

THE NIGHT CAFE

written by Brandon Shimoda | May 24, 2017



A young girl is standing at the window of a café, staring at the people dancing wildly inside. There is music warping through the glass, and the people are drunk. A man in a vest is playing the accordion. A man is walking back and forth with a baguette on his forehead. A woman in a sweater and scarf and a man in a hat are dancing. A woman in a long-sleeve shirt with a sweater around her waist a man in a trench coat and backwards beret are also dancing. Their dancing is contentious; they grapple like wrestlers. Their orbit is slurred. His eyes are opaque. Her breasts are enormous. He grabs her. She pulls away. They knock into the man with the accordion, but the music remains steady. A man in a hunter's cap, leather jacket and rubber boots, also knocks into the man with the accordion, but the music remains steady, as if it is coming not from the man and the accordion, but an omnipotent speaker above the girl's ears out the window. The man in the hunter's cap grabs the man in the trench coat and the woman with the sweater around her waist and pulls them apart. Then he lies down on a bench. A chair is tipped over.

A man is tapping on a table with a wooden cane. A man is beating on a countertop with his hand. A woman is sitting alone at a table.

The man with the baguette on his forehead is wearing an unbuttoned coat, dark pants, and rubber boots. He stares down his mustache to keep the baguette from falling off. He rolls his eyes back. A woman slaps the man on the arm and the baguette falls off. He puts the baguette back on. He holds a bottle over a glass but nothing comes out. When he gets up from the bench and bumps into the accordion player, the baguette falls off again, but the music remains steady.

The young girl watches with a mixture of awe and fear. Her ears are large, her hair and clothes are wet. It is raining.

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*I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity, Van Gogh wrote of his painting, *The Night Café*, which he painted in Arles, France, in September 1888. The chairs in the lower left are pulled out and empty; two face the center of the room. On the table are two bottles and two glasses. The empty*

chairs are still warm. Did the people step out or are they gone for the night?

What is outside *The Night Café* that makes the *terrible passions* so conspicuous, so lurid—luring the unknown and invisible people at this hour beyond the lights and warmth and lethargy and company and safety and *terrible compassion*—on the inside?

I have tried to express the idea that the café is a place where one can ruin oneself, go mad or commit a crime, Van Gogh wrote, but it seems the café is a place where one is safe from having ruined oneself, gone mad, or committed a crime; a place where one can process the damage, go further into it, reflect on it, or turn away, forget or try to forget.

Or revel in their ruin, madness, or crime.

Or atone.

Or be punished.

The *terrible passions* are even more powerful and perverse on the outside, because the outside makes the system by which the *passions* are judged. One is sentenced to hell, for example, for the crime they commit *on the outside*. Van Gogh's *low public house* is a consequence—a relief, at best, at worst, eternal damnation. If there is an understanding that the inside and the outside are the same, that is: the world's insatiable suffering.

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The important thing for me are the refuges, the places people go to hide, said Rainer Werner Fassbinder. They tell me more about the external world, about the elements of fear and danger lurking in external life, than the real external world. I think whatever fears are at work inside people can be recognized from the places they flee to; these places provide the opportunity for such a recognition, do you understand what I'm saying?

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Then there is the damnation of the museum, which is where *The Night Café* exists. Could Van Gogh have known the fate of his low public house? A betrayal of his aspirations inhered within; that is where his audience already existed. Because: there was no museum. It did not exist. Neither did the future. But the anemic, homogenous hell of the museum is where the future was headed—New Haven, Connecticut, circa 1960.

DD and I drove to New Haven from Beacon, New York, via Newtown, Connecticut. We were visiting our friend Youna (a poet), her husband Munro (a painter), and their daughter Musa. A year earlier a 20 year-old boy shot and killed 26 people, including 20 children, at an elementary school in Newtown. The last time I had been in Newtown was in the 1980s.

I knew a boy named Justin. He was my best friend's next-door neighbor in Ridgefield, the town where, twenty minutes southwest of Newtown, then he

moved with his family to a lake on the Housatonic River in Newtown. He was short, skinny, had a nasally voice. Last I heard he had become a Navy SEAL.

When I was young, my family took a canoe down the Housatonic. Shortly after putting in, we were pulled into rapids, and I fell out. I floated downriver away from my family. A fisherman stepped into the river and caught me. The fisherman wrapped me in a wool blanket and drove the four of us back up the river.

