

Boa and Flowers

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This article presents the author's reactions to a client who saw him for one visit, came 20 minutes late, demanded ideal "parenting," called during the following two weeks, and one day left flowers in his waiting room. The focus is on the failed meeting, the meeting that did not take place, loss, and longing. The aim is to go beyond diagnostic categories to the place where therapy fails, the edge of what is therapeutically possible.

Dwelling with therapeutic incapacity in a full and detailed way—letting "it" speak—may help to stimulate evolution of capacities needed to work with individuals who now slip away from what therapy can do.

WITHIN MONTHS OF ENTERING my office Janice told me analysis had destroyed her. She did not actually tell me but cried, shouted, screamed at me. Not simply a cry, shout, scream from the heart, the kind that elicits a saving response. Her tone accused, nagged, threatened, demanded. She *knew* what she wanted, *knew* what had gone wrong, she *knew* what she needed.

"It's the simplest thing in the world," she said. "I need good parenting. Will you give it to me? Can you give it to me? Will you do it?"

Here was a moment of raw appeal. "Yes," I felt. Who could deny the need for good parenting? She was right, and my innermost being responded, but I could not suppress a "but." This "but" was our undoing.

"I don't want analysis shit. That's what killed me. I was alive. I know what it's like to be alive. She [Janice's analyst for eight years] told me I was

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acting out, that my style of being alive was self-destructive. She tried to analyze me away. Analysis killed my soul. Now I'm a total mess. I can't feel anything. Nothing is alive for me. I'm a dead person, a nothing. She was jealous of my life. I went around with rich people, jet-setting, partying, terrific clothes—my element, not hers. She was down. She never lived. She couldn't take life. She had no idea of what life could be. I was high on life, and she couldn't stand it. Now I need love, the kind a baby gets, so I can come back, so I can be again—so I can have a *self* again. It's the simplest thing in the world. Can you do it? I need to know. No ifs, ands, but, maybes. Can you do it or not?"

Was an unqualified yes possible? Not by me, no matter how much I wanted to help, no matter how much she may have been right. I did not have a totally unambivalent and certain psyche and could not bring myself to lie about it.

"Have you ever helped people like me before?" That question I could say yes to. Yes. How good it felt to be able to say yes. I knew if she stayed long enough, there was every likelihood that she would benefit. But there was the catch: probability, likelihood, which to her meant there was a chance that therapy might fail, that I would not be good enough, that she would continue to die. There really is no bottom to this kind of dying. If the outcome of therapy was not an absolute certainty, it was a dice roll.

"You wouldn't beat around the bush if your own child was in distress. You would comfort her. You would care for her. No qualifications or doubts. You'd love her and give her what she needs. I saw your book. There was too much Freud in it. You're too Freudian for me. That shit doesn't work. I can tell you it doesn't work. It kills. Did you read Alice Miller? Do you agree with her? She's right. That's what I need. You can give it to me, if you want to. I can sense it. You'd give it to your own child. That's what I need—the same thing you'd give your own child. A chance to come back, to be myself again. That's what I want. Will you do it or not?"

How could I say no? How could I say yes? Her appeal came through the noise of her personality, through her accusations, through her dismissal of the therapeutic medium through which she sought help. Yet her demand for absolute care and certainty of outcome, comprehensible as it may be, acted as a practical barrier to her appeal.

If I tried to comfort her, she attacked me more. I did not find the right spot in just the right way. Moreover, she felt my failures were willful.

"You do not really want to help. If you did, there would be no reserve. You would give me what I need, as you would a child. Maybe you'd warm up after awhile, but I can't wait. I'm dying now."

Perhaps other therapists did not share my limitations. I pictured someone more related and caring than I. Face-to-face with Janice, I felt my restrictions only too keenly. Whatever was dry, reserved, or removed about me felt exacerbated. I felt how incarcerated I was by my distance, my unyieldingness, my unyieldingness. Suddenly I was all Scrooge. What happened to the goodness I liked to feel, the *jouissance*? It was gone like the killed-off life Janice raved (I wish I could say raged) about.

If only I could think of the right person to refer her to, the one who could click. But I learned that I was the eighth therapist she had seen in the past year. The therapy that killed her ended five years earlier. How many therapists could she try?

The death-dealing analyst was known in the field as competent and caring. Janice diagnosed her as suffocating and suffocated, someone who disparaged as manic all life manifestations (in Janice's words). Janice tore herself away and searched for the right situation. This past year, before she came to me, she thought she found it in a male therapist who took command and said he would be the parent she needed.

