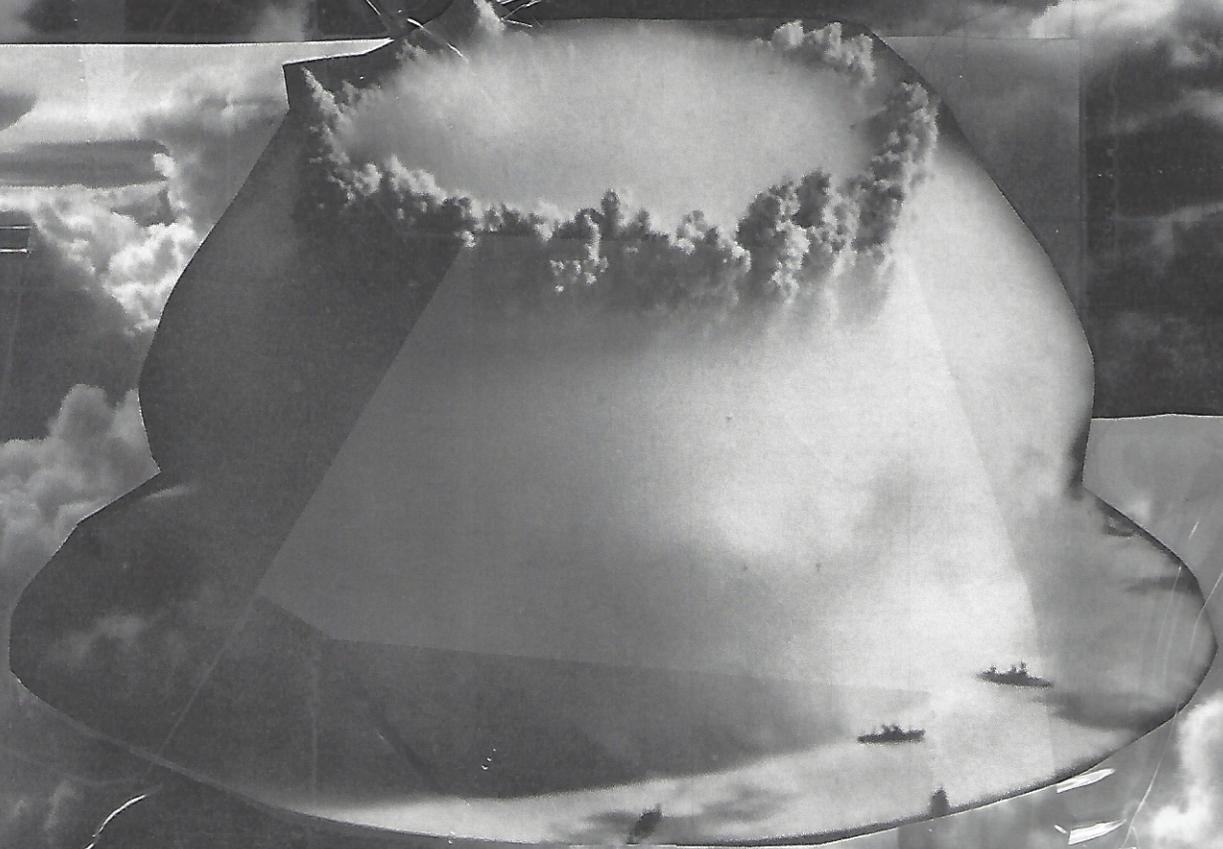
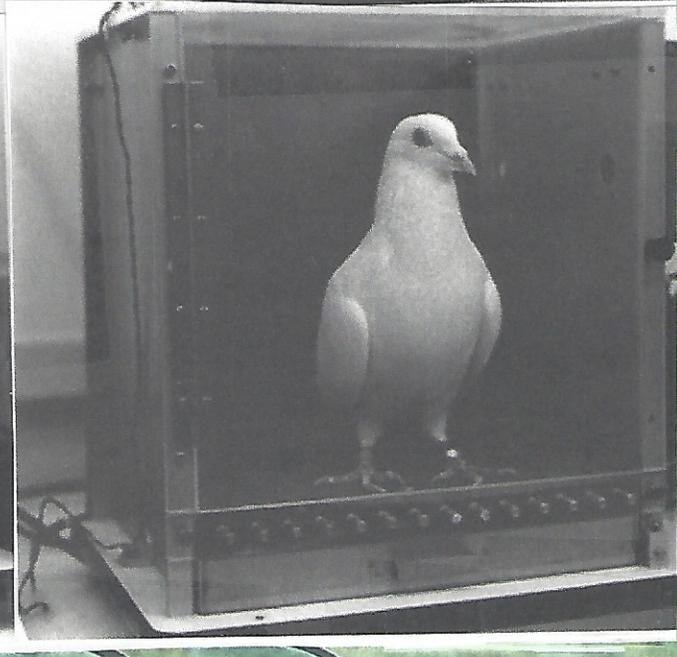
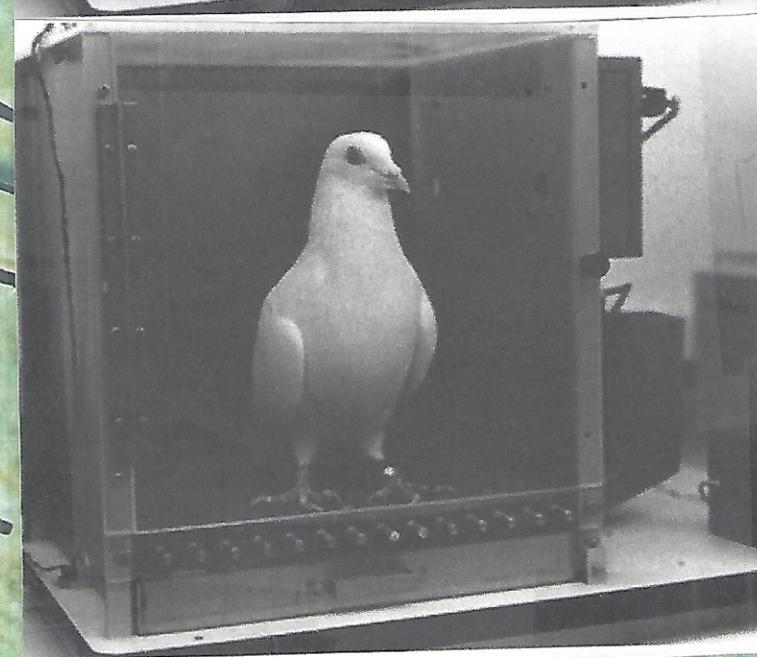
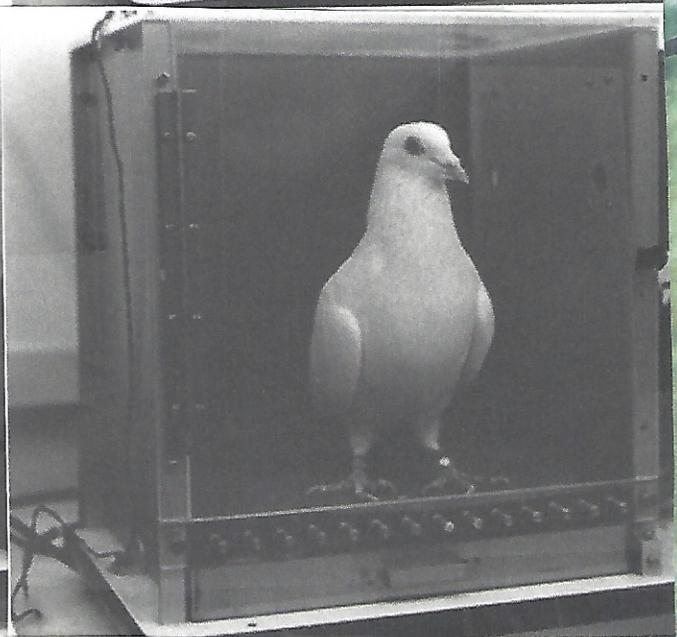
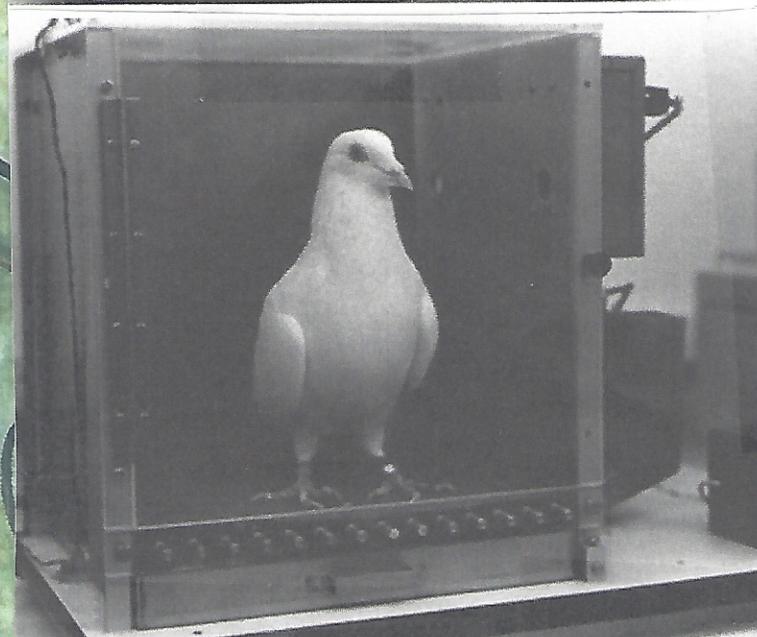
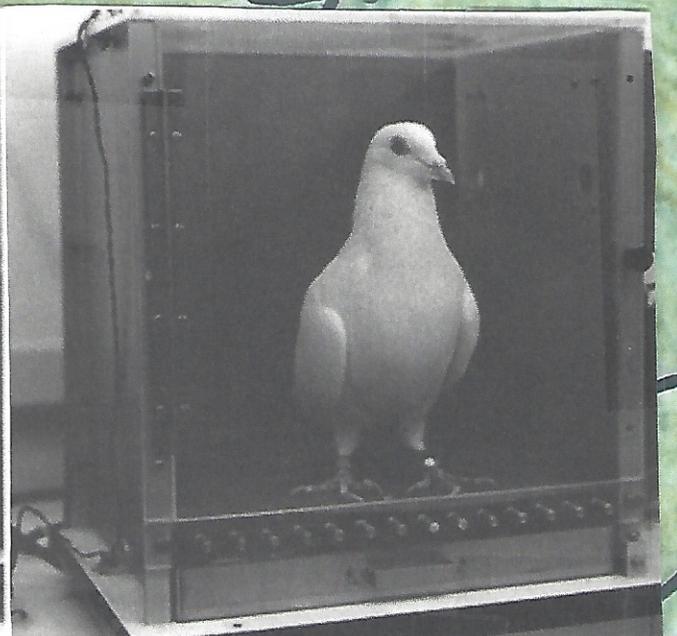
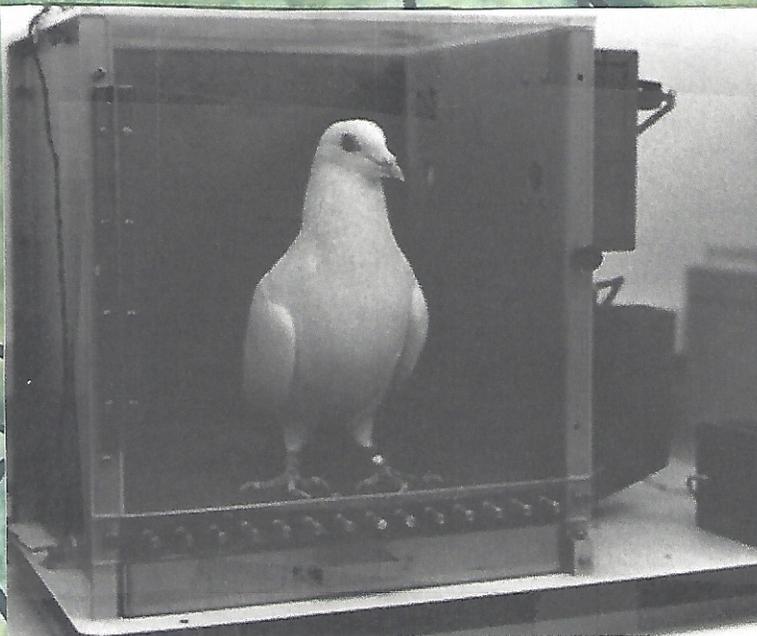