Drably colored houses piled against small wooden piers overhanging streamer-like reflections in the river. In Derby, a woman with an overstuffed shopping cart was stealing clothes from a Salvation Army donation box. Brueghel the Elder's *Big Fish*. Black Sabbath's *Born Again* was playing in a used bookstore in a defunct rubber factory in Derby. I carried Tolstoy's *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* through the bookstore's overstuffed rooms. It was so cheap there was no excuse for not buying it, except for a vague intuition it was not the right time.

When people from Connecticut tell me where they are from, I never know where it is, and have to admit that, even though I grew up in Connecticut, I do not know where it is.

The woods are empty. Deer have eaten all the flowers.

Witches lived in the woods behind the house where I grew up, in a small house covered in black tarpaper. Rain was drawn through the tarpaper onto the leaf-covered floor. Porno floated in the rain.

There was another house in the woods—smaller than the witch's, though taller, like an outhouse built in the style of a country church. A boy lived in the house. Or did; he was dead—he died sitting in a chair facing the door. I pushed it open. The boy was sitting with his hands on the knees of his denim overalls, like he died waiting for someone, his skin waxy, his glassy eyes fixed to the door, but I was too late. The silence found us the same.

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There is a mirror. The mirror reflects through parted curtains into the café. The reflection is obscure, and the color portraying the obscurity is green. Is the mirror another doorway? It is very narrow, an upright coffin. Is there a limit to how many times a thing, a space, can be reflected before it resolves into pure color? The green obscurity is the limit. There is blue in the bodies of men, on the upper wall behind the large oval clock, hanging 12:15 a.m. There is blue in the bottle on the table where the people were sitting. There is yellow in the bodies of haloed lights. There is yellow in the hardwood floor and the vase holding the *rose nosegay*. I especially like the combination of Van Gogh's descriptions of the café as having an *atmosphere like a devil's furnace* and an *appearance of Japanese gaiety*, for the evocation of their coexistence.

I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green, Van Gogh wrote (to his brother Theo, September 8, 1888). He wrote

about the *glow of orange* and the *dark yellow* and the *lemon-yellow lamps* and the landlord's white clothes turning *lemon-yellow*—the landlord like a father, the men his flock of orphans—and the *yellow-green* and the *pale sulphur* and the *glow of green* and the *pale luminous green* and the *soft tender Louis XV green of the counter* and the *most alien greens* and the *green billiard table* and *malachite* and the *harsh blue-greens* and the *blue* and the *violet* and the *most alien reds* and the *blood red*. If the night café feels like hell, it is a carnal hell, an intestinal hell. The slumped-over men have been devoured, are being digested.

The woman in the corner near the parted curtains, sitting with a man who looks like a debonair Van Gogh, is the only woman in the café. She is wearing an orange coat and green dress, the inverse of the colors of the room. She is the inverse of the room; she wears the downward gaze of a woman listening to counterfeit promises while contemplating the distance of escape, greater than merely through the curtains, past the green mirror, and out the door. The green of the men, and the lights, hives around which the strokes become supplicating insects, is bilious and untrustworthy. And yet, the coffin-mirror reflects a desperate hope: for peace in the inferno.

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After leaving New Haven, I wrote to Youna, *Would you be able to go, when you have time, to the Yale U. Art Gallery and look at Van Gogh's Night Café, and then, after looking at it, tell me what it is, what you see, what you see in it?*

I envisioned an empty museum and heard the sound of Youna's shoes. I saw daylight on the floor. Then I saw Youna standing in a small shed, staring at a wall. It is after midnight and everyone's asleep. The shed is dark but for one source of light, which I cannot see, but paper lifting slightly from the wall. I hear the sound of Youna awake. She is writing. She is one of the most important poets in my life, but that is to reduce a feeling I cannot put into sense. It is partly that I cannot define what or how Youna *is* that has evolved the imperative mystery of what begins, for me, in the shed where Youna once wrote. That shed is in Missoula, Montana, where Youna once lived, and wrote, as far from New Haven as New Haven is from Arles, though I never actually saw the inside. To stand in that half-illuminated space would have felt like a violation, but of what?

Every time I visit Youna, I make a point of visiting her desk with all the notes and fragments clinging to the wall, and yet I feel that what I am standing before is a reconstruction of what lies within—a mirage, that is, bearing inside the private and illimitable space where Youna actually writes or does not write, because how could it possibly be so exposed? Each poem falls from underneath the intensity with which each fragment is pinned to the altar for one who is not yet dead. Suddenly New Haven had become complicated, at least, and suspect, at worst, in the drama of the painting. A month later Youna wrote back:

Ordinary life.

