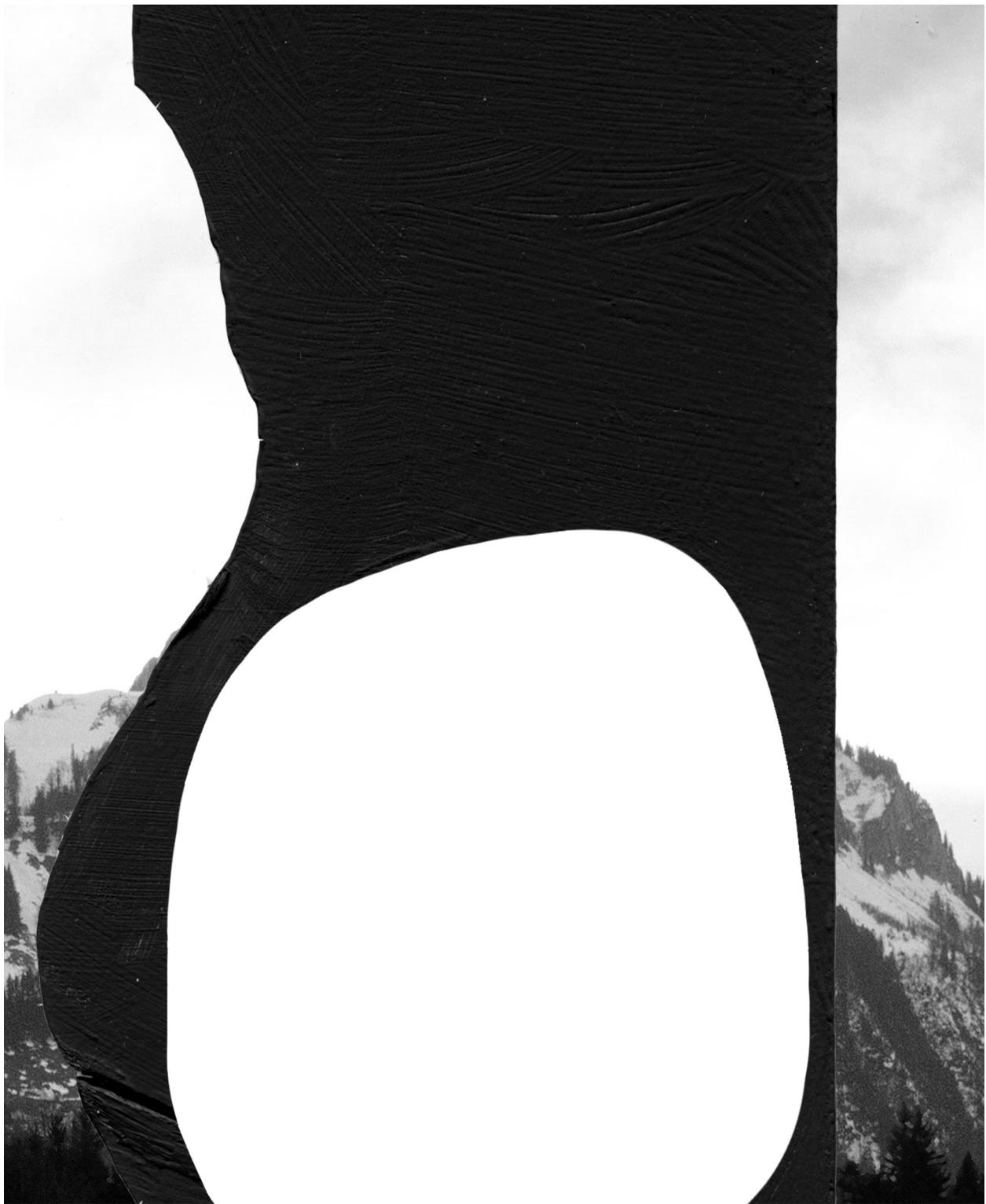


DIG
THREE
TUNNELS

Testsite 18.1—Joey Fauerso & Neil Fauerso

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DIG THREE TUNNELS

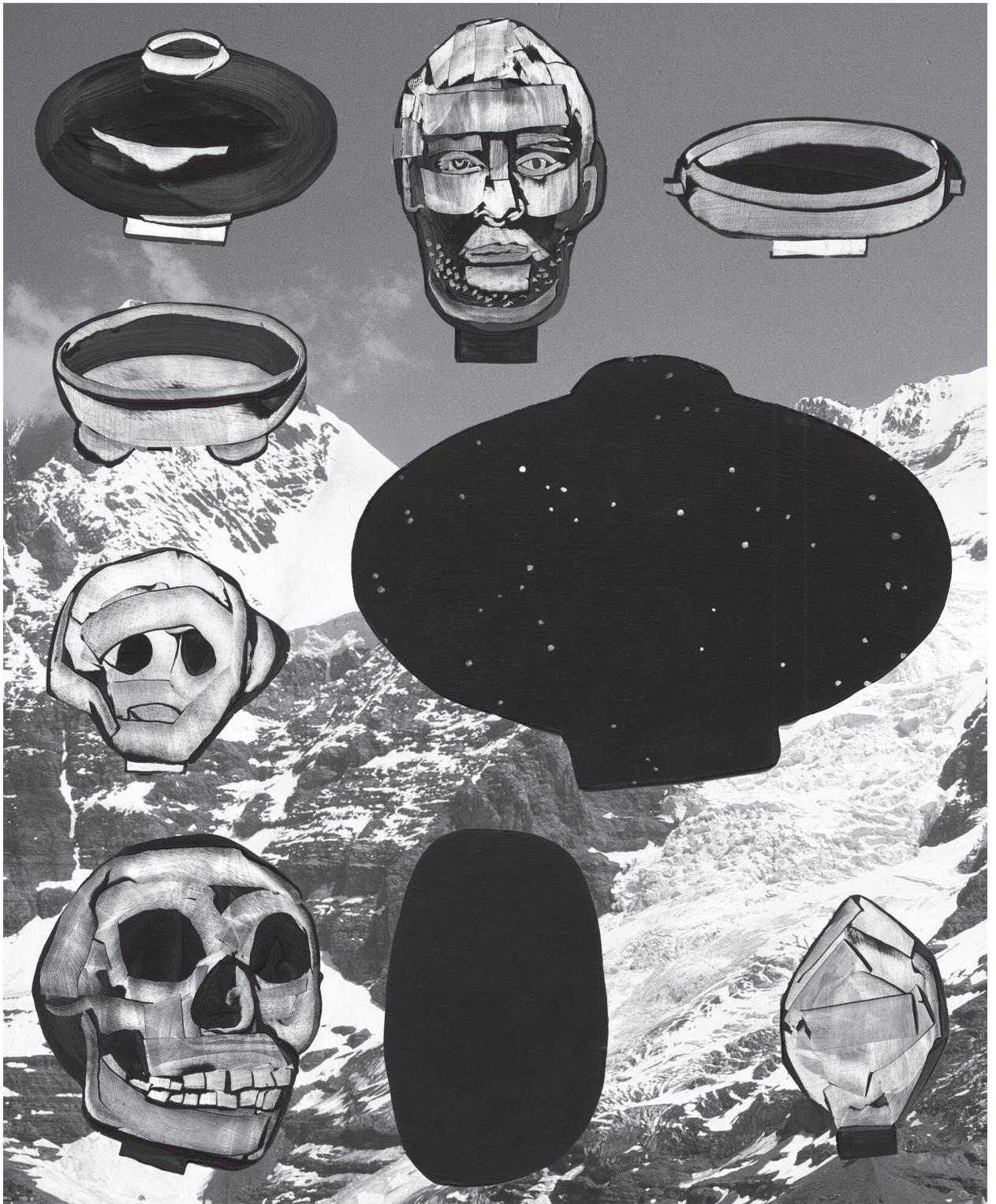
Social Democratic theory, and even more its practice, has been formed by a conception of progress which did not adhere to reality but made dogmatic claims. Progress as pictured in the minds of Social Democrats was, first of all, the progress of mankind itself (and not just advances in men's ability and knowledge). Secondly, it was something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind. Thirdly, progress was regarded as irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course. Each of these predicates is controversial. However, when the chips are down, criticism must penetrate beyond these predicates and focus on something that they have in common. The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself.