ARBOR



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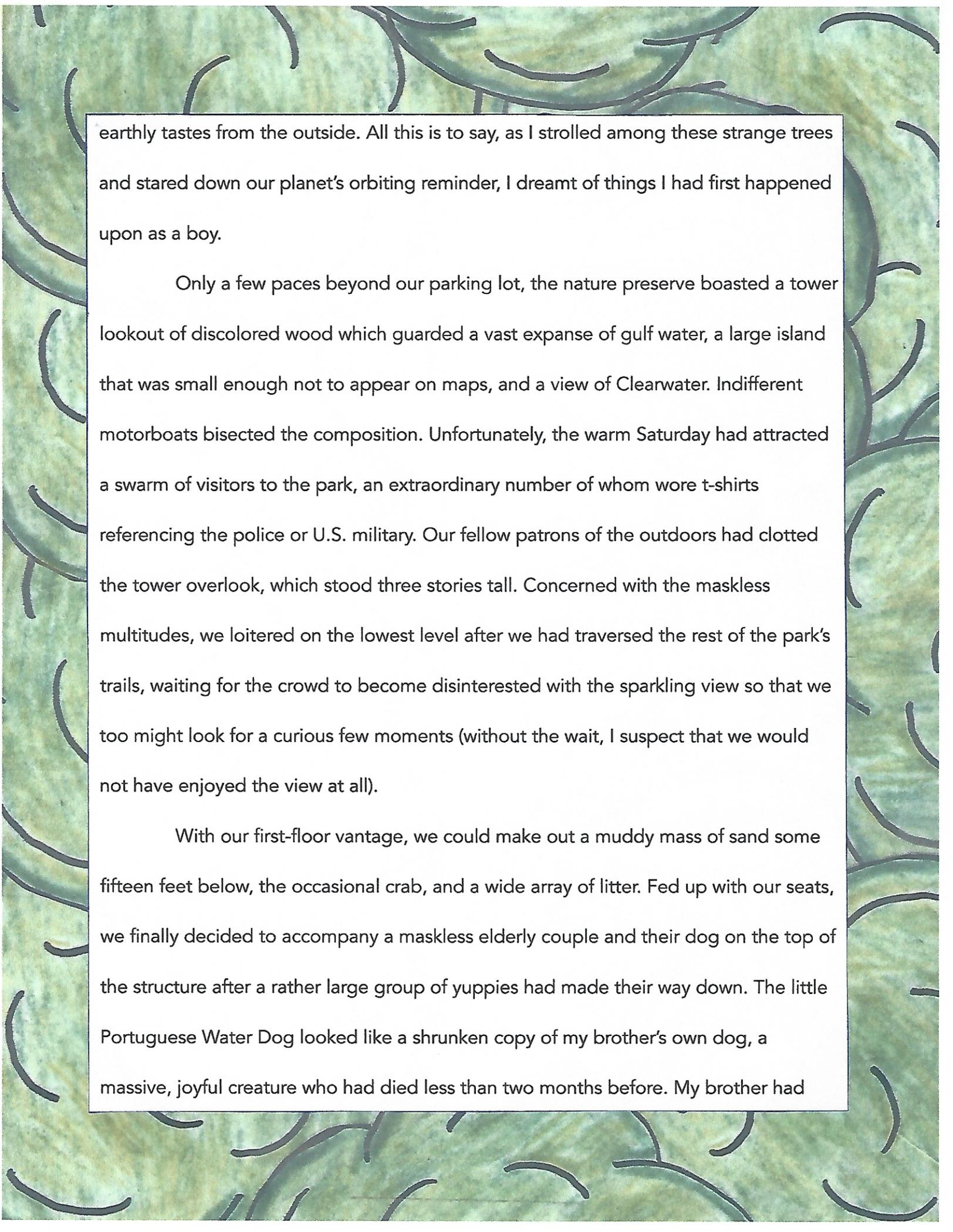
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Excerpt from *Cope Quietly*

Exactly one week after our acid trip and two days before I was to return to Boston, my brother took me to an impossibly green nature preserve with a few sprawling, well-polished wooden paths that you might expect a hopeful Eagle Scout to have made in a rush. With little elevation and thick mangroves populated by indistinguishable, craggy trees clothed in Spanish moss, I couldn't help but imagine myself within a science fiction narrative, ewoks and all. A nearly full moon made itself visible in the clear sky.

