

cradle

"Nor does anything prove to be more fleeting than this search whose movement constitutes the labyrinth which instigates it; the sense of strangeness imposes its secret necessity everywhere. The ensuing unfolding whose operation is contradictory is accomplished by the author's double: Hesitation. We are faced, then, with a text and its hesitating shadow, and their double escapade. As for plots, what is brought together here is quickly undone, what asserts itself becomes suspect; each thread leads to its net or to some kind of disentanglement. In the labyrinth space, many characters alluded to as witnesses and well-informed persons appear and are quickly relegated to the corner of some street or paragraph. What unfolds without fail before the reader's eyes is a kind of puppet theatre in which real dolls or fake dolls, real and simulated life, are manipulated by a sovereign but capricious stage-setter. The net is tightly stretched, bowed, and tangled; the scenes are centred and dispersed; narratives are begun and left in suspension..."¹

¹ Hélène Cixous, *New Literary History* (repr., United States: John Hopkins University Press, 2022), *Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheimliche (The "Uncanny")*.

You know, since we last spoke, everything we said has been rolling around my head like cold marbles in the grip of a twitchy kid. It's funny, isn't it - how they heat to the touch? Clasp the smooth spheres, you're transferring the warmth of your being into those little glass bodies. They only retain it for so long, though. Once your hand loosens, they return into the embrace of the air - the air that swirls around them, caressing and reclaiming them to its own temper, coaxing the glass back to a state harmonious with the present.

As more time passes, the same thing has happened to me. It's happened to you, as well. We've receded back into our own spaces, re-enveloped by a reality in which we're not held by each other's wor(l)ds. Even in the throes of conversation, I must admit, I was lulled away. Just a little! Every so often. In the crevasses between what you were telling me, other creatures leapt up, trying to fill those little gaps. I couldn't help glancing! So much is sloshing about all the time. I'm sure you can empathise. I'm sure that, even as we speak now, your focus ebbs and flows, tuning in and out of all the different frequencies which are trying to shape this moment. We'll both slip back into that cloying atmosphere soon, as we always do. Warm hands can only hold for so long.

How can I not think of *Adventure Time*? Episode nine of season two: "The Other Tarts."² Journeying towards the Candy Kingdom bearing precious cargo - a sealed, anti-gravity case containing the luscious royal tarts - Cinnamon Bun is met by a steady succession of chivalrous guards standing shoulder to shoulder. "Can I hold that for you, sir?"³ The first so graciously offers. "Okay," Cinnamon Bun accepts.⁴ He walks along the passageway to the rhythm of that same exchange repeated over and over as the tarts are passed from the hands of one guard to another, along the length of the entire route. The scene induces a chuckle. The naivety of Cinnamon Bun's character is emphasised; given the responsibility of delivering the irreplaceable tarts, he so willingly hands them to a seemingly courteous stranger. *Silly Cinnamon Bun!* we giggle. *How gullible you are!*

The character of Cinnamon Bun is portrayed from the beginning of the series as being "a little half-baked."⁵ He is not quite finished, not quite cooked-through. He is still in the process of *becoming*. Thus, he is shown to be constantly messing up, constantly making mistakes. In a world where so many of the characters' impediments stem from magical cursed items and fantastical origin stories, it's almost frustrating that CB is the easiest to identify with. While other characters' flaws are attributed to demon king dads and being born a supremely intelligent dollop of immortal bubblegum, Cinnamon Bun is the unfortunately relatable individual who simply still has a lot to learn. "I'm soft," he notes in one episode, poking at the squashy dough which comprises his body, leaving a tender indentation.⁶ To be soft is to be impressionable; vulnerable to the world. In his incompleteness, Cinnamon Bun must feel his way through

² Larry Leichliter and Pendleton Ward, *Adventure Time - The Other Tarts*, video (repr., United States: Frederator Studios; Cartoon Network Studios, 2011).

³ Larry Leichliter and Pendleton Ward, *Adventure Time - The Other Tarts*.

⁴ Larry Leichliter and Pendleton Ward, *Adventure Time - The Other Tarts*.

⁵ Larry Leichliter and Pendleton Ward, *Adventure Time - The Other Tarts*.

