**RAMBLING ON A PIER**

**Precarious Prologue**

Salford car park in darkness. Mired in musings for so long, I’d forgotten to drive home. Creeping condensation ferments into frost. Industrial shapes loom in the gloom. “Your assignment needs a shape”, they glower. “I need a shape”, I whisper, “...an escape.”

Lurching from the car, queasy with questions, wintry air whirls titles around my head, like stumbling steps into the unknown: “Affect Theory and Self-Shaping?", too vague. “Self-Actualisation and Shape Formation in Relation to Sara Ahmed’s Promise of Happiness?” What does that even mean? The second assignment is like that difficult second album. “Who says album anymore?”, I wonder, wandering with an imaginary Sara Ahmed. Lately she’s taken up positive residence in my head.

“Sara, I’ve got the fear”, I whisper. “You haven’t”, imaginary Ahmed replies, “Everyday language constructs emotions as a form of positive residence” (Ahmed, 2004, p.119). “What? This fear isn’t my own? Have I just contracted it from a sticky contagion in the ether?” I say. “May I refer you to the ‘rippling effect of emotions’?” (Ahmed, 2004, p.119), she replies in an exasperated tone.

I shrug, a subject dejected, negated. Patiently, Ahmed pursues me, “We do not have to assume that consciousness is what belongs to an individual subject” (Ahmed, 2010, p.165). “Whatever!” I reply, faking nonchalance as a film of frustration flies from my mind, sticking to red mill bricks as I scuttle. “Take that buildings! I’m still owning individual feelings and throwing them outward.” With that, I huff off into the night, nothing if not literal.

**SHAPE 1. DYSTOPIAN PIER.**

Moments later in Salford time and narrative time, I turn on to Absence Avenue, grids glare with shadowy teeth, slick with streetlight. “Step on a crack break your sister’s back”, I whisper, avoiding pavement cracks. A ritual to reassure me I’m retrospectively protecting my stillborn twin sister’s happiness. A sister who never even found her shape on earth. I trip as a pavement crack opens up into possibilities and my life as a tiptoeing talisman is called into question. I thus form a question: “Sara, should we avoid the gaps or live in them? It strikes me there’s poetry in the gaps. Where are we meandering to anyway? Discuss.” Imaginary Sara answers, “The wretched ones might be full of hap, might be hapfull, because they deviate from the paths of happiness, because they live in the gaps between its lines.” (Ahmed, 2010, p.223). I feel my lost sister wriggle away slightly, willing me to embrace possibilities and take my own shape against the guilty survivor’s template I’ve long inhabited. I step on every crack thereon in, wondering who says, ‘thereon in’.

I happen upon a sign. “Impossible Pier. Enter at your own risk.” Salford-on-Sea is not familiar to me. Imaginary Ahmed reminds me that “Other things can happen when the familiar recedes” (Ahmed, 2010, p.218). Making a pact with the moon, I own the risk and shuffle through a fence onto a decaying pier. Sea air swirls as sodium streetlamps fizzle out. Vast emptiness lies beyond, stirred only by a sparkling moonlit tide. The pier is a foreboding structure clinging to the shore; flanked by iron fenceposts like ideological guards of a bygone boundary. Its happy halcyon days past, moments of faded grandeur cast, like fallen pillars amid hastily tidied tools, the pier shudders a stubborn shape against each seductive squall. Once a great expectation of a pier, it is now abandoned to damp northern darkness - a shape falling apart - reaching longingly to a moonlit horizon it can never reach.

**ME:** “Sara, this pier was a happy place once. Now it’s a ruinous relic beyond redemption.”

**IMAGINARY AHMED:** “To turn happiness into an expectation is thus to annul its sense of possibility” (Ahmed, 2010, p.220).

**ME:** “So we need to take form beyond forms of happiness that are future-bound?”

**IMAGINARY AHMED:** “Nostalgic and promissory forms of happiness belong under the same horizon” (Ahmed, 2010, p.160).

Addressing the reader in my head I hold forth, a precarious plot device like the aside of an amateur actor:

“Why is taking shape so important? When we lack our own embodiment the future is cruel, promising things like a horizon we can never reach, beating us with a sticky stick of fear, from happiness structures in what Ahmed calls an “affective economy” (Ahmed, 2010, p.215), to ideological institutions, to the most powerful shaping idea of all: death. A fear of death could be the ultimate failure to take shape, a failure to become embodied while in life.”