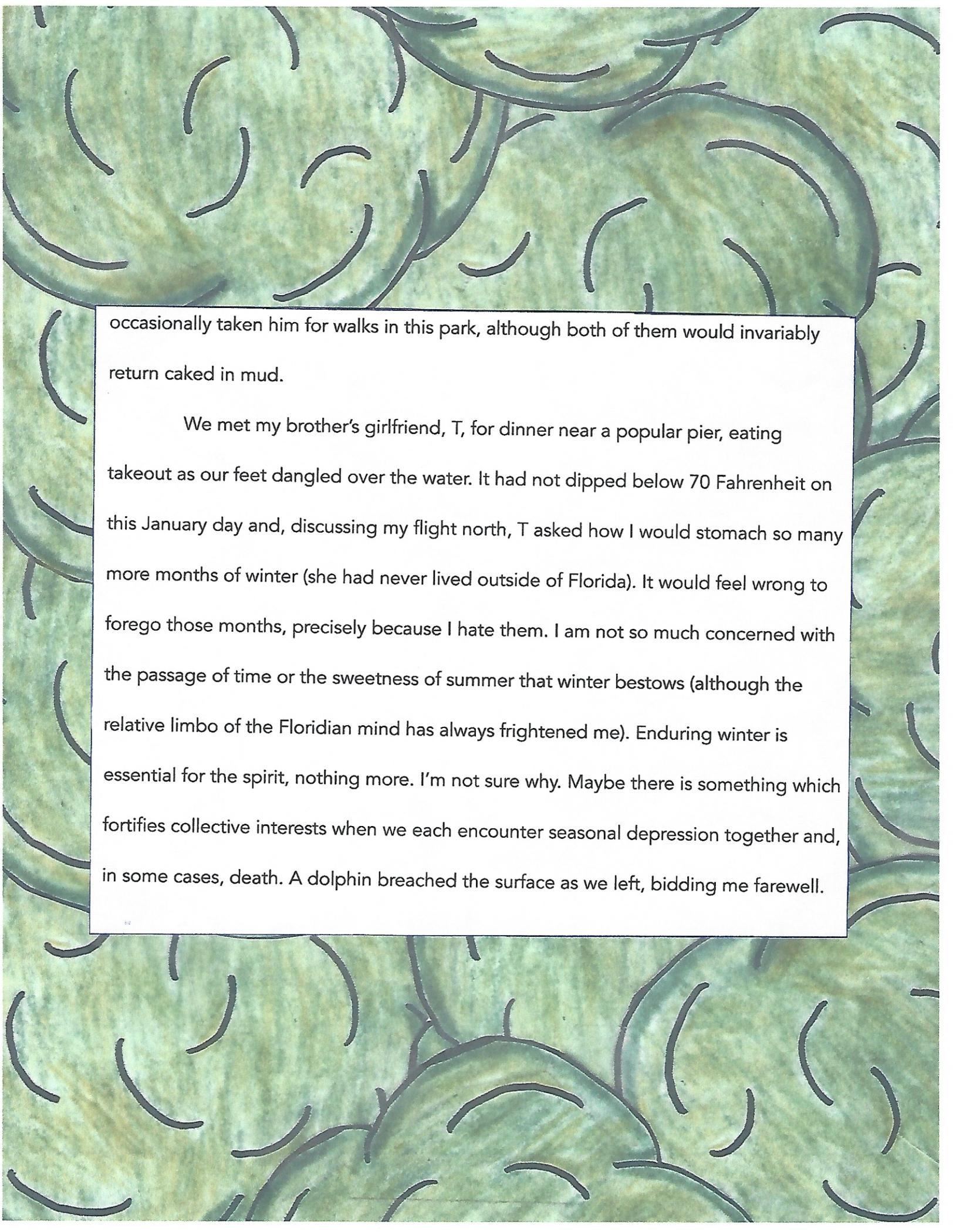
The previous night I had remarked upon the wafery Floridian clouds which retain so much pink light at this latitude and this close to the Atlantic. Despite the various pollutions here, one can always find the incessant purity of the sky underneath these watery vessels. At night, celestial markings peak through the gaping pockmarks among walls of spider-like clouds. I told my brother that such scenes have always brought to mind our cosmic relationship—we are not alone, though my brother would have you believe otherwise. I am used to seeing stars from beyond clouds in Boston. In Florida, however, you seem to see clouds through the skies. In the same spirit, the moon evokes an essentially human response when it shines through the night (pagan ritual, werewolves, etc). I imagine that I'm influenced by the popular culture I consume in this respect. But if I glimpse a lunar frame in daylight, I feel as though I can see my



earthly tastes from the outside. All this is to say, as I strolled among these strange trees and stared down our planet's orbiting reminder, I dreamt of things I had first happened upon as a boy.

Only a few paces beyond our parking lot, the nature preserve boasted a tower lookout of discolored wood which guarded a vast expanse of gulf water, a large island that was small enough not to appear on maps, and a view of Clearwater. Indifferent motorboats bisected the composition. Unfortunately, the warm Saturday had attracted a swarm of visitors to the park, an extraordinary number of whom wore t-shirts referencing the police or U.S. military. Our fellow patrons of the outdoors had clotted the tower overlook, which stood three stories tall. Concerned with the maskless multitudes, we loitered on the lowest level after we had traversed the rest of the park's trails, waiting for the crowd to become disinterested with the sparkling view so that we too might look for a curious few moments (without the wait, I suspect that we would not have enjoyed the view at all).

With our first-floor vantage, we could make out a muddy mass of sand some fifteen feet below, the occasional crab, and a wide array of litter. Fed up with our seats, we finally decided to accompany a maskless elderly couple and their dog on the top of the structure after a rather large group of yuppies had made their way down. The little Portuguese Water Dog looked like a shrunken copy of my brother's own dog, a massive, joyful creature who had died less than two months before. My brother had



occasionally taken him for walks in this park, although both of them would invariably return caked in mud.

We met my brother's girlfriend, T, for dinner near a popular pier, eating takeout as our feet dangled over the water. It had not dipped below 70 Fahrenheit on this January day and, discussing my flight north, T asked how I would stomach so many more months of winter (she had never lived outside of Florida). It would feel wrong to forego those months, precisely because I hate them. I am not so much concerned with the passage of time or the sweetness of summer that winter bestows (although the relative limbo of the Floridian mind has always frightened me). Enduring winter is essential for the spirit, nothing more. I'm not sure why. Maybe there is something which fortifies collective interests when we each encounter seasonal depression together and, in some cases, death. A dolphin breached the surface as we left, bidding me farewell.

Local Malaise

I

'Thinking local' is amoral, not immoral. Morality comes from struggle: we cannot be moral without a temptation to act otherwise. The sheer utility of United States anarchism negates such a choice—and who can blame us for gravitating towards this solution? Mutual aid networks, tenants unions, and other forms of local organizing are indispensable at a moment when state and international power structures remain inflexible in their drive to hoard wealth. Immediate needs must be met.

In the same breath, however, the 'local' disposition admits to a fatalistic vision of the future by way of its self-assured pragmatism. 'We must focus our resources, today, on these immediate needs.' At first glance it presents a strangely cheerful program, although its foundation is consistently left unsaid: *local evils derive from wider systems*. And while it is true that the particular grants access to the universal—that wider systems can only be seen and challenged from the vantage of localized points—the nature of our current predicament demands something new. 'Local' action is too often tainted by the wholesale dismissal, '*we cannot change wider systems.*' With this sense of doom, the 'local' practitioners also admit to this program's own impossibility: without coordination between localities, these individual points of

resistance, aid, or other interpersonal struggles are unsustainable. Local seeds cannot grow in contaminated soil. (Anarchist Accelerationism.)

II

This lack of imagination is not unique to the 'local' Left, but can be found wherever there are critiques of the established global order. In *La Possibilité d'une île*, Michel Houellebecq provides a common diagnosis of the cultural malaise and spiritual corruption endemic of the contemporary West. Daniel, a provocative and unlikable comedian, spends his leisurely days drinking and chasing women. Because of his high celebrity gained from critiques of political correctness and neoliberal politeness, he is rather successful in his latter endeavor. Between escapades, however, Daniel endures two genuine spells of love throughout his life which exacerbate the monotony and fleeting unimportance of his other, purely lustful pursuits.

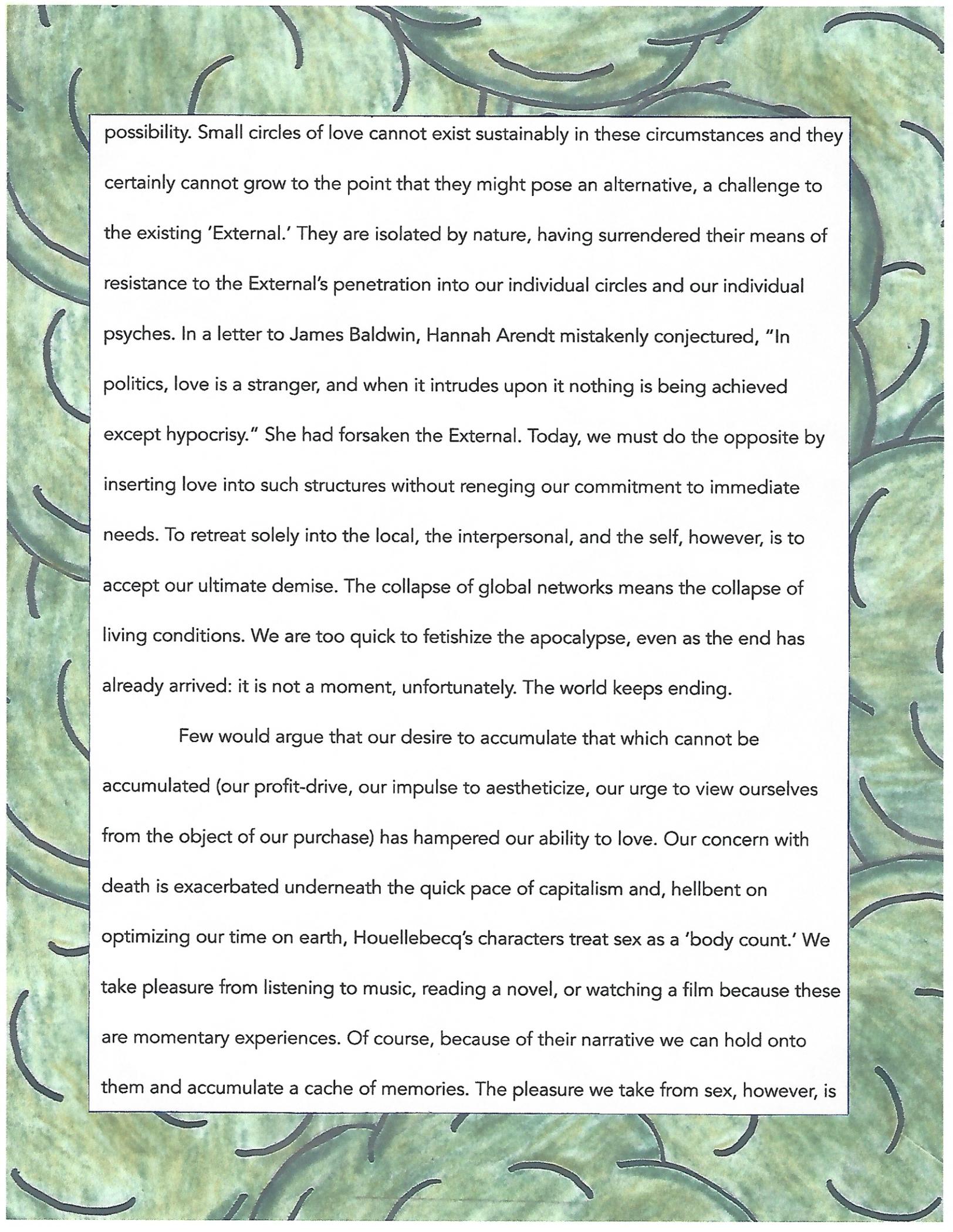
After falling into a cult which promises immortality, Daniel's DNA is cloned after he takes his own life. By the 24th iteration of the man, Daniel₂₄ lacks sexual desire altogether. In Houellebecq's world, our search to optimize, extend, and *accumulate pleasure* during our carnal lifetimes ultimately results in the eradication of pleasure altogether. The 'neohuman' clones live out their lives in an isolated living space physically removed from other beings of their kind, forever searching out

detached, intellectual truths in endless digital libraries which hold biographical accounts of their clone predecessors. Just as the reprehensible Daniel¹ was able to love and be loved by his dog, Fox, Daniel²⁴ likewise lives alongside a cloned version of the animal companion in his neohuman compartment.

