

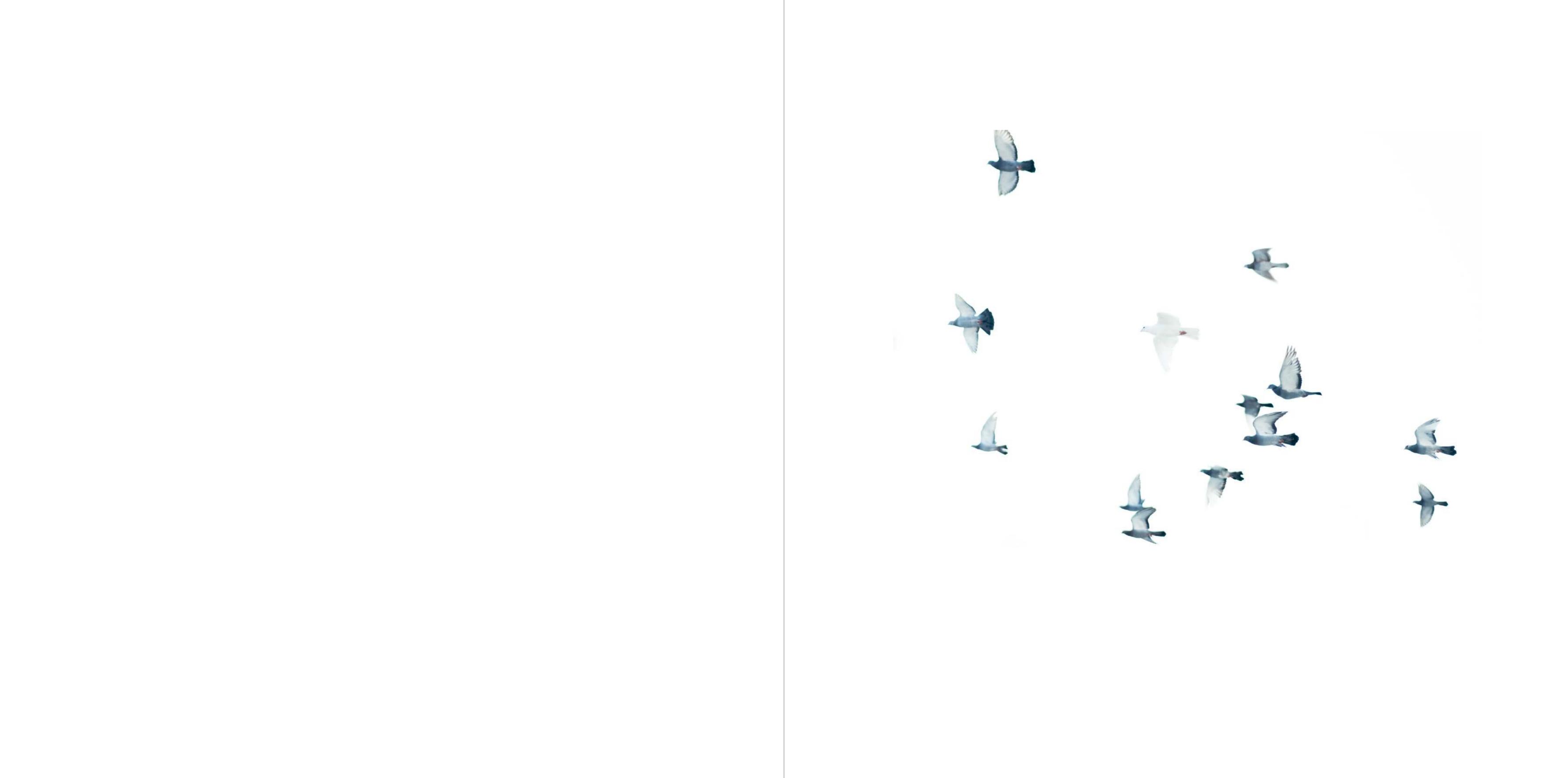
Seraphically Free



Luke Johnson

