

Killing Time

From *Tenderly, Tenderly*

I: 2001, 2016

I'll drown my beliefs, he declares.

In the first official release of Radiohead's "True Love Waits", Thom Yorke performs the song with a guitar to a live audience. The last track on the *I Might Be Wrong* live album, this rendition of the song is cloying and almost saccharine.

In an interview, producer Nigel Godrich describes this track as a "shitty" version, and comments that they had failed to record an adequate studio version despite numerous attempts while speaking disparagingly of John Mayer. I remember Thom Yorke also distancing himself away from this work. Yet, there remains a youthful sincerity to this recording, embodied in a naivety of belief and a tone of voice that borders on a desperate plea. I'm not living, Yorke croons. I'm just killing time. At times it is wistful, gentle, and at times it is despairing, broken. While it drips like treacle, it also possesses momentum in its rawness, which sustains it.

In the song's youth, I too am in my youth. I cannot fully understand why one would have to drown their beliefs in the name of true love, but I think of it as a dramatic sacrifice, slightly performative in its utterance, like Hamlet jumping into Ophelia's grave. This may be what draws me to the song at first, this desire to give everything, this willingness to sacrifice it all—it's precious.

The lyric keeps playing in my head. I start to believe that this expresses a type of fatalism. Without love, life becomes emptied of purpose—I'm not living, I'm just killing time.

Perhaps the most famous aspect of Yu Xuanji's biography is how she is alleged to have killed her maid and was executed for the murder. The veracity of this brutal end to the poet's life is suspect, with historical context and contemporary perspective suggesting that this account was borne from

a cultural fear of strong-willed women.

Beyond the basic facts of her life, there is scant little that we know for sure about the life of the Tang dynasty poet, but we do know that she wrote brilliantly. Centuries removed from the end of her life, her poems still sing today. Many of them study lovesickness, forlornness, or the delicate wonder of romance.

“I write you letters across great distances/and never know if they reach you”, she says in *Love Letter to Li Zian* (as translated David Young and Jiann I. Lin). Unable to reconcile the supposed murder at the end of her life with the graceful yearning of her words—what could have rendered this delicate soul capable of such violence?—I trust only the poems. Hundreds of years away, I can only be a reader. The poems speak new to me, and I see her introspection, her strength, and her willingness to love despite the pressures of societal expectation.

Elsewhere and elsewhere, Catullus pens personal, intensely emotional poems, charting his tumultuous path through life, armed with a pure mastery of poetic form that allows him to traverse the complicated territory of naked emotion with captivating verve—sometimes passionate and powerfully moving, sometimes biting and sarcastic, sometimes desperately romantic, and sometimes unflinchingly venomous. Catullus feels deeply, responds cuttingly, as though railing at the absurdity of existence. A writer both cruel and compassionate, he could be said to be overly sensitive, or perhaps his writing was a reasonable response to an unreasonable state of affairs, the work of a man brave and masterful enough to look unblinking at the chaos of life.

In 2021, I reencounter Catullus through Isobel Williams’s startling rendition of the poems. In these translations, his work is revitalised but also transformed. The poems become as bawdy and electrifying as I imagine they must have been in their day, charged with the energy of their composer.

Yet, at first blush, it is the famous opening line of Catullus 5, “Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus” (“Let’s live, Lesbia mine, and love”, as translated by Peter Green), that speaks most

resonantly to my moment. Here, the poem invites its reader to “[o]pen out to life and love with me”. To love is to live, and arguably, the negative is true as well—there may be no living without love.

The classics are hundreds, thousands of years old, but thus plucked out of their time, they continue to speak, finding new life, still metamorphosing, still seeking final meaning. They are messages that defy decay, always searching, always speaking,

immortal.

The painting comes to me in the form of a postcard, a souvenir from D’Orsay that conveys some sort of a well wish, to find love in an increasingly cynical life that renders it nearly impossible to hold onto anything resembling hope again. I have never seen a Munch painting in real life but have frequently lived the fantasy of doing so vicariously through books, prints, and the internet. Now this occurs via the small confines of a postcard, mechanically reproduced.