“Through these dogs we pay homage to love, and to its possibility... however ugly, perverse, deformed, or stupid this human being might be, the dog loves him. This characteristic was so surprising, so striking for the humans of the previous race that most of them—all testimonies agree on this point—came to love the dog back. The dog was therefore a machine for loving, which could also train others to love—its efficiency, however, remained limited to dogs, and never extended to other men” (Houellebecq, 131).

Believing this societal malaise to be irreversible, Daniel¹ and Daniel²⁴ both find solace in the enclosed, interpersonal relationship between Fox and himself. Houellebecq posits that humanity has lost empathy underneath our *accumulative* designs. Isolated, interpersonal relationships of love, however, can provide a model of hope (the titular ‘possibility of an island’).

But if we believe, as Houellebecq does, that the ‘External’ cannot be salvaged, then a model for love is not applicable outside of itself—there is, in fact, no



possibility. Small circles of love cannot exist sustainably in these circumstances and they certainly cannot grow to the point that they might pose an alternative, a challenge to the existing 'External.' They are isolated by nature, having surrendered their means of resistance to the External's penetration into our individual circles and our individual psyches. In a letter to James Baldwin, Hannah Arendt mistakenly conjectured, "In politics, love is a stranger, and when it intrudes upon it nothing is being achieved except hypocrisy." She had forsaken the External. Today, we must do the opposite by inserting love into such structures without reneging our commitment to immediate needs. To retreat solely into the local, the interpersonal, and the self, however, is to accept our ultimate demise. The collapse of global networks means the collapse of living conditions. We are too quick to fetishize the apocalypse, even as the end has already arrived: it is not a moment, unfortunately. The world keeps ending.

Few would argue that our desire to accumulate that which cannot be accumulated (our profit-drive, our impulse to aestheticize, our urge to view ourselves from the object of our purchase) has hampered our ability to love. Our concern with death is exacerbated underneath the quick pace of capitalism and, hellbent on optimizing our time on earth, Houellebecq's characters treat sex as a 'body count.' We take pleasure from listening to music, reading a novel, or watching a film because these are momentary experiences. Of course, because of their narrative we can hold onto them and accumulate a cache of memories. The pleasure we take from sex, however, is

intrinsically antithetical to accumulation (there is no narrative to recollect or recreate, only experience). Sincere, interpersonal connection is predicated on *present thinking*—something precluded to us underneath our future-oriented, accumulative frame of mind under which we live today. *To accept, to submit to, the catastrophic demise of global networks is the logical outcome of this future-oriented thinking.*

'Well,' you might say, 'local action is expressly present! What could be more present than working to meet a community's immediate needs!' Once again I must reiterate that I am not advocating against these efforts. *Rather, our future itself must be considered as a part of our present, immediate needs! We cannot end with local action.* I am merely proposing an *open future*, not *hopeful* thinking. These defeatists' vision of the future is infused with a pessimism that insists upon its own inevitability—the outward hubris of this program, however, signals the insecurities it harbors towards itself.

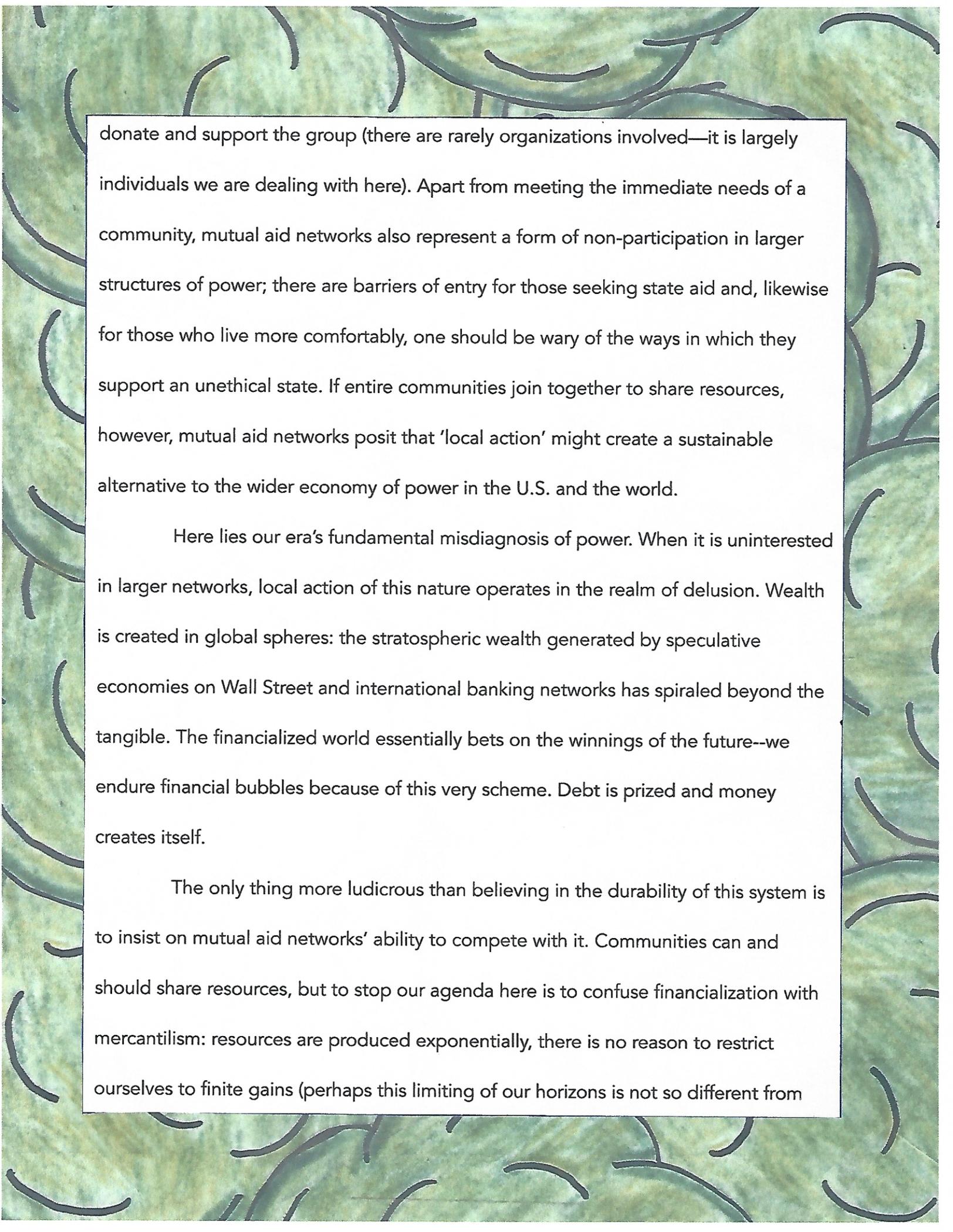
III

Let us consider the character in question, someone who 'thinks local' because of their pessimism with regard to global networks. They say, 'I can work to provide immediate needs for those suffering in my community today, in this very instant. The global order is doomed and our collective standard of living will surely fall, but there is

nothing I can do about that. But here, at least, is a concrete action I can take to alleviate suffering in our present.'

Indeed, this local action is the *only* option that our friend can take. Of course there is *inaction*, but their local action to provide material good, here, is truly amoral: there is no moral choice, really, beyond acting lazily and proceeding with a spirit of diligence built upon guilt (yes, think Weber). Guilt, because, 1) to act lazily is to withhold our ability to contribute good (local and, in my own experience, hamster-wheel-burn-out projects) and 2) if our friend is mistaken and the global order can be salvaged, then they are *actively* contributing to our collective doom by accepting a conceivably *avoidable* catastrophe! (*Roko's Basilisk*, except we are our own retroactive, retributive G-d, here.) Only this amoral notion of the local can absolve such thinking. Their local action is present-oriented in the sense that immediate needs persist, but their action is ultimately grounded in the conviction of a truly apocalyptic future. If we truly want to engage in present thinking, we must include the provision of an *open* future; present-ness cannot abide absolute surety—after all, the *moment* of love is founded upon uncertainty!

