

XVIII Indulgences

Brian Taylor

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The earth's memory is somatic; it scars as sure as a body. Dig a foundation and the building scabs over it. Decomposition changes the soil. The ground remembers.

||

My voice not strong enough to carry emotion

My ear too tin to carry a tune

Maybe I'll hammer it into a bucket

Room tone and tape hiss

Smiling knocks the buds out of my ears

Ran up credit card debt and traded those
points for a drum machine

Ativan at midnight and pistols at dawn

Automotive salvation burns the world

Hard to hear a tornado coming when you live
this close to the trains

My heart is full of glue from the dead horse
we've been beating

Caffeine in the morning and antihistamines at
Night

Walking to the bus stop after the show
A tree grows under a sewer grate

III

I have filled notebooks
And text files
And chat rooms and DMs
Cutting thoughts out of my head and sealing
them up or sending them off, trying
To quiet my mind.
I cannot go back to them for inspiration
To fill in the blanks
I do not keep food in a garbage can
Or my heart in a herd of pigs
I'm no poet.

Bleak

(Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. 2015.)

All along the derelict valleys...

“The DNR Waltz”

Wooden Wand

I’m not really sure how I got on the realtor’s direct-mailing list. I mean, I know what demographic tick boxes probably got me on their mailing list (33, mostly white, male, Master’s Degree, employed in a white-collar job at a local university, straight, single, childless). But obviously that quantified self misses that I am neither willing nor able to spend upwards of \$250,000 on a remodeled rowhouse.

I am a fairly late arrival to the neighborhood, Lawrenceville. Moved here two years ago. I showed the postcard to a friend who’s got a few decades on me and who is Lawrenceville born-and-fled. In addition to disbelief about the price, he couldn’t get over the large gray splotch on the front of the building; evidence of some patch job that was never painted red like the rest of the brick.

That patch that hadn’t even registered for me.

I apologize if what you’re about to read is too personal. If Gaston Bachelard’s phenomenological poetics of spaces is too naive, if applying Walter Benjamin’s “baroque cult of the ruin” to post-industrial space too glib, if the thinking is not (or too) fashionable. Too scattered or too reductive, all I can write is what is first in my mind. If the words don’t reverberate then at least I have done no harm.

I was doomed from the start.

I grew up in rural southwestern Pennsylvania in the 1980s and 1990s, with a melancholy bent that would eventually be medicalized as “Depressive Disorder, Not Otherwise Specified”. That wouldn’t happen until well into adulthood, though - apparently if you tested well, then your grades never fell far enough for people to get too worried about you. Not being particularly ambitious or really understanding the idea of goals...well, anyway.

Connellsville was a town built on coke (the steel-production material, not the drug or the drink). Always a trendsetter, the town started deindustrializing early - changes in steel-making procedures in Pittsburgh moved coke production closer to the mills. It had years to carve its large, turreted houses up into small apartments before suburbanization made that a common rental strategy. But since coke production involved long rows of beehive ovens rather than large factories, there wasn’t much in the way of large, brick buildings lying around. Most of the unused industrial infrastructure was transportational. An out-of-commission elevated train trestle loomed over the west side of the city throughout my childhood (its last pieces were torn down in 2003). Most of those old train tracks are now bike trails, crossing bridges above rivers and junkyards.

I don’t know enough regional US history to confirm, but I suspect the area’s culturally a mix of the urban steel industry of Pittsburgh and the rural Appalachians (geologically situated on the Allegheny Plateau, a subregion of the Appalachian range). While the entire area is not quite LBJ Poverty Tour photo op material, thanks in part to its geographic proximity to Pittsburgh and a constantly-increasing tourism industry, more than a few areas tend towards dilapidation.

So that’s who I am: a child of a region whose architecture might be described as “deregulatory post-industrial vernacular”, whose mind bends easily towards sadness and loss. Key personality traits not present in the demography that suggested I would be interested in purchasing a building whose value was based on an appearance of age. A building whose remodeling was either likely to be cheaply supplied and cheaply installed for maximum profit, or otherwise so historically accurate in its materials and construction that maintaining it would be feasible on a budget much larger than my own.

But I don’t want the remodeling. I want depointed brick and amateur patch jobs and cracked concrete and outdoor/indoor carpet and suspended ceilings and fake wood paneling and linoleum.

"Utilitarian" feels too long term for this "whatever works fastest and cheapest" vernacular. But even still, it's cultural masculinism, isn't it? Hostility toward decisions made for surfaces, curtains and throw pillows and area rugs, anything that covers the building materials without knowing its place, these "feminine touches" that soften and deny that which is below, that which forms the barrier between the inside and the outside.

