

And to think I try my best not to talk about myself.  
(Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*)

In the dream, the Smurfs have been apprehended. A normal human (to them a giant) plans to eat them. In a big forest clearing, they are gathered near a cauldron. Onions and stock have given a brown colour to its water. The captor/chef is nowhere to be seen; he has gone into the forest to look for more firewood. For some reason, the Smurfs are not in chains. Many are anxiously saying that they all need to leave. But they don't know where to go. And they don't really think they'll outrun Him. Then one Smurf – *Smurfette*, rather – announces that she does not mind the impending soup. To emphasise this, she climbs up and falls back into the cauldron. I see her from above, her hands behind her head, reclining. She makes visible the current left by the giant the last time he gave the water a swirl of his spoon. Does the dream end there, her head spinning around the centre? Or does she rise over the brim and invite the others in, promising the loveliness of the water?

I wake in fear and look across to see my two younger siblings. We share what we can fill of a double bed in the guest room of our grandparents' house, Tigh Nana-agus-Flan, in Clondalkin. (We are Irish speakers. I don't know what relevance that has for what follows, but there you have it, whichever way.) We live here for now because our house-moving is slow. I know exactly how close I am to seven years old. The round light on the wall above our heads emits the least amount of light that the dimmer switch allows without being turned off. On this setting, it produces its loudest buzz. The quilt is heavy and soft and never-ending. Beyond the bed is a red and thick carpet. More than these details, what makes Tigh Nana-agus-Flan feel like a luxurious resort is the Sky box in the living room downstairs. It has opened our horizons past the staple four Irish channels to include all the strange English ones, some of which don't broadcast until seven o'clock in the evening, some of which show the same thing at all hours (including the night's).

I feel more wary of that box now. I know this is a new kind of dream. More than any cartoons, I blame the nature documentaries with their footage of scuba divers. Without fail, they fall back from a seated position on the edge of the boat. I wish they did not have to do that. In diving forward, headfirst, you maintain some sense of agency, of self. You keep it long after the water is breached. But when you fall back, you allow yourself to be taken. You locate your centre of gravity behind you and you're gone, part of something else, long before you hit the water.

I am sure that I've done something bold in having this dream. I remind myself it was all in my head; no one could know. Calmed by this thought, excited even, I allow myself to think of the Smurf and my fear of her. What I fear, and what I pinpoint before sleep comes again, is that her logic will contaminate me, that I too will learn, when faced with an impending soup, to gladly fall back.

Have I ever been inside?  
(Ann Quin, *Berg*)

Afternoon sun rains golden upon the quays. I am going to college. I am scratching. It is Thursday. I have been on this bus for an hour now. I am scratching my left arm like mad. That April sky must be the bluest of the year so far, how it brings out the brick of the buildings. I am scratching because I think I might urinate. I don't know why but it helps. I have to keep doing this. It was at Chapelizod, little more than halfway, that I could no longer distract myself by re-reading the poems for the Keats tutorial. On this bus, yellow handrails curve from seats to ceiling. Red buttons say STOP. I cannot

stop. I must not let go. On reaching the quays, on seeing that traffic which promises half an hour between Heuston and Ha'penny, I decide I will not make it. The question now is at which bridge to explode?

My only recourse is to scratching. I don't know when it started. All I know is it grounds me. My left arm. My right nails. Fast. I do not care how it looks. I am upstairs, towards the back, on the left. There is a man and a female in the pair of seats opposite and one row behind me. I don't know if she is his partner, friend, or daughter, because I do not turn to look. I hear them. She whispers something. More clear is the man's reply:

"He sure must be itchy."

I put it out of mind. Scratch and control, that's all that matters. I have tried other things. My other arm, my legs, the blue fur of the chair, I tried pinching. Scratching the left forearm is nicest. I am wearing a pencil-grey hoodie. I tried without the sleeve. I didn't like that. Too harsh. Too rough. And I do not want to look at the damage. There is a shallow wound, more plasma than blood, grey cotton strands in it, starting to scab. It begins one third of the way up from the wrist and ends one quarter of the way down from the elbow. Half a bus journey's work. I am crazy, I note that. But what matters now is control, i.e. scratching.

