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Views of the Apocalypse

*Freud, climate change,
and language on the precipice*

IN THE Tiber Valley, about an hour's drive north of Rome, there is a little medieval village called Orvieto. It was first platted by the Etruscans in the ninth century BCE, on the flat top of a tufa butte. This "volcanic plug," as I've heard it described, is bound on all sides by sheer vertical cliffs—forming, in effect, a kind of sky island. In the white heat of summer, standing at the edge of the cliffs in a puny human body among steady-moving clouds, one gets the sensation of standing not on a plug or an island, but on the bow of a great ship.

A few weeks after I arrived here, I saw an aerial photograph of the village, taken by a U.S. Air Force reconnaissance squadron during the Second World War. The black-and-white photograph had a flattening effect and failed to capture the depth of the butte, but still I found it beautiful. It had the warm quality of old gelatin prints, how they seem to radiate their own light. At that altitude, Orvieto resembled a human brain, and this image more than any other confirmed my experience on the ground, wandering the closed circuit of the village, its network of narrow paths and dead ends. One seductive turn giving on to another. Lost in redundancy.

I am here because my husband has been teaching in a study abroad program. Four and five mornings a week he leaves our cavellike dwelling to help the hungover coeds in his charge

express themselves through poetry, while I lie on the cool tile floor in pajamas, absorbing the silence, watching the ceiling fan's slow blade. I have been writing a book concerned with the sixth mass extinction, climate catastrophe, the collapse of civilization—whichever secular phrase you prefer for *the end times*. Personally, I don't much like any of them. A hundred thousand words later, I have yet to land on an adequate term. This is part of our collective problem, I suppose. Finding language for the phenomena. Words that can hold, at once, the sweeping visions of cataclysm, the statistical modeling, and the particular, personal losses.

Estrangement—whether through illness or crisis or physical dislocation—can sometimes surface dormant elements, unknown or unarticulated parts of self. For example, walking the cobblestone streets of an ancient Italian village brought to mind a great blue heron I spotted on the rocky bank of the Nehalem River in the summer of 1988. The overgrown ruin of a necropolis might inexplicably summon an image of the weeping willow in the backyard of one's childhood home, its long plaits sweeping the ground, and the joy of secreting one-self behind that beaded curtain.

They felled the willow twenty years ago, along with the house, when they widened the road. But in the estrangement of the necropolis, the loss pricks fresh. A strange hysteria takes hold. How does the earth go on without the willow? The sudden conviction that human survival is worthless if the willow does not live. Certainly there is a name for this feeling, but when I reach for it, it escapes me.

As it happens, Orvieto is the birthplace of “parapraxis” (the technical term for Freud's eponymous slip). Common usage suggests the Freudian slip is confined to the tongue, an eruption of hidden truth on the surface of polite conversation, but that's only a piece of the story. A slip might recruit any part of the body. It might manifest as mishearing, misplaced keys, a forgotten name, or any other *detour inside the ordinary*, as Paul Keegan put it. In his introduction to Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Keegan writes, “The slip is hearsay about ourselves, news from a foreign country.” Collectively, these expressions of id form a sort of spectral village, superimposed on our everyday lives. A pageant of “motivated forgetting” and meaningful pratfalls, where even the phrase “as it happens” is suspect, for in this place even happenstance is by design.

I received news of myself in this foreign country during a period when I could not stop slipping. I mean this in the symbolic sense, of course, but I also mean it literally. The news pertained to a hypothetical child, and what I'd slipped down was the stairs. Twice.



AT THE HIGHEST POINT in the village, a fourteenth-century cathedral draws hordes of sunburned, day-tripping tourists from Rome. They clot in the narrow streets, clumsy with wine, eyes fixed on their cell phones. The duomo looks like something clipped out of a children's book, striped on three sides with an ornate facade of filigreed spires, stone reliefs, a large rose window. Its once bright murals have softened in time to dreamy pastels. Gold-leaf coronas wreathing each saint's skull seem to glow in that supernatural Italian light. Tourists momentarily lower their phones and fix their unmitigated gazes on the facade. It is as if they are able to see for the first time, like Bartimaeus on his knees receiving the Lord's mercy.