⁶ "Adventure Time", TV programme (repr., Cartoon Network, 2010).

existence, in a pilgrimage to solidify his own being. This is a process which requires openness, requires trust. Thus, still forming himself, Cinnamon Bun accepts that courtly offer. 'Okay,' he says to the guard, meaning: 'I don't see why not.' It's a shrug of the shoulders, an acceptance of shapelessness. *I suppose you may take it, for all other options appear to be of equal appeal.*

That neutral equality with which all options and pathways seem to present only does so from a perspective which lacks certainty. If one has no specific agenda, anything goes. Unless you are sure - of yourself, of where you are going - any direction is a fine one.

Contrary to the otherworldly roots of the various characters in *Adventure Time*, Cinnamon Bun, despite being a sentient baked good, is simple to empathise with. (*An overwhelming slew of supporting literature begs for my attention now, as I inch towards articulating this next statement. In the absence of a different method of ordering, I shall follow the rule of chronology and select the line which claims to be the first of this array.*) "To live is to be slowly born," wrote Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.⁷ In existence, nothing is final. One's state is constantly in flux, constantly in development. To be alive is to be soft, half-baked, incomplete, impressionable. It's a confronting realisation which has scattered itself across the history of thought concerning the human condition, haunting a lineage spanning mediaeval Persian poets to Emerson to Luce Irigaray to *Cartoon Network*. We are all familiar with it, in some way or another; it is the wretchedly wonderful reality of being - that that being is actually an endless becoming.

"Can I hold that for you, sir?"

"Okay."

Because what's the harm? Presented with a row of identical, willing guardians and no real sense of what is expected of you, why not accept the kind offer? But Cinnamon Bun has it easy. His options comprise of either carrying the tarts himself, or having these kind courtesans do so on his behalf. Rarely is it actually so simple. *To be or not to be?* More like: *To be A or B or C or Q or L or ST or M or MN or Hat or pR or mngewu or dvx or Y or grU or...?* So many possibilities, so many potentials - and even more configurations! No wonder you're overwhelmed. A whole sea of warm hands beckoning and clawing and grabbing and tantalising. The Candy Kingdom guards assemble as the perfect chaperones, made specially for the task, but outside of the sweetly animated Land of Ooo, the world can smell your vulnerability. It steps up to ensnare.

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Let me take that from you.

Another body enters the room, slipping through the doorway with a discreteness that comes to take on the potential for suspicion. Who is that? Should you be wary of them? Adjust your shoulders a little, stop hunching - they could be anyone. If they are important, you must look

⁷ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Flight To Arras* (repr., New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942), 34.

worthy. If they are a threat, you must look imposing. Sneak a glimpse. Body unmoving, your eyes dip in and out of the periphery. With this quick scope you garner that they're a little taller than you. Their hands are clasped behind their back as they survey the space (so they are contemplative, educated), high cheekbones are marked with hot pink circles (and very stylish), prominent knuckles base long fingers. This last detail throws you back out into the wind. That could indicate so many things. Out oozes imagery of the Beldam, her spidery, spindly clutches; the cautionary fog which follows that which might prick your finger and send you into an endless slumber; adopted memories of threading a pale skewer through plump marshmallow body; the impossible elegance of a pianist's hands. Porcelain keys pressed down with the same fervour which might grip someone as they push straining head underwater; but no gurgled yells emit - instead there is silken melody. How confusing! But you've strayed too far now. So conscious of the placement of each foot, you weave in a sly orbit around them, skirting the bounds of their aura. Every flit of the eye hauls in new findings. The room is dimly lit, with no other bodies in sight. You two are alone. This realisation glazes each fresh pearl of information. Their iridescence glints with a quiet paranoia because of it. Shoes so shiny and well-kept could mean respectable; they could also mean psychopath. That slight hobble might manifest in a genteel geriatric, yes, but so too could it be an act - a mere facade of harmlessness. It could be a promise that you're in no danger, so go ahead and break into the crisp flesh of that apple, edge closer towards the crocheted bulk in the heavy wooden bed, sign the waiver for the deal that seems just a little too good to be true - it could be your lucky day. Or not. The aircon is toeing the edges of discomfort and the room threatens to tip into notably-cold territory. The wheel has clattered and the arrow of your perception has decided to halt on the wedge labelled *Threat*. You fasten your sights on the doorway and move at a pace that might almost appear hurried.

