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Orbital

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I feel the melancholy coming. I'm sitting at my desk, eating a Hot-N-Ready and reading a book of Anthony Smirnov's poetry.

Smirnov was a man who went further than me in both joy and despair—someone already halfway down the path to schizophrenia, immersed in metaphor, paradox, seeing connections everywhere. His obsession with geometry and astrophysics was in reality an obsession with the movement of language, life, and paradox. He pitted himself relentlessly against meaning: saw incompletes, unanswered questions everywhere he looked.

In the Divine Comedy, heretics are enwombed in unquenchable fire. This is their everlasting punishment and reward—the self-immolation of a star—resisting the darkness and the nothing. Smirnov is relatively unknown now, his star burned and blazed until he fell—Lucifer comet—and whatever is left of his glory soars in particles through deaf space.

I have a confession. Most of that last bit was straight from Smirnov himself. I doctored up the ideas, tried to make them my own. But I won’t be able to make people understand those words. He’s Anthony Smirnov, after all. And I’m Trace Timothy Cross.
And never the two shall meet. I realize this as I write: Smirnov's words—I can never make them my own. What follows—the ruminations on the Hot-N-Ready pizza—that stuff is mine—the intellectual property of Trace Timothy Cross.

The Hot-N-Ready pizza is actually an example of honest advertising. It is hot, and it is ready. No mention is made of “tasty” or “nutritious,” only “hot” and “ready.” Like microwavable burritos or Top Ramen. Tonight, I eat too much Hot-N-Ready. Nearly the entire pizza. I’m aware of a growing warmth in my stomach, which for a moment I mistake for happiness. Later tonight, when I’m shifting around in my bed, trying to get comfortable, this happiness will prove to be nothing but indigestion. How ironic—happiness becomes sadness without warning.

This morning I say my prayers by sitting up in bed, slumping against the wall, and thinking about a girl I met a month ago. We played racquetball. She was good. Athletic, but not too cocky about it. So, I sit slumped against the wall with my eyes half shut, and I think about this girl for a while. I think about kissing her, but I have to shove that thought out of my brain because I just woke up and I haven’t brushed my teeth, and kissing someone in that state would be a violation of the golden rule. I admit, I have this weird vision of us as a couple. A married couple. It’s not a daydream I entertain very often, but that’s what I’m thinking about. It’s a Sunday afternoon, and we’re lazing around, completely comfortable, not trying too hard to make a good impression, because, you know, we’re married.

For a minute I think I might be in love. Then I realize I’m about as distant from this girl as a satellite—orbiting around her in
space. She's the planet. I'm sucked in by the gravitational pull of love, or something, but I'm also threatening to slip out into the nothing—into the unknowable universe. That's where my body would explode. Blam-splat.

Did you know there are more possible variations of a chess game than atoms in the universe? I heard that once. I believed it. I mean, what's not to believe? Just because it's a huge number doesn't mean it isn't true. But when I told Sami—the girl I'm orbiting around—she said it was impossible. Flat-out-freak-effing-no-way. “Why not?” I said. “Atoms in the universe,” she said. It's a pretty big number. I guess it might not be true.

Anyway, this morning, slumped against the wall, I realize thinking about Sami isn't the way I want to start my day. So I start doing something else—praying, supposedly. But then I'm thinking about the number of chess games in the universe. It might have been a prayer, in the end.

Anthony Smirnov once said melancholy isn't a humour, but an ingredient in goulash which adds zest. I'm not exactly sure what that means, but I can say for a fact that I like goulash.

Tonight I sink into melancholy the way a very old man sinks into a hot bath. That's the kind of mood I'm in. It means I'll do a lot of talking. A lot of meaningless storytelling. And you won't be interested unless you're the kind of person that just likes to listen to stories.

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Yesterday I watched a seventeen minute YouTube video on chess strategy. I suck at chess. But I can’t stop playing it all of a sudden. I’m playing the computer right now, as I write. There are more variations of a chess game than atoms in the universe. Just think about that number. They say there are $10^{78}$ atoms in the universe. The number of possible chess games is $10^{120}$. A much, much larger number. Almost inconceivably larger. I know it seems ridiculous. But how can you say you don’t believe it? Atoms in the universe. That’s not an argument. It’s just an expression of something too large and too overwhelming for your mind to comprehend.

Anthony Smirnov wrote, “Horizons have homes where dwellers have horizons where the night is dispatched like a blessing . . . A blackbird reaches 36.6 mph towards a crane fly and 1,300,026.6 mph towards Andromeda.”

Weird, but also cool, especially the part about the blackbird. The other night I was looking at the stars, and I saw three planets in a line, from one horizon to another. Venus. Jupiter. Mars. I looked at Jupiter through a telescope, and it looked a lot like a smudgy white dot. A dirty little disk. Like a dime in a fountain, but less impressive. You could say it didn’t turn me on. But when I saw those planets in a line—a horizon to horizon panorama right across the Milky Way—I felt awe and vertigo. I thought about what a tender little connection it is that keeps my feet on the ground. I thought I would slip away, fall up, into space. Maybe explode, blam-splat. But then I realize I’m already floating, on this giant rock, Earth.

In my room, I have a map hung upside down. Because in space, there’s no up or down. And it’s sprawling, growing in all directions.
It's a powerful thought, and it brings the melancholy, like the poet Anthony Smirnov when he got old and tired of things. Sank into a hot bath. Let himself into the water, down the drain.

I wonder if he ever fell in love, or if he just orbited around some girl, pushed and pulled by gravity and inertia.

Here's an excerpt from the introduction to Orbital, one of his books on astrophysics:

"I thought of the seeds that have been sown in anger and the seeds that have been sown in envy—Cain's planting which was unaccepted by the Lord—and the frenzied seeds of hatred and fear and selfish lust. I thought about the growth of evil seeds in the soil of the ignorant and impoverished heart. I thought about the lurid harvest moon hovering over centuries of chaos . . .

