

Yearning To Yield

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It seems to me we can never give up longing and wishing while we are thoroughly alive. There are certain things we feel to be beautiful and good, and we must hunger after them.

—George Elliot

The pallid yellow of the winter sun peeked through the sky's plush robe of gray. The sidewalks were blanketed in a starched sheet of ice and snow, which muffled the music of the city streets. The unspoken hush of winter wrapped itself around Manhattan, and besides the rhythmic honking of cabbies, only the wind, singing its sorrowful secrets and whispering of the warmth to come interrupted the almost-*eerie* quiet. New Yorkers, with thickly bundled bodies and scarves that covered their mouths, trudged through the dead of winter, and cursed to themselves silently for a change. With only their eyes uncovered, most stared straight ahead; they looked hollow and empty, as if the weather had frozen their bodies *and* their souls. They appeared to be slogging, not just through the snow, but through life. I thought of how funny it would be if a rosy-cheeked young imp flung a playful snowball across their grumbling brows.

The below-freezing temperature of the late January air forced me to suck in my breath as I walked down 10th Street, but, unlike my fellow pedestrians, who protected their skin from the icy cold by wool and down and fur, I was gloveless, hatless, and smiling. I smiled because I love the cold weather. It is a rush, a high for me. When I am outside in a certain kind of cold I experience my body functioning in the miraculous way that I take for granted daily. In that kind of cold that fills my lungs with fire so that I exhale in white swirls of smoke, my nose runs, my eyes water, and my heart beats a little faster. This coldness stings my face like a hundred unrelenting hornets, and my skin tingles and turns pink as blood rushes to the surface to keep me warm. It's *that* kind of cold that makes me feel the most alive.

During these precious, rare moments my inner-self is interconnected with my physical being. I feel wholly human in my body. Similarly, my mind becomes whole, my scattered thinking sharp and crisp like the air that envelops me. I think clear, uninhibited thoughts that are foggy in my stuffy dorm room. In the cold, I feel satisfied, at peace with myself. I am not searching for my next source of distraction, or entertainment, or craving a sweet taste in my mouth. I am thankful for the day God has given us. But, as with all highs, I come crashing down. Like a drunken fool I slip on the ice as my mind becomes a blank winter's palette, and I stop feeling so alive. My knees hit the sidewalk, and my body goes numb to fight off the pain of the frost. The cold makes me feel so much that I can't feel anything at all.

Right before the numbness took over my skin that day, the somatic sensation I felt to the core of my being heightened my senses. I was acutely aware of my surroundings. I inhaled the intense odor that was a mixture of roasted nuts and gasoline. I watched a lone snowflake flutter down from an awning just so, perfectly framing the universe for a muted moment. The steam from a paper cup of hot chocolate cradled tenderly in the grateful fingers of a little girl hit my face, and I turned away from it, and found myself looking straight into eyes that were the color of the caked mud on my boots. These eyes were miserable as well, but not in the ungrateful, unreasonable way of the others I had seen. I stopped. I looked. I saw that his pants were dirty, tattered, and too loose on his skinny legs. I saw that his dingy yellow windbreaker was much too light for this weather, and he was holding out a cup for change. I saw eyes that belonged to a young man who knew pain beyond bodily discomfort from the cold day; deep behind his dark irises was a want, a need, an agony. He said to me, "Please, can you help me? Anything you can spare...please?" I walked away. I walked away because the look in those eyes was all too familiar. His eyes were the eyes of an addict.

I've been told, no matter how much compassion I feel, that I should not give money to a begging druggie. I knew that my money would not help his plight. He would remain without a home, without food, and with an addiction to drugs. Not to mention the fact that money spent on drugs is likely to pay gang members or dealers or smugglers, all of whom are digging the mass grave for our society's death. I was making eye contact with an embodiment of the all-consuming hunger for a nourishment that is not food, a craving I had satisfied before, and I realized that gloveless hands and hatless heads were not the only things I had in common with the brown-eyed boy.

I love the cold because of the intense feelings it exposes in me. I loved the pills I popped because of the intense feelings that they numbed for me. I

know the torment and inevitable horror of addiction. I know the consequences of yielding to temptation. But I marched over to the struggling boy and dropped a twenty in his cup, because I also know the overpowering feeling of devastation that ensues when an addict is deprived of his craving. I know the overwhelming need to fill the void and to plug up the hole of empty sadness in an attempt to live a content life unaffected by inner disturbances. On that cold January day, baring my already chapped skin to the frost, I wanted to numb this boy to the pain of the cold, of his life, of his addiction. I turned back around, in spite of, *and* because of, my knowledge.

