When the First Light Comes, I Will Forgive You

A Treatise on Childhood Trauma, Repetitive Behaviors in Captive Animals, Mental Illness, and Our Developmental Conditions of Evolutionary Adaptation

Presented in the novel format of an autobiography, which itself occurs, as if in an effort to guarantee its permanent obscurity, in the context of a series of divinatory images.

by Scott Schroder

January 11, 2013
Available free online at www.springspeakstruth.org

The time has now come, in this trembling 3am hour and no other, with the day drawing near and the weariness of these moments beginning to extend into the morning's work, so that I can already feel the many tasks before me wearing my body a little thinner, making me a little more transparent in the coming light, to describe in some detail my madness. The purpose of doing so is not the wanton self-indulgence of pure autobiographical exposition—although I will readily acknowledge that I am prone to a strange and perhaps ill-conceived pleasure in describing hardships I have suffered—but rather to attempt to illuminate fundamental dynamics within the human condition by means of case study. My concern is not simply madness *per se*, in the sense of truly incapacitating behavioral pathology, but the trauma which so often seems to precipitate madness and which seems to afflict everybody or virtually everybody I have ever known, regardless of whether or not they are able to function. My concern is, quite simply, the pain that pervades our collective existence; I am undertaking an inquiry into the exceedingly broad question of why people are so broken, and what, if anything, would fix them.

I am attempting to speak now of truths whose existence has always seemed to permeate everything else I have ever written and diminished its validity, burdening it with ugly secrets. I want to discuss what embarrasses me most so that it no longer has any power to discredit me. I attempt, by describing my injuries, to heal them. I have every confidence that this will be an imperfect and incomplete effort. I can feel restraint on my tongue and sense, lingering in certain regions of this dim room, an ominous silence—the walls shroud themselves in it, not wishing to be spoken of. Nonetheless, I lift up my voice to them; I wish it to go wherever it can reach.

I recall hearing once from someone that divination was a legitimate undertaking because one examined a set of images—tarot cards, the configuration of a bundle of sticks cast at random on the ground, the entrails of a goat, whatever the procedure called for—which were in and of themselves meaningless but would be interpreted according to the unknown impulses and preoccupations of the individual, thereby making apparent previously hidden dimensions of mental experience. I have no idea if this really has any truth whatsoever, but no other approach to scrutinizing the workings of an individual's mind seems any more valid, despite the volumes of literature that have been published on the subject. Because it is hard to write about some things, and because I do not entirely understand myself, I will attempt a literary equivalent of divination. Simply put, I will articulate a random series of images and notions that haunt me and see what, if anything, I decide they symbolize.

The track of a mountain lion in muddy ground and a man's hand placed down onto the track, thereby making a composite print, or perhaps erasing it.

This image persistently occurs to me, but if it means

something in particular, I do not know what. I have used it repeatedly in various fictions. From a story I wrote called "A Map of the Mountains":

On the second day we crossed a wide meadow where narrow channels of water cut through the ground every few steps. In the wet soil, we found the track of a cougar. The man bent, stared at it for some time, and slowly, I believe reluctantly, placed his hand down on the track to erase it, or perhaps to make a combined print of his hand and the cougar's, I do not know. There was an undeniable sadness and ceremony to his action, and I do not know the meaning of it.

The experiential impetus for this image was, quite simply, a time when I crouched down on a logging landing south of the Puget Sound and stared into the track of a mountain lion for a long time. I did not put my hand into the print. Shortly thereafter, I got lost.

Some images persist and begin to contain new meanings. When I was young, there was a pool. I grew up in a strange sort of religious cult in Southern California, which was called, with the poor aesthetic taste so often displayed by religious cults, the Alive Polarity Fellowship. The place involved a predictable litany of distasteful things one inevitably associates with such entities—arranged marriages; a regretful predilection for violence toward children; prohibitions on contact with the outside world, including, without supervision, family members; and in at least one case, from what I understand, organizationally mandated spousal abuse. In any case, because the Alive Polarity Fellowship occupied and operated a resort, there was a pool. This pool had a diverse array of tiles, many of which contained images. In order to see the images, one had to venture below the water, often to depths that, to my young mind, seemed prodigious. On a perpetual boyhood quest for magical knowledge, I would make dives into those terrifying waters to see what powerful secrets could be learned beneath their surface.

There was one image in particular that struck me as greatly significant, the somewhat archaic image of a man—I know nothing more or less than that now. His bright colors predominate in my memory, but he is otherwise half-formed and indistinct. He was enigmatic then, and now he is doubly obscured by the imperfection of memory. Who was he and what did he mean? He merges in my mind with a hanged man—perhaps he was, in fact, a hanged man. The mind is like that pool, I suppose. Many of the images that populate it lie beneath a surface which is difficult to venture through, shimmering with uncertain meaning.

The track is this: it is the path. I was, initially, skeptical of my ersatz means of discovering hidden truths, but in at least this one case, it has proven successful. The cougar track, and the man's hand imposing its own shape on it, is the path. I got lost—and I do not do so easily—after the time I spent staring at the track. I lived below the mountain where I found the track when the Fukishima reactor had its meltdown, and there was much talk of the possibility of evacuating if catastrophic levels of radiation began migrating across the sea. The thought of fleeing to safety and leaving all of the living things around me behind, to suffer a fate we had created, appalled me—I realized that I could not go, that I'd rather die with the maples, firs, foxes, and owls that I shared a home with. Then, mere months later, I left, for reasons of a far less decisive and fundamental nature than avoiding imminent death by radiation poisoning. I do not wish to imply that my reasons weren't good ones, only to indicate the mercurial nature of my attachments and the ceaseless convolutions of my life's course.

