

When I Look at a Strawberry, I Think of a Tongue

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When I was young, I thought *Life: A User's Manual* would teach me how to live and *Suicide: A User's Manual* how to die. I don't really listen to what people tell me. I forget things I don't like. I look down dead-end streets. The end of a trip leaves me with a sad aftertaste the same as the end of a novel. I am not afraid of what comes at the end of life. I am slow to realize when someone mistreats me, it is always so surprising: evil is somehow unreal. When I sit with bare legs on vinyl, my skin doesn't slide, it squeaks. I archive. I joke about death. I do not love myself. I do not hate myself. My rap sheet is clean. To take pictures at random goes against my nature, but since I like doing things that go against my nature, I have had to make up alibis to take pictures at random, for example, to spend three months in the United States traveling only to cities that share a name with a city in another country: Berlin, Florence, Oxford, Canton, Jericho, Stockholm, Rio, Delhi, Amsterdam, Paris, Rome, Mexico, Syracuse, Lima, Versailles, Calcutta, Bagdad.



I would rather be bored alone than with someone else. I roam empty places and eat in deserted restaurants. I do not say "A is better than B" but "I prefer A to B." I never stop comparing. When I am returning from a trip, the best part is not going through the airport or getting home, but the taxi ride in between: you're still traveling, but not really. I sing badly, so I don't sing. I had an idea for a Dream Museum. I do not believe the wisdom of the sages will be lost. I once tried to make a book-museum of vernacular writing, it reproduced handwritten messages from unknown people, classed by type: flyers about lost animals, justifications left on windshields for parking cops to avoid

paying the meter, desperate pleas for witnesses, announcements of a change in management, office messages, home messages, messages to oneself. I cannot sleep beside someone who moves around, snores, breathes heavily, or steals the covers. I can sleep with my arms around someone who doesn't move. I have attempted suicide once, I've been tempted four times to attempt it. The distant sound of a lawn mower in summer brings back happy childhood memories. I am bad at throwing. I have read less of the Bible than of Marcel Proust. Roberto Juarroz makes me laugh more than Andy Warhol. Jack Kerouac makes me want to live more than Charles Baudelaire. La Rochefoucauld depresses me less than Bret Easton Ellis. Joe Brainard is less affirmative than Walt Whitman. I know Jacques Roubaud less well than Georges Perec. Gherasim Luca is the most full of despair. I don't see the connection between Alain Robbe-Grillet and Antonio Tabucchi. When I make lists of names, I dread the ones I forget. From certain angles, tanned and wearing a black shirt, I can find myself handsome. I find myself ugly more often than handsome. I like my voice after a night out or when I have a cold. I am unacquainted with hunger. I was never in the army. I have never pulled a knife on anyone. I have never used a machine gun. I have fired a revolver. I have fired a rifle. I have shot an arrow. I have netted butterflies. I have observed rabbits. I have eaten pheasants. I recognize the scent of a tiger. I have touched the dry head of a tortoise and an elephant's hard skin. I have caught sight of a herd of wild boar in a forest in Normandy. I ride. I do not explain. I do not excuse. I do not classify. I go fast. I am drawn to the brevity of English, shorter than French. I do not name the people I talk about to someone who doesn't know them, I use, despite the trouble of it, abstract descriptions like "that friend whose parachute got tangled up with another parachute the time he jumped." I prefer going to bed to getting up, but I prefer living to dying. I look more closely at old photographs than contemporary ones, they are smaller, and their details are more precise. I have noticed that, on the keypads of Parisian front doors, the 1 wears out the fastest. I'm not ashamed of my family, but I do not invite them to my openings. I have often been in love. I love myself less than I have been loved. I am surprised when someone loves me. I do not consider myself handsome just because a woman thinks so. My intelligence is uneven. My amorous states resemble one another, and those of other people, more than my works resemble one another, or those of other people. I have never shared a bank account. A friend once remarked that I seem glad when guests show up at my house but also when they leave. I do not know how to interrupt an interlocutor who bores me. I have good digestion. I love summer rain. I have trouble understanding why people give stupid presents. Presents make me feel awkward, whether I am the giver or the receiver, unless they are the right ones, which is rare. Although I am self-employed, I observe the weekend. I have never kissed a lover in front of my parents. I do not have a weekend place because I do not like to open and then shut a whole lot of shutters over the course of two days. I have not hugged a male friend tight. I have not seen the dead body of a friend. I have seen the dead bodies of my grandmother and my uncle. I have not kissed a boy. I used to have sex with women my own age, but as I got older they got younger. I do not buy used shoes. I have made love on the roof of the thirtieth floor of a building in Hong Kong. I have made love in the daytime in a public garden in Hong Kong. I have made love in the toilet of the

