

J. J. STEINFELD

nearly existential questions

“I HAVE NO MORE TEARS TO SHED, NO MORE words to utter ever . . . I have no more tears to shed, no more words to utter ever . . .” the person standing in front of the downtown library building was saying over and over. More like chanting, really. Persistently, without a hint of cessation. A mantra, or maybe an incantation. I was just ready to enter the library, to escape the city and my own inactivity, and I stopped to listen to the strange-looking person. There were about a dozen people standing there already, listening to the chanting: “I have no more tears to shed, no more words to utter ever . . . I have no more tears to shed, no more words to utter ever . . .”

*All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed.
No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.*

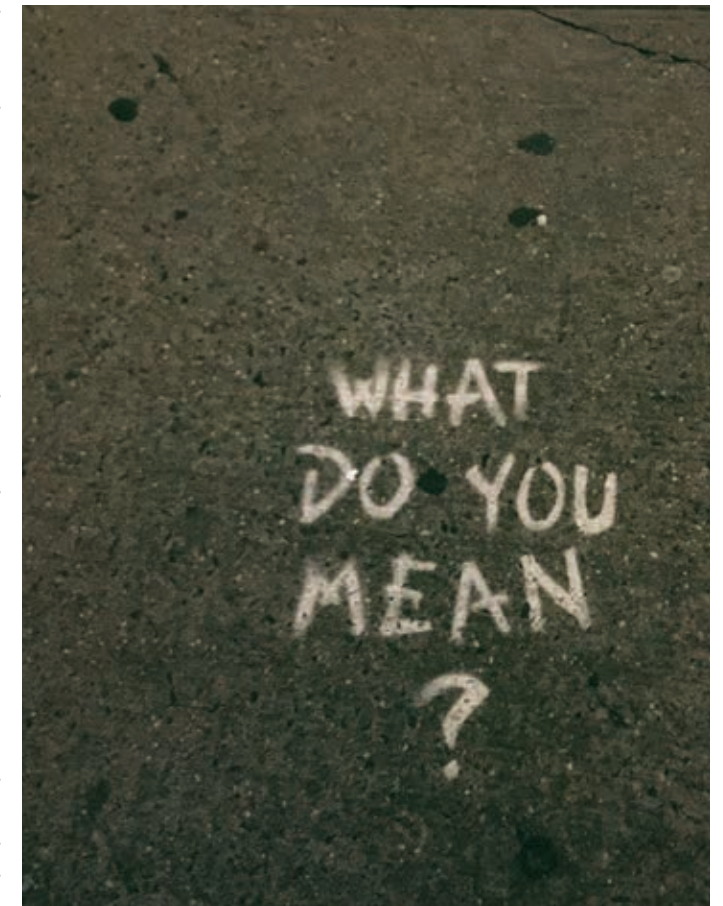
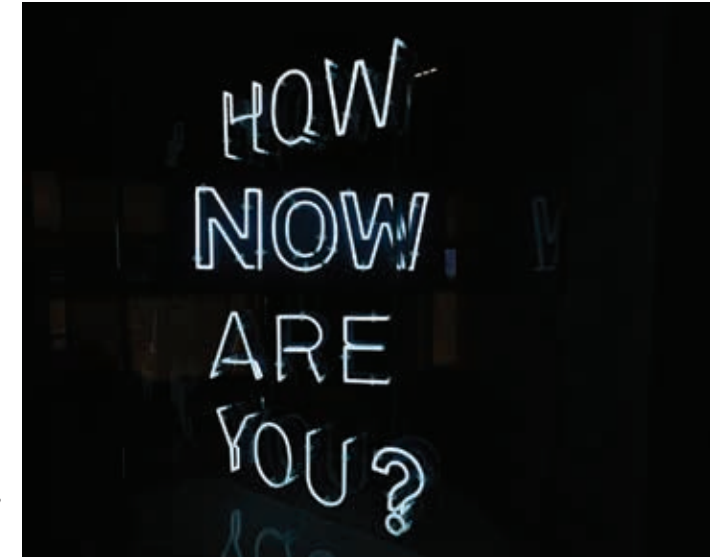
—Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*