I rally and self-determine, forging forward, furious at futurity. The pier planks creak against my nascent solidity.

**SHAPE 2. ESCAPING ENTRAPMENT.**

Reflecting on negative embodiment as entrapment, I wonder if my twin sister escaped that fate. Did she escape the trap of misconstrued embodiment that leaves us with no agency anyway? I reflect on the trap of predetermined terms Brian Massumi evokes when he asks:

“How does a body perform its way out of a definitional framework that is not only responsible for its very “construction” but seems to prescript every possible signifying and countersignifying move as a selection from a repertoire of possible permutations on a limited set of predetermined terms?” (Massumi, 2002, p.3).

Feeling a cry beneath my ribcage I think, “When you put it like that, it’s hard to be born. Are we ever truly born? How can we ever take shape?” The cry is wordless. Pre-verbal. Arguing that affect precedes emotion Massumi describes a “non-conscious experience of intensity that cannot be fully realised in language because affect is prior to, or outside of consciousness” (Then and Now, 2009). Imaginary Ahmed interrupts my cogitations, postulating that “Consciousness might be about how the social is arranged through the sharing of deceptions that precede the arrival of subjects”(Ahmed, 2010, p.165). “Sara”, I whisper, “if I could catch my twin who never uttered a cry. Would she enter a social construction of consciousness? Would that be the happiness moment within which to catch her?” No answer comes. So many questions that even Ahmed can’t answer.

“Did my twin escape affect?”, I wonder and wander on. “Never becoming conscious was she never initiated into the social stickiness of affect?” Ahmed argues that “To question is to be affectively an alien” (Ahmed, 2010, p.189). My twin and I could have been affect aliens together. We were binary. We were two. Now I am the question and she is the absent answer. Where are her answers? Did they adhere to the surfaces of the hospital room or did I absorb them? Does a mourning miasma still lurk in a 1970’s ward? Or were disinfected surfaces wiped clean of all affect? How much cleaning occurs over decades? Jif became Cif and it still didn’t clean my grief away.

**SHAPE 3. NEVER MIND. SMILE!**

A hunched mass perches on the pier ready to pounce. A familiar shape from childhood glimmers with a grotesque grin and a stare like a dare. Something paws at my memory. The grin throws down a grim gauntlet. I hurl back sodden canvas to reveal a forlorn fairground ride. Faded words read, ‘The Cheshire Cat. Serial number C21H20120.’ Electric cables split, disconnected, paint peeling like a thousand desperate clawings, unanswered. The lifelong instinct to connect to cats, even pretend ones, kicks in. “Hi pusskin”, I whisper touching his eerie ears. “What you doin’?” I’ve found a friend on the bleakest pier in the universe. The Cheshire Cat (Carroll, 1866), doesn’t leave me hanging:

“What am I doing? Doing is what I am.

Cats don’t like water, so I appear on a pier.

As water finds its own level so you have found me.

Curiosity killed me, I was not allowed to be free.

I smile to survive, manifesting mandatorily.

I’m the machinery of happiness. Literally.

I’m a smiling structure symbolically.

A catecholamine catch-all and a bum steer,

You’re here to free me that’s why you are here,

‘Happiness’ fixed me in this shape that you see,

No pawsitive residence for me tee hee...”

“STOP!” I shout, “enough riddles Tiddles! Shape yourself! No time for silliness in the fight for formational freedom.” “The riddles are the whole point”, he replies, “silliness can be radical and instructive. I symbolise the Berlantian ‘counterpolitical silly object’ (Ahmed, 2010, p.222), that Ahmed lauds. I’m an injection of irreverence keeping us productively “proximate to unhappiness” (Ahmed, 2010, p.223), and therein lies the radicality of hope.” An old flyer lands at my feet: “Psychic Hotline £99 per second”.