The waiting-for-it.
(Green)

The time of the light—the halo
around light that tells us
we're in time

Pink flowers in a room
full of men

Stripes on the floor
as on a shirt

Asking me to play

to bathe in the table or

always the or, ocean—
sea

of tables, green squares, blue
squares

The lamps giving notice

A single name
put my hand on your...
put your arm around my...

Its drip of green
Its beyond a room

of yellow, firewood,
trying to get loss

In the room, is it night?
Will I see it when
I close my eyes?

Sawdust on the floor?

Even his expression is green and tells
you: this is no moment but
the end of time

(does time keep on going
after the end of time)

Can you swim into
a table?

No odd numbers.

Beautiful objects

No one has done
the cleaning up

Flesh is a material

Green dark red dark green yellow. Black. Pale green everywhere.
Mustard bright blue dark blue navy. Overall effect of pale green.
Some browns. Whites.

Who he looks at
she hears nothing
what it is of
The men came and then
they were gone
Nowhere else
Hide your face

1888

Le café de nuit
V. van Gogh

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Who are the men in *Le café de nuit*? Van Gogh calls them *night prowlers* and *little sleeping hooligans*. They occupy what Van Gogh considered to be one of the *ugliest pictures* he made. The ugliness was intended, by colors not *locally true*, but to the *ardent temperament* Van Gogh wanted to express—a *place where one can ruin oneself, go mad or commit a crime*. The men in the café most resemble *ruin*. They do not appear criminal or mad. They do not appear debauched. The violence, the *ardent temperament*, the *terrible passions* belong to the café, not the men. The men are worn out, depleted. They have attempted to reach after *terrible passions* and failed. Their temperament is not *ardent* but *melancholic*.

Ordinary life.

The waiting-for-it.

The waiting-for-what?

*... no moment but
the end of time*

That is where the men are: *no moment but / the end of time*.

If it is the end of time, what are they waiting for? Ordinary life, the end of time.

But the end of time is not the same as no time remaining, so there still remains a *terrible* amount of ordinary life.

The men are sharing their suffering insofar as they are in the night café. If they shared more or went further, they would break the pact of the painting and become criminals. The people who got up, who passed before the green mirror, and went outside, are not *of* the night café. They are the only ones

who got out of their chairs, while everyone else sank further into their suffering. Then just as abruptly, back into the night.

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It is not the suffering we inflict on ourselves, wrote Simone Weil, but that which comes to us from outside which is the true remedy.

Even when it is an accomplished fact evil keeps the character of unreality, she wrote; this perhaps explains the simplicity of criminals; everything is simple in dreams. This simplicity corresponds to that of the highest virtue.

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I spent an hour one night in the middle of winter (March 2013) with a painting by Van Gogh: *Ravine*, painted near Saint-Paul asylum in Saint-Rémy, where Van Gogh was a patient from May 1889 through May 1890. *Ravine* was in a room surrounded by Gauguin, Matisse, and Monet. It reminded me of two other fields: Monet's *Poppy Field in a Hollow near Giverny* (1885) and the field of flowers in the first of Kurosawa's *Dreams*:

A young boy sneaks into the woods and spies on a foxes' wedding procession. When the foxes see him, the boy runs home. When he arrives, his mother is waiting. *An angry fox came looking for you*, she tells the boy. *He left this*, she says, pulling a tanto (short blade) knife out of her robe. She tells him that he must cross the field of flowers to beg forgiveness for spying on the foxes. If they reject his apology, he must kill himself. Monet's poppies, meanwhile, are growing in the shape of a grave-like path in a hollow, but the path goes nowhere. The hollow ends in a slope up to a row of dark trees limning the sky. Kurosawa's flowers are growing in abundant ranks to the edge of the woods. The woods are abbreviated at the base of fogged mountains. Both fields force a decision: keep going or turn back. To keep going is to enter the void, but the sky above the poppy field and a rainbow over the field of flowers suggest the fate, or inherent impossibility, of turning back.

Van Gogh's ravine is an impenetrable tangle, with swaths and tufts of grass growing along ledges and rocks. It expresses the psyche of the fields of flowers; its impenetrability is the nature of being caught between phases. Or trapped in motion, abandoned to the passions of possibility. The flowers in Van Gogh's ravine are naked and strong. Tufts of fire stare at each other across the mint-green divide, more monkish than the monk-like figures camouflaged on the path.