The subject of *The Kiss* by Edvard Munch is self-evident in its title. A couple locked in an embrace, the moment of a kiss captured in paint. Through his career, Munch would repeatedly explore the motif of lovers kissing, as though seeking some final expression that was perpetually out of his reach. In this painting, the couple lacks facial features, while around them, a swirl of colours that overtakes any possibility of verisimilitude. The two people blend into each other, becoming one perhaps, united in love, yet also losing their individuality completely.

Perhaps they have surrendered to archetype. In this way, it is a painting of contradictions. The energy of the brushstrokes and the swirls of the colours suggest something of the in-between moment, that which is fleeting and impermanent, and this is true to the substance of love. And yet, in becoming like everyone else, in become pure representation, do the lovers not also surrender something of their transience and individuality? Do the lovers not also perform within the trope of romance? We all play love’s familiar games, losing some part of ourselves in exchange for a

chance to participate in eternity.

I insert the postcard into the sleeve of my notebook, like some kind of promise, or perhaps some kind of acceptance. For a trice, I admire the convenience of the form, a singular painting halfway across the globe, now condensed into the superficial space of a postcard.

You can see the cracks of the paint in the details of the image, and soon it will also bear the marks of wear and the yellowing of the paper. A painting no longer a painting, just layers upon layers, always reproducing, always recontextualising, always sinking into time, or perhaps perpetuity.

The song transforms over the years. In the studio version, released 15 years after the live recording and over two decades after its first performance, there is an air of finality to it. After years of searching, this is the version that the restless band has settled on.

You can hear the years in this version, the overbearing weight of time that has worn down Yorke's voice, the shift in tone expressing not so much yearning perhaps, but more acceptance. The balladeer's guitar has been replaced by keyboards, with each note falling with fragile clarity, like glass. It crackles with a type of brittle energy.

I read that in the year before the release of the song, Yorke had separated from his partner of 23 years. I try not to read too much into it. It is foolish to map barebones biographical fact onto a complex artistic work. Nevertheless, I think of the journey that it has taken, this song, this poem, and how it must have constantly continued to mean in different ways. As though finding a truer expression. As though, having lived through the slow gravity of time, it had weathered enough to finally embody a satisfactory meaning for its creators.

To speak over and over of the same thing, to find its transformed and transforming meaning, I wonder if my efforts to make sense of love through thought, writing, and imagination constitute the same thing, devoid of the living, simply killing time.

II: 2012

In cinema, the face is sacred. It is a feature that anchors this trick of the light to our material reality. We search for the face in cinema. It gives us an understanding of our place in the luminous fiction. To see the face is to find kindred meaning. It is a symbolic mirror, that is, it does not reflect actuality, but it reflects something of our world, something real.

The first time I see *Amour*, I go alone to the theatre, with little knowledge of Michael Haneke's work except that I loved *The White Ribbon*. I know him by reputation. I've read some of the literature on his body of work, and I go in wanting to analyse. I am at this point in my life an over-enthusiastic film student, eager to make the most out of every second in the cinema. Every film is a text ready to be interpreted, every image some careful construction or opportunity for some incisive reading. As I step into the cinema, my mind is filled with all the homework I've done on Haneke's body of work. I'm wondering if I will mine this for a viable career. I still fancied myself a potentially successful scholar or film critic—and one could do worse than to become a Haneke expert of some sort. I don't remember the exact circumstances then—if I was working on a particular assignment or simply stocking up on ideas for a future career in film criticism—but I had entered the film with too much critical energy, as if I was spoiling for a fight.

It is the faces that stop my analytical brain. I watch as the visages of Emmanuelle Riva and Jean-Louis Trintignant fill the screen, see every crease, every twitch, every breath. And in an instant, I am no longer student, no longer aspiring critic. The human face when magnified far beyond proportions familiar to everyday space forces a confrontation with filmic reality. It is the first time that cinema makes sense to me beyond the tired discourses of spectacle, psychoanalysis, and narrative.