*So this is a panic attack.*

A somewhere voice finds it interesting. I tell it that this isn't the time, that I'm terrified. I don't know how we're on D'Olier Street. Upstairs has emptied. Will the lack of others' eyes remove all motivation for my not letting go? There are spikes in my chest. I want to slow this heart which pumps adrenaline blood. This body of vessels is an idiot. Nassau Street. Has the stop always been so far past the entrance? I'm afraid to stand. Scratching, I make the stairs. Ridiculously, I thank the bus driver. The path is full of commuters waiting for buses to the RDS, Ballsbridge, wherever; how could they mind? They have control of themselves, they are sure of the barriers between them and the world, they are solid. I wonder what they make of the porousness sprinting by. I navigate the Luas construction but bump into a girl leaving college. I whimper an apology over my shoulder, running on. Inside, I slow to a brisk walk while choking. If I can make the last few yards, the last steps, I'll be golden...

I am at the porcelain faced with the nothing I deep-down expected all along. I don't want to be graphic, but I am there a long time to a negligible result. My throat is dry, forehead flushed, legs are not bone. I want to tear in half and fall, jittering on the red tiled floor, a sack of skin in puddled piss where duffle bags are dropped while homeless men shave and hand-dryers roar. Maybe I do so. But the physical part of me stays up. He zips up. He washes my hands. What were the poems again? Odes to a Nightingale, a Greek Urn. Beauty, the sublime, all that. I apologise (a small class) for being late.

No, First Year is not going as it should be.

That man *has been he* and now matters no more to him.  
(Jorge Luis Borges, *The God's Script*)

Two months have passed as I finish the ten minute walk from the Shop to stop 317 on Westmoreland Street. Here, after each day of my summer job, I wait a further eleven minutes for the bus home. Here, after one particular blur of a shift at the tills, I receive a phone call from my father. The following is translated from Irish.

"Where are you?"

"In town. I was working. About to get the bus back."

"Right. Do you have a key? We might not be home."

"Yeah I've a key."

"We're in Clondalkin. Something has happened with Flan."

My granddad.

"Oh."

"Nana is very upset, we're looking after her."

The bus pulls up.

"I have a key anyway."

"Right, see you later."

"Bye."

I decide on the bus that there is no use speculating. I escape into the long novel I've been reading since the end of First Year. When I get off, I have pushed to the end of a chapter. The slow summer sunset falls through the housing estate's trees on my unchanging walk home. My father arrives shortly after me. I am informed while filling the kettle.

"He was out gardening, it seems, when the heart went. Nice way, considering. The paramedics had..."

I mumble and nod until I can leave the room. I drink green tea in the warm twilight. My mother comes home. I know the polite thing is to hug her. She seems strong, untired. In the excitement she's forgotten her cancer. Next morning I leave the house before anyone is up who can protest. I am told by my manager that I am needed not at the tills but on the mezzanine today. I want to thank her. This means I will not be confronted every thirty seconds by a customer with that question which reminds me of what I most long to forget: "How are you?" Lately I pretend not to hear it during transactions, so hard is it to come up with an answer.

It is hard to guess what task our mezzanine will demand of me as I fetch my bottle of water. A delivery of boxed books might need accepting from a DHL driver. Alternatively, newly delivered books might need unboxing. Alternatively, newly unboxed books might need scanning into the system. Alternatively, newly scanned books might need pricing. Alternatively, newly priced books might need shelving. Alternatively, there may be a list of books which, damaged or unsold, have been chosen for Return to the Warehouse; such books are to be removed from the shelves, de-priced, scanned out of the system, boxed up, and readied for the DHL driver. Alternatively, the

above might need to be done with cards, toys, or stationery. I buy a Coke for good measure. Easier to guess with the Mez is the demanded number of hours.

Our mezzanine is reached by descending a wide flight of stairs that is located at the wall across from the magazines and newspapers. The Mez can be hot, especially in summer. Other uncontroversial terms that could be applied to it include “oppressive”, “foul-smelling,” and “dusty”. This is to adopt an outsider’s perspective, of course. A worker posted there comes to think of it as a fish thinks of stale canal water. I find this to apply also to the regular customers who haunt its non-fiction sections. Nearest to the worker’s station are Business, Personal Improvement, Spirituality, and Illness, sections which attract people who seem to be either coming back from the brink or about to take over the world. (These are hard to distinguish.)

I am at the worker’s station removing hardened stickers from yellowing books, trolleys of them, a task that has taught me to stop cutting my right index fingernail, when a voice behind wonders if I can help. I swivel with a creak of my stool to face a woman of thirty in dark running clothes.

“I’m looking for a book that’ll help me channel my inner...” She makes a precise, wavy hand gesture.

“Well you’re at the right section. Though I’m not sure I’ve come across a book specifically about channelling your inner...” I replicate the gesture.