Paris–Lyon TGV. I have made love in front of some friends at the end of a very drunken dinner. I have made love in a staircase on the avenue Georges-Mandel. I have made love to a girl at a party at six in the morning, five minutes after asking, without any preamble, if she wanted to. I have made love standing up, sitting down, lying down, on my knees, stretched out on one side or the other. I have made love to one person at a time, to two, to three, to more. I have smoked hashish and opium, I have done poppers, I have snorted cocaine. I find fresh air more intoxicating than drugs. I smoked my first joint at age fourteen in Segovia, a friend and I had bought some “chocolate” from a guard in the military police, I couldn’t stop laughing and I ate the leaves of an olive tree. I smoked several joints in the bosom of my grammar school, the Collège Stanislas, at the age of fifteen. The girl whom I loved the most left me. At ten I cut my finger in a flour mill. At six I broke my nose getting hit by a car. At fifteen I skinned my hip and elbow falling off a moped, I had decided to defy the street, riding with no hands, looking backward. I broke my thumb skiing, after flying ten meters and landing on my head, I got up and saw, as in a cartoon, circles of birthday candles turning in the air and then I fainted. I have not made love to the wife of a friend. I do not love the sound of a family on the train. I am uneasy in rooms with small windows. Sometimes I realize that what I’m in the middle of saying is boring, so I just stop talking. Art that unfolds over time gives me less pleasure than art that stops it. Even if it is an odd sort of present, I thank my father and mother for having given me life.



I believe the people who make the world are the ones who do not believe in reality, for example, for centuries, the Christians. There are times in my life when I overuse the phrase “it all sounds pretty complicated.” I wonder how the obese make love. Not wanting to change things does not mean I am conservative, I like for things to change, just not having to do it. I connect easily with women, it takes longer with men. My best male friends have something feminine about them. I ride a motorcycle but I don’t have

the “biker spirit.” I am an egoist despite myself, I cannot even conceive of being altruistic. Until the age of twelve I thought I was gifted with the power to shape the future, but this power was a crushing burden, it manifested itself in the form of threats, I had to take just so many steps before I got to the end of the sidewalk or else my parents would die in a car accident, I had to close the door thinking of some favorable outcome, for example passing a test, or else I’d fail, I had to turn off the light not thinking about my mother getting raped, or that would happen, one day I couldn’t stand having to close the door a hundred times before I could think of something good, or to spend fifteen minutes turning off the light the right way, I decided enough was enough, the world could fall apart, I didn’t want to spend my life saving other people, that night I went to bed sure the next day would bring the apocalypse, nothing happened, I was relieved but a little bit disappointed to discover I had no power.



In a sandwich, I don’t see what I am eating, I imagine it. Even very tired, I can watch TV for several hours. As a child I dreamed of being not a fireman, but a veterinarian, the idea was not my own, I was imitating my cousin. I played house with a cousin, but there were variants, it could be doctor (formal inspection of genitals), or thug and bourgeoisie (mini-rape scene), when we played thug and bourgeoisie my cousin would walk past the swing set where I’d be sitting, outside our family’s house, I would call out to her in a menacing tone of voice, she wouldn’t answer but would act afraid, she would start to run away, I would catch her and drag her into the little pool house, I would bolt the door, I’d pull the curtains, she would try vaguely to get away, I would undress her and simulate the sexual act while she cried out in either horror or pleasure, I could never tell which it was supposed to be, I forget how it used to end. I would be very moved if a friend told me he loved me, even if he told me more out of love than friendship. I find certain ethnicities more beautiful than others. When I ask for directions, I am afraid I won’t be able to remember what people tell me. I am always shocked when people give