I have grown old and done very little with myself. I do not know why I left the Sierra Nevada for Portland, or why I left Portland for Olympia, or Olympia for Portland, or Portland for Oakland. I knew at the time, but now I think it is entirely likely that I leave places simply because it's in my nature. I feel often, rather than a single person, like a jumble of different men who are living all the various lives I have lived, all confusedly occupying a single skin, none of us any more or less valid than any other, none of us with any greater claim to dominate our shared body. A day never goes by when I do not imagine that I am about to leave wherever I am for somewhere else. The two tracks, a man's and a cat's, contain these things.

We were close for awhile, big cats and I—we both haunted that mountain in Olympia, we traveled along the same routes—the logging roads—and we were aware of one another's presence. I only came into contact with it once. I did not hear or see it, but you can tell. It was night. You can feel it when they are

close. I built a hut from logging slash on an eastern slope, cradled by a dense and low overstory of Douglas fir and Pacific madrone, and started sleeping in it sometimes. I started seeing cougar tracks and scats everywhere—not just on that mountain, but also on the railroad tracks between downtown Olympia and Sapp Road, which I would walk to visit my friend.

Then I went to Portland, and in Portland I borrowed a bicycle and rode to some Bureau of Land Management land just west of the Mount Hood National Forest, where I found the remains of countless animals, primarily deer of all ages and sexes, spread out over a few acres. They were mostly skeletons, but some were in far more recent stages of decomposition. The bones were cracked and the marrow sucked dry. There was a recent kill buried in the soil right by Highway 26. Cougar scat, inundated with the white hair of the deer it ate, was everywhere. I have never seen anything like it before or since.

Then I left the Northwest for California, and our paths no longer overlap. I never find myself close to cats. We do not haunt the same places or take the same routes. Occasionally, I wonder if by leaving I have broken some sort of promise I was only vaguely aware of making, or perhaps was in the process of making. That is all the tracks have to tell me. I must look elsewhere for answers.

Time slowing at the moment a bullet is fired at me, all of nature's unknown aspects becoming apparent as the bullet travels forward.

I used to wander around the country with no agenda whatsoever, and one time I was in New Mexico, for no particular reason, and something vaguely similar to this happened to me. This was a long time ago—I was seventeen then and I am thirty-four now—and the events have become exceedingly confused, muddled by the amplified and distorted nature of my perception during the experience and by my inclination to make events more coherent, and myself more interesting and charismatic, in the remembering and retelling. In any case, there was a long day out in the desert; a walk of twenty miles without water; nightfall; a small town; some barking dogs; a brief episode of trespassing onto someone else's property, motivated by a search for a spigot; and some gunfire. That is all that is really worth telling of this event anymore, but I believe it is the seed from which a persistent obsession with gunfire, time slowing, and perception consequently encompassing an infinite number of variables has grown and blossomed.Time has slowed for me, however much my body strained and fought to keep it flowing, on a number of occasions since then. The results have always been catastrophic—time slows for no one else, only for me, and I watch the world go by and progress in its usual fashion as I stand, horrified, frozen in a moment that mercilessly refuses to end. I first glimpsed my madness, first saw the world illuminated by light of some uncanny and inexplicable new quality I had never before encountered, when I was eleven years old. The religious organization in which I spent my life up to the age of eight no longer existed. By this time, I lived in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains, in a sad little town called Pollock Pines, and had, at least to the extent that I ever have, entered society. I was looking at a map of the world in my sixth grade classroom. On its own, its scale did not horrify me, but when I thought about it in exponential fashion—when I looked at a small part of it and thought that you would have to multiply that area by itself to get a larger area, and that area by itself to get a still larger area, until I finally found myself looking upon that incomprehensibly large exponent that is Eurasia—I felt insane. Then, with a decisive, cold certainty, I knew that at some point in my life I would be touched by something evil, something I would have to fight, and I turned away from the map.

I would come off the road intermittently in my teenage years and stay in Nevada City, California—another Sierra Nevada foothills town—where I had many friends. By the time I was eighteen, a few years of travel, in which I was perhaps trying desperately to avoid my impending insanity by means of physical evasion, had worn me down considerably; I ended up in the Sierra and found I was in no position to leave. I stopped moving and, in the fashion of crazy people the world over, started living with my mother.

This is when time began freezing, or rather when moments began expanding in my body while they died in the outside world, leaving me in a separate temporal dimension. I was alone; my mother was elsewhere, I don't know where. I believe it was winter. A terror began to seize me—I imagined that at some point in the future I could recover from my growing madness, but only if I could account for all of the stages in the process of my deterioration. I needed to meticulously record all of the parts of myself that ceased to function or became disjunct, so that when the time came that I was capable of doing so, I would have a representative schematic of my sane mind with which to rebuild.