Jane Tompkins *West of Everything* reads an era of American film westerns as foundational myths of masculinity, origin stories of a nation and the men who made it safe by dividing inside civilization from outside civilization. John Ford framing John Wayne's form in a doorway at the end of *The Searchers* becomes a thesis for an entire philosophy: sometimes the man is necessary for civilization even though he cannot come inside it. He does not need it's comfort and so is free of its bounds. It's a lie.

But a comforting one to some, and one that has staying power. Of course now it's not at civilization's beginning, but at its end. The post-apocalypse is the inverse of the Western, where the necessary behaviors do not predate the society but last beyond it. Those soft spaces were as fleeting as a dream, it says, and anything that benefitted you then was a luxury. But now you will return to what is real, what is outside, what is uncovered.

And certainly the kinds of architecture decay that we can see in our daily life draw on this idea. Like the members of Benjamin's Baroque ruin-cults, we can latch on to this bit of the past, this proof that something can survive.

And then they patch it up. It's like a museum skeleton, a blend of fossil and not-sil made to disappear into a whole. The soft tissue is gone; there are no memories here, just the suggestion of them. "Are you that naive? Do you honestly believe those are real fossils?" "Does it matter?"

But being like a museum skeleton is not the same as being a museum skeleton. These are spaces that have been lived through, surfaces and structures that carry a host of their own meanings. There aren't a whole lot of uses for fossils outside of museums, except as decoration for people who can afford them, and things like tax breaks and

robber-baron-guilt-assuaging cultural institutions provide a mechanism for ego and preservation that don't exclude nearly as many people from seeing them.

In 1976 the Society for Industrial Archaeology published a handbook for "the adaptive use of industrial buildings", claiming in its introduction that cost-conscious real estate developers would do well to look at unused industrial buildings in urban areas because refitting them could be more cost-effective than new suburban development. Existing building infrastructure could be reused and returning to denser urban spaces would mean less driving.

But it would take several more oil crises and recessions and burst bubbles and a whole host of other socioeconomic factors would line up so that, well, people could make money off of white people moving to cities. Knock down the minimum amount you can, restrain some floors and you're good to go.

What's getting used in this reuse? Not just inexpensive, solid, reconfigurable spaces that white cube for your expensive cocktail or locavore appetizer, but that idea of a past. Real Work has been done here. Man's Work. Manufacturing. An authenticity not immanent but imminent, ascribed by and inscribed into its age, its survival. The surfaces shout in your face, twisting Darwin just as much as the robber barons who built it originally, say that what has survived is what is fittest and don't you want to spend a few more dollars?

I tell myself that's not what I'm doing when I walk through these spaces after they've started falling apart, when I point my camera at a wall and reduce it to light and shadow and texture and color. There's a bit of a thrill of exploration, trespassing and documenting. Like finding an abandoned outhouse in the woods. But what's the cost, to me and to them?

These spaces strike me. They reverberate (thanks, Bachelard!) with my past and remind me of other times, other places I've been and places I haven't. But also, because I'm a stranger to these decaying places, a temporal tourist, they hold little

concrete meaning for me. I didn't grow up among them, didn't see them every day and need to get away. I don't remember the active mills, the fire and smoke and dirt that I expect were already being blown away even while the baby boomers grew up.

They were the first ones who couldn't follow their fathers into the mill and the mine (my grandfather Mills was an engineer with Westinghouse. Were I of that generation, would I have been, too? Or would I have been -ugh- management? Probably management).

My mouth is too smart and my attitude too proud (and my arms too scrawny and my fingers too pianist) to believe that I would have been on the floor. So not only am I a temporal tourist, I'm an occupational one as well.

It sometimes feels ghoulish, reminds me of being an undergraduate and seriously considering a photo essay of the homeless. Relying on what's in front of the camera to do the heavy lifting through cliché. But instead of exploiting people's images to show my own, I don't know, artistic social consciousness, I'm taking their spaces. Taking their memories. Where I have no history, where there's no "too contingent history of the persons who encumbered it" (Bachelard, 8).

But there's an even crueller thing going on. Draping myself in their memories, swaddling myself in their shoulder-chips, I will them to stagnate and decay so as to relieve the psychic pressure of possibility that I find so difficult to deal with. It's not motivated by not wanting others to have positive change; it's a fear of bad things happening to me that get everything all mixed up. Only bad things can come from change, inevitable and entropic, things falling apart; what's more natural than that?

