

JUST A SECOND

In 2003, after a months-long search on eBay, I managed to track down a DVD of Russian Ark, Alexander Sokurov's 96-minute single-shot opus, which I watched for the first time in my childhood bedroom with rapt attention one afternoon that same spring. I was seventeen years old. So moved was I by the magnitude of Sokurov's—as well as his actors'—achievement that in the weeks and months following I sought out everything I could on the film. I watched the behind the scenes footage on the DVD and sifted through dozens of film magazines for any coverage—critical, theoretical, even the marginal snippet review. Unfortunately apart from several blurbs and a lone fan-site in the proto-blog style of the time I found no satisfactory writing on either Sokurov or his film.

Frustrated, feeling very much held at arm's length by the artistry and specificity of Russian Ark's form—as well as its subject matter—I wrote in to the now long-defunct *24 FPS* (a film quarterly containing, as I recall, a brief 'Letters' section following the Editor's Note) with a kind of plea for information.

As scarcely any evidence of *24 FPS* exists in the now-corporatised, -SEO'd state of the contemporary internet, I cannot exhume nor frankly recall even trace passages of my letter. However I must have signed it with my email address at the time (eider3@hotmail.com), because the email I've included below was among the handful forwarded from that address to my current gmail account in May 2005.

The email—which I did not initially respond to—was from a woman called Julia Whitting, with whom I eventually shared a scattered decade-plus correspondence. I never got the chance to meet her in person, and unfortunately never will; she died in that dismal stretch after Trump's election but before his inauguration. I miss her, but because our relationship was only ever epistolary the dimensions of my sadness feel, in a manner of speaking, virtual.

What follows is her first email, sent at 10:46pm on 24 November 2003.

From: Julia Whitting [j.whitting76@aol.com]
Subject: ANTICINEMA

Hello,

I have some insights in response to your letter about Russian Ark in 24FPS. Did you see it in the theaters? I hope so. What a magical experience. It was playing for a few nights down on 11th or 12th when my husband and I saw it. I found it mesmerizing so I was happy to come across your letter. It's nice to encounter a likemind, even if it's 'penned.'

Part of why I'm writing is my husband is of the opinion that no matter how successful the film's execution, the gimmick of the endeavour - he calls it schlocky! - precludes any real discussion of quality or merit. (He teaches film at NYU.) I suppose I could see things from his angle were this a film about a first date or something, but I believe Sokurov chose to shoot it in one go BECAUSE of the subject, not in spite of it. Don't you agree? I mean he even uses the homonym ark.

We're made to believe, or at least are taught, that history is comprised of tidy epochs and eras - that the fall of a civilisation or the end of an administration equates to, as it were, the nailed coffin. As I see it Sokurov denies this stance. Denies linearity generally, hence the roiling sea at the film's close - like how different would we read it if those doors opened and all we saw were train rails?

Part of the reason I'm writing you is out of curiosity. Do you find you see things differently now that you've watched Russian Ark? Have you been able to watch movies or television the same since? I have to say it's altered how I think of the whole silly practice of film- or television- or advertisement-making.

When I was in college I had this roommate named Heather who was absolutely obsessed with the television show Cheers. Neither of us were social butterflies, but unlike me she seldom left our room at all. (I think she dropped out after freshman year.) She had several volumes of 'The Best of Cheers' on VHS which she would watch on our TV/VCR with almost religious fervor. This annoyed me. It annoyed me a lot, but I found smoking pot would quell my irritation. (I could also tell that smoking irritated her, even though she wouldn't say anything.) I remember I would hit my little one-hitter and the two of us would leave the show running every night until we dozed off.

Anyway the difference between 'before' and 'after' smoking was significant, and it reminds me of what Russian Ark has recently done to me.

