



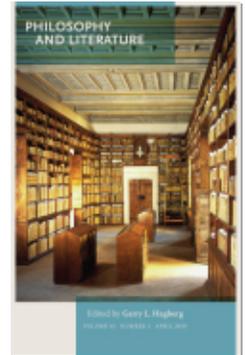
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Boxed

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Creative Directions

BOXED

BY DANIEL M. PUTNAM

Skepticism about other minds is typically presented as a straightforwardly epistemological thesis. Eliminativism about folk psychology is typically presented as a straightforwardly metaphysical thesis. But having moral status entails having, or having had, some mental states. And relating to persons as persons presupposes the application of folk-psychological concepts. So neither view can be divorced from ethics.

I

MARY LIKES WATCHING OTHERS. She always has.
“Stop,” her mother said. “It’s rude.”

“What’s rude?”

“Staring like that. Making people uncomfortable.”

“How do you know they’re uncomfortable?”

“Because they just are.”

“But how do you know they’re uncomfortable unless you stare at them?”

“Enough.”

They were in a supermarket. There was a fat man pushing a cart and a skinny man leaning on a cane in front of a row of Cheerios. The skinny man caught her eye and smiled. She looked away. She liked watching others, but she was shy. Deep down, she still is.

Now Mary waits: smartly dressed, a shock of red lipstick, wrinkles of thought around her eyes. The room she's in is cold and sterile. On one wall is a row of pictures. They are pictures of brains: arranged, chronologically, from crude eighteenth-century sketches to the present. The one from the late twentieth century has arrows pointing to different regions of the brain, each a different color, with names and short descriptions. Mary's eyes settle on the amygdala: "regulates memory and emotion, especially fear." On the far right is the most recent picture. Lacing through the brain are dozens of numbered squiggles. Like a highway map, Mary thinks. A legend identifies each neural network with a specific pattern of thought or feeling. But the letters are too small for Mary to read.

On the opposite wall is a long, steel shelf. On this shelf sits a row of writing devices. At one end is a jet-black, 1920s Corona typewriter. In the middle are the bulky desktops of the late twentieth century, followed by the slender laptops of the early twenty-first. At the far end is the 2039 model of Compuglasses. They look like aviator goggles. But if you put them on, all you see is a screen. Half the people on the train wear them. But Mary doesn't like them. She thinks they make people look like bugs.

There's just one other person in this room. It's an old woman wrapped in a burgundy shawl. In her hands is a book: the real thing, the kind you don't see anymore. Her lips are moving slowly and her fingers are tracing the words. Mary wonders what she is reading. She wonders what brings her here, whose patient she is. The woman looks tired and unwell; her cheeks are sallow, her shawl frayed. The edges of her eyes are puffy. It occurs to Mary that perhaps she has been crying. An image forms in Mary's mind: the woman leaning on a sink, peeling potatoes, two tears wending their way down her cheeks, the slicing motion of the peeler going faster and faster, to keep the tears at bay.

A door opens.

"So you're interested in Targeted Cognitive Elimination."

Dr. Sunderman's hands, dry and speckled with liver spots, are clasped together on a steel-and-glass desk. This desk is the only thing in his office, apart from the two chairs on which each of them sits. In the air is a faint smell of cleaning fluid. Sunderman does not like dust.

"I am," she says.

"Why? The last time we met you said you were quite happy with the combination. In terms of mood, I mean." As he speaks, his body

remains uncannily still. The gaze does not wander, remaining fixed on a point just between Mary's eyes. The hands do not move. The tone of the voice is even. It is just loud enough to be heard, but not more so. Sunderman does not like noise.

At first, Mary found his stillness disconcerting. But with time, and somewhat to her surprise, it made her feel safe. It made her feel that she could tell him things, that she could relate to him as more than just a psychiatrist; more than a neural plumber. His stillness is what enables her sometimes to cry in this room.

"I am. The depression is under control. Same with the anxiety."

"But you have some beliefs you'd like to eliminate."

"Well, here's the thing," she says, hands relaxing, chest opening up. "What I want is essentially recreational TCE."

"Recreational."

"Yes. It's going to sound rather ridiculous when I explain it to you."

"Go on."

He is listening more carefully now. She can tell.

"I think I mentioned that I'm teaching Descartes's *Meditations* this semester."

"You did."

"And this week we discussed the problem of other minds. How do I know that other people have any experiences? How do I know that other people have an inner mental life, since all I can see is the outward behavior of their bodies? I was giving the standard spiel, and I found myself bumping into a problem, something that's bothered me about this question ever since graduate school."

