

Lyrics

“He must have a gift for this, or else a touch of madness”—Aristotle, *Poetics*

I.

1. The river water is cold in the winter time;
Steep banks of clay rise up on either side;
The river below is rarely seen or heard:
It runs on the periphery of the city.
The street above is built across a bridge,
It extends along the expanse of empty forest.

While wandering at night along the river,
I chance to see some tarp caught on a tree:
It strikes me as a figure dressed in white,
Tattered, convulsing—rhythmless in the wind—
It chills me to the core; I hurry home;
I sleep, and dream of a ghost in the river bed.

He lives and wallows in the freezing mud,
He is blind, and has no power in his legs;
He attempts to scale the sides, and slides back down
Invariably—his nails are broken and bloodied
From where he strikes and scratches the unseen stones,
And he fills the night air with tormented wailing,
Sometimes frenzied, sometimes from despair.

There is a little neighborhood nearby,
And among the adults there is an unspoken consensus:
Nothing, nothing is said, nor acknowledgment made—
The children do not go out past eleven;
They stay in bed, and in their darkened rooms,
They nurse their half-formed fears in silent dread.

And in this dream, I ask an older man,
“Why is he blind, why grovel in the mud?”
“He is blind because he clawed and tore his eyes.”
“How did this wretched creature come to be?”

“He drowned, he drowned—yet he has always lived there.”

2. Another family meal in stony silence:
A bitter reluctance to speak has been the rule;
Emotion is mocked, or at the least ignored,
And every request is tallied and begrudged.
These periods of long and silent tension
Are punctuated by sudden bouts of shouting,
Where nothing is resolved: new wounds are opened,
Old wounds reopened; harbored resentment deepens,
The combatants embarrassed and ashamed of their anger,
Which in itself is grounds for silent hatred.
There is no laughter here, but if there is,
It is from alcohol, or something trivial.
I only want distraction from this place:
I numb my worried mind with entertainment;
I read, but only then with difficulty.
In spite of this, I harbor no resentment;
It is my family, and that has value:
Value if only in the name of it—
And what is more, I know of nothing else.
I only want stability and love—
That honestly is all I want in the world—
And so I labor to be unobtrusive,
For fear of doing wrong and being punished
(In truth, such punishment is down to mood,
And I myself do little right or wrong);
I chastise my desires and hide from myself,
As anything wanted here is something too much;
Only with shame do I say what I feel,
Because sincerity is a strange taboo:
And I hope that in this way I can be loved—
But it is fruitless; this is not provided.

At the age of eight, while lying on the floor,
I stared up at the chandelier for hours;
I thought and I thought, and finally I swore,
“I will not have a child of my own—
It is too cruel—they should not know this life.”

3. For many years we owned a plot of land,

And there we intended to build a bigger house:
There were obstacles, but the goal was attainable;
Adjacent land was purchased; money was saved;
Bank loans and gifts were taken to that end
(These are the flimsy struts of fantasy),
And after many years construction began.
French doors, two courtyards and three stories tall,
The roof tops peaked with copper ornaments—
My father had a love of Italy,
And so the walls were finished with yellow stucco.

The pleasure of that place was in the construction,
Anticipation, and its novelty;
The house had been their purpose for so long,
And here it was obtained—another object.

Now time has passed: my only thought is of
The folly of those yellow stucco walls,
The thought that they alone would be enough.
Our rugs, antiques, the handmade dining set,
Paintings—dissatisfaction, the absence of joy.
They went on making and spending aimlessly—
The only purpose of their education,
Their lives directed towards that single end—
With unacknowledged sorrow and frustration.

The house went to my mother—as did I—
It was sold to another somewhat wealthy doctor;
He was imprisoned, falsely accused by his wife.
I went there recently, it now stands empty—
A large house unmaintained soon comes to ruin—
At night the surrounding forest seems to loom,
It has a certain predatory stance.

4. That is the household of my childhood.
I am a quiet boy and somewhat shy,
Am circumspect, and not at all outgoing;
I tend to be alone, and like to think;
I pace, and content myself with inner fancy.
I would not say this is not tolerated;
Rather, it is not understood or preferred:
The loudest here are always most advantaged,

No matter right or wrong—assertion is essence.
I do not know this; in my youth I assume
That others share my instincts; as for me,
I cannot say a thing with confidence
Unless I am absolutely sure it is right.
I am fair-minded, and so I also assume
What others say with confidence is right.
So in this way, when someone claims to be better,
I quietly and trustingly accede.
Now, anyone experienced with life
Will know that, in our age, the greatest part
Of humanity will seize upon and exploit
An advantage, no matter how small, when they first see it—
They are like courtiers when the king's abroad:
Conniving, scheming, feeling out a weakness,
Lusting for one more modicum of status;
Their value is all art and court-learned vice—
That is what our “fellow man” is like.
With what I am, how could I therefore escape
Ill-treatment for their momentary pleasure?
I attach myself to those who mock me most,
Believing that they are naturally correct;
I debase myself; my dignity is stripped;
I wither into nothing in my mind.
As I grow older, I begin to see
How I was mocked and cheated in that time;
I see that humanity is a writhing pit,
Frightening and uncontrollable, a mass
Of exploitative lust; I begin to withdraw.

We praise equality and competition—
So many artists downcast and dejected—
So many years—have we not understood?
This is the meaning of equal competition:
One group, one *type* wins out, and all the rest
Are broken in their minds and in their souls.

5. I cannot stand to be among my peers.
They are too loud and lively, optimistic;
They take an easy pleasure in their youth,
They blossom with the natural world in spring:
They socialize and dance, and they make love.

There is a certain glow about our youth:
Nothing they do is wrong; they seem complete.
And why? They have their lives prepared before them,
A course laid out that was lived by their own parents,
A culture, and a time for every affect;
They have their songs, their institutions, habits—
And none of them their own, but thrust upon them—
They live and achieve in line with expectation.
This does not stop them; on the contrary,
They flourish as they should with this constraint.
They have their spring and spotless consciences—
So let them be; we will leave them there for a moment.