But how, really, can one know what is relevant and what is not? The smallest and most seemingly innocuous stimuli began to obsess me. I sat on a chair and examined the angle of the sun coming in through

a window, cross-legged, thin, my muscles tensed and my face jagged with concentration, my mind and the room humming in unison with the subtle and fatal potency of the sun's pale white color, crippled. I meticulously examined and re-examined it, horrified that I may be failing to grasp some essential aspect of its meaning which I would later desperately require. Ten minutes went by. Then twenty. Then an hour. Then its hue deepened; the light was gone, and I remained in the chair, exhausted, depleted, and, as much as I ever have been in my life, defeated.

Months transpired. I slept once every three days. I spent whole nights standing in one position. I never ate or drank. I pissed myself regularly. From such ceaseless and merciless exercise, my mind became monstrous, akin in form to the savage musculature one acquires from routine labor, and my thoughts had a terrible density—though they endeavored to encompass the whole universe, they did so without a single square centimeter of empty space; everything, absolutely everything, was meticulously accounted for, its interrelations with all other things examined.

It was, perhaps, ecology—with its basic precept that every part of a system affects every other component of that system—that truly authored my demise. This essential precept worked its way under my skin, took hold of my senses, and began, in my helpless mind, to make everything more complex than it really was—or rather, than it really needed to be for my purposes at a given moment.

Can a system be construed from the slightly ajar door to the bedroom, the light spilling out of it onto the carpet of the dark living room, the humming of the refrigerator, and my memory of dead cows by the side of a railroad track? Certainly—one may find valid interrelations between these things. The cracked door reveals light whose ultimate source, via fossil fuels, is the sun, that same sun bleaches the bones of the dead cows in my memory, and once burned these fossil fuels, which also power the humming refrigerator, amplify the sun's heat, increasing the speed at which it bleaches the bones of the cattle. Will these dead cows someday, under layers of accumulated sediment, form deposits of oil, to fuel future trains, lights, and refrigerators, and to bleach, under a blistering sun, the bones of their distant descendants with greater intensity than their own bones have ever known or could ever dream of? Does this humming of the refrigerator resemble anything more than the sound of my own thoughts, this light spilling out onto the floor resemble anything more than the contents of my own mind spilling out of me? Is the light my thoughts pouring out of me or my vision, the world coming into me? It feels like one or the other. If the light represents my vision, then at what angle would the door have to be from the platform of the train car to allow me to have seen the dead cows by the tracks? If such a tiny crack in the door, such a narrow band of light, represented the whole span of my vision, then the world must consist of more than 360 degrees . . .

I imagined, because I am prone to thinking about god, that what I was experiencing, were my mind to grow adequately vast to actually perform the task I was hopelessly attempting, would be one version of god. Here is god: crippled, alone, silent, unable to take a step forward or utter a word, so entirely occupied is he in the act of calculating everything in the universe simultaneously; here he is, holding together, with inconceivable physical effort, the sky.

And now, friends, you must permit me an indulgence—frozen in place somewhere between the kitchen and the living room, my foot hovering over the ground, the next step I take imbued with the potential for the destruction or creation of the world, wishing desperately I had the means to leave my body, I would like to do precisely that. I would like to sprout shimmering white wings from the shoulders of my frail form and rise above it, angelic, perfectly formed, luminous with redemption, and ascend from this scene of horror.

We will, to be certain, return—but allow me for now this *post-hoc* victory.

A sentience that is not localized to any particular organism or other aggregation of matter, but rather diffuse throughout an environment, that is dangerous to perceive the existence of.

Confessing to all of the miseries and travails of my existence quickly borders on the territory of a parody of a broken life, but I suppose in this case I must again refer to some long-bygone sorrow and mention that this first happened while I was dope sick. This is a few years later. I was eighteen or nineteen when time

stopped (time is still stopped—this interlude, these years, occur in the duration of a single footstep) and I was somewhere in my early twenties when this happened; we will say for the sake of argument that I was twenty-three.

There were various threads of my existence that had already wended their way into life's larger braid at this time that should be accounted for. There was that great, primordial trauma—that moment of realization that will continue to affect me for the rest of my life, that moment after which I knew I could never really be okay—when I was sixteen and I stood in a forest on the East Coast and realized for the first time that humans are a part of the nature we are doing violence to. This, to a large extent, has defined me ever since. As Douglas Peacock said in *Grizzly Years*, “If this is a wound, it does not want mending.” This is pain that wants only to find its source; it never wants to be assuaged.

At some point a year or two later, while I was still traveling, I began spending more and more time in libraries, trying to wrap my head around various facets of environmental law. Then back in the mountains where I settled, in between trips to psychiatric hospitals, I start doing things like filing administrative appeals of timber sales. This, I suppose, should have been my life. But simultaneously battling with my own mind and with the forces that are destroying the world proved to be a task I was not equal to. I broke, and reverted to the stupid, childish atavism of hopping a freight train without any particular destination.

No particular destination turned out to be Portland, and my periodic use of heroin in the mountains predictably became, on those rain-soaked streets, a routine. Having abandoned my difficult path, I devoted myself to whatever remained that interested me but in no sense required reconciling myself to all the truths that burdened me: literature, drugs, sex, music. It was not such a bad life. My girlfriend was lovely. We had an apartment. In film and literature, drug addiction is presented as a ceaseless litany of horrors, but our lives didn't play out according to any such formula. It was an irresponsible, pointless, self-indulgent way to live—essentially, the same rabid consumerism that afflicts so much of our society—but the quotient of time we spent sobbing in the rain dope sick and things like that was relatively low. These moments occurred, but infrequently; for the most part, I was occupied with doing art, being high, and forgetting.

