

Certitude and Joy

Draft of 18 January 2012

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A 23-year-old woman who said she was hearing voices stripped her three small children naked Wednesday and threw them off a San Francisco fishing pier into the bay, authorities said.
- *San Francisco Chronicle, October 20, 2005*
-

The Proem

HEARD IN THE DARK, A SINGLE VOICE

The mind is its own place, and the places inhabited by the insane and the exceptionally gifted are so different from the places where ordinary men and women live, that there is little or no common ground of memory to serve as a basis for understanding or fellow feeling.¹

ANOTHER VOICE SAYS

God decided to tempt Abraham, and called to him: "Abraham." "Here I am," he replied.²

lights

MAN

I grew up in a religious family. In my youth, I ached for a Religious Experience, one that would give me the certainty of faith that held my parents fast.

we see the parents, they act out the following

They told me this story: once, when my sister was very ill, a blizzard raged outside, and my parents were sitting late at night in the living room, not knowing whether to brave the storm to drive to a doctor, to risk all their lives in the process, when the room was suffused with a warm and reassuring light, a presence that informed them clearly that all would be well, that they had nothing to fear. They both saw it – the light – they both felt it, they both knew that this was the God of their faith, they both were sure that their daughter was safe and, as the morning came, my sister's fever broke and all was well.

we see the mother

My mother, a learned woman who knew Hebrew and Greek, who wrote books and plays, who would talk to me of philosophy and her passion for feminism, also spoke in tongues,

we hear the babble growing

a charismatic babbling of nonsense, an ecstatic experience, one of the gifts given to the apostles. My father, a Lutheran minister who knew Hebrew and Greek, who dedicated his life to the sick, poor and imprisoned, could, through the power of his words, heal the broken.

mother gives father a coat

As a young boy interested in Mathematics, a world to which I was beginning to look for certitude and

¹ Aldous Huxley

² Genesis 22:1

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intellectual comfort, I knew the work of Blaise Pascal

Pascal appears with book in hand, coat with sewn in description, etc.

who, even though a harbinger of the Age of Reason, had sewn into his coat a detailed, irrational description of a moment in his life when he was absolutely certain of the truth of the Christian Faith.

I couldn't shake the idea that this kind of faith, and the Religious Experience that is the seed for it, might be something necessary to survive in this world, an otherwise frightening place of chaos, illness, genocide, war, death, hunger and pain. But at the same time that I lusted after an episode, an experience like Pascal's, I began also to fear it, seeing it as madness, a profound loss of my rational mind, a rational mind that was becoming more and more important to me. My friends in high school, who all sought their own quasi-religious experiences in hallucinogens, offered them to me, but by then I could not let go. I was already on the razor's edge separating sanity's bright light from the dark night of lunacy. Neither the faith of my parents nor the homegrown sacred rites of my friends were able to convince me to take such a risk. I remained on the side of lucidity and reason, of sound and careful thinking.

YOUNG WOMAN

In 2005, a young woman from Oakland was told by God to throw her three children into the Bay, which she did, undressing them and killing them all in a brief ritual after a day spent in San Francisco, sightseeing and eating hot dogs.

MAN

I had seen the story in the paper, but had forgotten it among all the other news equally shocking. A few days after,

the stage is set with the following;

While riding my bicycle on the Embarcadero, I came across a scattering of flowers and stuffed animals and notes and candles, damp from the soft evening mist off the water. I stopped and looked at it, not knowing why it was there until I looked up and saw the lamplights of pier 7 receding from where I stood into the dusk over the bay, a corridor of light to another world, and I remembered that this was where

YOUNG WOMAN

she had sent her children through that corridor to another world.

MAN

When questioned, she told the police

YOUNG WOMAN

that the children were with their Father,

BOYFRIEND

not her boyfriend, their Earthly father,

GOD

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but with their Father in Heaven.

MAN

Later, as I read more, I discovered her clear and childlike faith, e.g.,

to psychologist

YOUNG WOMAN

her poignant request to the police psychologist that he take a letter up in a plane to her children in Heaven.

PSYCHOLOGIST

She was schizophrenic of course, with all the clinical signs of the disease appearing in her young adulthood, the most common time of onset.

MAN

When someone reminded me of her story last year during

ALL

a discussion of Medea,

MAN

the images of the pier and the lights and the unspeakable terror of the three young boys each killed by their mother came back to me and I began to remember my own fear, the fear of my youth. How could she be so certain of God's voice? God spoke to Abraham as well, and asked him to take his own son Isaac, whom Abraham loved more than anything in the world, to a place on a mountain to which God would lead him, and to sacrifice him, to kill him with a knife and to burn his body, the body of Isaac his own son, as an offering to God.