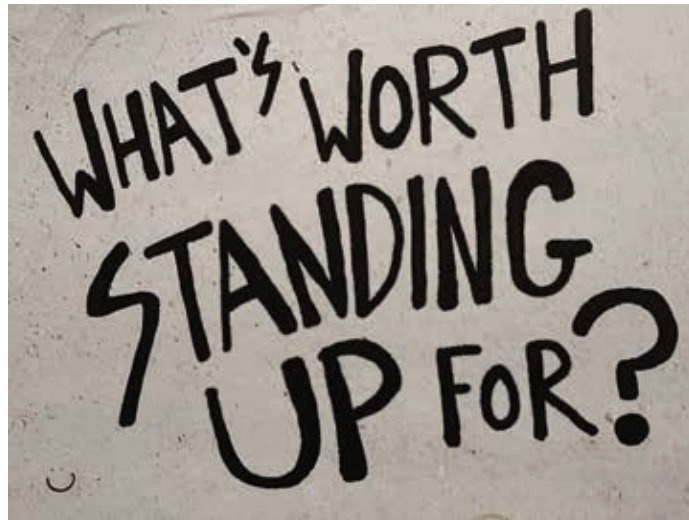
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The voice was quite lovely, but I didn't know if it was female or male or nonbinary. The person was in a colorful, loose-fitting costume and wearing a mask, not that it was anywhere near Halloween. I mean, some of the characters you can see downtown. At first I thought it was a busker or a performance artist. Someone seeking publicity for—for what? People were leaving and others were joining the afternoon crowd, which was getting larger. The sun was just starting to shine after a morning of light rain.

Sometimes, more so lately, I would like not to speak, to make a public pronouncement that for a month or two I would not say another word. I could imagine myself yelling out “I have no more words to utter for a while,” but that would be it, a single sentence, no chanting, no interminable repetitiveness. This person was being repetitious with a declaration of wordlessness. Talk about big-time absurdity and a contradiction in terms. Despite how fascinating I found the utterance of the words, if I were still a teacher, I would give her or him, this strange person, a failing grade. Unless I was missing something in what was going on or being said.

I have been missing a great deal these days and I can't blame it all on moodiness or depression or a little too much imbibing. Talking with my parents last night seemed to make everything worse, and I even used that silly word imbibing with both my parents when they accused me of drinking too much. Just a little harmless imbibing, I had said, the same words to my father and to my mother. I had called first my father and then my mother and told them I had quit my latest job, and both, in their usual way questioned whether I had quit or been fired, and both of them wanted to know how many jobs this was and what I was planning on doing next. Even though they are divorced, have been for a decade, they can still ask me the same questions, as if they had been comparing parental notes before talking to their disappointing son. My mother never fails to remind me of when I was a high school teacher. Of when I did something. Not doing anything is a form of doing something, I told her the other day. My father said I always spoke without thinking. That's not a crime, I told him. So tell me what's





happening in your life, let me hear a happy story, my father said after that, and I told him that I have no more stories, confessed in a pathetic way. Isn't that sad? Horribly sad, I said, but I wasn't feeling sad. I had pretty much said the same thing to my mother, admitting my lack of a new personal story to convey to her or anyone else. What are you going to do tomorrow? my father asked. I'm going to catch up on my reading at the library, newspapers and magazines, I explained, starting to make childish faces at the phone, to the past, to nothing in particular, really—a silly habit of mine when phone conversations aren't

going particularly well for me. You can't read at home after coming home from a day's work if you still had a job? he said, as I was doing my meaningless and I would guess grotesque face-making. The downtown library is my retreat, my recovery room, so to speak. Each of my parents reminded me—accused me—of being forty, forty without a career.

