

Unnamed Lake

ON THE NIGHT of October 8, 2014, or, rather, early on the morning of October 9, I had trouble sleeping. I lay in bed, closed my eyes, and let my mind go blank. Hours passed. I was in something like sleep that wasn't sleep. Around two in the morning, a light that had been bothering me went out, a neighbor's lamp, perhaps, or one of the electronic devices in the next room (the door was ajar) that in these days keep watch over us at all hours. Now wrapped up dark, my thoughts, instead of dipping into the cool subconscious, began to churn and froth.

I paced inside my own mind like a tiger inside its cage, like the Tasmanian tiger going back and forth, maddened by the prospect of its coming doom. Where I had been pinned down in sleeplessness by one small glare, my eyelids now trembled with the flashes coming from within. So quick was the succession of images, each of which presented itself like a problem to be solved, that I could not at any instant remember what had gone before. It seemed to me instead that my consciousness had become like a narrow, high-walled corridor crammed with everything I had lately read or seen, every landscape I had recently passed through or touched on in my thoughts. The intensity and

speed of these images—which had come to resemble a slide show played at absurd speed—became harder and harder to bear until I suddenly sat upright, shutting down the show, as it were, and got out of bed.

I went into the study, switched on a lamp, sat in a chair (not at the desk), and began to write notes (in a blank book, on my crossed knee). I wrote many pages. The room was peaceful like that, spotlit, silent. The shutters were drawn, the mountains in the distance invisible. I wrote for an hour or more with lucid ease, as though my hand were being guided by a benevolent spirit and there was no gap between the flow of my thoughts and the fluency of the ink. The next day, in daylight, I saw that the book was full of fevered scribbles, with only a clear word every now and again to hint at whatever it was I had hoped to set down in writing. I remembered only what I had watched on YouTube, what I had watched between having finished writing and not having yet returned to my bed.

For years now, when I cannot sleep, I rise from bed and watch Jacques Derrida talk. I watch what he said sometime in the late 1990s. Each time that I write something, he said, and it feels like I'm advancing into new territory (he demonstrates "advance" with his left hand), somewhere I haven't been before, and this type of advance often demands certain gestures that can be taken as aggressive with regard to other thinkers or colleagues—I am not someone who is by nature polemical but it's true that deconstructive gestures appear to destabilize or cause anxiety or even hurt others—so, every time that I make this type of gesture, there are moments of fear. (Derrida has proud white hair, and wears a red shirt, and at times he touches his thumb to his lip or lifts a hand to his face.)

The concerts were in honor of the Führer, who had been in power since 1933. The conductor was Wilhelm Furtwängler. The end of the first movement grinds and rumbles like the thick of battle. Never has it sounded so frightful: this is music March 1942: for the despair in Lodz, the internment of Japanese Americans, the horrific winter of the Red Army on the Eastern front, the heavy fighting in Malta. (Later that same year, Derrida is expelled from lycée for being Jewish.) But the *adagio* is clear and tender, played slower than usual, reaching an even greater ecstasy than usual. No one who heard it could have failed to be moved to human kindness. Could they? (In addition to Hitler, both Himmeler and Goebbels are in the audience.)

The concerts took place on March 22 and 24, 1942, on a stage draped with Nazi flags. A recording patched together from these performances is considered the greatest recording of Beethoven's Ninth. The previous week, on March 17, a Nazi camp had begun operation in Belzec, southeastern Poland. For the first time, people were shepherded into "showers" and gassed to death. Not slave labor, not shootings, not gas vans: this was the beginning of the gas chambers. Belzec was designed for death and death alone. ("Is considered the greatest recording" by whom?)

This doesn't happen at the moments when I'm writing, Derrida said. Actually, when I write, there is a feeling of necessity, of something that is stronger than myself (here he gestures with both hands raised to his head), that demands that I must write as I write. I have never renounced anything I've written because I've been afraid of certain consequences. Nothing intimidates me when I write. I say what I think must be said. (A fierceness

in his narrowed eyes here. He is tanned, and cannot be unaware that he is handsome.) That is to say, when I don't write, there is a very strange moment when I go to sleep.

