

Outsider

CAMILA KERWIN

We are miles apart, I think. *I cannot reach you. I don't understand you. You frighten me.* I exhale with a mouthful of stale coffee and a slow, creaking stretch. But my fatigue will not quell David's words. They spill over themselves in a flood of anger and emotion and unrest, trampling the pages in my hands, stampeding from cover to cover in a violent rage.

We sit together, David and I, in the chairs of a coffee shop on a street in the Village in the south of a booming city. A cold gust of wind follows each entering customer, rushing through my hair and down my neck, stinging my ears, draping David's somber account with an appropriately gray veil. I cringe at his childhood stories—tales ridden with abuse, addiction, disease. His is a streaming life, hurtling onward with nothing to lose and no one to disappoint. Two days have passed since we met, and we've begun to lose each other. He takes a breath as I gently place my palm on his cool paperback cover, worn from use. *Close to the Knives*, by David Wojnarowicz.

My eyes glaze over, departing.

I cannot connect to his wild, drug-induced, sex-driven lifestyle. I cannot hear him; do not *want* to hear him. I *deny* him.

Jim W. Corder's "Aching for a Self" concerns David as directly as it can without mentioning him. Corder celebrates the way we seek and convey fragments of our souls through written expression. He challenges the contemporary view of the written word, which doubts its ability to capture and recapture a given moment exactly as it was perceived. He acknowledges the obscurity of language, yet urges us to listen carefully for the impressions—the true impressions—that language allows us to produce. In Corder's view, listening is a means to salvation. He would probably rail against my disinclination to hear David's story. Thoughtlessly, I had cast David into extinction.

Corder's words crash around me in the gloom of the fading light, sounding his frustration. He fills my frame of vision, staring me in the face. *Wake up*, he seems to say. His is a vindication not merely of David's voice, but all forms of expression, all voices. We write in a desperate pursuit of existential

validation, he insists. We ache “to be absolutely present to the world, acknowledged, known and cherished, and we long for the world to be absolutely present to us, there, real” (139). We want to matter. We write to matter. We write to believe that our presence in this world somehow transcends our undeniably inconsequential size—our thin slice of time.

I look at the book on the table, frowning, and the space separating David and me suddenly grows thick, tangible, imposed. His nostalgia is distant to me, yet it reflects an unavoidable human impulse—a desperate look backward in the hope of making sense of who and how and if we are. Corder presents nostalgia as an ever-compelling gesture, natural and tragic, stressing that “we sometimes need to know the name and look of things. The world is always coming unfixed, and we keep trying to know what it’s like, and what it was like in some before that we imagine” (140). David is the manifestation of Corder’s assertion: the vociferous nostalgic, struggling to evoke meaning from a fragmented past, writing to quell the despair of a looming demise, shouting to be acknowledged. We need to be heard, just as David needs to be heard. He uses language to declare his presence to the world and pray for a response. Words are all he has.

He waits. And regardless of my reluctance to listen to him, regardless of my willingness to seek out his voice and his thoughts and perhaps even his presence, he will continue to wait indefinitely. I hold with me his language—a window into his history, his memories, his soul—and I matter because I have the choice to peer inside and save him.

Save him.

I cannot relate to David. Our independent realities share no common ground. I cannot fully sympathize with his personal terrors, his abuses, his fears. But I can listen to his story. I can practice compassion, and offer a willingness to try to understand a life entirely unrelated to my own. I look at David. *What, then, is your reality? What is the composition of your world? Show me.*

A cloud of thought lifts from my head, and I find myself back in my chair, a half-filled mug of tepid coffee hovering in my hand, David ready at my side. I resume my perusal of his cumbersome and tangled experience, listening as he recalls a strong memory in which he encounters a friend whose “face and neck were blurred with Kaposi lesions, like a school of burgundy-colored fish upturning around the contours of his jaw” (Wojnarowicz 167). This is his life, his world. I marvel at the lightness of a person’s existence in the palm of my hand. In recalling this single, isolated detail among the millions within his heavily encumbered memory, David searches for himself. He strives to remember the features of a long-ago scene, if only to craft an identity out of

the indistinct and evasive before. He yearns for himself, looking for himself in a space he has already departed. He *misses* himself.

His words are scraps, remnants, puzzle pieces. Yet for me to deny David's presence beneath the craftwork of his language, however shadowed it may be with the instability and futility of remembrance, is merely to betray an unwillingness to search carefully for his voice. We *do* exist in our texts, in the visible impulse to make them. We exist as tattered, incomplete souls.

Another coffee, please. The waitress refills my mug as I stare at the words in the yellowing memoir of David Wojnarowicz's far-away life. But what is his soul? On this point, Corder falters. "If you are a soul in here, how do you become a self out there?" he asks us (141). In creating a distinction between the soul and the self, Corder seems to have defined his terms by comparison. Whereas a soul is surely singular, that essence that resides within each of us, a self is invariably plural, constantly in flux, transforming with external interpretations. A soul is what we give; a self is what is taken. A soul is one, but a self can be many.