The tears that blurred my vision and stung my eyes as I walked away for the second time that day had nothing to do with the weather. I slapped the liquid trickles away from my face, furious with myself for being so spinelessly sympathetic to the addict's plight, angry with the reason behind my donation. I cried because I was penetrated by the realization that my connection with that boy was the same connection I had with many drug users: our lives revolve around an unending cycle of desire and indulgence. We want so much, we feel so deep, we think the pain is simply too excruciating for any human being to have to suffer through. War is waged within us; we cannot quiet the roar of the gunfire. We feel that we cannot access our cognitive skills or artistic talents, or even simply function in society to the best of our ability when the machine guns and hand grenades are aimed in our direction, when we are controlled by the seemingly unconquerable atrocities in our lives. We become obsessed with paralyzing the enemy, even if only for a brief period of time, in order to get to that gloriously liberating place of wholeness where mind and body are free of everything but a pure and gratifying sense of being on earth, alive and capable of attaining that ever-present goal of happiness. We convince ourselves that we are not like other people; we are enduring so much more than everyone else, we are entitled to an escape. So we constantly search for a way to break loose from the harsh, cruel realities of our lives; we search for peace. And once we find our own personal novocaine we begin to self-administer at the slightest tinge of a toothache.

But at what cost? I recently read a fact released from the National Center for Health Statistics that there are more deaths, illnesses, and disabilities from substance abuse than from any other preventable health condition. The researchers stated that one in four deaths is attributable to alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drug use. These words should have knocked me on my ass, made me realize the severity of my substance abuse, but they didn't. I didn't take them seriously, just as I didn't take my Drug Abuse Resistance Education class in fifth grade seriously. It was a class given to every fifth grade student in

every state in an effort to curtail the drug use among high school students, but while our teachers lectured on the dangers of cocaine and ecstasy, we whispered about our new roller-blades and the horrible haircut Melanie got.

So it was there, in a small Catholic grammar school in New Jersey, that I was introduced to drugs. The eleven-year-old Jessica had no need to escape her world at the moment; her family was healthy and seemingly happy; she was an identical replication of her girlfriends, giddy and naive. She was young and had not experienced a heartache beyond not being picked first for kickball. It was the first class of D.A.R.E. The florescent lights had been turned off, the videotape had been popped in, and all twenty pairs of pre-pubescent fifth grade eyes were fixed to the front of the classroom. A hot black frying pan with a sizzling slab of butter appeared on the television screen. The arm of a faceless man emerged from somewhere off-camera. He held a small white egg above the pan.

“This is your brain,” a solemn voice said. He dropped the egg. Crack. Hiss. Pop.

“This is your brain on drugs.” A pause. “Any questions?”

A brief moment of shocked silence ensued as the picture faded and then turned to snow. Mrs. Adimaro flicked on the lights. A rubber band flew across the room and hit a scrawny kid with glasses. A delicately folded pink note was passed discretely. A sticky purple bubble was blown from the mouth of a retainer-wearing cheerleader.

“Well?” Mrs. Adimaro said, arms crossed over her huge bosom.

“I think that guy coulda used some bacon,” cracked a tall kid in the back. The room exploded with laughter. Six years later, that boy was taken out of his high school basketball game because of a nose-bleed. He told the coach he got elbowed. He told me it was from the coke he snorted at half-time.

I felt lost because I expected more from Dennis, from his sad eyes and crooked teeth, his wide shoulders and sarcastic grin, the Catholic hymns of our youth, the algebra he taught me; maybe I expected some kind of wisdom. The kind of wisdom that our fifth-grade teacher had tried so desperately to engrave into our heads. I wanted to remember and find refuge in Dennis, in all that stuff the D.A.R.E. class taught us as I walked in the cold on 10th Street. But what I got was what I already knew: a hardness, a dulling of everything that left me feeling minus instead of plus, empty instead of full, a broken egg covered in boiling fat. I was the winner of the D.A.R.E. essay contest, dammit. And he was the runner-up. How'd we get there? How'd we get to that bottomless pit of need? How'd we wind up so low when all we wanted was to get high?

These are the questions that plague me, that I ask myself when I walk by homeless druggies asleep in the snow in Washington Square Park or when I sit on a stool in a dark seedy bar that smells of sweat and old beer. I think of the power of drugs: the power to enhance, the power to destroy. I weigh the pros, I weigh the cons. I weigh myself. But the scale is always changing, fluctuating with my emotions and thoughts. Funny. I'm always weighing things, but I just want to be weightless. Liberated from the pressures of pain that weigh me down. Weightless with the help of drugs that transport its users to a surreal world void of pain, both physical and mental. A fantasy world of calm and comfort where anxieties and fears are alleviated, where one can detach from the physical or mental limitations that consume the mind.