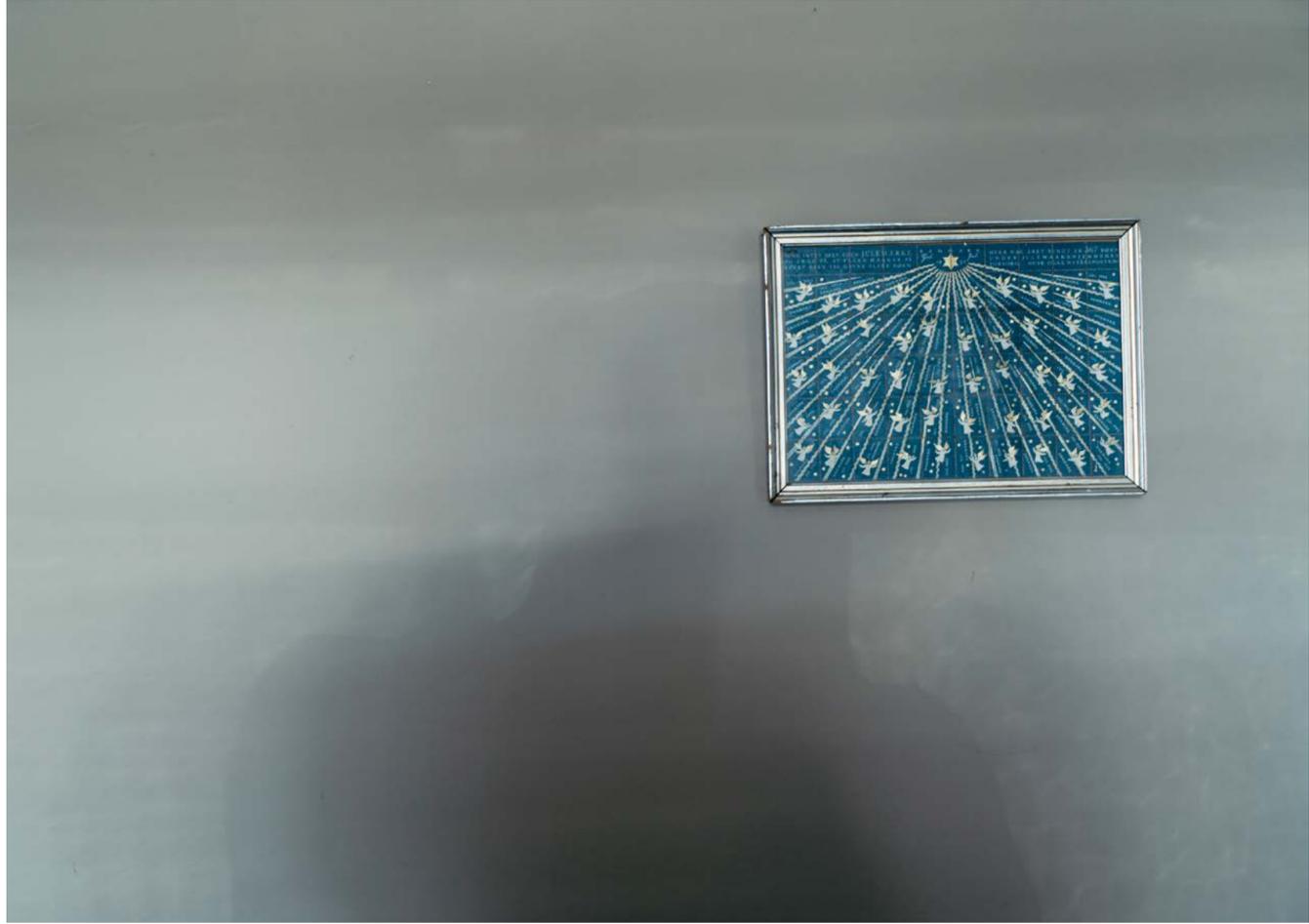
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