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Walking Away, Walking in Circles, Writing Lists

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ABSTRACT: Aumiller writes lists to externalize what overwhelms her. To be in control. To master and move on. Yet, her lists circle back to her. The process of writing the same list every day or the same act of writing the list is a looping. She returns to herself, to the parts she can remember and to the parts she can't remember, but also can't leave behind.

KEYWORDS: To-do lists; Repetition; Groundhog Day; Eternal return; Nietzsche, Friedrich; Memory; Memorial

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I make lists at the beginning of the day/week/month/year. I peck away at each item so that I may have that particular joy of crossing each out. The measure of time as the pleasure of erasure, of shedding weight, of leaving you behind.

As I clean out my desk, I find old lists composed of delicately drawn letters. Some lists are like driving by a house I used to live in when I was young or stumbling across an email from a lover who I no longer talk to. Sometimes I'm proud of how far I've come when I encounter the self I left behind in those notes. Tasks that were daunting to her now come to me with ease.

* This reflection resulted from a 30-minute timed meditation on lists led by Sam Dolbear. I made very few changes to the original stream-of-consciousness text from the exercise on 3 February 2021: the day after Groundhog Day, a Pennsylvania Dutch tradition founded in Punxsutawney where my extended family still lives. If Phil, the fortune-telling groundhog, does not see his shadow on this day, spring will arrive six-weeks early. If Phil does see his shadow, we are fated to be stuck in winter. The shadow represents a split in one's desire, the impossibility of self-reconciliation or unity. The shadow naturally leads me to Zarathustra, who seeks transformation through his fraught relationship with his shadow and the moment of its disappearance. Nietzscheans who are also Bill Murray fans will get the connection to the eternal return of the same damn day. My chapter in this volume explores the theme of stuckness and transformation on a philosophical register. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, ed. by Volker Gerhardt (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2012).

Other lists from years ago are identical to my list from today. '1. Practice German, 2. Write Book, 3. Answer Emails, 4. Run.' Day, I swore I was done with you yesterday. I wake up and write the list, to crumble it up at the end of the day, to wake up to write the same list. I'm *still* writing this beast of a book. The eternal return of the same damn day.

Yesterday was Groundhog Day. A few extra days of winter tacked onto a year that feels like an eternity could be my breaking point. Phil, the groundhog, lives in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. My great-grandfather moved to Punxsutawney from Italy when he was a boy. He played the button box and saved up enough money to buy a fruit chart. He sold enough fruit to open Raffetto's Restaurant. My grandpa grew the family restaurant until his brother ran it into the ground. He had drinking and gambling problems. They both fought in the war. After the war my family stopped speaking Italian.

I was always the last one left at the breakfast table with my grandpa after all my cousins had run off to play and my aunts and uncles competed for the shower. He took his time, working his way down the familiar list of his favourite memories, from childhood, from the war. The list was carefully curated for his young audience. When I was home, I would write down the memories, adding the parts he might have left out.

My grandfather told a lot of stories, but there are things that my family still does not talk about, like my uncle Al who died of AIDS when I was a kid. He studied philosophy at Duquesne. My aunt recently sent me his philosophy books. There is a lot about their life that I don't know about.

When I recite my family stories so they won't be forgotten, I try most of all to remember the ones that no one has told me. It's like trying to remember an item on a list that is already crossed off. Like trying to speak in a mother tongue that was never taught.

My favourite list is from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. I memorized it in German (before I 'learned' German. I'll never learn German). I often recite it in my head, counting to twelve:

Eins!
 O Mensch! Gib acht!
 Zwei!
 Was spricht die tiefe Mitternacht?
 Drei!
 ‘Ich schlief, ich schlief —,
 Vier!
 Aus tiefem Traum bin ich erwacht:
 Fünf!
 Die Welt ist tief,
 Sechs!
 Und tiefer als der Tag gedacht.
 Sieben!
 Tief ist ihr Weh —,
 Acht!
 Lust — tiefer noch als Herzeleid:
 Neun!
 Weh spricht: Vergeh!
 Zehn!
 Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit —,
 Elf!
 — will tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!
 Zwölf!

It is a dancing song that operates as a round. Whenever I recite it in my head, I imagine getting very drunk with friends while toasting to each line. Midnight wakes up abruptly from a deep dream. This day, as every day, she declares, ‘So deep is the world that she says to her woe, “Go! but come again!” So deep is joy that it also wants woe. It wants all things again, all things eternally.’

I write lists to externalize what overwhelms me. To be in control. To master and move on. Yet, my lists circle back to me. In Ljubljana we walk the Path of Remembrance and Resistance, a trail that surrounds the city where barbwire was erected during the Nazi occupation. Walking in circles allows us to remember, but it also allows us to forget, or at least to return with a different spirit to what can’t be forgotten. The process of writing the same list every day or the same act of writing the list is a looping. I return to myself, to the parts I can remember and to the parts I can’t remember, but also can’t leave behind.

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