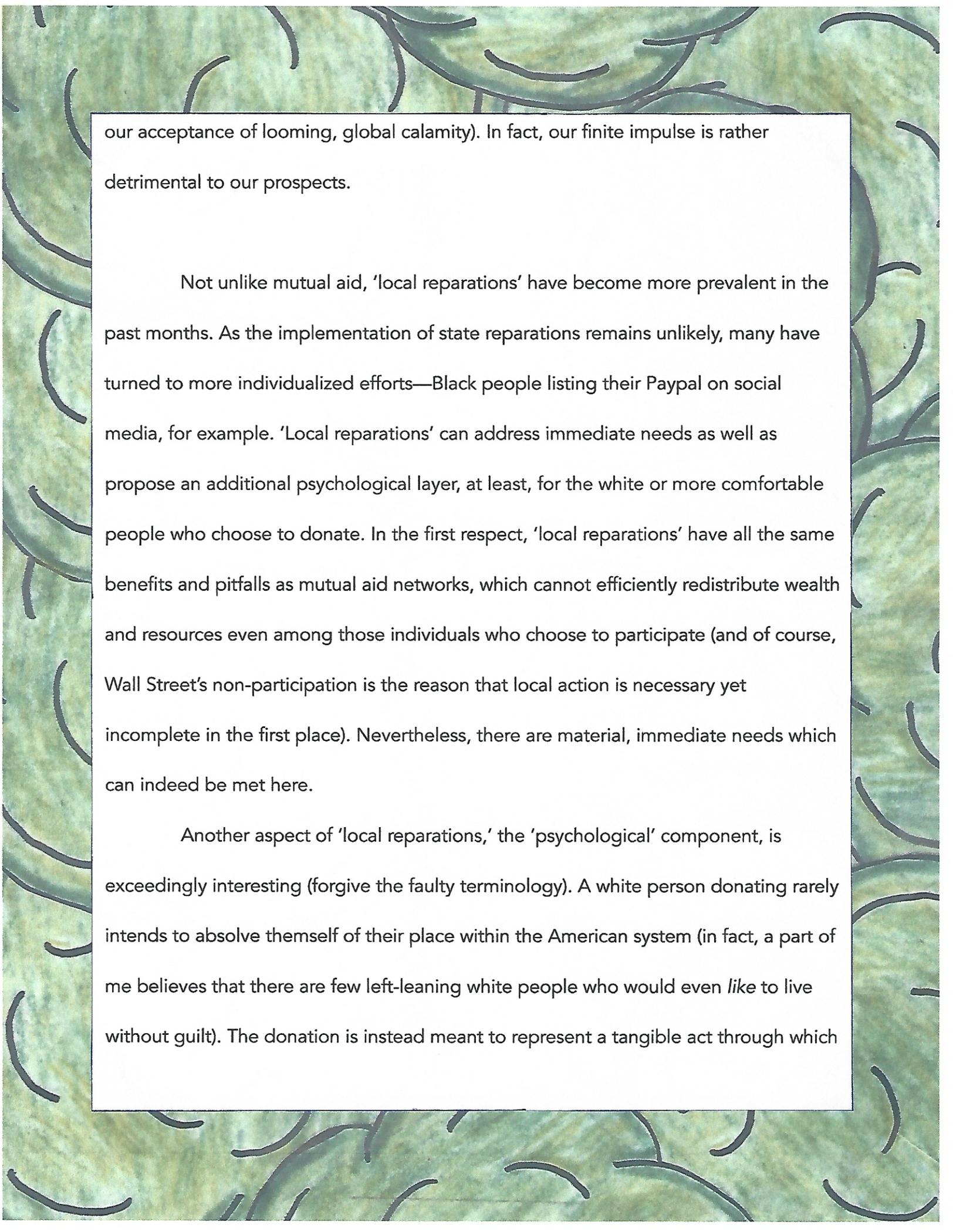
I find that mutual aid networks, though tremendously valuable, offer a perfect case study in this respect. Individuals who need funds, resources, or services can find help in these networks, while individuals in more comfortable circumstances can



donate and support the group (there are rarely organizations involved—it is largely individuals we are dealing with here). Apart from meeting the immediate needs of a community, mutual aid networks also represent a form of non-participation in larger structures of power; there are barriers of entry for those seeking state aid and, likewise for those who live more comfortably, one should be wary of the ways in which they support an unethical state. If entire communities join together to share resources, however, mutual aid networks posit that 'local action' might create a sustainable alternative to the wider economy of power in the U.S. and the world.

Here lies our era's fundamental misdiagnosis of power. When it is uninterested in larger networks, local action of this nature operates in the realm of delusion. Wealth is created in global spheres: the stratospheric wealth generated by speculative economies on Wall Street and international banking networks has spiraled beyond the tangible. The financialized world essentially bets on the winnings of the future—we endure financial bubbles because of this very scheme. Debt is prized and money creates itself.

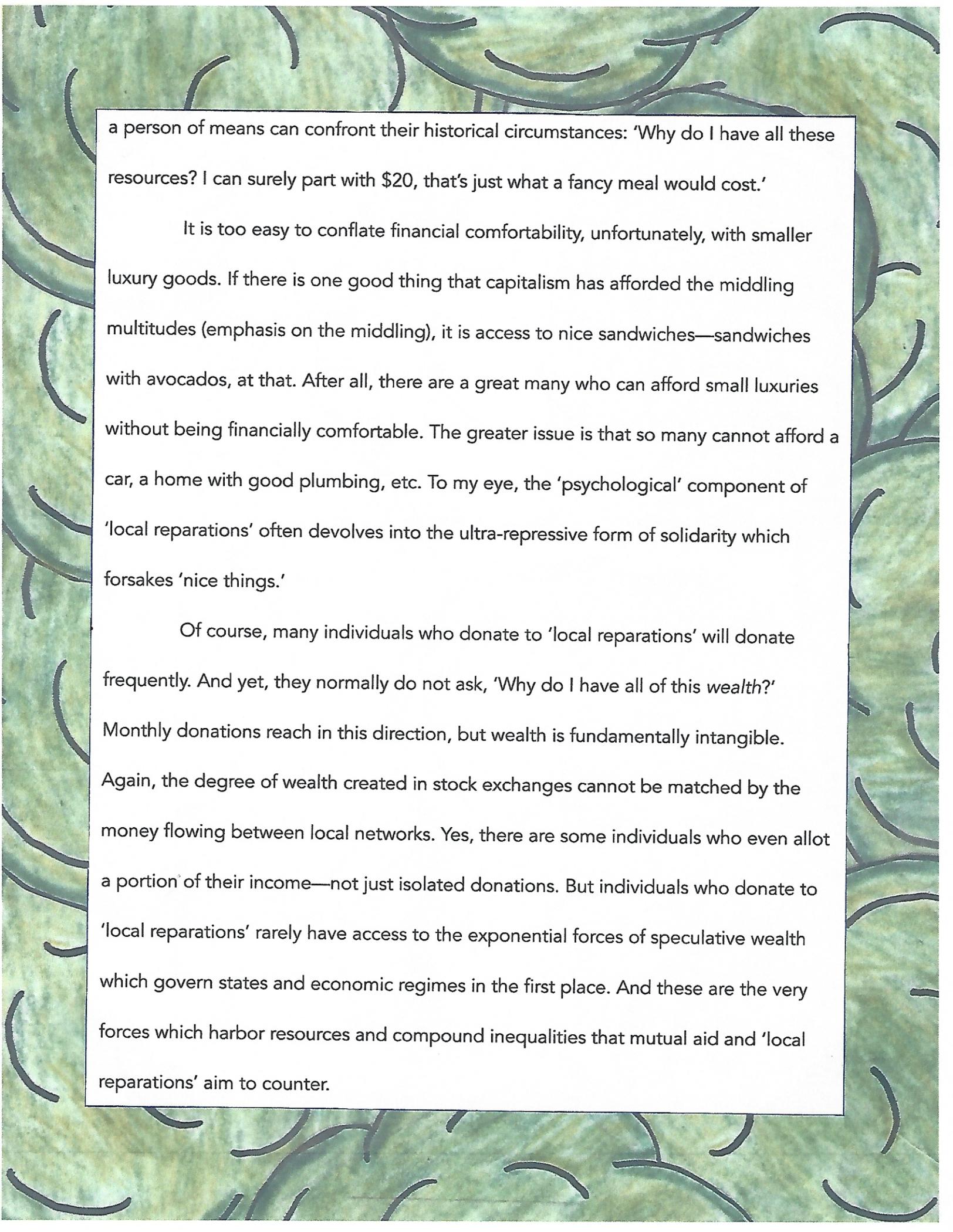
The only thing more ludicrous than believing in the durability of this system is to insist on mutual aid networks' ability to compete with it. Communities can and should share resources, but to stop our agenda here is to confuse financialization with mercantilism: resources are produced exponentially, there is no reason to restrict ourselves to finite gains (perhaps this limiting of our horizons is not so different from



our acceptance of looming, global calamity). In fact, our finite impulse is rather detrimental to our prospects.

Not unlike mutual aid, 'local reparations' have become more prevalent in the past months. As the implementation of state reparations remains unlikely, many have turned to more individualized efforts—Black people listing their Paypal on social media, for example. 'Local reparations' can address immediate needs as well as propose an additional psychological layer, at least, for the white or more comfortable people who choose to donate. In the first respect, 'local reparations' have all the same benefits and pitfalls as mutual aid networks, which cannot efficiently redistribute wealth and resources even among those individuals who choose to participate (and of course, Wall Street's non-participation is the reason that local action is necessary yet incomplete in the first place). Nevertheless, there are material, immediate needs which can indeed be met here.