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Conclusions are another funny thing. It has happened that I've been reading a book or watching a film and am finding it rather mediocre. My silly human mind, which so adores simplicity, begins to try to quantify the experience, contemplating how I will reduce it to a percentage, a tidy sum of stars, as so many systems encourage. *What will I report to Goodreads? Two and a half, maybe three stars...* Reaching the narrative's close, a slight buzz begins to reverberate. *Almost time to fold this up into a neat little rating.* And then, agonisingly, the ending will strut over and present itself with a mesmer which all the preceding chapters lacked. *How inconvenient! How does one measure that? In a matter of pages, this novel has transfigured from a four out of ten, to a potential nine!* But the conclusion is considered a portion of the entirety of the novel, is it not? To wrap it up elegantly would require regarding the experience as a whole - and we do so cherish elegance. So sloppy dough is dusted, rolled up into a tight scroll, and baked to delectable perfection. We nod in firm approval. I open my handy app and log five stars based solely on that glistening, golden outcome: the finished product. That which was in process is now complete, whole; declared done by the ding of the oven.

Oh, for such a declaration! That melodic assertion marks the sweet point of completion. But peer a little closer and that glittery claim is revealed to be little more than rubbish. Convincing,

though, isn't it? For a moment, you believed it. The timer chiming, the credits rolling, the book cover snapping shut - the illusions of finality. We saturate our world with them. What else to refer to now but photographs? Blessed stillness. A moment defined in time; snapshots framed in that fine, rectangular format. Or, even better, in a perfect square: to tile the facade of your Instagram profile like some treacherous game of tetris.

As one of what I'm sure is a large portion of unfortunates caught in this media age, I was not blessed with easy photogenetics. It puzzled me, as a young teen, desperate for an adequate picture to crown my new MySpace account: how can one scrutinise one's reflection in the mirror for so long, eventually hobbling to some point of satisfaction, to then confidently lock eyes with the depths of a camera lens, only to be astounded by the alien which is captured? What sort of skulduggery might this be? What strange transformation has taken place between my cluttered bedroom and that gleaming, mechanical wormhole? Surely, something has gone awry during that process of translation. Even the marvelous Willy Wonka couldn't quite get it right. He murmurs a feeble warning to the fixated Mike Teevee as the tour group surveys the Wonkavision room, but to no avail. Mike sends himself whirling through the air as a stream of pixels and into the confines of the television screen. "Am I coming in clear?"⁸ He wants to know. When he is eventually plucked out, something is wrong - his form had been scaled down to fit the proportions of the television, and this miniaturisation had not been reversed. He is doll-sized before his horrified mother as Mr. Wonka explains that the voyage to digitilisation always involves this shrinkage - presumably because the dissemination into "millions of tiny pieces" requires some cropping and editing before they can settle snugly into one's TV set.⁹ Mike, unphased, wants to do it all over again. "No, there'll be nothing left," his mother snaps before dropping him into her handbag.¹⁰

I learn from this that the process of translation is a wobbly one. Something cannot be displaced and then replaced without some amount of sacrifice. The transmission from reality to screen, in particular, necessitates a reduction.

So I look strange in photographs because that's not all of me, I am reassured. Some pieces have wandered astray.

The typical, romantic explanation of this unaccountability is that a camera cannot capture the subtleties of a person - the nuances which flutter about the crinkling of eyes, the grace of curling lips - all those idiosyncrasies which one might come to love turn stale when the aperture grips shut. This is a worthy theory but, as with everything else, it cannot advertise to be water-tight. Marina Warner seems, to me, to edge a little closer. In an interview for *The New Yorker*, she expresses a wariness towards the 'consistency' of photographic portraits; the way that they facilitate a perspective of the self which is "retrospective," and therefore unchanging, and therefore [claiming to be] complete.¹¹ *The oven timer trills*. What this pictorial interpretation

⁸ Tim Burton, *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory*, film (repr., United States: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2015).

⁹ Tim Burton, *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory*.

¹⁰ Tim Burton, *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory*.

¹¹ Katy Waldman, "Marina Warner Sees The Myths In Our Moment", *The New Yorker*, 2022.

alleges is that one's self is fixed. Without photographs, we haven't the chance to "see how contingent and inconsistent we are."¹² Photographs not only freeze but isolate. They are a limited representation, and one which leads us to forget that we are forever in flux, that we are never fully born.