Because it's a bad idea to hold onto architecture as something unchanging, a foundation on which a shaky mind can try to stabilize itself, and yet - I guess that's what photographing them does.

It's impossible to do these things without romanticizing the space of poverty, at least a little bit. If not romanticizing, then at least reducing. The photographs *are* disconnections; they don't capture smells and sounds. They rip away all the events that led to that moment and all the possibilities that could come from it.

And this photography doesn't even have the reassuring chemical / luminological continuity that was so important to Barthes. You can't trace a path of light to chemical to light to chemical to light for a digital photograph of a blast furnace like Barthes could with the photo of his mother.

Me, my camera, we can walk into and out of these places. We can take things from them- experiences, images - without putting anything back. We're not making condos or disrupting service industries. We don't gesture a smartphone app toward a rusted blast furnace while proclaiming, "this will unkill that!"

I can tell myself that we're not taking these spaces away from anyone. We're not telling people that their property will be worth more, with the unspoken, "so sell it and get out". A walk through a dense brick street, photos of peeling paint and rusting iron; maybe an outsider's view can capture what's there, guide others' eyes without being turned into someone's scout, someone's blockbuster.

Do I honestly believe these are reasons and not rationalizations?

Am I that naive?

V

You split the atom, you're the fifth dimension.

The eighth wonder of the world

Shadows of the saints behind your blinds

Blood is thicker than water but water can
wash away blood

Candide on the parking ticket machine

To see the world as I see it now without it
scratching, with grace and charity, non-painful
clarity.

Kerouac scribbled on scrolls

I type in a text editor with word wrap turned
off

VI

Before recruiting began, they had everything laid out. Identical desks with a selection of finishes for each employee to pick from. Each desk had a different palette, one that the designers would adjust as the nearby desks were customized. There were no wrong choices here. And lord knows STEM education had little time for color wheels.

VII

"Hey," said the woman leaning out of a first-floor window. "Can you pick that up for me?" She pointed a sleeveless arm at a disposable cigarette lighter lying on the sidewalk next to a drying splash of water.

Home of Vanna White

June 2012

I'm on vacation in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. I'm standing in front of a full-length mirror in the condo my parents rented for the week. It's late October, 2009 – over the course of the week, it will feel like I'm the only tourist in town who doesn't qualify for AARP membership. I'm surprised by the amount of blonde hair in my mustache and beard. In my apartment at home, the lights aren't this bright and I can only see myself from the shoulders up, so having visual confirmation of what the waist of my jeans has been telling me for months is kind of jarring. I don't remember being this pasty and hairy and lumpy.

I put on a shirt.

The extra weight around my midsection is not just an increased risk of several health conditions; I see it as evidence that my mind has settled a bit over the past year. No more periods of suppressed appetite (the unappealing nature of seafood, so prevalent on this trip, notwithstanding).

We're staying in a timeshare. Most of my childhood beach trips (first to the Jersey shore, then later the Outer Banks) were spent in condos like this. When I was younger, my brothers and I would search through coffee tables, drawers, closets – looking for things the owners had left for us. We were motivated by the memory of an early trip where this exploration yielded a stack of board games.

Nothing great to be found here – a People magazine special on *iCarly*, some Nicholas Sparks books. The condo is decorated after the T.G.I. Friday's fashion, with the faux antiques and signs all beach-themed. There are lots of puns involving the word crabby.

The building is relatively recent – it's seven or eight floors tall, beachfront. Nestled between two RV parks/campgrounds. It looks more than a little out of place – which is saying something, considering much of the architecture of this area is built around giant concrete pirate ships and volcanoes and pyramids and sharks.

It's what some might consider trashy: it's amazing and tacky and desperate and full of hope and wonder. Everywhere you look, reach exceeds grasp. In the off-season, everything looks bleak – there aren't people around. The paint is faded and flaking. The mini golf courses are empty.

Cruising down 17 with my parents – they're hunting for bargain hoodies, I'm looking for sandals. We stop at a store having a clearance sale and I have hope. I find sandals with the logos of licensed "import" beers like Guinness and Corona – drinks of the partying and slightly moneyed youth. I lose hope.

I gawk briefly at a beach towel with an image of Bob Marley and a lion's head back to back like Janus (Jah-nus?) and the assortment of weapons in a display case: knives and brass knuckles of varying design and licenses (Batman is a registered trademark of DC Comics) and tasers and halberds.