Before smoking I readily accepted the reality or diegesis of the show; the characters were PEOPLE in a BAR and the words they spoke were CONVERSATIONS volleying NATURALLY between them as in lived LIFE; after I smoked something grotesque happened (even thinking of it now gives me the creeps): the characters became ACTORS dressed in COSTUMES on a SOUNDSTAGE speaking LINES OF DIALOGUE which had been COMPOSED by a professional team of WRITERS. I would watch Ted Danson's and Woody Harrelson's faces and have the eerie impression that I could see or read their inner thoughts, which ran against or completely separate to the lines they were speaking, which - although they were good actors - I sensed had been memorised by rote and meant nothing to their individual personhoods, which I always darkly pictured as being hogtied and blindfolded in the unfurnished basements of their subconsciouses. This was disconcerting, depressing, and occasionally frightening. Try as I might to wriggle free from this angle of view - to see, that is, the show for what it purported to be, I could no longer suspend my disbelief.

Similarly as I watch films or television today, even good films, I can't shake this sense that the 'cut' or 'edit' is a result of - or direct reaction to - boredom, or perceived boredom, and can be thought of only as a desperate plea for the viewer's attention. I cannot get away from this awareness of the once-invisible and it's driving me crazy. Look! Look! Look! Each cut seems to say. Constant interventions, speeding up time. Possibly in the same way a substance's 'never-enough'ness to an addict exacerbates the addiction itself, so too do I see our collective attention span being truncated by its own truncation.

I'm sorry I know you wrote to the magazine wanting to know more about Sokurov or the film but I'm curious if you've considered this before? What the cut might mean in actual terms? What it's doing to us? I don't want this to become some kind of manifesto, but perhaps you share these concerns and will join me in championing or exploring what I've lately been calling ANTICINEMA.

I don't yet have a form for it, but the goal or ideal is to invent a cinema that acts AGAINST cinema. I don't know why but I'm assuming you're a

filmmaker? If you aren't then you can disregard everything I'm writing, but if you ARE then I'd love to hear your thoughts or for you to expound on these ideas!

ANTICINEMA is a cinema that undoes the durational aspect seemingly native to the art form, allowing or even necessitating a protraction or elongation of time. In ANTICINEMA one can move into or through time as it's captured or created by whatever tools or means the filmmaker deploys. ANTICINEMA addresses a person's interior as much as it does the exterior. ANTICINEMA inverts the Hollywood mode of action, denies the ruling show-don't-tell model. ANTICINEMA believes that if plot exists it does so only retrospectively and outside the bounds of formal structure - it resists, for example, Chekhov's (or anyone's!) Gun. ANTICINEMA is neither fast nor slow, but crucially resists the 'cut' as it is today being used. In ANTICINEMA a cut is never used; rather, it is attained. ANTICINEMA, in its ideal state, undoes the vocabulary of filmic history: there is no such thing as a reverse shot, the 180° rule is nullified, eye-lines needn't match up, and so on and so forth. I could go on but I think - hope! - you get the point?

Please don't feel the need to respond with any hurry, but I would love to hear your thoughts! Thank you for your thoughtful letter and for making me feel less alone!

Yours,
Julia

I did not read this letter again until September 2008—presumably just before the next email in our chain, which I sent, drunk, from my girlfriend's and my Miracle Mile apartment in Los Angeles.

Much had changed in the intervening years. While I can assume my reluctance to respond to Julia in 2003 was due as much to my youth as the intensity of her tone—the sort of unhinged quality of the penultimate paragraph, say—I can likewise speculate that my second nonresponse (in '05) was based on the fact that I'd decided, after months of depression, to give up on film school in MSU Bozeman and, by extension, a future in filmmaking.

By the close of that first semester I'd already lost interest—plus hope, faith, etc—in even the basic notion of filmmaking. Somehow I hadn't considered the inescapability of collaboration, and I found my classmates (the only available collaborators) bemusing and sort of embarrassing, taste- and conduct-wise, nursing my social anxiety—which was, in a word, total—with a superiority complex that left me, if it's possible, even further alienated. The fact that I couldn't seem to speak to anyone without my face flushing and throat clenching was tolerable, I told myself, insofar as no one from my vantage seemed to have anything worthwhile to say.

