

## Chain of Memory

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MY GRANDMOTHER bought me a French press for my birthday, in early October of 2022. To inaugurate my new toy, I went to buy some coffee beans and settled on a local seasonal variety, the Roasterie's "Autumn Harvest." The coffee was good, and for a few weeks I made a cup of it every morning at five, when I got up to read and write before my run. During that time I had rediscovered the Spoon song "I Summon You," and I listened to it while jogging down the sidewalks of the busy nearby boulevard, where orange and yellow leaves were piled before flagstone homes. I'd been out of prison less than three months, and I was sleeping on an air mattress in my mother's living room. Two kittens woke me up each morning around four.

THE NORMAL way of remembering things is disrupted by prison sentences longer than one year. Uncannily synchronized, the regular cycles of nature and society cause us to see and smell and taste the same things each year, assuming we occupy roughly the same location. This shouldn't be (conscious) news to you, but it was news to me, after stepping outside of the normal conception of time for sixty-four months. And because of this peculiar annual action of memory, it wasn't news to me until I'd been out of prison for one whole year. Like all functions of memory, it was delayed.

The first inkling came in the form of the physical bag of coffee beans on the grocery store shelf: orange with silver trim, cartoon acorns and leaves, the company's trademark propellered aircraft. Around this time two years ago, I was looking for beans to break in my new French press. Last fall I was in the same store, looking for beans again, but a little less fascinated by the abundance of options our empire has to offer—a year of liberty will do that. I saw the orange and silver bag and felt a little dopamine hit behind the eyes. Naturally, I bought the beans. They were good, after all. I wanted to taste them again.

But when I brewed the coffee the next morning and took my first sip, memories "came rushing back to me," to employ a shopworn but accurate trope. I was standing in the kitchen of my apartment (I had since moved out of my mother's), looking out the window into the backyard of a lush property that abuts the parking lot of my complex. When I tasted the spice of the coffee, the acoustic counterpart of my mind's eye sounded out the first lines of the Spoon song: "Remember the weight of the world / It's a sound that we used to buy / On cassette and forty-five." I heard the leaves breaking underfoot during my jogs. I touched my jaw and remembered Dmitri when he was still a kitten, bounding off of

my face to reach the kitchen counter from the air mattress at four in the morning, leaving a cut in my skin. And there were lines of poems I had been working on the previous fall, oxen weaving garlands of cattleya in their qên, a cherry blossom pinned to an oak, purses left on buses north of Joplin. It had only been one year, but the memories were freighted with the density and distance of nostalgia.

Euphoria—that's what I felt, and not just because those memories were good ones. In the final volume of his 4,000-page epic, Proust notes that "my anxiety on the subject of my death had ceased at the moment when I had unconsciously recognized the taste of the little madeleine, since the being which at that moment I had been was an extratemporal being and therefore unalarmed by the vicissitudes of the future." In a simplistically Proustian sense, the pumpkin spice coffee had led me to forget that I was going to die, and I was happy about that. To be clear, I would like to die one day, but every now and then it's good to feel immortal for a moment. Most forms of addiction, I would argue, revolve around the desire to immortalize that sense of immortality.

To me, the most interesting aspect of Proust's algebra is the fact that *active memory invariably occasions a forgetting*. A nibble of madeleine, a sip of pumpkin spice coffee—their triggering of involuntary remembering eclipses all other possible rememberings, at least momentarily. Simultaneously, and perhaps most importantly, the uncertainties of the future are supplanted by the certainties of the past, even if that certainty is suspect.

THE PAST—and our hope of reassembling it with any accuracy—is suspect. This is doubly true if one's past is marred by a significant period of incarceration.

This is not to say that time in prison does not repeat itself. The problem is that time in prison repeats itself *too* frequently, and less spectacularly. There is little to distinguish one day from another. A morning in December resembles too closely a morning in July. There may be snow outside, but it's still pancakes for breakfast on Mondays, and the cell doors still slide shut at nine. You get a special hockey puck of meat for the New Year's meal, and you sell it to another inmate for a bag of canteen coffee. You get a free thirty-minute video visit to spend with your far-off mother, lag and all. But what's missing is the ability to participate significantly in the variability of your own days, the ability to curate the dispensation of hours beyond a changing-up of workouts, writing prompts, and novels. What is December if you can't throw a snowball at a friend? In prison, throwing a snowball will land you

in solitary confinement.