There are aisles of rows of mass-produced tchotchkes with Myrtle Beach painted on in felt tip pen. Arbitrary souvenirs that have no meaning except when they are in a context hundreds of miles away and are ascribed a symbolic importance as detached from the day-to-day experience of the vacation as the vacation is from the day-to-day. Most people are not so pompous as to commemorate their trip with a thousand words.

For the majority of the vacation, I keep to myself. I interact primarily with wait staff. They notice my accent, ask where I am from. Depending on the size of the restaurant and its proximity to a major highway, you're likely to find many transplants. As you get further from the main drag, the accents of staff and customer get thicker, blend together and become more consistent. The restaurant owners start looking more and more like Paula Deen and you start to realize just how much of an archetype she is. Your waitress brings you hush puppies and honey butter and sweet tea and smiles at you from behind her exaggerated Kate Gosselin spiky hair and lopsided bangs-do, destroying your Yankee snobbery with Southern charm and deep fried cornbread.

And you eat. And it is good.

IX

Knowing that there is a limit to how much information is in an image. Digital or analog, you can get closer and closer but eventually rather than adding meaning, it falls away.

Notes on Seeing Bruce Springsteen for the First Time

October 2012

It's rainy and cold and there are people drinking tallboys around the Fifth Avenue side of Consol Energy Center, spilling out of the TGI Friday's

outdoor area and moving down toward the entrances. Apparently a Springsteen show, like a Bloomfield parade or a Steelers game, suspends open-container laws in the immediate vicinity.

I sacrifice a tallboy to my anxiety and my umbrella to the security gods (whose patdowns are much more chill than the TSA) before I'm allowed inside. There are so many people here.

The tallboy isn't doing its job, so I stop at a concession stand to buy a double rum and coke for \$15. I make a mental note not to bother checking the, well, I guess it's less a merch table and more one of several souvenir shops. The credit card machine beeps an error and the woman reassures me it is not a problem with my card. "These machines have been on vacation, they're not used to working."

"A lockout will do that to you!" I say. It works. I thank her, take my drink and my card and head for my seat.

—

There are a lot of dads here.

I feel like a tourist. (I always look for reasons to feel like a tourist — no club that would have me as a member and all that.) A sea of tour t-shirts, past and present, tucked into jeans wrapped by braided belts. A couple red bandanas — one guy's gone all-out, denim vest and jeans. I'm wearing a western shirt and a down vest that my dad put in his closet in the late 1970s and that I took out around 2003.

Springsteen shows are large — two or three or more hours long, with songs that segue into one another. (The band holds a note, the Boss counts them in and they're off again.) Fans collect live performances of the songs; people can tell you which songs they've seen, which ones they haven't, where and when. I'll be happy with any one of my Holy Trinity of Springsteen songs: "Thunder Road," "Rosalita" or "Sherry, Darling." He doesn't play any of them.

I didn't expect "Thunder Road" once a friend of mine informed me that when tour dates coincide with Obama stumping appearances (like the one earlier in the afternoon at

Soldiers and Sailors), it's usually missing. I don't ask for specific statistics, but I'm sure I could get them. (He's also informed me that, according to an iOS app, Springsteen has never played "A Good Man is Hard to Find (Pittsburgh)" in Pittsburgh.) It's the kind of manic dedication I associate with jam bands and baseball fans. I wonder if a lot of the people in this audience are accountants.

I'm pretty far from the stage. Not as far as I could be, and (thankfully) not behind it, but most of my experience of the performance comes from watching the three giant monitors suspended over the stage, each displaying well-shot images of the band and the pit. Lots of signs requesting songs or declaring that this is their first E Street Band show. These folks cheer when he asks who is at their first E Street Band show. I am at my first E Street Band show, but I haven't brought a sign and anyway I am up far too high on a far too steep slope and have been drinking far too much to stand and shout.

I have nothing to compare this to, no frame of reference for this arena rock.

Springsteen, to me, is a storyteller. When I was becoming conscious of music, he was putting out Human Touch and Lucky Town and that Jerry Maguire song (I am about six months older than Nebraska). He was a Born in the USA LP next to the Osmonds in my mom's record collection, Live 1975-1985 on cassette in my parents' closet (which you WILL NOT touch, young man!) I had almost an entire decade of anti-Springsteen attitude to undo by the time I started looking for things to connect me to this place, this once-a-working-man's-town (the Springsteen I love comes from the same time as Steel-Curtain-era Steelers, and sports have never been my thing), to the late '70s/early '80s, to my past. I'm not sure massive arena show is conducive to that.

