

## IMAGINARY HANDS // A LOVER'S DISCO

Dave Morse



Detail from "untitled", Praise Fuller (2021)

*"We can't prove he existed. We know somebody named Valentine answers prayers, but we know nothing else."*

—TanichaF, r/Catholicism

IT TOOK TWO CENTURIES for the Church to give up on determining a true Saint Valentine between the handful of plausible candidates of the second and third centuries, with Pope Gelasius throwing up his palms at the whole mess in A.D. 496 and declaring the life of Valentine as "being known only to God." The Vatican would go on to officially dump the idea of the man altogether by scrubbing his February 14th celebration from the Roman Calendar in 1969. Yet the scattered hagiographies of all the different Saint Valentines maintain one commonality of miracle between them: that he restored sight to the blind daughters of his persecutors, first for a judge holding his fate and years later reprising the act—his last—for the daughter of the jailer who warded him until his execution.

Together my love and I walk the imaginary forest. Hunting or hiking? Both. All woods are imaginary. ("These trees are magnificent, but even more magnificent is the sublime and moving space between them, as though with their growth it too increased.") It is this *sublime and moving space between* too that defines us—like fingers on the Sistine Chapel, beheld as they

are not for their proximity but their distance. Terrain travelled as through water—only through its momentary displacement. Curtains are built to open and then close again.

(I would not write against the holiday so much as color in its shadow. *Be Gone* etched on the flip of a candy heart proposing being *Mine*. Valentine was beheaded, beaten to death with hammers. We venerate him. His skull is crowned with flowers.)

B and I spend a year and a half caring for her mother C as and after she died. This backdrop of a certain and unavoidable eventuality of grief stabilizes into a sort of hyperreality, allowing the suspended slowness necessary to percolate true joy. Our happiest moments together are there in her mother's house, inhabiting a fully realized sense of purpose and place: nowhere but here. It is through total loss that we hold each other totally.

In C's final weeks I station myself out of sight in adjacent rooms and fumble at upside-down versions of Elizabeth Cotten on her guitar while she floats by, still overfilled with thoughts and curiosity. On these occasions she remarks to herself or to B how much she *loves whatever that sound is*, with the earnest wonder and pleasure I usually only know in toddlers or my little brother. In more lucid moments she gives spotty, mad-libby histories of the folk artists she loved so much: Cotten had been the maid for *that famous family* (the Seegers) and had kept her music secret from the Populist Aristocracy she served. One day they happened



upon her playing and proceeded to usher her out to the Folk. Left-handed, she had always played guitars upside down rather than restraining them, and so no one was ever able to quite steal her magic. The value of a treasure often lies just as much in the hiding of it.

My mother's birthday falls the day before Valentine's Day. This gives me always a sort of inverted holiday weekend, a Sunday/Saturday of different kinds of love. To celebrate the motherly. Then another. To know that I will lose both. I have, I will, I will again, just as I will never. A proper valentine is not a courtship or a conquest, it is an obituary, a biography. To *Be Mine*, if we can interpret the insinuations of possession not as ownership but as *download*, is to reanimate someone into what you hold within yourself: an interior portal through the prism of another. The way I most learned to love B was not for us committing to the caring for her mother together, but through witnessing her and her mother as they cared for each other—how what changed between them built its change on a deep and still foundation—how that witness fully remodeled me inside.

That the Saint Valentine would restore sight. Love, notoriously blind, often only regains clarity upon its own execution. Within relationship or courtship we navigate funhouses of delight, desire, horror, disdain. Years into one relationship I feel the kind of profound and total estrangement from everyone in my life that I have only ever felt on precipices of suicide. I confess this one night and receive my sentencing: *yes, you are different. You are no longer you. Everyone sees it. Be Gone*. It is midnight. I get up and lace my boots and walk the two miles home, too numb to cry. This stricken animal, this muttering at street. ("I crawled out of the bush and away from the window and I began to run. My only safety lay in flight. If I stopped I'd howl.") I don't consider any wisdom in the blunt verdict, I am merely shocked into stupor, into the growing impossibility of change.

I have only ever considered suicide near holidays. I don't remember which had been lurking. Probably Summer. I associate only cold air with happiness; death with the warm, the sluggish.

Now that we are gone of each other this encounter hardly seems conceivable, let alone real. This love—since crystallized as museum piece (archived or on display, but *committed to retain*)—does not anymore allow for the cruelties we would inflict on each other while it still held breath.

After a love ends I revel in the simple clarity of again only taking lovers. If I begin falling for someone the mania disturbs me so greatly that I eject myself, it flies too near my other consuming love and both burn up in the stratosphere together. I restore my own sight: I am my own Saint, my own prisoner, jailer, daughter.

There are so many self-styled Martin Luthers of love. So many interior decorators posturing as architects. You must weight-test scaffolding to see if it will hold you, but love requires faith, requires horse blinds and blindfolds, requires sure and providential footing despite the drop cloths all around you pretending at floor.

I wake next to B again in the dark belly of night and find myself briefly paralyzed. A space and time traveler fixed to an eternal

point, as if thumped by a rubber mallet and sentenced to lay in this delicious, dazed stupor. The moment is pregnant with forever—it is to this I cling, knowing that once it passes I will sleep again and wake as from any dream, to walk away filled with the lingering specter of an evaporated promise.

On the seashore I occasionally leave B and C to buy books from a man one town over. He couldn't host me for the first six months of my split residence there because he was in the process of replacing every one of his white blood cells, a last-ditch attempt to beat back his stubborn lymphoma. The procedure worked. This helps me to continue my work "remotely," buying books from this carefully curated apartment over the ocean and cataloging them to sell online or to bring back and put on the shelves of my book shop.

I too spent that year replacing myself at a molecular level. The procedure worked. It was not the correct procedure.

Love's blindness often develops through an overconfidence of sight: *I'm looking through you. Where did you go*. To not see the forest for the widening space between the trees. To shed the question for the assurance of a period. A truest Valentine would be to vacate this sentence totally, to blanken the page.

When the dead visit you in dream it is only them by a trick of swallowed mirror, of light that you yourself are throwing. The same to continue a dead love, a fleeting and Orphic illusion. If the willow tree dips with the wind into the water, if it still cannot drink with its fingers. This truest Valentine—disavowing him totally, keeping open a ticket booth in some Roman Basilica to visit "his" skull wreathed with wildflower. The nature of perspective is that, in gaining it, a door appears where before there was none. Behind that door lies the flood. Opening to it renders traversing the door (as *door*) impossible until all the water has rushed through and against you first, and finally you can walk again, on the few remaining puddles.

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