

Notebook from the Apocalypse

## Preface

*It is hard to imagine a time when this notebook was not required reading for all post-apocalyptic students. Like most regrown complex nova-life, I was first introduced to the notebook under duress by senior complex regrown nova-life and, quite honestly, found its clunky, stalling, overwritten descriptions to be nothing more than an exercise in tedium.*

*Back then all regrown nova-life were obliged to study the notebook within the narrow and dreary pedagogy of the lysogenic cycle—memorising and reciting passages, completing a not-so critical review of a not-so critical review of the original text, as well as noting stylistic inconsistencies, elliptical constructions and grammatical incompetence and as if they were rules to absorb and then mindlessly disgorge. This stultifying and nostalgically motivated scholarship still obstructs new readings of the notebook to this day. For this reason I have, for a long cycle, insisted that we, as highly advanced aerobes, try to avoid blind and automatic reverence for this fragmented text and approach it anew; not as an instructional, apodictic record of what we now confidently call “the apocalypse”, but as an artefact to*

*be opened, criticised and reimagined. The fact that the notebook comes to us in the form of fragments should afford us an interpretative freedom.*

*The notebook is, above all, a study of pilgrims in denial. Of course, very little is known about the author(s). It was discovered long after the Great Obliteration, when the first wave of nova-life assessment teams were sent back into those 10,000-year-old noxious clouds that cloaked the original wreckage. It is true that, once translated, it revealed many secrets of that lost and deep-fried world: places, politics, habits, customs, animals, objects, images and the nature of “relationships” (what we know as interdependencies) that seemed, for some time, to flourish there. However, it is not at all controversial to claim that the author(s) fail to comprehend the coming annihilation. In fact, what it reveals is that it all ended not spectacularly but unremarkably—the apocalypse, it turns out, was prosaic.*

*As we have come to decipher, the notebook seems to continually avowal its world even when that world was bloated, inequitable, conservative, uppity. This persistence in the face of so many terrestrial blunders was as admirable as it was stupid. From the position of our present cycle, based on what we now know, we are suitably astonished at the conditions in which this notebook was composed: the crooked and contradictory economics that, right up until the end, favoured a small fraction of the species; the bizarre intolerance for alternatives; the building of “business parks”; the love of industrial wasteland; the smooth and blatant mobilisation of the alienated; the enduring belief in the state; the widespread popularity of frozen yogurt; the addiction to bureaucracy; tech-industry smugness; hygiene*

*hysteria; golf courses. To the reader who is encountering the notebook for the first time, I encourage you to approach it not from the patronising position of hindsight and not as an odd chore (as so many of us have done) but as a motile resource, a thing that was “written” despite—or in spite of—all the signs.*

*As you will no doubt recognise, it would be wrong to think of the notebook as a diary. It is personal but not exactly confessional. It is a text that works hard to observe particulars that amount to nothing in particular, and perhaps because of this untethered labour the writing has an odd rhythm; not bad but not so elegant either. I find it best to think of the notebook as a collection of sensitively registered and concentrated fissions and fusions: the author(s) attempt to understand those final earthly moments by splitting from the world whilst simultaneously embracing it.*

*While this revised edition is more or less faithful to the original translation, I have taken some liberties to remove redundant (and damaging) exegesis. Having said that, where possible, I explain some pre-apocalyptic references, zeitgeisty gizmos and post-archaic phrases based on recent discoveries and research. Three extant images have also been included. First-time readers of the notebook may wish to begin wherever their ommatophores land; seasoned readers may find it nourishing to take on the challenge of approaching the text again with a self-imposed naivety.*

*It is worth noting that this revised edition came about through discussions with fellow regrown nova-life forms. We shared the opinion that most secondary literature on the notebook had thus far failed to admit that the text has its charms as well as its amateurish preten-*

*sions. When we approach anything from a self-satisfied position we risk overlooking all the contradictions and mutations living within (like GFAJ-1 bacteria living off arsenic instead of phosphorus). So, crystallised as this notebook is in the aura of its extinct world, I can only hope that coming nova-life forms celebrate this aura by defying it.*



Earth, c.1990

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A pack of rats—we count five or six from where we sit—scurry up a drainpipe and along a wall. Earlier, cockroaches huddle around a stepped on kebab. Later, it must be early morning, a flock of seagulls dance for dropped fries and chicken nuggets outside McDonald's (1) and moths mob a street light, unable to be anywhere else. The same day? Unseasonably hot. Not a swarm of bees but close enough in the middle of the median strip. A lively meeting of flies on a pile of shit on the pavement. You say you *need an electric kettle*. Pigeons coolly enter and exit the shopping centre, using the automatic doors.

