

# Studies For The End Of The World

*by* Chris Okum



## **Portrait Of Cady Noland In Total Darkness**

She walked across the room. She sat down. She stood up. She laid down. She poured herself a glass of mineral water and drank it. She stood in a particular spot next to the window and angled herself in such a way as to make sure that the light from outside hit her good side despite no one else being in the apartment to notice that she even had a good side or that when the light from outside struck her at this angle she looked exactly like no one she had ever seen

---

Available online at [«http://fictionaut.com/stories/chris-okum/studies-for-the-end-of-the-world»](http://fictionaut.com/stories/chris-okum/studies-for-the-end-of-the-world)

Copyright © 2024 Chris Okum. All rights reserved.

before. She blinked. She urinated. She wiped herself with a wad of thick Kleenex she was told to never flush down the toilet. She flushed the Kleenex down the toilet. She put her hair up in a bun and secured it with a black rubber hair band. She took off her clothes. She took a shower. She stood under the shower head and did not move. She did not use soap or shampoo. She got out of the shower. She toweled off. She put her clothes back on. She walked into the bedroom and let her hair down. She opened the window and threw her hair band out onto the street below. She stood in front of the bedroom window for three hours and thought about what used to be her art career. She said to herself, "No one knows where I am. No one knows what I look like. No one knows what I'm doing." She rearranged the furniture in the living room, pretended she was Leslie Van Houten during a creepy crawl. She pretended Patricia Krenwinkel was in the room with her. She said, "Patricia, I just love the way you look in plaid." She stood in front of the living room window and looked down at all of the people walking to and from places she would not be going to anytime soon. She smiled. She covered her face with her hands. She thought about what kind of art she would make in the future and decided that what she was doing right now was the art she would make in the future. She said to herself, "No one can see what you're doing. No one knows what you're doing. No one knows that you're making art and that makes it the only kind of art you should be making." She sang a Polish lullabye. She said, "Artists making invisible art means we're at the end of history." She walked from the living room to the bedroom and then back into the living room. She sat down in a chair and did not move for 271 hours.

## **Swoon**

From *The Eternal Ding: On What Is Lost & How It Can Never Be Found*, by B.V. Sylvester, Jason Aronson, Inc., 2016: "In psychoanalytic terms, the successive objects of our love are substitutes for an original lost part-object. If your original lost part-

object happens to be a mental image of someone you encountered online, then the Internet is where you would involuntarily shop for a replacement part. Seeing as how there are almost an infinite number of suitable images available at any given moment, one could spend their entire life finding and then discarding images which may be perfect replacements, but which are not seen as such in light of the fact that there may be a better, more approximate image only a click away. In this way, the lost part-object becomes less of a rarity to be cherished and possessed when found and more of a phantom that haunts the subject, an all-encompassing vapor that one can see and feel but cannot grasp."

### **Accumulation Without Limit**

They had gathered for her 80th birthday, brought her to a restaurant she couldn't stand, ordered her an under seasoned plate of fish and broccolini for dinner, kept referring to her as "the birthday girl," and then, after handing her some presents she had no use for (a vintage Hasselblad camera; an original Roy Lichtenstein lithograph; a white cashmere Chanel sweatsuit; and a gift card for an all day spa treatment at one of the most exclusive resorts in Palm Springs), signalled to the waitstaff to bring over the birthday cake, which was the diameter of a manhole, covered in rainbow sprinkles, and on top of which sat 80 thin candles on fire. They told her to take a deep breath and to make a wish, but before she could get her lungs to invite in enough oxygen a young woman sitting one table over got up from her seat, leaned down over the cake and blew out the candles, all of them, in the blink of an eye. Before they could say anything or wipe the look of shock off their faces, the birthday girl looked up at the young woman and said, "You stole my wish." The young woman wiped a bead of spittle from the corner of her mouth, said, "And you stole mine, yeah?" The young woman sat back down at her table. The birthday girl cut herself a piece of cake, shoved a forkful into her mouth, chewed with exaggerated delight, and then she shrugged.