Another aspect of 'local reparations,' the 'psychological' component, is exceedingly interesting (forgive the faulty terminology). A white person donating rarely intends to absolve themselves of their place within the American system (in fact, a part of me believes that there are few left-leaning white people who would even *like* to live without guilt). The donation is instead meant to represent a tangible act through which



a person of means can confront their historical circumstances: 'Why do I have all these resources? I can surely part with \$20, that's just what a fancy meal would cost.'

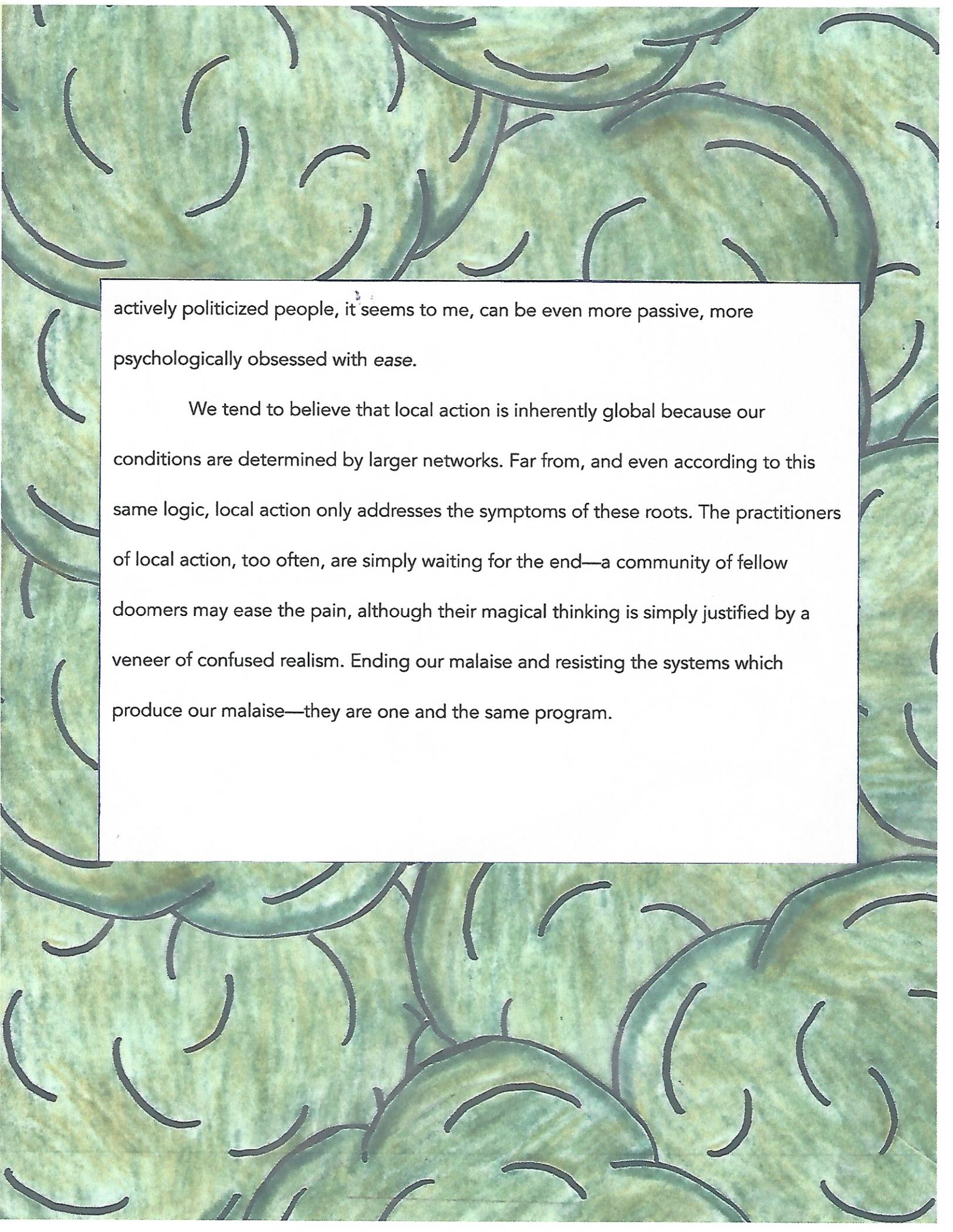
It is too easy to conflate financial comfortability, unfortunately, with smaller luxury goods. If there is one good thing that capitalism has afforded the middling multitudes (emphasis on the middling), it is access to nice sandwiches—sandwiches with avocados, at that. After all, there are a great many who can afford small luxuries without being financially comfortable. The greater issue is that so many cannot afford a car, a home with good plumbing, etc. To my eye, the 'psychological' component of 'local reparations' often devolves into the ultra-repressive form of solidarity which forsakes 'nice things.'

Of course, many individuals who donate to 'local reparations' will donate frequently. And yet, they normally do not ask, 'Why do I have all of this *wealth*?' Monthly donations reach in this direction, but wealth is fundamentally intangible. Again, the degree of wealth created in stock exchanges cannot be matched by the money flowing between local networks. Yes, there are some individuals who even allot a portion of their income—not just isolated donations. But individuals who donate to 'local reparations' rarely have access to the exponential forces of speculative wealth which govern states and economic regimes in the first place. And these are the very forces which harbor resources and compound inequalities that mutual aid and 'local reparations' aim to counter.

IV

Good faith readership may not exist in 2021, so I feel that, once more, I must unequivocally state that local action is necessary and immensely impactful (this includes mutual aid and 'local reparations,' of course). It is merely a product of a broader disillusionment with global networks and a general conviction in a coming doom that we have sunk entirely within these isolated forms of social engagement, this local thinking.

In the end, these strategies are not forms of resistance. They are forms of community which improve lives. In my view, those who remain apolitical attempt to minimize moral struggle and maximize communal possibility, however superfluous this possibility might be in a room filled with apolitical souls: *our human connections and our empathetic capabilities are lessened when we repress or reduce our personal moral struggles*. Our human capacity itself is lessened. If there is one quality that has dictated the trajectory of the past few decades, it is our categorical acceptance of ease; deep in our hearts, we have all been taught that ease is desirable, supreme. Even in the occasional instance of diligence, we insist on a work ethic in order to *resist* the undeniability of ease's 'truth.' We resist excess because we have already accepted a culture of excess, for example. This passivity is not unique to the apolitical—in fact,

The background of the page is a textured pattern of wavy, organic shapes in shades of green and blue, resembling a microscopic view of cells or a natural fabric pattern. The shapes are irregular and flow across the page, creating a sense of movement and depth.

actively politicized people, it seems to me, can be even more passive, more psychologically obsessed with ease.

We tend to believe that local action is inherently global because our conditions are determined by larger networks. Far from, and even according to this same logic, local action only addresses the symptoms of these roots. The practitioners of local action, too often, are simply waiting for the end—a community of fellow doomers may ease the pain, although their magical thinking is simply justified by a veneer of confused realism. Ending our malaise and resisting the systems which produce our malaise—they are one and the same program.

Sprawling Cities

I: EOTECHNIC

Phantasms of a gentle stream, and dim
Marshlights and silhouettes in the east wind,
And the saplings, treadles, and wooden gears
Bound together to feed the great windmill,
An abstraction of the body and mind.
Its petals spun and wafted off the long,
Forgotten dreams and icons of the past,
With goblets once full of Pramnian wine,
The hand-mirrors, flasks, and jeweled-trinkets,
Strewn atop the mountainous rubbish heaps,
Collecting dust and dirt and broken glass.
But what came was a new light, a new dream,
Seen within the scopes of iron and glass,
Upon far-off planets and near-by plagues,
Revelations of the ceaseless and not.