And we can't help but adore those cropped representations, to cherish them. It is so difficult to be an ever-shifting thing, forever in motion, unceasingly blurred. Clarity has been attained throughout history through microscopes, magnifying glasses, binoculars, telescopes. It's no wonder we believe that in order to see what is there, one must isolate the peripheries.

But here I am sliding down another adjacent route. It's rolling towards something, I promise. That thing was (")conclusions("). Photographs can now be tacked on to the ever-growing list of false endings. Even well after the credits cascade down the screen, the film continues; it continues to unfurl in your mind, blooming in its own strange way into the architecture of your world. (So many nightmare-riddled audience members of horror films exist as an easy attestation to this.) We wish it was as simple as binding floppy pages into the embrace of a book cover. Forgive me for getting existential about bread of all things, but that bun is never really finished. The oven ding is the snap of a camera shutter, a brief marking of time in the span of a thing which will never cease to become.

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Please, it would truly be an honour if you were to allow me.

and then a flush of warmth embraces you. At first, the heat is flirtatious, sending tingles across your surface, but soon enough you can feel that tickle dig deeper. It's as if it's clawing through you, pushing its way to your core. You grow taut, stretching to accommodate for this intrusion. Your whole body has to make way. Every cell and fibre, once kneaded so tightly together, is now being pushed apart by the sear which branches through you, weaving its way through your being, changing you. It doesn't stop at that. Having forced these impossibly intricate pathways, it seems to expand, burrowing so many caves to inhabit. Pockets are formed all throughout you, blowing up one after another. Everything you knew yourself to be is suddenly having to make way. Beginning close to your surface, the heat is carving inwards, demanding you to adjust yourself to house it, to form cavern after cavern in greedy succession until you're almost more it than you. It's not only a matter of making space - it is enmeshing itself into you, reforming you. You continue to grow as it nestles in, and you can feel yourself struggling to adapt fast enough. You swell, bulging as much as your shape will allow, and the heat becomes privy to the vulnerability of your distension and pushes further still. You feel the tautness at your surface becoming increasingly less bearable. It is at its worst here, where you're most exposed, and as if to resist, as if in some final, self-sacrificing attempt at defence, you feel your outermost layer begin to harden, forming an all-encompassing shell in the hopes of countering any further transformations.

¹² Katy Waldman, "Marina Warner Sees The Myths In Our Moment."

But what's already managed to weave into you doesn't stop wriggling, and your new defence system is so close to sealing itself when the liveliness of your insides - now barely you - manage to erupt, tearing scissions across your new crust. But despite the scarring, your shell holds firm, and the heat seems to respect your boundaries now and softens back out to a gentler caress. This embrace begins to loosen and an attentive new atmosphere sidles over to cradle you in its stead. It's busier here, this new air bustling with so much activity, so much brightness. Your crust is not entirely impenetrable and you feel the new world lash lightly against it. A few cavern walls give way and wisps of your steam mosey out, enticed by the call of adventure. The cold shock of porcelain burrs up through you as you slide onto newer-still terrain. Your underside seems to seize up a little in response, pulling tighter in resistance to the sudden shift in temperature. The contrast is not apparent only to you, though. The porcelain winces and the heat caught between you and it grows muddled and flattens into a fine dew, coating the site of exposure. This seems to soothe that jolt of tension like a balm and you survey this new, immediate landscape as the universe around you continues to whiz about.

Through the noise, you understand from this place that it serves. Placed upon it, you must be for serving. Not merely for serving - lavish borders of gold skirt the edges of this land brimming with delicate depictions of glossy blooms - but for *Serving*. The glinting details inform you of your own import and it becomes clear that your destiny is a fine one. The wisps of steam you're emitting begin to curl into elaborate flourishes, the moisture licking your crust and leaving a light, tantalising shimmer.

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And as if there wasn't already enough - with one's self so ceaselessly, stubbornly malleable, outright refusing to simply *be* and forever insisting on becoming, forever prone to the whispering gossip of a landscape - the whole wide world has to go on evading consistency, as well. Or so it seems. Who's to say, really? (*And here, I could call upon a veritable panoply of esteemed thinkers who have adorned my own framework; glossy names which will glitter and catch the eyes of many. I could conjure the familiar saying, that history is written by the victors, recalling wild variations in thought across different cultures and ages. I could play the role of the Modern and Playful Academic and build an argument pulling from the world of the 'low-brow' and pop-culture. I have done all of these things before; employed these tactics to fashion houses of logic which I'll so graciously guide you through, clipboard in hand as I lead you along the freshly-steam cleaned hallway, smiling in my polished shoes. You see, it is still not simply a question of whether to be or to not. So we've tried being A and B and dq and j and pLT - why stop there?*)

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Do you need a hand?