I, meanwhile, languish on my own:
The winter is an honest season to me;
The spring, new life and sunlight in decay.
Their course of life fills me with discontent;
I cannot articulate it, but I resist:
The dreary days of regularity
Put me in the blackest of moods; I drag my feet,
And go about the day mechanically.
My mind refuses to accept those habits;
I hardly sleep: the night is time to myself,
A kind of momentary solitude.
There are sacred things that I must keep in my heart—
The things I piously keep in solemn silence.
It is like when the well-born boy from Genoa
Was captured by the Ottoman Turk: when pressed,
He would not move his finger, the sign of conversion—
That proud and haughty Catholic nobleman—
He would have been a pasha had he stirred.
He was put to death, but even then they found
His little defiant fist would not unclench—
That is how I live and refuse the world.
I halt the rhythmic impulse in my body,
And pleasure in my mind: this life itself
Is one with that culture; I refuse it all.
I feel as though my body is not my own.
Their way of life is like a taint to me,
That would pollute the essence of my soul—
This is the way I think; I cannot help it.
I do not want to live that life, and yet
I have no way to live a life of my own:

I am too proud to try, too proud to lose;
I refuse to win, and think of that as glory.
I take this petulance to lengths absurd—
I do not yield; I do not ask for help.
The years are idle; I am stagnant and idle.

6. I saw a woman once in a corner shop,
She was waiting with two liters of cheap wine;
It was a routine thing to do, and yet
She was like a convict standing to be sentenced:
Timid with false composure, her nervous gaze
Was darting all around, save towards the till;
The cashier was like a judge who guessed her soul,
Having tried cases such as hers for years;
She was guilty before a hidden God and jury,
Guilty before her inner sense and thought.
She pays, and suddenly her features change:
She is now full of delight and gratitude:
Her sentence was commuted, she is relieved—
I think she could have shaken the cashier's hand,
Who was and always had been quite indifferent.

I know that woman's feeling all too well,
As well as the feeling of passing through a restaurant,
And glancing at the bottles behind the bar
Involuntarily; to conjure up their contents
Perhaps, while, faster than thought or calculation,
An inner plan is silently assembling,
A different course for a day free of concern.

There is a certain sweet anticipation
Before the first drink of the afternoon,
As I return, am walking down the hall;
My pace is quick, though lacking urgency;
I finger the keys that rattle in my pocket;
I find my room; I settle in and pour.
There is no hurry in my ritual—
I am dry and fresh; a week has passed
Since I last drank—I doubt I will be let down.
The first sip is nothing but a kind of promise—
I am secure, and the process has begun—
Not until I finish my first drink

Do my sharp nerves begin to dull and relax;
The soothing numbness drapes across my chest,
And giddy pleasure builds inside my mind:
I am fully at my leisure—I feel well.
I linger over another drink or two,
And then I saunter out to find my friends.

What is in a drink? It is a space
A little pocket within one's hated milieu—
Man's social reality is a constraint:
It bends the neck and breaks the gentle heart.
The drinker may disregard this world for a time;
It gives way to his inner fantasy—
His emotion has full scope, and he speaks freely—
And all of this with very little effort—
All alcohol is like kingship distilled into liquid.
And as for me, the people and the places—
Their latent convictions and their expectations,
The culture contained in a glance and in group movement—
That ordinarily burn and press my mind,
I pass through with a certain blithe indifference:
My nerves detach themselves from their surroundings.

I find my friends: we talk, we laugh, we smoke;
Others come and go, we listen to music,
We drink and drink. I always have my fill,
On some nights I slip into oblivion.

I wake, and I want to cling onto that feeling—
Three mild beers, and I am pleasantly dizzy.
Some mornings such as this, a strange thing happens:
My soul seems to shake free from all its weight—
This outrageous act suspends reality—
And I live in a storm, a coursing stream of feeling:
Benevolence and tenderness, acceptance,
Love and compassion flow forth from my heart;
I see the world, and it is all in place—
It is understood; it is perfect, and I attain
A state of complete contentment; I am at ease.
With a smiling sigh, I go to my own bed—
With aching head and shaking hand I rise.

I spit bile in the toilet basin;

My stomach churns—I have no appetite,
I do not perceive the darkness with right eyes:
I see figures and strange geometry in the dark.
Sometimes I drift into a restless, convulsive sleep;
I jolt and start; my emotions are all dampened.
There is morbidity in alcohol;
Little good can come of it for me.
Yet at times, I welcome this very quality:
I have no use for life or for the world—
I seek the destruction in a moment's pleasure.

Three days and nights of drinking—my aimless pursuit—
I am not gaining anything at all—
I started; I simply have no wish to stop.
I wake; clear liquor sits beside my bed:
It is six or seven, and I pour a drink.
The morning lights assume a different meaning—
It seems to heighten this unreality:
The brick wall outside is constant; I am not.
I am not maudlin, am not muddy-headed—
I have achieved that rare lucidity,
Amplified, as it were, by drunkenness:
I am saturated, my feelings are sharp and clear:
I sit and contemplate the streaming light,
And tears form unexpectedly in my eyes:
I still have self-concern; I still care for myself.

7. There is an empty space inside my heart,
A wound no other ever will repair:
I feel I need companionship and comfort,
While refusing sympathy and all concern:
I am embittered towards my faultless peers;
I do not want their sympathy or their love.
Why is it that I tear my heart and mind?
I was denied a very precious thing,
A high ideal, impossible to grasp;
An expectation no one can fulfill,
And so I dash all else onto the floor:
Even the promise of a middling joy,
Attainable, and well within my power,
Appropriate to my own stage of life,
The momentary happiness of youth—

This I deny with anger and contempt.
It is the golden heavens or nothing at all.
And sex, again, is separate from love;
To me, the two have no discourse at all,
So that, to me, all youthful interaction
Is the vulgar realm of sex and not of love.
(Am I understood? These are the conditions—
The parameters—of my own morbid state.)
On weekends, I am alone, unoccupied—
I talk a walk, buy food, do this and that,
And yet I find myself with idle time;
I clean often; ample light streams in,
Lending my room a sense of sterility.
I think of virtue, and I sit and study,
I imagine the stern pride of self-denial—
The flashing solemn eye of the sage's judgement,
Self-mastered, hard from years of solitude—
This takes up some two hours of my time;
I become distracted; my thoughts are wondering;
Something stirs and agitates my mind:
The amorphous, boiling sphere of want inside
With tendrils breaking out and grasping nerves,
Infusing chance thoughts with animal desire—
I loathe it, and I try to push it down;
Ignore it, but it cannot be ignored;
Halt it, but it comes back with twofold force:
It is like when the Czar for decades tried to stop
The currents of thought that were embraced in Europe:
With punishment and censorship he ruled,
And clung with all his strength to ancient rights,
And yet he slowly had to trade them off,
Maintaining only the façade of old;
At last, that tormented, pent-up will is loosed,
Breaks free, and bursts forth with irresistible violence:
That is how I grapple with my nature.
I am humiliated and ashamed—
I do not have the decades of patience to outwait
The writhing force that is natural to the young—
These things I feel are outside of what I accept;
I do not want to indulge them in healthy ways:
My convictions are hollow, and I hate myself—
I want to punish myself with greater outrage—
I want to soil my own dignity—

I want to cling to social isolation—
And so I visit prostitutes at night.