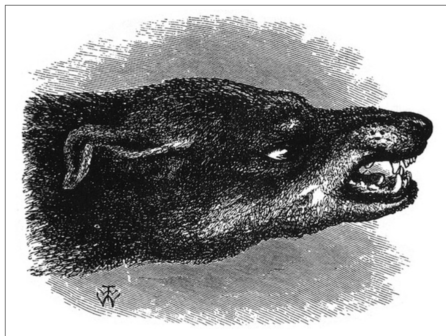
We can now return to the present of our narrative, granting that “the present” is actually an interlude that occurs in the context of a single moment—the step between the kitchen and the living room—some years in the past. I found myself one morning, in the small apartment on 19th and Hawthorne whose walls we had painted purple, withdrawing and reading the Old Testament. It was Exodus, and Yahweh was telling the children of Israel to mark the lintels of their doors with blood so that he would know them and pass over them as he traveled over Egypt, killing, I believe, all of Egypt's firstborn sons. It seemed odd that he had the omnipotence to travel through the air slaying son after son but not the omniscience to know who was Egyptian and who belonged to his chosen race. Then I had some vague thought about all of the evil that had ever come out of this document I was reading, then another vague thought about the desert being a configuration of matter that had, as an emergent property of all its stones, sand, rivers, lizards, and heat —just like our own consciousness emerges as a property of all the cells in our brains—a malevolent sentience.

I think that it was just the feeling of coming back into the world after so long in a dream-like state. I think William Burroughs described something similar in *Naked Lunch*—the stark, unimaginable magnitude of raw *reality* invading one's senses. Suffice it to say that I then imagined that this sentience was becoming aware of my awareness of it, and that the more I could perceive it the more a threat to me it was, and that I grew genuinely frightened.

Since then, I have had many dreams of this nature. The most potent took place in an apartment I occupied right after I cut it out with dope, in 2007. I was walking around the apartment when I became aware of a subterranean chamber wherein a man, the apartment's previous occupant, had descended, spoken to the earth, and learned its secrets. I then realized I was seeing something I was not supposed to, and the earth became aware of my knowledge of its own awareness. We did not speak, the earth did not send an emissary of some sort. I was simply interacting with the unadulterated presence of a sentience that was there with me in the room, pervading all of the room's contents and the empty space that separated those contents, humming inaudibly, animating everything with its presence, as I tried to disavow or forget my knowledge of it. There is something indescribable about that sensation, about the experience of two minds, without words or gestures, simply knowing one another. The earth grew more and more angry, and I felt my throat constricting as the life was choked out of me. I staggered around the apartment. I clutched at the walls, knocked something over, and finally sank

down onto a couch. Then, I woke on precisely that couch, in precisely the position I had fallen into in my dream.

Does it mean anything? I suppose one could draw the perhaps less than startling conclusion that any disembodied sentience I perceive suffusing a room is probably my own, however foreign it feels and however much it might seem to wish me harm. Indeed, I am also haunted by the sensation that alternate versions of myself are standing unseen behind me when I sit writing with my back to a room, or that other selves are following me, just out of sight, as I make my way down forest trails.



Who is with me in this room? How many alternate configurations of myself are there, and what do they want? How many disjunct configurations of my own body are there, and what are they simultaneously experiencing? I sometimes think I can feel bodies inside myself that do not feel pain, luminous, unblemished, and pure.

The bullet is still traveling toward me, I still have not taken my step.

We must, as we knew would invariably be the case, return to the confines of my skin, the moment in the secluded house between Nevada City and the South Yuba River, between the kitchen and the living room. What else is there to tell? Naturally, my foot finally found its way, after however many tortured minutes or hours it spent hovering, to the ground.

To summarize, for the sake of avoiding an unnecessarily prolonged narrative: moments expanded and contracted. Time appeared to progress, changes would occur, but then I would find myself frozen in that very same step but in some other house, in some other part of the mountains, and realize that time had collapsed back on itself; I was at the center of time and no matter how hard it tried to expand in any given direction it always retreated to the point of its origin—I was trapped in the same moment I always had been.

My periodic hospitalizations became increasingly routine and prolonged, until any time outside began to seem like a fleeting and inconsequential interregnum. I was given large doses of every major class of psychiatric medication there is. I was given medication for depression, hallucinations, and anxiety—afflictions from which I was not suffering. I was treated with puzzlement, perhaps even bafflement, because nothing in the doctors' experience had prepared them for a man who was frozen in time. I was given an MRI scan to see if my brain had some anomaly that was inhibiting my movement. But this bafflement never translated into a moment's hesitation to subject me to every conceivable treatment. I developed, although I would not know it if I had not seen photographs from that time, a rigid, uncomprehending stare from all the drugs. One of them swelled my tongue so that it filled my entire mouth. Finally, I was placed on a gurney, a needle was put into my arm, I was anesthetized, and that is all I can say: the shock therapy robbed me of months of my memory. Let us speak no more of it.

A narrative such as this one would warrant a moment of redemption, a decisive transformation in which the wounds of the past are integrated, and by that integration, deprived of their sting, a moment in which a new person emerges whole and free from the wreckage of himself, but I have no such moment of which to tell. I did not stand on a mountain and speak to god. I did not know the gentle touch of some nameless invisible benevolence. I have already told the rest of the story. I took a train somewhere, I did some drugs, some years went by, I did no good for anybody whatsoever.