What's strange is that my days in prison rarely felt identical, and I credit my education, imagination, and curiosity for that. I treated my cell like a laboratory, in the sense that I could read or write whatever I wanted, and for the most part *whenever* I wanted. In a system whose very structure was a vast, interconnected chain of permissions dictated by others, there was an intimate permissiveness of self when I occupied my cell. The guards didn't take issue with me "riding my bunk" all day. A Parisian penpal sent me Proust, Camus, and Balzac. My grandmother sent me Dostoevsky. Writing mentors from the outside gave me poetry collections and literary journals when we convened for our semi-frequent writing groups. I exercised and socialized, and for my prison job I tutored other inmates, but I rode my bunk in my free time, and there was something unintentionally magical in that metaphor: if I was *riding* my bunk, that meant that my bunk was *moving*, that my incarceration was in fact dynamic. It meant that I was traveling.

But while my days rarely felt identical in the intellectual sense, their material details were largely the same, and I believe that that sameness had a cumulative effect that worked closely in conjunction with another memory-altering power: the constant threat of violence.

TRAUMA'S ABILITY to augment remembrance is well documented, but like Proust's madeleine, it privileges certain memories over others. I remember very clearly the silences at night, buttressed by the HVAC system of the prison. I remember lifting weights outside with my friends, in five-degree weather under a white sky, and the pair of ravens who laughed at us from the concertina wire, how they were able to perfectly mimic the sound of percolating water. I remember how a guard would walk by my cell every thirty minutes to make sure I was still breathing. But specific memories, memories with specific coordinates in time and space—those aren't as easily summoned.

There's a metaphor that gets tossed around in prison: "Our lives are on pause." If a video or a song is paused, you are met with stasis: a still frame or silence. Eventually, in the face of stasis, where else can you look but backward? So in prison there is a lot of remembering going on. War stories, yes, but also attempts to remember the good times.

I remember trying to remember. I remember, all of a sudden, how difficult it was to remember. The threat of violence (not to mention consummated violence), trauma, stress, distance from friends and family—I believe these all dampen the ability of the mind to both retain and make new memories. There's simply not enough bandwidth.

I suspect I wrote more than the average prisoner, and so one might argue that I should remember more than the average prisoner, but this doesn't appear to be the case. When I flip through the eleven prison notebooks I filled with poems and stories and fragments, the writing doesn't meet my mind with the usual attendant memories that accompany a writer's own

work. There is a valley between myself and the words, and I credit violence with that valley.

The only physical violence I suffered and inflicted was in my relations with other inmates, in fights. But forcible relocation is itself an act of violence, even when hands aren't physically laid on bodies, and its duration is at least as long as the relocation lasts. The etymology of "violence" only seems to lead back to violence itself, but it does share a heritage with "vehemence," which comes to English via Latin, "perhaps from an unrecorded adjective meaning 'deprived of mind,' influenced by *vehere* 'carry.'" It seems that even the definition of violence itself is subject to violence and relocation, and that a kind of mindless carrying is involved in that action.

WHEN I TASTED the spiced coffee and remembered the Spoon song, it was because the memory of the taste of the coffee contained the memory of the song. But there was a double movement: the memory of the song, conversely, contained the memory of the taste of the coffee. Memories are covalent and interdependent—they carry one another. This is the faculty of memory's daisy chain that is disrupted by prison.

I used to play a lot of pool the year before I lost my mind and began to live on the streets, landing in prison some months later. You would think that when I play pool in a bar now, memories of my time in Portland bars would resurface, and in a way they do, but not with the fullness and continuity that I experienced with the coffee, the song, the leaves, and the fragments of poems. Prison's disruption of the faculty of memory meant that there were no covalent bonds being formed between 2017 and 2022.

Let's imagine for a moment that I had not gone to prison. When I played pool, I often drank whiskey with some kind of pale ale, smoked American Spirits, and ate fried bar food. (Even now, when I try to write about my pool-playing days, it's like trying to access a largely deleted history, and so I am having to approximate details that I cannot confirm with the usual accuracy afforded to fond memories.) Now let's say that for some reason I decided to quit all those things simultaneously, swearing off pool, bars, alcohol, cigarettes, and fried food. It is my belief that fragments of those pool-playing memories would still have been covalently bonded to different but related memories: the voices of the friends I played pool and drank with, the smell of burning tobacco, the clack of billiard balls, the sights and sounds of the little neighborhood side street I always parked on before walking to the bar. And those different memories would themselves have been bonded with other memories. This is the daisy chain that prison disrupts. Incarceration meant that my mind could not ensure the survival of my memories of playing pool in Portland bars. To be clear, I remember those days, but only as a kind of bloodless transcript, a black-and-white CCTV recording on mute. And it is not just memories of billiards that did not survive intact. Nothing survived intact.

WHAT IS your favorite [insert: book, song, food]?