It is, in fact, a simple thing to do:
I call and mention her ad, set up a time—
This part is a routine, like phoning a clinic—
The only thing now is to find her flat,
Which sometime is the city's width away.
Anticipation builds as I near the spot;
Thoughts race, my stomach and my nerves are hot,
And mingled with guilty corner-sense in my mind,
And yet this process gives me a certain pleasure.
I often arrive too early with time to spare—
The thirty minutes feel like several hours—
I pace, and my anxious mind forms expectations,
Images of the girl and our business there;
I do not know what is beyond her door.
The complex is typically low-rent, secluded—
Anonymous doors, old halls, its squalid look—
Such places now give me a sharp erotic thrill—
It is time; I go to her room, my stomach drops;
Perhaps she smiles; money changes hands;
I strip and shower; she has on lingerie;
We kiss, and to her bed, where we make love.

I rarely ever go to the same girl twice;
I note my enjoyment, and the girl's performance,
And yet I hunger after novelty:
I go through the fair-skinned beauties of Eastern Europe.

I have just one exception. There is a girl,
Her dark hair is dyed black, she has blue eyes,
Very deep blue eyes; she often smiles,
And has a friendly, unassuming presence;
She is not at all cynical, and is even kind—
It is like making love to an older sister.
Now, from the time I started with this habit,
I always entertained a certain fantasy:
That one of these girls, despite her occupation,
Despite the men she sees, that come and go,
Might be arrested by a glance, a smile,
That, of a sudden, I might charm her heart;
I do not look for love, but passing warmth;

A moment of true and unfeigned tenderness,
Before the time is up and we must part—
I keep this fantasy to no avail.
But with her, I sense a genuine affection—
She compliments and fusses over me;
We talk and laugh in easy conversation.
I am not stupid, and I know full well
That she must do this with every man that pays;
Perhaps she acts, but, if so, with real emotion;
At any rate, her acting has fooled me,
Or I know I am fooled, yet we indulge in *something*.
The act itself is rough and impersonal.
We lie down; now I hold her in my arms,
We kiss, and do this for what seems like hours.
I kiss her lip and then her open mouth;
I taste and smell the cigarettes on her breath—
This is mingled with the scent of spearmint mouthwash;
I find this taste and smell both sweet and pleasant:
I have come to associate it with her.
I cannot describe the skin of a girl in her twenties;
It has a quality beyond my words.
A particular sort of softness, a special warmth:
I kiss her neck and trace her tattooed back;
The bedroom light against the ink and skin
Seems to heighten sense and touch; it is surreal.
And so time slows, and it seems to expand for me;
I think we reach a speechless understanding.
Our hour has elapsed; she seems to ignore it.
Perhaps she wants me to stay, and yet I know
Were I to ask, she could not let me do this;
She would rebuff me with a gentle laugh.
I start to leave; she leads me down the stairs,
At the door, she stops me with one last long kiss;
She pulls me in and whispers in my ear—
Her voice has hit my spine—she turns me out.
And now I am out in the night and the winter air:
My first impression is of a lonely lamppost,
Alone, completely and totally alone.

There is a bus that runs straight to my street;
I decide to walk instead; it is not far.
I swear I will not make the call again,
Yet I know that some day I will break that oath.

I return to my room and lie down on my couch:
I want to fill my heart with someone's presence;
I want to love her, but this is not love.
My soul is not in center with myself—
I feel my mind is slipping away from me.

8. Something beckons to me from a distance—
I have felt it pressing for some time.
All my affairs point to a single end:
I strain without a vision of success,
In a field I know I have no business in—
I fear the work that truly calls to me—
Unconsciously I know that I must fail,
That I will be forced to face what I cannot bear.
And yet some morbid part of me is relieved:
To have a destination is reassuring;
I sense some end to the tension that has plagued me.
I am committed to this course of mine;
Wherever it may lead, I will not change it,
Although I feel a fatal destiny.
At any rate, I press on as I do.

I go to the opera to see *Don Giovanni*:
With giddy excitement, I await the end—
I want to hear those terrible strains of music
That make me quiver with a tragic feeling
Which even Aeschylus cannot produce.
But in this production there is an innovation:
At the point of catastrophe, Don Giovanni
By some device puts Leporello forth:
He goes down with the Stone Guest in his stead.
I am aghast; this is a travesty,
Surely directed towards the common sort
(In vain!); the soul-shaking music is undercut.
I take offence beyond my sense of reason:
I know it is ridiculous, and yet
I inwardly insist it is an affront,
Not just to art, but to me personally.

And this is how it has been with me for months:
I am enraged by even the smallest slight;

I ignore what good is done for me and dwell
On every incidence of social harm.
Something inside prevents all open trust:
I refuse to forget; my mind prevents forgetting.
It is like when the emperor Tiberius
Sat in his sullen palace on Capri,
While brooding on sedition and faithless friends:
He thought himself alone in all the world,
Embattled by all men as enemies,
And by his very acts he made it so—
He basked in sunshine, nursing speechless fury—
That is how I take my injuries,
Real or perceived, and tally them inside.
Added to this is my lack of satisfaction:
Night and day I work to no clear end,
Resentful of the status that I have,
Wanting more without the means to reach it,
Laboring against my inclinations.
I am unhappy, yet I am in balance;
I am accustomed to this kind of life—
The line, however, is tight, and I am brittle.

But then a certain incident occurs,
Too strange and unnatural for me to detail;
I am shocked—I spend a night in mortal fear:
There is a strut inside each of our minds,
Or else a wall that props up all our actions:
Our disregard for death and injury,
That lets us live in health and confidence—
We live because we do not think of death.
This night, that thing inside is shaken loose,
And not one part of it, but the total structure:
The incident stalks me in my memory,
Behind my mind—I cannot bear to look.
And now my solitude is predatory;
The night cuts into me without relenting;
All rest and ease have flown from me completely.
The stress and strain of my unhappy life,
Which stretched my inner fortitude too thin,
Now breaks forth in the day and overwhelms me:
To my peers, I feign aloofness and my pride:
They live as usual—why should they not?
I struggle, meanwhile, minute after minute:

It is like the injured swimmer in a race,
Who tries to go on with a punctured lung:
The others are thinking only of the goal,
Straining with all their might for a faster pace—
The straggler lifts and gasps with every stroke,
And every stroke is a hollow victory—
He spits and froths as blood streams from his mouth—
That is how I live from day to day.
What beckoned now draws nearer to my door:
I glimpsed it in my lonely fitful hours,
Walking in muddy fields in the clouded winter—
Its shadow is now falling on my threshold;
I think it is still and patient; I think it smiles.