—from Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History"

Dig Three Tunnels explores the intrinsic tensions and contradictions in the search for escape, freedom, and utopia. Referencing a wide range of history and aesthetics—including: prison escapes, utopian communities of the 19th century, Russian monarchs, and stolen and repatriated museum objects—the works approach a disparate set of collections and stories with the charge of agency and yearning.

The Benjamin quote above questions the three fundamental philosophical underpinnings (three tunnels to freedom) of utopianism and, by extension, hope—that progress is real, that it is of unbounded potential, and that it has a necessary magnetic current and motor. Benjamin believed that such mechanisms of positive change can only exist in their platonic states through "empty time," a temporal order so thoroughly unencumbered by the barbarism of humans as to be almost wholly abstract. The starkness of Benjamin's logic illustrated itself in the sad denouement of his life: he could not imagine a world different from the one he believed he fully comprehended, and thus he died by suicide.

Joey Fauerso's works in *Dig Three Tunnels* reference and interact with objects and histories that sought or were integral in some yearning for one of the facets of Benjamin's critique of progressivism and freedom. The works are contained within two archetypal structures of escape—in this case meaning a constructed world to remove oneself into: collections and the dining table.



For the dining table Fauerso designed and painted ceramic plates with the faces of utopian iconoclasts: Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, Victoria Woodhull, Margaret Wright, Amos Alcott, John Humphrey Noyes, and Mother Ann Lee. Additional plates include the 19th-century Christian utopian community the Shakers and the prayer drawings they made, and the Swiss Alps from photos our father took during meditation courses during the 1970s. The dining table references Russian monarch Catherine the Great's, whose rule was so mired in intrigue and conspiracy that her intricate table had a series of contraptions for her to pass secret messages. Her table was a refuge, a place of authority and control. Similarly, the utopian communities such as the Shakers, Fruitland, and the Oneida community all placed great importance on dining and the ways in which the table could dismantle hierarchies and present a vision, if only for the duration of the meal, of a different world.

The black open shelf hosts "cut-outs" of various objects and people: details from the erotic furniture Catherine the Great collected, priceless items plundered during colonialism, the enslaved couple Ellen and William Craft who escaped from Georgia when Ellen posed as a white planter and William as her personal servant. The black matte shelf serves as a wireframe of sorts for the idea that collections enable the systematized narrativization of time. The shelf is open, and on the reverse side, the back of the cut-outs are painted black, with a star tapestry or ecstatic pastels suggesting that the true order of things—the material facticity of freedom, agency, and progress—is inscrutable and cosmic.

In the same essay, Benjamin writes:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is. The knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.

Those final two sentences are harsh, but not despairing. Essential for transformation is understanding: understanding our nature, our stories, and thus allowing ourselves to see through the museum shelf to the heavens.



TOAST 1: UTOPIA

In the early 19th-century, boredom permeated America, and mystery hung in the air like afternoon humidity. The Rosetta stone had been discovered in 1799, dinosaur bones were being dug up by baffled farmers, and white Christians often wondered in murderous rage who the indigenous people were and where they came from. In this summer haze of confusion and cruelty, some like Joseph Smith “found” ruby glasses and tablets and rode that dream ‘til he was killed in Illinois. Francis Wright dreamed of emancipation of enslaved Americans in Memphis, the city named after the place in Egypt where the Rosetta Stone was found. Charles Fourier believed that a fundamental change in all social institutions was necessary, as civilization was coated and embrittled by the brutality of empire.

The word utopia comes from Greek, meaning good place but also no place, suggesting an unreachable point in the distance (to quote Emily Dickinson: “I went to heaven, - ‘Twas a small town, Lit with a ruby.”) Thus, this first tunnel has no knowable end, its light always just out of reach. My sister and I were raised in the Transcendental Meditation Movement, which built golden domes in a small town in Iowa where we grew up. They built the domes so that when people began levitating during meditation they would have room to move around. Meditating in the domes in the morning and late afternoon, the light beams cut through the dust particles with such presence they appeared as ledges that one could sit and rest on if they could only rise up to them.