I am unable to answer this format of question honestly. Whatever were my favorite things, I forgot them. They didn't survive incarceration. These days I just think of a good book I read recently, a good song I listened to recently, a good food I ate recently. Perhaps I'll be able to formulate new opinions, the longer I spend away from cells, but I often fear that something has gone wrong in the deeper structure of my personality, something beyond even memory.

The easy and somewhat gooey explanation is that this phenomenon is a relic of the asceticism common among prisoners: *If I don't have a favorite book, then the guards can storm my cell and take all of my books and they won't have taken my favorite; I shall possess no favorites of anything.* But I never looked at things that way while I was inside, and so I suspect a different culprit. Maybe it's all the drugs I did. Maybe there are multiple culprits.

DURING MY incarceration, the Oregon prison system offered four varieties of instant coffee through its canteen system. Most inmates would tell you that the best is Nescafé Taster's Choice, an instant coffee that costs ten dollars for an eight-ounce bag—the proverbial “big bag.” I consumed many big bags during my time in prison, and it has occurred to me that I could test my daisy-chain hypothesis by tracking down some Taster's Choice and making myself a cup with 190-degree water (the hot water pots in Oregon prisons are all set to 190 degrees, exactly 22 short of a full boil). And in fact I just performed such a test.

Today, at the very same grocery store where I originally encountered Autumn Harvest, I passed the end-shelf displaying the pumpkin spice coffee and was met with a doubled memory: buying the coffee in the fall of 2022 and buying the coffee in the fall of 2023. I was there for Taster's Choice, but I stopped at the end-shelf for a moment. Naturally, I grabbed a bag of the beans. They were good, after all. I wanted to taste them again.

In the coffee aisle I found the Taster's Choice, though it was packaged in a fancy plastic jar, not the flimsy bag I was familiar with from prison. At the self-checkout, I used my debit card to purchase these two coffees that were metaphysically opposed in my mind.

It is possible that the popularity of the pumpkin spice latte is rooted in its olfactory ability to temporarily banish the knowledge of certain death. Its flavor profile carries within it not only the completion of a year but the promise of more years, more pumpkin spice lattes. But Taster's Choice didn't do that for me. I hope I'm not being too dramatic when I tell you that the taste of Taster's Choice reminded me that, on the contrary, one day I will die.

AS I BUILD this essay—adding a few hundred words each day, listening to “I Summon You” over and over, in an attempt to summon that original

October from two years ago—I wonder what would happen if one day I turned on my computer and found that the previous day's writing was missing. It wouldn't be the end of the world, or even the end of the essay. I could simply approximate what I had written, from memory. But it wouldn't be the same; there would be a kind of grief. The relationship between the new writing and what had already been written would be altered. I would feel it in the fabric of the work, and this is the kind of fissure I sense in my own memory. March 23, 2017 and July 22, 2022: they stand shoulder to shoulder. When I run my fingers over the site of their fusion, I feel the handiwork of an amateur welder. Smooth for the most part, but sometimes there is a barb that catches. Sometimes I am cut.

THE SKY was a cloudless blue the day I was born, bright but crisp. And so it was two years ago and last year and every year—this time when so many things begin to die. The night of my birthday last year, 364 days after I brewed my first cup of Autumn Harvest, I sat in a vast and empty suburban AMC theater with my mother, brother, and sister-in-law. We were there to see the remastered *Stop Making Sense*. About halfway through the concert film, the stage is plunged into darkness, and as the band rolls into a frantic rendition of the David Byrne song “What a Day That Was,” each member is lit from a single light below them, as when a child shines a flashlight up at their own face while telling a scary story. I wasn't particularly fond of the chord changes and agitated rhythms of the verses, but the choruses rattled something loose in me. Atop the holy harmonization of backup singers Ednah Holt and Lynn Mabry, Byrne sings, with the cleareyed brokenness of someone who is no longer young:

And on the first day, we had everything we  
could stand  
Who could've asked for more?  
And on the second day, we had nothing  
else left to do  
What a day that was

The speaker of that song is able to remember the first day as well as the second day, despite their terrible incongruity. The days stand shoulder to shoulder.

That was a year ago. For at least a week afterward, my favorite song was “What a Day That Was.” And by now it has changed again, and will change again, to something else.

At present, the joy in my life is abundant. If I am to be destroyed again in this life, my only wish is that the borderland between abundance and desolation be clearly demarcated in my memory. May I remember despair's approach, be it slow or sudden. And if there is to be abundance again, after the desolation, may I depart the ruins with a firm past, and with memories of that past. May I not emerge as though from a fugue.

Some days I regard my altered ability to form new memories as a kind of gift from prison. Other days I wish that I had a favorite song—a favorite song that wasn't just the last good song I heard.□