For several months Janice's dream came true. She felt inklings of the life she lost, moments of hope. He *was* helping her the way she wanted. He was not afraid of contact. He found and cared for her child self. Then he turned on her. He became impatient and angry and put her down. He told her about difficulties in his life. He wanted her to give him something too. She loved him and wanted him to take care of her but could not bring herself to give him anything. He let her down, but she liked him better than other therapists she had tried. She felt that he had the right idea, but his craziness and needs interfered. She wanted someone like him, only less crazy and more reliable. "Call him and find out what he does. He does it the way I want. He's got the right idea. Call him and find out about it. I think you could do it if you wanted to and do it better."

I could do it and do it better! Wow! Megalomania, here we come! I knew the man she spoke about and liked him a lot. He believed in working with the baby soul like a parent, if need be. But he was a big baby himself and expected the parent-baby business to go both ways. Many of his patients swore by him. But Janice was not ready for

reciprocal quirkiness and mutual catering to baby needs. She wanted to be the only baby, the center of someone's universe. She wanted total devotion.

She could not tolerate the idea that any person who tried to do what she wanted must inevitably recoil. There would be a backlash. No personality could bend so thoroughly for so long. Even parents rebel.

Yet Janice's need was real. Her capacity to be alive was deeply wounded. She wanted loving attention. She wanted someone who could give. She wanted someone who could let her be, who would let her be first.

One thinks of primary love or primary narcissism or the need for mirroring of archaic grandiosity. But a self-psychologist referred Janice to me. He could not get to first base with her. And an object relations therapist had referred her to him. She ran the gamut. I wondered about humanistic psychologists from the 1960s who did hands-on parenting. There were no guarantees.

I could not help wondering what massive or specific or cumulative failure of parental/environmental provision might underlie such painful loss of self-feeling. As if reading my mind, Janice said, "I had a happy childhood. My parents were loving and good, and I loved them. It's not my childhood. It was my analysis that killed me. I want the feeling I had before she killed my life off. I want to get back to me."

I have been in the field for over 30 years. I knew analysis could kill. I have seen harmful and helpful effects of therapy. I also knew individuals who idealized their prebreakdown selves. Compared to the horrors of breakdown, their earlier misery seemed like happiness. It could be that Janice's analysis *was* harmful *and* that she idealized life prior to it. Or the situation could be more complex. Perhaps Janice felt assaulted by the ambivalence of life and counterattacked by oversimplification. Perhaps she already was on the way toward breakdown when she sought help and analysis failed to help her. I could extend this list of possibilities, but complexity was certainly something that Janice did not want. She used the word *simple* repeatedly: "What I need is simple. It's simply what you'd give a child of your own. The simplest thing in the world!"

I feel that simple thing at the center of my being. It shows in my eyes, my tone, my skin. I live from and through it. It is my home. Yet some people see it, and some do not. To some I may seem cold or distant or reserved, and to others, warm and playful. Some coming near me may

feel they are entering the House of Complexity. Where is that simple thread leading to and coming from the heart's center? Where is it when it is lost? How can something I feel so deeply and thoroughly not show? With Janice I felt like a stroke victim who could feel his shining essence unable to break through layers of imprisonment.

Yet she saw something in me. She felt I could help, *if I wanted to*. There was the rub. It was up to my desire. If I wanted to, I could. I could not help wondering what pressure she must be under if she felt desire could do all. How often it was said to me from childhood on: "You can do it, if you want to!" I could not help wondering what disease or deficiency of desire plagued Janice's life. Who wanted her and how? Who did not and how not? What provision was made for loss and limitation? For immersion in experience?

"I can do it myself if you'll just be there for me. I can. I know I can—I know what it is I need and where to find it. But you have to be there while I do it. You have to let me do it. I have to know that you can be there, that you *will* be there."

But mere being is inadequate. "You have to take charge. Do you understand? You have to direct it. No analytic bullshit. It has to be real. You have to know what you're doing. I have to be able to lean on you. I have to rely on you to be there and take charge when I am falling apart. You have to put me back together when I fall apart. I have to do it, but you have to take charge. Do you get it?"

Well, Mr. Therapist, Mr. Wise Guy, let us see what you are made of. Put your money where your mouth is. Only true emotional reality will do. The thing itself. Isn't this what you talked about all these years?