The duomo is home to a famous fresco cycle by the artist Luca Signorelli. Within an inner chapel, Signorelli spent five years completing his vision of *The End of the World* and the *Last Judgment*—an epic orgy of demonic violence and naked writhing masses of muscular booty. Freud was famously affected by the frescoes. Versions of the story vary, but the gist is: In the year 1898, Freud shared a carriage with a man traveling to Herzeegovina. They'd come to the subject of Italy, and Freud inquired as to whether his fellow traveler had been to Orvieto, and whether he'd seen the frescoes in the chapel, but the name of the old master escaped him. He could summon the work itself in his mind's eye, the violent and sexual vision, but he could not recall the artist's name, though he'd known it well. Freud searched himself and retrieved two other names, one he knew equally well (Botticelli) and one less so (Boltraffio). This was the birth of the slip, or "parapraxis" (James Strachey's term, not Freud's), parsed from the Greek as "faulty act."

Whatever you call it, something subterranean was making itself known on the surface. Freud later analyzed this experience of motivated forgetting through a complex diagramming of the carriage exchange, along with his private network of associations, determining that he'd forgotten Signorelli's name while repressing a connected thought about (you guessed it) sex and death.

Some have found his self-analysis in this instance unconvincing. I'm less interested in why he forgot the name than in what remembering the name occluded. In remembering Signorelli's name, Freud discovered he could no longer recall the murals themselves.

In certain spiritual traditions, a vision or a revelation is to be withheld from speech. The more often we tell a story, the weaker its hold upon us—a fact to which the inventor of the "talking cure" would surely attest. It's a strange prospect for a writer, but one I find compelling. To keep an image living, we must keep it decoupled from language (or at least from proper nouns and the verb "to be").

Climate catastrophe, mass extinction, Anthropocene. In a crush of abstract and inadequate language, I was eager to stand in the chapel San Brizio, speechless and awash in Signorelli's apocalyptic vision.

THE FIRST TIME I slipped, it was down our stairs in Seattle, about a week before we flew to Europe. My husband and I were discussing whether or not to have a child. Our dilemma was basic: we loved children and wanted to be parents, but we loved and wanted other things too, such as sleeping and having time to write. Privately, I feared I'd be a mediocre mother, that I'd shortchange the hypothetical child. I understand these concerns are fairly generic, but they so consumed and distressed me that I kept having "accidents." A stub of the toe here, a slip of the kitchen knife there. One minute I was at the top of the stairs, my arms full of towels; the next I'd whooshed to the bottom as if down a washboard, bouncing off each step like a Stooge. (Throwing oneself down the stairs has long been a strategy for redressing procreative ambivalence, though typically there is first a pregnancy involved.)

To breed or not to breed? is a personal question, but not exclusively. An obvious point: Earth needs more people like I need a hatchet to the head. Also, condemning a child to life in the ecological holocaust projected by climatologists is ethically questionable at best. Soon I'll age out of the dilemma, but for the time being, I dream. I dream of babies. The beautiful baby mislaid in the confusion of a party. Pulling the baby from the rubble of a bombed building. Yanking the child back from the edge of a cliff.

In Orvieto, I am preoccupied by a sense of *nearing*—nearing the end of the world, perhaps, the end of my fertility, for certain. Whenever I am lost on this sky island, I find my way to the edge of the cliffs, where a path running the perimeter of the butte affords an unobstructed view of the valley, a patchwork of green vineyards and gently rolling hills. Here I can look out past the ending, with just a waist-high stone wall dividing my body from the precipice. Dense white clouds float in the blue above vineyards, shattering the sun in scriptural prisms that seem to reference every depiction of God in every fresco ever painted (though I guess I have the reference backward).