Van Gogh's colors, even when least assuming, are wet; his colors immediately differentiated his paintings from the colors of Gauguin, Matisse, and Monet. Their colors were stressed and fading, whereas Van Gogh's colors were not only vibrant, but *still happening*.

A conservator, while studying an x-ray of *Ravine* discovered, beneath the paint, *another painting*. The painting beneath the painting corresponded to a drawing Van Gogh sent to Theo in July 1889, titled *Wild Vegetation*. The corresponding painting was painted a month before *Ravine*. Then Van Gogh ran

out of canvases—Theo was late on replenishing his stock—so he painted over it.

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*Un hombre pasa con un pan al hombro
¿Voy a escribir, despu és, sobre mi doble?*

*(A man walks by with a loaf of bread on his shoulder.
I'm going to write, after that, about my double?)*

César Vallejo (translation by Clayton Eshleman)

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The difficulty in being alive and anywhere is that I am also not and somewhere else. The museum was closing. I did not want to leave. If the painting was still being painted, what would I miss?

It was snowing. I walked through the city with wet hair, like the young girl at the window of the wild dancers. The city was soundless and empty, but stifled, like a grave to which all of the people had danced. My shoes soaked through.

During the day, New England cities are colorless and ambivalent. At night, the ambivalence, the feeling of being nowhere, resolves into a more dire and mystical feeling, something akin to electric abandonment, as if the center of the world had moved on, leaving what surrounds it, the margins, the marginal, to unmonitored wildness, freedom.

At the center of the vortex formed by the restlessness of desire, conjoined but separating, grows an animal property. The animal property is the quickening of a secondary, prenatal self—a body inside a body. The body inside the body grows feverishly beyond the limit of the primary body until the primary body has been surpassed. Like an undeveloped fetus that forms the voice that opens and closes your dreams, you are suddenly at the mercy of your own evil shadow. *Suddenly*, you feel, but your life has always been contingent upon the shadow.

It is a tragedy that the souls inhabiting the night café are not given their respectable place in the hour- and limitlessness outside, and it is a tragedy that these souls are consigned to asylum in a place that mocks and indicts them, and it is a perversion of that tragedy that the people who were just there, the interlopers, are able to move so freely. The *night prowlers*, the *sleeping hooligans*—what will become of them? What the people want—and they are desperate—is purification, to no longer be made of battles between hybridized, irreconcilable selves, but become at last their own soul without body: transcending-asylum in eternal transition.

Visiting a painting in a museum, then leaving the painting: the imagination begins to perform all manner of tortures in order to keep up with the reality

of what is going on behind the walls. But there is no assurance that the imagination will not outperform the unendurable tortures on the inside, and that the moment the lights come on, everyone will turn and look at you, and pull out a chair.

Everyone sees you—revealed in the light, inebriated, exhausted—painting them beyond who they are, and more terribly, who you are. The green will brighten upon the mirror, the yellow lights will go natural, the red walls will stripe momentarily. They will suck you to the rose. And you will be there with them inside the café—you will be one of them, but which one? The more present, the more manifold and spectacular making, the more impossibly great is the distance.

NOTES: This essay was originally published in *Modern Pizza* (issue two, “Red Rooms”), co-created and edited by Munro Galloway and James Miller. For more information, or the issue itself, write to PO Box 1184, Redlands, CA 92373. The opening paragraphs describe a scene in Béla Tarr’s *Sátántangó* (1994). *The Night Café* is hanging in the Yale University Art Gallery (1111 Chapel Street, New Haven, CT). The quotation by Rainer Werner Fassbinder is from “I’ve changed along with the characters in my films,” an interview published in *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2, May 1992. Youna Kwak’s writings and translations include a book on intimacy, autobiography, and Roland Barthes (in-progress), a translation of Véronique Bizot’s *Les Jardiniers* (Lavender Ink, 2017), and can be read in *Boston Review*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The Conversant*, *Harriet* (The Poetry Foundation), *Muthafucka*, *The Offing*, among other places. *Ravine* is hanging in the Museum of Fine Arts (465 Huntington Ave, Boston, MA). The two lines by César Vallejo are from an untitled poem in *Poemas Humanos* (English translation by Clayton Eshleman).

Featured image: Still from *Sátántangó* Dir. Béla Tarr, 1994