CHRISTIANS

Christians happily accept this as an instructive tale: how we should blindly accept the commandments of God, following His voice without question.

MAN (NOW THE COMPOSER)

We live in a world where there is much focus on the terrible actions inspired by religious certitude.

COMPOSER AND YOUNG WOMAN
(NOW LASHAUN)

In writing the libretto, LaShaun and I became one and the same.

COMPOSER

I accept that she was

COMPOSER AND LASHAUN

in communication with God,

COMPOSER

that He told her

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LASHAUN

to kill her children.

COMPOSER

I am compelled

COMPOSER AND LASHAUN

by her certainty and her great joy.

The Opera

Scene 1: in which we meet God and LaShaun

God appearing in glory.

GOD

My prophets are neither fish, nor flesh, nor good red herring. My delusions, my faith: neither fixed, nor false, nor involving the presence of incontrovertible evidence, but inspiring the idiosyncratic behaviors and thoughts which make society uncomfortable, nervous, make society to strike, to lash out at that which troubles it.

Enact the passion.

My own son, one of three of us, flesh of my flesh, a prophet, had to carry the wood on which he was condemned to die, up Calvary, stumbling three times with, *(falls)* oh God I remember it, the pain of the lash, teeth tearing at my flesh, blood stinging my eyes, such ecstasy, a bliss that no man has ever known, to carry all the deaths of all the world. *(collects himself)* And to die: three that died that day, today you shall be with me in paradise.

LaShaun, lost in herself, acting as a child. The two speeches below are mixed together, sung and spoken.

LASHAUN

One day in the street, a man was talking about Jesus. The sun was so bright it hurt the little girl's eyes. She was going to school and her grandma said take this lunch money. The man was talking to everyone, telling them what to do. But she knew that it was too much and she spent some of it. She was afraid of the man. When she got to school the teacher said where have you been. The girl said nowhere sorry. The light was bright behind his eyes. At home she took the toy out of her pack. The man told her to buy it. Her mama said go to bed so she did.

GOD

My prophets, chosen by me to be touched by madness, a result of mental distress, correlated with poverty, with race discrimination, family dysfunction, unemployment; maybe related to a gene, the gene that controls the production of the Zinc finger protein, maybe inherited, maybe caused by *de novo* mutations affecting gene copy number. Since you continue to have such madness in your midst, you must accept a putative evolutionary advantage to it. What is that advantage?

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Hold my hand LaShaun.

God's hand comes off.

Scene 2: youth

LaShaun moving from teen to adult.

LASHAUN

My mama ran over my cat. He was sleeping under the tire of the car when she pulled out of the driveway of our little house. I can still feel it. They said "don't go outside" and from their faces I knew. I found a dark place in my stomach and I knew no one had ever felt this way before.

When I went to school the next day, all that I saw and all I experienced was suffused with a harsh and clarifying light, a world put through a fire that burns away everything that is not the truth.

A sermon.

GOD

My chosen, you each, die at my whim, never to know why. You hope to be together enough at the end to understand when it is explained to you, why it all happened, why you live, why you die, why the universe was born in fire. You may believe it's all a test, and maybe it is, or maybe it is not. You may simply be deranged. You can't know. You can't test me. You must simply trust in the absurd leap of faith. How do you know if your visions come from Him most divine or from impulses most evil? The answer is simple: that, when it happens, you will know, and that will give you peace.

Take my hand LaShaun. Come with me.

Still in herself.

LASHAUN

My friends who took drugs in high school, entranced by *The Doors of Perception*, did not fear the razor's edge. Already too close to madness, I feared the fall: passing into a chemical psychosis from which I could never return. After some of my friends dropped hundreds of times, I was no longer able to follow their conversations, while they seemed unaware of the change. I asked myself: how can one tell if one is mad?

GOD

You are made in my image.

LASHAUN

My boys.

We each, each of us, is a universe, and each of us feel and sense and fancy. We live out our lives alone. Jesus died alone even though he was one of three dying together. I try to explain this, all that I am, to my boyfriend, the father of my children. He is so sexy, his hands on my young breasts, his warm body against my skin, straining into me, like in the movies, and I like it and then he is coming in me, and I try so hard to join with him at that moment, to commingle our ecstasies, when he looks at me, but he is already gone. I don't know what he thinks, what he imagines he is doing, I push myself against him, I

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dig my fingernails into his back. I'm left alone. How it hurts me, a hard cold place in my stomach, so alone here, how we die alone but three together.

