Essays

KRISTIN DOMBEK

A Hollywood Screenwriter

Advice from the Help Desk

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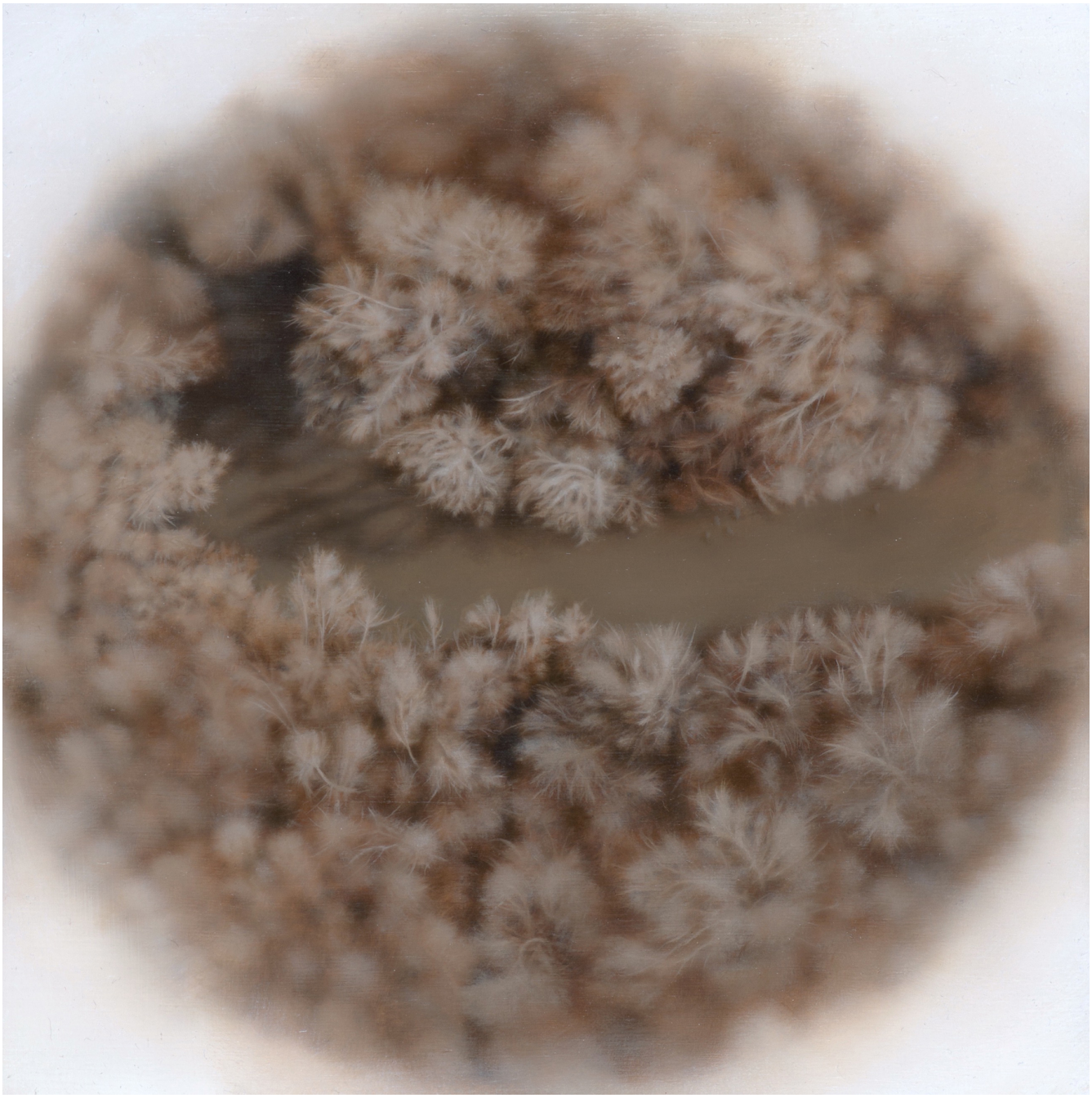

Melissa Doherty, *Frill no. 3*. 2010, oil on board. 10″ x 10″.

