

SASKIA VERLAAN

Saskia Verlaan was born in New York City, but has spent the majority of her life in the town of Bowna, located in the Catskill Mountains of New York state. A member of the class of 2006 at New York University (NYU), Verlaan wrote "Perspectives on Fear" in an advanced essay class during her first year at NYU. The essay was selected to be published in *Merrier Street*, the university's journal of student writing.

PERSPECTIVES ON FEAR

In "Perspectives on Fear," Verlaan analyzes her own fears, trying to come to terms with fear itself, she is concerned ultimately with the beneficial effects that fear can have on the development of self. She tells a number of stories about her own fear, cites from a study on fear, analyzes Picasso and cubism as a way of gaining new perspectives on fear and self-development, and concludes that fear exposes her to her own contradictory nature. Understanding her contradictions leads to a deeper understanding of who she is.

"At the University of California at Irvine, experiments in rats indicate that the brain's hormonal reaction to fear can be inhibited, softening the formation of memories and the emotions they evoke." (Baard).

Sometimes I have trouble sleeping. I lie in bed for hours while my mind churns through endless streams of fragmented thoughts and memories, bits of brain matter that I do not have time for in my waking life. I have tried the homeopathic remedies. I drink "calming" teas, take showers, and inhale scents advertised to promote sleep and relaxation. I even have a lavender neck pillow. Nevertheless, when I am afflicted with a bout of sleeplessness, there is usually very little I can do but wait it out. I stay away from sleep drugs.

The streetlamp outside paints shapes across the wall next to my bed. I can see them in the darkness, dull orange lines that have become familiar in my many restless nights. At the heart of their canvas, they intersect to form a rectangle. A

rectangle? For months I believed in this reality of form with the inborn certainty that accompanies that which is obvious. I didn't have to think about it. Nightly, I would study the shape in a sleep haze, unconsciously harboring knowledge of its regularity. Except that it is not a rectangle.

Two forty-sevens. Nearly three hours after my first attempt at sleep, I stared up at the wall and realized for the first time the distortion within the orange light. Where the lines connected to form the shape, the rectangle, were angles. Obtuse and acute; they had none of the symmetrical regularity that geometry dictates of a true rectangle. The outline on the wall was crooked, skewed, an imperfect representation of the form.

I tend to think of my memories as shoeboxes, precise, neatly uniform components that stack tidily in the mind. Somehow I have trained myself to believe that in regularity and order I will uncover the diagram of my true self, a clear-cut explanation for all that I think,

say, and do. But in sleepless nights I realize that even old recurring thoughts can be strangely misshapen, and I am thrown into a talspinn. My memories of experiencing fear seem contorted. Among the most vivid of my recollections, they stand out with their potent doses of color, emotion, and experience. They have been with me so long that I rarely question the nature of their composition. I trust in their regularity, so often failing to notice their glaring deviations from box form, a wayward corner or a fifth side. Yet, there are times that they do seem strange to me, cartoonlike and yet luridly real, carefully preserved though strangely altered. They carry with them the nagging ache of contradiction.

I was eight when I got lost at the Grand Canyon.

Momentarily forgetting the spectacular vistas of the place, I had chased after fat squirrels, reverse pied pipers that scampered beneath the boulders and scrappy brush that lined the canyon's edge. Soon, however, they left me, and I realized with childhood's sudden, ambiguous sensation of horror the absence of my mother, sister, and grandmother.

Panic set in. Wild thoughts of abandonment took hold while I quickly retraced my steps along a rocky path. My surroundings, sparse cliffs with deeply incised furrows, became sinister, abstract forms in an alien landscape. As I strained my eyes ahead, trying to discern a recognizable form in a throng of distant onlookers, the intense heat of the day blurred everything ahead of me with the hallucinogenic appearance of a mirage. I felt infinitely small compared to the massive pit torn into the ground beside me. Staring over

the edge, I could see myself tumbling over, a pebble plummeting down through the miles and miles of emptiness that stretched far below me.

Fear is a powerful presence in the mind. Long after the incident is past, it remains vivid in the memory. I can remember the feel of the hot air against my skin, the gravelly texture of the ground beneath my feet as I ran, the tight, sickly spasm of my stomach as it twisted in upon itself.

But I was never truly lost. When my mother, sister, and grandmother "found" me, I was reassured that they had known where I was the entire time. The fear that I felt, the ideas that I had formed in my panic of abandonment and death were unnecessary in the face of a danger that had never existed. The whole thing was funny really, my intense, panicked reaction comical. Nevertheless, I could not, still cannot shake the terror of being lost. How could I when it is the fear of that experience that I recall with every wrong turn I take, every path down an unfamiliar street? Whether legitimate or not, it is this fear that has seared itself into my mind to become inseparable from the lighter reality of the moment. What results is a memory that is a composite of contradictions where terror and death stick out at odd angles from what I know to be true, like the noses, eyes, and limbs of a Picasso.

