

“On days he wept, the Master did not sing.”

The Analects

Book VII, Chapter IX

find it harder to sleep after the brain injury. Usually I wake up in the middle of the night and putz around for a few hours before my alarm goes off. That's when I wash down the pills with a splash of vodka so I can start getting ready for work. I'm not addicted or anything, or at least not to the alcohol. And the pills are prescription. I don't even know if the pills do anything, but the doctor recommended them. He also recommended I keep a dream journal. I don't know why. I think he's a quack. Anyway, I had a weird dream last night. It kinda starts in the middle so I guess when I write about it I'll start in the middle too. So maybe some details won't make sense at first, but don't get too lost, because you'll figure it out eventually. There is one little note I wanna make before I start, though. See, I dreamt that I was in a library, and now I'm awake I know I'm not. But I just can't shake the feeling that really, I *am* in a library, and now I'm dreaming that I'm not.

The Master Did Not Sing

I was almost done with high school when I opened my Instagram account. Most of my peers started using it in middle school, and by the time they were in high school they hardly ever did anything else. Now, far be it from me to complain that my generation is “addicted to their phones” — it’s not incorrect, but it is hypocritical. I was addicted as well, just not to Instagram. I didn’t see the appeal. I didn’t care at all what happened in other peoples’ lives, so it followed that they wouldn’t care what happened in mine. Who was I, anyway? What did I do? What part of my mundane teenage existence deserved even a modicum of attention?

I opened the account when I was 17. It was around the time I went to a summer camp for gifted writers at Kenyon College in Ohio. A year later I would attend Kenyon. While my parents drove me to the airport, we passed a tiny dell coated in lawn grass. The image was strikingly similar to the photograph *Bliss*, which appears when you start up Windows XP. On top of the hill there was an abandoned tractor. The tractor leaned over so sharply that it looked as though its wheels would collapse under their own weight and it would tumble down helplessly into the valley. But it didn’t. It held steady. The tractor was not merely present on the hill, it dominated the hill. In the face of adversity it exerted its will and came to a position of power



the title of this one doesn’t matter

tractor stands ground
on unremarkable hill
leaning forward
domineering
where are all the humans
who would bother
with domineering tractor
on unremarkable hill

over its environment. I was momentarily entranced by the sheer strength of the image, and more importantly, the metaphor which I had created for myself. When I looked away, though, the futility of the whole thing crashed into me. It was just a fucking tractor. There were millions exactly like it, parked somewhere and forgotten on hills so boring they don’t even have names. By the way, did you know that not every location is a place? Technically, to be a place, a location needs to be named. This space to which I attributed so much meaning was so irrelevant that it didn’t even qualify as a place. It was nothing.

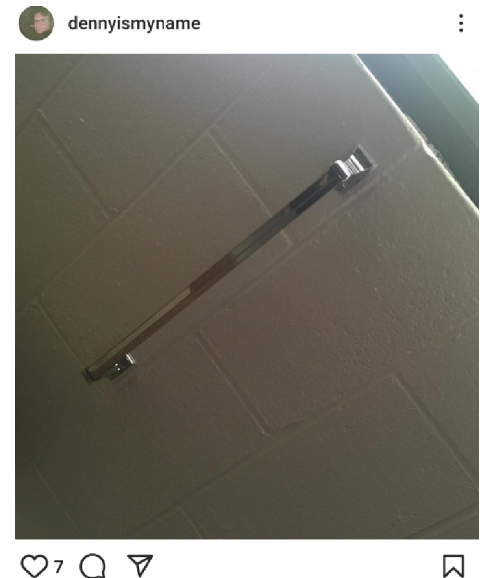
I couldn’t get the image out of my head. At camp they asked us to write a freeform poem every day. My very first one was about the tractor. They asked me to give it a title, but I didn’t think it deserved a title. It was a poem about nothing, and how do you give a name to something that doesn’t exist? I just said that the title didn’t matter and left it at that. They interpreted my refusal to participate as my participation, which, come to think of it, is a recurring theme in my life. But that’s something

we'll get into later. The point is they accepted my title, even though I explicitly said the title didn't matter, and that worked well enough for me.

