“Ideas of order”\(^1\) are ours to refuse, although preferring loss may be pathology.\(^2\)

We dismiss the grave sun (“bull fire”)\(^3\) to graze like bulls on wind (“\(ru’et\) ruah”),\(^4\)
sacrificing all but ourselves and this understanding of wind:

that it shifts as we shift, shadowlessly, reconciled to \(hevel\)\(^5\) without aggrandizing complaint.\(^6\)

But, to be clear, none of this bravely. Not bravely.
1 Made of ourselves, against “the meaningless plungings of water and the wind” (Stevens 1990, 129).

2 Melancholics: lovers of loss, psyches husked in the (black) sun.¹

3 Stevens’ ceremonious sun, “that brave man,”ii was the center of his modernity.

4 “Ru’et ruah,” from Koheleth (Ecclesiastes), is often rendered: ‘chasing after wind’ or ‘ vexation of the spirit.’ It means to pasture, to graze on wind (see Dor-Shav, 2004, 220), to travel with the wind and not the flock toward the next nourishment, to believe the wind’s sustenance.

5 Hevel is Hebrew for breath, vapor. Cognate with Abel, it connotes substancelessness. When Koheleth says, “All is vanity” (Eccl. 1:2), he says, “All is hevel.”

6 E.g., “vanity and chasing.”

¹ The term “black sun” comes from Gérard de Nerval (“Porte le Soleil noir de la Mélancolie”), who hanged himself from a grating on the rue de la Vieille Lanterne. Julia Kristeva (1989) used it to mean obsession with impossible maternal return. Melancholy is to burn in black sun, to turn in endless orbit, because, after all, it is still hot with mother’s residue, hissing like mother, still as mother was still, rather than depart for a different dark.

ii “Tomorrow when the sun, / For all your images, / Comes up as the sun, bull fire, / Your images will have left / No shadow of themselves” (Stevens 1990, 198).
In the hope of evoking your self, you keep a journal in the second person. In the hope of marking this self, you sketch little pictures next to your words: two bugs copulating, a desiccated palm frond, the road to the dépotoir.

You write of your adventure honestly, respectfully, but you also watch and judge yourself. The endeavor turns out to be a bit Foucauldian, a bit Care of the Self (1988), a bit self-governmental, but you don’t know that yet because you have not yet read that much Foucault.

Instead, you are content with your new relationship, in which you demand honesty, exhort self-sacrifice, bear witness —

— gladly the cross I’d bear bear children grin and bear it bear weight bear fruit bear repeating bear gifts bear scrutiny bear responsibility bear the sins of the father bear down bear in mind —

to your secret and strange thoughts and actions.
For this labor you earn a kind of self-love, self-love and good will, good will and confidence. It is a bargain.

§

When there are no bathrooms, no bedrooms, no rooms of any kind, you have to masturbate during ‘showers,’ which begin when you draw a bucket of frigid, foul water from a deep rock well and end when you pour the water over your sunstricken head while hiding behind the largest tree in the yard.

This difficulty inspires the idea that, for once, you are ‘out there,’ having ‘real experiences,’ in ‘the real world,’ where ‘real people’ don’t enjoy private rooms, hot showers, or leisure time to indulge in unproductive luxuries.

One day you come to believe that all the showering and masturbating and sleeping and reading and television-watching you have done in your life is a horrific quantity of inexperience, the result of continual efforts to avoid that which is not familiar, controlled, self-contained. Worse: a definable mass of decadence, a dark substance you have in-
gested and must expel. But your decadence is great and will remain lodged inside you until you expiate it in the agony of sun and labor and sickness and poverty and exhaustion.

When we speak of experience, we mean ‘direct,’ ‘hands-on’ experience, which is to be distinguished from the ‘indirect,’ ‘hands-off’ experience that is, curiously, disparaged as so much ‘intellectual masturbation.’ It must be that when we put our ‘hands on’ experience, we imagine ourselves to be engaged in a sort of coitus, a relationship, a rendezvous avec l’autre, whereas when we take our ‘hands off,’ we are merely alone in the private chambers of our minds, playing with ourselves.