The sun, of course, always goes down. For the Shakers, the era of manifestations disappeared like wisps of smoke. The Oneida community, which believed that Christ had returned in the year 70 AD and that a perfect kingdom on Earth was possible, eventually dissolved and became a silverware company; their products can still to this day be purchased at any Bed, Bath, and Beyond in a stripped, bleached shopping center. When I think of Oneida silver, I think of the great Linda and Richard Thompson album *Pour Down Like Silver*, recorded after they converted to Sufism and moved into a commune in London in 1975. Their Sheik allowed them to make music as long as it was about god. So, raise a glass and listen, if you will, to this song in silence, and think of the light at the end of the tunnel to utopia, always dimming and elusive—the flicker of stars on a cold, wet night leading one through this world filled with sadness.



TOAST 2: COLLECTION

In “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, Walter Benjamin writes:

Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.

Benjamin died by suicide in Spain convinced he would be captured by the Nazis. He probably would have escaped to the US and taught at some leafy, stone campus—taught his elliptical brilliance about the world, about the way one perceives the world, about various yearning methods to escape the prisons we sit in craning our necks to see the world through small, barred windows. In its last act, Benjamin’s story tragically became a vignette supporting his own theory. The philosopher died by his own hand even though escape had been wafting in on the sea breeze. His understanding of history had rendered his fate inevitable. He felt himself beginning to lacquer over, an object plundered by empire.

What Benjamin means in this quote, I think, is that no object is innate. The brutal and horrible histories of objects are their life force, and like all living things, they yearn to be free. The objects taken from Egyptian tombs must be especially melancholic. The ancient Egyptians spent their whole lives preparing for the afterlife, and they were ready—believing death not to be stasis but a journey, with those objects as necessary supplies.

Isabella Stewart Gardner stipulated in her endowment for the eponymous Gardner museum that her collection be exhibited in perpetuity, frozen in the placement of her vision. This is one way to live forever: your taste cast in amber, but at the stringent cost that your freedom to glide through time is dependent on restriction.

I recently saw the restoration of *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, perhaps the most eloquent filmic depiction of a soul. The film has an interesting history. Made in 1928, it was thought lost for decades until a nitrite copy was found in a Danish mental institution in the ‘80s. I wonder how it got there, whether it had sought out the facility intentionally to show