The prospect of slipping makes me woozy, takes the bottom out. But it's also a thrill. No more nearing, no more indecision, just the slip and fleeting catharsis of the plunge.

THE FIRST TIME I try to visit the chapel, I'm too late. I spend most of the day lying on the tile floor, watching the ceiling fan revolve, weighing the terms *climate genocide* in one hand and *geriatric pregnancy* in the other. By the time I summon the resolve



Orvieto, March 15, 1944. Aerial photo by MAPRW, 3rd Photo Group.

to rise, it's late afternoon. I wind my way through the village just as the stores are waking from their *riposos*. Because the duomo is at the top of the hill, I only get a little lost, stopping for wine along the way (for courage), then becoming distracted by a pile of beautiful leather bags.

At the ticket counter, the agent speaks many words I do not understand, but his meaning comes through: *You meandered too long. The entry is barred.*

AND WHAT MIGHT we say of the lesser hells?

The study abroad students look at their phones. They look at their phones before class and they look at their phones during

class and they look at them after. They hunch and coil around the cold, meager light of the phone and stroke its surface like Gollum with his ring. In their case, the vice was not stolen but inherited. They resemble the elders in the countries from which they come.

My husband gives his students a fifteen-minute break. The classroom's open window looks onto a sunbaked plaza. Vendors are out singing in their stalls, arranging piles of fresh asparagus and tomatoes, perhaps harvested that very morning in the valley. A small café on the corner sells espresso and sweets. A lot can happen in fifteen minutes besides emptying a bladder. There's time enough to sip coffee, a small glass of wine, to flirt or to kiss. No one smokes anymore, but there's time for that too. The students



The Orvieto Cathedral in Umbria, Italy.

do not move. They pass the break fused to their classroom chairs, each stroking a phone, their *precious*.

My husband despairs. I think of Plath: “And this is the kingdom you bore me to, / Mother, mother. But no frown of mine / Will betray the company I keep.”

Many psychology majors are studying abroad this summer. One of them hopes to secure a job with the military as an interrogator. One of them wishes to work in the field of “animal companionship.” One of them—an attractive former dancer with a Nordic appearance—hopes to become the proprietor of nightclubs.

Later we find another student folding clothes in the laundromat. I happen to be carrying a copy of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. I ask her if she’s aware that Freud spent time in Orvieto, and that his theory of forgetting proper names stemmed from an experience with Signorelli’s frescoes.

“I didn’t know that,” she admits. “But I hate Freud.”

“You hate Freud?” my husband asks.

“Yeah,” she says. “Some people are like, ‘but his contributions!’ And I’m like, ‘I don’t care, Freud was fucking crazy.’”

THE SECOND TIME I try to visit the chapel, I leave early in the day. I plan to take the long way, walking the perimeter of the cliffs until the path winds inward toward the duomo. But I bungle the route and wind up tangled in a sleepy quadrant I do not

recognize. I enter a small piazza where several cats laze on warm stones. One of them stirs as I pass and sluts toward my leg. An old man is sitting outside a shut café, smoking.

Several streets later, I find I’ve somehow doubled back to the same piazza. The man surveys me with steady indifference, his desiccated skin racked so tightly on the bones of his face that it shines. I smile at the man and hurry by, unaccountably nervous.

Repetitions are to be paid special attention. In his essay on the *unheimlich*, Freud relates a similar story. One summer afternoon, strolling through a different Italian village, he comes upon a narrow street populated by “heavily-made-up women.” Recognizing them as prostitutes, he turns on his heel and walks away, only to find, moments later, that he’s unwittingly returned to the street. He repeats this mistake several times, sparking titillation among the working girls and a mounting panic within himself. Unintended repetitions such as these are compared to the helplessness of “dreamstates,” or of the traveler “caught in a mist.”