One day as I am working at my desk,
I feel an emptiness well up inside,
Something that I have felt before, but today
It is complete, and I cannot ignore it now;
I feel as though I may now lose myself.
I leap up from my desk in sudden panic,
And set out, briskly walking from my door,
Hoping that physical strain will jar my mind,
In an attempt to will me back to health.
It is late afternoon; the sky is grey and bleak.
I walk and try to summon up my will:
I promise to endure, to make a way,
But now that emptiness has grown inside:
I suffer now and know that I will suffer.
I pass through a neighborhood, and as I do,
A woman in a car draws close to me;
She thinks that I intend to rob a home.

Night falls; I come to an unfamiliar place:
The gates of a park that loom ahead of me.
The park is black and desolate as hell;
It is wide and flat without a single light—
Only the houses around illuminate,
But they are very distant from the street.
A cat darts by; I feel a chill, but now
I am compelled to enter through the gates.
Dread overwhelms me; not a single soul
Is anywhere in sight, yet I fear this most:
Two people in such a place is a different context,

Where we revert to a basic, savage state;
At the center of the park, there is total darkness.

I have slipped into the underside of life,
And I am now a foreigner to all,
To social places; all is foreign to me.
I want to cling to someone, anything,
And yet this very vulnerability
Fills me with fear and hatred of all others.
Animal desperation begins to fill me,
But there is no shelter for a broken soul:
Huddle inside, and press yourself to your knees,
But the world will march on without regarding you—
It violates the safety of the helpless,
And so I fight on as I die inside.

The night is deep; I walk along the highway;
Now physical exhaustion starts to set in,
And mingles with my inner desperation.
The city, which is cold in the best of times,
Is a monolith of anonymity,
Of faceless horror: drab building stare at me,
And shadows play on the darkened alley-ways,
Which line the tenements and the dingy shops.
If high-rises are a canopy, these alleys
Are the jungle floor—their darkness implies a force:
The machination of ten million interests—
Ten million things that predate on the weak—
Ten million things concealed now in the night.
The highway, at least, is elevated and lit;
I am paralyzed with dread when the sidewalk stops,
When I must descend down stairs onto the street;
I hasten to the next raised section of sidewalk:
In the same way, my mind resists the things I feel;
It tries to say above the currents of fear,
As though I stand to lose my total person:
I cling to repetitious thoughts and mantras,
Or else I think of nothing but my footsteps,
One step at a time; I harbor superstitions,
And everywhere ignore the portents of doom.
I arrive at my half-intended destination:
A train stop, black and gated-off for the night.
I said a final goodbye once at this place;

It signifies nothing. I feel another chill.

I return to my room; a full ten hours have passed;
My feet and legs are sore, but I find no rest.
The familiar place and things bring me no comfort.
I go out once again, I want to cross the river—
I swore I would, it is inevitable:
On the outskirts of the city, there is no light,
Where the street is running along the expanse of forest——
The clock has struck that dreaded fore-felt hour:
Madness is my promised dinner-guest.

9. I have a fantasy—it is worth sharing:
A crisis breaks all faith in former structure—
The somnambulist has fallen down the stairs—
Economies collapse and nations shake;
No politics proceed in an ordered way.
Our institutions exist in name alone—
One election comes, and is then overturned;
The successor is in office for five months,
And then is killed; the title “president”
Is nothing more than a pretext to use force.
Whole segments of the military revolt,
Each following their senior officers,
And nowhere can the tattered government
Project its authority or sanctioned will.
Now factions vie for dominance and power,
Carving their spheres of control from region to region;
Some charismatic warlords fight for themselves,
While others band together for survival—
But of these factions, the most successful are
Those built upon some ideology:
Quickly these consume the other groups,
So that some two or maybe three remain—
In short, brute strength alone determines right,
And the value of life is how well one can kill.

I am an officer in one such group,
A middle-leader over a division—
Unscrupulous efficiency and fervor
Commended me to the party leaders,
And I received my command in two short years.

Our corps has taken special oaths in blood,
In a secret rite with a sacrificial victim:
We swore to keep away from the pleasures of life—
No women, alcohol, or garnished food—
Water and rations only, a few hours' sleep—
Until the party has no need of us.
We swore we died that day when we took the oath—
And so we devote ourselves to the business of death.

Soldiers talk, as often they will do—
They have their camaraderie and cheerfulness,
Their necessary raillery and banter,
To distract themselves from the constant threat of death.
Moreover, soldiers in a civil war
Have one hundred reasons for taking up their rifles:
The common soldier speaks of a wife, a sweetheart,
Dead or alive, or children, a home, their land;
Their enemies or petty politics,
Their desire for fortune, status, victory;
Some only want the lawlessness of war.
These are not professionals in a foreign place,
Driven by patriotism or decent pay;
They are normal citizens and countrymen,
Compelled by circumstance into the war;
They laugh together and they cry alone—
Or else their tears pool up inside their hearts,
Unwittingly, inside their dampened hearts—
They keep a vision of their former lives
Inside their memories, and call this precious—
Most do not know the first line of party doctrine.

We, on the other hand, are silent as graves,
Even in battle keeping our reserve,
And speaking only to convey an order.
Not even the court of Sulieyman the Great
Was as silent as a camp of our party leaders;
Our presence unnerves the most hardened of our soldiers.
If the common soldiery are common men,
Going where time may lead them, wanting ease,
Adopting public custom without thought,
And unconcerned with who or what may rule them
So long as they have intervals of pleasure—
Then who seeks out our severe society?

They were discontents and intellectuals,
Writers, polemicists (if such still exist),
Directionless intelligence and wit;
They were students drifting through the academy,
And many of them hold (or held) degrees:
Here is a bachelor in philosophy,
Here a student of literature, of history;
Here is a frowning seminarian:
He lost his faith, but not his will to believe.
They deal in words, words, words, and not perception—
They struggle on a field above our science—
They were at once proud and somehow diffident;
They were frustrated by a certain absence,
Unsatisfied with life as empty pleasure.
They are lanky, thin, and pale-skinned with clear eyes,
Eyes timid once and formerly uncertain,
That now possess the fire of conviction.
Above all, they have this one thing among them in common,
That Nature wrought them from their very births
With the need to understand the world and act
Only with some idea before them—
When this organizing principle is found,
There is nothing they would not sacrifice to it.
Their thoughts and minds are so firm that discomfort,
That want of food or sleep, or physical strain,
The lives of others and death itself all pale
Compared to the pleasure of holding their ideals.
In short, they can—they must—devote themselves
Body and soul to some compelling thought,
And the stronger the thought, the more compelling it is.