It seemed so harmless at the time, didn't it? Anne Hathaway, Meryl Streep, and the world of fashion journalism.¹³ And just the opening sequence, no less! A montage featuring Beautiful Women of the Big Apple preparing for the day at undoubtedly glamorous jobs. It's just a

¹³ David Frankel, *The Devil Wears Prada*, film (repr., United States: 20th Century Fox, 2006).

moment, just a brief flash, really. Dainty lingerie and eyelash curlers and unreasonably stylish footwear. KT Tunstall's voice trills out like a hypnotic chant:

*You can see she's a beautiful girl
She's a beautiful girl*

*And everything around her is a silver pool of light
The people who surround her feel the benefit of it
It makes you calm
She holds you captivated in her palm*

*Suddenly I see (suddenly I see)
This is what I wanna be¹⁴*

And it's barely more than a flash: the stainless steel benchtop, the dainty wrist emphasised by heavy silver bracelet, slim fingers carefully selecting an oh-so-modest portion of raw almonds to place into the glossy, ceramic bowl.

*Suddenly I see (suddenly I see)
This is what I wanna be¹⁵*

From this sample, it has been deduced that the attainment of the desirable status [articulated in the non-diegetic track which accompanies the sequence] of "beautiful girl" is achieved via a succession of rituals performed during the early hours of the day.¹⁶ Such rituals are observed to incorporate the use of various items ranging from apparel and trinkets (of both ornamental and utilitarian function), to tools employed for the application of decorative body art. Body art appears to primarily involve the enhancement of chosen facial features (eyes, mouth). An interaction with food items ensues, namely a precise focus on preparation, wherein grains and nuts are measured and devotedly portioned into glazed earthenware. No evidence has been recovered regarding the purpose of such foodstuffs, therefore it is unknown whether these meals were served as offerings to dieties or intended for communal and/or individual consumption. Portions were notably meagre.

After that, every almond which entered my orbit took on a shimmer. Superfood, indeed. Over the years, you've shined every one to an untouchable gleam. Ridged, tear-shaped gems gliding about making all sorts of promises. What a gloriously straight-forward world it is! *The Devil Wears Prada* elucidates for us the magic of simple cause and effect. Dainty quantities of raw almonds embellish the cornerstones of success, of course. A particular strand of success, the one flourished before my soft little childhood mind as the glitzy ideal: Cosmopolitan Chic.

¹⁴ *Suddenly I See* (repr., United Kingdom: Relentless, 2004).

¹⁵ *Suddenly I See* (repr., United Kingdom: Relentless, 2004).

¹⁶ *Suddenly I See* (repr., United Kingdom: Relentless, 2004).

Maybe she's born with it, maybe it's Almonds. Maybe she's born with it, maybe it's restrictive eating.

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I'm stupefied by potential ways forward. Do you know how dizzying it is to try to formulate an argument in a world in which you believe(know) to be meaningless? To adhere (however loosely) to accepted methods of rationalisation where X is stated and backed up by Y, when X could be anything, as could Y, so long as you know how to bend it, and that is exactly the predicament? Because it's not only you who are still becoming, but the whole wide world and whatever crazy star system it claims to be situated in. A game of chess in which neither player knows the rules, and the board and every piece is entirely imaginary, existing only on the precarious strain of collective belief.

Or perhaps it *is* just you. Just you and your brilliant mind cobbling together all sorts of weird/ordinary things. Just you and your brilliant mind seeing the colour red the way you see the colour red, knowing that clothes must be worn when presenting oneself in public, accepting that the Earth is round and rotating and telling yourself that anyone who says otherwise is delusional – mad – because telling yourself that anyone who says otherwise – and anyone else at all for that matter – exist only in your mind, the entire world nothing but an elaborate projection generated by comically large armchairs (the *true* dominant race) in order to occupy your psyche as they harvest that dark gunk which accumulates (agonisingly slowly) in the folds of your belly button – now that would require much more extensive cerebral recalibrations. It could be done, though. Every structure of logic can be established, just as every structure of logic can be torn asunder.