A green reboot juice, free samples of hand cream in small packets, a slippery floor, an out-of-service escalator, a wide selection of kettles arranged in a line from most expensive to least. Teenage boys skulk in concentric circles around teenage girls who slouch over each other in oversized armchairs; all limbs and fruit-flavoured gum. A t-shirt with a faded image of a snow leopard on a man who looks like ~~Walter Benjamin~~ a father. One teenage girl peels off from the group, embarrassed. A giant, discoloured George Clooney (2) drinks an espresso. A toddler attached to a leash spirals around her mother—totem tennis-like—until both are immobile. (3)

Hours pass unnoticed until we're hungry.

Not at home but nearby ants devour a dead lizard and make it look fuzzy, pixelated. A cat—suspicious, handsome, casual—watches us, stretches, yawns and slips through a security door. Later, a bull-necked

man complaining to a woman about whitefringed weevils eating his potatoes holds one potato up to her face and she lets out a chesty laugh.

School kids with disproportionately large backpacks playing a brutal slapping game; uninterpretable rules.

a fridge door

a cardboard box full of health magazines

a pile of coat hangers

a scummy blender

a busted Ab King Pro (4) covered in the pearlescent lines of a snail or slug. ~~TARGET UPPER ABS/MIDDLE ABS/LOWER ABS/OBLIQUES.~~

No more stadiums. 10,000 people in the bathroom, 40,000 people in the living room, 60,000 people in the kitchen, 100,000 people in the bedroom. No toilet paper, toothpaste or soap. There is instant coffee. Earlier, there were biscuits. A collection of 20 cent pieces sorted into 1 dollar piles on the table. A rock that resembles the undulating form of a soft cheese. All the plastic bags stuffed into one plastic bag stuffed into a cupboard below the sink.

In the pantry, an army of ants marching in two lines, back and forth, until you wipe them up with a sponge. From the other room: a documentary about the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. (5) An expert in a Hawaiian t-shirt wearing a shell necklace explains the water column.

epipelagic  
mesopelagic  
bathypelagic  
abyssopelagic  
hadopelagic

We both hear (but do not speak about) a series of muffled popping sounds. A conversation about water: you say *it's a substance that parodies every form*. That is, until 1957: chemists at Bayer and General Electric polymerize "bisphenol A". Polycarbonate will not vanish.

An email from a friend with a link to a Disney film about a Great Dane that thinks it's a Dachshund. A basic mistake, a problem of scale. Newlyweds unable to find the time because Brutus has identity issues. Brutus, the sublimation dog. Brutus, answer me this: were you named after

- a) the founder of the Roman Republic?
- b) Julius Caesar's assassin?
- c) a Trojan hero, the first king of Britain?

Brutus, what's your real name? How long have you been dead? Man and animal break up, historically, when Descartes decides the body and the soul are separate. Man and dog unite, historically, when the dog decides to habituate man. What would Descartes do to Brutus? Bloody himself with the proof that he was a "beast-machine". (6) You say *what we know about them is an index of our power and this index sepa-*

*rates us from them. You say the first subject matter for painters were animals, probably the first metaphors too. But what about big clumsy Brutus, too big for his small ambitions and too far from the cave? We half-watch the film until the wifi drops out, and by then it's time to leave.*

Postcards: Saul Steinberg's Techniques at a Party, c.1953; Anni Albers's Rug Design for a Children's room, c.1928; Giorgio Morandi's Still Life, c.1946; Medardo Rosso's Conversation in the Garden, c.1893 (7); Sailing Stones at Death Valley, c.? (8).