LaShaun pauses and looks at God.

You are here with me. You talk to me.

GOD

Yes, I am here, and I know that all things work together for good in how much you love your God, you who are called here according to my purpose.

Treyshawn enters as LaShaun sinks back into herself, God leaving. Both spoken and sung, the coherency carried by one or the other.

LASHAUN

It's frightening to find yourself filthy, crazy, doing something crazy, with dirty fingernails, with a craziness about dirty fingernails. I woke up one morning sick and stayed home from school and, as the day went on, my fever increased. I was scared that You were going to hurt me, that there were people out of sight, trying to touch me. And when I am clear, the children are there, scared, frightened of seeing me change, disappearing there in their sight, trying to touch me when I am disheveled, hair filthy, itching, crazy. Sometimes there is clarity, but it's frightening, confused, and I know what I have to do, the new religions pushing out the old religions. The poems on the bus, the advertisements, the television, the Bible, my favorite passages, sacrifice, some I focus on and they make no sense, the Watchtower, blood, AIDS, condoms, doctors. The new sanity pushes out the old sanity, a logical consistency of the world to those of us whose rational thought may just be an indication of our own madness. My world is a rational world that always seems so.

Scene 3: in which we meet her children

TRAYSHAWN

Are you OK, mama?

LaShaun doesn't hear.

LASHAUN

A parent loves her children, but is like God to them, granting them life, sometimes harsh, wrathful, unfathomable, mystifying. Orders hard to understand.

Pointing at each of them

Boy ... boy ... boy, a reflection of their father, I struggle with them, sometimes they hurt me too, hard for me to understand, the unbridgeable gaps between us all, children so simple but so hard to understand. When one is with fever, I comfort him; delirious, I comfort him.

A flashback.

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TRAYSHAWN

Mama, I'm sick.
Mom, mom!
He was talking about Jesus.

Scary men.
Captain.
Peanut butter sandwich.
Crash.

Bandicoot.
Willicoot.

LASHAUN

Trayshawn, you're burning up.
Delirious.
So sick, so hot.
Flames licking your young body, like the furnace
of Hell, the anvil of the sun.
Need to cool you,
cold water,
covering your body.
The cold water,
where there are sharks.
Baptizing in the river Jordan.

Trayshawn is gone and God is back.

LASHAUN

But You talk to me, You are here with me?

GOD

Yes, of course.

LASHAUN

You choose us, but like the gift given to King Midas, being chosen, made so special, we prophets, raised apart from all others, suffer the consequences of our gifts, set apart from all others, utter aloneness in our thoughts, in our terrible introspection and fear. We each must walk a lonesome path and, even in the glittering arrows of morning, even surrounded by, touched by, loved by those ordinary men and women who do not see what we see, feel what we feel, we touch the rim of the sky. Yesterday, I saw a young man, festooned with tattoos, one in Latin, one a layered representation of the Lorentz transformation. He wishes to see what I can see, but he will never see, and, although he may not realize it, he is the happier for it.

The child is back.

My kids.

When they look up to me, what do they see?

And they talk to me.

THE CHILD

Mama?
What are you doing, mama?
Who are you talking to?
I love you, mama.

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LASHAUN

God loves you, Trayshawn.

THE CHILD

I'm hungry, mama.

LASHAUN

Mother, why have you forsaken me?

THE CHILD

The baby's so cute.

LASHAUN

Is your will that I am my children's mother, ...

THE CHILD

Do you need help with that, mama?

LASHAUN

... that I am wife to my husband?

THE CHILD

I love you, mama.

Scene 4: the migraine

LASHAUN

God loves you.

When the headaches begin, I am still alone. I am still one person. A spark, then a spot in the center of my vision, like I've caught a reflection of the sun in a mirrored glass, too bright, hurts, the spot a dark afterimage. But no, I feel a moment of fear as it begins to move. He is coming, crenellations sparkling, and in closing my eyes I see a quivering, a cycling color table animation, lines of yellows and oranges against a dark purple background. He is coming to me.

When I was pregnant, I was so happy, in a heavenly state of bliss, hormones cascading through me, taking the headaches away, bringing quiet.

I see Him as He approaches, the battlements of light bristling. I am a child soldier, his favorite, begotten of Him before his worlds, light and light of light. When a parent's light falls upon her child, it is a warming light. The child curls up in it, catlike, stretching out to meet it. I lean over to pick up Ray Jr, his arms outstretched, reaching up to me, the source of the warming light.

