

Metastasis

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To describe the life of a city is no small task. One might begin with the buildings, the towering behemoths of steel, glass, and brick that lend shape to the goings-on of everyday life; or perhaps with the general temperament of the citizens, be they gentle or harsh, demure or extravagant, well-educated or uninformed. Perhaps it is in the weather or the traffic patterns, perhaps in the demographics or distribution of wealth, or perhaps simply in the shape of the skyline that we find the animus of a human center. Or perhaps, as in the swirling melodies of a Iannis Xenakis composition, the life of a city is so beautifully, stochastically vast, made up of such a multitude of ever-shifting parts, that we may never grasp its particulars. We may never understand the hierarchies of chaos that must coexist for such a system to come to be in the world. Such a thought can be beautiful, or maddening, or enlightening, perhaps even some combination of the three; yet, what the cognizance of this phenomenon means to the average human being, pondering away at the tapestry he finds himself woven into, is far from clear.

To Richard Rodriguez, the heart and soul of his city, San Francisco, lay in the advent of its gay community. In his essay “Late Victorians,” he contemplates the crippling effect of AIDS upon a population attempting to define its new identity in a city old and storied. The city in question has always, as Rodriguez tells us, “taken some heightened pleasure from the circus of final things. To Atlantis, to Pompeii, to the Pillar of Salt, we add the Golden Gate Bridge, not golden at all but rust red. San Francisco toys with the tragic conclusion” (125). He warns us that in this fallen city, the AIDS epidemic is merely another in a long string of tragedies. This sense of context, however, does little to mitigate the effect of this particular tragedy on him. In his exploration of the architecture around him, in his depiction of the faux-masonry paint jobs meant to hearken back to idyllic concepts of Americana, and, finally, in his realization that “in San Francisco in 1990, death [had] become as routine an explanation for disappearance as Allied Van Lines,” our disillusioned narrator admits that San Francisco has fallen prey to the wily demon Chaos, to that which

we cannot understand (130). The essay ends with our introspective, Augustinian guide sitting disconsolate upon a church pew, abandoned by the order he so espoused, jaded and left with a mouthful of ashes instead of the semblance of understanding he once had.

We have all experienced similar struggles to come to terms with the things beyond our control. I am reminded by Rodriguez's words of a late winter funeral for a thirteen-year-old boy who had taken his own life, seemingly without cause. As a close friend of the family, I was asked to prepare a eulogy for the boy. As I spoke to the population of my small suburban town, trying to put Casey's death into some palatable context, to frame it in some comfort or hope, I found myself stricken dumb. His father had been taken from him at a young age; he had been bullied at school; he was beginning to undergo the maturing pains that we all must face; none of these facts, however, seemed anything but empty excuses. All I managed to say was that Casey had been taken far too soon, and that tragedies of this proportion are things we cannot explain. I remember, too, bitter tears as we guided the casket to the hearse, and anger at the senselessness of it all.

It is true, certainly, that at a most basic level all things make sense. In Lewis Thomas's meditation, "Crickets, Bats, Cats, & Chaos," we are made to understand that, at their core, "the random behavior of a turbulent stream of water, or of the weather, or of Brownian movement, or of the central nervous system of a cricket in flight from a bat, are all determined by the same mathematical rules" (492). To many, these latter creatures are readily understandable—two-in-one music box thermometers that follow a simple, specific set of regulations. As Thomas explains of the evasive maneuvers of a cricket, "when Int-1, an auditory interneuron, is activated by the sound of a bat closing in, the message is transmitted by an axon connected straight to the insect's brain, and it is here, and only here, that the swerving is generated" (492). In this creature's relatively simple neural ganglion exist chains of cause and effect that we can dissect and understand. A similar mathematical certainty underpins a cat's pursuit of an elusive scent, triggered by scent molecules encountering hyper-sensitive olfactory organs, or the effects of the AIDS retrovirus upon a cell and a human body, or even the suicide of a pre-pubescent boy.

This fact may grant us solace, if we let it, in that it lends to all a certain Zen-like interconnectedness. It removes us from the perils of our human reality, keeping us safe from the maddening and impossible analysis of a world comprised of an infinite number of moving parts. It simultaneously acknowledges that some sort of logic is at play, some divinity exists in the science that

drives the world. As Thomas states, “It is the total unpredictability and randomness [of a system] that makes the word ‘chaos’ applicable as a technical term, but it is not true that the behavior of the system becomes disorderly” (492). Rodriguez, therefore, alone and overwhelmed in the face of AIDS, should have been able to derive some comfort from the vastness of San Francisco’s population—tens of thousands of people composed of millions and millions of cells. He should have been reassured by his own inability to quantify or understand those cells’ interactions with weather patterns, food, water, and even disease. By that same logic, I should have been able to achieve some minimal composure when calling the paramedics, when turning on the garage lights to encounter a four-and-a-half foot tall corpse dangling from dusty piping. At least total comprehension lay beyond my control, I told myself, at least this chaos had a cause, though I could never understand it, and I should have been safe in my smallness.