I spent the early part of my second semester applying as a transfer to the Rhode Island School of Design—a measure I regarded as something of a hail mary, but in my thinking it was either RISD or discontinuing college altogether and moving back in with my parents, so the arithmetic in that sense was straightforward.

I didn't think of Julia's email during my summer transfer session at RISD nor indeed at any point during my subsequent three years in Providence. In fact it was not until I moved to Los Angeles and encountered the vertiginous blues of the recently graduated (one's freedom from the bounds of institutions feeling at once like an infinitely wide, horizonless plain and equally like some indeterminately long and very narrow corridor) that I felt compelled to go through my gmail archives.

My girlfriend worked in the film industry, the hours of which were gruelling and demanded something like an inversion of the notion that one works in one's life; as I saw it in Hollywood (and she shared this—she left the business in 2010) one lives in one's work. This trade-off is tolerable and even ideal if the work is meaningful, but most of her—and by extension, our—life was subsidised by costuming a pulpy show on NBC about would-be superheroes. All to say production had devouring tendencies: Monday's call time might be 6am, but if any snags plagued production—and snags *always* plagued production—by Thursday her days might wrap at 11pm, midnight, or later. For me this equated to an excess of free time, which, new to the city and already reluctant to socialise, equated to loneliness.

Bored, I would pour myself some form of alcohol—I believe Jameson and/or Jack predominated in those days—and type random words into the search function of gmail's interface. Of the dozens of emails that would pop up usually a handful were long or lyrical or worthwhile as I saw it, and these I would read sitting upright and fully clothed on our made bed, piqued by a nostalgia it seems, paradoxically, only the young can experience.

After stumbling across Julia's email I remember fixating on the '76' in her address. Assuming this was her year of birth, it made her twenty-six or -seven at the time of her letter's composition. Young by most measures, at the age of twenty-two I still saw it as coming from someone unreachably mature and worldly. Perhaps this explains the rigid tone of my response.

I've edited my email for length and content but have retained, somewhat to my chagrin, aspects that today strike me as cautious or poorly phrased or, and this is difficult to articulate, things I know to be lies, either in sentiment or intention. I also can't believe I used to have a Marquez quote as my signature, and double-spaced after periods.

From: Joseph Yaeger [josephyaeger@gmail.com]
Subject: ANTICINEMA

Dear Julia,

I'm really hoping you still check this inbox and haven't changed your address, but first I wanted to apologize for my lengthy silence and offer what is now a shamefully tardy response to your email about Russian Ark that you wrote me back in 2003.

[...]

Third, you'd have no way of knowing when you wrote your note to me, but I was in high school at the time, and to be perfectly honest I don't think I knew what to do with your letter. [...] All to say it got me thinking: what came of your concept of anticinema? Did you wind up developing it into a working theory or make anything under the heading of that concept?

I don't think I particularly understood what you meant by Anticinema back when I received your email, and frankly even today I still find the concept a bit opaque, but I suppose my first question is about technology. It's funny I haven't watched Russian Ark in a number of years but I can still remember how the first time I saw it how long it took me to get over the digitalness of the 'film stock'. Again I'm just working from memory here but I especially have this recollection of these very dressed-up women getting out of a carriage, right at the beginning, and how the frame rate sort of glitchily lagged as they passed too close past the camera. I suppose what I'm trying to get at is I felt even as a teenager that perhaps Sokurov hadn't waited quite long enough for the technology to catch up with his ambition. (Not unlike Kubrick and his waiting to make AI.) Anyway is your notion of anticinema at all tied up

in the fact that technology as it stands today can't handle the vision you might have about duration?

[...]

I hope you don't mind my asking, but some of the details in your letter were enticing yet unclear. For instance - and again, I hope you don't mind my asking - but do you still live in New York? And does your husband still teach at NYU? [...] You also mentioned college, where'd you go out of curiosity? And, gosh, what do you do now? Are you a filmmaker?

Sorry for all the questions, as I've said I just moved to LA and was thinking about your letter and was wondering, to be dramatic yet honest, what to do with my life.