I saw one of his paintings from the nineteen thirties recently. It was titled *Weeping Woman*. His subject is portrayed in the particular style of cubism that is among the most recognizable forms of Picasso's work. Her face exists as a caricature, seeming almost to have been cleaved in two and then pasted back together in some grotesque fashion. This

maceration provides a fractured view of both frontal and profile perspectives that miraculously seem to have been forced to exist simultaneously on the two-dimensional plane.

The painting's color is vividly bright, lending an air of absurdity to the unhappy subject. Thick stripes of yellow and ochre stream down the wall in the background, while atop the woman's head is perched a broad-brimmed hat, colored in bold chunks of orange, purple, and electric blue. Over the contorted, angular mouth is a jagged area, like broken bits of pottery, made artificially gray through the clever use of indigo, lavender, and violet pigments. The remainder of the woman's skin reflects the yellow of the wall, contrasted with shadows formed in robust shades of green and occasional splotches of dark sugary pink.

I leaned in, scrutinizing the details of the deformed figure, my eyes lingering momentarily upon the brilliant blue of the flower in the woman's hat that blazed along sharp lines and rugged contours. My memories of fear burn themselves into my mind with a similar richness of pigment, saturating the cerebral tissues with bright, indelible inks. In thinking about my experiences I am aware of a similar sensation of looking at a picture from many angles all at once, an amalgamation of perspectives.

Recently I read an article in *The Village Voice* entitled "The Guilt-Free Soldier" which discussed the development of new drugs and therapies by scientists in several different institutions that could numb the effects of fear in the mind. It provided a description of the way in which fear is remembered: "The web of your worst nightmares, your hauntings and panics . . . radiate from a dense knot of

neurons called the amygdala. With each new frightening . . . experience, or even the reliving of an old one, this fear center releases a flood of hormones that sear horrifying impressions into your brain. That which is unbearable becomes unforgettable too." Fear inevitably distorts. In a moment of panic the world appears changed, is changed within the mind.

A sudden jolt of adrenaline from the brain and neurons and synapses launches the imagination and senses into action. The mind wildly grasps at ideas as they occur, sweeping the self into mounting waves of panic. These notions, though by nature temporal, are nonetheless included among the images branded into the folds of the psyche and become inherent to the experience. They stay embedded, remaining even as old opinions are regained or new ones are adopted. The original comforting ideas born in safe, familiar conditions continue on, but are augmented by the rough, jagged angles of anxiety. Ultimately the memory becomes fractured, combining two perspectives on a single plane, a cubist masterpiece of thought.

I stared at the painting. Searching the outline of the misshapen head, the angular nose, the skewed eyes, I could remember fright's twinge in my stomach.

Rats, at least those of the upstate New York variety, don't look as mean as you would expect. Little more than overgrown mice, there is something in their tawny color and lithe frame that is reminiscent of the sun-bleached grasses of autumn fields, a casual reminder of their place in nature. Even their faces bear none of the typical features, the gleaming red eyes, gnashing fanglike teeth, and pointy elon-

gated snouts that are usually associated with their species. Instead, their muzzles are blunt and boxy and their eyes are not red but rather a deep glossy black, hinting at an innocence that is no more or less profound than that of their cousins, the chipmunk and the deer mouse.

Nevertheless, I hate them.

As I moved from room to room in the chicken coop I was haunted by my fear of their naked scaly tails, their gorged yet astonishingly limber bodies, their rapid sinuous movements. They had invaded nearly a year earlier, a persistent plague that gnawed through wood and wire, and evaded traps of glue, glass, and metal. The mere thought of seeing a rat caused a tingle to race up my spine and stay ringing in my ears, and in my mind I conjured up sudden, terrifying images of one darting up ahead of me. Already I could feel the yelp of fright that it would elicit, a lump in my stomach.

The final section of the coop was home to small bantam chicken breeds, an assortment of roosters, and a few select hens that lived in cages lining the walls. Stepping just inside, I hit the wall next to me with an old, battered broom, attempting to frighten away any lurking rodents with the noise. My eyes scanned the ground and the tops of cages for signs of the quick, fluid movements that were characteristic of the rats I had seen there before, but the room remained still, and I set about my work with a tentative feeling of relief.

Nothing struck me as unusual when I opened the door to one of the taller cages. However, as I reached my hand in past its single, obliviously good-natured occupant, an old tawny hen, I became suddenly and horrifyingly aware of the startled figures of four enormous rats.

Piled on top of each other, they had wedged themselves into a small gap between the outside of the cage and the wall. Their eyes wide, they stared fixedly at me through the layer of chicken wire to which they desperately clung, frozen in a moment of terrified surprise. My expression mirrored theirs for a moment before I began to scream. Stumbling back, I dropped the bucket I was holding, spilling corn over the ground. The rats too, sprang to action, writhing in their confinement, desperately clawing over one another.

Even as I screamed, a new thought cut jaggedly through to my mind. I wanted to hit them, to beat them and mash them with my broom as they struggled, to step on them and hear their bones break, to feel the delicious pop as their skulls cracked. My grip tightened around the broom's handle, and I could feel its chipped paint pressed hard into my sweating palm as I made ready for action. But I hesitated. Looking up at the rats I saw their shiny black eyes, their wheat-colored fur, and their tails. It was too much. Terror and pity made me drop my weapon. I was running before it even hit the ground, stumbling past the door. Running far away from the coop.