"Which is."

"I don't see what the problem is."

"Explain."

"OK. So, I can get myself into a state where it seems like I'm dreaming, where I see everything out there as an illusion created by my mind. And of course, if everything out there is an illusion, then a fortiori so are other minds. But here's the thing. Once I accept that there's an external world that is independent of my mind—once I grant that there's at least some stuff out there—I can't stop myself from thinking that there are other minds. In other words, I don't see why I should be any *more* skeptical about the existence of other minds than I am about the existence of, say, this desk. I don't see why there's any *special* problem of other minds, over and above the general problem of skepticism about the external world."

Sunderman appears to consider this for a moment.

“OK. But of course, the only experiences you have direct access to are Mary’s. That’s because the only experiences you can *have* are Mary’s. So grant that there’s a desk in front of you, and behind it, a body. Isn’t there a *further question*: namely, how do you know there is anything going on inside of this body? How do you know there’s something it’s *like* to be this body? How do you know that I’m not just a zombie or robot that’s been programmed to perfectly imitate the behavior of someone with an inner life, consciousness, and so on?”

“That’s the right thing to say. And that’s what I tell my students. But I don’t really believe it, and so I always feel disingenuous when I say it. I guess I never really bought into the whole ‘inner/outer’ distinction. I mean—to get concrete. I’m sure you’ll forgive me for saying this, but you’re not the most expressive person in the world; and yet in spite of that, I can tell that sometimes you’re listening more intently than at other times, or you feel this way and not that way about whether to pursue a certain line of discussion. Some days I sense that perhaps you’re a little bit down, something’s nagging you, and you know me, I want to ask why, but you’d just deflect it, that’s your job. Of course I can’t read your mind, but you’re not totally opaque to me, either. I do feel that I can see at least some of your mental states.”

“What does that mean? *Seeing* another’s mental states?”

“In your body, your face, your hands. I don’t *first* see that your face looks a certain way, which I could describe in purely mechanical terms, and *then* hypothesize certain unobservable mental states ‘on the inside’ that are causing what I observe ‘on the outside’; it’s not so intellectual, so truncated as that; I just see *that* you’re pensive, or bored, or whatever it might be. I realize this may sound a bit presumptuous, perhaps even invasive”—she laughs—“but that’s how it seems to me.”

“Fair enough. But you’re also exceptionally empathetic.”

“I’m told.”

“Ninety-ninth percentile in susceptibility to the neural correlates of emotional contagion, among other things.”

“Now you’re laying it on thick.”

He clears his throat.

“Anyway. What does all of this have to do with TCE?”

“In a nutshell: I want to know what I’m missing. I want to know—for just one hour—what it would be like to believe that there aren’t any other minds. I want to know what it would be like to believe that there are tables and chairs, and human bodies, while at the same time really,

truly believing that there is nothing going on inside of those bodies. That other people are just robots, or zombies, as you put it. Part of me suspects it's not even coherent to have this combination of beliefs. But if it is, I want to know what it's like. For just one hour."

Sunderman's gaze drops to the floor.

"So you're essentially asking me to prescribe a drug trip," he says.

Mary stiffens slightly.

"I prefer to think of it as part of my research."

His lips curl, but he neither smiles nor laughs.

Then he looks up.

Sunderman begins by explaining the intended purpose of TCE: to eliminate the beliefs associated with crippling phobias in patients who cannot be helped by traditional cognitive-behavioral therapy. He observes that this is not Mary's situation. And he says a thing or two about the obligations of a psychiatrist. But as he goes on, his words acquire a tired, rote tone. Mary senses that he is warming to the idea. After she agrees not to file an insurance claim for it—if, that is, they agree to go forward—he tells her how it would work.

"Surprisingly simple," he says. "We'll need you to sit for some tests. I'll ask you a series of questions about the target belief, and we'll see what pathways are activated. This will tell us what, in your brain, is identical to what ordinary people would call your 'belief that there are other minds.' I could guess, based on the semantic mapping we've already done of the human brain, but there's individual variation, and obviously we want to get it just right. Once I have this information, I'll fill out an order form, specifying the content of the belief to be eliminated and the duration of its elimination. You said one hour?"

She nods.

"OK. An hour's the shortest we can do. But that's easy. Now, one more question. As you would know, 'eliminating' a belief is ambiguous. Do you want to merely *suspend* belief in other minds: not take a position one way or the other? Or would you prefer to *negate* your belief: that is, believe that there *aren't* other minds?"