"The darkness we have become blind to and the cold we have become numb to—these are nothing—nothing. In the beginning there was the matter, and there was the nothing, and the nothing was nothing but the lack of the matter so that in the beginning there was nothing but matter.

"I thought about the bitter apples we have eaten because humans would not sit forever at the threshold of a closed but unlocked door. And the seeds that grew into the trees which bore those bitter apples—those were good seeds, because they grew. The darkness and the cold are nothing. "But my heart is something, because it is bitter, and because it is my heart.

The end is an allusion to Stephen Crane's "In the Desert." A poem I've always loved without understanding why. I think it has to do with being human. I feel afraid to interpret it any further, especially on paper where people can read my thoughts. Anyway,
it's getting late, and I'm starting to get that indigestion from my Hot-N-Ready.

When I wake up in the morning, the melancholy might be gone. So the precise space that I'm in right now—it might not come back. I could go in one of a trillion directions tomorrow. More than a trillion. \(10^{10,000,000,000,000}\). More than that. So let me just write a few more things.

"Paradox is the is in is not—black hole devours supernova, becomes hungrier for more light..." That's Smirnov.

"Dark leaves are moving through space/to lite in vermilion on my grave." Again, Smirnov.

This one, also by Smirnov, is addressed to "The Philosopher," generally recognized to be the long-dead Plato: "A star is still invisible everywhere you choose to look... Your... infallible senses may not be gratified by the speed of light." And later, "The sun is dead."

"I like pizza." That's not Smirnov. That's me.

II.

I need to be square with you here. Anthony Smirnov, as you may have gathered, never existed. All the quotes are made up, too. Maybe you googled his name. You found somebody's Facebook profile, named Anton Smirnov. Me too. I don't know that kid. Anton-Smirnov-the-Facebook-guy exists, but as far as I know, he wasn't a writer or a philosopher or a math genius or any of that, although he could be. I haven't clicked on his profile. I don't want to know who he is or where he's from. He could be my next door neighbor, or he could live across the world. His first name makes me think he's from a Slavic country. Maybe he lives in the States.
or the UK or Canada, but in reality he could be living anywhere. I imagine him as a young guy, but for all I know, he's nearly seventy. In fact, I can't really be sure that he's male. I won't click on his profile. I don't want to know.

Somewhere in Kiev, Anton-Smirnov-the-Facebook-guy shows his latest painting to his girlfriend. She laughs because the painting is absurd. She asks for an explanation. She wants to know why. Anton has nothing to say. This guy—wherever he is—has my respect. His painting is better than any I've seen.

III.

After arguing with Sami for a pretty long time, she relented that there is one circumstance which allows more variations of a chess game than atoms in the universe: the number of chess games is infinite when and only when the two players are willing to engage in an eternal rally of fruitless moves. Knight to C3. Knight to B1. Knight to C3. Knight to B1. Knight to C3. Knight to B1. And so on indefinitely. At any stopping point the game is made new—has never been played before—and so the board game is of unlimited variety.

Something about this disturbs me. The idea of endless agency, endless improvisation, and endless virtuosity only being possible in a never ending series of B1 to C3 and back again, until the game is “out of book”—never before played. There's no novelty there. It seems like a shortcut to eternity—a cheat code.

As I've mentioned earlier, Anthony Smirnov was obsessed with geometry as well as astrophysics. There were certain shapes that received special attention: diamonds, circles, and straight lines.
He found these shapes everywhere, and in everything, like Donald Duck in Mathmagic Land. The diamond he despised, the circle he loved, and the line—the line fascinated him—he perseverated on it—like he was terrified of it and in love with it at the same time. What the ultimate significance of these shapes was to Smirnov, I don't know. It seems all connected, though. The diamond had to do with some beef he had with the formalist school. The circle and the line stuff—it's trippy. There was some profound significance in the fact that in any given line, you can find eternity “contained.” The two ends of the line are constantly approaching the “end point,” but never quite arriving. Because space can be eternally divided. Spaces within spaces. A desert. Nothing ever meets.

Some of the most spectacular rock formations are a result of enormous ice slabs scouring the land. Essays are a bit like that. You never see the ice, but sometimes you can see some of the places it's been. A lot of time has elapsed since I started writing this piece.

The other night Sami and I were sitting under a pretty expansive set of stars. I told her how I felt about her—that I liked being with her. She told me she wasn't on the same level as me, but that if I wanted to kiss her, she'd let me. I pondered this. What a way to start a kiss. Like getting ready to ride a roller coaster—all fun and adrenaline—but right before you hop in your car, a clown walks up and kicks you in the groin.

I kissed her anyway. So she added, “You remember what I said, right?” as if the kiss, like alcohol or a hard hit to the head, had deprived me of short term memory. Ah, yes. The clever clown greets you after the ride as well, his boot steel-toed.
I'm not offended. My pride is wholly uninjured—I'm aware that she hasn't insulted me. After all, I'm orbiting in space somewhere far from her—maybe even slipping into the abyss—into a different universe—one whose atoms haven't been counted yet, because it is utterly unknown to us. Into spaces so deep that my senses fail me.

In this fantasy universe, I meet a girl. I can't imagine what she looks like, and I don't try. But we aren't a likely pair, she and I. For one, she doesn't like the fact that I smoke. But hey, she gambles to relieve the stress. So we break even.

I sit down with her at a chessboard and start telling her about this kid, Trace Timothy Cross.

He's a writer, I say.

What'd he write? She asks.

Nothing consequential. He liked pizza.

She laughs and rolls her eyes because we both know the story is just for fun.