The camp put students into dorms. They were empty in the summer and there was nowhere else to put us in the bustling metropolis of Gambier, Ohio. I stayed in the same dorm that I would stay in my first semester attending Kenyon, but the particular room I stayed in over the summer had a peculiar irksome detail. It had a towel rack. The picture on the right might be misleading. The rack could only hold a little dinky hand towel, but there was no sink in the room. It hung directly above my desk, which struck me as an unusual place to dry one's hands. It was such a negligible detail, however, that I couldn't imagine anyone ever giving it any attention. This seemed wrong to me. As incongruous a design element as this deserved attention. It deserved mockery. I was the only person in the world who cared about this, and I didn't think that was okay, so I opened up my fresh instagram account and took a picture. That was the first post I ever made on social media.

dennyismyname

That summer is a little bit blurry. I remember a lot of individual things that happened, but not really the order in which they happened or why. I was pretty stressed out because my ex-girlfriend had accused me of sexual assault and gotten me expelled from school just a couple weeks before, but that's a story for another day and frankly not as important as the instagram account.



dennyismyname This handle exists
July 22, 2018

[TITLE OF BOOK]

intestines dripping out of my abdomen onto the subway floor. The subway is packed but there are hardly any other white people on it. Just this one gay couple that keeps making goo-goo eyes at each other. It makes me want to vomit. I keep digging the scalpel deeper in and expelling more viscera out onto the ground. Blood and fat pools and congeals into this rancid orange jelly that gets all over my nice shoes. There's this asshole behind me playing obnoxious trap music with no headphones and the volume all the way up and I think about turning around and throttling him before the blood loss gets to me. I wouldn't want to make a scene, though, so I just stew about it in silence. I widen the slice with the scalpel so I can dig in a bit deeper. I've never disemboweled anything before so I don't really know what I'm doing. I just want everything inside of me to be outside of me as quickly as possible. Some of the people around me are looking at their phones but a lot of them are just staring into space. I wonder what they could possibly think about. What is going on in their lives that warrants thought? None of these people have an inner world. They're automatons, they work and sleep and eat and shit and watch tiktok and repeat and repeat and repeat. It makes me nauseous just thinking about the empty vapidness of their lives. I shove my hand deeper into my guts. They're all dangling out of me now. The only parts still inside of me are where they're connected at one end and the other. I'm not finished, though. I take the scalpel and cut open my stomach. Yellow acid squirts out like a fountain and lands on my intestines with a fizz. The subway stopped. Some slutty looking twentysomething girls get on. I don't actually care that they're pushing their boobs up out of their shirts or anything, I just think it's rude that they make me look at them and then don't have the decency to have sex with me. I try staring at this one girl in a half-hearted goth sort of get up, but she doesn't get the message. She doesn't even really look at me. These girls are the only ones talking but they're not the only ones making noise. I said there was that one guy earlier and there's another one who's gambling or maybe playing solitaire or something and this cartoon character keeps showing up on his screen to spew some inane garbage about how he can do even better if he just shills out more money. I bet he does. See, this is exactly what I mean. These people have so little

going on in their everyday lives that they're willing to send hundreds to sweatshop video game studios in Shenzhen just to feel the slightest twitch in their penis. I don't like mindless noise so the girls' chatter and the grating music and the phone game and the tiktoks and the rumble of the subway all kinda piss me off, but I guess I'm a hypocrite because my stomach cavity is making a sort of gurgling noise. It's a lot quieter than everything else though so it's pretty forgivable. I cut into my stomach until I can open up each flap and let my half-digested food and bile slide out. I needed to lose the weight anyway. I look over to the girl wearing a hijab and a t-shirt that reads "I MET GOD. SHE'S BLACK." She caught my attention because when we were waiting at the same subway stop she balanced her phone on a piece of broken tile on the column so she could record herself doing this idiotic dance. She was standing really close to the yellow line and there was this ad behind her about why subway surfing is dangerous and she did this robot style dance but she wasn't very good at it. The phone was propped up all precariously and it fell and she ran over to pick it up and for a moment I thought she would fall on the tracks and get run over by a train but she didn't. I was disappointed because that seemed like it would be interesting. I think about throwing my spleen at her just to see if she would notice but I decide not to. I grip it with one hand and tear it out and I'm not sure what to do with it so I kinda just drop it on the ground all surreptitiously. I look around to make sure nobody saw me littering but nobody did. There is this pack of kids eating candy and throwing the wrappers all over the floor, though, so I'm not sure that it would make a difference if they noticed or not. I actually know these kids because I've seen them on my route before. They like to run up and down the aisle and throw trash and scream and get into fistfights. I wonder if this sort of thing happens on subways in other parts of the world. The only organs I really have left at this point are my kidney and my liver, and I definitely need those where I'm going, so I decide to leave them be.