She cradles her chin in her hand, frowning.

"I've thought about this. And I think I want to go whole hog. I want to actually believe that there aren't other minds. I don't just want to suspend belief."

"You're sure about this?"

"I am."

"Fair enough."

She chews her lip.

“But this brings me to another question,” she says. “When I take this pill, I know I’m taking a pill that’s going to change my brain in such-and-such a way that it will at least *appear* to me that there are no other minds. Hence, unless the pill induces temporary amnesia, so that I don’t remember taking it, I’m going to know that the *only reason* it now appears to me that there aren’t other minds is that I took the pill. Given this, why on earth will I trust appearances? Why won’t I retain my original belief that there are other minds, and dismiss new appearances to the contrary as hallucination?”

“The best I can do is simply report what patients say about their own experiences. Most patients who negate one of their beliefs for just an hour or two report a profound dissonance. On the one hand, it really does seem to them that, say, house spiders are harmless, or heights need not be dangerous, or whatever; and yet they know that they just took a pill which is designed to make things seem precisely that way. They report feeling *torn* between believing that the pill is making them hallucinate, and believing that the pill has pulled back the curtain, revealing things as they’ve been all along. But here’s the thing. The longer the influence of TCE, the more that dissonance is resolved in favor of belief: full-on, cognitive endorsement of how things appear to be. It takes about three or four hours for most patients’ beliefs to be fully aligned with appearances. After that point, going back to the patient’s original belief—negating the negation, as it were—is extremely difficult.”

“I see. So it’s important to get the timing just right.”

“Of course. But there’s no reason to worry. TCE is very precise.”

Mary nods slowly, taking it all in. Reviewing what’s been said, she feels a sense of relief passing through her body. She had worried that he would dismiss her proposal altogether, and even worse, deem her flippant, reckless. (Yes, she muses: I *do* want his approval; echo of distant father, hugs rare and stiff; all so predictable.) But she feels excitement, too. Never mind that it’s essentially a drug trip; never mind that with it comes some fear. It is something she has wanted to know for years. What would it be like to inhabit, if only briefly, a world with no other minds?

The rest of the session goes by in a blur. Appointment times are settled, room numbers noted. Goodbyes are briskly exchanged. As the office door closes, a thought forms in Mary’s mind. Her parting moments with Sunderman will always be awkward, because there is a closeness that cannot be shown, a distance that must be kept.

Sunderman listens to the echo of heels on linoleum growing fainter and fainter until there is only silence. After they meet he often sits across from the chair that is now empty and listens to the sound of Mary leaving. He wonders where she will go and whom she will meet, what impressions of the others will form in her mind, and which of these she will choose to share with him, which of these she will keep for herself. This is his last appointment; he can allow his thoughts to linger, like smoke.

But today, it occurs to him, is different. A single ticket for *A Doll's House* awaits him. To rush would be a pity.

Gathering his things, Sunderman walks to the door.

A finger touches a switch.

There is a click.

The light is gone.

II

It is small, round, and white.

Like a Tic Tac, she thinks.

Mary is sitting on the balcony of her apartment. In another balcony on the opposite side of the street, Mr. Ferreira nurses a Corona whose label has slowly been picked away. Skin like leather, eyes bloodshot: this much she can make out, even from a distance. The two neighbors nod in silent acknowledgment. Mr. Ferreira takes another sip and closes his eyes, allowing his head to lean back a little. Vasco, an arthritic beagle, hobbles onto the balcony. He brushes against his owner's limply hanging hand. Mr. Ferreira's lips break, fleetingly, into a smile. There is a sadness that clings to Mr. Ferreira: a damp fog, Mary thinks.

She remembers once running into him at the park nearby. He was walking Vasco in a slow, deliberate manner that mirrored the dog's own slow, pained movements. The conversation was brief and halting, only one or two word answers from him. Mary remembers sensing that his mind was somewhere else, that even when he looked at her he did not really see her: an image in his mind's eye separated them. She remembers wondering if he is a widower. She still wonders.

One floor above Mr. Ferreira, Mrs. Lefkes waters her plants. Bent at the knees, brow furrowed in kindly concentration, she reminds Mary of a nurse ministering to the sick. Carefully she gives to each of the flowerpots its allotted dose of water. Her face is done up, as always, but tastefully so. She wears a long, flowing green gown: a few shades darker

than the sea-color of her eyes, which move deftly from the roses to the delphinium before settling, briefly, on the cactus. She looks up; her eyes brighten. There is a smile, which passes as quickly as it came.