It is the blurry world of Ema, the subject of Gerhard Richter's oil on canvas that art critics praise for its likeness to a badly developed snapshot. This seemingly smudged polaroid captures a world I am inexplicably drawn to, that I always turn back to when I flip through the glossy pages of my art book. I stare at the reproduction of *Ema—Nude on a Staircase*, and I watch as Ema slowly descends the narrow staircase, long thin arms limp at her sides, flawless porcelain face emotionless. She pauses at the bottom of the dark and blurry stairwell, her tiny, bare foot melting into the step beneath it. Her body does not obey the laws of gravity; it is floating in an underwater world of colorless illusion that lacks clarity and solidity, an undefinable and intangible place of shadows. She is one with her fluid surroundings; the shape of her figure is hazy and vague like the outline of the railing she isn't grasping or the seemingly permeable walls she isn't touching. She is beyond the physical space and inanimate objects of actuality. In her dreamlike state she is unaware of her luminous nudity against the neutral-toned background. She is exposed completely, yet she is undisturbed, void of all her senses.

Art lovers marvel at the blurring of a faithful depiction Richter created by smearing the paint before it was completely dry. But to me, the painting is not striking because of its uncanny likeness to a smudged polaroid. *Ema—Nude on a Staircase* is compelling because I see it as a rendition of the chimerical and delusory experiences of drug users. Ema is unfocused and so is the hallway, both of which are unsettling the rules of perception and questioning the meaning attached to reality. Free of the sharp edges and hard surfaces that dictate the natural order of the sober, free of the boundaries of the material universe, free of the events, situations, emotions, and beliefs that define their actuality, substance abusers are able to find solace in the fuzziness, to find peace in the unreal.

When I look at this painting, I feel all at once the sweet pleasure of unfeeling. I am transported to a place in which I am stripped, like Ema, of my external confinements, unabashed and unrestrained, free of the tortures of a pained existence. Ema and I go beyond our human limitations that are forever plaguing us. We can't feel the splinters from the wood under our feet. We don't get goose-bumps on our naked skin. We can beat down the monsters of hunger and desire if only we endure the cold, drink the poison, swallow the tablet, let go of our shame. Looking at Richter's piece is like looking through intoxicated eyes. If I look long enough, the image becomes my own, equally distorted scene. I am in a similar colorless hallway; everything around me is blurred. It is the summer before my freshman year at college, and I am at a huge party at a friend's empty vacation house at the Jersey Shore. Unlike Ema, I am clothed, and my arms are not limp; in one hand I hold a red plastic cup of Coke and cheap vodka, in the other, I am hiding four over-the-counter diet pills. These substances are the yin and yang of my life at the moment; they are both damaging and repairing my body and mind. I am torn by this feeling of unfeeling: I hate that my vision is not clear, that my balance is off, that I can't hear myself think or speak, but I love that my body has become smaller, that my stomach is not angrily growling, that I have let go of the serious and responsible Catholic school girl that I have been for eighteen years. I am both embarrassed and proud, I am both out of control and completely restricted, I am drunk and I am skinny. I am descending my own staircase into the fantasy universe of drunkenness, and I know that I may fall, but it is only in this dazed semiconsciousness that I am rid of my obsessions and bodily discomfort. I am Ema, my imperfections veiled by the broad strokes of Gerhard's brush.

Drugs can be used like paint brushes, swirling the wet colors that create the pictures of our lives. We are able to change the shape and appearance of ourselves with the help of our drugs, we can even possibly produce a masterpiece. Addicts can conceal themselves, can hide their defects with the brush strokes. The high allows the pain to become the background, not the subject, of their art. Our highs are from different sources, many more lethal than mine, but drug users are all painting in the same galaxy. Some, like my high school friend, like the homeless boy, may be way closer to the fiery sun; their eggs are almost fried. Still, I believe many would whole-heartedly agree with what Hunter S. Thompson wrote in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*:

Every now and then when your life gets complicated and the weasels start closing in, the only cure is to load up on heinous chemicals and then drive

like a bastard from Hollywood to Las Vegas...with the music at top volume and at least a pint of ether.

Thompson guiltlessly and unabashedly promotes drug use as a means to escape and acknowledges the sickness deep within us that we are constantly trying to heal, the pathetic self-perpetuating disease that is a continuous cycle of our own greed and weakness.