“Right. See, I’m creatively and logically challenged. I do intense yoga and after my yoga I feel like Lady Gaga and the rest of the time I feel like shit. I just want to be successful. I want to dress like Lady Gaga and not get laughed at. She’s so much more successful than Madonna, in my opinion. Madonna takes things from outside, but Lady Gaga finds it within herself. Like her costumes, I just watch her videos and think, does she storyboard them? Does she get help?”

“Ah yeah,” I say. “I’m sure she gets help. The big pop stars, don’t they have all sorts of teams.” I’m not sure she hears me. She seems lost in the thought that makes her pause between sentences. She turns again to the shelf.

“There’s only so much you can get from a book, though. I have most of these books already and like I start them, but I never finish. It’s about luck, really. The right time and the right place. I do acting, but I keep getting shitty roles and each one leaves me so unfulfilled. It actually gets worse. And I keep...”

I nod and mumble in agreement or sympathy where appropriate until she is done. I wish her luck and mean it.

The travel section is also down here, nearer the stairs. Would-be tourists, very normally, come to

scan the names of Earth's places, hoping for inspiration, a destination. Having found one, they then search for a clear indication that it's D.K., no, the Rough Planet, wait, the Lonely Guide that is right for them. The greatest freaks of all, in their way.

When it is time for lunch, I descend another flight of stairs to the staffroom. If the room is occupied, the sweltering heat will be remarked upon. If the room is empty, the hum of the fan will be listened to while the kettle is boiled. In this latter condition, I realise every now and then that weeks and weeks have flown by. I am scared by how much longer it can go on like this.

“What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?  
“I never know what you are thinking. Think.”  
(T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*)

On a rare day off work, I read to my girlfriend the highlighted extract from the long novel I've been reading. It involves a character who is highly successful at academic and social levels but who, internally, is nothing. That is to say, he has no inner life. Events bring him neither joy nor pain. In truth, he is not really *there*. The book describes this as “anhedonic depression”. I come to the end of the extract. Her eyes are fixed on me from her side of the couch. They have not moved in a long time. My eyes slide in escape to the easier sight of her ankle socks, the coffee table, anywhere else in her living room.

“Are you saying you're depressed?”

I close my eyes. I wasn't saying that. I don't think I was saying that. I have long given up on saying anything. That extract had spoken to me and I had simply wanted to share it with her. That is all.

“Please,” she says.

“I don't...”

My head is in her lap. She is stroking my hair. Facing out are my eyes, full of wall and the fireplace opposite. She is saying something over and over. The past few months feel cut off from me as if by a sheet of glass. It is because she has named them, turned it all into a phase, a concrete Thing. I feel changed, also.

*Hello. I am a depressed person. I am a person who is depressed. Mine is a life that has encountered depression. I have a life, and at times it is depressed.*

I practice saying these kinds of things in my head. They weird me out. I put them down, feeling sick. Let all who can think and use words and laugh do so while I stare at the fireplace. To be wooden and horizontal. To be left among statues in the wax museum after dark. What I long for. She is talking to or of the heavy head in her lap. It sounds like she is calling for something. A word for that is “yearning”. But you can tell she can tell it is hopeless. “Mourning” is the word in that case. It's all very complicated. I am happy to be at one and none with the fireplace. The wall above it is red. There is a mirror on the wall. The wooden mantelpiece has pictures of her family, framed. A tubby Buddha candle sits among them. The wood's colour is light. Around the pit and inside it is all black from the coal. The fire-screen mesh is in place. From its centre there hangs a handle-ring which even in the day's overcast light reflects gold.

The stroke is made with the back of her middle finger, the same of her index, and the tip of her thumb. It goes down the cheek to where the ear ends, lifts, and returns to the hair above the temple to start again.

A somewhere voice realises her sounds make my name.

I do not know myself sometimes, or how to measure and name and count out the grains that make me what I am.

(Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*)

It is the only thing, that summer, able to make me see the beauty of colour, or laugh, or be inside, or feel, and so I accept every chance to smoke it I get. This explains how despite never being stoned off my face in Blanchardstown, I am there tonight being just that.

I am in a bar. The people I am with study philosophy. I don't know them that well. There are four of us. The purest one is a musician. He reminds me of Shaggy from *Scooby-Doo* but all energetic and twenty. He is going on about how at times he thinks he is a genius, but that these times reveal to him that we are all geniuses, that genius inheres in all of us. I zone in and out. I am smiling. Small orange lights shine to my right. They hang from the ceiling and stretch from the far wall, where the toilets are, to the wall with the entrance, beside us, which is all glass, ceiling to floor. Beyond that is the road outside, the car park behind, and the streetlights. I see this all by peering above the low and opaque glass barrier that keeps us in this elevated corner section. Against the view I relocate my friend's words, now as foreground, now as background. Perverse sounds enter the picture. My head turns left a little, my eyes a lot. Three tables away two heterosexual couples of the same age as our parents make fun of us. They are making fun of my pure friend. They mimic what we say, make verbal caricatures. The men wear expensive-looking and well-ironed shirts. They look like they belong here. I realise we do not.