As with Mr. Ferreira, Mary has exchanged words with Mrs. Lefkes on only one or two occasions. But from Mrs. Lefkes came a profusion. She chattered happily about the different plants on her balcony and in her apartment ("You really must come over to see!"), and about the doings of the various neighbors ("Mr. Lewis spends all his time at home playing with toy trains, did you know?"), asking only periodically after Mary's own life. At the time, this habit irritated her; it seemed self-absorbed, almost childish. But then Mary thought that people often don't know quite what to say to philosophers. Reflecting more on her encounters with Mrs. Lefkes, and connecting them with scattered balcony observations, she began to wonder if nervousness underlay all those words. She pictured Mr. Lefkes as stern and quiet, a partner who could make one fear, and therefore rush to fill, the silences he leaves in his wake. Mr. Lefkes is rarely seen on the balcony.

Mary sits with these thoughts. The remembered and imagined images merge with what is in front of her to form something agreeable: a private film.

But the pill remains.

Regarding this white sphere with some curiosity, she recalls Sunderman's instructions: to be taken 3–4 hours after a meal; 10 minutes' expected onset time; 60 minutes' duration from time of onset. She turns these numbers over in her mind, as if they mean something more than they do.

Taking a deep breath, she reaches for a glass of water on the table.

Then she pulls back.

Mary considers again Mr. Ferreira and Mrs. Lefkes and the world she is about to leave. She feels an impulse to walk away, to abandon this flight of fancy, to leave appearances as they are. But, just as quickly, the old impulse to know comes back.

In a flash the pill is on her tongue and there is water and her eyes are closed and there is darkness.

At first nothing changes. She feels a gentle breeze on her cheek. The sounds of the city waft up from ten stories below: the honking of horns, the rumbling of trains, and the thousands upon thousands of people talking and doors opening and windows closing and televisions blaring and dogs barking and phones ringing that together make up

a city's murmur. These sounds comfort her, reminding her that she is not alone. But after several minutes, they begin to change. The honking and rumbling seem louder, closer, more distinct. Soon the murmur seems no longer to be an emanation of life, but a shifting of gears, a turning of parts: a mechanism.

Mary opens her eyes.

Twelve minutes have passed.

Looking around, she finds no one. In the building across the street, all the balconies are empty. She studies its façade. Steel and glass and right angles: nothing remarkable, she reflects. But then she finds herself wondering how it was made. She imagines what its blueprint might have looked like. She pictures skeletal scaffolding.

Mr. Ferreira's door slides open. Mr. Ferreira steps forward. In its left hand is another bottle.

It plops into a chair. Mary watches as its hand puts the bottle on the table. Its other hand picks up a blue lighter. Several fingers on its right hand hold the lighter and press it against the cap of the bottle while several fingers on its left hand hold the bottle in place. After a moment, the cap flies off. Mr. Ferreira's arm raises the bottle to its mouth. Its head tilts back. Then its hand puts the bottle on the table. Its head turns up. Its eyes point in Mary's direction. Its right arm rises. Slowly, Mary raises hers.

One floor up, the door to Mrs. Lefkes's balcony opens. Mrs. Lefkes steps out, still wearing the same flowing green gown. In its right hand is a lit cigarette. Slowly, its hand carries the cigarette to its mouth. The cigarette stays at its mouth for a moment and then it is pulled away by its hand. Smoke comes out of its mouth. It sits. The door opens wider. Mr. Lefkes comes out. It makes some sounds, and Mrs. Lefkes makes some sounds, and for several minutes the two make sounds. Most of the sounds are coming from Mrs. Lefkes, but some of the sounds come from Mr. Lefkes. Sometimes the sounds that come from the two overlap, but usually the sounds coming from one have ceased, or are just ceasing, when a sequence of sounds starts coming from the other. Mary cannot make out what the sounds are, exactly. But that they are mere *sounds* is clear.

Mary shivers.

Is this what it is like?

She leans over the balcony to survey the street below. She sees a stream of cars, a black "U" imprinted on all their roofs. The sidewalks are cluttered with humans: like ants, she thinks. It occurs to her that humans are

not, in fact, so different from one another. Some move quickly, others more slowly; some are thin, some fat; some tall, some short; some have bright pieces of clothing, others dark; but in the grand scheme of things they are, fundamentally, interchangeable. Nor, for that matter, are the humans so different from what is around them. The humans and the dogs and the cars and the lampposts are all just things.