This is the third print installment of Kristin Dombek's advice column. Questions can be sent to askkristin@nplusonemag.com.

DEAR HELP DESK,

When I started reading the first installment of the Help Desk, I assumed its title and contents were ironic. Halfway through, I realized that much of what you wrote was breathtakingly sincere. By the end, I found that almost every sentence could be read as either ironic or sincere, in the same way an optical illusion can be seen as a young woman or an old hag, but not as both at once. Either way, you wrote so deeply and extensively about each question, I found myself wanting to ask for your help, perhaps just to have you think so attentively about me, too.

However, as I thought about a question to ask you, I felt anxious. I began to worry that my problem would seem neither cleverly ironic nor lyrically sincere. What if you brushed off my question with a dismissive remark? What if, because you have so many questions sent to you, I got no response at all? It was this fear of your indifference and my inconsequence that helped me finally settle on the right question.

I have shared writing credit on several relatively high-budget movies, all of which were critical and box-office failures. I've realized, in midlife, that despite earnest dedication to my craft, I am ashamed of the work I've been involved in. None of it represents what I value artistically or politically. None of it expresses anything I think or feel. Worse than that, I fear that I've spent most of my fifteen-year career empowering shallow and immoral people to create cruel and witless films.

What I pine for is the same wry but authentic connection you make with the people who ask for your help, and I envy your satisfaction (as I imagine it) in moving your readers the way I was moved while reading the Help Desk.

How, as an artist, do I shed my failures and begin again?

A Hollywood Screenwriter

DEAR HELP DESK,

A lot of literary/academic/political/artistic types seem to have a proclivity toward things like depression, anxiety, manic episodes, et cetera. Along with this, most literary/academic/et cetera types tend to end up dating each other. Any advice on how to support a partner who deals with depression and anxiety?

Best,

Worried and Supportive

A TWEET

Love Dombek's advice, but will it be a Miss Lonelyhearts situation? Worried about Kristin @kristindombek @nplusonemag

DEAR HOLLYWOOD SCREENWRITER, WORRIED AND SUPPORTIVE, AND WORRIED ABOUT KRISTIN:

Miss Lonelyhearts opens with our advice columnist only fifteen minutes from his deadline, beleaguered by questions that he used to find funny—the advice column was supposed to be a joke—but no longer does, questions that seem "stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife." He has nothing written but one bullshit sentence: "Life *is* worth while, for it is full of dreams and peace, gentleness and ecstasy, and faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark altar." But he hasn't even chosen a question yet. He pauses to reread some, tosses them into his desk drawer. It doesn't matter which question. It's all the same money trouble and violence and desperation, but he's run out of words. He's taken it in, their despair, until it is like a stone in his gut. The joke is on him. The copy editor comes by, asking for the column, but he's got nothing yet. Shrike, his editor, looks over his shoulder, complains he's saying the same thing over and over. "Why don't you give them something new and hopeful? Tell them about art. Here, I'll dictate: 'Art Is a Way Out.'"

He's joking, Shrike, and so is Nathanael West, by putting this joke about the redemptive possibilities of art at the beginning of a novel. That night, at home, Miss Lonelyhearts reads *The Brothers Karamazov*: "Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in

things." How he wishes he could follow this advice. He thinks his column would be a commercial success if he could love everything. He thinks he could bring the kingdom of heaven to earth if he could love everything. In the world of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the wish for commercial success and the wish to write for good are in impossible tension with each other. It's worse than that, actually. These two wishes empty each other out. He chants to himself, "Christ, Christ, Jesus Christ," toying with the power of that name, but he always stops short when he feels the hysteria of faith begin to uncoil in him. That is how West describes it, the "hysteria" of faith. West figures faith as a snake whose scales are so shiny as to reflect the world back to you as if it were alive and beautiful, rather than dead as a bunch of doorknobs, which is, to Miss Lonelyhearts, how dead the world really is.

