The Depressive Realism of "The Life of the Mind"

Christine Smallwood's début novel inhabits the abyss between what we think about and what we actually do.

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Illustration by Ard Su

A cherished former editor of mine used to offer a koan-like dictum: “Ideas make you stupid,” he’d remind me from time to time. I never asked him to elaborate, because I was afraid that any resulting ideas would indeed make me stupid in the way this dictum seemed to reference—so obsessed with perception that I’d stop actually perceiving, so focussed on the conceptual that I’d neglect the actual,

churning world. I feared asking in part because I was already sort of stupid in this particular fashion, as were many people I knew, as is anyone who's great at analyzing their life but terrible at experiencing it. In some arenas—academia, media, Twitter—this talent can feel ubiquitous, and more or less apt. How, exactly, is one to fully inhabit one's experience at a time when three and a half billion of us are sharing our thoughts on the Internet, twenty-six billionaires hold as much wealth as half of the global population, and the climate disaster threatens to be the end of us all? Add to that the standard, petty humiliations of living in an animate meat sack furnished with a heart and an ego, and the answer is: often, we don't.

Consider Dorothy, the protagonist of Christine Smallwood's jewel of a début novel, "The Life of the Mind." She is an adjunct instructor of English at an unnamed school in New York City, drifting through her thirties. Her bank balance delivers only panic; meanwhile, her best friend regards a ten-thousand-dollar couch as a steal. "Other people had jobs which kept them away from gum-lined troughs," Dorothy muses, beholding a university water fountain. An English Ph.D. with no job prospects, Dorothy is stuck teaching books she dislikes to students who don't interest her, as life quietly separates her from her sense of promise the way you'd ease your blanket out from under a snoring neighbor on a plane. "She vaguely recalled a time when wanting to do the job she had trained for did not feel like too much to want," Smallwood writes. "Now want was a thing of the past. She lived in the epilogue of wants."

When the novel begins, Dorothy is on day six of a miscarriage, taking a shit in the prized single-occupancy library bathroom, surveying the "thick, curdled knots of string" that come out of her. The miscarriage is "less than a trauma and more than an inconvenience," she thinks; like everything else in her life, the pregnancy was neither wanted nor unwanted. Dorothy regards her body with detached interest. Unable to align the miscarriage with a narrative frame for her life, she doesn't talk about it—not with her respectfully distant partner, Rog; not with her buoyantly self-absorbed rich friend, Gaby; not with her therapist; not with the backup therapist she's sought out to discuss her need for a backup therapist. These are the only people with whom Dorothy speaks about herself, and even with them Dorothy mostly overthinks things and goes mute. It's too much, communicating about being alive; being alive is too complicated, especially these days, she has decided. "It would kill you to confront the agonies and joys pressed together in the crowd, in one single subway car," Dorothy thinks. "Each person with their disappointments, their millstones, their pleasures, their loves." The "only recourse was to hide somehow, to deaden oneself to the cacophony of pulsing, repulsive existence."

Like many of the people who will love this novel, Dorothy is either tremendously depressed and dysfunctional or completely ordinary and doing pretty well. "*Was* she tired? How *should* a person feel?" she wonders. She lives in the privacy of her own brain, silently adventuring on an inner tube through the roiling white water of her thoughts. Outside, in the physical world, Dorothy doesn't do much. Smallwood generates a bounty of humor from the chasm between the kind of things Dorothy thinks (that a group of imaginary children clinging to rafts in the apocalyptic future will judge her when she explains that her lack of climate activism was rooted in her need to "buttress the borders of my self, which was assaulted to the point of porousness by digital media") and the kinds of things she does (wipe back to front).

Smallwood, a journalist and critic, has a Ph.D. in English from Columbia University. The subject of her dissertation was "depressive realism," and it analyzed the work of authors who represent "different degrees of stuckness or woundedness, and different strategies for tolerating or rejecting ambivalence." (The term depressive realism is borrowed from the work of psychologists who have hypothesized that depressed people see the world more clearly.) On page three of that dissertation, Smallwood begins a sentence by writing, "I am not saying that the scholarly critical endeavor is a futile one, necessarily." This sentiment, extremely funny in context, is applied to even sharper effect in the novel, where scholarly critical endeavor is both Dorothy's primary approach to understanding the world and the process by which she constantly dissociates from it. On the subway, Dorothy ponders the way her fellow-passengers effectively become a group while being addressed as one, by a milky-eyed man shouting his life story ("such, Dorothy reflected, is the power of a speaker"). As the man goes on about a past staph infection and how he knew to stay uptown on 9/11, Dorothy has an epiphany about "The Rime of the Ancient

Mariner," a poem she doesn't like—"resistance *was* the aesthetic experience," she concludes. Another day, following a silent meditative spiral about climate change, Dorothy unsticks hardened spaghetti from the bottom of an unwashed pot, and tells her boyfriend about how "although one had to seek habitable ground, one could not let geographic strategy blind oneself to the overwhelming power and machinations of fortune." Smallwood adds, "The spaghetti was chewy and also crunchy."