Our combat uniforms, of course, are black,
Embellished with symbols and macabre devices
Utilitarian, though they mark our status—
But for dress occasions, they are black and gold:
Coats and tassels, polished riding boots,
Sabers and plumes on ornamental helmets,
Epaulettes with cords, and warlike medals—
A splendor defying the scarcity of war,
And disproportionate to any need.
The party leadership is clever; they know
There is pleasure even in the pride of displeasure:
For all of the austerity of our corps,

There is not a man among us who has no pride.
Such uniforms are worn with affected indifference,
But examine an officer and you will see
That he stands a little taller and puffs himself out—
What is the meaning of a uniform?
It means to turn away from one's desires,
To turn away from the need to make decisions,
From the need to struggle for life or for oneself—
For many, this is a very welcome thing.
It means to have no pride in one's own acts,
It means to place it all in the strength of the group,
To have pride only as a pride conferred,
To be the living embodiment of a movement,
And, when the time comes, to be left by the movement.

Perhaps you scoff at the wearing of uniforms,
Supposing man to have the moral end
Of leaving these behind and finding himself—
But do you, dear reader, not wear one yourself?
Have you not considered just how necessary
The uniform is to the functioning of the world?
How many would have no life and waste away
Were it not for the uniforms they don for some purpose?
And even if that purpose is now pleasure,
Is it not pleasure as defined by custom?
Does this not have an attending uniform?
Perhaps we should not question uniforms,
But the ends to which the uniform is worn.

But to the substance of this fantasy:
I am ordered to take a city of importance,
And after two sharp months of fighting we do:
I then am charged with administering the city,
Procuring conscripts, materiel and the like.
As commanders, we have a degree of autonomy,
The militant's hierarchy being loose;
We mostly follow general directives,
And as such, I have total control of the city—
Among my priorities is to find and root out
The ideological enemies of the party.
(The party's doctrine, mind you, is unimportant
To the *human* essence of this idle fiction.)
Most are disposed of with summary execution,

But I want to hold a public show of force:
I gather the prominent among their number,
And set them before a military tribunal.
The outcome is, of course, already determined,
But I broadcast it and compel a crowd to attend;
I want to overawe them into submission.
A stage is erected in front of the city hall:
The accused are bound on their knees and arranged in a line.
I sit in a kind of elevated stand,
Presiding over the trial from the rear;
A junior officer in grey fatigues—
He is not one of our selected corps—
Stands in the front of the stage addressing the crowd:
He goes through the cases, reading out the charges;
He inserts derisive comments about their doctrine,
And does not refer to them as human beings.
His voice is sharp and shrill like that of a man
Invested with authority and force,
And given free reign to play-act the part of power—
I look on with blank attentiveness.
After two hours of reading, he stops abruptly,
Demanding their chosen leader to answer the charges;
In flustered bewilderment, his reply is poor—
This elicits laughter from our soldiers attending;
The crowd stands stock still in their silent terror.
With gravity, I extend my hand out forward;
An orderly gives me a sheaf of documents.
With solemn deliberation, I sign the papers,
And pass them forward to the trial's speaker.
He reads them, pauses, stares out at the crowd;
Tense silence—they know his word, and yet they fear it—
He is stone: yet suddenly he booms out "Guilty!"
The soldier-bailiff who cradles his rifle grins:
His eyes are mocking; he smokes a cigarette—
He saw his friend get shot five days before—
For him, this trial is cruelty and entertainment.

And now I rise to carry out the sentence;
I straighten my uniform with ceremony.
My cold blue eyes glint from under an officer's cap;
My coat is pressed, my decorations shine—
The pitiless glimmer of an iron skull.
On my hands, black leather gloves (the gloves are essential);

A belted holster with a shoulder band.
I now unbutton this holster at my side
With exaggerated military precision,
And draw a small steel automatic pistol.
I work the slide one-quarter of the way
And check the chamber; it comes to with a clack:
The harsh metallic sound reverberates
Across the space of anticipatory dread.

A woman condemned breaks into a quiet sob.
The first man nearest me on the line seems dazed:
In these moments he lives as though he will live on.
He is unaware of his place—he is somewhere else—
He sees the details of a distant tree,
And thinks of his childhood—thinks of his yard—

The first report of the trigger pulled is sharp,
And now there is a collective inaudible gasp;
Two steps, a pause, another shot is fired—
I establish a precise and consistent rhythm.
One man breaks down and begins to plead for his life;
Another's pathetic prayer from under his breath
In panic rises now and is spoken aloud—
It consists of babbled half-right formulas
Remembered from youth; he is an atheist,
And clings to empty words and empty pleas.
Most close their eyes, or else they clinch them shut,
And quietly imagine oblivion,
Or imagine it, and try to bury those thoughts.
The bullet caliber is small, and yet
A fine mist of blood sprays from the exit wounds;
Pieces of skull now litter the front of the stage.
And as for me, my face shows no emotion,
Save for a subtle scowl of contempt,
Elicited by outbursts of their feeling.
The pistol holds eight rounds; there are fourteen to die;
After the eighth, I halt for another clip;
I load this in; the pause falls in with my rhythm,
But the prisoners take this as a reprieve—
The ninth shot stirs them with fresh agitation.
The fourteenth woman has already died in a way;
She is pale, and quakes and trembles before she falls.
When this is done, I notice some blood on the pistol;

I produce a handkerchief and wipe the front,
Frowning disdainfully; I nod to the speaker.
“These men have died like enemies to our cause;
Let it be known that all who oppose us,” etc.

This is an optimistic age and time:
The sense is that, with every passing year,
We move towards a long-awaited future
Of equal harmony and brotherhood,
While overcoming our every obstacle,
Abolishing each day the vestiges
Of a social order contrived, of false arrangements
Set up by malice beyond our understanding.
The “End of History” has been proclaimed—
Why do I therefore have this fantasy?
It is not at all in keeping with our time,
With the blithe and happy faces of our youths
Who live and accept such values uncritically—
This fantasy was taken from my soul,
Put down directly, with no embellishment,
No contrivance, and with very little art—
If most are happy in society,
Content with the goals inherited from time,
Then it must be madness that stirs my mind and pen.
If so, then why are there so many mad?
If madness alone, would I not be peculiar?
If what we strive for truly is “The Good,”
Then why are there so many discontents?
In truth, this fantasy’s parent was frustration,
And so I will attempt to explain our time,
And, in so doing, the source of this frustration:

To break the social order breaks constraint;
In the absence of purpose, only desire remains,
So that all human beings only live to take—
No love, society or tenderness
Exists in such a world of bare-faced greed—
And even when we join ourselves together,
There is no natural union of trust or affection.
A kind of abstract love for strangers is preached,
While common values are prohibited—
A common society is prohibited—
So that we are all strangers, competitors—

Tolerance for others, but not for ourselves.

