

Jonathan Snider

The repetitive stop-start traffic at the intersection below does nothing to lighten the load that bears down on my eyelids. There's something to be heard right now, something I should write down, something transcendental, something irrelevant, something written by a constipated compulsive in the eighteenth century. But the fuzzy analog tape loop of my thoughts is droning me to sleep and my eyes are locked in a meandering stare, hypnotized by the cancerous mechanical cells pumping through atrophied asphalt streets...pumping...pumping...

I let my eyes shut and can feel gravity's seductive drag on my head. Tires on wet pavement begin to sound like the ocean, or at least the ocean on one of those subliminal relaxation tapes.

I remember. Eight years old, listening to waves breaking on sand, seagulls, and the calls of whales, straining to discern messages buried by far away studio psychologists who inexplicably think highly of me. I tried to sound excited, not repulsed by the idea, "So, there's somebody talking to me, I just can't hear them, and what they say will make me happy?"

"Yes," she said with a warm, sad smile as if she knew better but refused to admit it to either of us, "think of it as encouragement." Her eyes were large, brown, glossy, fixed in eternal welling, just short of spilling over. She was beautiful.

"And I listen to it when I'm asleep?"

"Right."

"Do you like it?"

"It's very relaxing," having a go at sounding hopeful now.

She was still young, but her hair was thinning and streaked with gray, her scalp visible when she ran her fingers through it. She had lines at the corner of her eyes and her fingernails had all been bitten off. "So whaddayu think? Wanna give it a try?"

I'd watched her move her children 800 miles across country, watched her leave for work at 5:30 and come home dead at 7:00 for a few weeks now, watched her decide between telephone bill and electric bill, watched her apply for Food Stamps and Medicaid. I think I understood intuitively the strain on her. I wanted her to be right about the tape and I

wanted her to listen to it every night.

"Yeah, it sounds good," doing what I could to ease her mind.

"Well, I've got to get up early."

"Are you going to listen to one too?"

"Yeah. Goodnight, and don't forget to say your prayers."

But I didn't say a word. Even at eight years old I was a skeptic.

Skeptic. Skepticism. The Refutation of Idealism. Notes I think I'm taking, but I can't be sure. I should open my eyes. Lids part deliberately. My hand moves of its own volition, regurgitating dedication to Newtonian mechanics, Euclidean geometry, mind dependent universe, grammatical structure of thought. Things are still wet and gray out the window. I can feel all endurance leaving me; everything goes hazy as I let the whales sing me to sleep.

Once I'm shaken successfully out of the trance I'm headed down Park Avenue; the wind dashing droplets of water, so small they seem to penetrate pores, against my unprotected skin. Sparse, mud-suffocated grass is stretched thinly across the ground. The concrete is stained with the shapes of long decomposed leaves. A man with broken glasses asks for change. A drunk vomits heavily. Whales and waves still sing over encoded words and the exhaust left by the music makers leaves a sick taste on my tongue.

The tape loops.

*Jonathan Snider stays in Portland, Oregon, USA. He studies creative writing at Portland State University, awaiting the return of his prodigal circadian rhythm.*