Now I think of the picture on the cover of the paperback edition of Croddeck's *Book of the It*—an impish man popping out of a body slit, a mock image of pulsations of the unconscious. Now I picture soul filling body, simple emotional availability, a flow back and forth through surface-depth, person to person. I wish I were one of those people who make you feel good just by looking at them. So many barriers, barriers upon barriers. Janice hated all barriers. I felt as if all I had to offer was the grim prospect of hard work. Psychotherapy—sometimes a feather that tickles, now the Grim Reaper.

I do not have a party line, a dogma about just how I am supposed to be with every patient. I am willing to shift ground, try different styles, try to locate some way of being/experiencing that might work. I do not like getting boxed in to any particular version of myself. Often I have the

feeling of my personality regrowing around the impact of a particular O,¹ reshaping itself with the requirements of the emotional reality of moment. Such reshuffling sometimes happens rapidly and automatically. Sometimes it takes going through many deserts.

If Janice would give us time, we could try this and that until we became viable. Mothers and infants work at feeding. Each learns to do what has to be done—the mutual adjustments that make a difference. When I suggested that I might learn to work with her, that we might learn to work with each other, Janice replied severely, "If I needed a physical operation, I would not get a doctor who had to learn how to do it. I would get an expert, one who knows."

"I don't know that thoughts and feelings are exactly like brains or livers. Their location isn't so certain." Did I say or merely think this? I already said too much, too little—all wrong.

No uncertainty of locale could be tolerated, and there was no time. Either I was the one who could do it or not, and I had to be the one to say so.

I do not mind contradictory demands of difficult patients. My paper "On Working with 'Unwanted' Patients" (1977) summarizes 10 years of work with clinic patients. My book, *The Psychotic Core* (1986), summarizes nearly 25 (now nearly 30) years of work with psychotic dynamics and psychoticlike processes. I am supposed to be something of an expert in the "difficult," and this reputation is why Janice was referred to me. Over the years my practice imperceptibly became weighted with psychoanalysts and psychotherapists. Am I becoming soft? Would Janice have been too much for me 20 years ago? Then I would have done anything to make contact.

Now all I had to do was say I could do it. The words did not come. I felt more deeply in contact than 20 years ago, a deeper inner sense of being, but outwardly was I more removed? Perhaps Janice was right in thinking she would have to work too hard to get to me.

My patients years ago were not less disturbed, but they tended to latch onto therapy long enough for something to happen. They seemed to take their unconscious, masochistic attachment to therapy more for granted and held on for dear life. They needed to establish a parasitic grip

¹O is a Bion notation connoting unknowable ultimate reality, here the ultimate reality or emotional truth of a session. We try to experience and process its impact. See Bion (1970) and Eigen (1981, 1985, submitted).

(whether via rage, withdrawal, depression, or seductiveness) on therapy and were willing to play the game in exchange for being allowed to hang on. They gave me time. They did not seem to mind losing time. The passage of time did not irritate them. Perhaps in those days submission to a doctor was more permissible.

Janice opposed her masochistic desires with brittle interrogation and demands. She wanted to be sure what she was getting into. She could not afford another failure. She knew how to shop and what she was looking for. She was examining the goods very carefully. She wanted to be in control; she knew her rights. What did I do, and how did I do it? It was like examining the teeth of a horse. But I did not feel that she would allow herself to see me. Her trust in herself had been destroyed. After all, she had given therapy a chance and lost. How does one select a therapist?

Janice took what little time we might have had away. She saw me only once and came 20 minutes late. During her 25-minute hour a Con Edison construction crew furiously ripped up the road in front of my office window. Jung's synchronicity came to mind—how fitting that this noise should happen now.

I could play or be the analyst and establish the frame of silence (Con Ed saw to it that this would not be). Or I could confront or elaborate or empathize or interpret or hunt for a good enough maturational response. I could tell her how right she was in being circumspect, in trying to find what was right for herself. I could try to be myself. I could be honest, but which profile of honesty, which part of the elephant would manifest the word or gesture that counts? It was clear to me in an instant that I was unable to present myself in the way she wanted and that (from her viewpoint) I offered no viable alternative. She could only leave unless she could do precisely what she could not do: give us time to see what might happen, give us time to learn to work together. I could not give her the one thing she demanded: I could not be sure. I could not end time.

Janice and I spoke by telephone for almost two weeks after this visit. She kept calling and leaving long messages. She did everything she could to make me say yes, to be sure, to reassure her that I could do it, that I was the one. Nothing I could find to say and no way that I could find to be were useful. Janice brought me up short against my limits and refused any intersection at or beyond the boundaries. She was fixed on my having to be sure and on her having to be sure that I was sure, that I was the one who could do it, who wanted to and who would. She was very articulate about this position and yielded no leeway.