As the armies pass, I can no longer see, the lights pushed out the dark. At first, I feared the blindness, but then I knew that it protected me from His searing light, painful now, oh God, a pulsing pain behind my eye, and I'm sick, I need to be sick in something, lying down now in the dark, pillow over my head, but needing to get up and be sick. Death would be a welcome guest, but my boy, my Ray Jr, has fallen asleep against me in the dark, and I am still providing him the warmth that is a poor reflection of the

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warmth that is to come.

How is it that he could leave me here, alone with the children? How could he forsake me?

Soon the pain worsens and He is here with me, and then I can see again, so clearly, like someone has cleaned and shined and polished the world just for me. And I put myself into His hands, and into His hands I commend myself.

drops to her knees as God returns

It's frightening.

Scene 5: genesis 22; sightseeing

GOD

LaShaun!

LASHAUN

Here I am.

GOD

Take your sons, your three sons, whom thou lovest, and go with them into the city. Your boys, your three boys, your most precious children, whom you carried and bore into this world. You must offer a sacrifice there, in the city, in a place I will show you.

LASHAUN

I must put my children in the cooling water. I must give Jesus my baby.

NARRATOR

Early the next morning, LaShaun got up and dressed her children and got her things together. When she had collected it all and when she had gathered her children, she set out for the place God was to show her, and caught BART into the city. It took a while, and they walked through the city, through Fisherman's Wharf, ate hot dogs.

Sightseeing dance.

NARRATOR

In the third hour, LaShaun looked up and saw the place in the distance, the place God was to show her.

LASHAUN

I must feed my children to the sharks.

We see the two rows of lights down the pier, into infinity. LaShaun pushes a stroller and her oldest boy Trayshawn walks next to her.

NARRATOR

She looked and saw her grandmother, long dead, standing beside her and said to her, "abide ye here, while I and my sons go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." She asked her

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oldest, Trayshawn, to help carry her things, and as the two of them went on together, Trayshawn looked up at her and said, “Mama?” “Yes, my son” “Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” “God himself will provide the lamb for the offering, my son.” So they went, all of them together. And they came to the place which God had shown her; and she took her things and laid them down, and undressed her son.

Scene 6: in which she kills her children

TRAYSHAWN

I'm thirsty, mama.

LaShaun undresses Trayshawn.

LASHAUN

Dear Father,
dear Jesus,
lead these little ones on their treacherous journey
fleshly, into your arms.
My little boy, Mr. Trayshawn Harris, who cannot swim,
an angel in human vesture,
the water is so cold,
will chill him,
deep through his naked skin,

TRAYSHAWN

No, mommy

LASHAUN

to his bones,
bone chilled.

TRAYSHAWN

what are you doing, Mama?

LASHAUN

But not his heart, not his soul,
with which your hand doth protect and shelter and warm,

TRAYSHAWN

No, mommy

He runs, but she catches him and picks him up,

LASHAUN

such a little boy, so easy to lift, yes, I hear you,
so easy to lift.

TRAYSHAWN

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No

*and, swinging him by one foot and one hand, flings
him over the railing.
She turns to the next child, undresses him,*

LASHAUN

And Taronta Ray Greely Jr, take this plunge,

TARONTA RAY GREELY JR

No, mama, no

LASHAUN

harsh and cold,
into the deep sea, back from where we came, each,
formed by mysteries beyond our comprehending
and swim, and founder,
and feel the chill of the water in your lungs,

and drops him into the water.

tearing, searing pain,
and pass through death,
that which He has promised us,
He who, on Calvary's mount, defeated Death,
so that each of us can come into his arms,
waiting for you, my son,
my son, behold your mother, woman, behold,
my Joshua Greely, my boy, only 16 months,

She holds out the baby

who still toddles so cannot swim,
and the water is so cold,
I send you through this passage,
like the Stargate with the lights all around.
Waiting for you,
a kindly old man and his son and the other,
less corporeal,
a bird,
halos like lights all around,
I see the light form about your brow, dear Joshua.
Your mother is so happy for you,
my God is in you,
as I undress you.
I feel the nubs of wings on your back,
they will lift you,
even though your body is sodden down with cold watery death.
A powerful strength will find you,
the wind from your wings drying the chill water from you,

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the hands of our Lord warming your heart,
his lungs breathing life back into your limp drowned body,
the resurrection and the life,
he promised this to us all,
forever and ever.
Don't struggle my son.
I hear you,
cooing to your mother,
so easy to lift
and drop into the water,

She drops him in.

JOSHUA

Mommy.