I should have expected some issue, as this is the Wrecking Ball tour and I don't really like Wrecking Ball all that much. (It's too new, too now - I need the distance of time to appreciate rawness, maybe I've still got a bit of the 1990s in me.) The set is Darkness on the Edge of Town-heavy (five songs from that album, only four from Wrecking Ball), and most of the set's 27 songs (six of which made up the encore) are from Born in the USA (1984) or earlier.

So I guess the inclusion of "Glory Days" in the encore isn't that surprising. I'm pretty sure he shouts "Night of the Living Grusheckys!" before bringing out Joe and his son Johnny. At this point, I think there are like six or seven guitars on stage. Are they all plugged in? I guess you need a lot of instruments to fill up that amount of sound space, and, well, everyone looks like they're having a good time up there.

I think that's what people are here to see. Old friends having a good time amid that spectacle - that scale. You hope it's more medicine show than snake oil sales pitch, but it's not like this is his first tour where thousands of seats sell for around \$100 each.

Springsteen's music has always sold redemption. Explicitly in cars and women and music, and later, when his protagonists end up being trapped, too old to run away, there's always a hook or a poetic lyric that aims to make the shittiness easier to bear.

During the last song of the night, "10th Avenue Freeze-Out," he announces "This is the most important part!" before singing "And the Big Man joined the band." After that lyric, the song goes on hold while the video screens show a montage honoring the Big Man, Clarence Clemmons, and other members of the E Street Band and the Bruce Springsteen entertainment complex who have died in recent years. The montage ends, and the

band drives through to the end of the song.

I get the feeling that for a lot of the people in the audience, people who are on first-name basis with the members of the band (I get this feeling that by calling him "Springsteen" rather than "Bruce", I'm committing some kind of faux pas, of not allowing myself to get attached in the way others have), are really responding to that emotion.

When I interviewed Owen Ashworth of Advance Base last year about, among other things, his love of Springsteen, he said, "it just sounds like family to me." I think he's onto something there. For some of us, that's a small group of friends and relatives. I guess for some folks, having that family be thousands-strong isn't a source of anxiety, it's a source of strength.

XI

Woman painted in pixelvision

She's got an ace in shirtsleeves and a row of
cards flipping

Fall

October 2016

The first cold nights are quiet. Summer hums, fans and air conditioners gone. Windows closed except for the bedroom. Keep it open because it's easier to sleep when it's cold - natural cold, not air-conditioned. That's too dry. Once the heater kicks in (you keep it off for as long as possible, even on the budget plan you prefer to save on gas) it'll be dry again. Still not that warm. At least it keeps the basement from molding, and you don't need to run the dehumidifer.

In a few days this will not seem so cold and people will again be on the sidewalks shouting and drinking, but for now there's peace.

To Know

March 2016

When faced with inconsistency in Reality, we can ignore contradictions. Or if we're Catholics or research scientists we can embrace the contradiction as something we can't know or just don't know yet.

The Fiction, though. The Fiction does not cotton to contradiction. It despises it. It bends and twists to make it go away.

The lure of The Fiction is the comforting notion that a world is completely knowable. And so you're driven to know it all. The knowledge, and not the search for it, drives you mad. It's the thirst for knowledge perverted. A knowing that masters and therefore rules reality in all its permutations. When you know all, there is nothing unexpected.

Even with a thousand episodes and movies and books and games, The Fiction is finite. You can catch it all. There is nothing to know about it outside of its texts. So you devour. You are hungry, and this is your comfort food. Would you like to know more? But there is an end. The permutations aren't infinite and so you don't get overwhelmed by contradictions that HAVE to make sense. You just decide what's canon and what's not.

Canons are authoritarian. They blast away dissent and create a reality that's consistent and defined by those who create the canon. One holy, catholic, and apostolic reality.

The heretic's search beyond the canon is his undoing. Faust bargains (a heresy of degree) and Cthulhu drives you mad (a heresy boundary). But The Fiction; The Fiction is safe. It's created by Man and so it's knowable. Anything outside the canon can be dismissed. It follows logical rules, because otherwise it's not consistent and inconsistency is a luxury of History, not of The Fiction. That's why The Fiction (appears to) thrive within video games. Their language is the Code. Games' scifi and fantasy antecedents could only dream of a language like this to build their Fiction: no language is more logical than the one that breaks according to rules.