Thinking, it would seem, by ignoring the desired otherness and relatedness of experience, is accused of onanism, of narcissism, of an un(re)productive withdrawal into the self, a retreat which is thought to ignore living others and their (and our) (re)productive needs. We might even say that thinking is imagined to sterilize or negate the sexual relationships between self, other, and offspring which assure our collective security and survival.
Consider Wallace Stevens’ “Esthétique du Mal” (1990, 323, part XII):

He disposes the world in categories, thus: The peopled and the unpeopled. In both, he is Alone. But in the peopled world, there is, Besides the people, his knowledge of them. In The unpeopled, there is his knowledge of himself. Which is more desperate in the moments when The will demands that what he thinks be true?

Is it himself in them that he knows or they In him? If it is himself in them, they have No secret from him. If it is they in him, He has no secret from them. This knowledge Of them and of himself destroys both worlds, Except when he escapes from it. To be Alone is not to know them or himself.

This creates a third world without knowledge, In which no one peers, in which the will makes no Demands. It accepts whatever is as true, Including pain, which, otherwise, is false. In the third world, then, there is no pain. Yes, but What lover has one in such rocks? …

This perplexed agony of mutual interdependence and interpenetration (“Is it himself in them … or they / In him?”) and the impossibility of secrets due to intrusive knowing
seem to make relating impossible: an essential part of a drama predicated on the belief that knowing somehow both neglects and overwhelms the other and the self, destroying the possibility of relating to others in the world.

But what is left once the knowing of self and others is destroyed is not a fertile co-experience but the most desolate of *environs*, an apparent escape from the apparently destructive consumptiveness of thought, but a place where the self can find only unknowable experience (“To be / Alone is not to know”), reunion with “whatever is” and acceptance of “whatever is as true / Including pain.” This thought-less, knowledge-less experience is to be isolated, to be reduced to passivity, to submit to and obey all things, “including pain.” The “third world” is not a world of robust or creative experiencing, but a world without subjectivity, without possibility, without love (“the will makes no / Demands … / but / What lover has one in such rocks?”).

These reflections sound like confused considerations of the “third area of experiencing” that D.W. Winnicott associated with transitional phenomena, play, and cultural life:
where the self and the not-self, the internal and the external worlds, are creatively bridged and blended (1989, 58). Creativity and play are impossible if they result in (or are feared to result in) intrusions that collapse or erase self-boundaries (i.e., “no secret”). Because transitional phenomena involve a blending of the self and the world, we can become afraid not only of having our secrets stolen but of own power to penetrate others’ and to reconstruct the world according to our whims, to unsettle life’s solidity (i.e., “rocks”).
It is no coincidence that in John Guare’s stunning play, *Six Degrees of Separation*, much of the action takes place within private residences, while two of the would-be ‘victims,’ wealthy art dealers Flan and Ouisa Kittredge, frame the narrative by relating their experience at parties and other social gatherings. The relation between social or public histories and the more private, domestic experience that Paul, the charming conman who schemes his way into their apartment and their lives, offers them is at the very heart of the drama. Indeed, in what may be the most important moment of the play, Ouisa blusters that they are turning their engrossing and painful experience with Paul into an anecdote to dine out on. Or dine in on. But it was an experience. I will not turn him into an anecdote. How do we fit what happened to us in life without turning it into an anecdote with no teeth and a punch line you’ll mouth over and over years to come. ‘Tell the story about the imposter who came into our lives—’ ‘That reminds me of the time this boy—.’ And
we become these human juke boxes spilling out these anecdotes. But it was an experience. How do we keep the experience? (1994, 117–118)

Ouisa gives voice to the common fear that in communicating experience we will lose it, that in profiting from it we will no longer serve it, that in cleaning it up (as Paul cleaned himself up) and making it attractive for guests at a dinner party (as Paul made himself attractive for the Kittredges and their dinner guest), we will no longer honor it. More than the loss of experience, in telling and retelling the experience, Ouisa fears she and her husband are losing their very humanity, their selves, that instead of living, real people, they have become mere “human juke boxes.”