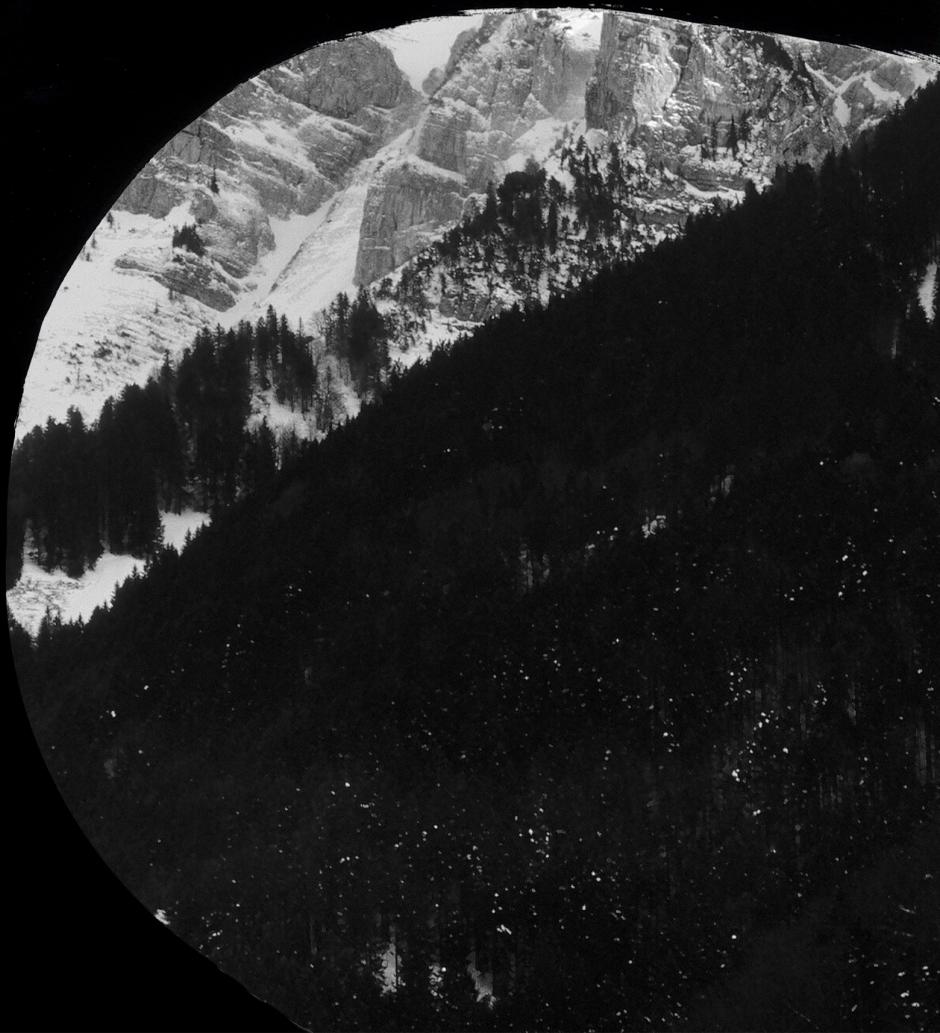


itself to the patients and tell them it understood the feeling of believing something devoutly.

Of all the objects that have come and gone in my life, the one I think about most is a gold coin given to me when I was born in 1982. Made by the Transcendental Meditation Movement for the Movement's 25th anniversary jubilee of when the guru, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, came to the West, the coin depicted the guru beatifically on its face. Later, when I was living in China, I turned the coin into a medallion on a silver chain, which I would wear over my shirt often in a white suit. It was... a look. Last year, during hard financial times, I had to sell the coin to a coin shop. They of course melted it down, and I like to think that the Maharishi of the coin was freed in the same way the real Maharishi was when he died in 2008 and his body was burned in a pyre on the Ganges River.

So, I raise this glass in the hope that all of us in this lifetime can be unencumbered, even if only for a moment, like smoke drifting over a river.





TOAST 3: ESCAPE

The name "*Dig Three Tunnels*" is a reference to the three tunnels dug by prisoners of war to escape the Stalag Luft III camp during WWII. Of the three tunnels, named Tom, Dick and Harry, only Harry was used. And of the 600 people who worked on the tunnels only 76 escaped; 73 out of 76 were captured, and 50 were executed. For those three men, what did that first silence feel like? The pause that echoed long enough to appreciate some moat had been crossed, some vessel boarded, the shore blissfully receding.

The 1963 film *The Great Escape* made Steve McQueen a star, and some years later he and Keith Moon of The Who were neighbors in Malibu and would get absolutely trashed on the beach. Moon would insouciantly goose step and seig heil in drunken mania, and McQueen, feeling a boozy patriotism and nostalgia for those days hiding among fake trees on a lush soundstage, would wrestle Moon to the ground and the men would roll around the wet sand, bombed at sunset. Both men eventually died in fairly bleak, sudden ways, as if by inscrutable fortune they became too free, were dropped into a desert, and staggered from mirage to mirage.

Christopher Daniel Gray, who became known as Little Houdini, stole Crystal Gayle's tour bus while trying to visit his dying mother after escaping police custody. For some reason he went to Daytona Speedway and tried to pass himself off as a member of Tony Stewart's race team. This baffling and ruinous decision suggests Gray's initial escape was due to catching the sail of some capricious trickster spirit, and had he not been caught, he might have just continued stealing aging celebrities' vehicles and ingratiating himself into entourages. Stewart, a brilliant racer and notorious prick, once killed a fellow driver who emerged from the wreckage of his car waving for help. Stewart simply wouldn't stop.