I do eventually find my way to the duomo and approach the ticket counter, but I soon discover that I have failed to bring either cash for admission or the prescription glasses I need to see the frescoes. I stumble from the cool dark of the cathedral into the sun and sit on a curb, caught in the disorienting mist of my mistake, its atmosphere of the “fateful and inescapable.” It’s clear that I have a competing wish *not to see* the Signorelli,

the murals that so intrigue me in the abstract but that threaten, like all real-life encounters, to disappoint in the flesh. Laying eyes upon the chapel would be another sort of naming, and that naming would diminish or supplant my experience of it through Freud's text.

I tried and failed to see the Signorelli twice, opting instead to be late, to be broke, to be functionally blind.

THE SECOND TIME I slipped, we were in Granada. I was heading downstairs in the rented apartment, ruminating on the hypothetical child, feeling my sprained toe in my sock, when I slipped again, this time gashing open my elbow and prompting a visit to the hospital. A half dozen nurses gathered around to watch my elbow get cinched shut, skin folding over the bone like an origami star. They did not use lidocaine, and I felt each suture pulling taut. Pain spared me contemplation of the repetition. In pain, I am present. Past and future knit together into a single throbbing bead.

But weeks later, in Orvieto, sitting on the curb, gazing on the cathedral, my elbow aches, and a cascade of belated association comes. Ambivalence in the would-be mother is manifest in "accidents." She pretends shock in the aftermath, but in fact, the dominant feeling is *release*.

After having "accidentally" broken several objects, Freud remarks, "The indifference with which I regarded the damage in all these cases may be taken as proof that I had some unconscious intention to inflict it."

Twice, I slipped down the stairs. But in some sense, I realize, I also threw myself down them.

WE JOIN the school field trip to Pompeii, where abstract notions of ruined grids become solid beneath my feet. I'm transfixed by the fetal forms of women and children frozen in ash in their moment of utmost terror, and remember the ruin of Lot's wife, Edith.

In the old story, Edith looks back and watches God rain fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah, and is turned into a pillar of salt as punishment. According to some versions, in ignoring the angels' warning, Lot's wife betrays a secret longing for an evil way of life. That was her slip.

Nine years before the eruption of Vesuvius, the Romans sacked Jerusalem, and some say a sibyl foretold God's punishment in the form of "smoking ashes" and showers of fire that would "fall from heaven like red earth" upon the Romans. It seems survivors at the time even drew the connection. After the smoke cleared, someone returned and scrawled on a wall with a piece of char: SODOM AND GOMORRAH.

My fascination with the fetal forms is morbid but not unique. Later, I learn that they aren't bodies at all, but plaster casts of subterranean sockets the dead left behind after decaying. Absence made visible. Abstract concepts of loss rendered three-dimensional.

ON THE FIRST NIGHT of the field trip, I dream that I am tasked with caring for someone else's infant. I'm in a rambling house filled with junk, boxes, a hoarder's den. People move throughout its rooms. I speak to one person, then another. Time passes. I've mislaid the baby somewhere in the piles of junk. I'm frantically searching for her when her mother arrives. I'm so sorry, I cry. I'm just so distracted.

Fireworks explode late into the second night, and we wonder if a minor holiday is under way. The next morning over breakfast, a local professor speculates that the explosions were to celebrate the recent formation of a populist government. The newly elected coalition vows to deport 500,000 refugees. One leader, speaking at a rally, tells migrants, "Get ready to pack your bags."

Back in Orvieto, I see a little old Italian man apparently berating a young refugee in the street. I say *apparently* because on several occasions, I've watched locals argue angrily one moment and then embrace or kiss passionately the next, so I'm not certain of what I am seeing. The young man often begs outside the *supermercat*. He's always friendly.

I keep walking. I turn down an alley. Someone has spray-painted MUSSOLINI in red on an ancient wall.

The city's surface structures that had once seemed so ancient, so grand, were revealed in an instant to be relatively young and marginal.