I *tried* to be just, to be content with mine,
To set aside my needs, to accommodate—
I assumed that fairness would receive fair treatment—
And I was left with nothing. Added to this,
I was mocked for taking nothing for myself.
I was left a broken and an empty person,
My feelings prohibited and disregarded,
I was left behind by the clever at exploiting:
Very well; it is as it must be—
I have learned that complaint may make one feel important,
But it does not accomplish what one wants or needs—
Though I ask: what is it in their greed that deserves its right?
What right do they have to demand their rights,
When they do not respect the rights of others?
All humans necessarily take, it is true,
But society is founded on setting aside,
And a *stable* society is built on trust,
But ours is not a trusting society.

And here is one point further: equality
Is called out like a prayer to an unknown god;
No sacrifice to it is ever spared,
Its altar mounting on dead heaps of years,
The wasted time in which it was not law,
This promise of earthly pleasure and paradise;
The word is sacrosanct, and its adherents
Gather around it like the priests of old,
Wielding before them the sacrificial knives—
Sharp, harsh things for innocents on god's pretext—
Killing with words their victims and their critics.
Or else it is like the wound on an animal
Which agitates and drives it mad with pain:
Delirious in the summer grass where gnats
And flies are drawn around the morbid scent,
It licks the decaying sore, yet this attention
Causes more pain—and yet it thinks this pain
Is inflicted by the malice of outside forces—
It runs about in frenzied rabid anger—
That is how it drives the public's thought.
And yet for everyone who speaks so boldly,
Equality is not well understood,

Even among those who benefit from it—
Those combative people have two arguments,
Which they alternate and use as suits their needs:
The first, that equality is equal footing,
Which evokes a place of harmony and fairness,
But is used to curtail the natural strength of the able—
The able are made gloomy, they want pity;
They praise their betters as the proper thing,
Receiving nothing from them in return,
No recognition of their sacrifice:
They limp around like downcast crippled dogs—
This creates a sphere within society
In which the advocates alone may thrive.
The second, praising what they want by nature,
Advancing this at every chance in public,
Ordering things to service their desires.
This second argument has made a culture
Which openly prefers the advocates,
Conferring an unassailable first place in public—
They do not even try to hide this fact,
Although it contradicts equality.
When questioned on this apparent discrepancy
Between what they have made and what they argue,
They claim that it is only fair for others
To hold first place in public for a while,
Which doctrine denies a fundamental state
Of equality concealed by human custom.

Two centuries of war and revolution,
And this is what our writers have established:
An aristocracy of the disadvantaged.
Do we need two more centuries of strife
To learn that Life strives for its best conditions?
That “diversity” is also diverse needs
That consume and compete, and vie for supremacy?
“Equality” as social doctrine reveals
That equality in nature is not found.

To summarize our time and my frustration
In a word: If pleasure is our purpose now,
If desire sets our aims and all our interests,
If we deny eternal forms of Good,
Which we serve by constraining ourselves and what we want,

If there is not a blessed life in heaven,
Then why should I serve this equality,
And sacrifice to it all that I am,
Loving idea more than my own nature,
Accepting a lower place in society,
If equality is the advantage of others?
This is the contradiction of our time.

10. The mind recoils from every thought and feeling:
So long accustomed to pushing these away,
And now it follows this logic to the extreme
So that no memory or new sensation
Is any time at all admissible.
I do not, for instance, use a scented soap,
As this would be a novelty and a pleasure—
Something, in other words, to be avoided.
There is a threshold deep inside of us—
It is the boundary-line of sanity—
If this is crossed, life takes on a different meaning—
There is hardly any sadness, fear or anger;
One's every feeling turns to grinding pain:
Resistance is pain, experience is pain;
The day is pain, but the night brings some relief—
To wait for it is emptiness and pain.
To live is as bleak and colorless as concrete,
And it is pain—in short, it is not pleasant.

What is madness? For everyone insane
There must be a different definition of it—
An external perspective is perhaps instructive:
It is, in brief, the inability
To comprehend or otherwise to function
Within society, by reason of
An acquired or inherent infirmity
Of the mind. To put this in another way,
If one is otherwise an able person—
I mean a capable adult and not a child—
But cannot provide for themselves because of their thoughts,
That person is, in social terms, insane.
It is an involuntary dependency,
A second sort of nonage and childhood—
For idiots and visionaries alike,

If they cannot stand on their own, they are all the same
In the eyes of society in every age.

For me, I do not have the luxury
Of abandoning myself to childishness;
I keep the outer semblance of sanity,
And make decisions by thought and calculation,
Not feeling, as everything I do feels wrong—
This dependency and inner pain, meanwhile,
Gnaws me, distorting all I see and do:
I want to fall into trustworthy arms,
I want some comfort and a place to heal,
I want my peace, security, and rest,
But none of this can be provided to me.
It is made clear that I am interrupting
Their lives, imposing on them without need,
And they want to be free of troublesome obligation.
I am a tenant and a stranger to them,
My value consisting in what I spend and earn;
In so many words, I am now called a failure.
They want to give me over to a doctor,
Which is just to say that they cannot provide support—
Not the slightest sign of warmth or commiseration,
Which is really the only thing I want or need—
They do not even ask me what is wrong.
I grasp the futility of wanting now
What I never received from them at the beginning.
Very well; I sell my car for rent,
And take my recovery in my own hands—
My only concern in life is now survival.

My unit is spacious, sterile, neutral-colored;
It has two bedrooms and a little hall:
Alone, I occupy one of the rooms,
But I do not ever enter the other one—
It is strange, but I have the inescapable feeling
That something terrible transpired there;
I leave that door shut and never open it.
One day I collapse with a pillow on the ground
And beg for one half-hour's worth of rest—
I have not fully slept for some three days.
I look out the window: the sky is clouded-grey,
The complex is fifty years old, and shows its age;

The parking lot is a patchwork of aging asphalt—
Today it has a certain quality:
It is still and empty, and seems to have no meaning—
If I were to step outside and go somewhere,
I would accomplish nothing, think of nothing—
I begin to drift off to a welcome sleep—
I start and think of the lock for the third time:
I check, and, as before, it is firmly closed;
I lie back down, but now am wide awake.
I laugh aloud with grim and bitter thoughts.
I want to die; I am repulsed by death:
I live, and feel I am condemned to life.