It is part of the human condition to want what you cannot have, to be someone you cannot be, to understand what you cannot understand. I realize this is why I have an addiction, and I believe it also to be the driving force that propels all other addicts. The temptation to escape to someplace better is all too great for us. We believe ourselves to morph into more desirable, more talented, more beautiful people when we are under the influence of drugs. We are aware that we are altered. The LSD gurus believe that the chemical changes in their brains, which cause them to perceive the world differently and to perceive different worlds, bring them into a divine realm. Getting high means opening the doors of perception to a higher reality. They believe they are closer, with the aid of their drugs, to their spiritual or true nature. They know the way. They know truths the modern scientist has not even dreamed of. They have found the fountain of knowledge: hallucinogenic drugs. Maybe that is why they think they can fly and transmogrify into birds and other animals. Edgar Allen Poe, literary genius, was an opium addict, wasn't he? Many of the great musicians were addicted to *something*: Jim Morrison, Bob Dylan, Elvis Presley...the list goes on. Moviestars are always in rehab. Doctors are all too quick to prescribe. Our ex-president was addicted to sex for Heaven's sake.

Therein lies the problem: we are a culture cooking in that black pan of addiction, and some of us are bound to get burnt. In our attempt to reach this godlike state of mind where we are at peak performance, at this place that is better-than-life, we step closer to death. Each time we use, we are altering our minds and bodies, the risks of which are listed in the D.A.R.E. textbook, in articles by the National Center for Health Statistics, and from the FDA. The price of war is high, but sometimes, the stipends paid for peace are higher.

Addicts are constantly at war. We fight blindly for that one moment of highness, that unattainable minute or two of nirvana. But the moment we are trying to reach is fleeting, and we find ourselves *too* far away from reality, *too* numb, so we about-face, and march back to the front lines, unarmed. We look straight into the eyes of our enemy, who has a loaded gun pointed at our heads. And we surrender once again.

The word surrender has such strong connotations. It seems to me that surrendering is thought to be an embarrassed resignation, a forced abdication, a transfer of power from the weak to the strong. My mother, however, works in direct opposition to this notion, for she rids herself of her inner pain by surrendering to her physical pain. Like me, she is unclothed to the cold and is empowered by her conscious vulnerability. I want to be like my mother, whom I can picture now, sitting on a sofa, heating pad on her neck, ice pack on her lower back, eyes scrunched shut in agony. She allows the pain to surround her spine. I remember three years ago I sat by her side and asked her why she didn't just fill the prescription for the pain killers her doctors had prescribed. I wanted to know why she didn't just numb the sharp ache of her bones and quell the emotional distress evolving from her bodily suffering. She answered, "Because I'd rather feel all of the pain my body can handle and be your mother in this world than be a vegetable in some other one."

When I think of my mother's answer, the photo album that is my memory falls open to a random snapshot haphazardly pasted on one of the first pages. It is my sister and I, in Osh-Kosh denim overalls and matching white turtle necks. We were skipping that day down the impossibly long corridor, singing, "We're going to the ZOO, ZOO, ZOO. How about YOU, YOU, YOU?" My father told us to be quiet or we would wake those who were sleeping, and we immediately became wildlife observers on safari, creeping silently so as not to disturb the animals in their habitat. We peered, wide eyed, into each exhibit, stealing quick glimpses of the curious creatures within their confinements. Some were being fed, some were thrashing about, tugging at their leashes, some appeared to be in a deep sleep. "Playing dead," I told my sister. The air was thick with the smell of urine and feces, and Stephanie, never one to conceal her feelings, held her nose in disgust.

Finally we reached the main attraction. We entered tentatively, clutching each other's hands in anticipation. Enclosed within the iron cage was a lioness, we knew, but she was burrowed in her nest of blankets, only her black curly mane and queen-like face visible. We gripped the bars of the cage, staring in shock at the great beast lying motionless. My sister and I made animal calls in an attempt to wake her. We sang our zoo song quietly. We even stuck our fingers inside and gently poked. Stephanie's eyes filled with tears. "Why won't Mommy wake up?" she whimpered.

And then the make-believe was over, and we were no longer at the zoo. The smell was human waste and sickness, the leashes were IV's, the only observers were nurses, and the iron cages morphed into hospital beds. The patients, held captive to their diseases and injuries were, in fact, just like the

animals in the zoo. Ripped from their natural environment, probed and prodded by rubber gloves and speculating eyes, shot up with countless drugs meant to sterilize and sanitize, pacify and sedate. Drugs meant to alter patients' present state, suppressing their spirits as they deadened the pain or stamped out the abnormal or the unwanted conditions. The massive lump under the sheets was not a lioness playing dead; she was a woman with degenerative disk disease recovering from her third operation, out cold due to a massive dose of morphine.