I have said nothing in a long time. I am hearing our words (coming from them) in my left ear and our words (coming from us) in my right. I try to tune to the right, but the left channel is overpowering. Every time my pure friend says something that I want to find a mixture of gas, beautiful, and brave, I hear it from the perspectives three tables across. I tense and await the blow. This (for them) is gold. One of us talks about ego-death, of returning from something beyond stars, and going bowling in Leisureplex while the processing starts. Tangents go wayward from there as the collaborative potential of psychedelics and bowling is explored. Soon enough, I hear middle-aged cackles from the spouses' side as they plan their own games of inter-dimensional bowling. How have none of us noticed them? I don't know when I stopped counting myself as one of us.

My friends are gone. I am the only one at the table. Some went for the jacks, the pure friend, I think, for a rollie. Two from the other table have gone too. So three of us populate this corner section. And the one called I starts staring them out of it, a smile on him. The woman notices. She looks away. She twirls the straw in her drink. She looks back. One cheek and chin still rest in my palm. The same length to my smile. The same glasses. She begins to whisper to her husband. She is telling him not to look. The husband looks. He no longer looks. He tells her not to mind. Her eyes dart again. I understand her. She cannot relax while he (this *he* meaning *me*) is still doing it.

"He's still staring," she whispers. "Right at us. Why is he—"

"You know why."

My volume is measured to perfection. It is not a shout, not a mutter, but an articulate address. Inside, I celebrate. I have no more quotes, but I know I proceed with passive aggression to ask them to stop making fun of my friend. I do not use the word "pure". They tighten their brows. They answer back. Everyone returns and I find myself the centre and cause of an argument. I am new to this. I mention how I distinctly heard them laugh about inter-dimensional bowling. The woman says "inter-dimensional bowling" with an audible question mark. I learn a lot. One of my half-friends has sat down. The other is still where he was when he first grasped the scene. They back me up and help

deconstruct the others' arguments. The bartender is over now, a young fella. We agree to stop. A sort of silence grows, but the husband with a red snooker ball for a head has to get the last word so he erupts:

"But he is not a genius! He is *not* a genius." He practically jumps in his chair.

The barman asks us to leave. We do so as if it was our idea.

The pure guy has just finished his smoke. He asks what's happened and the others narrate. Pinching the contents of an Amber Leaf pouch as he walks, he interjects with "Hahaha" or "Dude" or "No way". I walk slightly in front. I don't know who/what that was. I look for joy or shame and find nothing. Blanchardstown is all empty car parks. We go back to someone's sister's apartment. There is seasoned sucking from cans. Some stay up to watch McGregor. One has no interest and fades into the couch. At one point, he wakes up as if realising something. He walks out to the hall. There are two doors to the left. One, he knows, is a bedroom. He pushes a door. The light reveals a bathroom. He is okay with this. He kneels down, hangs onto the seat, and pukes his ring for four to eight seconds. Is seated there for a while. Gets a bit of toilet paper, dabs his lips, runs another sheet around the seat though he knows he did not miss. He flushes and makes sure to turn off the light. On the couch, he feels the smugness that comes with a correct decision. I remember all this when the sun is up and I have found my glasses at last; they were folded behind a cup of toothbrushes.

What is unbearable in life is not *being* but *being one's self*.  
(Milan Kundera, *Immortality*)

Summer ends. Second Year begins. My girlfriend has stopped being that. I feel nothing and cannot take any more. Thankfully, I am asked the question I have been waiting for. I tell my parents I will be staying the night in the house of a friend I know through Philosophy in college. This is no lie. I get a train to the free gaff after my lectures.

The house is in Meath. It is large. It is perfect. There are four of us. We eat pizza and chat. We go to the supermarket in the village to buy liquids and snacks. The time comes. We are in a lamp-lit box room. There are bookshelves, a record player, a study desk, posters on the wall. I sit with my knees to my chest on a small battered sofa. I must appear nervous because the others ask if I'm alright.

"Yeah," I say. "I just forgot that doing acid actually involves doing acid."

This brings them to empathetic laughter. I smile but feel gutless. I want whatever New this will bring to start so that the Old can be over.