But therein lies the rub: Rodriguez does not find consolation in his implicit understanding of the world’s mysteries, and neither did I. As children of rationality and logical progression, we find instead an emptiness. We sense the overwhelming weight of the forces which, for all intents and purposes, conspire constantly against us to disrupt even our grandest and most well-composed plans. The world is far too vast; the chaos and complexity involved even in Thomas’s example of the cricket are beyond the realm of human understanding or prediction. We are, like Rodriguez, victims of happenstance, pawns in an impartial and pointless game of chess. We may fall prey to a retrovirus or we may rise up, authors of history, as the unfolding of the universe sees fit, regardless of human foresight. This bleak, existential lesson, however, which leaves Rodriguez shifting his tailbone on a hard church pew, is not one entirely of despair. There is a beauty and a sort of magic in our contemplation of the cat as it lounges in the sun or the cricket as it chirps to itself in the night; the heart-breaking San Francisco plague defined a city not only in sadness and defeat, but also in a new-found sense of unity. The unshakable, inescapable disorder of the corporeal world offers humanity hope as much as ruin. We might relinquish the weight of what Thomas feels is our “duty to run the place, to dominate the planet, to govern its life” and realize that we are, instead, tenants of reality, whose only “duty” is to exist, to do what we can with what we are given (493).

Implicit in this idea is the admission that we are forever and fundamentally wrong. Our categorization and discussion of the world are products of our peculiar surroundings; each culture’s values are doomed, or perhaps entitled, to be of and for the moment in which they exist. They are, therefore,

destined to fade out of memory, to be replaced by new waves of thought and enlightenment. The only hope we may have in the face of this transience, the only message other than resignation, is that we might strive to make of the swirling maelstrom of the world something closer to the natural order from which we have so estranged ourselves. Thomas implores us to “finally start learning about some of the things that are still mystifications,” to search for truth and self-apparent realities, instead of constantly deconstructing our world in the belief that we somehow transcend it (493). It is perhaps our only chance for sanity in a world that will always be bigger than our best and purest intentions, a world of dominoes stacked in a precarious and infinite pattern in which we may only do our best to seek order and logic, wherever they can be found.

These concepts are epitomized in the works of Kurt Vonnegut, who is well known as a thinker for whom the world is inherently beyond the scope of our understanding. His black humor and apocalyptic plots have confronted several generations of readers with their own insignificance and inability to grapple with the complexities of the universe. His novel *Cat's Cradle*—a work concerned with the deconstruction of religion, politics, social norms, and more or less all things humanity has created to keep the unknown at bay—contains an ample supply of commentary on the peculiar human condition that is sentience, and thus the need to question. In the novel's “Book of Bokonon,” a satirized form of Holy Scripture, Vonnegut writes, “Tiger got to hunt, bird got to fly / Man got to sit and wonder “why, why, why?” / Tiger got to sleep, bird got to land / Man got to tell himself he understand” (182). Vonnegut's anti-fable suggests that our natural, insatiable curiosity will lead to a swift, devastating end, and that we delude ourselves in thinking that we have accounted for the complexity around us. Furthermore, the metaphor from which the novel gets its name—the game of string contortion known as “cat's cradle”—and the character Newt's scathing condemnation of that metaphor's implications when he shouts, “See the cat? See the cradle?” suggest that to search for a purpose, or any sort of pattern at all, is pointless (183). We ascribe what value we can to the things around us, but at the end of it all, we are tiny data points in an infinite set of invisible equations, paradoxically removed further from the truth with every bit of wisdom we attempt to impose upon the world. With every cat or cradle we see in the twist of strings between a child's fingers, with every attempt to ascribe purpose to a lover's death, with every justification we offer the mourners filing past a child's casket, we lose touch a bit more with reality.

It is a sign of maturity, some might say, to acquire that awareness, to acknowledge that we are but transient and nearly powerless creatures for all of our complexities and achievements, our potentials and our pitfalls. Humanity is not all, will never be all; we merely play out the drama of our lives as do stones, planets, the smallest of organisms, the most vast of stars, dancers obliged to perform in a choreography that we will never understand. The nineteenth-century poet Charles Baudelaire wrote in his poem, “The Gulf,”

Sleep frightens me, as one feels loathing at
A great hole leading who knows where; I see
Only the infinite through all windows. (9-11)

That sentiment is surely universal to all humankind; Rodriguez certainly found it poignant as he faced the sting of his loss. “Thus,” Rodriguez muses of the nineteenth-century mirror on his wall, “the mirror that now draws upon my room owns some bright curse, maybe—some memory not mine” (130). It exposes the infinities within, the unknown visages who have peered into it in decades past, one of Baudelaire’s windows from which Rodriguez recoils in fear. Life may be bigger than you and I; the world, a vast, unfathomable place, which we would do well to remember rules over humanity as it rules over all. But that world oversees what we claim to learn from our losses, too, just as it supports our efforts to sing of them. We can hold our awareness of mystery and chaos at the edge of our consciousness, even as we turn from it to order the minutiae of our lives. And we can know that the world will bear that too, just as Xenakis’s chaotic rumble bears each note, indiscernibly playing its part in a grand and hopelessly convoluted work of art.

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