[...]

Please don't feel obliged to respond (lord knows how long I took). Hell, this might not even get to you. But I hope it does.

Take care,
-Joe

P.S. That same thing happened to me, by the way, but with Seinfeld. And only once. But I definitely do know what you're talking about. Eerie.

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"He had to go very close to see that it was an old man, a very old man, lying face down in the mud, who, in spite of his tremendous efforts, couldn't get up, impeded by his enormous wings." -Gabriel Garcia Marquez

When I received her response the following summer I had a vague sense that I knew a j.whitting, however at a glance I couldn't place the name; was he/she a RISD classmate whom I'd forgotten? I'd composed plenty of drunken emails in my life to that point, however they'd almost always gone to close friends. Shame or regret might haunt the following morning, but it never lasted long. I think because I didn't really know Julia all memory of having written her dissipated pretty instantaneously. When my eyes landed on the subject line and I saw 're:' I felt a nauseating jolt of dread.

Half expecting to be castigated, I waited a day or two before clicking on the email, which, as it turned out, was unnecessary, even silly. Not only was Julia unbothered by my drunken missive, she seemed amused. Her tone was chaotic and buoyant and funny—unpredictable right from the jump. Plus her form had shifted: where previously she'd stuck to tidy paragraphs and accepted sentence/punctuation structures, her second letter, as you'll see, read more like free verse, which, to my surprise, I actually found more approachable and/or appealing. I had never read an email quite like it.

I can't recall now the specifics of where/when I read this second email, but in the nebulous timeline we all keep on ourselves I know I would have been working almost full-time at a bakery not far from our apartment, whilst in my spare time painting thickly impasto'd geometric oils. 2009 was, on the whole, a tremendously happy year: one of youth and freedom and new friendships and contented cohabitation, the clearheadedness of generally feeling—and this is silly to think of it now—as if I had it all figured out.

Which should double, really, as a good explanation as to why I did not respond to Julia's letter until the following year. While not exactly unhappy, 2010 was characterised by upheaval: my girlfriend moving to London, an extensive application for a visa as her dependent, moving back in with my parents from September through December, and my decision—in a vague mirroring of quitting film, really—to give up painting in order to write fiction.

From: Julia Whitting [j.whitting76@aol.com]
Subject: re: ANTICINEMA

Holy shit I was NOT expecting your email but I've had it starred for months and you're catching me in a good moment just a second

plenty to discuss

Who wrote that first email I have no idea but I don't recognize her ignore her put her in the corner like baby ha (actually maybe I do, but keep that to yourself)

First things first

Yes I'm still in NYC (BK now)
No I'm not married but he still teaches at NYU as far as I know
WashU undergrad
From St Louis originally
Grad school at Hunter
Not a filmmaker but not NOT a filmmaker, kinda multimedia thing

Your email made me laugh have you figured out what to do with your life yet? Ha!

I seriously cannot believe I only wrote that email six years ago Jesus it feels like ten lifetimes.

Can I bore you a bit? This might help to clarify that YOU'RE FINE but I'm sure you already know that

Listen here's who wrote you that email all those years ago

I had gotten to NYC in late 99 after living with my parents and working a couple years in this drag of an ad firm in St Louis
Most of my downtime drinking with this guy who I'd been obsessed with in high school, good sex dim conversation you get the picture
Long not very interesting story
Breakup + promotion + job offer + college friend with an inherited East Village apartment and a couch = bye 27th city (fuck Franzen btw)
So I get to NYC and within a MONTH have met this older guy. BIG LOVE indistinguishable from psychosis as I look back now
a love blackout
I fall out with friends
his friends become my friends that kind of thing it's sort of a cliché but he's older and I tell myself that I'm *mature*
Like part of me likes that I'm falling out with my friends?

Move in with him
Married at twenty-four
Parents eyebrows slightly raised but he's only 41 not like he's geriatric or anything and they like him or at least they don't dislike him
9/11 happens and we decide fuck it why be in advertising when you could just die any second
(what's the difference!)