The same disjunction is present, but less comic, in the way that Dorothy processes her miscarriage. She is shy and bewildered and curious about it—a beginner when it comes to her body, like a kid. She examines the gelatinous jewel-red blood on her panty liner, rubs the glop off, tastes it and imagines she's at a fancy restaurant, and goes to bed with the lingering taste of her own tissue at the back of her throat. Bodies are strange and unspeakable: Dorothy prefers easier topics, such as the dire plight of human civilization, or the psychologist Silvan Tomkins's concept of shame-humiliation and contempt-disgust. At precisely those moments that seem most conducive to considering her lost pregnancy, she slips into abstraction; looking at the ultrasound of her recalcitrant uterus, she thinks about "synesthetic paradox" and Thomas Mann's "The Magic Mountain." Still, her mind keeps presenting her images of the primacy, and casual monstrosity, of the body: a dog she'd once known, so riddled with tumors that he felt like a "sock filled with gravel," and a friend who had a cyst on her elbow, and who was putting her hair in a ponytail when suddenly "streams of white confetti burst out."

"The Life of the Mind" belongs in a growing family of fiction about highly educated white women who are trying to comprehend the coexistence of privilege and precarity; at the reunion, Smallwood's book would be a second cousin, quiet and dressed in black. Other recent arrivals to the gathering include Lynn Steger Strong's "Want," which features a protagonist who flounders after being rejected by academia; Sheila Heti's "Motherhood," in which the narrator, like Dorothy, is profoundly passive and truly ambivalent about reproduction; and Jenny Offill's "Weather," narrated by a college librarian who nests in esoteric knowledge and can't stop thinking about climate change. In these novels, women crave the clarity of crisis but will do almost anything to avoid it; suppressed anger and social frustration are usually close at hand. Dorothy occasionally experiences severe flashes of irritation, usually prompted by uselessness or excess, the qualities she fears she has cultivated in her field of choice. At one point, she goes to Las Vegas to deliver a paper at an academic conference. "*What is the meaning of this* ingestion? was how one long section began," Smallwood writes, "a section that did not ultimately resolve the meaning of anything but indicated, by certain very long digressions about the Eucharist, baking, nineteenth-century discourses of the digestive tract, and the cholera epidemic, to imply that the meaning, forever deferred and desirable, was profound." On the plane, she looks down at a book by the literary theorist Franco Moretti and imagines it sternly berating her for the superfluity of her work. The "problem of the twenty-first century is a problem of waste," the book scolds. "Don't you know anything, you joke of a humanist, you walking fatberg of consumer debt?" The flight attendant interrupts, offering peanuts.

"The Life of the Mind" captures Dorothy over the span of about a month and a half, roughly the length of time it takes her mysterious miscarriage to somewhat complete itself. It is tempting to view the miscarriage as the central, reverberating metaphor of the novel—for Dorothy's lost potential, or her inability to identify what that potential consisted of in the first place. "It must be that other people were more secure in their power to declare when and whether a life was a human," she thinks. "If you wanted it, it was a baby and you could email it around to your friends; if you didn't, it was an act of violence to be asked to look at it." But, in this novel, the miscarriage is just one item among many like it: crises that move so slowly that you don't know how to react to them, experiences that feel like life and death at once, various pieces of evidence of inviability and failure. At a party at Gaby's million-dollar apartment, the guests start doing karaoke, and Dorothy reflects on the way that even this once reliably ecstatic ritual now sends her into a funk. She feels "the fragility of her ebbing youth and the sweet ache of pleasures she had known or missed." She also feels "another funk," of loneliness and grief:

And sometimes those two funks blended together into an overpowering pang of life and death in which Dorothy experienced the smallness of her being knit into the large, incomprehensible whole of everything else. Great passions were expressed and mourned. She would come home wound up like

a clock, pulsing with all the songs sung and unsung, running on anxiety and regret, amped up and disappointed, wanting more and also wanting to have had much less.

The part of me that dislikes all my stupid ideas wants Dorothy to turn her brain off for thirty seconds, cue up "Go Your Own Way," and achieve fleeting animal pleasure. But, then, this paragraph, like the rest of Smallwood's casually agonized and abundantly satisfying novel, provides the exact sort of thrill that can be found only through obsessive overthinking. Why live in the moment when you can dissect it like this?

An earlier version of this piece incorrectly referred to Dorothy as the novel's narrator.

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