Of the no fewer than 434,500 and as many as 500,000 who were eventually brought to Belzec, two survived. Karl Alfred Schluch of the SS was not at the Berlin concerts, for he was working with Christian Wirth ("Christian the Terrible") at Belzec. Schluch said, "My location in the tube was in the immediate vicinity of the undressing hut. Wirth had stationed me there because he thought me capable of having a calming effect on the Jews. After the Jews left the undressing hut I had to direct them to the gas chamber. I believe that I eased the way there for the Jews because they must have been convinced by my words or gestures that they really were going to be bathed."

A composer who loses his hearing can still compose. The real disaster for a composer would be to lose the ability to count.

In a small enclosure in Beaumaris Zoo in Hobart in 1933 (at the time Jacques Derrida is a three-year-old in Algiers) a Tasmanian tiger, or thylacine, paces. His name is Benjamin. He has a doglike head, and stripes on his back like a tiger. But he is neither canid nor felid; he is marsupial. He is also a carnivore, a hunting animal, though not an especially fast or particularly strong one. The thylacine was first described in 1806 by Tasmania's deputy surveyor-general George Harris. "Head very large, bearing a near resemblance to the wolf or hyaena. Eyes large and full, black with a nictitant membrane which gives the animal a savage & malicious appearance."

In mainland Australia, the thylacine may have survived until the 1830s, according to the oral history recorded by the Adnyathanha people of the Flinders Ranges region to the east of

Lake Torrens. "Today *marrukurl* (thylacines) are known only as mammals of the Dreaming. That is, there is no one living who claims to have seen one. Both the Dreaming and other traditions, however, suggest the possibility of their bodily existence in the region in the not-too-distant past."

At moments, you may notice that what you are looking at contains both its own obliteration (the promise of death) and a curious quantity of eternity, like a single body possessed by two spirits. Survival and extinction are both indelibly there. There is a quality of listening in the dead of the night (the "dead" of the night) that is perhaps not conducive to writing or interpretation, but that heightens the possibilities of what can be heard, or that might lead one to believe that there is an unnamed lake underneath all reality, and that there are places where the ground, insufficiently firm, can suddenly plunge one through into the subterranean truth of things.

The thylacine is the quarry of a state bounty in Tasmania between 1888 and 1909. Many thylacines die in that crazed hunt. Then an epidemic finishes off most of the rest. In the year 1933, when he paces for the camera, Benjamin is the last of his species. And when he dies in September 1936, the thylacine goes extinct. There are sightings afterward, but none credible.

When I have a nap or something, Derrida said, and I fall asleep (these words in English, all of a sudden, and not in French; but only these words), at that moment, in a sort of half-sleep, all of a sudden I'm terrified by what I'm doing. And I tell myself: You're crazy to write this! You're crazy to attack such a thing! You're crazy to criticize such and such a person. You're crazy to contest such an authority, be it textual, institutional, or personal. (His gestures become more animated.) And there is a

But within a year and a half, he will be killed in an ambush during the Biafran war. In the three years of the war, more than a million of his Biafran compatriots will be dead, too.

Imagine a child who does something horrible, Derrida said. Freud talks of childhood dreams where one dreams of being naked and terrified because everyone sees that they're naked. In any case, in this half-sleep, I have the impression that I've done something criminal, disgraceful, unavowable, that I shouldn't have done. And somebody is telling me: "But you're mad to have done that." And this is something I truly believe in my half-sleep. And the implied command in this is: Stop everything! Take it back! Burn your papers! What you're doing is inadmissible! But once I wake up, it's over.

On August 4, 2014, the MV Pinak-6 ferry, with more than 250 passengers, was crossing the Padma River near Mawa Ghat in Munshiganj, Bangladesh. It was high tide. The ferry was headed to Dhaka. It became inundated with water and capsized, sinking in a matter of minutes. A man on the audio track, presumably the same person recording the video from the shore, can be heard calling out God's name, in shock and in fear, and then reciting the shahada: *Lā ilāha illā-llāhu*, Muhammadur rasūlu-llāh. The ferry was approved for only eighty-five passengers. The death toll is well over a hundred. The event sinks into the handheld camera recording it, the amateur videographer calling out God's name.

