

The Secret and Unknown Histories of John and His Friends

Peter Jaeger

READY TO BEGIN

A hint of autumn leaves lingered in the air while John and Marcel huddled together in a scraggly orchard. Marcel hummed tunelessly. A whistle blew in the distance and they heard football shoulder pads smack against helmets. Marcel stopped humming. He lit a cigarette, took a long drag, handed it to John, and said: 'First I fill an earthenware bowl with fresh water. Then I wash my hands and face. I break the bowl over a pile of books. I let the water soak through all the pages until they become wet bricks of pulp. I position them around my head so that I am unable to see, smell or hear. Then I am ready to begin'.

Foreplay

John and Peggy loved to hug trees. An oak tree thought that all tree huggers just wanted to have sex all the time—that's why they came to the forest. He said, 'Hey, John and Peggy, I'm really into you, but can't we talk a bit first at least?'

Stones

Stones have been buried and hidden in the earth and two old trees named John and Xenia have given way to younger, nameless saplings.

Anyone

Syvilla said, 'I'm just a place holder. I could be anyone. I could even be Jasper'. Peggy didn't understand what she meant, but John agreed.

So Sweet and So Cold

Now and then, John remembered the resonance of his own jaw chewing apricots in a snowstorm, how that sound vibrated on his inner ears and how the blizzard that surrounded him dampened the sound of the traffic. But Carolyn was no longer there to ask him why the tang of that memory was so important to him.

It Was Just a Feeling to be Observed

'I feel strangely incomplete', said Nam. 'Me too', agreed John.

Tolerance

Pauline purchased a small boat and began the year-long task of fixing it up. That was the year she also became a mother figure to Bucky and John. Once the boat was repaired, Bucky had a premonition about the approach of an apocalyptic storm. When he told Pauline about his premonition, she was confused and did not know how to respond. Bucky said, 'Most people are unable to comprehend their own inability to comprehend, although they may be able to cultivate a sense of tolerance towards the incomprehensible'. On hearing these words, Pauline loaded her boat with supplies and headed upriver.

I Am You and What I See Is Me

'What is the face you had before you were born?' asked John. He uncrossed his legs and scratched the stubble on his unshaven chin. His friend Morton looked out the window for a moment before reaching over to John's guitar and plucking its bass E string. John looked at Morton and said, 'Was that sound Daisetz?'

A Web

Joan asked Yoko: 'Why is a fly on the wall?' Yoko had no idea, so Joan answered, 'Because John loves Merce'.

Murder and Quietude

Xenia began to unravel after witnessing a murder while on tour with her string quartet. Her therapist advised her to write down her thoughts and dreams in a journal with the notion that journaling would help her to regain her mental and emotional stability. Xenia filled several notebooks until she realised that the only reason to use words was to arrive again at music, and the only reason to play music was to arrive at some sense of inner stillness. She left her violin, string quartet and therapist to join a religious order that used music as a pathway towards inner peace. After studying with this order in complete silence for several years, Xenia was given a single note, which she was only permitted to play one time on a small bamboo flute. On the day that she played this single note, she entered a state of total quietude.

Name and Form

John wore a cowboy hat so he must be a cowboy. But in truth, he found the whole Western thing insufficient.

Unspecified Object Orientation

Now that John was retired and getting on in years, he liked to sit around home and read the paper. One morning he read that people all over the world were turning into unspecified objects with human names. The papers didn't know why these transformations were taking place, so John decided to walk to the local shop and find out. But before he could leave home, he turned into an unspecified object named Bucky.

The Perfect Blue Equation

Merce tried to practice but he couldn't keep his mind on anything and/or nothing for more than a few seconds. And what was he trying to achieve with all this practice, anyway? One day he would find out. Especially after his friend Carolyn created the perfect blue equation. *Yes, he thought, when I finally see the perfect blue equation with my own two eyes, I will certainly experience what anything and/or nothing really is.*

A Note on Method

Here come John and Jasper, the wild pigs! You can always tell them by their tusks and squeals. They plunge into the river as it meanders through the jungle. The pigs

drink deeply but without a common method, and when they've had enough, they run off squealing in random directions.

The Cure

John arrived at Pauline's island complaining of deep fatigue. He told her that he had been going downhill for weeks and that he could now barely stand up. Pauline began to hum in a low, tuneless drone. She led John to the beach, strapped him to a log, and pushed him out into the current. As he floated downriver, John could hear Pauline's drone getting louder and louder over the sound of the approaching waterfall. The further he got from Pauline and her island, the more he heard her drone. Just before he tipped over the waterfall, his eye was caught by a tall pine tree standing in a shaft of sunlight.

Chance Operations

John's twelfth book was published by a small press, who asked him to write his own advertising copy for their website. John recommended his book to everyone who wanted to understand their own heart and the one heart of all the cosmos. He thought it was a deeply optimistic book. About a year after the book's publication, John cut a copy into thin strips and put the strips into a cardboard shoebox. Then he cut up all his other books and put them in the box too. Winter sunlight slanted through the windows of his studio apartment. He sat on the floor, sipped a cup of tea, and pulled random strips of text from the box. He then wove these strips into small, page-size objects. John took photos of these objects and posted them on the internet, calling the entire series: *I Have Cut Up all My Books and I Am Weaving Them Back Together Again with Joy*.