Mary sits. Her heart pounds. At first, she feels on the verge of a panic attack. But after a moment this gives way to a different feeling, a warmth rather than a heat. The feeling begins in the depths of her chest. It spreads outward, slowly and then quickly, until her whole body feels it, from her forehead to the tips of her fingers and the tips of her toes: a surge of energy, of power. *I could do whatever I want.* If every experience in the world belongs to me, then so does every pain and every pleasure. If things are as they appear, then nothing I do can make things worse for any other; my point of view is the only window on, and in, this world. If everything out there is an object, she finds herself thinking with cold creeping clarity, then morality has no hold over me. Even the unspeakable—smashing the body of another human—would be no worse than breaking the window of an abandoned car.

Mary feels drunk. She tries to focus on the shadowy plants of Mrs. Lefkes's balcony, or the way the light falls on the steel of Mr. Ferreira's railing, but the images slip and slide into each other. Nothing is stable. In place of the warmth is a growing nausea. For a moment it feels like she's about to throw up. But then a gust of wind braces her body. Her stomach settles; her vision becomes still again. Mary takes a deep breath and slowly lets it out.

Lie down.

It comes to her as an imperative from without. Mechanically, she picks up the empty glass of water and steps back into her apartment. "Lock all doors and windows. Lower all shades," she commands. Throughout her apartment there is a clicking, followed by a gentle hum.

In her room the clock reads 4:59. Remembering that she took the pill at exactly 4:10, she calculates that the effects will be gone by 5:20. Mary crawls into bed and surrounds herself with covers. She closes her eyes. She waits for the mercy of sleep.

It is dark in here. Mary is on her back. She reaches up and her hands bump into something hard, wooden. She feels around and realizes that she is in a box. She screams but there is no one to hear. She screams again, but hears only the scream itself. Mary starts pounding on the box.

She claws at it. One of her nails breaks off. There is pain, followed by the soft light of a candle. The last thing she sees is a speck of red: her blood, on the wood of her coffin.

6:13.

Blinkingly, Mary surveys the contents of her room. Here is the oak bookshelf, filled with her favorite novels, and next to it the cedar bookshelf, filled with philosophy; there the photograph of her niece, here the steel lamp; there the folded yoga mat, here the framed print; here and there the pooling mauve of a Persian rug. Everything is as it should be. It was just a dream.

In the kitchen, Mary pours herself a glass of Malbec. Even though the “drug trip,” as Sunderman called it, ended an hour ago, her nerves are still on edge. She finishes the glass, thinks of pouring another, decides against it, and pours nonetheless. To akrasia, she thinks, taking more than a sip. A warm languor envelops her.

It is night when she steps onto the balcony. The lights in the other apartments burn brightly. She settles back into the chair, crosses her legs, and daintily sets the wine glass onto the side table. Later she will write down her thoughts about this afternoon. Now she just wants to *be*.

A car honks.

A plastic bag floats.

Mrs. Lefkes steps onto the balcony.

It sits.

Sitting up, Mary watches as its hand puts an earbud in its right ear. Then its hand puts an earbud in its left ear. Its head leans back. Its head starts to slowly sway back and forth. Its left leg folds over its right. Its eyes close, then open.

Mary double-checks the time: 6:31.

This can't be, she thinks.

Rustling in her bag, Mary finds her Compuglasses. With a few glances and blinks, she activates the binocular function. Zooming in on Mrs. Lefkes's face, she places the image that is now in front of her alongside a remembered image of Mrs. Lefkes watering plants just a few hours ago. Before, when Mrs. Lefkes's eyes narrowed, that motion was, at the same time, a fixing of attention; when they moved slowly, a surveying of a scene; when they brightened, a recognition of another. Now, as those same eyes move—resting, pausing, resting, pausing—Mary finds herself thinking, with a shiver that begins at the base of her spine, that they are just a pair of rolling marbles.

Then it hits her. The others have died.

Everyone is there. They look the same as before. But all of them are dead.

Mary hears it inside her before she tastes it and sees it: vomit. The convulsions of retching give way to the convulsions of sobbing. Keeled over, she buries her head in her hands. Through her fingers she sees an empty wine glass rolling back and forth, each arc smaller than the previous one, until finally it comes to a stop in a puddle of burgundy vomit.

Slowly, Mary lifts her hands. She takes hold of the railing. She staggers to her feet. Blinking away the remains of tears, Mary realizes what should have been clear all along: a solution, a way out.

Love is when she could not even conceive of there not being another.

“Lily.”

“Mary.”

Mary smiles, feebly.

Lily searches her face. She cannot find Mary’s eyes: they keep looking away.