So The Fiction, when judged against certain standards, when used for certain purposes, and the Code are simpatico. When Code makes the world, the world must make sense. Everything operates by Algorithm.

In Reality, there aren't Algorithms. Or they're too complex to model. So we tell stories. Stories help the world make sense by making its lack of sense bearable. Stories spackle over the cracks in Reality, the spots where Algorithm breaks down. Too much desire for sense, too much focus on the consistent, on The Fiction, is a trap. If you look for the cracks and the seams in The Fiction and you can't find them, then you've probably had a psychotic break.

You don't need to question The Fiction; it is written without agenda, unlike History. What it describes is how it is; it is not a certain point of view. It is easy and safe.

In The Fiction, culture and society are stagnant. If The Fiction invents a culture in transition, it is stagnant in its transitional moment. The History of The Fiction is not an interpretation of its past; it is its past.

History is an attempt to understand the past; to shape it into something useful to the present. The Fiction leaves no wiggle room (unless it is built into the text): you cannot reinterpret the motives of the great leader of a thousand years ago in light of new historical evidence because there never were motives and the new "historical" evidence carries exactly the same weight as the old "historical" evidence because they're both The Fiction.

Unless.

Unless History and the Fiction, Algorithm and Code are all kinds of stories. They are all ways of making sense. Some are free from the tyranny of reality. Stemming from the need to make "logic". Free to be messy. You're human; you're prone to irrationality. Even when you're rational, you're selecting the information you parse, filling in gaps, to make your judgments. The key is to make that irrationality, those judgments, constructive and enriching. Not destructive and impoverishing.

XIV

Date	Time	Sys	Dias	Pulse
10/4/2022	11:10AM	115	85	75
10/5/2022	4:25PM	125	84	104
10/6/2022	12:30PM	127	87	116
10/7/2022	12:20PM	144	86	112
10/8/2022	10:54AM	117	88	73
10/23/2022	10:00AM	125	78	78
11/1/2022	6:40PM	128	86	70
11/4/2022	10:00AM	137	96	87
11/7/2022	4:10PM	121	78	76
11/8/2022	7:00AM	122	78	75
11/8/2022	3:00PM	132	80	70
12/2/2022	7:00AM	122	80	73
12/2/2022	10:30PM	127	78	73
12/4/2022	5:30PM	131	82	83
12/4/2022	11:30PM	140	100	89
12/5/2022	3:30PM	115	74	67
12/5/2022	10:15PM	135	76	78
12/6/2022	5:13PM	110	72	74
12/7/2022	9:40AM	118	74	67
12/10/2022	10:00AM	163	96	69
12/10/2022	6:20PM	117	82	79
12/11/2022	7:21PM	131	87	97
12/12/2022	9:45PM	128	78	75
12/13/2022	8:30PM	127	78	73

Touchdown, Jesus

November 2022

Touchdown Jesus hung above the altar in my childhood church. Arms extended like a football referee calling a successful score attempt, backlit by sunlight filtered through an exterior window, a storage closet, and thick chunks of colorful stained glass embedded in the interior wall where the carving was mounted.

I remember its exaggerations - an El Greco leanness, pronounced curves suggesting the flow of robes. A benevolent face that would have been white and blonde, except it was carved out of a brown wood and not painted.

When they beigned up the church during the 1990s, a large wooden cross was placed behind touchdown jesus. When it was renovated to an alleged historically accurate manner in the 2010s, Touchdown Jesus was replaced by an elaborate altar and tabernacle.

My granddad's carpeted kitchen had a crucifix on the wall where the suffering figure was replaced by the risen Christ. Bloody, thorn-crowned Jesus may have sat on the kitchen table. Or possibly in a drawer somewhere.

Spending at least an hour a week in churches and classrooms, surrounded by crucifixes and drawings and stained glass windows of martyrs and miracles - it digs into your brain. Shapes it. The world is terrible and magical, pesky sinning bodies can be offset by confession or some post-death time in Purgatory (shortened by the prayers of the community and pay-for-pray indulgences sold by unscrupulous clerics), and salvation can come through good works.

In our catechism classes we learned about the triad of mysteries (Joyous, Sorrowful, and Glorious), with accepted lack of explanation, the theological equivalent of a shrug emoji rising from the dead. Being able to recognize you sometimes have to hold a contradiction in your head in order to get through the day was good training for life.

I don't clearly remember the committal ceremony portion of my father's funeral. Christmas Eve falls during the November - April ban on graveside ceremonies in the cemetery where he is buried, so it was held in a chapel on the grounds. We drove there from the church and filed into the room behind the casket.