She did not ask about my fee, and I did not bring it up. I knew my colleagues charged her for their consultations. I did not think that charging or not charging would make a difference. I could not bring myself to charge, perhaps because of Con Ed, perhaps because I was psychologically impotent or because I wanted her to know that the unconscious could be generous even if it did not seem so, that there were ways that time and timelessness could be interchangeable.

She left a vase of flowers in my waiting room one day. They were obviously hand-arranged by her, beautifully so. My self psychologist colleague told me she left him one too. So many flowers, so beautifully arranged. How many flowers she must have left behind!

We spoke a number of times after the flowers. She wanted me to speak to a therapist whom she felt really knew her, someone who had been good, a woman in Washington whom she saw years ago, when she left college. Perhaps this woman would help me find the right way to be.

Janice contacted this good doctor, who called me. We spoke when she came to the city for a funeral. She scarcely remembered Janice. She had seen Janice briefly. Now she felt Janice needed hospitalization, she feared Janice could not take care of herself. She planned to tell Janice's parents. She asked me which hospitals in the area I thought were good, and I told her. The calls from Janice stopped.

I have worked with far more collapsed people than Janice on an ambulatory basis. Perhaps some doctors would have felt that some of these people should have been hospitalized. Janice's flowers were not even close to the bleeding flowers of schizophrenic dreams. Her loss of self did not have the butchered, bleak quality of psychotic landscapes. She used flowers to finalize loss. Where self had been and might be again, flowers are, not the flowers of the living self, but markers of the place where self disappeared, the place where self was last seen and where Janice is waiting. If only we could both sit at the fishing hole in the ice and wait for spring.

Janice's flowers showed me what I was missing by not saying yes. They were my punishment for my "but." If only I could have taken the leap, what a sensitive being I might have discovered. Her vase of flowers was a token of the flowers to come, the promise of our work together, the promise whose grave they marked.

How many promises, how many graves litter Janice's search and mark her trail? Perhaps the search is more real than the trail. Trail implies movement and direction, implies that someone has been somewhere.

The bread Janice leaves behind is dropped in the same place, over and over. Droppings. Therapists left behind like droppings. More waves of therapists to come. Janice moves from therapist to therapist, searching for Mr. Right, the One Who Can and Will Do It. Her flowers tell me what I am missing, that I am missing Someone Special. She shows me that she is generous, that she forgives my miserliness. But I am not just I—I am all therapists, the therapy field, the barren field in which no flowers grow, the field she hopes to activate.

Why do I feel something in the search is real? It is not a scientific search, a patient testing of hypothesis or imagining of hypotheses, although these are not entirely excluded. It is a search for the flower that is not there, the therapy flower, the flowers outside her that march those within. A search for the flowers she wishes were there, within or without. She shows up to find nothing again, the blank hole in the ice. She will not hold hands or fight or wait it out at the brim. But her flowers say that she could do all that if only you were the right one, if only you were good enough, if only you would or could say yes. If only you would do as she says and be as she wants.

I think of Milton's fairest flower "no sooner blown than blasted," a hymn to a dead child. So many dead therapies to mimic the therapy that killed her.

Her search cancels itself out but is not dead. I can feel aliveness in the intensity of its standstill. It dies over and over until only its drivenness remains. But I can feel this restless drivenness, the scratch of nails that will not let go. I can feel its insistence in how much I am driven to exercise myself trying to enliven the corpse of therapy, how I ache and work to find a way. We both wear holes in ourselves from this mad, soldierly discipline, running in place until feet burn and lungs burst and earth disappears. Our psyches grind themselves to smithereens trying to make contact with nothing, trying to give each other the benefit of the doubt.

Infinite uselessness. I know I will feel exhausted after this brief meeting, which seems to go on forever. I could have remained detached and immune—precisely what Janice might criticize me for. But another psychic force field was at work. I did not find myself sitting back and thinking, "There's nothing I can do. She needs to be hospitalized." I found myself working like a madman, chewing myself up, trying to find the right current—*because I sensed it was there*. There, but not available, not available to me, not available to most (perhaps all) therapists, and not available to Janice.

The good woman therapist from Washington feared that Janice was unable to take care of herself. It would not surprise me if I missed the most obvious thing, if I did not see what stared me in the face. Perhaps her breakdown was not a florid kind. No hallucinations or overwhelming panic or depression. Just a kind of scatter and depletion of functioning, a kind of blank breakdown.