Like Christmas presents, I don't know where they're kept, all I know is they appear, filling the room with their aura. One is taken from the neatly folded tinfoil and given to me. I have a look at it. I am electric with sweat but still freeze from the fear. What I fear is not taking it. Then someone mentions it dissolves on your skin and that's enough, I turn off, my body does it, that sum of muscle jerks and chemical reactions that together are more me than I could ever be. It lands under my tongue. This is where I had been told the most oral veins are, where it should most quickly absorb.

I get what I came for.

Afterwards, I am alive and curious and in-the-world for a number of months. By the end of second year, exam season specifically, I am as dead inside as I've ever been. Work does that to me. But now I know what to do.

A free gaff comes up in late June among old friends from secondary school. It is late at night. This time it is I who brings out the tinfoil. They are nervous. I am nervous, but less so. I draw a scuba diver leaving the edge of a boat on some copy book paper.

"At any junction," I say, "do as they do. Fall back."

I get what I came for.

Next afternoon, one of the friends has to go to work at a concert handing out free pints of water. Before he leaves, I take the drawing from the mantelpiece and ask if it helped.

“Eh,” he says, “to be honest, I had no idea what you meant with that.”

The other friend, whose house it was, says: “Me neither. The other side really helped, though. That hit the nail on the head.”

I flip the page. On the other side I had written the word BREATHE.

Later that afternoon, this second friend sleeps while I continue coming down in the living room. I had taken more than them. My friend’s dog shuffles in from the hallway. Its laboured journey continues before me towards a bed in the kitchen. It is an old dog, and small. Its breathing is loud. It has big bulging eyes that might be unseeing. It is certainly deaf. In recent months, my friend had said, it has started to have fits that resemble an epileptic’s. I swell with love for this thing. I am the same as it. I want the best for it. This is why I command it to die, to drop down and let go, to give up.

The somewhere voice says there is something not right with this.

“Why don’t I sleep a while longer and forget all this nonsense?”  
(Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*)

I knew I needed a change of change, so I applied to spend my third year of college in Prague on Erasmus. During stuttering attempts to add to my languages, I was pleased to come across the German word *Fluchtpunkt* (the point to which one flees). It was in Prague that I read the quoted lines I’ve stuck in between this piece’s sections. They are just seven among the hundreds underlined, highlighted, or copied out in a Word document. What began with taking such quotes soon involved notes on the quotes and later notes on these notes. To my surprise, I was writing again.

Still, reading took up most of my time. Reflections of my experiences seemed to be everywhere. They were in the theoretical texts which led me to conclude, among other things, that televised images of persons letting go of themselves unnerved me so as a child because most of what I watched had told me to be true to my *self*, as though that were something I was born with ready-made. They were in the novels and poems which led to me wonder if identifying superlative works of art might in fact be worth more than, say, championing the dung beetle’s best attempts at a sphere. All I read helped me see all of it—not feeling yourself, not feeling fully *there*, not being sure where (or if) the World ends and You begin—as normal, as human. I had no discoveries to break to the species. There remained only facts to inform day-to-day friends.

Towards the end of my stay in Prague, a group of us went to a music festival that was held in the Holešovice exhibition grounds (the Czech version of the RDS). A friend from Ireland had flown over to join us. After the headline act had finished, he and I found ourselves drinking beer in a small pavilion on makeshift couches with sponsored cushions. I started telling him about my difficult time in college. For the first time, I managed to put some version of it all into words. I felt warm though I was shivering. The MDMA made everything sparkle as if under some kind of frost. When I was done, he told me he twice tried to kill himself. He had to hold onto my leg to do this.

“You have no idea how good it is,” he said, “finally getting this out.”

I asked him a lot of questions. He was happy to answer them, but it would not sink in. I am in the presence of Pain, I told myself. Actual Pain. I realised I had gotten off lightly. My two years were nothing in comparison to Actual Pain. I tried to imagine myself pushed to that limit. I came up blank. What could send me there? What self could I long to kill? During a silence a group of Czechs in their thirties sat on the couches beside us. At the same time, our friends returned from the hypnotic



drum-beats filling faraway halls. We agreed it was best to resume this conversation back in Ireland. I had immediate regrets. I wanted to tell more. I wanted him to tell more. But he was already laughing at the Czechs, who were offering us a pipe of strange grass they had grown in Brno (the Czech version of Cork). I would have to wait. I promised myself it would get better in Dublin. For the time being, I told myself, it would be best to forget, release myself from my story, turn off and fall back, become part of something else, something bigger, and check in later. After all, this was something I had developed into a fine art, something to be deployed where necessary until it is discovered what healing is.

Return to the present, I tell myself. Take a deep breath. Return to where all I am is the moment, this Bohemian air...