“Lily. Listen. I know—I know this is out of the blue. And—I promise, I’ll explain. But—can I—can I—come in, just for a minute?”

Lily hesitates. Then she pulls open the door.

“Thank you.”

Mary walks in, her arms encircling her chest, as if to brace against a draft.

“Mary, can I . . . get you something?”

Mary shakes her head.

“No,” she whispers. “I know this doesn’t make sense. But I just need you to hold me for a minute. That’s all. I just need you to hold me.”

Lily’s back stiffens. She takes a small step back. But the way Mary is cradling herself tells Lily what to do.

“OK,” she says, softly.

Mary and Lily walk to the bedroom they once shared. Awkwardly, the two lie down, side by side. Lily asks if Mary wants her arm around her. Mary says yes. Lily’s arm folds over Mary’s chest. Mary closes her eyes. After a moment Lily does, too.

At first they breathe to different rhythms. But soon Mary’s chest rises and falls in synchrony with Lily’s. She remembers Lily saying, with a faint twang, if my good Southern mother could see me here now. She remembers Lily raking her hands through her hair, saying that Mary was on a power trip, that she was out to diagnose. She remembers making love in this bed, mingled sweat, a surprising silence.

Imagining follows remembering. In the morning the dust will dance in the sunlight. At the kitchen table, she will tell Lily about a nightmare. Lily will laugh: her rare, big, generous laugh. She will start to make eggs, saying, you must need this after a dream like that. But Mary will say no, you were kind enough to let me barge in on you like this; let me. Rising, she will take the wooden spatula from Lily's hand, and for a moment their eyes will meet, shyly. Mary knows this will happen because she can see it in her mind's eye: clearly, distinctly.

Mary stirs. Craning her head, she sees that Lily has fallen asleep. Doesn't Lily know they need to get up?

She gives Lily a nudge. Lily's eyes flutter, then open.

They are a doll's eyes.

Now Mary screams.

III

Knock.

Compglasses on, Sunderman sees only his inbox. He closes his eyes, then opens them. The inbox is gone. In its place is the homescreen: a picture of Peter, the first robot to pass a face-to-face Turing test. It has tousled brown hair and blue eyes, and olive skin made of plastic. Sunderman closes his eyes again. When he opens them, Peter too is gone. In its place is darkness.

"Come in," he says, feeling his hand remove a weight from his face.

In front of him is a stout, whiskery cop.

"Have a seat."

The cop sits.

"Good evening. My name's Officer Jackson," he says, flashing a badge.

"You're Mary Murdoch's psychiatrist?"

"Yes."

"When was the last time you spoke with her?"

"Oh. It must have been at our last appointment. Two days ago."

"You've had no contact with her since?"

"No. Is anything the matter?"

"I'm afraid so," the officer says. "Last night, in what appears to have been a domestic dispute, she pushed her ex-girlfriend, Lily Strawson, down a flight of stairs. A neighbor called after hearing screams. Mary was at the scene when the police arrived. The girlfriend is in the hospital now, coma, massive head trauma. Doesn't look good, to be frank. Mary's fine, physically I mean, but she's not talking to anyone. Ever since picking her up, we haven't been able to get a word out of her."

As the officer speaks, Sunderman has the strange sensation that the words he is hearing are in a foreign tongue, that he must translate them before they will mean anything to him. *Pushed . . . stairs . . . coma . . . trauma.*

“Oh God,” he whispers.

“I’m sorry?”

“Just, ‘Oh God.’”

“Oh. Yes. Well, I’m sure this must be a shock to you. And it’s not my intention to keep you here long. But we did need to notify you, in part because we’ll need a witness statement, not right now, but soon. If there are criminal proceedings, I mean. Either side may want to call you as an expert witness, too, especially if the defense pleads insanity. So you’ll want to keep your most recent patient records in order.”

“Naturally.”

Jackson slowly pats his leg, as if to console it.

“Again, I’m very sorry to have to bring you this news.”

“No, no, I appreciate it, officer. Thank you.”

“Of course. Oh, and one more thing, before I forget: does the letter ‘S’ mean anything to you, doctor?”

Sunderman frowns.

“No, not offhand.”

“OK. I ask because when the guards stopped by her cell one time, she was writing ‘S’ all over a napkin. Didn’t try to show it to anyone or anything. Probably just a scribble. But I figured I’d ask.”

“No, I’m afraid I have no idea what it could mean.”

“Beats us, too.”

Something flippant in the officer’s remark makes it hang in the air.