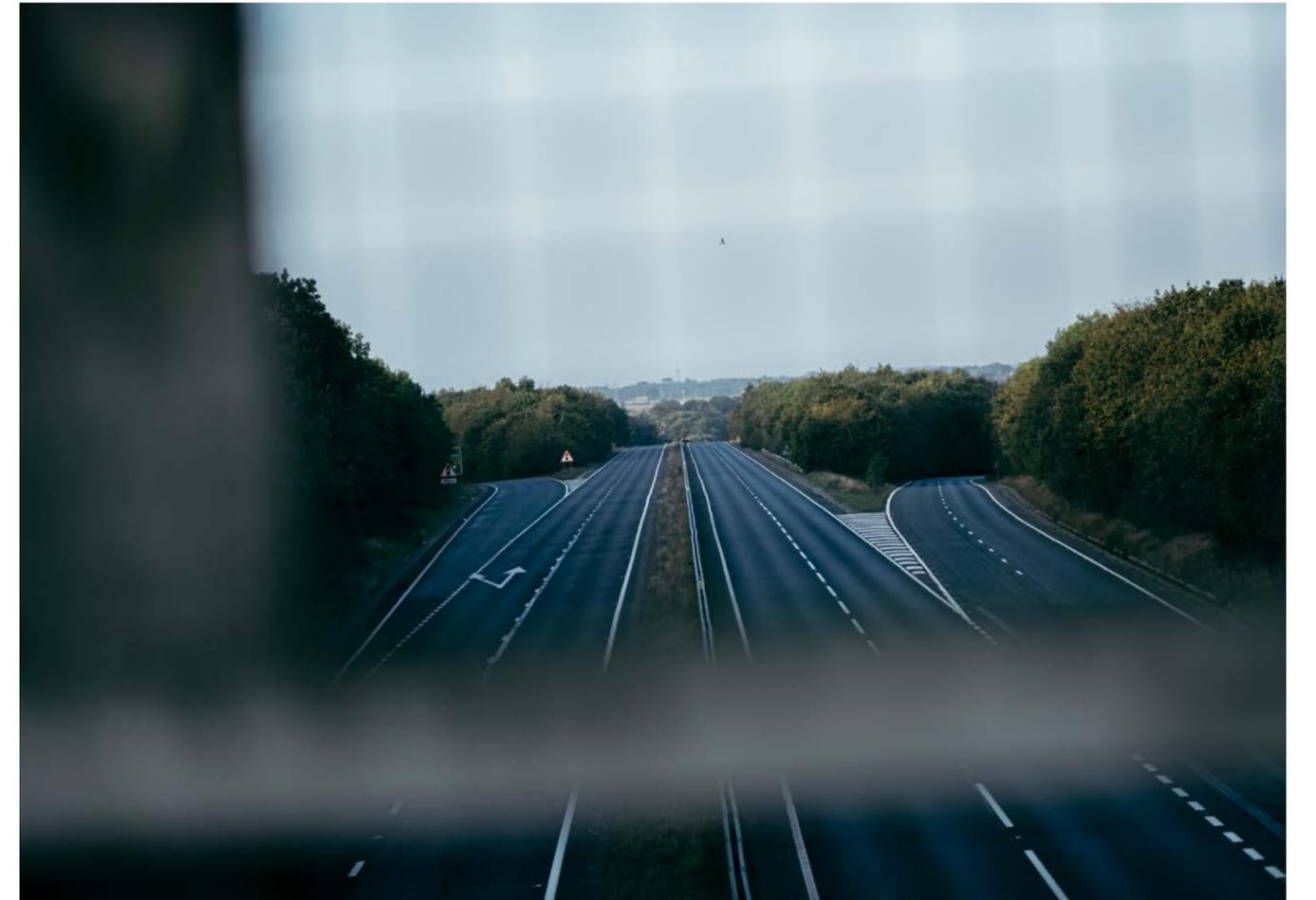


















