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Essay In Twelve Paintings  
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On the occasion of  
*David Robilliard: The Yes No Quality of Dreams*  
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1.

*Don't get sand in your boiled eggs*, dad says to my little brother on the beach. A red crocodile on his swimming trunks, he thwacks the freckled shell onto his knee. One. Two. Three. It is 1996 and from inside the beach loos I can hear showers slap against salty skin, the ice-cream men din, gulls as large as cats foraging into a litter bin; tin-cans explode onto the tarmac of the boardwalk like glockenspiel chords but in here it is silent save for the inconstant drip of a leaky cistern. I press my ear to the cubicle wall like it's a shell and hear another man breathing. I get onto my knees to spy him – a quiff rinsed blue in the UV light, pink skin, hunched shoulders – he is shaking, crying I think. Wordlessly he crouches down like a foal kneeling and both of us lie our cheeks on the church-cold concrete, we are eye to eye; this moment is the opposite of blindness. He kisses me through the gap and his mouth is warmer than the July sun heating sand dunes outside. *David*, he whispers. *Richard*, I reply. His eyes are the colour of cola. Then someone else says *Richard*. Not him, his lips are on mine. An echo then? No a familiar voice, shit it's my father! *Richard are you in here?* he bellows. I hold my breath. We close our eyes. David's lips retreat into the dark hum of his own cubicle. Gone.

This never happened but to simply call it fiction sounds too harsh – it is a poem so the I voice is, by necessity, mine; part of me was there, but David was not. Still, when I read Robilliard's oil script I hear surf in my ears, the gull's cry; I can feel his saline lips on mine. Poetry feels true but as soon as a narrative comes it vanishes into that other room, that other cubicle. The three men on the canvas, David, the green boy and those prying eyes; the artist, the poet, the father, are retreating too – caught forever in paint and yet they want to vanish, away from interpretation, away from imagination; they jostle, they tug, they slide back. The white space is filled with their vanishing.

Giotto too knew the power of a hungry look. In his fresco, *The Lamentation of Christ*, somersaulting angels, silk-wearing saints and hysterical family members all turn the lamp of their gaze to the slack and grey body of Christ – whose shimmering halo has not quite yet been extinguished. Christ's body takes up around four percent of the fresco's surface area but we follow the hunger of their mourning, pious, regretful looks and recognise him as the most important thing there; more important than the ripe blue sky, than the bare olive tree, than the crowd of rainbow-robed figures. A gaze makes you important. A gaze makes you powerful even in death.

Men look at other men like this in gay clubs, with a hunger that can empty you of reason. Some nights after school I would steal up to Heaven with my friend Jamie. We'd change into jeans, hide our uniforms in rucksacks and enter the fray of shimmering men – all haloed with strobe and neon. I soon learnt that the thing to do was lean against a wall – the men were always leaning and looking – this was how to be hunted. And when you felt those eyes on you, that look of sheer uncaring hunger that meant *let me put my hands on you please I am so lonely*, you knew it was time. I felt many men bore into me with their ripe eyes, their gazes turned up high. At first I was terrified for a hungry look contains such violence, but soon you learn to want that violence. We are made whole with that look, knowing someone else has a hunger for you momentarily completes you.

But there were those nights when nobody looked, hunger was directed towards other dancing boys – their bodies jagged and rhythmical caught in the disco lights like inlaid silver. Darkness crowded around me – a room full of hungry looks is the loneliest place on earth. The boys who knew this snorted their way out of sorrow. Once I saw this kid OD'ing, his friends, made that night, backing away; a bouncer shoving; someone grabbing for water, for ice. His slack face turned grey. The hungry looks finally interested for a moment then turning away again – their collars and chins rainbowed by neon. Someone said his name was *David*. Someone said his name was *Richard*. I touched his feet when they carried him out head first, like how Mary cupped the heels of Christ in Giotto's fresco. His trainers were soaked in beer, his laces undone. When no one was looking I tied each filthy lace. I wanted to kiss each toe cap but the ambulance came and someone said he was coming to.

3.

*Quite why anyone would want to do something so unseemly* was something my grandmother could never understand – and by that she meant, putting it up there; you know – bumming, buggery, fudge-packing, sodomy, anal-sex.