And yet, the question remains: what *is* a soul? How do I know if I am a soul in here, before I can hope to become a self out there? What is the essence that each of us longs to convey to the world? Do I hold it in my hands?

I drift away from the broken conversations, the shuffling footsteps, the thick, heavy mugs and the intermittent dings from the cashier. David shrinks from me, as if at the opposite end of a telescope, while I nurse my new bewilderment. Sifting through his memories and fighting to convey their force on the page, he has offered me a glimpse into his experience—a bit of his "soul," with which I may construct my version of his "self," according to Corder (141). Yet I struggle with such a binary. In Plato's *Phaedo*, we witness the beginnings of this dualistic thinking when Socrates expresses a hopeful outlook in light of his imminent death, which will be the "separation of the soul from the body" (20). For Plato, death is the cathartic moment when our souls are "most like the divine and immortal and intelligible and uniform and indissoluble" (44). In his conviction of the immortality of the *psukhé* (soul), and his association of immortality with intelligibility, Plato anticipates Corder's belief that our souls can be read, and that we can give ourselves to one another in our writing. Yet while both Plato and Corder claim the intelligibility of the soul, both fail to describe that which makes it intelligible. We are left without a clear understanding of the essence that is supposedly comprehensible, within our reach. Plato and Corder cling desperately to the belief that we can somehow transcend our physicality, our bodies, through a process of transformation, yet the condition of our souls remains tantalizingly obscure in their

accounts. Corder does not answer the question of what the soul is; he merely grants the soul a means of preservation—the written word. Plato, too, tells us what the soul is *not*—the body—and tells us how to set it free. Both authors leave us fumbling with an incomplete bridge to it.

How do we recognize souls? How can we search for an object whose face and condition are inconceivable?

Like this. Words. Introspection. Language. We use expression to strive toward the impossible goal of spiritual self-recognition. Like David, we examine the experiences we know to create some semblance of what we are.

Our intelligibility stems from the ability to organize our surroundings with a sense-making process—language—that is inherently flawed. In her essay “Signs and Symbols,” Suzanne K. Langer describes how language is deeply intertwined with the structure of our thought. She explains that language has “so completely taken possession of the human mind” that our mental and emotional wellbeing now depend on how we use it, echoing Corder’s fundamental belief in the value of words (528). Yet even Corder—who firmly rejects the contemporary notion that language is a highly limited means of expression, imploring us “to believe that our character could be in the text of what we say, that we do exist, that we can be in our words and own them even in the act of giving them away”—readily acknowledges language’s shortcomings (140). “Words and images are incomplete class notes from the world, a way of catching reminders,” he notes, curbing his own enthusiasm. “Of course they are only traces. They were never anything but traces,” he admits (140).

If we have grown to be as heavily governed by language as Langer suggests—if the need to express does indeed permeate the deepest structures of our consciousness—then it is tragic that language should be ridden with Corder’s stated insufficiencies. If we cannot hope to achieve a perfect representation of our experience because we use an inherently flawed medium of expression—flawed because of the instability of memory, because of the subjectivity among differing points of view, because of our tendency to decorate and embellish our independent circumstances—how dreadful to depend on it so thoroughly, as Langer suggests we do!

Perhaps language conceals us not only from each other, but also from ourselves. Perhaps we are our own observers, looking at ourselves from the outside of a shell of letters that we call identity. Words and images and phrases soar through our skulls and out of our fingertips and onto our sheets of paper, simultaneously digging and concealing, searching and cushioning, finding and keeping us from whatever it is we are. With language, we can construct an intelligible self, but not a soul. Our soul precedes, dwarfs and

transcends language, eluding all attempts to define it. We can examine ourselves in the way others examine us, anticipating their examinations, but we cannot outwit the failings of words. They travel in fits and bursts, invariably reaching us in what Corder calls “the jackleg way,” crude and indistinct (143). But a jackleg immortality is better than none at all. Words are all we have—our only faltering tools.

I look at David, and he is smiling.

Words, I think, and me. Now, you have me.

I look up and notice that my coffee has been refilled. David waits, patiently, while I take another long sip. But before I let him resume, I stare down at his words while grappling for a pen in my bag. In the margin I scribble, *I'm listening.*

WORKS CITED

- Corder, Jim W. “Aching for a Self.” *Occasions for Writing: Evidence, Idea, Essay*. Ed. Robert DiYanni and Pat C. Hoy II. Boston: Thomson, 2008. 139-44. Print.
- Langer, Suzanne K. “Signs and Symbols.” *Occasions for Writing: Evidence, Idea, Essay*. Ed. Robert DiYanni and Pat C. Hoy II. Boston: Thomson, 2008. 526-30. Print.
- Plato. *Phaedo*. Trans. E. M. Cope. Ed. Henry Jackson. London: Cambridge UP, 1875. Print.
- Wojnarowicz, David. *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*. New York: Vintage, 1991. Print.

110 - MERCER STREET