THERE'D LONG BEEN rumors that Orvieto was hollow underneath, but it wasn't until the 1970s, when a landslide opened a window on the world below, that the truth revealed itself. Speleologists came in droves, anchoring their harnesses to whatever was nailed down on the surface—tree trunks, light poles, the axles of parked cars. They rappelled over cliffsides with acetylene torches, illuminating a vast network of more than a thousand grottoes. The city's surface structures that had once seemed so ancient, so grand, were revealed in an instant to be relatively young and marginal.

Freud could not have known about the underground, but certainly he sensed it. In the Freudian view, our psychic structure is like an iceberg. The ego floats above the surface, but most of our substance is submerged in the id. Certainly, on some level, Freud sensed that a living model of the human psyche lay just beneath his feet.

Orvieto is nearly impenetrable on account of its cliffs, which protected the Etruscans from sieging armies, but it has no surface lakes or springs. The Etruscans remedied their lack of water by digging wells through the plug, down into the substrata, a hundred meters deep. When I visit the grottoes, I see walls of dovescotes, carved into the tufa like giant honeycombs, where pigeons were once bred for food. I see olive presses and grindstones where their beasts of burden labored, and imagine the slim men who shimmied into those narrow channels and dug the wells, and I feel moved and intensely claustrophobic.

Thanks to their subterranean labor, the Etruscans were self-sufficient enough to withstand the Roman siege for two years, though not indefinitely. The wonders of antiquity bestow such stock revelations: “the end of the world” is a relative term. For Etruscans, the world ended long ago.

First we named the disaster, and then we numbed ourselves to the cost, to the real losses.

IN THE OLD STORY, the gods wished to reduce the human population, to punish their avarice and violence, and so they sent a flood. When the flood came, the darkness was total, and the people could not recognize one another. “All the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened,” and beings on land with “the breath of life in their nostrils” were drowned.

One man was instructed to build a vessel, and to carry with him pairs of reproducing representatives from the land-based world (a vision of hope or reductive despair, depending on your view). In the Akkadian version, the sky god Enlil is furious with the water god Enki for letting Atrahasis (Noah’s forerunner) live. Enki, for his part, seems to view the affair with pragmatic resignation, saying only, “I made sure life was preserved.”

I begin to think of Orvieto as a kind of ark that for two years withstood a deluge. At the bottom of town, inside St. Patrick’s well, an inscription reads: QUOD NATURA MUNIMENTO INVIDERAT INDUSTRIA ADIECIT. (“What nature stinted for provision, application has supplied.”)

One ray of hope in my otherwise bleak book is related to this notion. I’d interviewed permaculture experts who talked about experimental plots where gardeners were hedging against climate change, planting species that could thrive if the temperature rose. Plants, like people, migrate to survive, but many of them need assistance to do so. For example, based on climate-change modeling, a man in British Columbia planted ginkgo and windmill palms, species native to the region millions of years ago when average temperatures were forty degrees warmer.

Some people oppose planting non-native species. Others roll their eyes, think the effort pitiful in the face of such vast threats. But that’s part of the old story too. The Talmudic tractates tell us that Noah attempted to warn his neighbors about the flood, and they mocked or ignored him.

SOME DAYS I feel that the darkness is total, and I no longer recognize my fellow human beings.

On May 31, I turn thirty-six years old, and after eighty-eight days of negotiation, Giuseppe Conte is appointed prime minister of Italy. Conte has the support of the Northern League and the Five Star Movement, the two parties most flirtatious with fascism. No one mentions the concept of cyclical history. The pigeons whose wingbeats echo in the narrow streets at dusk, descendant, perhaps, of birds bred below the surface millennia ago.