I watch David's ass move through the club in tight stone-washed denim, rainbow in the neon lights. I want to put myself inside him, like each and every homo in Cafe de Paris. Alongside the blood and E.coli and faeces is love.

The poet Sally Reid, in her poem about anal sex but also about fishing, seemed to think her coccyx is somehow involved – and called it her peach pit of nerve endings. In one of the first poems I ever wrote I declared anal sex to be *like a hammer/ hitting my hip bone/ hard*. The alliterated H is meant to sound sore, passionate, panting. But of course nothing hits your hip bone or your coccyx – these are imagined injuries, referencing the potential pain of anal-sex. But to talk solely of the pain belies the pleasure, a pleasure so great it has been experienced across the world since Roman times, with very little break or condemnation until The Victorians.

The latin word meaning to sodomize is *pedicare*, as in the first line of Catallus' 16<sup>th</sup> poem, *pedicabo ego vos* – I will sodomise you. And the ass, that ripe box of tricks, was rather wonderfully described by the romans as a fig or *figus*. The insides of our bodies is, after all, puce and purple and vermillion, patinated, chock-full of seeds – these wet buds of genetic information. But despite this near-constant historic celebration of buggery it is technically illegal in the UK unless you are man and wife – something for which we should again thank The Victorians.

I suppose it is the dual purpose of the *figus* which alarms some of our more vocal critics. A common fundamentalist Christian war-cry is – since there is no hole for it to go and by this they mean no vagina – that it is unnatural. *Adam and eve not adam and Steve*, for Steve does not have a man-vagina, only a *figus*. Once in St. Ives, a man shouted, *Faggy-bum boys! Your ass is for shitting!* at me and a boyfriend as we held hands on the beach. Later we sodomised each other all night in poetic retaliation.

*Keep Tomorrow Free.* I imagine those three words to have been his last. I want those to have been his last. Glib. Inviting. Red. The suggestion being that David will spend tomorrow with everyone, with me. However they are probably not his last words, after all he did paint them but then again he painted them in the year of his death. What is it like dying? Wait that's not my question, I mean to ask, what is the colour, the flavour of the last synaptic spark? As you open your mouth do you know it will be your last connection, your last utterance? Have you saved up the right red words?

*See you tomorrow I love you,* were the last words of Alex the African Grey Parrot, said to his handler, Dr Irene Popperberg, as she closed the door of his cage at dusk; slipping in a fresh cuttlefish bone, refilling his water, ruffling his vivid pink feathery mohican. And I wonder, did Irene teach him these words to say to her every night or did he overhear them in a soap-opera and save them up for her, his lab-coated mother-jailer, when the time was right?

Alex was thirty-one when he died. Alex which stands for Avian Language Experiment, proved that not only primates could handle complex language problems. Writing in his obituary, Dr Irene noted he had the emotional intelligence of a two year old human child, but she did not say how much she loved him. Only his name said that – A. L. E. all accounted for, avian language experiment, but where did the X come from? It's a kiss. Her kiss to him. The more logical amongst you will say X is from experiment, it's the second letter after all, but I dispute this. You are technically right but that is not what Dr Irene intended. How poetic of her to encode her love in language.

Sometimes when I come here David I feel unconditionally happy for these 12 paintings, that we even have them! Other days, like on Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> June, I feel black and colourless. Why didn't we have more – more years, more paintings. It seems so terribly unfair. But you are not saying this, I am. How terribly obvious of me. You met death whispering *Keep Tomorrow Free* and twenty-six years later I, a self-absorbed gay poet, am mourning you. You would probably have said, *Honey get over it, I am.* On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June I told my friend I was afraid of dying. *What if I die?* I said, *will they publish the poems they find on my laptop?* *Probably not,* he smiled, *we wont even switch it back on.* David said, *keep tomorrow free* and I am afraid of death. I am afraid of tomorrow. How arrogant to presume I matter, that words matter. And then the canvas whispered, *forget all this death, what if you live?* And I started to write . . .