## **Hot & Cold Faucets**

From *Cracking Up: The Work of Unconscious Experience*, by Christopher Bollas, Hill & Wang, 1995: "The momentous facts of life, or the dramatic things done, are the entrance of the real into the life of the subject - creating a momentary caesura or blankness - and they stand in isolation, as markers of the subject's history, notations of trauma and subjective absence. They tell nothing, or tell of the presence of nothing. It is only in the displaced mutation of the subject, in his asides, his sotto voce mumblings - in the details of the seeming trivia of his life - that one can discover the true response to the deeds done."

## **All Is Revealed**

"The problem." said art critic Thomas McEvilley while discussing the erasure of Francis Morellet from the history of minimalism, "with communicating the secret of the flaw in Pythagoras' theorem was that it revealed an essential discrepancy between arithmetic and geometry, that is, between the order of numbers and the order of lines, and therefore, it called into question the whole principle of the rationality of the universe. This was bound up with the so-called Pythagorean theorem: that given a right-angles triangle, the sum of the squares of the two short sides will equal the square of the hypotenuse. The problem is that the hypotenuse, given a triangle in which the two short sides are rational numbers, is an irrational number. That means that one could never measure the hypotenuse; no ruler, no matter how finely calibrated, would ever yield a whole number value for it. So the existence of the irrational number, discovered through the Pythagorean theorem, reveals an inner incommensurability between mathematics and geometry. The world as measured in numbers and the world as constructed in spatial units do not coincide and in fact will never do so. So the world is really two worlds. There is an eternal incommensurability built into

it that is the groaning of nonsense at the heart of sense. When Hippasus of Metapontum, one of Pythagoras' major disciples, revealed this secret of irrational numbers to an outsider, Pythagoras took Hippasus out to sea, pushed him off the boat, and watched as he drowned."

### **Recreation Myth**

This is the story of a woman whose life severely deteriorated after she came from a small Texas town to New York City. In almost no time at all she fell into an existence consisting exclusively of drugs and crime. As she was fond of saying when she made periodic calls back home, "I have let myself go." She was the first to admit that she gave in to the worst aspects of herself, and that she felt exhilarated by the danger she engaged in, as well as feeling whole even as she fell apart. She told her mother she was powerless against this constant giving in. She was free and it turned her on. And then, in time, she found herself unable to pull out of the death spiral threatening to destroy her. She had been raised with religion, and now, for the first time in her entire life, she felt alienated from God. She was positive that He could not love her because the prostitution and the heroin had twisted her into an unrecognizable shape. But then she started to understand that the reason she had distorted herself was to see if God really did want to find her and save her. She did things she found so repulsive that even she could not recognize herself. Each time she forced herself to perform fellatio on a couple of New York City police officers in the back seat of their squad car she could feel herself disintegrate even further, and she would say to herself and to God, "I've really done it this time, haven't I? Now you really don't love me anymore. I just know it." But no matter how traumatic a situation she got herself into, afterwards she would settle down and feel Him slowly coming back to her, reappearing by her side at the most unexpected moments. Finally, she learned that there was nothing she could do that would push Him away completely. And then she understood that what she was

doing to herself was a form of purification, a tossing away of the person she was and all the goodness that was attached to that person, a goodness she felt was suffocating her. The only thing she could do was unleash the evil side of herself and whittle herself down to nothing. It was a test. Did God really love her? Yes, He did. Because no matter how many times she made herself disappear and Him along with her, no matter what kind of reprehensible behavior she exhibited, He would always find her, and it would make her laugh and weep with gratitude. "You remind me of a young woman I once knew," she could hear Him say in the dark of her empty studio apartment. "She flunked out of college to see if her parents would still accept her. After she realized they would, she went back to school. She got a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Drama, which didn't really serve her well in the world I have created, but hey, at least it was something."