On the subject of motivated forgetting, Freud remarked: “It is likely that a suppressed element is always trying to make itself felt somewhere else, but will succeed in doing so only where it finds suitable conditions.” Austerity and hunger, superstorms and heat waves, wildfire and floodwaters: all suitable conditions for breeding a fearful pestilence. The signs arrive more frequently: swastikas scrawled in the public john, a bald teenager in jackboots walking a dog. I wonder about the old Italian man who berated the beggar, wonder if he saw the graffiti on the ancient wall, and if MUSSOLINI was a blight to his eyes or a source of nostalgic comfort.

On my way back to the duomo for the third time, I pass another defaced ancient wall. This time the graffiti is in English — WHITE POWER — catchphrase of the desertified inner life. But someone else has come by and planted an F and L in that desert, so now the passing eye plucks instead WHITE FLOWER.

WHEN FINALLY I enter the chapel, I stand in the center of the room, put on my glasses, and methodically run my eyes up and down the walls. In the fresco titled *Sermon and Deeds of the Antichrist*, Satan is depicted as a naked man with goat horns. He whispers into the ear of the false prophet as he delivers

his sermon to the masses. In *The Destruction of the World*, fires consume the land and earthquakes topple cities. Winged demons—some red, some ghostly white—shoot red sci-fi laser beams out of their mouths and eyes into the bodies of people fleeing on the ground. Of the four women depicted, each cradles an infant. It is otherwise every man for himself. I think again of Edith, who in a different version of the story looks back on the destruction not for lust but in search of her daughters.

I cannot say whether I'm disappointed or impressed by what I've seen. Maybe both. The murals are strange and powerful, but ultimately too mannered to serve as any kind of portent. A demon tears at a man's ear with his teeth, but it's too elegant. It looks like tender foreplay. Groups of tourists cycle in, raise their devices, tap out a few pictures, and leave. Some leave without having looked, even once, with their own eyes.

According to the contract on file, Signorelli's compensation consisted of several hundred ducats and a monthly ration of wine and corn. This is how we used to pay one another, and may soon again: food, drink, shelter, and chits to trade at market. The possibility that neither credit cards nor cell phones will exist in the post-apocalypse pleases me, though it could be that my nostalgia for a bygone world is just a distraction from the destruction of this one.

A length of velvet rope divides Christ's ceremonial tomb from the tourists. A small boy pushes the rope while his father takes pictures. The boy and I make eye contact. He holds my gaze and pushes the rope to maximum swing until it's batting my thigh. His attention casts the atmosphere of a dream, of the fateful and inescapable. Above our heads, the blessed ascend. The damned descend. But here, on the ground, there is only the boy, the comforting rap of velvet against my thigh, only this single flashing bead of recognition.

To name a thing is to forget it, to forget what the name represents. First we named the disaster, and then we numbed ourselves to the cost, to the real losses, communal and personal. What can no longer be taken for granted: the arrival of fireflies on summer nights, insect-smearing windshields, migrating flocks of songbirds, the subtle revolution of seasons, an unremarkable future of a human scale for the boy.

I dream I'm holding a baby, and I'm woken by my own teary joy.

Life as we've always lived it continues humming on the surface. Meanwhile, deeper structures are eroding. We go to work, we file our taxes, we meet for coffee, we binge every episode in the series. The surface hums with activity. But deeper down, we know our insecurity has raised up a false prophet, that species are dying, sea ice is melting, drought is catastrophic, storms come and come.

We can dream of abundance, come close enough to touch it, and still be too late—the entry barred. ○

Egrets

Some say beauty
 may be the egret
in the field

who follows after
 the cows
sensing slaughter—

but I believe
 the soul is neither
air nor water, not

this winged thing
 nor the cattle
who moan

to make themselves
 known.
Instead, the horses

standing almost fifteen
 hands high—
like regret they come

most the time
 when called.
Hungry, the greys eat

from your palm,
 tender-toothed—
their surprising

plum-dark tongues
 flashing quick
& rough as a match—

your hand, your
 arm, startled
into flame.

—Kevin Young