Poetry, Philosophy, Art

Morton wanted to be a real poet, but no one wanted to read his poems. They said he was too clever to be a poet, and that he had no real heart for poetry. Nevertheless, he kept on writing. One autumn afternoon Morton bought an unfamiliar hardcover book at a charity shop. He didn't bother to read it. Instead, he glued the book's pages together, put bolts through the cover to ensure that it could never be opened, and glued this statement onto the cover: *To write a book and revoke it is something else than not writing it at all ... to write a book that does not claim importance for anybody is something else than leaving it unwritten (Søren Kierkegaard)*. Morton then sealed the book by covering it in wax. His friend John told a rare book collector about this unreadable book. The collector bought the book from Morton and sent it on tour as part of an internationally renowned exhibition.

Social Media

Marshall made an instructional video called *How to Watch TV*. In this video, he filmed himself playing different musical instruments while watching television. He played a jazz guitar, a child's plastic recorder, and some wood block clappers. When he posted his video online, he was disappointed to see that it only received 3 likes and a comment from someone named Syvilla, who wrote: 'What is your motivation for posting this video? How will it benefit anyone to watch it?' Marshall wandered outside to ponder Syvilla's question. He walked to the local park, looked up at his favourite pine tree, and inhaled deeply. The scent of pine filled his nose and lungs. When he exhaled, the pine tree told him the most important thing about social media was not the size of the response, but the scale

Insight

Daistez and Pauline the oak trees stood quietly with their branches swaying gently in the winter sky. John thought of them as his closest friends and his best teachers. One morning he told them, 'Please don't ask me if I've ceased wanting anything. Last night I watched TV'. As always, Daisetz and Pauline said nothing, and John took this as a further indication of their insight. He sat on a fallen log and folded his hands peacefully in his lap. How his bare fingers felt the cold!

Absorption

Marcel sat quietly through the committee meeting. John, Doris and Marcel's other colleagues discussed the agenda while consulting various charts and graphs. No part of their discussion was remotely comprehensible to Marcel. He began to zone in on his breath. Soon Marcel noticed that his colleagues had already merged with the walls, furniture and sounds of the room.

How Objects Relate to Each Other

Before dawn John tied up his bundle, took his provision box, and went down from the sandhills to the beach. The sea was still and littered with broken shells and balls of kelp. As he trudged through the wet sand his nose began to bleed. A few large drops of blood fell on his arm. He washed the blood off in a tidal pool, stopped the bleeding, and found that the loss of a little blood had made him feel light in the head. He sat down by some seakale in the sand, broke off a blade, stuck it in his hat, and said, 'Hey seakale, how do you feel about things like blood and sand? Do you think they have any notion about who they are and where they fit in?' The seakale, whose name was Carolyn, looked at him with compassion. She replied, 'A

time will come when you have a firmer grasp of how objects relate to each other'. John took a sandwich from his provision box and began to eat his breakfast.

Communication

When John turned around, he found himself confronting someone who was lying in his bed. Beside the bed an extremely bright lamp shone directly into John's eyes and temporarily blinded him. But as his eyes became accustomed to the light, he could see that the person lying in the bed was in fact not a person at all, but a video-mediated communication system named Nam, who promptly began to show John a video feed about shadows. Nam scratched his head, looked at John, and said, 'I'm not sure if this feed will help or hinder our attempt to communicate'.

Some Progress

On Friday night, John, Joan, Bucky, and Doris shared a cab home after watching a film. Joan said, 'Don't you wish that when you're at the movies they would just roll the credits half-way through and dispense with the ending altogether?' John thought about that for a moment and replied: 'It would be better if they just took a short loop of film, and played it over and over again, like a wheel of events spinning in endless repetition'. The cab stopped at a red light. In the front passenger seat, Doris rummaged through her bag. A light drizzle began to settle on the windscreen and the cab driver flicked on the window wipers. John found their rhythm strangely compelling. Doris turned around and said, 'What about if the film just isolated one still frame, like maybe some rain bouncing off a window or something like that, without any other actions or development?' The cab driver smiled to himself and thought, *at last these people are making some progress.*

Stop the Music

Joan's neighbour Jasper played loud music at all hours of the night. Sometimes he played John Coltrane and sometimes he played John Cage, but always at maximum volume. When Joan complained to Jasper, he told her that she should learn to hear the silence within the sound. That way she could actually stop the music altogether.

Heart

Where was the trail to Xenia's house? There was no clear way. Icy roads remained frozen all summer and thick fog covered the sun. John knew he would never get there without a guide, for his heart and Xenia's heart were not the same. If his heart was like Xenia's heart, he'd have already made the journey, and be there now!

Gravity

When Marcel died in the monastery, John and Nam sewed him into his tattered suit with rough twine. They sewed his socks to the bottom of his trousers and his gloves to the cuffs of his sleeves and they pulled his old woollen hat over his head and face and sewed it to his collar. 'Marcel wore this suit in life', said John, 'so now he can wear it as a shroud in death'. John and Nam looked around Marcel's little room, opened his window, and listened for a moment to the song of a robin. On the windowsill, John and Nam found Marcel's only possession: a piece of sun-bleached driftwood the size of a fist or a heart, given to him many years ago by his friend Morton. When they carried Marcel's body to the graveyard, it was entirely weightless.

The Chamber of Silent Repose

'I'm not fleshed out enough', said Peggy, right before she entered the Chamber of Silent Repose. Yoko, Syvilla and John never heard from her again.

Music

In the park, John heard a gentle breeze sweep through the top of his favourite tree. As the tree's tender leaves brushed against each other, they harmonised with the sound of nearby traffic. And though John could not sing or even carry a tune, he understood the texture of that harmony, and fell into it forever.

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