Looking back he's essentially handling me at this point but he's so complimentary. He believes in me so much I'm painting and making mediocre in retrospect proto-Trecartin videos. But he LOVES them. Like I'm autonomous but I'm also totally being handled
I feel famous in his eyes
He's helping with applications he actually WRITES my references Jesus
And me who is basically a baby I'm just in awe of him
And he's sweet thoughtful all of it, super intelligent he really is at this point
I kind of think of him as a mentor who as luck would have it also loves me

So I get into my MFA and I love it INSTANTLY and I'm ALL IN
But this thing starts to happen
My husband's personality starts to change
he's ill tempered, impatient, crabby
First I blame it on myself I'm thinking: I'm not doing enough for him. He's the one who got me here and I owe him. All that
I'm thinking either maybe he's seeing the real me finally or I'm changing for the worse or I'm not showing enough dedication all of it self loathing the whole thing
Heaps of it. My fault whatever it is. Seventy thousand sorrys to this sulking manchild

But all of it goes away when I'm at the studio, all of it, it's amazing
I meet my best friend she's amazing
still my best friend
So of course I start spending all of my time in the studio
And it takes a long time probably not until a year after I graduate for me to realize that for the first time he was coming second and he just couldn't handle it
So I'm out, graduated, and then I epiphany
is that a verb?
slowly then all at once
I don't want him to come first anymore
Boom
What a realisation, like ever
I get the feeling that I want to be free
If you ever get the feeling you need to be free it's not a good marriage

You say you moved to LA to be with your girlfriend remember you don't always have to come second
K there's my little advice column

I was REALLY dedicated to my MFA (Do an MFA!!!) but seriously such a strange thing for this person you admire to suddenly start behaving like a toddler.
I hated coming home, hated hated hated it
never knowing what he was going to nitpick

Ha I remember once this isn't funny but I remember once I was in the studio and it was late and there's this car horn blaring outside the building that will NOT stop. I go to the window and it's him
I was so mortified
Fucking furious sure but mortified

Anyway that was my thesis: ANTICINEMA. I don't remember writing you that email but I do remember the fight we had over Russian Ark. We used to fight over basically every film. Like I iced that fucking cake in the way I presented it to you, it was a blowout fight our disagreement over Russian Ark. A movie! All the way home and then continued in bed, tears, blah blah blah

Looking back I think that letter must have been one of the first real efforts I made at getting out of my marriage
It reads like an admission to me, to myself
huh
It wasn't abusive or anything just dumb and painful and childish
Plus he was cheating
Or no let's say his next wife appeared on the scene *just* as the ink was dry

Get married if you want but honestly never get divorced

I really should have an advice column

I'll attach a scan of the 'manifesto' part of my thesis. Peruse away. It's only a few pages. The rest of it's on some hard drive that I probably lost. Ce la vie. It sort of leaves a bad taste in my mouth to think about that time so I won't get into any of it in detail here but you're welcome to read it. Makes more sense than my email for sure

So yes is the answer, re my work and anticinema

I'll send you some stuff later if you want to see

You should send me your paintings when you get the chance do you have a website?

Hows that side hustle thing with archiving? I looked him up those coffins are spectacular
don't know about 'white african art dealer' but hey

Stay in touch and let me know if you're ever in NYC, we can discuss long unedited shots in person like proper sophisticates

Take care
Julia

To say that I comprehended her manifesto would be an exaggeration. And it wasn't as if I skimmed it. Unlike after her first email I found myself taken with Julia, attracted in the platonic sense, so I read the manifesto closely and felt ok with the fact that most of it went over my head. Instead of just seeming mature, I now saw Julia as discerning and savvy and cool. Intelligent. Rather than feeling frustration I believe I was generally in awe of her, and filed all of it—graduate school, a thesis, the studio, multimedia practice etc—in the back of my mind under 'future aspirations.'