Would simply not talking about Paul allow Ouisa to keep her experience and, so, to keep her self? Why must she be connected with Paul and her experience of Paul in order to keep herself? Is it necessary for her to remain connected with Paul in a literal sense, perhaps to invite Paul back into her home, although this invitation would surely involve continued suffering and although, at any rate, it is im-
possible because the conman known as Paul has been arrested without Ouisa ever having learned Paul’s real name?

Ouisa’s fear of transforming her experience into an anecdote with no “teeth,” just a “punch line” suggests that, for her, the telling of anecdotes (the word _anecdote_ derives from the Greek for ‘unpublished secrets’) diffuses her private pain, dulls the bite of her experience, disgorges her intimate connection to Paul and the pain she holds inside her, turning her experience and its objects into things she and others can ‘dine out on’ and, perhaps, ‘digest’ together. To keep her experience, Ouisa feels she must keep (perhaps somewhere in her guts) the very personal pain associated with it. Do not our homes, on this line of thought, become the places where we house the special pains that permit us to keep hold of our experience?

§

Repeated African illnesses leave you with a moderate hand-washing compulsion (at least this is how you _experience_ its origin), beginning several years after you depart the con-
tinent, acute in times of private stress, dis-
appearing entirely in moments of public cri-
sis.

Compulsive hand-washing coincides with ob-
 sessive contemplation of the dirty things with
which we live: trash bins, currency, door-
knobs, gas pumps, menus, telephones, and
 eventually the tendrils of infectiousness ex-
tend from your imagination to your body to
an elaborate and nearly visible corporeal-
fantastical web of all you have touched, and all
these items have touched, and all those who
 have touched these items, and all the items
those have touched: The food that descends to
the gut has been carried by the fingers that
have touched the chair sat on by the body that
has knelt on the floor that has been walked on
by the feet that have stepped on the rug that
has been wiped with the shoes that have
marched through roads full of garbage and
shit.

Eventually you see that your ablutions are not
designed to protect you from the filth of the
world but, conversely, to protect others from
you (i.e., ‘garbage and shit’). You are caught,
endeavoring to suppress experience that might
jar garbage loose like dried dirt from a shoe’s tread, washing in order to prevent touching more than being touched, repeating and repeating in order to set the dirty, shameful, destructive self apart. In the end, these repetitions become your most substantial connection to Benin, to your sickness, to that experiencing self. They are what you will have taken home, your sole enduring souvenir.

Of course, neurotic defenses rarely have their roots in particular experiences of twenty-two-year-olds but, rather, in patterns of experience developed throughout infancy and childhood, meaning even apparently new defenses to apparently new dangers may be in an important sense repetitious. Thus, you seriously reflect upon how you came to be a ramasseur des ordures [garbage picker-upper] — sick and soldierly — in the first place.

§

In The Politics of Experience, R.D. Laing argues memorably that although “I cannot experience your experience [and] you cannot experience my experience. … I experience you as experiencing yourself as experienced by me”
(1983, 4–5), and so on. But these possibilities of inter-experience, their impacts on us, and their almost infinite permutations never fully resolve themselves, never lead two or more individuals into a nonproblematic or identical ‘shared experience.’

On the other hand, the trend in ethical theory over the past several decades has been to point out ways that not merely thought, language, identity, and action but experience, personality, embodiment, and affect are not private, but shared, theory-laden, and therefore culturally, historically, and politically constructed. The ‘I’ that writes is not created only by the writer. So, too, the body in the photograph, the embarrassing adolescent memory that still elicits a grimace: These, according to our contemporaries, are not wholly one’s own. To believe they are is to take part in the cult of monadic subjectivity, while to see them as borrowed or shared is to give up on a destructive and isolating fantasy.

Is experience so personal and idiosyncratic that it can never be truly shared? Or is experience so fundamentally constructed and shared that it can never be truly personal,
genuinely private? Why must experience evade either the self or the group? Why is its communicability (either the impossibility of communication or the inevitability of communication) such an important part of our struggle? Does not the mistake that informs this quality of our thought about experience derive from a misunderstanding of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, one in which it is imagined that we must *share* each other’s experience in order to respect each other as subjects, i.e., in order not to abuse each other? Instead, we might say that when we regard one another as subjects, we do so on the grounds of difference, of commensurable experience *not* shared (see Levine 2011). Part of the terror of losing experience, then, seems rooted in a false dilemma by which we feel we must choose between concealing our experience or connecting our experience to others’ by giving up all that is special about it (i.e., isolating our experience or abusing it), between imposing our experience upon others or ignoring their part in shaping our experience (i.e., destroying their experience or ignoring it).