And here it comes again, that which has been so deeply and indelibly carved into me: the instinct to buttress my claims with outsourced words which have been sitting still long enough to gather the arcane dust that attests to their validity. You know I need it, too – I need to convince myself. I'm stuck in this ridiculous game of chess as much as you are. So excuse me as I just dip quickly into my treasured collection of endorsements of meaninglessness.

Here's a pretty one I like to start with:

"A pond becomes a lake, a breeze becomes a storm, a handful of dust is a desert, a grain of sulphur in the blood is a volcanic inferno. What manner of theatre is it, in which we are at once playwright, actor, stage manager, scene painter, and audience?"¹⁷

This is from the celebrated German writer W.G. Sebald, who Mark O'Connell reports for *The New Yorker*, was "one of contemporary literature's most transformative figures," and who was expected to receive a Nobel Prize in Literature if not for his sudden death at age 57.¹⁸

¹⁷ W. G. Sebald, *The Rings Of Saturn* (repr., Great Britain: RANDOM HOUSE UK, 2003), 80.

¹⁸ Mark O'Connell, "Why You Should Read W.G. Sebald", *The New Yorker*, 2011.

See the degree to which this one proves its value? Look at the way it glimmers. In just one sentence, no less! Tier upon tier of credibility stacked to the nines and slathered in that thick, trustworthy icing we love so much.

Let me fetch another. This one's a little wordier - I don't always get it out for guests, but I think you can handle it:

"Even so-called universals as ultimate concepts must escape the chaos by circumscribing a universe that explains them (contemplation, reflection, communication). Every concept has an irregular contour defined by the sum of its components, which is why, from Plato to Bergson, we find the idea of the concept being a matter of articulation, of cutting and cross-cutting. The concept is a whole because it totalizes its components, but it is a fragmentary whole. Only on this condition can it escape the mental chaos constantly threatening it, stalking it, trying to reabsorb it."¹⁹

Hardly needs an introduction, though, right? Those elaborate strings of thought woven so tightly together that they might appear entangled – to the untrained eye, at least. That's how you know it's a good one. The loveliest things are always the most unattainable, are they not? But just in case you begin to second-guess yourself, that name contains all the reassurance you need. It is authored by none other than *the* Gilles Deleuze; "one of the most influential and prolific French philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century," according to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (*Stanford!*).²⁰ It doesn't get much better than that.

But let's get a little freaky. You've been so great, I'll show you just one more:

"The process of justification is the delicate one of making mutual adjustments between rules and accepted inferences; and in the agreement achieved lies the only justification needed for either."²¹

Wild, isn't it? Goodman has an entry in Stanford, as well, by the way ("one of the most influential philosophers of the post-war era of American Philosophy"),²² but it gets better. So, just like the others, he's talking about a sort of staging, no? That truth and reality are nothing but scenes playing out in a theatre which is just as reliant on the illusion as the audience is. They make you nervous, gesturing to the instability of this all – how easily it could come undone, velvet curtains crumpling into sad, irregular heaps. How nothing is True but instead merely agreed upon, notions furiously drawing circles around themselves just to maintain visibility. It's the tall ones we all see best – those many-tiered notions I showed you earlier, which rise up above all else and serve as reassuring landmarks. This is where it gets good (depending on your definition of

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (repr., London: Verso, 2015), 16.

²⁰ Smith, Daniel, John Protevi, and Daniela Voss, "Gilles Deleuze", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/deleuze/>.

²¹ Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, And Forecast* (repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 64.

²² Marcus Rossberg and Daniel Cohnitz, "Nelson Goodman", *Stanford Encyclopedia Of Philosophy*, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/goodman/>.

the word). Goodman recognises the dreaded neutrality with which all things present themselves. Just like for the sweet, squashy Cinnamon Bun, no value system is predetermined. It's all up to us to cobble together some structure, some framework for designating meaning and worth. But how does one even approach such a task? Goodman takes us on a whirlwind of a journey trying to answer the question. This means page after page of maddeningly circular logic, every new paragraph desperately trying to skirt the "intolerable result that anything confirms anything."²³ Eventually, we settle on a conclusion which almost barely kind of lands within the required bounds – depending on how closely you're paying attention. The way to discern reliability, to navigate having to hold on to certain ideas tighter than others, is to be based upon what Goodman calls the suspect's "entrenchment."²⁴ Turns out we aren't the only ones having to sell ourselves through self-aggrandising CVs and dinner party lines – stability is recognised in whatever "has the more impressive biography."²⁵ We're hardly dodging indeterminacy here. "The reason why only the right predicates happen so luckily to have become well entrenched is that the well entrenched predicates have thereby become the right ones."²⁶ We're bowled over, gasping with hapless laughter: *Nelson, you're too much!* After all that, we come to the conclusion that the degree to which a concept is bestowed our faith must be based upon how many other [equally unsure] people have shrugged their shoulders and idly gestured to it in the past. An endless pilgrimage for which you only have access to the people you pass, some who have been walking for years, others merely days, but not a soul has reached the end.