All at once in a line through the door—we count fifteen or sixteen from where we sit—carrying plastic bags heavy and clinking with bottles. A single jar of black olives. A disproportionately small packet of potato chips. News spreads quickly: no ice for the drinks because it's too hot for water to freeze, or someone just forgot to close the fridge door. At first, tentative and desperate, we abide by the group. We make provocative statements with rehearsed faces that perform the burden of thought. We name names and know that those names carry weight and significance. We introduce obscure, funny facts. "Before industrial chemistry, urine was used in the manufacturing of gunpowder." We're careful to be relaxed and dispassionate when we're challenged, gracious and uncompromising when we disagree, equanimous and introspective when we're confused, brooding when we haven't listened. All camouflage and well-delivered regurgitation.

We talk about—more or less in this order—the heat, indoor plants, Berlin, UX, wifi dead zones, ugly ceramics, Paul Walker’s face (9), bowling, flatbread, polite Canadians, the Fermi Paradox, drones, e-cigarettes, epidemiology, womb transplants, the fact that an octopus can project images from its body onto its body, concrete, duct tape, levees, the universal displeasure of uncles, borscht. Some of the group leave to find food and never return.

Finally, a glass breaks. The mood loosens in loudness.

A laughing girl wearing black cat earrings and a lime green jumper stands on the table and pours gin from the bottle into a laughing boy’s glass, and misses. New faces appear just before the lights go out. Illuminated by phones heads are bodiless, you say *they’re without history*.

Outside a plumpish boy smooshes his face against the window, pulls down his pants, then repeats the action, first with his arse, then with his dick. He yells at the group: a squashed rat! a squashed rat! it’s a squashed rat! The girl in the lime green jumper yells something uninterpretable back and runs outside to do the same, first pressing her breasts against the glass, then her arse. People cheer. Suddenly there’s pizza and suddenly there isn’t. You whisper that you’re *thinking about Brutus*. Two people emerge from the bathroom, flushed and grim, as though banished. A boy speaking about phallocentrism holds a slice of pizza in each hand. Now the music, irrelevant before, hisses and squeals, and you say *it’s deranged and good*.

Later, considerable time must have passed, a semi-supine body under the table, the brief acidic smell of vomit, a swaying circle of fig-

ures bathed in the obvious light of the open fridge. A boy barrels in from outside, head bent back and holding his pancaked nose in an effort to stop the blood. His t-shirt—now soaked and carmine—a picture of a jubilant cartoon orange holding a glass of orange juice in front of a bright blue sky: VISIT FLORIDA.

Time fattens. Drunk on a beanbag, you pitch plots: —*Robert Musil’s ghost returns, learns motion capture software, gets a job at George Lucas’s visual effects firm Industrial Light & Magic, is paid reasonably well, the end.* —*Cy Twombly returns as a slug, does his best work in and around a dog’s bowl.* —*Instead of pursuing politics, Margaret Thatcher (10) opens a chain of ice cream stores called Lucky Lady.* —*Under a sulfur-yellow sky, Henry Darger (11) delivers the longest Powerpoint presentation in history, followed by a discussion about the weather.* —*In a world overrun by ageless, beautiful, sun-stroked zombies, who will protect the Earth’s collagen supplies? Using organic bio-fermented and bio-synergising methods, great minds labour over an anti-zombie cream. But it all goes wrong. The Chilean wine berry, octopus ink sacs, acai, papaya, blueberry, and pomegranate powders, plus avocado and spinach extract, do nothing.* —*Instead of pursuing politics, Berlusconi becomes Italy’s second largest butt plug supplier.* You whinge that *these are the stories that should be told*. Eyes closed, you burp and continue. —*If the soul is working, what work does it do? —Does it have a desk? Is it in possession of a chair? —Does it work on its knees? Does it struggle to concentrate when cold, get lethargic when hot? —Does it have money problems, paying rent to the body? —Is the soul on minimum wage? —Or, is the soul the*

landlord, a property owner? —Is the body the soul's capital? —The body is the soul's capital. —But is it obliged, or does it choose, to convert biological matter into a moving, talking, reactive critter? —Does the soul sleep? —Does the soul fuck? —If so, does it fuck well? —Has the soul read Spinoza? You say, not joking, that *all souls look a little like croissants, but croissants are without doubt the wrong tool, and a shovel would have been much better.* You say, moving your hands to indicate you're quoting: *we're a process, and precisely, the process of our own acts. Asses prefer sweepings to...gold. Sometimes croissants can turn into stone, a bit like that 250 year old bagel that was found in Germany.*

A drunk fop, crying and curled up in the foetal position near your feet, mumbles an objection, but you're all done now, asleep.