In 1933, when *Miss Lonelyhearts* was published, *depression* was a word more likely to be used to describe the kind of economic collapse endemic to capitalism than a disorder of the individual mood. This was before the discovery of the role of serotonin in depression, before the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, before "anxiety" became the druggable thing it is today, with a fifth of Americans on psycho-tropics. It was before every drug that could be sold needed a diagnosis to treat, and before the pharmaceutical industry came to supply half the APA's budget for the development of *DSM* diagnoses. Before crushing sadness—bone-deep pain so bad it's hard to live, perhaps accompanied by mania or longing for death or persistent numbness—became "major depressive disorder" (MDD), or DMDD (disruptive mood dysregulation disorder), or

PDD (persistent depressive disorder, previously dysthymia), or PMDD (premenstrual dysphoric disorder), SMIDD (substance/medication–induced depressive disorder), SAD (separation anxiety disorder), SAD (social anxiety disorder), or GAD (generalized anxiety disorder), before even grief at the death of a loved one, finally, would be called depression, as it is in the *DSM*'s latest edition.

By any standard, though, Miss Lonelyhearts is depressed, and his depression is related to the failure of his joke: the letter writers really need help, and he can't authentically give it because of his literary ambitions, which would imagine an advice column as lesser work, commercial work, and yet he's failed at doing literature, too. Undrugged, his depression plays out disastrously. He undertakes a colossal bender, alternately seducing and rejecting a woman who loves him, cheating on her with a married woman, getting in fights, getting wasted with his friends and then hiding from them for days at a time in his apartment, an apartment empty except for a bed, a table, two chairs, and a crucifix.

"That book is brutal," says a friend who's a retired psychologist, when I tell him I'm rereading *Miss Lonelyhearts*. I ask him whether there's been any convincing study that shows artists and writers tend toward depression, or even madness. "Definitely not," he says. He's of the opinion that because artists and writers tend to represent the world, we just hear about their problems more. "Think about it," he says. "They have more words for describing their feelings." We spend an hour talking about whether depression is really a useful term. He's not sure.

But let's go with your assumption, Worried and Supportive: there are kinds of sadness and panic that attend the work of signifying, of expression done for money or in the terrible absence of money, of participating in modes of cultural production formerly called "art" or "writing" or "political thought" and now called "content." There is the particular sadness of these things being called, now, "content." Actually, I don't know quite how to wrap my mind around the categories you name—political/academic/artistic/literary—but I'll take them, because I like the spirit of your question. So much of our psychology has turned to "self-help." But what of "other-help"? Why isn't other-help our most popular genre of "literature"? So I've reordered your categories so that we can call this other person your PAAL. Because you haven't given much detail, I'm picturing your PAAL with the kind of hopelessness described by West and also, perhaps, by our Hollywood Screenwriter. For a writer, at least, the thing that is called "depression" is often bound up in Hollywood Screenwriter's question about how to shed failure and begin again to do meaningful work, for this is pretty much all that writing is, as far as I can tell. So we will practice our other-help on her or him, with Nathanael West's poor advice columnist in mind, too.

"WEST'S DISEASE," as W. H. Auden called it, inventing a whole disease of the psyche to diagnose West's protagonists,

> is a disease of consciousness which renders it incapable of converting wishes into desires. A lie is false; what it asserts is not the case. A wish is fantastic; it knows what is the case but refuses to accept it. All wishes, whatever their apparent content, have the same and unvarying meaning: "I refuse to be what I am"… a hatred of oneself and every being one holds responsible for oneself.

To be at war with who one is and what one does to the point of complete self-rejection: might this disease plague our PAALs?