My baby,
I can't see you,
I can't hear you, my son,
be strong,
the water is cold and you have such a long way to go.
I love you and I'm so proud of you,
strong enough to take this journey,
dangerous through the cold chill,
a bone chilling watery death,
ahead of your mother,
whose certitude,
feeling, joy, peace,
God of Abraham and Isaac,
Joy, Joy,
Tears of Joy,
Peace,
On this day the 19th of October,
the year of our Lord, 2005,
we must each take this journey alone,
so alone,
I feed each of you to the sharks,
the pain of their teeth tearing through your bodies,
in the cold chill dark water,
cold to draw the life from you,
through your naked skin,
taking the life that I gave you,
that your Father gave you,
that He gave all of us.
Hold, I hear him now,
I have a phone call from him,
He's calling me.
Sorry, can't talk now, busy,
can just listen.

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Thank you my God,
tell me again how right this is,
each of my boys,
the cold chill of death,
the dangerous journey,
through this Stargate.
From here on Earth to Heaven above.
To be with him today in paradise, truly,
This is Eternal Life,
that they know you,
the one True God,
and the one that you sent,
Jesus Christ,
Jesus Christ,
Jesus Christ,
may I not forget your words.

She adds:

It is finished.

She turns back to the stroller and starts pushing it away.

I did what I'm supposed to do, what God ordered. My kids, man, I love my kids. Now they're gone to heaven.

Scene 7: the wheels of justice

A policeman comes up to her.

POLICEMAN

Where are the babies?

LASHAUN

They're OK.

POLICEMAN

Where did you put the babies?

LASHAUN

They're OK, they're with their Father.

POLICEMAN

Did you put your babies in the bay?

LASHAUN

Yes.

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THE COURT PSYCHIATRIST

She seemed serene, pleased that she had carried out God's will.

LASHAUN

It was my life or the kids I guess, like I had to give a living sacrifice. If He calls me to do something, I'm going to do it, I guess. I think He wanted them because I was loving them more than him because I took them to church and I couldn't finish the service because the kids would be crying or running around.

THE COURT PSYCHIATRIST

She had a history of schizophrenia, auditory hallucinations the last two years, had been hospitalized twice, Haldol prescribed, fought with the father, spoiled her children.

LaShaun looks up.

LASHAUN

Are you going to kill me? I want to be with my children.

THE COURT PSYCHIATRIST

Can you tell me what happened?

LASHAUN

I guess it's murder. You never know how he is going to call who he wants.
My baby.

...

Are you going to kill me, 'cause it's murder, throwing my baby over there?
If you do, I forgive you.

THE COURT PSYCHIATRIST

Do you define death as the cessation of life?

LASHAUN

Death is simply a way of conveyance to heaven, a way to God.

...

I have a letter.

THE COURT PSYCHIATRIST

I see it.

LASHAUN

This letter is to God in heaven. Can you take it, and deliver it to Him? If you take a plane you can fly it up to Him.

THE COURT PSYCHIATRIST

Let me see it.

Scene 8: the letter

THE LETTER

How is heaven holding up? I know I might not get a letter back. Kiss my boys for me. I did what you told me and now I am in lockup. Kiss them for me. I hope they are having fun, I hope they are chasing dogs and my grandmother is taking care of them. I hope they have a nice house. My oldest boy struggled with me, it made me mad, and he tried to run but I just picked him up. With one arm and one leg, I swung him back and forth and flung him over the railing, into your arms. He said no, but I picked him up. He asked what are you doing mama, but I threw him into the water. They are gone, but they live in heaven and in my heart.

Scene 9: reality

turning to God

LASHAUN

I want to see you.

It's too hard for me here, no one understands, it seems, that I was touched by you, chosen for this task. I am who I am, and the ordinary people who don't see as I see, feel as I feel, and are not touched by the divine, and whose every act is not sanctified, is not sacred, they cannot judge, lest they be judged, by Him who will judge us all when we come bidden to Him. Some are called sooner, sooner, when they are so very very young. To be young and to be called is so sad. Oh Goddamn you, why did you choose me for this unwelcome task, to kill my only begotten sons, begotten before all worlds? Where are you? Where is your calming voice? I need to hear you again, I want to see you.

I have a clarity of thought, a thought borne of the previous sanity, and not the sanity in which I now find myself. The world is suffused with a clear and burning reality, burning all falsehoods and leaving a truth, a truth of such pain I can't fucking stand it. Wait, is that you, calling me? I see a light, I catch a glimpse of the sun, the battlements, God, no, my shit, my God, my sons.