*Gosh Al, not too sure about that, as the last time we met you told me I was sexually demanding and now you seem to be suggesting that I come and hang out in a room full of your ex-boyfriends and mates while you blow out the candles on your vegan chocolate birthday cake, are the exact words I left on a boy's voicemail. After so many rejections, after being the perpetually disposable boyfriend, I started to transcribe the terrible conversations I had with them in my diary.*

Five or six years later, reading these conversations back, most of them either texts or voicemails for they wouldn't pick up the phone or return my calls – I can't think why –, makes me wonder at my mental health at the time. *Well fuck you Sean, if you are so incredibly damaged and unfixable then maybe you shouldn't have sex with boys who spend the whole night saying they attach sex with longevity. And clearly I am a terrible judge of character because I think that sending someone a text message saying it's best if we leave things here and it was really nice to meet you is totally generic and sickening. Maybe it's something you saw on TV and thought was a good idea but I'm here to tell you, via voicemail, that sending someone a text message to say anything serious is cowardly. You suck, and not that well as it happens.*

This transcribed answer phone message struck me as even odder because I had begun to quote these losers back to themselves; a tactic I had almost certainly learnt from my mother's disciplinarian yet passive-aggressive approach to child-rearing.

The next day, February 1<sup>st</sup>, I wrote, *I should not have left that message.* The day after, on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, I wrote, *I am so glad to have left Sean that message, people should be told how to treat other people.* Again, this seems almost like a direct quote from my mother. Rejection seemed to bring out my mother in me, seemed to split me in two. Becoming disposable brings duality – sadness and strength, passion and wrath, gay man and mother.

I cannot decide if the men – blonde, ginger and blue-haired – in Robilliard's painting are the disposable ones or the ones who disposed of him, but his red words encompass how I have always felt, how David felt, how we have all always felt. Disposable.

The grey cock struts, fanning his oil-slick tail. His neck undulates like a hydra. He coos – a dark noise he pulls from deep within himself like a heart murmur whilst his wretched bloody feet dance a circle of ownership around me. I am on all fours waiting, submissive like Leda wasn't. The downy feathers part and I glimpse the in-human phallus begin to rise. It begins. The naked flame burns in The Temple of Mithras; a finger nail is drawn across the gelatinous neck of a bullock; the sacrificial bowl fills with black blood; cigarettes are being lit outside the bars of East London – they dance like Bassarids in the coming night. Campfires gleam, lighting the faces of storytellers. Once a god was birthed from wet rock, magma his placenta, a six-legged Persian cat was born in Dalston that night. Every omen, every pain is condensed to anecdote. *Can I borrow a light?* He asks. *David. Richard. If you were thinking of kissing me you could.* He doesn't. His hand is already on my dick. Minutes later I turn his body, this beautiful thing, into some awkward, knock-kneed, victim. *When it is right its ugly,* I say. We sweat and bite and bruise. He turns me around and I feel the human part begin to rise – the naked flame burns in the temple of my head, pulsates like poppers. He draws his finger nail across my throat. I am full of black blood. I hear the sound of wing's beat.

7.

Writing about how to relax your partner on couples.com, Maya Huby – a somewhat extroverted sexpressionist coach – instructs you to *massage his shoulders and neck with lavender oil and if he does not fall asleep after this then perhaps you might fellate him.*

You know how to make egg & lemon soup – avgolemono. You know how to water my Africa violets – from beneath so the roots don't rot. You know how to kiss me – without tongue in public, with tongue and teeth and breath in private. You know how to spy on other men in gay bars at supermarkets when you think I am busy drinking or enraptured with literature. You know how to talk to my father, how to dance with him – no hands or hip contact – at family weddings. You know how to slide your index finger down the small of my back then tamper with the rim of my boxers. You know how to wait for me outside bookshops – with a smile that belies your impatience. You know how to rim me. You know how to call me handsome to end a bitter row – your father told you if a woman is angry just call her beautiful . You know how to wind me up like a toy mermaid thrashing fruitlessly round and round in the avocado tub. You know how to calm me down – by reading my poems, nodding subtly as you go from line to line to line.

It is unclear what Robilliard means exactly when he paints *The Yes No Quality Of Dreams*. The words yes and no imply decision, imply choice but dreams *feel* choiceless – the daring path taken, although it might surprise the dreamer, often feels inevitable. There is no yes. There is no no. In a dream there just is. In a recurring dream, I allow the turkish barber who wears my old headmaster's face to cut my throat with a silver razor as the whole school watches on silently; my blood drains over my stomach, pools in my lap and hymn number 106 is called. I have no power in the dream – I don't allow his razor, I don't fight his razor, I simply sit down in his barber's chair night after night.