I knew Janice was depleted, bleeding to death, running scared, sensitive, and tyrannical. I saw that she could not give me the chance to find a way to reach her, nor could she extend me the courtesy of torturing me for months or years or properly exhausting my repertoire of abilities (she already said she could not give a therapist anything). Perhaps what was most irksome was that Janice did not *really* try me out at all. I was unusable, and perhaps the sense of not being used or usable is what exercised me. Perhaps I was so preoccupied with my own breakdown and the unfairness of not being given a fair audition, that I did not see the need for a hospital.

Previous therapists had not hospitalized her. Had she reached a new low in depletion or spinning? Was the therapist from Washington speaking out of her own sense of impotence, or was she right? Am I too used to psychotic and psychoticlike states and dynamics to see a hospital case in front of my nose?

Winnicott (1969; Eigen, 1981) has taught us that it may be precisely the capacity to use another person that is unavailable and must be grown in many patients. Is it fair to say I was not being used, or was I (and the therapy milieu) being used to feel useless? Was precisely this state of uselessness my (our) use? Was the therapist who recommended hospitalization feeling this endless uselessness? Was she hoping a hospital could contain what was beyond personal containment, perhaps beyond containment of the therapy milieu in general? Was any container adequate for this limitless uselessness?

I can picture Janice in a good hospital being nurtured back to aliveness. She rests and finds herself in a setting that upholds her and allows for growth or repair. At last she achieves what she wants, a chance for true self. This growth can and does happen. Would it for Janice? I have learned from hard experience that often I must say something like, "Yes, a hospital stay may do you good. But when you come out, the same problems will be waiting. You still will be you. The world will be the world. The dirty work will be waiting."

One can speculate and question. Did my uselessness reflect the deep

uselessness Janice felt or feared to feel? Did she need to make the parent feel useless? In what ways were the parents useless or worse than useless? Would one expect to find distant or controlling parents or both? Was parental need for a happy child too great, so that emptiness became the inner reality or protective shell? Did loss of self protect against invasive overstimulation or reflect a lack of inner richness in her once "happy" life? Perhaps there were real elements of richness to her happiness, but the impact of reality after college was too hard to bear. Was the contrast between family and reality too great? One could go on.

In our 20 minutes together Janice hid her history in the gloss of happiness. She would not let me near her past, not in any obvious way. She displayed a wound that was still smarting, a death in process, an accusation, a demand. Actually she did not display it so much as talk about it and berate therapy. She demanded that I be an empathic, usable object who can take charge, who can set direction and let be, who can establish conditions in which she can find herself. How tantalized I was with her sense of rightness, her knowing what was right for her. A knowing that dangled and withdrew the carrot, saying, "I'm sorry. Your dance is not quite right. Please do the right one now. I know you can." And frantically I pressed the jukebox until only whirring remained. That whirring nullity is what I suspected Janice was vanishing into. I looked for the hole in the needle she said was there, but it too was whirring away.

"If only you would treat me like your own child, love me like your own child." God, how I love my children! How I can hate them too! How exasperating they can be. They drive me over the edge, those beastly monsters, those so, so precious beings. But don't you know, Janice, I loved them before they were born. I loved them before they were conceived. They came into a love that was waiting for years. And they ignite new loves, loves I never catch up to. Each child plays on me with his own personality and creates loves with unique tones. I become musical instruments that never were before and never will be again. "Sing a new song to the Lord." New songs, new hearts. My children create in me new hearts and wear my hearts down.

Their life kills me off. I come back. I want to kill them and fight for my life. "I go to bed crying and wake up laughing," as the psalmist says. My soul is restored, ready for more. What a battleground the playground is. Is this what the Bible means by slavery in Egypt—*mitrayin*, the "narrow

strait," the binding limit, cement mixed with blood? Janice, don't you know my children never asked to be loved?

Yes, I think you know or once knew. Somehow it got narrowed down. How this process happened I cannot know but would like to learn, if you let me. Perhaps someday you will become the kind of person I can love like my children. But you are not like them now. They do not tell me that I must be sure I can be a good parent before they splatter themselves all over me. They do not require my certainty that I will not fail them before they run at me and jump on me. I am certain I will fail them. I cannot count the times I have made them cry. But I am certain I will keep on trying, as long as I have breath—at least part of the time, intermittently, as much as I am able. How can they escape my wounds, or I theirs? We each have our inner drummers. We are driven to come through—to live. I look at them and feel my death. I look at them and thrill to life.