me directions and they actually get me where I'm going: words become road. I like slow motion because it brings cinema close to photography. I get along well with old people. A woman's breasts may hold my attention to the point that I can't hear what she's saying. I enjoy the simple decor of Protestant temples. I do not write memoirs. I do not write novels. I do not write short stories. I do not write plays. I do not write poems. I do not write mysteries. I do not write science fiction. I write fragments. I do not tell stories from things I've read or movies I've seen, I describe impressions, I make judgments. The modern man I sing. In one of my recurring nightmares, gravity is so heavy that the chubby pseudo-humans who wander the empty surface of the earth move in slow motion through an endless moonlit night. I have utterly lost touch with friends who were dear to me, without knowing why, I believe they don't know why themselves. I learned to draw by copying pornographic photographs. I have a foggy sense of history, and of stories in general, chronology bores me. I do not suffer from the absence of those I love. I prefer desire to pleasure. My death will change nothing. I would like to write in a language not my own. I penetrate a woman faster than I pull out. If I kiss for a long time, it hurts the muscle under my tongue. I am afraid of ending up a bum. I am afraid of having my computer and negatives stolen. I cannot tell what, in me, is innate. I do not have a head for business. I have stepped on a rake and had the handle hit me in the face. I have gone to four psychiatrists, one psychologist, one psychotherapist, and five psychoanalysts. I look for the simple things I no longer see. I do not go to confession. Legs slightly open excite me more than legs wide open. I have trouble forbidding. I am not mature. When I look at a strawberry, I think of a tongue, when I lick one, of a kiss. I can see how drops of water could be torture. A burn on my tongue has a taste. My memories, good or bad, are sad the way dead things are sad. A friend can let me down but not an enemy. I ask the price before I buy. I go nowhere with my eyes closed. When I was a child I had bad taste in music. Playing sports bores me after an hour. Laughing unarouses me. Often, I wish it were tomorrow. My memory is structured like a disco ball. I wonder if there are still parents around to threaten their children with a whipping. The voice, the lyrics, and the face of Daniel Darc made French rock listenable to me. The best conversations I ever had date from adolescence, with a friend at whose place we drank cocktails that we made by mixing up his mother's liquor at random, we would talk until sunrise in the salon of that big house where Mallarmé had once been a guest, in the course of those nights, I delivered speeches on love, politics, God, and death of which I retain not one word, even though I came up with some of them doubled over in laughter, years later, this friend told his wife that he had left something in the house just as they were leaving to play tennis, he went down to the basement and put a bullet in his head with the gun he had left there beforehand. I have memories of comets with powdery tails. I read the dictionary. I went into a glass labyrinth called the Palace of Mirrors. I wonder where the dreams go that I don't remember. I do not know what to do with my hands when they have nothing to do. Even though it's not for me, I turn around when someone whistles in the street. Dangerous animals do not scare me. I have seen lightning. I wish they had sleds for grown-ups. I have read more volumes one than volumes two. The date on my birth certificate is wrong. I am not sure I have any influence. I talk to my things when they're sad. I do not know why I write. I prefer a ruin

to a monument. I am calm during reunions. I have nothing against the alarm clock. Fifteen years old is the middle of my life, regardless of when I die. I believe there is an afterlife, but not an afterdeath. I do not ask “do you love me.” Only once can I say “I’m dying” without telling a lie. The best day of my life may already be behind me.

Best known as a photographer, Édouard Levé was also the author of four works of prose: Oeuvres, Journal, Autoportrait, and Suicide, the last of which he finished days before he took his own life, in 2007, at the age of forty-two. Levé wrote Autoportrait — the source of these pages — in 2002, while he was traveling across America, taking the photographs that became Série Amérique.