I am weary. I began this text over a month ago, during a few fleeting moments stolen from sleep, and I doubt I have experienced more than a day or two since then in which I did not, from the moment I woke, desire to again close my eyes. Nonetheless, we must now attempt the most difficult and essential part of this undertaking: we must ask why. What is this madness and why did it afflict me?

Needless to say, the doctors who drugged, shocked, and confined me against my will, for all of the sophistication of their methods of analysis and the terminology with which it is described, can provide no meaningful answer. Perhaps this is no fault of psychiatry *per se*, but simply a fault of these particular individuals—there is perhaps something about a willingness to coerce someone into treatment that precludes understanding someone, understanding being based at least in part on a capacity for empathy. Moreover, we should recall that less than a century previous, individuals who made the same claims to authority as modern psychiatry—that flawless, rigorous analysis was the exclusive basis for their conclusions

—diagnosed people with female hysteria, classified homosexuality as a disease, and sterilized social undesirables. Just as these absurd cruelties perished with the troglodytes of bygone science who practiced them, some day the modern inheritors of their questionable legacy will also die, and with them, a substantial number of their clinical constructs. Let us leave these thugs of dubious credibility to their dirty business, without consultation, as we are faced with a task of attempting a genuine understanding of the human condition with which they can be of no assistance.

As is so often the case, we can gain insight into our own behavior through observation of our non-human brothers and sisters—in this case, by examining the responses that animals have to the cruelties that humans inflict on them. In industrial agricultural and research facilities the world over, cows, pigs, rats, monkeys, chickens and many other species are raised in barren, socially isolated environments, such as pens and cages. A very substantial number of such animals develop what are called stereotypies, purposeless and often quite bizarre repetitive behaviors. Stereotypies vary by species. 80% of the observed stereotypy in captive carnivores is pacing, whereas 70% of observed stereotypy in captive ungulates involves the chewing of air, the ceaseless licking of non-food objects, and other similar oral behaviors. Likewise, these repetitive behaviors vary by individual within a given species—rhesus monkeys raised in social isolation often develop somersaulting and head bobbing stereotypies, but a smaller number bite themselves and bang their heads against walls.

When confronted with the diversity of behavioral pathologies that develop between and within species in these contexts, some might be inclined to view them in separate conceptual terms. Understanding the similarities and differences in various stereotypies is essential for understanding the precise neurobiological mechanisms that underly them, but not for understanding what, fundamentally, they represent—animals having gone insane from being subjected to adverse conditions to which they are not adapted. In other words, in captive rhesus monkeys, caged polar bears, and penned sows alike, *madness is a many-headed hydra, each one of which sprouts from the single body of trauma*.

As with other forms of life, so too with humans. Where adverse experiences occur at levels beyond the individual's capacity for processing them, insanity results.

I do not wish, by stating this truth too starkly, to insinuate that trauma is the exclusive source of severe mental disturbance. Experience modulates one's genetic predispositions to mental illness, but in some individuals, it appears to develop regardless of how benign their environment is.

Nonetheless, considerable variation exists between societies in the degree to which people are afflicted, and the source of this variation appears to be the extent to which people are routinely subject to circumstances that are stressful beyond their capacity to process. According to a 1994 World Health Organization study, 27% of people in the United States experience some form of mental health disorder, a rate higher than that of any other nation in the world.

Whatever the credibility or dubiousness of the actual clinical classifications of people's afflictions—whether ADHD, for instance, is a real disease, or “anxiety disorders” meaningfully describe the problems they refer to—the fact that 27% of the population is defined as mentally ill clearly does underly a simple and irrevocable truth, which is that people are in a great deal of pain. Mental illness is perhaps not even precisely the point. The point, which I make with no basis other than my own lifetime of personal observation, is that, whether or not their suffering so drastically impairs their functioning that they could be considered “mentally ill,” virtually everyone I have ever known well suffers from some sort of terrible affliction. It seems all of modern society is composed of people who are experiencing crippling self-doubt, or a genuine inability to interact with others, or deep-seated feelings of loathing for themselves and/or their fellow humans, or persistent and decontextualized shame, or any seemingly infinite number of other equally severe adversities.

As I said, I do not intend to justify this statement with any statistic or rigorous argument. I base it simply on my experience of people. My life has been a multifarious affair and my interactions have been confined to no particular segment of society. This observation has been true of the rural conservatives, career-oriented city dwellers, and countercultural artists I have had the occasion, for one reason or another, to know. It has been true of people who believe in god, people who claim to practice magic, people who only believe in science, and people who don't see the difference.

An affluent college student with whom I once got drunk —a complete stranger—told me through clenched teeth that he believed himself to be a hideously ugly man. A man from rural Colorado who once picked me up hitch hiking confessed tearfully to the murder of his girlfriend. In a discussion of what we were grateful for in life that took place in a community college English class I took, our professor told her students, with perhaps inadvertent gravity, that she was most grateful for her ability to endure. For all that the obscure artistic circles with which I've associated myself are imbued with notions of community and liberation, substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and interpersonal discord seem more or less ubiquitous. I have selected these cases at random; I could easily replace this brief list with a hundred other such lists. Modern, complex society might consist of individuals with vastly different occupations, aesthetics, and philosophies, but we seem more or less to be united in our pain.