ANTICINEMA

PART ONE: MANIFESTO

1. Cinema depends upon the observation of diegetic motion.
 - (a) Diegetic motion is an illusion.
 - (b) Diegetic motion is comprised of set and numerable chronologies of non-motions.
2. Cinema, therefore, is a metaphorical anti- or re-animation of passing time.
3. Cinema is an exploitation of its depiction of time insofar as it resembles its viewers' experience of time's passage.
4. Cinema, being comprised of set and numerable frames of non-motions, may be physical—i.e. of film—but cinema's truest state is non-physical in that it resides in the mind.
5. Cinema, residing in the mind, is a fundamentally liminal form.
6. Cinema's liminality is predicated upon the consecutive spaces between frames creating an illusion of diegetic motion.
7. Being liminal, cinema's determination of 24 frames per second (&c &c) is arbitrary, or liquid.
8. Because cinema is a liquid form its durational aspect must be regarded as a lie.
9. Because cinema is a lie it cannot be regarded moralistically or using truth as a compass.
10. Time is a fact, and is tethered inseparably to space, so cinema, a lie, must definitionally deny chronological time.
11. Cinematic time is a failed representation of actual time insofar as it is perforated.
12. Cinematic perforation, native to the form, necessitates the liminal burrness of the observing mind.
13. The observing mind, non-native to the cinematic form, adapted to diegetic motion quickly and violently.
14. The violence of diegetic motion, exemplified in audience reactions to Lumiere's train, was multiplied further with the advent of the cinematic edit.
15. The advent of the cinematic edit, formally speaking, acts as an evolutionary fulcrum between primitive and early cinema.
16. The advent of the cinematic edit, a kind of physical [film] violence, quickly garnered the sobriquet 'cut.'

Mostly I remember a smouldering sensation of: why? Why did this matter to her? What were her motivations? How could you *care* so much about something so esoteric yet banal? (Many years later, doing my own Master's and indeed composing my own dissertation I discovered the answer to that question, but in those fledgling years in LA such considerations bounced off my mind's surface like houseflies against sunny glass.)

Rereading it today—I've attached julwhitanticinema1.jpg for reference—I find her thinking much more robust; the unspoken 'anti' haunting each mention of the word 'cinema' seems to flesh out her theory in absentia. It is a manifesto whose intentions are drawn with negative space, just as cinema, for her, treats the viewing mind as caulk. The worst critique I could launch is most of the conclusions she reaches, though logical, are reiterative. But perhaps this is also the point.

As forementioned I composed the next email in our correspondence in 2010. By then I had moved into a very shabby ant-infested studio apartment not far from my girlfriend's and my former apartment, and was experiencing the anxiety that attends having mistakenly taken a wrong turn at some long-passed fork. My girlfriend had moved to London and I'd decided to stay in LA while applying for my visa. The apartment was small and hot and the air conditioning smelt of burnt something—noodles, plastic, human remains. I had never lived alone. The despair was relentless.

My email, which I won't include here, reflects this state of mind. Misanthropic, it is full of non-sequiturs and a desperation to entertain—for many years rereading it disappointed and embarrassed me.

Julia, to my great surprise—not to mention relief—loved it. She found my pain hysterically funny, a stance that I can today share with her (the melodrama in my letter is spectacularly over-the-top), but at the time struck me as callous and a little bit mean. No one to that point in my life had so brazenly refused to take me seriously, and it felt like a dose of bitter medicine.

In truth I likely would not have responded had she not also praised somewhat emphatically the short story I'd attached. It was about a boy who'd recently lost his mother to cancer, though in the story this fact is oblique, inferred. Hers was the first praise I'd ever received for my writing. It still touches me to remember the words she wrote; she had read the story and read it closely and she appreciated the themes and had perceived depths—particularly its handling of cancer and mortality—that even I as the writer hadn't fully intended.