And yet I do know what Robilliard might mean. Upon waking, as we forget the inevitability of our actions in dream – and presumably this is the mind protecting us, allowing us to forget that we step off buildings, swallow birds whole, rub broken glass into our eyes without a second thought – well upon waking we feel like anything was just possible. The dreamer has said yes to everything and no to normality. The dreamer rejects his boring, snoring, sweaty body and climbs into the carriage of desire. As we flip the switch from yes to no, finally we are the master.

Onerologists tell us that a sleeper may have up to seven dreams a night, with some lasting as long as twenty minutes. I have had dreams that feel like whole days are passing. Dream-time moves like time in a different reality; often when people in science fiction novels step from world to world, their friends or their loved ones have aged horribly. They cry. This trick of time is a tragedy to them. But when I wake, no matter how many weeks or months I have spent in dreaming my boyfriend is the same age as last night and his face is beautiful in the morning; young, smiling like a toddler who is most playful and sweet upon waking.

Some five thousand years ago, in ancient Mesopotamia, they kept dream logs on clay tablets. Upon waking, the rich would call for these fresh tablets, assembled by a servant just before dawn, and they would scratch glimpses – an owl, a nipple, a god's mouth opening into a valley, onto their earthen pages. Romans thought dreams were prophecies – messages written on our inners by deities. Vestal Virgins were put into dream like trances, consuming fistfuls of noxious herbs, just so they could reveal truths. Cities fell on this advice. Little did they know, as I do, that dreams are a playful jumble of what has come before. They are a diary written backwards, a brain fart. There is nothing new in a dream, save it's order.

Now whether or not we dream in colour is debated hotly by onerologists. But how could they know, colour is subjective to every eye and every beholder, the measuring of it depends on opinion and light. There is no way to enter another's dream, like Jennifer Lopez does in that movie the cell, to rescue the serial killer's next victim, where she faces operatic stage sets of pure terror, a horse cut up into fifteen slices and even must become the virgin Mary albeit armed with a crossbow. We cannot see another's dream. We cannot see another's colours. But Of the many things I do not know about dreams, I know this – David Robilliard dreamt in colour.

I often dream of The Galapagos Islands, or more accurately of the flowers there. Each and every blossom and petal is yellow for the only bees that flew the some six hundred miles from the coast of South America are blind to all but one colour, yellow. How wonderful to be so single minded I often think when I think of them honing in on their shining target. In my dreams and waking recollection of those blooms I believe I see the yellow. Not misremembered black and white, not a synapse misfiring or a neuroprotein, just yellow. It is the very yellow David used for the S of his DREAMS; thick, primary, a sliver of sun from a children's book, the centre golden ring of a deep bruise on pale skin. David saves the yellow for his S – he knows its importance. He knows that an S at the end of a word implies eternity. The plural are uncountable and go on before us.

Just like those innumerable blooms. But the yellows didn't choose to survive, didn't change their hues; they were simply lucky being painstakingly pollinated by the delicate bees hungry from their sea voyage. Imagine the thick buzzing cloud descending on them, dropping like hail from heaven, ravishing them so completely. The other blooms were unseen, therefore untouched – the season the bees arrived was their last for those un-yellow others. They dropped their rainbows of petals onto rocks, withered into sticks. And their last vision, these thriving yolk-yellow crowns haloed by coptering bees. This is how we will die too, closing our eyes on life as it continues on in hunger.