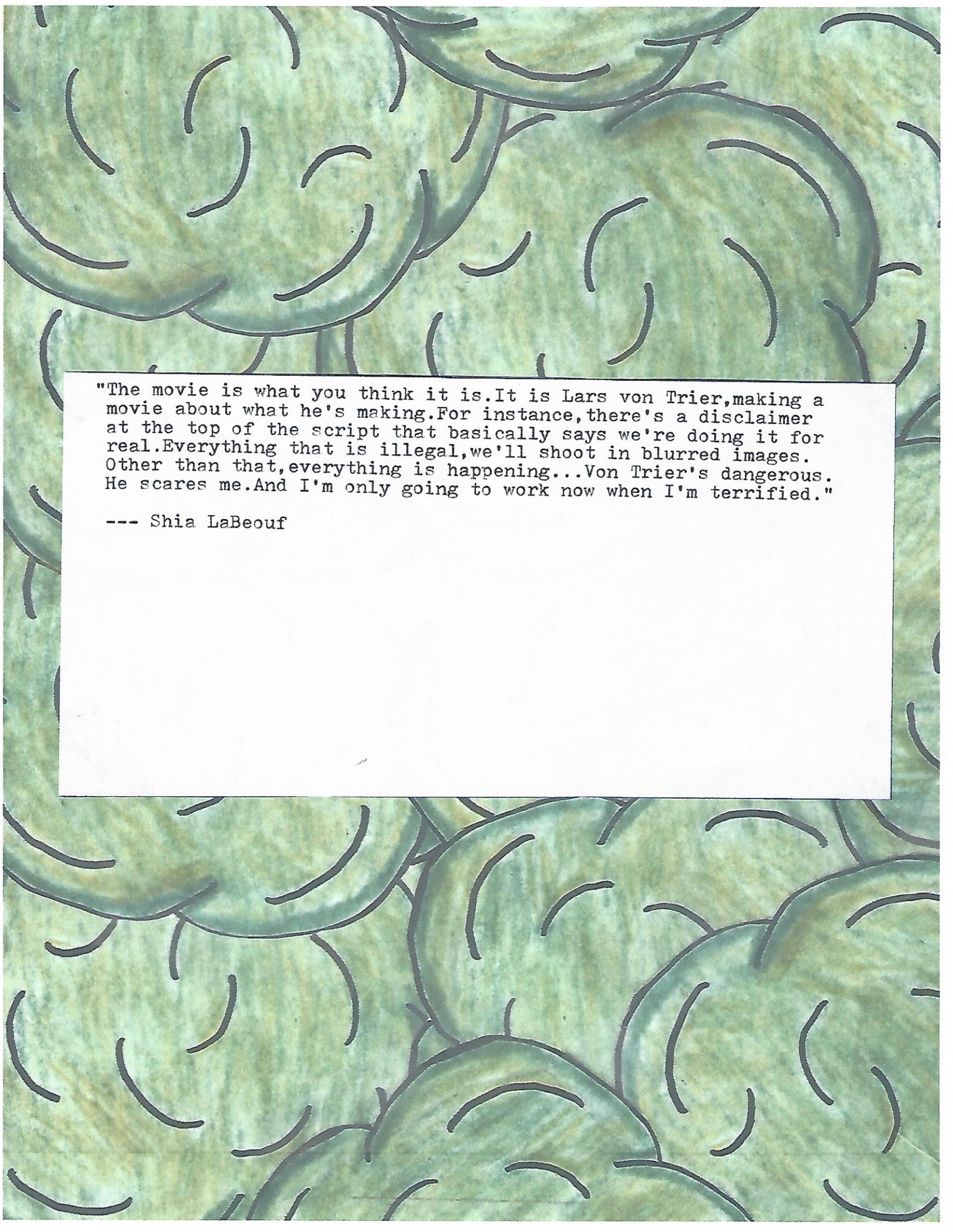
II: PALEOTECHNIC

Darkness overhead soon shrouded the skies.
For the coal burned, the water churned for the
Perpetual turns of the shafts and rods.
The locomotive roared like a wild beast;
Omniscient, it tore through the dark slums,
As smokestacks, billowing, black and heavy,
Amidst metal clangs, rose from its chimney.
And peasants too toiled amidst these clangs,
And of the lawless cries of the steel bird---
Confine it to the hills, to the valleys!
And all the while, deep within the shanties,
A girl, Ada, placed before her mirror,
Washed away the filth and smog of the town,
Thinking thoughts already thought, wondering
Wonders of who she really is or was.

III: NEOTECHNIC

Colossal and cloud-capped, the city had
Transformed into the great Metropolis
Of iron phalluses against the sun,
Of its streets in shadows to be consumed,
Where no one would escape its endless reach.
But a bird would soar across these shadows,
Among freedom, turning its alloyed blades,
And of its contrails that passed, through and through,
The city's heart of iron valves had birthed,
The holy lights, slogans, and coughing fumes,
Those mechanized lives en masse, eternal.
They would find no solace in the tunnels
Of railways that wind and of total darkness.
And though they'd embrace the light of the day,
Only peace would arise among the grave.

RIP VAN



"The movie is what you think it is. It is Lars von Trier, making a movie about what he's making. For instance, there's a disclaimer at the top of the script that basically says we're doing it for real. Everything that is illegal, we'll shoot in blurred images. Other than that, everything is happening... Von Trier's dangerous. He scares me. And I'm only going to work now when I'm terrified."

--- Shia LaBeouf

zhao/bergman/von trier
by hegelsh

chloé zhao has made three films. *songs my brother taught me*, *the rider*, and *nomadland*. in them, she films real people. she stages, but she asks real people to do real things. usually, they are things they have already done. *ride a horse*. the one you fell off of. *sing the song you sang when your brother was ill*. yes, that one. *what was it you said when you reasoned existence to itself?* yes, say that, just how you said it.

in the *rider*, all *whiteness* faces itself. she takes the real family trio of brother/sister/father and films what was the son's rodeo mishap. near-paralysis. denial. horses exchanged at night with hope to ride again. maybe. *i'm thinking about it*. and is anything really lost? as far as the quality of realness, which we can sometimes glimpse when we see something of which a great deal has been said. appeared before us. struck by the sense that this thing, this person, is the quality of reality before us. what is lost if I exchange again the horse which, in the vision of my life, I really gave away, and which now I return to, in part because i've been asked to do it again. *to do what?* it.

in celan's poetry, *it* is a figuration of being. it does not refer, but situates the possible conditions of reference within itself, so that if you want to speak on it, you need *it*. zhao is not so indiscernible, because, for her, reality is not at a stand-still with itself. if it approves itself in repetition, it only succeeds in asking the same mystery twice. we want to say that the subject of her film is the *unlaboured*, but this kind of concept gives only a temporary unity to a project we cannot really say is real. yet, such reluctance exchanges the temporalness of reality, its sublime situatedness *right here*, with an inner *dis*-temporalness. it is not always itself. misguidable. misperceivable. in this way, celan's mark is at best a container for a thought, but no part of zhao's project is conceptual, and yet, like a concept, if there is something real in it, it seems to come at the expense of reality.

she is not just giving us back life. she is not tarkovsky. her concept of time is completely different. tarkovsky places the eventual structure of something upon itself, and his technique is to place this outline so that no distortion is visible. no misalignment. all that remains is the hovering moment of artistic perception which provides the sublime grounding for a reading of an event as itself. *pure presentation*. this is far from easy. but, the misalignment of reality and itself is a classical reading, and it is what leads adorno to say that *to write poetry after auschwitz is barbaric*. but, if he is wrong, it is not because it was never easy to write poetry. he is wrong because what we lost was the *fiction* of our alignment. and what he cannot imagine, which zhao does, is that *fictions work*.

they do not succeed if they tell a lie. *what is the lie of the white worker?* or *what is the lie of the rate of alcoholism in south dakota native reserves?* the same thing remains true, and, if anything, without fiction, we cannot imagine approaching realness. we could not suffer the lies we'd have to tell, because we could not trust our words unless they said perfectly what was there. but, our words do not say what is there. the disjointedness which celan gains, but adorno forecloses, is that between reality and something it produces which it cannot configure back into itself. celan takes this, but adorno refuses it because he cannot believe that the image of reality is also a distortion. that it only succeeds to translate reality if it draws

with it the pain and the horror and the inexpressible without which expression is impossible and yet with which expression becomes almost unreadable. almost. what is explosively subjective about *the rider*, or any of her films, is how the frame of their re-entry into their lives is not portrayed fictionally, but, in the remnants of their lives, fiction provides the only means of that re-entry.

why? fiction doesn't work because it looks like reality. it works, as a structure, which is nothing but its own performance. to understand zhao, we must understand that, like a good poet, her sole concern is with the honesty of life that sits behind what she says. like *de waal*, poetry is an act first, and she believes that her performers are there to do something honest and *real*. some are trying to understand their own life, and what is filmed can almost, though not entirely, be read as *exactly what it is*. a person repeating their own life. and fiction is nothing but a support, which, like *de waal's* ceramics, assists the return. it is pure manipulation. it is fiction, removed from its conditions as the mere vessel of a lie, which it never was for lacan, and used as part of the sublime ground of a life's honesty reconnoitering with itself.

if zhao has a dictum it is something like *a good journalist makes their own news*. so, with *nomadland*, she situates what is a fictional journey through a real place with real people. the continuity of that narrative draws out what would otherwise go unsaid. it is not a careful lie, because it stands in view of itself as fiction. or, it almost does. zhao, perhaps, as a poet, does not desire to go so far. she presents the ceramic of life, an expression, without needing to point out how she fired it. her concern is not with pointing out the concept of fiction, but with the active participation of fiction in life.

what is reality? who knows. what does a fiction look like? not like reality. it measures, at best, *the approach*. which, in some immanent way, stimulates reality, but to express reality is to engage so directly with it that the only way to speak is to live. this means that when we speak of reality, when we think of it, and hold that which we think bears out its image in its distillation, not only conceptual, but true, as that adequation of reality with its container, we can only trust that expression which fails in some way to be clear. its lack of clarity is the promise that it was written with immediacy. we can only approach the speaker if we approach at the same time their thought. what we gain in their expression is the act of life which is not behind their language, but which is their language. sometimes this immediacy self-purifies, but more often than not, it approaches itself without support and what we see is not just reality, reality as a de-conceptualized, un-structured distortion, which is, in badiouanese, *the horizon of pure choice*. the appearance of fiction does not remove this choice, but in the performance of its structure, which is the quality of an expressive structure, makes it livable.

by contrast, we must consider bergman. *the theatre of life*. let us consider three theses, which we may apply to him:

- i. life involves performances;
- ii. the minimal condition for a performance is that it is *a part of reality*;
- iii. with *oscar ekdahl* one finds that giving meaning is a leap of faith.

in *fanny and alexander* the priest is not just a priest. there is no sublime a = a. we can avoid the naive adomian despair at their decouplement. if nothing else, schelling allows us to think that, in the *pores of logos*, everything with an identity is unfinished. the priest must think he is a priest. he must fight to be a priest. he must let all humanistic appeals flow off him like water off a duck's back. the *ekdahls*, who are full of humour and performance, at least, understand how their performances charge destructively through him. even *helena ekdahl*, the grandmother, was an actress. but, one must be very careful not to believe that one is one's own performance. one performs it. this is essential. alexander, our hero, throughout, retains the surreal quality of his imaginings, because, where adults long for union with being, to close the gap between *l'apparetenance* and *l'inclusion*, he desires nothing more than the disturbing and transformative quality of his imaginations. they offer to change his life. they hinge on how they disturb the order of things, and alexander's subjective truth is that he doesn't believe in our peaceful movement into fictions, but in the eruption of fictions into our otherwise peaceful lives.