Do you see what I mean, now? How ridiculously, hopelessly inconceivable it all is? Even that which stands as testament to the tendency for human understanding to unravel cannot help but undermine itself in the process. It's that jarring realisation all over again: that your parents – the omnipotent gods of your childhood – are flawed and confused and so terribly bound by their own limitations, as well. Nothing is true, and yet we're condemned by the sake of sanity to insist otherwise.

We're back to vulnerability, to doughy malleability. Even those aged structures which promote the absurdity of fixedness have glitched and revealed their true precarity. Fanciful mirage or frightful boggart? It's not just fluctuation but multiplicity that taunts/flaunts; simultaneity is both a blessing and a curse.

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Wouldn't you just so love to be wholly convinced by something? To be you yourself fully dedicated to, utterly transfixed by, something – *anything*? Oh, you're blushing! Don't be embarrassed! We've all been there. See, Goodman discusses entrenchment as it stands in the realm of theory and cognition, but so many other functions are stumbling about shivering just waiting to be held. Disordered thinking is spoken about in regards to entrenchment, I'm told by a

²³ Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, And Forecast*, 75.

²⁴ Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, And Forecast*, 84-99.

²⁵ Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, And Forecast*, 75.

²⁶ Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, And Forecast*, 98.

social worker at the ward. Don't forget that the stuttering status of unalignment applies to your perception, as well. This is most crucial, and Guillermo del Toro bludgeons us with the memo as Ofelia lays dying at the end of *Pan's Labyrinth*.²⁷ The possibility that it really was nothing but a silly fairy tale looms over you, but you grip your knuckles and will with all your might hoping that little Ofelia, at the very least, might keep on believing. She deserves the bliss of ignorance, for what else does she have, at this point?

It could be argued that Cinnamon Bun hands the tarts over because, between carrying them himself and having someone else do so for him, the latter directly alleviates his load. Without a sturdy framework to guide your perception, why not go for the path of least resistance? Or maybe the shiniest, or the loudest, or the one which makes the most promises. Whatever tickles your fancy.

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Woah, what's that over there?!

snatch

What can I say? It was practically glowing. It was like this palpable shimmer – that's how tantalising it was. I don't know if it was a trick of the light, or some sort of Hollywood magic, or maybe it was just all in my head like some projected Freudian slippage, but it was dazzling.

It's like it *knew*, as well. It knew it was getting through to me. There I was, just going about my day like everyone else, bumping along trying to fill all those empty, irregular slots with the things that were the least likely to slide back out, just getting by, when it called out to me. I say "called" but it was more like a pull, like the world stretched and straightened itself taut to draw this streamlined tunnel from me to it, directing my sights and then eventually my whole body. I sound like a cartoon character describing it like that – like Coraline, wide-eyed as the passage to the Other World unfurls before her – but the magic of it wasn't so technicoloured.²⁸ Maybe it was a bit more *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* – the faint voice of Poseidon just barely forming itself at the edge of all the sounds of the world, so that the guidance could almost be mistaken to have come from within.²⁹ It stood out just that little bit more. At the beginning, at least. As soon as it has your attention, it really ups the ante. Medusa's gaze, Siren's song. I had heard the tales of its trappings, of course, but it knows how to angle itself so you're not even *thinking* about the cost. What you might lose doesn't seem to matter then, not next to all the things you just might get.

Riches and wonders; it gleamed with the promise of them. Like Dumbledore's Mirror of Erised, it flashed the You you wanted to be – for a price, of course.³⁰ By this point you've entered the

²⁷ Guillermo Del Toro, *Pan's Labyrinth*, film (repr., Spain: Estudios Picasso, 2006).

²⁸ Henry Selick, *Coraline*, film (repr., United States: Laika, 2009).