*Wondering What To Do This Evening* I call up Max but he's off to a concert, Strauss I think, with a composer-friend who possesses an unnaturally large penis. My boyfriend is out so I drink half a bottle of red wine and then text everyone I know – the subtext being, I cannot bare to be alone. People are at work, at BBQs, at galleries, at the pictures. TJWB texts back *free but teetotal at present*, I don't reply. I open a window to smoke when I see her – across the way, cleaning her windows with a skin-coloured chamois leather. She smiles politely at first and then waves. She mimics me smoking and then laughs, we laugh. A friend. Finally. Phew I think, no wretched solitude for me tonight then she flashes me a boob! Shit. For a brief second I consider showing her my flaccid penis – it would be a political demonstration of sorts – but I just draw the blind. I go on Youtube and look up T. S. Eliot, *the burnt out ends of smokey days*, he drawls. See he's alone and he's fine I tell myself. Come on Richard, be like Thomas. I run a bath as he drones away but then a click, a microphone off or on I think. What a jerk, he's lying! His secretary is probably there and a sound engineer – he doesn't know my black loneliness. I finish the bottle to spite him, get into the bath and call my mother. *Not a good time*, she says, she's watching Frazier – you know the episode where Helen Mirren is the guest caller. I laugh and say *looser*. She hangs up. I hold my breath and submerge. Drunk and confident I feel like a free diver, one of those men who can swim down for pearls with only a shucking knife and walk along the surface of the turquoise sea for a time; a silver stream of bubbles rising up like an epiphany. I might drown I think. Beneath me a woman is hammering a picture into a wall. I fart. I let in a mouthful of bath water. My boyfriend's late I think and he never brings me flowers and I hate my mothers temper. I rise up like a basking shark, angry, spilling over the edge. My belly in the bath tub is super pale, I see worms of blue veins, a scar, black hairs all pointing in the same certain direction. I hear David's voice remembered from an old recording, *the water puts a flower in your button hole*, but it doesn't, it flops out like a transparent slug. I hear a key turn in the lock and get ready to lie. Something about how being alone can be marvellous.

It is impossible to determine the exact roots of this English proverb which first appeared in print in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in a now anonymous book of household management, but it is worth noting that the author wrote *too many cooks spoil the potage*, thinking themselves fashionable for using the French word for soup.

What they meant was this; if every individual in the household added the flavours they thought were missing, the soup was soon become a spicy salty mess or even worse, become bland. My mother would often say something similar to me as my sister and I would jostle over the pot, fists full of herbs, dressed in little waxed cotton aprons. We both wanted to be like her, perhaps I succeeded more. And whilst she did teach us how to cook, we always knew that we were the too many. Only her grace and careful eye prevented the dinner from spoiling. We were not the cook, the artist that she was.

I have also heard it said, *too many chiefs not enough indians*. My grandfather would say this to me when I attempted to boss him around in the back garden playing wigwams or pirate ships or forts or castles; with a spade for a sword and a twig for a telescope. Robilliard doesn't mean any of these things but he hints at them, for humour. He perverts something which we remember from our parents mouths to give us a giggle. It works. But its not so funny really, it's a plea for moderation.

*Too Many Cocks Spoil The Breath*, meaning don't suck off too many men in one night – at the gay bar, at the club, on The Heath, at the bath-house; or where ever you might be. But why? – he didn't care about breath, he cared about mental clarity. He might as well have written, *too many cocks spoil the mind*. Lust is, after all, confusing. And nothing seems more confusing than queer lust. A gay man would think it nothing to accept a blow-job and then walk away without giving you his phone number or even his name. *By the way I'm David. By the way I'm Richard*, you shout after him, to his broad shoulders.

To write you need composure, you need equilibrium, you need moderation. A cock, whilst inspiring, is the pink enemy of poetry. This calligram, which is probably representative of a bell end, is atypical for Robilliard. Usually he doesn't draw with his words, but his mushroom-cloud cock seems important here – it is a warning. For him, for us, for anyone who lusts and writes or paints. *Too many cocks spoil . . . everything*. Apollo himself climbed down from heaven to caution Orpheus against too much love. *Moderation is key to happiness*, he intoned. But Orpheus didn't listen, he was still picturing the wet line of Eurydice's lip as the weeping Shepard came over the brow of the hill . . .

As the London dusk turns his white studio an ever deepening shade of primrose, we drain our cans and head into The Shoreditch Triangle. Lee, in his new bomber jacket, meets us outside the pub with three kisses each, offers me a purple cigarette from France and we smoke. David buys me a whiskey and this tune comes on and I dance like my dad – some boozy clown – and I teach David how to swing his arm like they aren't connected, like they have no cartilage, no bones and I accidentally head-butt him. *Sorry, so sorry* and I kiss it better. And Peter's there and Mo shows us his new tattoo –some blonde dude, an ex; Roman nose, collar like a priest. *Was he a priest?* He nods. *You filthy bugger.* I touch it, I touch him – still a little scabbed over but beautiful. And Peter's dancing and he jumps and his head grazes this faux-baroque chandelier and we laugh and I kiss it better and nothing can touch us here not money or disease or family. We are the chosen few who can taste the burning humours of life and drink it down with joy. *Life isn't good it's excellent,* whispers David, malt-breathed, panting – *Only none of this is real.* He smiles. And I am drinking alone. The pub smells of B. O. and puke. It is midday. The landlord burps.