**OMNISCIENT NARRATOR (Probably in an armchair in a study).**

The Cheshire Cat’s entrapment on the pier is a double bind illustrating the machinery of happiness leading nowhere fast. He is a mechanism to highlight the fixity that arises from a failure to hold your own authentic shape against the “happiness duty” (Ahmed, 2010, p.204). A feline investment in a fake future, his very existence depends on his smile. Embodying the era of the “happiness turn” (Ahmed, 2010, p.2), he echoes Barbara Ehrenreich’s idea of “mandatory optimism” (RSA ANIMATE: Smile or Die 2010), the ‘believe it to see it’ mentality. Ironically, here the oftentimes invisible Cheshire Cat known for manifesting becomes a manifesto against manifestation.

**Meanwhile back on the Pier...**

**THE CHESHIRE CAT:** “Anyway what are *you* doing?”

**ME:** “Me? Oh nothing, just calling back libidinal energy from social, political, and spiritual institutions. Recalling it where it has been spirited away by affect, leached away by capitalism, no longer to be prey to the power of the happiness promise. Seeking my own positive residence by a movement into the real. No biggie.”

**THE CHESHIRE CAT:** “A movement into the real? But you are talking to an imaginary cat”, he giggles. He has a point. I take him to task, “Cheshire! When you’re creating your own real as an act of becoming, you are defying what Massumi calls prescribed ‘realities’ you know. Tut.”

**THE CHESHIRE CAT:** “Hmmm, you sure about that?”

**SHAPE 4. TIME.**

A voice booms from the other side of the pier: “Did someone say libidinal energy?”. Tiptoeing towards the voice, I make out a faded sign on a dilapidated booth, ‘Fortune Teller - See the Future for £99.99’. Something twitches behind dusty glass. I peer in. A light flashes and a fierce bearded face glares out for a lively moment, then collapses in on itself, dormant. It’s an old animatronic man - like the laughing man at Blackpool - but there’s no laughter here. This is Old Father Time telling our fortunes; now the long defunct face of seaside amusement. Pausing to wonder how disconnected fairground lights can flicker and an ancient animatronic can have a moment of glorious renaissance, I think aloud: “What made you work?”. Old Father Time answers. Of course he does:

“I don’t need electricity to function” he says, allegorically astute. “I’m a seaside structure signifying the power of the promise, taking power from the past and future. However, I am not authentic amusement so I’m constantly under threat. For authentic power I need to escape this booth, to live outside of happiness. That would equate to living outside of the tyranny of time, but I *am* time, so I’m not sure I could continue existing. Perhaps I’m happier here, with a diminished existence.”

With that he folds in on himself - a deflated deity in stasis until the next short-circuit moment of manufactured life - maybe years off. Turning to the horizon, despairing at the tyranny of time, I whisper, “I’m scared and I want to go home.” Imaginary Ahmed sighs sympathetically, "...when happiness is present, it can recede, becoming anxious, becoming the thing that we could lose in the unfolding of time." (Ahmed, 2010, p.160). “The past’s history, the future’s a mystery,” I reply, shrugging with faux bravado.

**OMNISCIENT NARRATOR PLAYING FOR TIME**

Through what Ahmed calls the “promise of happiness” (Ahmed, 2010), we misconstrue cultural happiness machinery as promises of happiness to come. Instead of embracing our own embodiment, we fling our energy futureward. This misconstruing ultimately leads to mourning, from lost time, to lost dreams. The climactic moment of pain comes when power actually reroutes back to us. The moment we start to take shape and the future loses its power; we are reborn into the present. In affective economic terms, we withdraw our investment from the future.

Ahmed’s idea of painful affect alienation is the cost of freedom from “happy objects” (Ahmed, 2010, p.21). Owning our own shape is painful, as she states, “Embracing possibility involves returning to the past**,** recognising what one has, as well as what one has lost.” (Ahmed, 2010, p.218). An element of emotional time travel is necessary to reclaim your own temporality. Reaching for a new way of being can be frightening, as Ahmed states “Possibility means grasping terror as well as joy” (Ahmed, 2018, p.218).

This idea of being suspended between an externally imposed shape and a real, authentic shape of self is reflected in the psychoanalytical idea of the timelessness of the unconscious. Kelly Noel-Smith describes the Freudian idea of time as a “projection of a perception” (Noel-Smith 2016, p.179). She elaborates into the link between temporality and spatiality, “Freud...claimed that our idea of space derives from the first projection we make: that of the sense of spatiality of the psychic apparatus” (Noel-Smith 2016, p.179). Thus, taking shape can be seen temporally as a movement into the present and a spatial shift away from the power of affect.