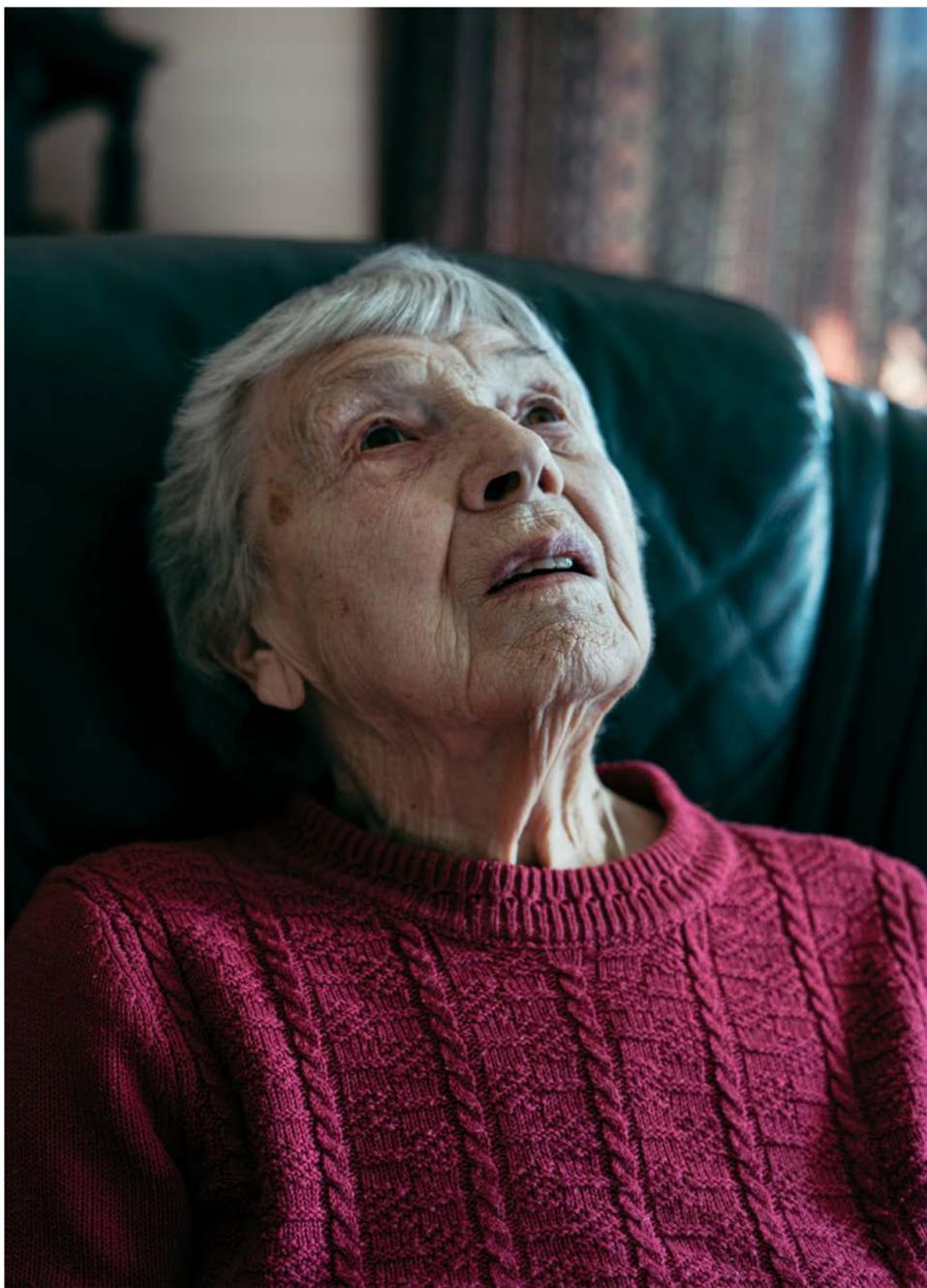
































I'm at Golders Green tube station

Evidence of last night's succouring activities; the intemperate sex, single malt and cigarettes, are no longer contained by the long since unbuttoned shirt that grips my back. The garment, adorned with austere vertical stripes, fashioned to a masculine cut, has lost its form – an apt metamorphosis. Creased and untucked, a placket torn – what remains of this shirt is now the forlorn uniform of a lost man. The fresh perspiration of today's fear is steeped in the pheromones of yesterday's pleasure. Together they have saturated the once carefully pressed cotton. It is the revealing scent of my lassitude, I can't move, my limbs are frigid. Commuters pass by, a seamless flow of energy with no nucleus. Unable to focus on any individual, a Gaussian blur has distorted my *reality* – where am I? The hubbub of the station concourse and the din of the street outside, quickly evolves into an ear-warping paradox. A tumultuous, but inexplicably muffled cacophony – did someone ask me if I needed any help? – Can I not efface myself? Carbolic fumes, metallic particulates and fried breakfasts have amalgamated into a fetid miasma – I can't catch my breath! A vacuum fills my chest, respiration involuntarily suspended, I need to exhale, a crescendo of internal panic, then... Reanimation in a quop! A palpitation with the force of retinal disturbance provides deliverance from this maelstrom. I gasp with a moment of clarity – 'I've made a mistake, I am at Golders Green tube station, miles from home, unsure of how I got here, I need to get home, but how?'

At that instant, a cruel depression became a conqueror. A malignant anxiety, distinct from any previous dysthymia breached the confines of my mind. The disorder became fully somatic – tachycardia, hypertension, diaphoresis and myalgia began to stress

my body daily. This unaccustomed presentation of physiological ailments became a hypochondriacal education in the malleable and contingent nature of how the reality of existence is perceived in one's mind. At its height, the experience of being so misaligned from one's own corporeality felt pseudo-supernatural. My subconscious and body had bonded together with anxiety, intent on developing a recalcitrant campaign of destruction against the remaining rational forces which once governed their function inside my head.