How am I to interpret the memories that fear produces? Tossing in my bed at night I am plagued by their nagging contradictions, their obscurities, and their abstractions. Trying to sort through the meaning of my experiences I have attempted to explain my actions in the chicken coop to myself. I wanted to kill the rats out of fear. I ran from them out of fear, I pitied them, loved them for their natural innocence out of fear. But such conclusions provide little more than additional confusion. I find myself

wondering how all these contradictory reactions could have occurred within the mind of a single person in reaction to a single event. I desperately want to apply a rational order to an emotion and an experience in which there is none to be found. I want my memory of the rats to conform to my ideal shoebox logic, but my reaction in that situation, a reaction bred by fear, was not logical. Instead, it was the product of confusion. Ultimately, it has been its source as well.

Sometimes at night I hate looking at the shape on the wall. I clench my eyes closed so tightly that they water through the fringe of my lashes. I bury my head beneath the covers where I cannot breathe. I try to hide from it, to block out its pale light of deformity. But inevitably the lids spring open, and the covers fly off to reveal the hard points of the non-rectangle's lopsided corners where they stand out crisply against the wall's shadows, monuments to disorder.

2. I have confusion. I become tired of the endless struggle with its snares and tangles, the way it warps the metal of my mind, the way it muddles my thoughts, the way it keeps me awake at night. I toss repeatedly in my bed, hoping for the chance of escape.

"Researchers are mastering the means of shortcircuiting the very wiring of primal fear" (Baard). Drugs for fear, drugs for sleep. The temptation to medicate my way into unconsciousness is often strong. Now I wonder if I might not someday do the same with fear. Pop pills to ease the brain, ebb the tide of thoughts, but at what cost? Beyond my confusion I want to believe that there is some purpose to the multiple perspectives that fear creates. Something that exists whether or not I am able to understand it.

Someone asked me recently if I understand cubism.

I paused for a moment while I inwardly struggled with the reality of the question. Then, "No, not really." I considered my answer for a moment. I have a basic knowledge of certain of its aspects picked up in reading and conversation. Very loosely I could tell you that cubism involves an attempt to see every side of a figure at once, but I don't understand the way in which it is created, the manner in which the artists decide how to portray their subjects. I replied again, more certain this time, "No."

I didn't understand cubism, and I didn't understand the *Weeping Woman*. The mechanics, the technical questions, the how's and why's of the painting's creation all evaded me, and yet I realized that I still loved and appreciated it. It was not something that I had to make sense of except to see exactly what was in front of me. Within his painting, Picasso invites us to see parts of his subject rather than the whole. This inevitably leads to distortion of the figure, but through this abstract form it also implies the depth and realism of the character.

The woman on the canvas looks so bizarrely deformed, but in that deformity we are given a sense of a truth that is not easily represented in any media. Within her jagged contours and brsk lines, we see the multiple facets that are inherent to her identity; the splintering of her portrait reveals the complex dimensions of her entirety. It is only physically that the painting is distorted, for within its fractures Picasso has rendered a portrayal of the woman's character that is more pure. There is a suggestion of form and dimension that transcends the distortion it

requires. Perhaps it is the same with my memories. Perhaps it is not they that are deformed but my understanding of them that is.

Do the multiple perspectives that I have gained through fear provide a more precise representation of reality? I have tried so often to understand myself through the disregard of the fractures and irregularities within my memories, but perhaps it is precisely their idiosyncrasies that are essential to my ability to comprehend them.

I am reminded of the early history of art, in which human beings were often portrayed through composite views showing the head and legs in profile, while the torso was represented as it would have appeared from the front. The laws that govern human physiology prevent this position from being replicated in real life; nevertheless, it served a purpose for the ancients who used it. Composite perspective gave the most obvious depiction of a person by combining distinct traits that were "very descriptive of what a human body is—as opposed to what it looks like from any one viewpoint" (Kleiner, 14). Through distortion ancient artists achieved a portrait that was faithful to the characteristics of a human being. Thousands of years later this method of functional distortion is still being used: in the painting of Picasso and in my mind.

For so long I have desired to assign order to myself in an attempt to comprehend something that I am now beginning

to believe must, by its very nature, be understood through its confusion and distortion. Rather than being obscured by them, my experiences of fear reveal themselves through their facets, their fractures, and even their contradictions. This is most clearly demonstrated in my reaction to the rats in the chicken coop. Once the paradigm of my confusion, I now wonder if my conflicting, emotional responses of hate, love, and pity in that situation are the key to understanding the role of fear in my memories. Each feeling represented a different aspect of myself at that time, a self that was capable of interpreting a situation in a variety of ways. More and more I am convinced that the episodes of fear that I have experienced and stored within my memory are not in opposition to my quest for self-understanding, but have in fact provided me with the multiple perspectives that are essential to furthering this aim. I can see now that these aspects of my memory are windows into the multiple aspects of a single personality, attesting to the complexity that exists within the self.

Works Cited

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