And if it does, do they have a choice? In his judgment of West's Disease, Auden misses the possibility that if West was writing about a failure to adjust to reality, it was a reality that we might also deplore. He wrote here and in *The Day of the Locust* about a sadness so thoroughly bound to the conditions of producing and selling creative and intellectual labor, its psychological and systemic dimensions so inextricably entwined, that there was no redemption in political ideology or personal improvement or love. If Miss Lonelyhearts' condition is a response to the shock of art-making transformed by the age of mechanical reproduction, ours is, I suppose, the shock of art-making gone fluid, everyone performing their own creative celebrity everywhere at high speed, everyone an artist, everyone doing the work that used to be the province of certain kinds of intellectuals, interpreting our culture online in real time, joking and not joking, even our headlines about politics sounding like *Onion* headlines.

> There is always nothing you can say that is absolutely right, but you must speak anyway.
>
> Tweet

But we always grow up into a world different from the one we dreamed of. And isn't every work of art, like every utterance, like every piece of advice, a wish? I took this job at the Help Desk because I was fascinated by the impossibility of advice, the way that in the moment when someone asks most desperately for your help—when she asks how is it possible, in this day and age, in these circumstances, to live, even to live well, or even just to see things as beautiful again—there is always nothing you can say that is absolutely right, but you must speak anyway. The place where friendship and love become acts of invention, even of art. My life felt saved by friends who'd dared to do it.

But to be honest, I haven't felt much like being an advice columnist lately. Initially my own failure to live in any way most people would consider wise or healthy or whatever made it seem funny to become an advice columnist, but this winter, it's not so funny. Alone in the Help Desk office, I write, day in and day out, as fast as I can, which creates something that looks a lot like depression, even though it isn't, don't worry, I don't think so, but I can't tell, in here, if I'm a young woman or an old hag. The deadline's passed and the editors are emailing me, wanting the

words already. Dayna offers to lend me Lauren Berlant's book *Cruel Optimism*. "Have you read it? I've been reading it as self-help."

Berlant defines "cruel optimism" like this: "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing." An attachment to a person or substance, an idea or "fantasy of the good life," that becomes cruel when the attachment itself, with all its attendant wishes, gets in the way of the "aim that brought you to it initially."

Nathanael West's fiction writing career began in forgery. He didn't finish high school but got into Tufts by manufacturing a transcript and then, when he flunked out, got into Brown by stealing the identity of another Tufts student and passing off his transcript as his own. He went to Paris to play at literary hipsterdom. He called his vocation "lit-rachoor." He wrote *Miss Lonelyhearts* while managing the Sutton Club Hotel, near the end of the Great Depression, in the shadow of F. Scott Fitzgerald's superstardom, which had reshaped the idea of what literary success must mean. He hung with William Carlos Williams, Dashiell Hammett, and Edmund Wilson, got at least the last two men cheap or free rooms in his hotel.

His first three novels earned him $780, though critics liked the books, as did some other writers, including Fitzgerald, who would become his close friend. Unable to reconcile himself to what he felt was his failure at lit-rachoor, he chose the studio paycheck, moved to Los Angeles, and ended up a contract writer, writing scenarios and doctoring scripts, typing away in the

cubicles with dozens of others on B-movies and star vehicles, films he considered witless and insipid. What went wrong? Could anyone have helped?

The question of what depression is and how it can be improved is, I warn you, endless. Especially if you are yourself a PAAL and therefore have staked your life in part on your ability to understand/overthink/solve/create things. Can you use your powers of research and invention, likely rewarded by your fancy or unfancy school, and possibly by your career, but more likely (according to Hollywood Screenwriter and much of the rest of the Help Desk's inbox) profoundly unrewarded, to solve or cure your PAAL's problem? You can certainly try. There is no research more readily available—translated into personal action items and then into bits and appearing on your computer—than research on the question of what makes us happy and sad. You can study it on the internet all night long, compare potential diagnoses and begin to see your depressed person through the lens of whatever actions and attitudes seem uncannily to fit the things you're noticing about your PAAL, actions and attitudes that then coalesce into symptoms. Everyone is doing it now, even the US government, which is working to implement a Gross National Happiness index, the better to study us, as if we were one giant PAAL. You can study the happiness and sadness of others until the confusing and endless question of what depression is, and the very things you are trying to do to cure it —understanding, defining, naming, strategizing, thinking about it all the time, as a *thing*—are in danger of contributing to the problem itself, by freezing your PAAL in it.