The luminous illusion of cinema conveys a larger-than-life scale, but it also brings into

focus the softness and ambiguity of reality, all the detail captured on film, the impossible totality of its complex detail, inhabiting the space delineated by the limit of perception—the sensation of passing time. In *Amour*, these shots convey the intimate distance of love.

Cinema is the art of projection. In the briefest of moments, I think I see her face. They hardly share features, but are ineffable overlaps. The film loses definition, becoming more like Munch's painting, a pool of ambiguity, colours stolen from other days, persons who are now merely suggestions of persons.

I read in false celluloid reality my own subjective experience. I make an impossible journey into displaced time. Memories overlapping with image, flowing out of time, crossing into the future. This must be what it is like, I think, this aspirational process, this is what it is to fall in love, a coincidence of hope and wishful thinking, a portal through to years that lie ahead, a river impossibly crossed. A vision: We are happy and I see the two of us in an imagined future, spending meaningless days in joyously meaningless moments. Something miraculous must have happened for this to have even fallen into place. The perfect love story.

And as the deception fades, reality takes hold of my thoughts again. The imaginings settle. The actors embody themselves again. I reacquaint myself with the facts. We are apart, never was, never will be. There are beginnings and suggestions, and yet also the towering sense of impossibility. I have no reason for optimism for the two of us. And still I saw her image in the film, still I projected the fantasy of romance onto my cinema experience, an illusive flight into a nonexistent future.

The theatre seems to darken. I've been abandoned by the world, drifting into dull silence, a pathetic creature addicted to romance.

Amour is a simple story of an elderly couple that is forced to suddenly confront the end of life. One day, the wife, Anne, suffers a stroke, and when surgery goes awry, she is paralysed on the

right side of her body. After a second stroke, dementia overtakes her, and her everyday is seemingly fraught with pain.

Georges, her husband, serves as her caretaker through all this time, stubbornly resisting the pressures of the world and the deteriorating condition of the spouse as things fall rapidly apart. He is tested. He is forced to reconsider what he understands of love. He begins the movie with a sense of humour, with a generous spirit, with an appetite for the whimsical. But when she has a first stroke, a light goes out.

One day, Georges sits next to his bedridden wife and tells her a story of his childhood. By this time, he has already made up his mind, already seen through the Faustian bargain of love. And then he channels the suffocation of the world, smothering his wife with a pillow. True kindness is found in patience and sometimes cruelty. A light goes out.

He buys her flowers for one last time. He lays the flowers down, then pens a letter. He frees a pigeon trapped in the house. He imagines his wife washing the dishes. In his face, we see the soul diminishing. A light goes out.

Is this love, then? A cruel enactment of absurd desire. I quickly become overtaken by cynicism. Perhaps this is the true face of tenderness, just loss and violence and cruel mercy—barely any room for forgiveness or poetry.

Is this the point of *Amour*? That love is a ritual so well-rehearsed that it becomes cruel once its substance has been worn out? Perhaps it is energy, the mana with which we can sustain ourselves, a lie we tell ourselves until it runs out, and all we are left with is this hollowed shape. It was good while it lasted, but why indeed did it have to last?

Love kills time, makes every moment seem eternal, turns the years deathless. Romance and desire become twisted pathways to immortal happiness, form the cruel process by which things so fragile and transient are dragged into an eternity. We read the always into the momentary, turning it into some grotesque, misshapen thing. Monstrous.

When my father suffers a stroke in 2022, the entire family churns to a halt—there is no longer buzzing, no longer plans, no longer humour in our days. We learn quickly that we cannot be ourselves again.

I spend an entire night awake thinking about what must be running through my mother's mind as she watches the man she has married collapse, deteriorate, falter, this man that she has seen from his youth, when he was full of vigour and aspiration, now a shadow of a shadow, now a tortured shape. The memories must come hard and fast, this brutal flood, the relentless crash of torrential time.

