

Everything Initiates



Katie Stewart

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN



Untitled, Tom Hsu, 2017

Everything initiates

In my hotel hallway in Boulder there's a framed photograph of Bob Dylan's face above an antique table and a vase of flowers. The handwritten caption reads "All I can do is be me, whoever that is." The claim to a centering self prompts an anxious jolt, the passing recognition that the "me" is a mass of reactions. The self is not the kind of thing that just declares itself. It's what likes to swim, what gets dreamy at the glimpse of a scene on the side of the road, what prefers strawberry jam on its toast.

Surprise

Surfaces take on traction in the ordinary generation of phenomena (as in "When did tattooing your head become a thing?"). Sociality is an info-botic query into what others know. "How'd you get into *that*?" "What *is* that?" The mode of surprise is not only because of the conspiracies and occluded zones but because whatever has popped up is so specific to an angle, or a mood, or a competency and being "in" it, even in passing, is a commitment to the activation of the details of some world you didn't even know existed.

Under Pressure

We live in an “as if”, “so what” world, outsiders to the mechanics of how things work. Sociality is under pressure. Composites of money and impacted bodies are the taught tendons of the affective, energetic, material world. Ecologies of living compel manic labors of keeping up with what’s at hand but most of us are also bowled over by the torque of things. The punishing realism of so-called “best practices” gestures, cynically, at the vague notion of an upright centering. Noumena now touch matter as a matter of course. There may be the cohesion of a milieu or a habit entrained, for better or worse.

Weight of the World

We hope for and fear the weight of the world. We’re selfie-obsessed or hoarding. Or we’re all about mindfulness achieved and hardened against the situations of the others. Things provoke us; we’re barely bearing up. We rage up from an unsteady place to an overwhelm in a hundredth of a second. Or we labor at athletic yoga that takes us all the way down every day. Too many get a shit storm of a life and then have to find ways to get to the food bank on top of everything else. Unmarked white-collar criminals push through the sinking bodies; their own crazy is now their only, lonely undertow.



Untitled, Tom Hsu, 2017

Preparations

Evan Osnos's piece in *The New Yorker*, "Survival of the Richest: Why Some of America's Wealthiest People are Prepping for Disaster", announced that fifty percent of Silicon Valley billionaires are now survivalists (January 30, 2017, p 37-45). Hedge-fund managers in New York are into it too. The top one percent trade in probabilities. They know the chances that nothing breaks in the next fifty years in a network of nested risk factors: the food supply depends on GPS, which depends on the internet, which requires the grid, towers, underground and undersea cables, software. Ricocheting between techno-optimism and the apocalypse that pings off grotesque inequality, ecological disaster, bad connections and

rogue elements, they think of everything. They stockpile gold, Bitcoin, cryptocurrency, and real estate. Lasik surgery frees them of the need for contact lenses or glasses in the event of a crash. A militia would have to be formed; they see themselves as leaders of a community. Like the moneyless Preppers, whose apartments are survivalist storage

units and who dream of buying land on the gulf coast and a railroad car to live in, they have motorcycles to move through the traffic jams of fleeing cities. The preparations - food canning, real estate shopping, shooting practice - are ways of breathing, as in "take a breath."

It's pragmatic for them to invest eleven percent of their hyper income on land in New Zealand (first world, self-sufficient, and far, far away from the rest) or a three-million-dollar luxury condo in a nuclear-hardened 1960s underground missile silo in the desert tricked out with highest end fixtures, manufactured natural lighting and air, and LED "windows" offering real time views of the prairie above or Central Park. In the event of a disaster a swat-team armored tank will pick up any owner within a four-hundred-mile radius. There's a sniper roost built into the top of the silo and floors of public space below: a spa, kitchens, meeting rooms, a gym, a track. Solar panels, tilapia farms, elaborate filter systems, and hydroponic vegetables expand the self-sufficiency of the underground living. They've planned to avoid depression (more lights) and prevent cliques (rotate chores).



Untitled, Tom Hsu, 2017

The Women

The women in customer service keep asking me, “512, is that an *area* code? From Texas? Oh, I feel sorry for people who have to live there, what is it now: tornadoes, floods, what’s the *temperature*?” As New Englanders, they also believe in social services, so *not* Texas. But what’s happening here is a national conversation lite about living right in the middle: not too much of this, not too little, not too far or too close. It’s as if everyone’s joined the local booster club, and, for a minute, excess and the sad are somewhere else. A deliberate collective fiction that leans into a joking, but also squares on a straight-up loyalty to the good that’s in between.

George’s daughter, Mary, plops herself down in a chair at the kitchen table for a little visit because she thinks Peg and I are a trip. She says she has to get back to work but she’s getting a beer. She’s working for a criminal defense attorney doing his shit work until she gets clients of her own. Some asshole beat the crap out of his girlfriend and Mary’s come up with an argument that the 911 call is inadmissible because the statement “he choked me” is not an *imminent* threat but a *past* threat. She hates the work but she’s also getting a charge out of the game. Part of me wishes I wasn’t here, but on the other hand I’ve never been inside a lawyer’s head before. Peg, though, has had enough of all *this*. She responds to whatever people say with “Ya, I get *that*” but she says it just a split second before they’ve finished their thought because she knows where it’s going. She’s signaling a kind recognition, a being on their side, but also a wise-ass, Buddhist, disavowal booby trap that says let it go, zip it up, move on, that’s enough of that.

I was in the state liquor store stocking up on tax-free social liquor for the summer. I invented a game for my then 12-year-old, asking her to carry a great big bottle to the cash register. The clerk started screaming at me that this was illegal in the state of New Hampshire and they could take my house, they could arrest me, and I’d be in jail. When eye contact with the clerk didn’t get her to stop, I turned to the now extremely anxious child to insist loudly and slowly that none of this was actually going to happen, not ever, and the clerk burst into tears. “Oh honey, no! You didn’t do anything wrong! No, no no!” This was a time for dramatic pause but we were out of there.

Meanwhile

Meanwhile, back on the academic ranch, the death maws of humanist critique just keep snapping at the *world* as if the whole point of being and thinking is just to catch it in a lie. As if some fixative of state power or normative fantasy could be the *only* problem. As if there's something *wrong* with other people. Some of the things this view misses: all the extensions of ways of being touched, what it feels like to be carried along by something on the move, the widespread joking, the voicing, the dark wakefulness, the reluctance, the stuckness, the sonorousness, how managing a life vies with an unwitting ungluing, how things get started, how people try to bring things to an end, like the day, through things that slam or slide down their throats, why thought might become an add-on or window dressing, or take the form of a speed list condensing a range of possibilities, or why it matters that attention sometimes slows to a halt to wait for something to take shape.

So, you're writing. You make a pass at capturing something. It's too fast for you, the world doesn't cooperate, but you get *something*. You follow things around, backing up at the hint of a precision, muscling your way in. You see how much you can't catch, especially now that you're onto a composition of your own. You need another detail, you get rid of a container concept that doesn't work. Writing's accordion mechanics of expansion and contraction changes the environment of a concept. Thought becomes a little surprised to latch on to something, to arrive somewhere, still looking around. It turns to what could happen, not what seven things make this scene a clog in some big picture or a chutes-and-ladders shortcut right into its dangerous fantasy.

References

Evan Osnos (2017). Survival of the Richest: Why Some of America's Wealthiest People are Prepping for Disaster. *The New Yorker*, [online]. Published on January 30, 2017, pp. 37-45. Available at: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/30/doomsday-prep-for-the-super-rich>.