believing that they are performance is part of allowing the full force of their effect. the way imagination disrupts reality is not just as a disruption, but as that which testifies to how fiction *is not* a piece of reality waiting to be integrated. its whole force arises in that it does not simply fit into any part of reality, even as it resembles it. the puppets, the *voice of god*, the ghosts, which fill up the more demonic of part alexander's impressions are not mere surreality, and, as bergman approaches the biblical, he approaches the *livingness* of fictions all the more directly. their singular quality is that they gain in being seen as performances. *god* is not a lie. his performative power arises as his own coherence comes at the expense of reality. indeed, the move of fiction into reality, which appears as violent and disturbing in the series, is not the violence of some practical violence latent in fictions, as in the idea that a fiction is a disruptive lie, but that fictions *as fictions* directly, in their coherent non-conformity, attack, or violate even, reality. to search for a ghost is to *find traces*, whose latent coherence is what anoints reality itself to the position of being something which is open to violation and to transformation. alexander cannot put back his imagination, and his desire for freedom means that he doesn't want to. what he sees in the *voice of god* is that which it suffices to call up, to perform, before all reality trembles in its presence.

it is essential for bergman that we realize that, in view of all of this, a performance only succeeds if it arises from within reality. if it is itself, as a performance, a part of reality. when *oscar ekdahl*, alexander's father, late on christmas eve, gives his children a performance, pretending that a simple chair is that of an ancient empress', we see how no part of his performance is lost on the children. they see how the gesture of meaning itself is a performance, and that if you lose the quality by which a performance is recognizable as a performance, if you miss that moment of theatre entering into itself, then you cannot appreciate the force of the performance. it all hinges, not on fiction becoming reality, but on how we give a fiction itself, and the openness of reality to that fiction, the openness of our senses to a performance, which is sustained in the failure of a fiction simply to point to anything but itself, is what creates bergman's *theatre of life*.

when knausgaard discusses *oskar's* moment in *winter*, he conceives how the entire shape of meaning arises in this moment. we give meaning, and it is something which we give without being able to integrate it into reality. what is surreal about alexander's visions is just how

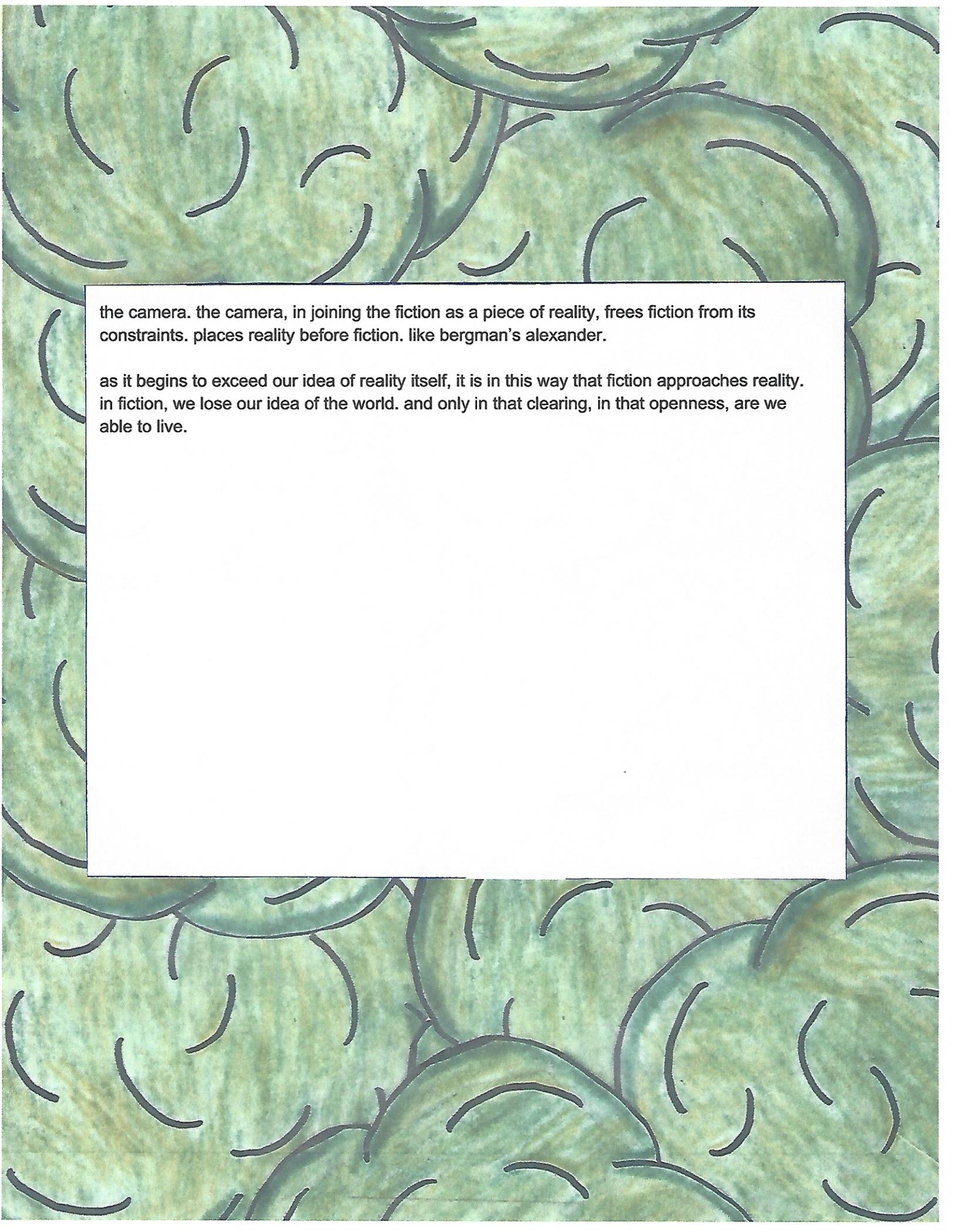
much the question of what's real is aggravated, not calmed, by fiction. they are not pieces of possibility interrupting in some gesture of displacement, but, rather, they are acts. giving a fiction suffices to invite the question of these almost ungroundable structures, these performances, into a life which cannot imagine itself after a certain point without them. the livingness of fictions is how we may, without hesitation, bring to an object in our world the full force of a dream. that it is a performance does not diminish this effect, but increases it. when alexander sustains *isak jacobi's* tender, but profound, gaze with his own, it is in confirmation of the fact that the force of a fiction is not diminished in reality, because that it is a performance does not diminish its power. in theatre, the transformation of a human being into something, which is the height of the move of reality into fiction, is strengthened in view of the actor's *move* into it. without this, we cannot understand fictions. we would ask that they always come back to reality. but, alexander, who goes so far as to contemplate almost all spiritual revelation in these terms, fears that we would not take their power, as fictions, seriously.

by the end, alexander understands, in an attitude of deep sympathy, how much the *theatre of life* pertains to our feeling of life and of the divine and of our boundedness to others. he sees the divine chain of all mystical visionaries: performers. *is it all a lie?* the voice of god he hears in *jacobi's* house is a performance we have given to gift ourselves something which is missing in reality. that it is a performance is essential, that it is hidden, that we go looking for it. all this preserves this gap within reality. we could not tell ourselves something if it was already in front of us, and, after a certain point, only *theatre* can suffice to speak on the world, because only it preserves the hidden quality which defines all statements on the world. not only that we must find them, and, for that matter, all adequation, but that we must give them too.

there is a moment in lars von trier's *nymphomaniac* when the camera points to itself in a mirror. briefly glimpsed, the camera becomes a part of the film. von trier's point is to raise a camera to the level of reality. if they are filming, they are filming what is really going on. by contrast, zhao is a poet. she prefers materials. to give a *bookcase as a bookcase*. everything she says she is living. but, von trier gives us that which we cannot *not* think. it is not that, in our attendance to the continuity of fiction's appearance, we have either to perform it, or to draw it directly into reality. von trier goes one step further. for zhao, fiction helps structure reality, but, with von trier, reality helps structure fiction. it is a camera. it is not a prop. it does not lose its reality. but, in fact, its reality grows stronger.

the essential point is: why shouldn't we believe that what happens in the film is really happening? what is, after a certain point, more real in von trier's *nymphomaniac* is that we should not doubt that, just because there is a camera, it did not take place. fiction, after a certain point, is nothing, but it draws in the gap it seeks to repair. and von trier's injunction, which great fiction allows, is: we don't need to believe it really happened to believe in it.

the believable becomes something that is regulated through fiction insofar as fiction is the sound wall by which reality records the things that are hidden within it. it absorbs every sound without being able to distinguish its own. as a piece of reality, the camera enters and sustains the fiction as fiction. to believe it is really going on exists as an act independent of



the camera. the camera, in joining the fiction as a piece of reality, frees fiction from its constraints. places reality before fiction. like bergman's alexander.

as it begins to exceed our idea of reality itself, it is in this way that fiction approaches reality. in fiction, we lose our idea of the world. and only in that clearing, in that openness, are we able to live.