Derrida claims that every relationship, every friendship begins with the end. "One must always go before the other." We always begin knowing that things will end. All love ends in death, that is for certain, even if sometimes that death is a metaphorical one when people fall out of love. All love ends in its spectralisation, in the emergence of its ghost, insubstantial and repetitive, devoid of its true meaning. I spend the first nights wondering if this was ever on their minds. *Amour* returns to me, a revenant. If prolonged love ends like it suggests, I wonder if my parents are past that point and now in the throes of undead affection. What good is this show that goes on for too long? The thought brings only tears.

Georges holds her, his expression pleading her to recognise him. In her face, he must see the marks of time. He is searching for their secret, a shared history invisible to people outside of this modest connection. Yet, nothing but a soul emptied of her subjectivity. Here he seems to grasp the true horror of his situation—loving without love, affection displaced by sympathy.

Perhaps we find love just to pass the days, believe these lies just to kill the time, creatures who want nothing more than affection, monsters desperate for undying bliss.

But in between the moments, in the lapses of the seconds, in the briefest of promises, we

live in the hope of finding one another, piercing the practiced veil of romance,
that we may scavenge the light of passing days.

III: 2022

I understand then that there is no way that things could be left alone. I have to take some initiative or simply suffer as it all drifts away. To be frank, it's simple. All I have to do is to say hello. But the years have not been kind to my sense of self. Between us, an unfathomable chasm has emerged, a profound obstacle to true connection or understanding, and I spend hours, days, weeks wracked with pointless anxiety and useless pain.

For a long time, I am preoccupied by the complicated matter of compatibility, the simplistic notion by which people are matched on a dating app. It is a stupid thing to ruminate about. Logically, even scientifically, it makes sense that it should exist. If two people are to figure out if they want to spend their lives together, it would help for them to begin with some type of shared aspiration or common language. Yet, I think that what draws us to each other is otherness.

It is a Goldilocks problem: too similar and things are too plain; too different and there is no basis for attraction, no foundation for a life together. Where does one draw the line? This becomes the impetus for an interrogation of myself and my situation. Were we right for each other? Would we ever be?

The questions advance: Would you put up with my idiosyncrasies, my embarrassments? Would you be interested in my bad memories or my bad dreams? Then, they escalate rapidly: Beyond the simple idea of compatibility, would you know of all the brokenness that I contain within me? Would you understand the courage it would take me just to ask?

I have long been averse to photographs and mirrors. In my image, I read only the ugliness that I have internalised over the years. I see the scars, see the grotesqueness, see the unspoken

truths of my person. Can I bear to tell you my secrets? Can I even ask you to look beyond the surface, look beyond this ugliness that I have cloaked myself in? My insecurities are a pit. Drowning in self-doubt, I struggle to hold onto any semblance of hope.

I realise, then, that I am really asking a simple thing: I wonder if you could see me for who I was. Perhaps I fear the vapidness of romance, fear that I am merely performing the rituals prescribed to me. Will the other see through these rote processes, or will they be able to see me for who I am?

Underneath it all is an overwhelming anxiety of fatedness, entangled with notions of self-worth: I will never be good enough. Similarly, I wonder if we will end up together, if we were “made for each other”. We are told lies about the singularity of love. Much like literature, we often only encounter the narrative post facto, its arc already complete, its promises already fulfilled. In some ways, romance happens in retrospect and thus always resembles destiny—it could not have been any other way. But in truth, it is little more than compromises and consternation. Destiny is a tyrannical force. Destiny—and time.

I can only ask in defiance of fate.

“I write you letters across great distances/and never know if they reach you.”

For now, I can only hope to engineer a chance. Eventually, I reach out. I write to you indirectly, searching for a line in which we can connect, in which I could finally speak as myself.

I don't say very much. Hello. Would you like to go for a movie? A coffee? A show? That's all it is, and yet, somehow, in its plainness, it carries a much more severe gravity. I suppose that in extending even slightly beyond the realm of courtesy, I am brushing up against the walls. I am trying to cross the chasm. It is an expression of hope for a conversation to begin, a suggestion that you could consider the prospect of us, an invitation to “open out to life and love with me”.