I started to look at the gathering as free entertainment, more free entertainment. That's why I go downtown in the first place. But the sight of two city police officers arriving seemed to alter my perception of things. Whenever I see a cop I think how different they are in real life as opposed to films or on TV shows, and I watch too many films and TV. The sidewalk was blocked. It was a busy noon hour, after all. I wondered if someone had complained or the police had chanced by. I could imagine the speculation: an afternoon demonstration for, a protest rally against—no, a single idiosyncratic costumed character rippling the usual downtown noontime activities. Maybe idiosyncratic is a little obvious and usual, not descriptive enough, but I was completely caught up in what was defining the moment and the afternoon for me. "I have no more tears to shed, no more words to utter ever . . ." I have no more tears to shed, no more words to utter ever . . ." the person standing in front of the library building was continuing to say, but it sounded louder. What an incredibly strong voice this person had, I thought.

I wanted to ask the costumed person out for a drink, my treat, you name the place. I have a lot of time on my hands and in my wallet a piece of plastic that's screaming "use me for some human contact." Over drinks, I'd gently ask questions. Why do you chant like that, and so loud? I wondered if it was a type of public humiliation. Or was it self-destruction? Could it be an attempt to communicate with something transcendent? Nearly existential questions, or were they? I keep looking for a little more in the everyday. I want things, even small or fragmented things, seemingly inconsequential things, to have meaning and significance.

Someone from the growing crowd—I'd estimate 150, easily that number—shouted for

the police to put on the cuffs. Another accused the person of being a space alien. Still another shouted to let the lunatic speak, not that the costumed chanter needed anyone's permission or approval. The shouts triggered other comments. There were even obscenities being hurled, at the costumed chanter and at the police.

Yet the strange person stood there unmoving, repeating the declaration of no more tears to shed, no more words to utter ever, now in a less stentorian voice. That was the way I was regarding the chanting, as stentorian, but no longer. It had become soft, with little emotion, yet the words were unaltered: "I have no more tears to shed, no more words to utter ever . . ." More questions started to jump through my mind: What if a severe thunderstorm started? Would the person or the crowd move, run for cover? What if someone attacked the costumed chanter with a knife, threatened the person with a horrible fate if the chanting was not stopped immediately? Once again I thought, nearly existential questions, as if the phrase was inherently profound. Profound, indeed. As profound as my careerless existence at forty. I bet my parents would love to hear that from my lips.

The police started to move the costumed person away from the library building. The person, still chanting, shoved one of the police officers, and then the second police officer, with a force that startled me.

I imagined myself rescuing the person—let's call her or him or they, a performance artist—from the long arms of the law. I actually wanted to say that aloud, about rescuing the performance artist from the long arms of the law. Neither of the police officers had especially long arms. I had to smile. Then I had a sharp realization that I had never done anything heroic or even truly dramatic in my life. All of a sudden I wanted to do something, call it brave or foolhardy, I don't know, but I jumped between the two police officers and the person chanting "I have no more tears to shed, no more words to utter ever . . ." I have no more tears to shed, no more words to utter ever . . ."

The first police officer told me to step back, and I said "No!" The second police officer asked



me what I was doing, and I said, "Trying to make sense out of my life." I didn't intend to push the police officer, only to keep him from disrupting the beautiful rhythms of "I have no more tears to shed, no more words to utter ever . . ."

Well, as the two police officers moved me away from the library building and the crowd, I realized that I had never been in trouble with the law, the long arms of the law, but it seemed natural what was happening. As natural as going to the library almost every afternoon or attempting to ask profoundly existential questions, even if they might be nearly existential questions. So much was swirling in my head as I was being moved away from the front of the library building and the mesmerizing chanting. I looked forward to going to jail, to getting out of my routine, to having a new story to tell my parents next time I phoned either of them or they phoned me. ☹️