One must ask the only reasonable questions that, when confronted with facts of such tremendous implication, present themselves: why? Were we always like this? If not, what broke us? Can we mend?

I must confess that I have never endeavored to write something that posed questions I am so unable to answer. One could perhaps find themselves wondering what, exactly, the purpose of this writing is—does it function solely to frame a dilemma to which it presents no solution? Yes, I suppose that would be a fair characterization. Nonetheless, I must, however inadequately, attempt answers.

We do know of course that individuals are far more susceptible to long-term harm from events they experience during the earlier, developmental stages of life than later on. To make a gross generalization, it seems to typically require a truly horrendous trauma to fundamentally damage an adult—a trauma like being in a war, for instance—whereas a child may suffer similar damage from far more innocuous stimuli—simply yelling at or hitting a child seems to suffice in a large number of cases. The next part of this equation is equally common knowledge: those people who are wounded in some way as children mature to produce children they in turn inflict wounds upon.

Thus we may give a perfunctory answer, such as it is, to our monumental question of why people are in so much pain. We have at least established a mechanism of sorts for our suffering. Now we must seek a mechanism for this mechanism. We are in other words now approaching the questions of whether or not we were always like this, and if not, what broke us. Are children, under any environmental conditions, simply terribly delicate? Did our seemingly endless cycle of developmental trauma, parenthood, and developmental trauma in the next generation have its origins in the phylogenetic history of our species? Or earlier? Are chimpanzees and bonobos all scarred from their early experiences of life? Or, alternately, did some change in social conditions in more recent human history provide a context for the severe disruption of childhood's normal course?

I doubt one can find simple or truly decisive answers to these questions —at least not legitimate ones. Nonetheless, there are convincing indications from the ethnographic record of hunter-gatherers that at some point in the transition to complex societies childhood became far more traumatic, and thus adults became far more broken creatures. The hunter-gatherer has been the subject of every imaginable overstatement, traversing a continuum from unquestioning adoration to scathing contempt—claims range from their societies being utopias free of interpersonal discord, jealousy, or violence to their societies being technologically simpler because their members are cognitively simpler. What is unquestionably true, however, is that foraging was the mode of subsistence throughout human evolution, and that the conditions that prevailed throughout our foraging history are the conditions to which we are adapted.

Such a statement should garner little controversy. The reason that dioxin and mercury are harmful to us is because they were not present in the water we drank or the fish we ate during our evolution. This is of course not the same thing as saying that every material we've created or disseminated throughout the environment in modern times is harmful to us. Glass bottles were also not present in our environment of evolutionary adaptation, but they do not cause cancer or birth defects. Likewise, not every change in our social worlds or the mental stimulus to which we are subject since the Pleistocene should be assumed, *a*

priori, to be harmful to us—but it would hardly be surprising if some of them are. What changes that have occurred since the dawn of the Neolithic in how we structure our lives, what we believe in, or how we interact with one another are the psychosocial equivalents of dioxin or mercury?

In Frank Marlowe's 2010 ethnography *The Hadza: Hunter-Gatherers of Tanzania*, he describes seeing only one spanking during the course of a year of 30 minute intensive observation sessions of men who had young children. He describes the extent to which children are accommodated by adults thus:

Hadza children are allowed to do as they like most of the time. By American standards, Hadza adults do very little disciplining or training of children . . . When children are 1 to 3 years of age, they often throw tantrums, during which they may pick up a branch and repeatedly whack people over the head. The parents and other adults merely fend off the blows by covering their heads, laughing all the time. They do not even take the stick away. (p. 197)

One can almost feel the trembling of the mass of child psychologists and social scientists who would read such a description in horror. Much ink has been spilled on how best to indoctrinate one's children into the world of healthy, functioning adulthood, but relatively little has been spilled on the notion that children simply do not require much in the way of explicit training to become adults. Contrary to the predictions of discordant antisociality a modern commentator might make for the behavior of a child who is simply not disciplined or otherwise instructed on how to interact with others, Hadza children seem to integrate into broader social life at far earlier ages than we do:

Children go from being terribly spoiled during their "terrible 2s" and 3s to being perfectly well behaved and respectful of adults—even obedient little servants—by the time they are 4 or 5 years old. Five-year-olds fetch anything adults want. Sometimes they fetch things they see the adult will need before they are even asked. For example, when seeing a man getting out his pipe and tobacco, a child may grab an ember from the fire and take it to the man to light the pipe. They never complain. In fact, they enjoy being helpful. (Marlowe, p. 198)

I should hasten to make a distinction. Most of us are familiar with very minimal parenting from our complex societies—what would often be termed negligent parenting—but it more or less always occurs in conjunction with stressful or harmful conditions. Essentially, one finds children being left unsupervised, with little effort being made to "raise" them, in families where violence, drug abuse, and similar agents of childhood trauma are also to be found. I do not mean to suggest that not bothering to teach morals to or instill a work ethic in a child will guarantee them happy adulthoods if you also hit or ceaselessly scream at that child. I do mean to suggest that children who are raised without these severe impediments to their development do not require discipline—that discipline, in fact, for all that it may be perfectly well-intentioned as a means of guiding a child toward functionality and responsibility, is itself an impediment to successful development.