It feels like too much. How could I, after all, expect you to want to take even contemplate the prospect of this? Between us is all the fences we have built up, all the burdens that we carry,

all the secrets we struggle to bear. And sometimes, I think, how can it take one person so much just to say just a little more than just hello? And at the end, I fear that what awaits me is silence, and the prospect that “life, stupid life, continues” (Barthes) in spite of it all.

It takes everything I have. Every moment is fraught, pulled taut by anxiety. I prop myself up by imagining fleeting moments of potential happiness, the standard romantic narratives, instants containing within them the shape of forever. There is almost too much to surmount. And yet, in the briefest moment of light, I find it within myself to do so.

In grave despair, I speak it—and hope.

In contemplating his grief after the death of his mother, Barthes compares mourning to love, and suggests that the world—responsibilities, expectations, social life—defies his grief like some cruel machinery. I identify with this. I cannot bear to think that the world goes on during my suffering. There is something singular and permanent about my suffering—or at least, I yearn for there to be.

I become fixated with this analogy, this entanglement between love and death. I wonder what it is about it that I am so drawn to, but I soon realise that the answer is right there in Barthes’s words. Those of us who choose or perhaps suffer from this intensely lived life, one where the littlest emotions explode into feelings sometimes wondrous, sometimes devastating, always too intense to bear, must live as though love is a matter of life and death.

There is no living without love. It pales in comparison. It becomes unbearable and dour. Barthes understood this. What else could compel a man to write so meticulously about his interior world, to elaborate so carefully his “lover’s discourse”?

If not for love, all we have left to do is kill time.

As I wait for the reply, I think of Catullus, passionately composing. I think of Yu Xuanji and her strength and wisdom. I think of Edvard Munch, snared in his melancholia. I do not have their

searing insight, wondrous poetry, or mastery of self. I think of the husband in *Amour* and his delicate everyday joy at the beginning of the film. I think of his desperation at journey's end.

I am in tatters.

When things fall apart, there is a silence that descends upon us, an impenetrable fog. We never speak again. I never find the words with which to explain, to apologise, to ever speak again. This silence is the absence of tenderness, the violence of acknowledgement. The silence is a declaration of things ended before they have begun, of things disallowed.

I keep thinking about the exchanges we had, the back-and-forth of social niceties, and how we had never truly begun any conversation. Perhaps that hurts most of all, having said so much, and yet all of it futile and pointless.

I spend several days chasing after the water under the bridge in my mind. I spend the hours contemplating what went wrong, what I could do differently. I lose my voice. I become difficult to enunciate anything, communicate anything. I spend nights without sleep.

In moments most pathetic, I am besieged by maudlin questions echoing in my own head. I understand this as a form of grief and an expression of my self-loathing. I keep telling myself, for instance, that things could have been different had I been someone else. A little more invested in your interests and aspirations—and a bit less me. It is a ridiculous thought, but one that sends me into the vertigo of self-loathing. I start to tear myself down, start to distance myself from things I consider to be part of my identity.

I feel like a monster, feel as though I have overstepped, caused distress, damaged things. Perhaps it is all I am capable of. Perhaps that's in my very nature.

I want nothing more than to erase myself. Injured and injurious, I start to detest the things that constitute my person. Some nights all my hours writing furiously, producing meaningless, dreadful drivel. In these moments I am not creating but merely destroying. I am trying to wear myself out.

Once I had a vision that in you I would find the life that I had wanted for myself, a way of living that would have simply been killing time. I would have loved to have wasted all my days beside you. And yet instead, life, stupid life, continues.

The clock ticks on.

The machinery of the world continues to whir.

All that's left for me to do is to write

killing time

Perhaps there is no hope of ever understanding, only the monstrosity of the other. No conversation ever begins. In an instant, I realise that I am the monster. The monster is me.

I see the minotaur in the labyrinth

Awaiting a destiny thrust upon him

Something prescribed and mythological, something archetypal and digestible, a creature outside of time, a bit like love, a bit like romance

unable to possess his own substance

I see a painter in a room struggling with emptiness

seeking the first moment of blankness

you are my poem

I am your silence

Still the world churns

I'm writing to compel the time to pass

I'm writing myself into silence