But no matter how hard you study, the fact is that what you have in front of you, if your partner is such a PAAL as Worried and Supportive has described, is a miserable person, one miserable in ways that are probably completely systemic and also absolutely unique. Someone either so listless and in such despair that they will barely speak, or someone so buzzing with their own worry about their unhappiness that your dialogue with them can turn into a constant monitoring of their every mood, of their promised methods of self-improvement. Someone whose despair is very literally contagious—you may in your research come across studies about mirror neurons and experience in your own life the reciprocal emotional contagion that can occur on a date or in a dwelling in which two people are imitating at the level of neurons, i.e., in ways beyond their conscious control, each other's moods and psychic states. Someone whose despair may be *literarily* contagious, too—that is, drawing power from a special and shared belief that such sadness is somehow the special insight of genius PAALs everywhere and throughout history, for if genius thwarts happiness, unhappiness becomes the favorite refuge of thwarted genius. Someone whose war with themselves may even turn to cruelty toward you, or become so annoying or so sad or heartbreaking or mindfuckingly all these things at the same time, that you find yourself asking your friends, over and over, what do I do?

Loving your PAAL can be its own kind of cruel optimism.

"CHRIST, CHRIST, JESUS CHRIST," Miss Lonelyhearts chants. The first night he fails to turn in his advice column, he dreams he tries to sacrifice a lamb to God and botches the job.

He has a Christ complex, he's a "leper licker," his friends joke. But what does Christ have to do with cents per word, words per hour? His wish—that art can be redemptive—has indeed, as Auden would put it, come into conflict with who he is. As for his friends, they're depressed from losing hope in the power of literature: "At college, and perhaps a year afterwards, they had believed in literature, had believed in Beauty and in personal expression as an absolute end. When they lost this belief they lost everything."

> But what happens when your martyrdom amounts to little?
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These friends dealt, Miss Lonelyhearts muses to himself, by being "machines for making jokes." They coped with their despair at their own lack of literary success in part by complaining about the emergence of females who presume to write and sometimes succeed, and how this problem might be solved by gang-raping these women writers, locking them in a room for three-day sessions to which "they sold tickets to niggers."

Antonin Artaud, with whom West shared time in Paris, had been calling for the old occult meaningfulness again: "And if there is one truly hellish, accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames." How many young artistic dalliers have posted this quote above their grad school desks? I confess I did. But what happens when your martyrdom amounts to little? *Miss Lonelyhearts* makes a mockery of the way that the competition over suffering can turn, among writers, into a theater of cruelty.

Before he wrote *Miss Lonelyhearts*, West wrote *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, in which a man travels into the anus of a Trojan horse, in whose intestines he finds a bunch of people who want to tell him their stories: writers in search of audiences. A section of the book called "The Pamphlet" says this:

> I always find it necessary to burlesque the mystery of feeling at its source; I must laugh at myself, and if the laugh is "bitter," I must laugh at the laugh. The ritual of feeling demands burlesque and, whether the burlesque is successful or not, a laugh.

Miss Lonelyhearts, the book, resorts to performances of cruelty itself. In the end, Miss Lonelyhearts has a kind of revelation and begins to think he really is like Christ, and that he can help everyone. A letter writer—a "crippled" man—comes to his apartment late at night. This happens to be a man whose wife Miss Lonelyhearts has fucked, and who has accused him of rape. But Miss Lonelyhearts, invigorated by the revelation of his

Christlikeness, seems not to remember that in reality, he's done this man wrong. He walks toward him to embrace him and the man shoots him dead.

The advice columnist killed by the letter writer, the man he's trying to help: West makes a burlesque of his feelings, and laughs at the laugh.

ONE OF THE FEW THINGS I remember about my own worst bout of paralyzing hopelessness, a few years back, is what bathroom floors feel like. The bathroom is the only room in many New York apartments with a locking door, so there I went, whenever I couldn't deal, like a lamb in search of a slaughterer, to cry with my cheek on the cold, safe tiles.