The other day I typed your address into Google-map, 4 Garden Walk, London, EC2A 3EQ – the house where you lived, wrote, painted and fucked; kissed men or left them at your door or heard the door close as you came to with a hangover – the bed empty but for you. I must have walked up your street before I think, without even knowing it was yours – Innocuous office buildings, design companies, backing onto The Rivington Grill. Pricey now. The roof – a grey square with three small vents; I think there's a sliver of a garden there too. I switch on street view. The shot must've been taken in autumn for the plants, the tree looks brown. From my computer, I can't tell if you are to my left or right – copper clad company headquarters or old factory doors? Someone has placed blue dumpsters everywhere. You aren't anywhere. What did I expect? Some sixteen years has passed – you lived here when I was seven and still I was hoping to find a clue. I must be very stupid, very lacking in imagination. I resolve to make you a blue plaque from cardboard and paint. And then I see it. Someone has parked a yellow motorcycle outside your old house. The same yolk-yellow as you use for blonde. The same yolk-yellow smeared against your studio wall as sunset came down and you took my hand and wrote David Robilliard 1988 on my palm. Bruise-yellow, mimosa-yellow, blossom-yellow, your yellow. Yellow is, after all, the colour of presence.

Before you left, a last present. *Wait till i'm gone before opening it*, you said through the door-jam. A blank envelope – I shake – filled with powder or grit; just like a poison letter filled with ricin I think. And on the back, *Just Add Water*, written in your rainbow script. I tear it open – fragments of what, bone? – fill the bottom of a bowl. I pour the kettle and steam rises like off the sea in Positano. Then comes slime, soup and a bubbling noise like far off Meissen porcelain bells or the rubbish lorry compacting glass. From within the steam – form, shoulders, a collar bone, a chin – and he's here, naked, glistening like a seal! A tattoo, *1988*, on his left bicep. He doesn't have a name, he tells me, so I name him. *Not David*, I say, *he was your creator, I think I'll call you Absalom*. I dress him always in sensible jumpers, how very un-you. On our first night together I take him to The French House and whilst he's in the toilets having a piss, I dip my finger in his half-pint and write *David Robilliard 1988* in beer on the bar. It glistens like petrol in a puddle. And in the boozy lamp-glow, I catch your profile on his face – a mask of memory; thick eyebrows, lips always parted.

In Beethoven's Solemn Mass, towards the end of the Sanctus – just around the time one might get bored of the choir shouting Sanctus over and over again as someone rolls a kettle drum – the first violinist stands up and begins to play a high solo. Gradually everyone else drops out and it's just him left playing his four gut strings with his fingers and bow. Beethoven wrote, *this is the human soul leaving the earth in search of a heaven*. But it is not the human soul, it is a collection of notes and it does not reach heaven it reaches our ears. A joke perhaps from an agnostic before his time.

Your words are just words David, your paintings just paint – so why then do I feel this other, this pulsing behind it; something glib and loving and sad. Things are what they are, there is no more. You lived, you painted, you died. I live, I write, I will die. But I feel you here beneath the words, inside the words. Thirteenth century Dominican friars believed that if they prayed hard enough, if they meditated on the words and pictures within their illuminated manuscripts that they would suddenly spring to life, that they would see the grass at Gethsemane move in the wind, a bird might hover above golgotha, an eye looking down at a wound might glance up and meet their gaze. This was the ultimate in holiness, a sign.

I have been praying hard enough David, I am no friar, but I have done my meditations. Give me a sign, a whisper, meet my gaze – I implore you. Then you come all at once, in this ghostly glib cacophony of care; *Keep tomorrow free! Life isn't good it's excellent! Too many cocks spoil the breath! Don't get sand in your boiled eggs! Live! Write!* I hear you as clearly as water falling on rocks, as a pencil scraping paper. Then the canvas, the gallery is full of vanishing and we are alone but not alone but alone.