For all of their sanctification of the first-person and of *epochē* [the bracketing of as-
assumptions], the great phenomenologists (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty) permit the verb “to experience” to prop up the noun “experience” in the nominative and accusative. Why we should imagine that “to experience” may generate, yield, or reveal some thing called “experience” is not obvious. (Notice, too, how plausible but imprecise verbs like “to generate,” “to yield,” or “to reveal” lubricate the translation of the verb, “to experience,” to the noun, “experience.”) Perhaps we should never say “experience” without pinching ourselves. If experience is not a thing in itself and if we can not experience intransitively — We can not just experience full stop — then when we praise experience we must also praise the objects of our experience, whatever they may be: God, nature, power, reality, the community, the body, fortune. We praise not only these objects but the particular manner of relating to these objects that we call ‘experiencing them,’ a manner of relating whose result we call ‘experience.’

§

One month after you return to America, your
parents forward you a letter sent from Abraham. It reads:

Cher Papa et Maman,

Grande est ma joie de vous écrit cette lettre rien que pour vous salue; comment vous vous portez. Vous écrit est une joie parce que j'ai eu le privilège de connaître votre fils Mathieu qui a été avec moi durant son séjour en Afrique précisément au Benin (Porto-Novo).

Mathieu est très gentille et sage et correcte; ce qui ma permis de dit que il a des bons parents. Papa Maman je vous aimes beaucoup et très heureux de connaître votre enfant qui a été un vrai ami; Mathieu une donne des conseil dans ma vie surtout quand je suis découragé il a réjouie.

Mathieu a été à Natitingou connaître mes parents et les frères; je suis content Papa Maman je vous aime et je dois vous connaître voila pourquoi j'écrit pour informe que j'aime toute votre famille.
Quand j’ai constaté le voyage de Mathieu, j’étais vraiment découragé mais je vous aime.

Au revoir Papa Maman,
Mouru Abraham

[Dear Dad and Mom,

Great is my joy to write you if only to greet you; how are you? It is a joy to write you because I have had the privilege of knowing your son Matthew, who was with me during his stay in Africa, precisely in Benin (Porto-Novò).

Matthew is very nice and wise and proper; which permits me to say he has good parents. Dad Mom I love you very much and am very happy to know your child who has been a true friend; Matthew gave me advice in my life especially when I was discouraged he cheered me up.

Matthew was in Natitingou to meet my parents and brothers; I am glad Dad
Mom I love you and I would like to meet you that is why I write to tell you I love all your family.

When I realized Matthew was leaving, I was truly discouraged but I love you.

Goodbye Dad Mom,
Mouru Abraham]

You are troubled by this otherwise touching letter because it is addressed to your parents, and not to you, and because it may or may not include a plea to invite Abraham to America to live with you, to be a part of your family.

Surely, Abraham could not be blamed for making such a plea. And yet, does his letter mean that your friendship was something other than friendship? Does it mean that you shared nothing of your experience, that you and he were merely exploiting each other, you for an exotic experience, him for the hope of escape? Or does it suggest that you shared too much, experienced too much, took or gave too much?

You recall the way old men and young boys
constantly taunted you, followed you through markets and roads shouting “Yobo! Yobo! Yobo!” [White! White! White!], which of course reminded you of the legacy white invaders have left in places like Benin, and of the fact that you were another white invader in a long line.

You recall the way Abraham and you walked around town holding hands, as is the custom for male friends, and of the evening when the inevitable cries of Yobo began and Abraham exploded: “E no nyi Yobo à!” [His name is not Yobo!].

You remember your terror at the thought that you had made a terrible mess of Abraham’s life, had attached yourself to him in a way that set him at odds with his own experience, had somehow interrupted or interfered with his pressing concerns (employment, housing, marriage), had somehow implied a promise impossible to keep.