Still no updates of any kind. We go looking for some instant coffee.

All the soulless objects have been put to one side; the others have been sealed in waterproof bags and placed in a box. You quote Nabokov's story "Symbols and Signs". A poor boy suffers from referential mania, believes objects to be "*...hives of evil, vibrant with a malignant activity that he alone could perceive, or gross comforts for which no use could be found in his abstract world... Pebbles or stains or sun flecks form patterns representing, in some awful way, messages that he must intercept. Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme.*" You say this to illustrate a point, perhaps nature's only revenge is that it is indifferent.

moon like a clipped toenail, barely there  
bricks, rope  
wifi

Four-year-old euphoria comes in the form of marshmallow characters on a pair of pink pyjamas. A little body tucked into dark blue bed sheets printed with galaxies, planets and rockets. A fleeting thought concerning the functionality of decoration. We endure a litany of complaints, questions and emphatic gestures that arise when a word that would be of use is missing, not learnt, doesn't exist, needs to be invented. Glow-in-the-dark stars and moons on the ceiling look more like punctures than stickers. Full of tiny inanimate eyes, the room is crowded. Urgently, a selection of mislaid, treasured items need to be found.

a talking stegosaurus  
a squishy, half-masticated piglet  
an ice cream that never melts  
a miniature wooden loaf of bread  
a didactic platypus  
a supercilious mouse

Is the little body asleep? It is not. A story is told again and again about a silent cricket on a leaf, a cricket without language. Is it asleep? It is not.

You speak about Lascaux II <sup>(12)</sup> with a stranger over the last bottles of wine. You say *the audio guide attempted to situate you 17,300 years in the past in the copy of the real cave* and you mock the voice of the guide by covering your hand with your mouth and speaking, as if through headphones.

*...throw a rock against the wall and listen to it erupt with laughter. Look at the rock. A rock is a rock. Now, notice that the grooves, fractures and fault lines start to speak. Pick up that stick near the “fire” [Light-emitting diodes], bang the “burnt” end against the ground and bring three or four running bison into the cave [bison already on the wall]. Now, listen to the rocks again as they laugh. Without responding—be deaf to the ridicule—select the rock with bright-scarlet specks from the pile and “grind” [hold] it. Now that you have a handful of powder [pick up the powder in the pouch provided], “spit” [use water provided] into your hand and begin to colour in the moving beasts to make them pop out from the wall. The rocks stop laughing. Repeat the action over and over and, like magic, notice what comes into the cave: an owl, a lion, a panther, reindeers, au-rochs, mammoth, ibex, boars, bears, frogs and fishes. Now notice all the pictures of plants and trees, bugs and tools, shoes and socks, toasters and handbags, cups and bowls, spoons and phones, laptops, USBs and the other abstract mass of bibelots. Now, listen to the rocks shriek [...] this is how the eye overwhelmed its own world.*

A sublime mess in the bathroom. Oddly, plastic bath animals with oversized eyes—a fish, a frog, a hippopotamus, a crocodile and so on—are delicately placed amongst the most cosmic dispersal of shit imaginable. What universe did this come from? What extraterrestrial or chrononaut or preternatural animal shat so ferociously here? We don't doubt that this is interplanetary or time traveller shit, not for a second, because the more we clean the worse it becomes. The substance has otherworldly dimensions and does not submit to any known laws. No drain will swallow it. It overwhelms every sponge, wet-wipe, mop and squeegee. You say *Ajax, the strongest of all Achaeans, is driven insane. Mr. Muscle is impotent.* An ecosystemic sign from an intergalactic anus. Brutus? We're not cryptologists, and it's all smeared around now, covering the tiles like a layer of rich chocolate mousse. The fish, frog, hippopotamus, crocodile and so on keep grinning from atop the muck, saying nothing. Do they know the secret of living, happy and ~~loftless~~, in ~~base materialism~~ shit?

Now, you're suddenly jovial and chatty again after your irritable mood and tiring thoughts. The same day? We eat muesli bars in the park and a woman introduces us to her five dogs, all different breeds and sizes, all called Lamarck, all generous with their unsuppressed affection.