Janice, you have closed yourself off to this mixed-up, painful, joyous growth of real life. You have become a purist. You want a guarantee. One of my boys is more cautious, the other more abandoned, but both press headlong into the maelstrom, wound after wound, coming back for more, growing and growing. Who can get enough of life? Who can hold back for long? They can be impossible, conniving, spiteful, nurse their wounds—but life sweeps them up, moods change, things happen, currents flow every which way from hidden springs to the seas.

I suspect I am wrong in saying you closed yourself off. It is more accurate to say that closing off or narrowing happens. You did not plan psychic deadness any more than a flower plans what happens to it when rain does not fall or light does not shine. Perhaps this is why control is so important to you now—so much is out of control. You want me to will you into life, for will has failed.

Yet you say you had plenty of sunshine and enough watering—until analysis. Analysis took the conditions of life away. Now you want therapy to restore what analysis has taken. Justice. I cannot judge. I do not know what happened. I only know that Something Went Wrong, Something Wrong Happened. Help is needed but seems more on the way out than in.

The child is not dead. You are there, Janice, beating down therapist after therapist with your raw appeal. I believe your appeal. I picture you as my child, crying angrily, "You broke your Promise." The world is a broken promise. Every therapy knows that. Yet in spite of brokenness,

every therapy is a promise (no matter what the therapist says), a promise linked with an unconscious as "no-less" as it is timeless. Now you cannot say yes to any real therapist, Janice, nor can you say no to the promise.

You ask if I want to see the documents. You have written it all down. I can learn from your writings who you are and what you want. From your written words I can see what needs to be done and gird up my loins to do it. As you speak, your inner being slips through the words. You cannot hold it all. You cannot give it to the other. In your aloneness you have written it. The paper holds it. The other cannot steal your reality away. You can show it at will, and if I read it, I will know. The self psychologist has the writings. You will bring them to me and hope that by my reading them I will know if I can do it.

Janice never brought them over. I would certainly have read her testimony, her plea, her fury, her poetry, her analysis, as many before me did. But the problem would have remained: I would not be able to say that surely I was the One. The reality of my disability must have hit her, and I imagine she found her way into another sector of the therapy field to continue her fall.

Bion (1965, p. 101) writes of a force that continues after the last point of personality has been annihilated and existence, time, and space have been destroyed. Janice had not yet reached utter pointlessness and loss, but she was on her way. Alice Miller didn't help. Freud, Jung, Winnicott, Bion, and Kohut didn't help either, nor did my training or experience. My very life and personality were useless. I survive my annihilation just as Janice in one way or another partly survives hers. But, like a boa, the force molds itself around the victim's breathing and now and then gently squeezes with the intake of a breath.

In Bion's vision there is no end to annihilation. We move from one heart of darkness to another—heartlessness beyond heartlessness. Just as our eyes become used to the dark, it becomes darker. There is no end to the darkness to explore. The force is on a permanent search-and-destroy mission, a Pac Man feeding on every sign of life. And after life is destroyed, it will continue to feed on death, nonexistence after nonexistence. Surely such a force cannot be real—its existence is a contradiction in terms. But it is precisely this impossibility that gives it power.

Janice, if you saw me today, could things be different? Would I do better? How I wish so. How I wish I could explode myself and become the kind of presence or presence-absence balance that would do it. I know about getting the right distance-closeness balance—how I tried! Where is

the me/not-me self you could work with? Where is the I you could say yes to, or say no and fight it out? The missing link is all. It is cuddled in the boa's caress. Each breath it dares to take brings it closer to its undoing. We both know the link is there but cannot escape our own constrictions.

Please, Janice, let us agree to fail for as long as it takes. I believe the force can be outflanked. There is something deeper, something more. You sense it, or you would not be here at all. It is afraid to breathe now, but perhaps it will wait for us. It will feel "our" breathing. I understand that it is buried under the collapse of the entire earth, that all existence has become the killer. You see, I know the force well; I am part of that constriction. I write too, like you. I am writing you this testimony. For I, too, slip away when we speak. I am telling you, from my aloneness to yours, writer to writer, that I believe you. I believe in the flowers you gave me. We are those flowers, the missing links. I believe in writing, the writings you never gave me. I am writing to you, Janice, any Janice, who may read this testimony and respond with next-to-last breath. I have breathed my last breath many times and want to go with you to that place. Between the words, breathing starts up again.

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