The sight of our strong, omnipresent and all-knowing mother capable of kart-wheels and jump rope, crippled and helpless, was as appalling as discovering that the Easter bunny was fiction. When our mother awoke she was a frenzy of disorientation from excruciating pain shooting down her back and from a mind clouded with drugs. Our cheeks, flushed from the excitement of our zoo trip, now drained of color and confusion. Disbelief contorted our small faces. Who would push us on the swings until we reached the moon, who would stop our tears from falling and our bellies from aching, who would chase away the monsters in our closet? Not this woman in the hospital bed, that was for sure. At age five and seven, my sister and I found ourselves in an uncharted territory. But it was not the unexplored rain forests of South America or the icy tundra of Greenland where we discovered a new organism. No, it was in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital where we found a species we had never seen in a zoo: The Vulnerable Parent.

Twelve years later, she doesn't remember a single day in her two-week stay at the hospital, but still recoils at the memory of our disappointed and disillusioned expressions when she returned home, only to take to her bed for two more weeks. The drugs that allowed her a pain-free month also transformed her into a babbling, uncontrolled child, and she hated that feeling. She refuses to become addicted to a painless existence, for it is not possible. There is a life without pain and with drugs, she knows, but that life is full of the pain of an unfocused mind, murky with misunderstandings and a memory dimmed by incoherent thoughts. The life that drug users ultimately lead.

I know, as I rush from the cold of the city streets into the heated drug-store, that although my mother has surrendered to the pain, she has not lost the war. Her strength is derived from her willingness to endure the pain, her unwavering decision to turn away from relief for the sake of her own mental well-being. I understand this as I stand in the aisle of the pharmacy section of CVS scanning each bottle, shelf after shelf. Blue, red, orange, and green letters scream at me to buy them, for they will fix my problems, they will stop my hurt. I don't cover my ears to the promise of numbness like my mother

does. I move past the calcium supplements that shout that they will help me build muscle. Past the ginseng extract that announces its intelligence boosting effect. Past the vitamin B for strong hair and nails. I continue my search for what I know is necessary to cage the beast inside me. I reach the dietary section. The animal of hunger within me growls. I pick each bottle up, read the labels, believe the advertisement. A quick fix. An easy way out. Instant satisfaction. I am not strong like her. I lose a battle a day, because I believe that *my* mental well-being *must* come from drugs. I *want* the murky mind and incoherent thoughts, for they will surely overpower the ugly thoughts I have about myself every minute of every day.

I am haunted by the paradoxical nature of the effects of drugs. I am compassionate to those who are addicted, I respect those who are not. I want the high, I want to feel alive, and walking in the cold, I realize I don't need drugs to attain my goal. The snow, the freezing wind, my tingling skin, they can be my paintbrushes. They inspire me, make me feel realness so real it's indescribable. But I can't control the dosage of the weather like I can alcohol and ephedra pills. The coldness isn't a consistent guarantee, and I can't self-administer. So I resort to necessary measures: I pay the cashier, the bartender, the guy down the hall, whoever, so that I can experience that enticing state of semi-existence.

Again and again I find myself high among the confectionary clouds of drunkenness and numbness. Now, New York's scenes overlap New Jersey's in my photo album; the battle ground was moved, but the war continues on. Mine is a beautiful war, a beautiful sadness. It makes me feel alive, you know. It makes me feel human. The only way I could feel this sad now is if I felt something really good before. The only way I could appreciate warmth is if I had experienced the cold. So I have to take the bad with the good, the torture with the numbness. But, I am aware that under the influence of drugs, I do not experience genuine feelings; I am not my true self. No one is. Pain, sadness, anger, stress—these are inherent aspects of life. To accept, cope with, and continue on despite the barriers is to be a strong, pure human being, more capable of happiness than any addict, for hers is a triumph all her own, without the assistance of a synthetic medication. Unraveling the coils of pain and laying them out for all to see brings me closer to an acceptance, closer to becoming grounded in reality like my mother, and like Emily Dickinson. She writes, in Sonnet 341:

This is the Hour of Lead—
Remembered, if outlived,

As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow—
First—Chill—then Stupor—then letting go

I know and love the Chill as much as I know and love the Stupor. I yearn for the Chill, I yield to the Stupor. Maybe, if it's cold out, I could yearn to know and love the letting go, break the cycle of addiction, step down the staircase of clarity, and just yield to the snow.

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