In the museum the air conditioning is working and the place is more popular than it has ever been. You say *it's funny that objects have accrued a new and peculiar value: these things are more and less than what they originally were. They are less, you say, because they have been reduced to their part-ness without any promise of whole-ness,*

*and they are more because they are no longer required to explain themselves.*

Groups of 30 or 40 on guided tours move hastily through the space, paying little attention to their guides. We join one of the smaller groups huddled around a younger looking guide with an angular face and oily hair. He stands in front of video projectors placed on the ground that are projecting not images, but light. "...this is the secularisation of the already-secular image which imbues the work, oddly enough, with a spiritual dimension." The guide quotes the artist: "...the projectors show the absence of an image, the flickering internal light of the lens, like someone's eyes when they're daydreaming in the middle of a conversation. This is an old idea about ~~illuminated~~ interiority."

In another room, people line up to take their shoes off before bouncing and flopping over a variety of soft and squishy surfaces. You say *uselessness can disturb and it can comfort. Museums are storage facilities for all the useless things.* Further on, we look at enormous photographs of dust particles that resemble outer space; a rubber carrot protruding from a hole in the wall; a video showing a series of bodies crashing through panes of glass in slow-motion; an indoor plant (Zanzibar gem?) reading *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Pieces of cardboard and other refuse fashioned into ersatz chandeliers hang from the ceiling; in a tank of water, a hermit crab is using a diminutive Japanese Noh mask as its shell. On the ground, a giant pink latex pimple oozes a foamy "puss" and is talking like Phillip Guston; burnished glass chainsaws; an animation of apples and oranges dancing, fighting and kissing on a white draped tablecloth; a collection of volcanic rocks that resem-

ble different types of junk food; a big metal motorised sphere titled *Parabasis Ball*; an empty bookshelf made from reconstituted porn magazines. Large industrial plastic pipes stand vertically and "sing" old communist propaganda songs. If one thing is observable about an artwork, apart from the actual work, it's whether it has overcome something in the process of its making. Near the exit, on our way out, visitors are invited to break long porcelain sinks with medical reflex hammers. The shards are then swept by museum staff into a ~~impluvium~~ ditch. ~~If an overooming makes the work, where is the pleasure?~~ In the making, not the made.

Later, a long walk. Still bright, hot and thick. Flies, mosquitos and other insects make the air seem busy. An ibis buries its bald head into a rubbish bin, pigeons nod to each other along the footpath, a plastic bag is swept up in the wind and looks like a jelly fish. We both hear (but do not speak about) muffled popping sounds. On the ground, spat-out and stepped-on chewing gum look like stones embedded in the concrete. The assertive smell of chloramines. You say, stopping, that *it's a sluggish kind of day*. A sluggish day! Bending forward, you hang your head between your legs and try to touch your toes.

- (1) popular protein-rich venue where extracellular digestion occurred.
- (2) common noun for a handsome fool.
- (3) 'spirit game' whereby a player would hit a ball (the sun) that was tethered to a pole (a deity).
- (4) a widespread, underused BDSM device.
- (5) a large blanket of non-biodegradables located in what was known as the North Pacific Ocean, also referred to in some extant documents as the Pacific Trash Vortex.
- (6) Descartes, the so-called 'father of modern philosophy', asserted that nonhuman animals are bête machines (beast machines), complex but lacking consciousness. Disney, the so called 'father of modern animation', is believed to have contested this assertion.
- (7) see opposite.
- (8) see opposite.
- (9) minor tragedy, reversed.
- (10) unknown chemist.
- (11) believed to be a janitor-artist. Bequeathed a lifetime of work to his bedroom, including a 5,000-page manuscript titled *The History of My Life*; a journal that fastidiously tracked the weather conditions over a 10-year period; and, most significantly, a fantastical 15,145-page illustrated tale, *In the Realms of the Unknown*. The heroines of this epic story are the Vivian Girls—seven sisters and child princesses fighting in a conflict that was inspired, in part, by news reports, and what was known as the American Civil War. The Girls' evil enemies, the Glandelinians, were adults who enslave, gruesomely torture and massacre children. Darger wrote himself into the story as the children's protector. Subject to many interpretations and debate was his depiction of children as transgendered.
- (12) a tourist-friendly replica of the original cave near what was known as Montignac, France. The original cave was renown for its prehistoric paintings, the copy of the original cave was renown for its verisimilitude.