In disengaging with the tyranny of time we disengage with ‘happy objects’ and empower ourselves. The false templates of happiness fall impotent with this radical act. We reshape ourselves with resilience against restrictive happiness propaganda and narratives. Self-actualisation hurts, as Ahmed states: “To hold on to moments of suspension, we might have to suspend happiness” (Ahmed, 2010, p.192).

**PAVEMENT PLOT DEVICE (Wherein narrator and protagonist start to align).**

I turn to leave the pier, tired of moody, mechanical metaphors. “This is not a pier”, I think, “it’s an emotional rollercoaster.” I put one foot in front of the other and start to run to the fence. Where once stood the fence is now a fifty-metre wall reaching up to the clouds. Panicked I wonder how a wall can appear so suddenly.

Raging against the wall with my fists. I cry out. I’m alone on a pier talking to imaginary shapes I can’t hold on to, looking for a sister I couldn’t hold on to; now trapped by a wall demanding a leap of faith. I wonder if my sister has positive residence in the negative space of my unconscious or just “lives on in my heart”, a trite concept that short-changes grief, leading to a crashing into the wall of understanding. The wall is death. It is the ultimate, immutable wall of ‘NO’, all too real against the intangibility of placatory language.

**SHAPE 5. ~~CATACLYSM.~~ ~~CATASTROPHE.~~ ~~CATALYST~~...CAT**

“You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose.” (Seuss, 1990, p.2). Jumping again, I turn to the Cheshire cat who has materialised as a real cat, marching comically and caterwauling.

Galvanised by my feline friend into self-ownership and action, I feel the personal and the political mingle in my veins. This is one for imaginary Ahmed I reflect, calling out: “Sara? Whatever else this affect theory is, it certainly brings grief into sharp relief.” Silence. I feel imaginary Ahmed slipping away from me, her work done. I thank my imaginary friend for holding open a space of possibility where I can reside. A place of alchemy, of movement, of magic. I dance in that space, the Cheshire Cat joins me like Puss in Boots, we circle around. A little girl starts to take shape in our circle. I spin and spin till I fall to my knees. I don’t stop falling, down, down, down until...THUD!

I open my eyes. I’m face down, with my head in a puddle, spreadeagled over a crack in a pavement near a Salford car park. No pier to be seen. Something licks my face, rough but soft. A feline green eye stares into mine. A soft paw nudges my cheek. Words form in my head, “Cats release pheromones through stroking their cheeks on objects they seek to claim." I remember the crack in the pavement from earlier. Having tripped and fallen into a metaphorical gap, I was now able to embrace new ways of existing by expanding the cracks in a happiness culture that did not serve my true shape. Groggy but unhurt, I wonder how long I’ve been ‘out’. In Salford time I’d say two minutes. In narrative time probably about 25 minutes. In stressful affective time, my whole life, as Ahmed says: "For the stressed subject, your being is "out" as you are out of time" (Ahmed, 2010, p.169).

**SHAPE 6: OMNISCIENT NARRATOR ABSORBED INTO THE PROTAGONIST**

I hesitated to bring grief into this piece, perhaps through ‘grief killjoy’ narratives or a sense of guilt, but my sister followed me through the dark Salford streets. Woven into the story and to me, my lost sister becomes a primal shape from which to launch my own shape into a more real life, perhaps for the first time. I brought her to safety at last, positioning her as a pre-conscious entity, free from the forces of affect and ‘happy objects’. This hesitation, this reticence to express the personal reflects Ahmed’s argument that “So much happiness is premised on, and promised by, the concealment of suffering”. To conceal the narrative ‘I’ is to engage with happy narratives by concealing vulnerability.

Imaginary entities released, including my old-shaped self, I walk back to a beginning, not back to happiness, but a walk toward Ahmed’s possibilities that lie in the ‘perhaps’, that express her idea of hope as she states: “We might remind ourselves that the ‘perhaps’ shares its ‘hap’ with ‘happiness’. The happy future is the future of the perhaps” (Ahmed, 2010, p.198).

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