“Officer, I have to ask. Is she being treated well? I mean, are they taking good care of her?”

Jackson shifts in his chair.

“Oh, um, yes. I mean, you know, it’s no picnic. But women’s jails are always better than men’s. I think she’ll be in good hands.”

“And her cell? What is it like?”

“What’s it *like*?” For the first time, there is a glimmer of skepticism in Jackson’s eyes. “Well. I mean, you know, it’s a standard-issue prison cell. Not much to say about it. Reasonably clean. No windows, I’m afraid, but she’ll probably get an upgrade at the long-term facility. Black and white.”

“Black and white?”

“Yeah. Stripes on the walls. Same with her uniform.”

Sunderman sees her there: crouched, cold, the shadows of bars on her face.

“A loss,” he chokes out. “A true loss.”

“I’m sure it is, doctor,” the officer says, leaning forward on his heels, getting ready to go. “You’ll have plenty of time to work this over in your mind, try and put two and two together. I’ve got to go, I’m afraid, but we’ll be in touch very soon. Here’s my card.”

They shake hands. Jackson turns and leaves. The chair is, again, empty.

As in a film, a series of images from the nine months with Mary slowly unfolds. He sees her at their first meeting, tight-lipped and formal, all talk of neurotransmitters and brand-name medications, an expert on her own nervous system. He sees her hands unclasping as she refers, in passing, to a difficult childhood. He sees her face brighten at the mention of someone called Lily. He sees her cry: first about a mother who waved from the Toyota one morning and never came back, then about a father who left in his own manner, and finally about a lover she herself stifled away. But what he remembers most is what she saw in the others. She was full of observations about people: the incipient curiosity of a student, the understated warmth of a colleague, the habits of Mr. Ferreira and Mrs. Lefkes, and the little surprises, good and bad, that Lily brought forth every week. He has never met any of these people, but in his mind there is a gallery of faces and features and ways of being: Mary’s gift. For that, he will always be grateful.

Still she is gone. A hollowness begins in his chest and spreads, slowly, throughout his body. He wants there to be tears, something in here to put out there, a material token of feeling. But he has never been able to cry. That, like love, has always eluded him.

Sunderman looks out the window. It is night. Skyscrapers extend in every direction. The closer ones he can make out clearly: steel, glass, a sprinkling of lights. The further ones are harder to make out, their contours melting into darkness. Weaving between the buildings are skyways. The cars are like fireflies, he thinks.

His focus recedes to the pane of glass in front of him. There is a reflection. It is of a man. Everything about this man is thin: his nose, his face, his frame, his limbs. There are eyes, too. But he prefers not to look at the eyes.

Finally, Sunderman looks down at the hands. It seems to him that there are more liver spots on the hands than there were before. Somewhat to his surprise, he finds himself wondering—idly, matter-of-factly—if in

the grand scheme of things it would be a tragedy were those spots to be the first signs of a cancer.

Then he sees the screen again.

ORDER FORM: MARY MURDOCH

TARGET CONTENT (p): "other people have experiences" OR "other people are such that there's something it's like to be them" OR "other people have conscious states."

ATTITUDE: believe negation of p suspend belief in p

DURATION: permanent finite: ____ hour(s)

SUBMIT

Sunderman remembers watching. He remembers watching the arrow move, slowly and inexorably, past **finite** to **permanent**. He felt his eyes close. When he opened them, there was a check in the box next to **permanent**. He remembers watching the arrow move again. He saw **SUBMIT** become bold. He felt his eyes close again. For a moment there was darkness. Then there was light.

Thank you! Order number 9067 has been entered for patient Mary Murdoch (#24602).

Please retain this form for your records.

Why? Sunderman knew the duration they had agreed to: a single hour, nothing more. It seems he could have entered that with his eyes. But something made his eyes get away from him. Something *in* him did that. He didn't want the eyes to move that way. He didn't want to make the change permanent, to give Mary a pill that would make her a prisoner. Sunderman didn't want to do that because he wasn't a person who liked harming others. He isn't.

Sunderman closes his eyes, face a grimace of thought.

The night before he entered the order, Sunderman dreamt of a villa. Mary was there, too. But both were children again. They shrieked as they ran through a forest toward a clearing. He felt excited because he'd read a lot about this villa. In his mind he saw a blueprint of the

entire structure: lines and boxes and arrows and numbers. Mary hadn't bothered to read about it, but she too was excited. When finally they reached the clearing, the villa was even more majestic than he had pictured it. Its graceful roof was all terra-cotta tile; its sprawling walls, the color of peaches; and everywhere were windows, each flanked by a pair of baby-blue shutters.