Another thing I remember is the faces of those who helped, of friends who listened, agreed, disagreed, understood, and the face of the man I lived with at the time, who, whenever he discovered I'd snuck into the bathroom again, would break in and pick me up off the floor. He called whatever was wrong with me "the gift." "You're doing really well," he'd say. "You're getting to the bottom of this." I held on to his words like a life raft.

But the face that stands out to me now is the face of a friend who found me locked in a bathroom at a dinner party, took both my hands in his, looked me in the eyes, and said nothing at all. I

remember the feeling of his cold hands, his bent fingers, and how he looked at me, without judgment, just sat with me while I cried and didn't say a word. And this is what I want to tell you: there was compassion in his eyes, but there was also laughter. I had become a grown woman who could not sit in a chair among people at a dinner party and talk with them. It was absurd. In that laughter was a knowing hint of the future: this was a temporary state. Soon, I was laughing, too.

This is different from cruel jokes, and from the laugh that would burlesque our feelings and then laugh at the laugh. This is a humor that says: to be in grief over the world and our lives is real enough, and true enough, but this is not all that is true, this is not how it will always be, and for this reason, the depth of our grief, and our self-concern, is funny. And it is a hopefulness that is different from cruel optimism and the magical thinking of positive psychology: it is the hopefulness of a friend's point of view. With your PAAL, that is always your job; be with, and quietly see outside.

But sometimes you do have to speak.

Here's one of my favorite advising sessions I've ever overheard. I was sitting in my mentor's office, looking at a terrible draft of a dissertation chapter with her, a draft that I hoped by some magic she would mistake for being done, or nearly done; the fundamental wish of a writer, that it can happen somehow without your having to do it. The proponents of *The Secret* or positive psychology should try wishing writing into being. It

doesn't work. Anyway, my mentor was interrupted by a phone call from the department secretary. "I'm sorry," she said. "I have to take this. Honey," she said, "what is it?"

She covered the receiver and whispered, "It's my daughter's school; she's in the principal's office."

"Of course," I said.

I listened to her listen to her daughter, 11 at the time. "Oh, honey," my mentor said. "It's true. It did happen." She covered the phone with her hand, whispered to me that her daughter had learned about the Nazi genocide in class and had been taken to the principal's office because she refused to believe it, and she couldn't stop crying. "It is true, it is." I listened to her affirm the atrocities, one by one. "Yes, to gay people, too."

Then I heard my mentor change her tone. I knew this change in tone quite well—I'd heard it many times. I heard it first when I met her, a few days into graduate school, which was also a few days after my father died. It marks a transition from understanding you to reminding you it's time to get to work.

"Honey," she said to her daughter. "It's true what they're telling you. It's all true. It's unbearable, but it happened. It could happen again. But it is not the truth of the world. You are the truth of the world."

In the moment when we would most authentically help, we might also be learning to write fiction. *You're getting to the bottom of things. You're the truth of the world*. Sometimes we

must wish on behalf of the other. It is up to them to find out if the wish can be true.

She put down the phone and looked out her office window for a moment, and then she looked at me and said, "I'm sorry, but it isn't working yet, this chapter. You have a lot to do."

IN SOME YOGIC TRADITIONS, enlightenment is figured as a snake, like the one West describes. Shining, it uncoils up your spine, through your chakras, from the base to your brain, until the world is beautiful, and there is no world. One of the things I did to get undepressed was three gazillion hours of yoga and meditation. Finally, one day, it happened. The hysteria of faith coiled up my spine. The universe flipped inside out, and I saw the unity of all things, and I laughed inside or something laughed at the silliness of every moment when I hadn't seen this beauty, and the unreality of the material world, and its shimmering reality, made by my mind. A few weeks later, a few blocks away, I would destroy a whole car by leaving its sunroof open during a hurricane, in a very real way.

Here's an optical illusion for you: the snake of enlightenment says the world is beautiful, because you love every grain. The snake of depression says the world is shit, because you hate everything.