11. Description fails me; I will paint with words
The things that I envision in my sickness.
I do not think that you should look for meaning—
These are not “symbols,” allegories, or thoughts—
They are images derived from inner feeling,
Formed by the logic of emotion alone:

Dark skies, an expansive run-down public toilet
The multi-colored tiles are darkened with age,
And with the dust, debris, and hardened grime—
Two men are fighting with their hands, unarmed:
They are intent with hot and angered breath;
They scarcely bother guarding or keeping their distance—
Neither of these two are fighting here to win,
Nor do they even fight to preserve themselves—
They only fight with the desire to kill.
They are no longer recognizable,
They are so swollen, bloodied, their noses bent—
Bones in their hands and faces bruise and break;
They fight on without feeling any pain.
They stand, exchanging frenzied heavy blows
They close and grapple, pushing, kicking, gouging;
They tear flesh with their hands and with their teeth,
And now they fall and wrestle without art:
They roll on the ground, attacking limbs and neck—
One stands to stomp and punch the other’s head—
He slips on the filth, receiving a kick in the face
That breaks his broken nose and dazes him—
They struggle like animals that are being eaten,

First one and then the other playing the prey—
At last one overpowers the other man:
He is larger and stronger than his conquered opponent—
He lands a series of blows that breaks the other:
When the other was standing, he was hit with a ready mind,
But now he goes limp and covers his head with his hands,
Taking the blows and hoping to be undamaged—
In vain: the blows come harder and hit him harder—
He falls to the floor and is kicked relentlessly—
His legs are pried away and his inside pummeled
His organs rupture, and he spits out blood—
His skull is fractured; he loses consciousness.
The victor is glaring down, possessed with hatred;
Driven by thoughtless anger, he searches the room,
Retrieves a length of pipe found in the corner,
And returns to the fallen man on the filthy floor:
He strikes his head and strikes his head again—
After the fourth blow, his skull begins to collapse—
The dying man convulses violently;
His attacker continues to strike and strike again,
Laughing hysterically as he lands the blows,
Turning the other's skull and brains to pulp.

An ocean of dunes stretched a continent across;
Heat blasted calm and storms of whipping sand,
Where the night brings cool and lifeless solitude:
This ocean is dry, save here at this oasis,
Where presently a migrant clan is stopping,
Mid-way into their hot and weary crossing.
There is the patriarch, his wives, their children,
Two wide-eyed boys, each in their early twenties,
Their younger sister, some little boys and girls—
Three camels, laden down with household goods;
Exotic pelts and spice from distant lands,
Good foreign wine to cover their expenses.

But the gem-stone set on the ring of the father's hand
Does nothing to match the azure water,
Where shade is given by the gentle palms.
They go to drink and they let their camels drink,
And this brief repose has brought new life to them.
The children, who before were dragging along,
Now run and play their games with squealing laughter;

In hushed tones, the women talk among themselves,
But now some cord is struck, and they giggle aloud;
The father tends to something with his goods,
While the eldest son is helping attentively;
He listens to and indulges the speaking man.
They pace around the outside of this space,
Attending to this and that, and checking things over,
When the father glances up and spots a figure.
He does not believe his eyes when he first sees it,
But the figure does not dissipate with time:
It continues to approach, and draws in nearer.
The son now sees his father's glaring eyes;
He follows his stare and sees the figure himself—
A chill runs down his back at the sudden sight.

It approaches nearer and nearer, and does not turn;
The father prepares himself to meet the unknown—
He draws himself up and steps forth in front of his son.
It comes within view—the father is amazed:
Long black and tangled locks and sun-tanned skin,
So much that he has turned a dark deep brown,
He is not tall, but he is thin and wiry,
And the sinew in his lanky limbs shows out—
Clothed only in a cloth around his waist,
And a tattered robe that drapes across one shoulder.
The father is suddenly seized with piety,
And respect for one who could survive like this:
He goes to offer up his cup to him,
A gesture of his manly charity—
But now as the father comes close he sees the face:
His mouth stretched out in a demonic grin,
The strange and rhythmic panting as he walks.
Too late does he see the knife within the folds—
The father is stabbed five times, then ten before
He can even reach for a weapon of his own;
The nearest son has started to react,
But hesitates from the shock of the sudden murder—
He is lost; the man he mirrored has now fallen.
The stranger slashes his face then stabs his heart
As he reels back from his wounded punctured eye;
The second son is running to the combat,
But arrived, has no idea what to do;
He draws his curved knife with his pudgy hand,

Then freezes still—the stranger’s nerves are like branches
That are coiled back and whip forth with full force,
So odd and lightning-quick are all his movements:
He is at his throat and face with animal fury.
The women, meanwhile, had noticed the stranger coming,
And had huddled around, awaiting the father’s judgement—
And now they are all wailing as they throw
What rocks and solid goods are ready to hand;
They will not part from the weeping little children,
And are ready to die while fighting tooth and nail.
The stranger yelps and cries aloud with joy
As he runs to the group completely unabated.
The women are all slaughtered where they stand,
Though they seem to fight with more-than-human strength;
One clutches the stranger’s leg as she chokes on blood.
He butchers all the children as they cling
To the miserable bodies of the dying women.
The stranger now begins to arrange their corpses
Around the water according to some design,
When he notices a girl who is running away:
It is the sister—she broke and fled from the slaughter
While she was overwhelmed with mortal panic;
But now she slows and weeps with all her soul
For the dying family that she has left,
And for the fact that she is lost in the waste.
The stranger catches up to her from behind,
And overpowers her with little effort:
He plants a knee between her shoulder blades—
The wild bronze skin and his pointed bone—
And, pulling her head back, he quickly cuts her throat.
He drags her through the sand as she spits and gurgles,
And plants her, dying, face-down in the mud.
He gazes at his work in ecstasy,
And plunges the knife into his abdomen,
Working the edge down towards his boney waist,
Shrieking and panting, laughing as he does,
Uncoiling lengths of bowels in his savage hands.
He collapses, and they mingle in the mud—
He drowns in the bloodied water of the desert.
The cool night brings its lifeless solitude.

It is a deep and subterranean place,
A large, rectangular chamber underground,

That is like an ancient cistern or a cellar:
Its aging bricks are a spotted earthy brown,
And colonnades run down the length of it,
Supporting a somewhat high and vaulted ceiling.
Flickering torches are the source of light;
They line the walls of the long side of the chamber,
And cast the columns' shadows on the center.
There is a figure at the far end of the room,
Which gives an aura of unnatural dread;
Here, even the highest hope would surely die.
It is like when the wooden floor-boards of a house
Are pulled away to reveal black rot and corruption,
Where insects creep around decaying matter;
The discoverer reels back with sudden horror—
That is the sense one has when entering.
And yet if we approach this figure nearer,
We see its emaciated limbs are nailed
To the splintered wood of an upright cross.
In every respect it seems to be a human,
Save for what has been done to this thing's face:
Its skin has been peeled back in four long strips,
Which are affixed to its head by metal pins—
There are no recognizable features there,
Save for the twisted gaping hole of its mouth,
And the disfigured orbs sunk in its skull.
It seems to be still and dead, but now it convulses—
Blood spurts from its indistinct anatomy—
Its empty eyes stare out with no comprehension.
It stands down here, perhaps for centuries:
The end of life, a mockery of man.