Touchdown Jesus, too big for the space, looms. The wall is solid- no light shines from behind. The wood is a darker color than the oak casket my brothers and I picked out a few days before. That was an easy decision: we walked into the room,

saw the wood grain that matched Dad's love of the outdoors and the living room wall's wood paneling, and didn't have to think.

The upside of being in this chapel: we didn't have to stand at the graveside while the casket was being lowered dramatically into the ground. Not that I ever remember that happening at any funeral I've ever attended.

Memory is a tricky thing. That's why I remember my mom and the priest talking after the ceremony about hanging Touchdown Jesus in the chapel. In this memory, my mom suggests it and the priest agrees that he wants to do it. He tells her he plans on it, and that "great minds think alike", Dad's casket on a bier in front of an empty wall.

XVI

Too poor, too uneducated, too different in priorities or resources,
reminders that there might be forces outside of your control.

Hierarchies intact - a little more porous, maybe, but still quietly
stable.

Lorelei

June 2024

This essay discusses lots of parts of Lorelei and the Laser Eyes, from its beginning to its end and from what is on the screen to what is in the mind.

It becomes clear pretty early on in Lorelei and the Laser Eyes that you might not be Lorelei, and that this might not be the real world but the maze you've been reading about and that Lorelei has been hired to build. It's meta, but not precious - it makes the jumps between different kinds of adventure game cohere. Her memories leading up to her arrival at the hotel are 2D point-and-click games. You jump into "prototypes" of the maze: a library, a set of halls, a forest. Fixed camera angles, tank controls, and an animation of a door opening when you go between rooms. You find the bug reports for these prototypes and they tell you how to glitch them out to get more information for other puzzles. Finding multiple prototypes before any of the bug reports, though, had me thinking I needed to perform as QA and try and trigger the bugs without knowing what they were. A thrilling mistake - stumbling into a bug and having the prototype crash, misdirecting myself into over-thinking what was going on.

The game's required puzzles have clear instructions somewhere - though sometimes that clarity comes in hindsight. There are patterns - symbols on doors and their keys match, puzzle aesthetics tell you the same process can solve different ones. Being about memory and history means that things repeat across puzzles - there may be ten thousand possible four-digit combinations, but for Lorelei they are limited to years of births and deaths and important events. Motifs repeat the way they do in memory, in obsession, in art. You will eventually have everything you need in Lorelei's photographic memory to solve the puzzles. If you can't find it in her memory, then you're probably not supposed to solve it yet.

Optional shortcuts are unlocked by solving number puzzles in an in-game puzzle book. The game confirms in its manual that these are optional. Lorelei's memory is not much help here, and I definitely used algebra at least once. But these are also the only puzzles in the game that can be solved through trial-and-error. Every shortcut is locked by a dial with ticks from 0 to 100. Select the right number and the door opens. Select the wrong number, and it doesn't. The dial stays where you put it, though, so if you want to go through the five-or-six-second-cycle of "interact with door, be told it's locked, move the dial by one, try to open the door, watch animation, return to Lorelei", it is conceivably

possible. Tedious, though. But if you can narrow it down to a chunk of the dial, then the trial-and-error becomes faster than banging your head against the puzzle until it makes sense. And then, when you have the answer, you can figure out what you needed to be figuring out.

Solving in this game is an act of translation - for most puzzles, you'll find a lock with a conspicuous clue nearby. It's Lorelei's memories, her experiences, which allow you to translate the clue into the solution. The things Lorelei remembers give you clues to her character. And translation happens at a character level. Roman numerals write numbers using letters - the game plays with this, as well as with the visual relationship between Arabic numerals and letters. Are they acting as numbers? Letters? A series of lines to be counted or inverted?

There's lots of thinking laterally, or possibly unhingedly - trying to turn things into patterns that can plausibly be transformed into an answer. Conspiracy. Mazes within mazes within mazes, memories that overlap. Some of those nested mazes are more literal than others - those prototype versions of Lorelei's project - recreating these bug reports gives you more information that you'll eventually be able to contextualize to open yet another door.

These prototypes are lower-resolution than the version of Lorelei's project you're playing, and the controls are out-of-date as well. You've got to go back to tank controls. Pushing UP on your thumbstick moves Lorelei in the direction she is facing, not "forward" in relation to the current camera angle. There's some time for adaptation when you move between these two worlds, when your hands and brain haven't caught up to the movement changes. Your hands have to adjust to their changing role of translator between what you want Lorelei to do on the screen and what she does on the screen. It's a very pleasing little bit of brain itchiness, that adjustment.