Neither of these things is true. In this way, they're the same snake. But when you see the snake of depression, run.

Because as long as you don't come to believe you're, like, fixing AIDS in Africa with your down dog, as one of my yoga teachers liked to say we were doing, enlightenment won't make you cruel or crazy, just spacey, in my case at least. But what the snake of depression wants to tell you is some of the most compelling, riveting, paralyzing, time-sucking shit you'll ever hear. And how much time do you have?

West had very little, as it turned out. He never seems to have reconciled the money-making of producing art or content with the dream of a grander redemption or a grander fame. But he fell in love in LA. Not long after their wedding, he and his wife, Eileen McKenney, drove to Mexico to hunt. On their way back to LA, with a trunk full of dead birds, they heard that their friend Fitzgerald had died. Were they talking about it, as they drove back? Something distracted West, or he was—understandably—wasted. He ran a stop sign and collided with another car. He and his new love flew from the windows and died on the pavement. He was not yet 40.

Sometimes, I think, when you look at your PAAL and you see the snake of depression, and you feel the shortness of life, you call it out. You say, this is not necessarily true.

> It's nothing special, everyone does it, but that doesn't mean art isn't the way out.
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It is not true that you are unusually bad at living, or have some fatal flaw that keeps you from finding the work you should do. It is not true that you have it worse than others, or that your luck, as it is right now, is your luck forever. It is not true that you are the center of the world, or that the world is identical to this bone-deep pain that would keep you home, staring at the wall, or that this is your whole life, from now on. It is not true that if you would find exactly the right diagnosis, you'd be cured, or that sadness is your only home. It is not true that there is no real human love. It is not true that nobody cares. It is not true that there's something special about being an artist, or an intellectual, that there is any genius other than practice that is supported by partners or groups, that geniuses have to be sad, or that sadness demands cruelty. It is not true that everyone is lonely and miserable and cruel, that the atrocities of the past have to happen in the future, that what happened to you when you were hurt will happen again and again in the arms of everyone you try to love. It is not true that the success of others evacuates yours. It is not true that doing your art for money, or no money, empties your life of meaning. It is not true that someone's rejection of your work will erase your own worth. It is not true that it is possible to get anywhere new except by failing deeply,

many, many times. It is not true that there is some story of your life you somehow failed to find, other than the one you have. It is not true there is some better story you risk losing if you make any decisions at all. Think about it: there is only one you, versus an impossible economy. It is not true that how things are is how things have to be. It is not true that without these beliefs to which you have attached yourself, you will die. It is not true that racism will be forever, or that 21st-century capitalism and technology are somehow more specially eviscerating of all good human potential than any era before. It is not true that the world is ending, unless we let it end. Come on.

Or if some of these things are true sometimes, they are not the truths we need. You may not be that special, not globally, not historically, and underneath it all, you probably are a fraud—the snake of depression is right about that much. But your ability to choose the truths that are useful makes you divine. You can remain fixated on the image of artistic success, your individual suffering, which has us all facing forward, not talking, alone next to one another, pitted against one another, waiting for the wafer, the magic. But there is no God, and good art is not identifying as an artist, any more than thinking is identifying as an intellectual. It is invention, thinking, action, remaking the world ourselves. It's nothing special, everyone does it, but that doesn't mean art isn't the way out; it is, if we do it together.

Hollywood Screenwriter, it is not true that if you haven't written your real, planet-changing screenplay by age 40, or 50, or 60, or 70, even if you've written a pile of shit so far, that you can't and won't do it now. It might be true that you'll only know how to

write it because you've written a pile of shit so far. So choose the more interesting truth: hate everything witless and shallow, immoral, and cruel, but love everything that's taught you to know the difference, and use all this to write a better movie than you have yet, and than we have ever seen. You know as well as I do how it will be done: one page at a time, like everything else, with the help of your PAALs. Wear a seat belt until you are finished. I for one will be here, waiting to see it. You're not done yet; it's time to get to work.

Yours,

The Help Desk +