This illness was my master, a sardonic despot with an insatiable appetite for dominating one's cognitive functions. My internal monologue became a dystopian story narrated by another. The characters and setting were familiar, but the structure, plot and theme were refractory compositions. A healthy relationship slowly crumbled; she left. I was incapable of performing adequately at the office, marginalised; I quit. Travel on public transport became impossible; ten-mile walks across London to avoid it. I had lost any semblance of control.

Occasionally periods of coherence betrayed the malady. These fleeting gifts of unfettered cerebral bandwidth were readily received and utilised. Inhabiting a clearer, more familiar, reality was a rare but welcome respite. To once again experience rational thought, and a view of the world seen through the lens of a camera, provided a point of optimism as well as the time and means to address questions of a type I reasoned were at the source of my illness: What is the point in life and living?

This is the ultimate existential question, which invites supposition without the possibility of ever striking a satisfactory conclusion. My illness has taught me that we are perpetually shifting

around in our own realities, only surfacing to present our temporal and spiritual constructs as rejoinders to one another's varying perspectives. There is currently no singular reality to ground us. For all of our achievements, humans have not yet developed the capacity to instigate the methods of enquiry required for absolution here. In the face of answerless questions – addressed using the inadequate tools of intuition, faith, feeling, deep thought and science – it is fortunate then that the key to tackling my anxiety is perhaps not in the attainment of answers, but in the futile attempt of trying. By using a metaphysical, photographic posture which I have called *honest subjectivity*, my photography is a personal, but ultimately doomed venture that has its roots in getting to the bottom of it all in a very personal manner.

By addressing the essence of this question with the images above, I am confronting the people around the world who similarly encounter these challenging existential problems, without truly engaging with them. Instead they retreat to distraction, conformity or oblivion; by turning to god, submitting to celebrity, propagation, drugs, materialism, ego, community standing or social media engagement, and that minority who end it all in suicide. All these actioned choices represent the closing down of a route to an understanding of the nature of our undefined existence. However, all but the last option, at least, gives its subscribers a chance to break from a life chasing meaning and settle for a sentience with value; recovery in this rebellion is possible: I accept that I am a stranger in this universe, but I will to live for living. Suicide is no solution here, only a renunciation of life and the absurd.

To move beyond nihilism, I use the act of photography to revolt against the absurd without destroying it. It is me staring at life in the face and saying, I know that nothing I do matters, that my life is a tale told by a fool, signifying nothing, but I am going to live life to the full anyway. A life with value without justification, just because I can. I am larger than my fate – I endeavour not to engage in the fantasy of the existence of a divine higher being, or to deceive myself with titillating distractions in an attempt to furnish my life with meaning. I choose to live for the sake of living; it's an inconsequential 'fuck you' to the complete meaninglessness of it all. An existence like this, composed with an absence of meaning, is the embodiment of absolutely free existence and a valuable life. It is this choice that drives me to pick up a camera, to read, to travel the world – to value everything that I can. But the publication of this book is a philosophical blemish and a point of conflict; it exposes a contradictory conviction that communicat-

ing the value of life in this book might result in the application of some meaning to it, when I know that fundamentally it will not. But I digress, what I mean to say is that I don't mean to be dogmatic here; a subscription to a philosophical treatise is not pure, it is a best aspirational and inspiring at the very least.

The photography in *seraphically free* is a peregrination without an end, furnished with complex thoughts which will evolve over time and space. The camera, when in my hands, objectively transcribes my construction of reality at any given time into a subjective and material medium. While peerless in its futile venture of sharing the pursuit of the understanding of the never to be understood, photography is ultimately strangled by an observing population who collectively possess only limited means of effectively translating the Gordian messages which infiltrate the images.

Tackling these philosophical questions photographically has been part of a salubrious quest to ameliorate my fractured state of mind, a process that *has* paved a route to a recovery of sorts. Photography is abreactive, a scientifically recognised therapy and spiritually cathartic, it is what C. Fausto Cabrera calls 'medicine for the soul'.

The experience of living with existential nihilism, infused with moments of acute anxiety and depression as I have described, is part of a chaotic mental gyrotory familiar to many of us who are tormented by such cognitive contriving. It is a symptomatic philosophical standpoint that is neither the cause nor effect of a wounded mind. However, amongst the darkened clouds of a storming mind there lies a paradoxical power of eliciting a state of reductive stupefaction; thoughts are at times, briefly but sufficiently, cleared for an opportunity to focus on the ultimate question of existence. This singular enquiry is powerfully concentrated by Albert Camus in the opening line of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 'There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy'.