Difficulty is a weird thing. Apologies to the social model of disability here for any misapplication of its approach, but difficulty's not so much inherent in a game as it is in the relationship between the game and the player. Most of the puzzles in Lorelei didn't feel difficult to me, because they lined up with ways of thinking I am used to from coding, from playing games, from solving puzzles. I know how to look for information in different spaces and menus in a video game; I know how to do algebra, to solve for X

and to find patterns in numbers in order to figure out the algorithm that will let me fill in the blanks. And where I don't have the necessary knowledge, like say knowing the Greek alphabet or being able to parse Roman numerals without my eyes going crossed, Lorelei's photographic memory has my back.

Ah, but arrogance and certainty are undermined by misdirections in narrative and space and puzzle and in my own mistakes. My certainty that I didn't have enough information to unlock document tubes, the result of overthinking the process and missing clues, meant I spent a large portion of the game mapless. Assuming I knew another puzzle's answer, I didn't fully read the instructions and spent several minutes frustrated that the clearly-right answer wasn't working.

Like the way film projection worked by messing with our visual processing system, making flickering gaps into motion, redacted documents in the hotel give you the framework to convince yourself you know what's happened. But you're still just filling in blanks. Trying to piece together a story that travels between the supernatural and the supertechnological - or, rather, between the supertechnological model of the supernatural and the supertechnological.

Art and life and history and memory and time get tangled - things happen in art before they happen in life, then happen again in art. Art that lies, art that covers up, that weaves together fragmented memories or disk drives. Art that is both more and less than Lorelei's life.

I thought I knew that Lorelei wasn't safe - she was in an isolated building with a man who may have been very dangerous. But her story was being simulated here, so maybe she makes it out alive.

But if Lorelei isn't in danger, there are times when your progress is - the interrogation sequences, when misremembering can lead to a game over (and, as the game tells you in both its instruction manual and through one of its ghosts, that means whatever is unsaved is gone).

I got stuck twice. The first time, I missed an interactable object in the world. The second time, I was at 90% completion and couldn't figure out which of the four or five things I had left to do was the Next Right Thing. I found a forum post where the person was in the same spot, and a single reply saying which was the next thing to do was all I needed. Walked back to that puzzle and the solution jumped out at me as soon as I knew I wasn't missing anything for it. Looking at the Lorelei notebook screenshots after finishing the game, I am wondering if the way it structures your notetaking would have helped me frame the puzzles more quickly in my mind the way I needed to in order to solve them.

The game's most explicit truths come in the form of questions and answers - questions where the wrong answer will get you a game over, or prevent you from moving on through the final area.

There are interrogation scenes where you know the interrogator is going to ask you a question, and you're placed in a frozen scene and allowed to walk around, but you have no control of the camera. Memory is partially, but never fully, under our command.

Since you don't know on which question your interrogator hangs your life, wandering through these frozen scenes becomes hyper-focused moments of neurosis - everything becomes important and must be fixed in the brain. But if you think with your technology, you can augment your unreliable memory. Taking a cue from the game's information-board being called "Photographic Memory", I took so many screenshots during these sections, smashing the button as I walked and the camera moved.

It worked.

Later, whenever you're questioned at gunpoint, you will have the opportunity to walk away, check your memories and your notes. You're approaching the truth on your own terms. It's no longer chasing you through a mansion, locking you in an interrogation room, pointing a gun at you. Now, these people with guns stand in the maze. They ask you one question.

It is important, I think, that the game gives you these quizzes, and that they often come with the threat of violence toward Lorelei and the threat of progress-loss to the player. Moving toward the truth can feel threatening - especially if it's a truth that's been willfully obscured. The final questions aren't threatening. They're very straightforward and block your path, but they're no longer men with guns. They're just questions, and you answer them, truthfully, and the obstacles disappear.

If the questions are true, then they split reality and fiction more cleanly in two than the rest of the experience does - they lock the game into a single-meaning puzzle, one solution. It's necessary for the journey to feel complete. Without something concrete, you can reconfigure things forever. Then you just walk right out, and know that you can remember what had happened without having to relive it.

Because you those questions were definitely objectively true, right? They weren't just there as a way to finally process everything, right?

I shouldn't go back in. Right?

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We aren't the things that made these scars
but we are the way we heal

I hope this helps.