### **I Want Your Love**

From *Disco Death: Essays on AIDS & Paranoia in the New York City Art and Literature Scene, 1982-1990*, edited by Lydia Mallon and Roger Kern, Future Tense Books, 1992.: "AIDS didn't enter the body through the rectum," said William S. Burroughs the last time we visited him at his bunker, where he was alternating between cleaning his collection of enormous hand guns and cooking Coq au vin for his guests, some of whom you may have heard of (Lou Reed, Jim Jarmusch, Debbie Harry, and Susan Sontag), and some of whom you may have not (WXRK DJ Vin Scelsa, Ray Patel [Owner of Gem Spa, the 2nd Ave. corner store which Reed claims has 'the best Egg Cream in the Tri-State area], and James Grauerholz {Burroughs' assistant}). "AIDS entered the body through the ears," said Burroughs. "It was Disco that gave us this disease, not the sins on Sodom. It's got nothing to do with blood and everything to do with rhythm. Disco carries within it the virus of the machine, which is another word for entropy. You go to a club and they play Disco and you lose control of your body. You are taken over from within, and

eventually, what I am convinced is happening, is that this virus, spread through the music, turns your body against you, causes it to breakdown, because no one can dance 24 hours a day, which is the only way to keep this virus at bay. The United States government did not create AIDS in a lab. AIDS is not the result of some priapic airline stewards having sex with monkeys. You wanna blame someone for AIDS? Blame Nile Rogers. Blame Giorgio Moroder. Blame Arif Mardin. These are the men who are responsible for all these horrible deaths. They created a sound virus and then they unleashed it on an unwitting public. The reason there is no cure for AIDS is because there is no cure for sound, for rhythm, for dance. Once the body has gotten a taste of autonomy there is no going back. Whether a body looks as if it's in motion or not does not matter. Under the surface there wheels are spinning. The organs become exhausted. The beat goes on long after you've stopped. Music can be lethal. Just ask anyone who has watched the Master Musicians of Joujouka kill a flock of seagulls from a mile away. Dagnabbit. I just tried to baste my .44 Magnum."

### **No Question As To What Is Meant**

The wall looked like a wall. He stood in front of the wall and took a picture of the wall. He developed the picture and then placed the picture of the wall on the wall. He looked around his room at all the other objects and found them resistant to metaphor. Everything looked like what it was. The chair looked like a chair. The table looked like a table. The half-eaten apple sitting on the table looked like a half-eaten apple. Nothing he looked at looked like something else. He looked at himself in the mirror. He looked like himself. He did not look like anyone else. He sat down in the chair. He sat down in the chair as if he was sitting down in a chair. He picked up the apple as if he was picking up an apple. He bit into the apple and it tasted like an apple. He looked at one of the black pens resting against the ashtray. It was a pen. It looked like a pen. He could not see it as a symbolic object. There was nothing to interpret when he

looked at the pen. The flow of connotation had stopped. He got up from his desk like a man getting up from his desk. He looked at himself in the mirror again. He was no longer a subject. He was simply a man looking at himself in the mirror. The mirror was a mirror. He took a picture of the mirror. He developed the picture and then placed the picture of the mirror on the mirror. He had recently been diagnosed with cancer. His doctor had called him and sounded just like a doctor sounds when a doctor calls to tell you that you need to come in because they have something they would like to talk to you about. The doctor showed him the results of the x-ray. The doctor pointed to a white spot at the bottom of his lung. The white spot looked like a white spot. The doctor said the word tumor. The tumor looked like a tumor. He looked at the white spot on his lung and felt exactly like how someone should feel when they look at a white spot on their lung. He was going to die. It was going to be a death just like any other death. He looked at himself in the mirror. His eyes looked like eyes. His nose looked like a nose. His mouth looked like a mouth. His skin looked like skin. He took a picture of his face. He developed the picture and then placed the picture of his face over his face. Tears ran down his cheeks like tears running down cheeks. Outside, cars drove down the street and they sounded like cars driving down the street. He closed his eyes. He looked at his life. It looked exactly like his life.