Maybe childhood—and likewise, parenthood—are not all that difficult or terribly perilous. Maybe it does not take rigorous instruction and methodical, agonizing, correction to get a child to learn how to behave like an adult. On the contrary, just as we do not as children require explicit instruction to learn language, but rather learn through our innate capacity the specific terms and rules of the language being spoken around us, perhaps we require no stimulus other than observing the conduct of others to learn, through our innate capacities, how to conduct ourselves in a like manner.

A consequence of this would be the possibility that the human creature is not one that has evolved any real capacity to develop normally under the influence of ostracizing or recriminating adults, just as it has not evolved the capacity to develop normally under the influence of mercury. Perhaps mercury and adult enforcement of behavioral standards alike are post-Pleistocene environmental factors to which we can not adapt.

The statement might sound radical, but on the contrary, it is the only one that accords well with the readily observable facts. Popular culture's greatest frustration with psychoanalysis is perhaps a sense that it indulges endless emphasis on seemingly trivial wrongs suffered at the hands of parents and other adults in childhood—that it attempts to justify an adult lifetime of neurosis and pathology through the recapitulation of the childhood spent with the unloving mother and the stern father. For as much as it is questionable that psychoanalysis has ever really healed anyone, as much as it may be be built on theoretical foundations that range from uncertain to shaky to absurd, its precept that people experience lifelong trauma from their childhoods—even seemingly benign childhoods—is simply, empirically, irrevocably true.

The lifelong traumatic response that adults have to being occasionally hit, yelled at, or threatened with boarding school as children may seem entirely out of proportion to the initial events, but one simply can not deny the preponderance of evidence indicating that this is precisely how people respond to such experiences. Grown men and women—including people who have managed to "succeed" by virtually any conventional measure—still cower in terror as they approach their parents' houses for the holidays. Psychoanalysis may not lack for flaws, but that does nothing to diminish the significance of the raw fact that people still feel the need to subject themselves to it, to talk about their childhoods week after week and year after year.

These conditions are so pervasive that their consequences are difficult to overstate. Everyone or virtually everyone in modern societies may be suffering from a significant level of thwarted developmental capacity, the consequence of childhood conditions to which our species is not adapted. Little of modern life could be comprehended without bringing this fact to bear on any analysis. Everyone—people working in grocery stores, people designing contingency plans for accidents at nuclear power plants, the editors of fashion magazines, the people invading countries and the people fighting those invasions—is broken. This truth, in ways we can only begin to assess and in concert with myriad other factors, must be informing everything we do as a collective, from the poisoning of brown pelicans with DDT to the creation and dissemination of film adaptations of fantasy novel trilogies. Nothing of contemporary civilization, in all of its creative and destructive enormity, can be understood without comprehension of the nature of the wounds which have been inflicted into its inhabitants.

A caveat must be made. Where I do not specifically disavow a statement, it will be assumed that I am making it implicitly. What I am stating, or at least suggesting is a very strong possibility, is that people in complex societies are suffering from lifelong injuries inflicted by childhood conditions that, while not always meeting common criteria for tragedy, are outside the range of conditions to which we are adapted by evolution. This is more or less equivalent to suggesting that both the hunter-gatherers who are everyone's ancestors and at least some modern hunter-gatherers experienced or are experiencing significantly greater integration into adult psychic life, with far fewer experiential barriers to overcome.

Thus, I am discussing an advantage of foraging society over civilized society. Moreover, it would hardly be the only advantage—foragers, after all, are hardly suffering from the obesity epidemic. In both cases—childhood and adult mental life in one, and diet and lifestyle in the other—we observe instances where factors not to be found in our environment of evolutionary adaptation have a deleterious effect on us.

My caveat, however, is that it is not the case that every single time one witnesses human suffering it is the result of evolutionarily novel conditions. Foraging societies exhibit much of the same interpersonal discord our own societies exhibit. People are jealous, prone to resentments and hostilities, capable of behaving disrespectfully toward the natural world, and sometimes lethally violent toward one another. To read an ethnography of the BaMbuti Pygmies, the Hadza, or the Ju/'hoansi is quite often to read something more striking for its familiarity than for its novelty. There is no lack of conditions which we may find quite torturous that appear to be more or less ubiquitous, in the most and least technological societies alike. This is not to say that any given cultural universal is inevitable in the future—we do not know what humans are capable of under our ever-changing environmental conditions—only that such universals have probably always been with us and can not be evaded by abandoning civilization.

We are, in our core, Pleistocene foragers, there is no doubt—but we are Pleistocene foragers who have journeyed into the sky. No compelling reason exists to categorize the first few billion years of evolution as "nature," but these last couple of million, in which humans developed their unique capacities and altered the face of the earth, as something else. Thus, there is no "nature" to which we may return—we are, in all our complex novelty, already there. We *are* nature. We must learn to live with the prodigious capacities that evolution has endowed us with, with respect for life, but we can not simply put these capacities away, as they are built into our being.

Discussions of conditions in foraging societies—the conditions to which we are adapted—are typically

obscured by various ideological tendencies. There is first and foremost, abundantly evident in much contemporary social science, albeit suffering a gradual decline, the simple refusal to believe that our entire evolutionary history endowed us with any mental predispositions whatsoever. The various arguments made in favor of this notion would be torturous to account for in all their convolutions, but the common root from which they all grow seems to be a fear that accepting the existence of human nature, and a human nature formed during millennia of Pleistocene foraging at that, will mean accepting everything undesirable that humans do—such as starting wars and raping each other—as inevitable.