The prisoners that escaped Alcatraz were never found and they probably died—drowned or frozen to death, or maybe they made it to Mexico, got too drunk, were killed in a fight and dumped in the desert. The mystery of their fate is comforting. They escaped... and then there is an ellipsis that never ends. Callie Khouri, the screenwriter of *Thelma and Louise*, says that people often approach her and say they believe that Thelma and Louise didn't crash, but just drove off the cliff and kept going.



I often think about what it would feel like to escape from prison. How many years of captivity would be worth that euphoria? We all experience those modest jolts sometimes: getting out of work early, not having to attend a dreaded social obligation, a snow day from school. The Transcendental Meditation Movement, like most spiritual organizations, or really any organization period, routinely would have meetings or events that to the children in attendance seemed to last a disconcertingly indeterminable amount of time. I remember being 15 and going with my mom, who is on the board of trustees at the Movement university Maharishi University of Management, to a meeting that was held on the top floor of the World Trade Center in a conference room with panoramic windows to the New York skyline. I remember looking out the window from the morning light to the magic hour, freezing the image in my mind like the character in the Borges story who can take a day to remember an entire day precisely moment by moment. And I remember how delicious the pizza we ate at twilight was when the meeting finally ended.

I have been thinking about freedom, what true freedom for a human might mean. I won't ever experience it; I can't even really conceive of it. But I can dream. I can dream of what a person so full of life as Christopher Daniel Gray could be if he wasn't constantly imprisoned and trying to escape. So I raise a glass, and I ask that you join me in listening to one of my favorite songs by the Jamaican legends the Paragons, who began in that bright fleeting window between the end of a colonial empire and the beginning of a multinational corporate one. As they sing: "Love that runs away from me, dreams that just won't let me be, blues that keeps on bothering me, chains that just won't set me free. So far away from you, so sweet and warm, just out of reach..."





HAIR

They say when your head is cut off,
clean as with a guillotine you remain conscious
for ten seconds.

Ten. That's a long time.

Enough to recite the alphabet at least twice.

Enough to say the names of all the people
who truly meant something to you.

Or apologize for all your misdeeds in an earnest
general way: I'm sorry to all the people I hurt.

Long enough to remember some of the best times of your life,
those tiny moments that prick memory like ornament glass.

The time you drove a yellow convertible through fog so thick,
you didn't realize you crossed the Golden Gate bridge until you reached the other side.

The time you swam and made love at midnight in a river
still and reflective as enamel to the waterlog of submerged city sounds.

But what about the physical?

If you're thinking, you're probably feeling.

If not pain, then place.

Would those sweet thoughts pass if your head
was tumbling in spongy red dirt?

The kind that clouds like sea foam.

It would be kindergarten, when you were rolled up into a plush

12 foot rug of infinite dustiness,

except now the ground would be the rug

and it would go on forever.

If you were sputtering grit, would you be able to remember the time you

And your friend watched glowing Greenland from the tin syrup light of an airplane?

What would you do?

What would you want your head to fall in?

Velvet box?

Baby pool?

Bonfire?

I'd beg to be dropped onto a catapult and launched in the air.

I'd play myself as a baby-faced blue blood,

my family's lawyer would plead for my last wish

across liquid oak and lamps sleeping in a forest canopy.

I would get it.

My head would drop into the catapult's mouth.

It would be lined with a simple cotton pillow.

Someone really on the ball would make sure it activated

Right when my head hit the cushion.

My head would fly through the empty air.

The sky would be so blue it would almost feel liquid.

The expanse of the air and the insignificance of my tiny

head would be deeply fulfilling, I would feel assimilated

like those sea creatures that are mostly water

and are more a part of the ocean than anything else.

I would expire before my arc began to fall.

I would look directly into the sun.

My hair blown back, would feel softer than the strands of a peach.

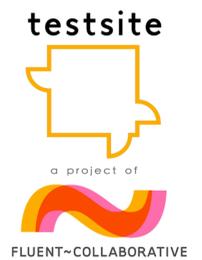
My hair would be happy.

My hair would have more time to live and grow.

—Neil Fauerso

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