"Look!" Mary exclaimed, peering into what must have been the living room. "There's a beautiful brass chandelier!"

"Really?" he said, walking toward her. "Let me see."

Mary stepped aside. But just as he approached the window, a gust of wind blew the shutters closed.

"Oh my," Mary said, looking now into the dining room. "There's an oak table, and curtains the brightest shade of red!"

"Is that so?" he replied. Again, he approached the window, eager for a glimpse; again, the wind blew the shutters closed.

So it went. She described the charcoal painting of bats that loomed over the glossy piano in the music room. She said there was a gilded mirror in the lounge where you could see your reflection if you stood in just the right place. She told him about the way the light fell on the marble fireplace in the library, how the wax on the banister in the foyer made it shine so, and how the wine glasses in the kitchen winked at you in the afternoon sun. He heard her words, struggling to picture what they referred to. But every time he got near the thing itself, the windows slammed shut.

After a time he gave up. She continued to skip from room to room, remarking on this and that. But Sunderman remained where he was, lingering under a dark oak tree. Slowly, it sunk in that he would never know what the villa looked like on the inside. He would know the precise dimensions of each room, and their relations to one another in space. Were the two of them ever to go in, he would surely be the more reliable guide. Yes, what he knew about the villa was useful. More than that: it was beautiful, in its own, austere way. Yet what he knew in itself told him nothing about what he most wanted to know. She could see in, and he could not: that was the naked truth.

By turns, disappointment gave way to envy. Envy bled into indignation. It was not fair that she, who had none of his knowledge, should be allowed to know how things appeared in there, whereas he, with all his knowledge, was condemned to remain forever on the outside. More than that, he concluded: it was unjust.

Then he noticed the stick.

Sharp and pointed, it lay at his feet in a bed of grass. He picked it up, feeling its bumps with his fingers. He stepped out from the shade. He walked toward the villa, gravel crunching underfoot. Just as the look in Mary's eyes turned from joy to terror, Sunderman woke in a pool of sweat.

Sitting in his office, the doctor thinks about this dream and about the screen on which the order was entered. Tauntingly, a pair of images dance before his mind's eye: the arrow, moving from finite toward permanent, and the stick, moving from the ground toward Mary. He has the obscure intuition that understanding what happened on the day of the order requires understanding the dream that took place the night before: that somehow the same force that impelled the boy to reach for the stick in the dream is what caused his own eyes to move the way they did in the lab. Sunderman feels lost in a fog; a sense of vertigo overcomes him; the fog slowly parts; and just as he sees the outlines of an answer, a different thought swiftly intervenes.

How silly.

His lips part, letting out a faint chuckle. To an observer, he looks like a mathematician who sees that the final step in a recalcitrant proof has been lying in plain sight.

How silly: to think that the movements of eyes could be explained by interpreting a dream!

Why did Sunderman's eyes move that way? Well, an electrical potential was initiated by motor neurons in the left abducens nucleus. This resulted in contraction of the left lateral rectus, causing the left eye to move to the left. At the same time, the firing of interneurons in the left abducens nucleus caused the right medial rectus to contract, moving the right eye to the left. We could, of course, ask why these electrical potentials were initiated in the first place, and we could go back as far in time as we please: to dreams, to the distance past. But this history would *itself* consist in a complex pattern of electrochemical activities in the central nervous system: the opening and closing of ion channels, the movement of vesicles, the release of neurotransmitters into synapses.

There is nothing more to say.

Yes, Sunderman thinks: that old talk, that folk psychology, is just superstition. It is what prescientific people came up with when they wanted to make sense of each other's behavior but didn't know the first thing about how the brain works. For a moment there is a cloud and Sunderman is sad because Sunderman is thinking about all those human beings muddling through history, trying to understand one another with a set

of tools no better suited to their task than the medieval apothecary's bag of potions was to understanding chemistry.

The shoulders relax. It is a tragedy, what happened to Mary. How could it not be? But perhaps, Sunderman reflects, an event like this should make one grateful for what one has, for what remains. Sunderman is lucky to have been born at the end of a long dark age, and to have been given the gift of grasping mind. What a waste to fret over the nonsense that lingers. Indeed, chasing questions about Sunderman's "desires" and "intentions," "choices" and "responsibilities," all that can only be a fool's errand, predicated on a fantasy: that a person is a character in a story. This only children and madmen believe.

Feeling better, Sunderman exhales.

Then it stands.

DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

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