²⁹ Chris Columbus, *Percy Jackson & The Olympians: The Lightning Thief*, film (repr., United Kingdom: 20th Century Fox, 2010).

³⁰ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter And The Philosopher's Stone* (repr., London: Bloomsbury, 1997).

strange tent, too committed to notice the ominous tone of the gypsy's pitch, too preoccupied to pay any attention to the fine print. Sights set, I wanted more than to just get by. I wanted things to not *only* stay in their slots, but to fit perfectly, to attain the security spoken of only in legends...

But I digress. What I was getting at is that you've no doubt heard this story before, as it's reiterated itself across time. The hero with so much desire and the will and audacity to believe those wants can be satisfied. Sometimes it ends well, other times it doesn't, but there is always the revelation; the final achievement of sagacity, illumination, understanding, acceptance. The part that always seems to be left out, though, is that that mysterious tent doesn't actually vanish in the night, having bestowed its strangeness to then disappear without a trace. It stays right there, wide open and forever beckoning. Because there is no one Ultimate Moral, no Gem of Wisdom which can satisfy. It is not a quaint little story but an endless saga. They just always manage to leave out the fact that the tent keeps calling, with different quests each time, and, more often than not, you wander back and find yourself going through it all over again.

*

It's that damned oven timer; that closed book deceiving us once more. Because things contained are easier to manage, easier to hold. How agonising, to be bestowed a mind which can only digest through story but is so insatiable for Fact. I meant it when I said we've all been there: madly groping for a moment of simplicity. The need for steady comprehension is endlessly teased by a reality which is unfathomably rickety. Brutal, I know. But here – I have just one more to show you before we call it a night:

"Doubtless, it would be easier for us to find our bearings in the world if we could appropriate and possess, if things were firm, and concepts stable. But everything is fugitive and evanescent so that we lose things before we manage to close our palms over them."³¹

So Cinnamon Bun takes the easy way, because maybe that's the initial instinct; Cinnamon Bun the Simpleton with his silly lizard brain. But hands can be shaped to grasp for different things, and nothing ever stops wriggling, shifting, falling open to snap shut just as suddenly. The weird tent stays by the edge of the village but is it *really* the same tent? And even if it is, are you really the same you? There are other routes to venture down which sing about more than what is merely painless.

In a pivotal moment for his character development, Cinnamon Bun is struck during an attempted coup in the Fire Kingdom. This heated casualty seems to complete his baking process and results in his increased intelligence and competence. The episode ends with Cinnamon Bun saving the day, this blossoming crowned by his "[showing] up" of the series' esteemed hero, Finn the Human.³² But you should know better by now than to fall for those clean tales.

³¹ Branka Arsić, *On Leaving; A Reading In Emerson* (repr., Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 82.

³² "Adventure Time", TV programme (repr., Cartoon Network, 2010).

For a succession of episodes, CB gets to enjoy his new wisdom, rolling into the next season still the diligent knight to Flame Princess. The world moves on but it's only a matter of time before there's trouble in the Fire Kingdom yet again. The temperature is dropping and its citizens are suffering for it. While the royal family discusses the issue, something else is notably off: Cinnamon Bun is just standing nearby, vacuously picking his nose. As the insufficient heat has caused the flame people to shrink and begin accidentally absorbing one another, it seems CB has been reverted back to his former, half-baked state.

*

Of the four elements, water is usually the one most heavily symbolic of flux. Though fire flickers and the earth quakes and the air quivers, water is busiest with its many errands and reformations. The tide ebbs and flows, each time altering the shoreline, each time bringing with it new gifts, and taking back old ones. The composition of a rock pool dictates how a wave might wash over it, informing what is lifted and what is placed. Every new configuration goes on to conduct the ensuing surge, everything roving back and forth, each influence barely perceptible but unquestionably present. The shape of Cinnamon Bun at the moment he was designated tart escort accommodated a swell which glittered with ease. But those rocks eventually shift and harvest different watery swirls. Variations in a landscape can cause the funniest little ripples. What takes root in a rock pool, what meanders about for a while, or marks, or dips in and out barely leaving a trace, is dependent on so many complex variables. Is it too reductive to claim that only a simple mind yearns for simplicity? That the greatest existence has to learn how to relish that complexity? Cinnamon Bun's priorities grow loftier when he rises up, but we see that he can just as easily sink back down. In the end,

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