In the story a boy is whittling outside of his house when he senses he's being watched. Standing from the splitting block and walking over to the rope swing (the whole thing's a tad twee-Faulkner for my present taste; I'd recently read *All The Living* by C. E. Morgan and was probably parroting her tone) he gazes down into the small valley that his family home overlooks. At some distance he thinks he sees a shape in the grass, some faint movement, perhaps a twitching ear. He considers running inside but instead stays frozen to the spot. It's dusk, a deep rod-and-cone-confounding dusk, and he can't properly detect the edges of this creature—its shape, its form—so, with trepidation, he begins to walk down the valley. He feels hypnotised. As he walks he thinks of his mother and how she forbade him from walking so far from the house after dark. He feels anger at this directive now that she's gone, betrayal. Turning he sees his father in the window preparing a late dinner and this too angers him. By now it's clear the creature is a deer, a doe, though no sooner does this occur to him than the doe spooks, stotting blurrily downhill through some brush and into the woods at the edge of the clearing. Night by now has for the most part fallen—he detects stars overhead, a waning moon—and although the boy knows it's against the rules, he decides to follow the doe. Afraid, but resolute—standing at the end of the clearing, the border of this place he'd always been fearful to explore—he gathers himself, then enters the darkness.

In hindsight that email, her response, was when we became proper friends. It was the final gasp of formality, allowing in intimacy and a tendency to playfully rib one another—a tendency she frankly took greater advantage of, but one that I always appreciated. It was big-sisterly, which, sisterless, I liked.

Over the next few years we wrote regularly, with breaks between letters of two to three months at most. Our lives moved as lives do—slow as experienced, fast as recounted: mine to London, marriage, a job, increasingly nicer flats; hers from Greenpoint to a house in Ditmus Park, the hell of adjuncting, and the relative joys of dating a woman for the first time. I looked forward to her emails because they entertained me, but also because Julia didn't really know me, so my decision to become a writer or a cheesemonger or to start painting again was from her perspective as natural as if she'd told me she was taking up paleontology—we regarded one another primarily as present tenses, and took one another at face value.

In this sense it was not exactly distressing when, after six months, I hadn't heard from Julia, nevertheless I decided to break precedent and follow-up—one of those 'hey haven't heard from you how you beens' in which one must actively voice concern to avoid seeming passive-aggressive or spurned. It was 2016 and my thirtieth birthday had recently passed. Her fortieth was in June, just around the corner.

When she responded her form and tone remained unchanged, however now they wilfully belied the content. Her cancer had recurred, she wrote casually—cancer I hadn't ever known was in remission and was frankly disturbed to learn about in chaotic free-verse. She was back in St Louis where she'd undergone a mastectomy and a round of chemo. Her parents and sister were looking after her, which she appreciated. She made some comment about her sister that suggested they'd been estranged, but this was the first I'd ever heard of a sibling, so that's probably conjecture.

Towards the end of the email, almost as if she were performing a public service, she mentioned also that the cancer had spread and that the doctors weren't hopeful; whether she was undeterred by this prognosis or dismissive I couldn't say. She was writing in the little window of time before another series of treatments and procedures, so if I didn't hear from her for a while that would be why, she wrote, and not to worry.

Unsigned, the email ended there. It had been 'Sent from my iPhone.'

My response, here from the vantage of almost six years in the future, was probably a bit too grave. Or I don't know. If I'm honest with myself I would probably write something similar today—my reach for profundity exceeding my grasp—still the whole thing feels as if I were whispering it to her on her deathbed. Granted that was indeed how I felt, but I can't imagine Julia needed any reminding, implicit or not. I think I regret that.

Or maybe I regret that I didn't follow up that email with something less solemn. That I didn't ever course-correct, let alone check in again. It wouldn't have needed to be a long thing—just a little note wishing her well.

Lately though I think that I must have intuited that 'not to worry' meant capital-G Goodbye as Julia wrote it. That I'd known somewhere below conscious consideration that my response would, or should, be, so to speak, the end. And really in that sense I don't think it's my email that I regret, not really, but rather the circumstances under which it was written, which, if I were to remove those—dismantle the chronology, as Julia wrote to me at one point—I would in effect negate the whole thing, erase every word we'd exchanged over those thirteen years. Add tragedy to tragedy, or, in other words, edit.