This fear, and all its consequent ideological baggage, which denies humans any intrinsic characteristics whatsoever, has obscured the study of our species terribly, relegating it to a “soft” science with little in the way of definitive results to show for the last century of its existence, while science in general has advanced exponentially. The simple and readily observable fact that people are ceaselessly doing things for which there is no historical precedent should be more than enough to dispel the notion that having an evolved nature is equivalent to inevitably behaving in any given way in the future. Their fear thus assuaged, even the most fervent cultural determinist should begin to acknowledge that biology and culture can fit together into a cohesive analytical framework.

Further confusion comes in the form of the idealization of the hunter-gatherer. In a sense, it is the opposite of cultural determinism—it is essentially the notion that human nature developed so rigidly in the context of hunting and gathering that any deviation from this way of life wreaks psychological havoc on us. In this view, hunting and gathering societies are free of all of the woes that beset modern people. Despite the fact that even a cursory examination of the ethnographic record absolutely and irrevocably discredits this notion, there is a substantial literature devoted to its espousal.

In the future, we may hope to study hunter-gatherer life outside of any rigid ideological constraints and thus with a better chance of formulating some genuine understanding of human nature in relation to modernity. We may understand that foraging conditions represent our physical and mental environment of evolutionary adaptation, and therefore provide a framework for assessing all of the changes that have occurred since agriculture began. In some cases, we will find changes that have not been in our best interest, and we can accordingly restructure our society. Other changes, however, we may find neutral or desirable. I submit that the experience of childhood trauma is a case in which deviation from our environment of evolutionary adaptation has proven detrimental to our wellbeing—namely, childhood has become more traumatic, and integration into adult life more problematic, than was the case during most of our species' history. In order for this claim to be substantiated, and for action to be taken to change this regrettable situation, assessments must be made of precisely the factors in complex societies that are causing the human developmental course to become so perilous. This will, no doubt, be a difficult and multifarious task.

I freely confess that many logistical barriers exist to simply restoring the childhood scenarios of our hunter-gatherer past. There are cross-culturally prevalent features of foraging societies that make child-raising systems possible that may not be immediately practical in our own society. For instance, children in many foraging societies spend a great deal of their days in play groups that encompass a fairly wide range of ages, with older children caring for younger ones. One or a few adults remaining behind in camp, within hearing distance of the children, is all the “childcare” that is required while adults are out foraging. When adult supervision of a given child is required, there are usually multiple people who can share the responsibility. All of this functions to alleviate some of the sheer demand of being a parent, and thus the inevitability of coming into conflict with or feeling the need to punish a child.

Moreover, because foraging societies are technologically simpler than our own, with fewer specialized occupations, learning the relevant skills of adulthood through observation and playful emulation is far more plausible for foraging children. Nonetheless, thorough analysis and careful consideration of our evolutionary history may very well yield meaningful possibilities for reducing the quotient of trauma in children's lives.

The tongue as a knife

This means nothing, I imagine, other than that I am a crazy artist, and I'm obsessed with the notion that language is a weapon, that statements formulated with adequate precision and emotion have the capacity to directly affect the physical world. Thus far, I have not caused the collapse of a single building or even made a single cup tremble on a tabletop just by speaking.

I imagine, or at least I want to believe, that if I'm not capable of bringing ruin to coal-fired power plants or tearing roads off of forested slopes with my words alone, that I can somehow at least heal my own body. Thus far, this has proved to be an arduous and uncertain affair, progressing at such an imperceptible pace that, as the years accumulate, I do not know if the process will be complete before I die. I have subjected myself to trial after trial in an effort to gain some courage or resilience I think I lack, but it does little good. In adult life, I am reasonably tough—I can endure cold, hunger, and pain with equanimity—but this adult toughness does nothing to negate the fact that I can not seem to recover from fairly innocuous childhood trauma, trauma that seems like it should be no match for my strength but which continues to overpower me regardless.

Nonetheless, when viewed in the long term, some decisive shifts have occurred. I am not well, but I am certainly not frozen in time. One thing that people often notice when they are being scrutinized to determine whether or not they are insane is that, in such a context, nothing within the realm of their experience really seems all that sane—any strong emotion can be interpreted as a manifestation of madness. There is no way for me to qualify that I am not sick like I used to be, other than to say that no one is scrutinizing my sanity. Nor am I a narcotic addict.

This is, perhaps, all that anyone can really do. Perhaps my tongue is not a knife, perhaps it can not cut me free of my bonds, and perhaps I will never really be okay. But I get a little better each day. On a scale that exceeds the individual, this is enough. If everyone can heal themselves somewhat, if not entirely, then they should inflict correspondingly less trauma on others; each generation should suffer less and less damage.

It is Christmas night, perhaps two months since I began this writing, and little of substance has changed since then. The books that lie around my bed are different than when I began, but the night is still suffused with the same intangible promise of something new coming with the approaching dawn, something hovering in the air that will be made apparent when the first light touches the sky, something I sense is of tremendous importance and am certain exists despite that I can not describe it—the promise of the knife removed from my chest, the bonds cut away from my body, the morning in which I will take my first breath and speak my first word into the trembling world.