for as long as possible with my eyes closed. The most vivid experience I can recall is Pink Floyd's "Shine on You Crazy Diamond." There is a note that David Gilmour hits right at the 2:36 mark (this is the 1994 Live Pulse version) that sounds like a drop falling into water, and it drug me under. At about 3:50 he plays a lick that's like moving quickly under water before the rest of the song sweeps and swells into focus. In my little musical oasis, I was floating on water directly under stars.

3. At the Dentist's office. Particularly when the floss came out and the evidence of my dental neglect ran red from the spaces between my teeth and out the weird little suction tube. I didn't so much fear the dentist as I accepted it and learned to deal with it by going somewhere else. Somewhere my mouth was actually being upgraded. The doctors were soldering circuit boards and wires together. The pain would be temporary and when I was done my transformation into the Billion Dollar Boy would be complete. Eventually I needed braces and I blamed that on botched upgrades.

I learned eventually that I could, with enough motivation, float away at other times as well. It made dealing with being grounded easier. It made getting through lectures about how I played too many videogames effortless. It made it easy to entertain the conversations started by family members I'd met once and never would again. It became a tool to combat boredom. It became a habit and in time it'd be reflexive, a response to stressors that would plop me out of the situation and into the comfort of car rides and Pink Floyd.

Here are two of those stressors:

1. I opened a report card. I went over the familiar columns, one right index finger tracing down the columns and past the teacher notes and comments, next to the dates, next to the class names. My finger raced past the A's and the B's, the singular C, and I found myself staring at a lonely D. I watched myself look at it, floated out my window and out to the clouds. My mother knocked on my bedroom door.

2. I was lying in the bed next to my grandmother's, preparing myself for sleep. The sound of pencils on paper made its way through the sleepy little upstairs. My aunt was doing homework. Downstairs, I heard my grandmother carrying the nightly conversation she'd always shared with my mother, a series of "Ah yes's" and "Mmhmm, I know that's right" made their way up to me, the words, sound and habit forming an additional sheet of labor wrapping its way around my mind. Then she and the conversation grew quiet, and the pencil stopped scribbling and the air fell a touch cooler. She made her way up the

stairs, tempo of her steps slower, her body sounded heavier and the stairs made a creak that I never noticed prior but always would afterwards. She walked up to my bed and I thought of pretending to be asleep because I was surely in trouble for something. She woke me from my sleep anyway and told me “Baby, your other grandmother has passed away.” I spent the rest of the night looking for comfort in that bed. Trying to find warmth in blankets made too thin by those words, a pillow too flat by the finality of them. And I could not. I had to instead imagine myself back in that jet, this time with a co-pilot, but that wasn’t the right place. So I placed us, the co-pilot and myself, into my maternal grandmother’s home - a small trailer with a television and too many dolls. She sat on the bed and I hugged her for as long as I could. We watched an episode of *The Price is Right* and we guessed answers on *Jeopardy*. She told me that she was going to bed then, and so I said goodnight and woke up with my arms wrapped around that flat pillow.

These moments and events blur together and form a blob that might be labeled “anxiety” or “depression” and a habit of escaping collapsed into compulsion.

Now I am in a constant state of fighting that compulsion. The cycle of it is tiring. I have good weeks and months where it doesn’t bother me so much. Where I feel like I can focus for long periods of time and where I stay in the present. I am afraid, though. Afraid that one day I might get pushed out and have no way to reel myself back in, or that by the time I get back here again it will be too late. Compulsion became habit and now I’m here.

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*I’m sitting on the couch and I realize that she’s been talking for a while. I’m trying to figure out if I can piece this together. Flashes of conversation, but nothing that I can grasp. Nothing that I can forge into a reaction. She is not laughing so I think it’s best that I follow up on that. She asks me what I was thinking about and I realize I don’t know.*

*“What you said,” I say, hoping that she might clue me in on some context.*

*“You weren’t listening, were you?” I start to panic.*

*“No, I was, I swear!” and it’s true but it isn’t.*

*I’d left my body on the couch and he’d nodded along and even interjected at a few points. They had laughed at one point, I remember that, but somewhere between that moment and this, when I’d come back, she’d said something else. I don’t know what we were talking about, I don’t remember getting to the couch.*

*“I promise I was listening. We were talking about. . .” There is a flash of a word, something I can grasp, but it slips away. She smiles, and she laughs a bit before she springs off the couch, leaving anger in the air behind her. I’m doing my best and I want to get up and go after her. I want to say something, but it’s foggy on the beaches of Atlantis.*