What if the event were recorded on video, and could be summoned up out of the depths for helpless viewing again, and again, and again?

What this means, Derrida said, or how I interpret this, is that when I'm awake, conscious, working, in a certain way I am more unconscious than in my half-sleep. When I'm in that half-

kind of panic in my subconscious, he said. As if . . . what can I compare it to?

Perhaps when people talk about liking a man in uniform, they are thinking of someone like Major Patrick Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, someone both confiding and confident. The interviewer is white. He asks about the events of January 15, 1966. "Did the Sardauna himself attempt to fight?" "No, we didn't see him until the time we actually shot him. He ran away from his house when we fired the first two rounds from the antitank guns into the building. The whole room was blown up and the place was set alight. Then we went to the rear of the house and started searching from room to room until we found him among the women and children, hiding himself." Nzeogwu says this part with faint but detectable mockery.

He is young, fit, not yet twenty-nine, the consummate professional in his officer's cap and short-sleeved uniform. He speaks with astonishing clarity. He is what will change Nigeria at last and for good, there can be no doubt about it. "So we took away the women and children and took him." By "took him," Nzeogwu means he himself shot the Sardauna of Sokoto, Sir Ahmadu Bello, who had been serving as the premier of Northern Nigeria. In the same coup on the same day, Nzeogwu's co-conspirators killed the prime minister of Nigeria, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa; the premier of Western Nigeria, Samuel Akin-tola; the finance minister, Festus Okotie-Eboh; Brigadier General Samuel Ademulegun; and many others. Blood gushed.

What if the things that happened could be seen again as apertitions before us? And the people who did these things could speak as they spoke in life, and move about like the people you see in dreams?

Nzeogwu smiles as he gives his answers: the future is bright.

sleep there's a kind of vigilance that tells me the truth. First of all, it tells me that what I'm doing is very serious. But when I'm awake and working (he raises his hands and lifts his head, like a conductor about to give a downbeat), this vigilance is actually asleep. It's not the stronger of the two. And so, he said, I do what must be done. Jacques Derrida died on October 9, 2004, and I am watching the video in the wee hours on October 9, 2014; a good coincidence, but history has few dates into which to fit everything.

"I realize the tragic significance of the atomic bomb," said President Truman, after the first bomb had been dropped, but before the second. "It is an awful responsibility which has come to us. We thank God that it has come to us, instead of to our enemies; and we pray that He may guide us to use it in His ways and for His purposes."

The footage shows the island of Tinian in the Northern Mariana Islands on a sunny afternoon in August 1945. Men prepare a bomb—the second bomb, the pilot of the first having just returned to base—for deployment. They paint it, check its seals, and position it into place. Some of the men wear tan fatigues, others are shirtless. (Are they being exposed to radiation without even knowing it?) The atmosphere is cheerful and tropical. The bomb, bright yellow, looks like a school project. The large ovoid plutonium bomb is about the size of a small car. The president invokes God. I am half-asleep, and therefore more awake than if I were completely awake. The footage is in vivid color.

What if it were visible? What if you could rise from your restless bed and switch on a machine and see it all again?

Major Charles Sweeney pilots the plane, called Bockscar, from which the bomb, called "Fat Man," is dropped at 11:00

A.M. on August 9. Thirty-five thousand people below in the city of Nagasaki are killed instantly. They "took" them, brought whatever it is they had been, into instantaneous extinction. Another fifty thousand are to die later, in greater pain. But all that, and much else besides, is now in the time of the Dreaming.

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—REBECCA SOLNIT, author of *Men Explain Things to Me*

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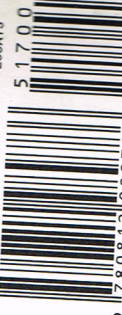
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Teju Cole

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