The automated voice snaps me out of my daydream to let me know that I'm at my stop. Not a lot of people are getting off here. I mentally scoop up my intestines and put them back in place. As I get off I notice a woman slapping her six year old child. She gets on the subway and I never

[TITLE OF BOOK]

It is the year 1636. My friend Rene Descartes has just devised a method for measuring two variables relative to each other, which he calls a “Cartesian Plane.” I am enraptured by the concept. I quickly discover that certain mathematical patterns take specific shapes in the plane, such as direct correlations becoming straight lines and exponential growth becoming parabolas. What I find most intriguing, however, is that when I graph the difference between any two points on the plane, I can actually measure the average rate of change of the graph itself. I try reducing the difference between points until it is infinitesimally small, which yields a new graph entirely, one that perfectly measures the slope of any curve. Alongside Descartes and another friend, Pierre de Fermat, I develop a new school of mathematics called “Infinitesimal Calculus.” I die without fully grasping the practical applications of my work, or the feud that I would prevent half a century later.

It is the year 536. A volcano erupts in Iceland, an island I have never heard of, and the resulting ash blots out the sun. It is dark and freezing and my crops will not grow. I assume that I am suffering divine retribution. I spend the next decade wandering an overcast earth and grieving my loved ones before finally succumbing to famine myself.

It is the year 1945. I have just come back from WWII and I am enthusiastic about my future. I imagine a straight line which passes through every milestone in my life: finding a job, getting married, buying a house, having children, and retiring. I will spend the remainder of my life traveling this line. In spite of some difficulties, I am eternally grateful for the straightforward lifestyle I lead.

It is the year 1066. I am struck by a random arrow in the Battle of Hastings and die instantly.

It is the year 2018. I am a recent graduate of MIT. I have never lived in a home without a computer. As a child, my father nurtured my love of computers, the internet, and video games by enrolling me in programming classes. I majored in computer science, with a particular focus on machine learning. Today my team at OpenAI introduces GPT-1, its first large language model.

It is the year 1874. I have just stepped onto Ellis Island. I came here on a ship from Hamburg. The immigration officer informed me that my American name will be “Blankfield.” I will marry a woman from Pennsylvania and we will open a moderately successful furniture shop together.

I do not know what year it is. I am an infant. I die of pneumonia days before my first birthday.

It is the year 1995. My future is bleak. I will never own a home, I will never marry, and I will never have job security. I do not know any of this because I am 13 years old and attending a friend's birthday party. We eat pizza, play video games, and watch anime all night.

It is the year 2154. It is now safe for me to return to the surface, provided I wear specialized gear. My group and I search for canned goods in the ruins of the neighborhood we once inhabited. I injure my leg and tear my suit, and my group abandons me. While I wait to die of radiation sickness, I dream of the world that came before.

It is the year 200 B.C. The authorities in Alexandria have just confiscated an epic poem I translated from Greek into Latin because they wish to copy it and add it to the archives of their library. Due to a clerical error, I will never receive the copy. Had anyone read it, this poem, heavily embellished by myself, would be recognized as one of the greatest works of literature in history, and students millennia later would study it in great detail. Instead, it goes unnoticed until it is destroyed in a fire.

It is the year 1234. The Mongols have just invaded China. I will go my entire life without knowing this, because I am an illiterate farmer in a German hamlet. My life is uneventful.

It is the year 1776. I am standing in the Pennsylvania State House waiting to sign the Declaration of Independence. I recognize that this will certainly be my greatest contribution to the history of the world. I feel proud.

It is the year 1349. I have caught the black death.

It is the year 2062. While searching through my grandfather's things, I knock over a set of self-help books. I am astonished to learn that in living memory, people actually used exercise to sharpen their bodies and education to sharpen their minds. I bring down the books and set them next to my diet pills and nootropics.

It is the year 1513. I receive an invitation to study with an artist in Genoa. I am amazed to discover that I will learn not just about the arts, but also the sciences. I am now on the precipice of realizing my lifelong goal of excellence in every domain of human life, a goal which had not been possible before the academic revolution in which I live. I take a moment to reflect on my gratitude that I live in a time so conducive towards my own values.