12. Recovery is slow, and it takes effort,
But after two long years I begin to improve:
I start to see the light in life again;
Music regains its melody for me;
I take long walks in the sun as I once did;
And my surroundings which once seemed so hostile
Have acquired a pleasant familiarity.
But one thing continues to weigh down on my mind,
Preventing me from living as I am:
It is the way of life we have developed,
The habits we impose on our young people.

To live here only does me further harm—
I aimlessly nurture rage at nothing clear—
I decide I will seek myself in foreign places,
And go into a voluntary exile.
I want to return when there is harmony,
When every element is recognized.
And so with sorrow I turn away from my country,
But not from the future that I wish to see.

Afterword

Lyrics is a deeply personal piece. It is also a piece that is full of bitterness, anger and pain. Looking back, I believe that I wrote it in 2020 as a way to get to grips with a period of darkness and isolation in my life. For a long time, I deliberated whether or not I even wanted to release it at all. When I first finished it in 2020, I was hesitant to release it even though it was undoubtedly my best work at that point. I did not want to make a debut as an author who writes grim, black poetry. In fact, according to my original plan, *Lyrics I*—the present work—was only meant to be the first part of a larger work; *Lyrics II* I planned to be bright, cheerful and possibly full of love poetry in order to strike an impressive contrast with part I. But a sudden, dramatic reversal of my circumstances has not come about, and *Lyrics II* remains unwritten.

After much vacillation back and forth on the issue—I even posted *Lyrics* once before removing it not long after—I have decided to leave it posted. It is full of darkness, and it is a darkness that I want to leave behind now that I am older. However, it is also a product of my creativity, and certainly not a bad one at that (at least in my estimation). It is a piece of me. I feel that to suppress *Lyrics* would be to suppress myself, and if I want to persist as a writer, I have to learn to have faith in my creative output.

There is something else that influenced my decision. Although I may improve as a poet and as a prose writer from a technical standpoint, the emotional circumstances under which this piece was written are basically irreplicable (at any rate, I hope never to experience anything like them again). I went to a very, very dark extremity of experience, and *Lyrics* is like the piece of unholy knowledge that I brought back with me.

To give an example of what I mean, I was living in Beijing when I wrote *Lyrics*. Poetry—or most writing, for that matter—is like acting in silence: in order to write about being bitter and isolated in the years prior to 2020, I had to live it again, making myself angry and withdrawn. I got into a fight with my friend—who was the only person in Beijing I knew at that point—and we had a bad falling out. He left the cubicle in the office where we both worked, and I felt completely cut off from humanity: alone in a foreign place where I didn't speak the

language. I collected myself for a moment, and wrote most of the “desert scene” in section 11, which I feel is the best—and the most grotesque—poetry in the piece. The animal desperation I felt elevated my poetry beyond my capabilities. The experience was horrifying, but it was art; I never want to feel like that again.

What is *Lyrics* About?

Lyrics is about a breakdown I experienced while studying at film school in London to become a director. Before leaving for London, during my senior year of college I met a girl with whom I fell deeply in love. The relationship didn't work out; there never was a relationship. I went to London feeling rejected, angry and confused. I was determined to become a successful director, but it quickly became clear to me that film was not my calling. At the same time, I was still deeply in love with the girl, and I felt that I couldn't live without her. I wanted to become successful and win her over, but at the same time I knew this was impossible; I strained and I strained until I finally collapsed. I returned home to find that my family was mostly unsympathetic. In 2020 I moved to Beijing briefly for work. By then I had recovered somewhat, but I still felt that I had that trauma inside of me, and that I needed to give it some expression.

Lyrics actually had its genesis in 2019. I remember the exact moment when it happened: I was crossing the living room of my apartment at night to go out when I stopped to consider how I could express how I felt in visual terms. During my breakdown in 2017, I actually saw a piece of blue tarp clung to the branches of a tree next to a river. From that memory, I fashioned the image of the tarp and the ghost in the riverbed as a poetic description of how I felt—this image stayed with me until 2020 when I felt moved to write.

Lyrics is roughly broken into two halves. The first half features scenes from my childhood and teenage years. I think these sections are weaker overall, but the experiences they describe formed the basis of my shy, withdrawn social-phobic personality. My childhood was very unhappy, and there is no doubt in my mind that my breakdown in my 20s was made much worse by what I experienced as a boy. My dissatisfaction with politics and culture probably also have their root in my childhood.

The second half details the inner experience of my breakdown and the events following it. I wanted to use gruesome fantasies and surreal imagery to convey what I felt. I was influenced by Dostoyevsky and Yukio Mishima, both of whom I had recently read. I was also influenced by death metal bands such as Cannibal Corpse and Bloodbath, as well as classic Black Sabbath tracks. I remember getting drunk and listening to “Electric Funeral” on repeat—I had originally planned to write a nihilistic section about nuclear weapons, but I felt that I was completely at the end of my tether after finishing section 11.

Section 9

Section 9 details an apocalyptic vision of America and an inhuman scene of trial and execution. This section gave me the most pause as I deliberated whether or not to post *Lyrics*. It gave me pause because it could be interpreted as an attempt to incite political violence, especially since it is joined with a critique of left-wing ideology.

I want to make clear that *this is absolutely not the case*. I do *not* want to see political violence in America, and I do *not* want to see anyone harmed for their political or ideological convictions. Remember that this was written from the perspective of a confused, angry and delirious young man who has momentarily lost faith in humanity. It is a Mishima-esque poetic *persona* that speaks. While my critique of the left is in earnest, under no circumstances do I want to see political violence done in our society.

Section 9 should be taken as a warning. In writing it, I drew upon the historical experience of the 20th century—the civil wars in Russia and in Spain, for instance—to depict how ideological conflict dehumanizes and destroys combatants on both sides. I wanted to show how blind, ruthless devotion to an ideological conviction is like the death of one's own humanity. There is no need to repeat the atrocities of the 20th century for the sake of the false and terrible gods of ideology.

Today we still see headlines suggesting that a civil war is possible. It is in our “collective unconscious,” so to speak; section 9 is something unmistakably born out of our time. I have already made my criticism of the left clear, but the right must make concessions as well in order for us to form a functioning society. My warning is this: if we do not find some grounds for reconciliation, the horrors of civil war await us all.

As for me, I am ready to leave my trauma behind me and turn my attention away from politics for a while.