

# COMMENTS ON LINDSAY TUNKL'S VIMEO POSTING OF IS THIS WHAT FEELING FEELS LIKE? - FIRST ATTEMPT

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A person who wants to be destroyed by love is normal. The human wish to be ravished, despite its bearer's avowed feminist principles and self-possessed public persona, does not present an anomaly. At rare yet foreseeable intervals, erotic desire will offer most mortals an expensive, all-inclusive trip to a magical land where they will engage in mutually confusing flagellations with other reasonable people who are similarly, if temporarily, afflicted.

So, no, it is not strange to want to be bent painfully over a headboard while wailing with happiness. Even famous people like Herman Melville aspired to be slayed like a babbling lamb. Indeed, this ambition proves so common that it often crawls to the depths of banality. Maybe Melville wrote the great *Moby-Dick* about Nathaniel Hawthorne, but think about the thousands of cliché-flamed films that have been made in passion's name. Desiring another person to drink from your flagon of life is a well-worn theme in the history of love.

What *is* strange is articulating this longing in language.

"Grab my ass! Pull my hair! Harder!" goes the mantra.

"Spank me! Say my name!" goes another.



Brandon is a 34-year-old civil rights lawyer I met in a Ralph's. He is imposingly tall and possesses buoyant pectoral muscles. I am a 38-year-old former performance artist, an aspiring writer, and now a platform strategist for Snapchat. Brandon is half Chinese and half Polish, and likes *Star Wars* prequels. I am a bisexual Chicana with large eyes and sturdy legs. We have been dating for six months.

When I visited Brandon's two-bedroom condominium in Culver City tonight, I arrived at its walnut parquet foyer ready to talk. I had been reading Wittgenstein's late philosophy on the Metro and wanted to ask Brandon about his thoughts on indeterminacy. But then I saw his blue-veined biceps and bloodshot aura of overwork, and became incredibly excited.

"Hi, you look really pretty," he said, backing into the living room as I threw my recycled canvas Snapchat work bag to the ground and tore at his shirt buttons. "Babe. Baaaaabe. Whoa, this is so exciting. But. Hold on, wait—" *Plop* we fell on the sofa, which is covered in tweedy wool.

"I am holding on, I *am* waiting a minute," I gasped back, until I heard myself yelling "TAKE ME NOW YOU MONSTER! LOVE ME LIKE A STEVEDORE! MAKE ME BEG!"

Etc.

"Oh my God," Brandon said. "Okay, okay. Okay."

I love Brandon a lot.

“What’s a stevedore again?” Brandon asked afterwards. We cuddled in his queen-sized bed, in his small blue-walled bedroom with its transom window. “It sounds like something out of *Moby-Dick*.”

“It’s a figure of speech,” I said, stroking his arm hairs.

“Not one I ever heard.” Brandon pursed his lips to the far right side, as if his mouth were running away from something.

“It’s a compliment.” I laughed.

“Uhhhhhh . . .” Brandon lay on his back and looked at the ceiling with eyes that kept widening. “Do I have sex like a postal worker?”

“What do you mean, like, homicidal?” I asked.

“No, like boring,” he said.

I stretched out my legs. “No, you have sex like a lawyer.” Brandon *is* a lawyer, but I immediately understood my mistake. “A really amazing lawyer. An A.C.L.U. person who fights for justice and stuff like that.”

“Oh, Jesus.” Brandon rolled over and closed his eyes and stopped talking.

“Like Thurgood Marshall,” I said. “That’s good, right?”

Now he is asleep.



I am awake, web surfing. When Brandon started snoring around midnight, I padded out to the living room and retrieved my bag, which contained my Wittgenstein and my laptop. I returned to bed and turned on the small white lamp on the stand next to me. I took out my paperback copy of *Philosophical Investigations* and read until I reached the last page.

After that, I leaned over and whispered into Brandon’s ear: “You have sex like a superhero.”

He remained unconscious.

“I am fanatically in love with you,” I barely breathed.

Still no response.

“I want you to tie me up like I’m a Victorian femme fatale and you are an evil villain with a mustache and a top hat,” I said.

“What?” he said.

“You’re dreaming,” I said.

Brandon fell back asleep.

I turned off the lamp. I tried to sleep, too. When that didn’t work, I dug through my bag again and this time fished out my laptop. I opened my computer and balanced it on my knees. I started looking at feminist art videos on Vimeo, which is one of my favored distractions during uneasy times. After a while, I found the work of Lindsay Tunkl.

It is 3:01 in the morning.



You have likely never heard of Lindsay Tunkl. You have probably found this Vimeo page in the same way that I did, which is to say, on accident. According to her website’s *CV/Bio* section, Lindsay Tunkl graduated from CalArts with a BFA in 2010 and, as of this writing, is attempting to complete an MFA in Studio Practice and an MA in Visual + Critical Studies at California College of the Arts in San Francisco. From her videos on Vimeo, and her still shots on her website, we can see that Lindsay Tunkl is a White woman in her twenties. She has long dark hair, with streaks of early gray in it. She also has a big silver lip piercing, and bears a metal stud below her left eye, which seems painful. Lindsay Tunkl is pretty and large-framed, with fleshy arms and powerful breasts and thighs.

Lindsay Tunkl has made a series of conceptual art perfumes based on the Apocalypse. One of the perfumes is called “Tsunami,” and another is called “Nuclear Blast.” They do not appear to be available for purchase on her website and doubtlessly smell bad.

Lindsay Tunkl has the word “HOLOCENE” tattooed on the inside of her lower lip, as a *memento mori*. She is in mourning for the Holocene, which has been replaced by the apocalyptic era of the Anthropocene, the age of global warming and atomic annihilation. In 2010, Tunkl took a self-portrait. In this photograph, she sticks out her lower lip





LINDSAY TUNKL, STILLS FROM *IS THIS WHAT FEELING FEELS LIKE?*  
- *FIRST ATTEMPT*, 2013, IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

But what if you have imperfect relationships and no one is trying to imagine your subjectivity? What if you are a loner who is obsessed with the Apocalypse? What if, left to your own devices, you spend your afternoons singing *I Will Always Love You* while drowning and filming it? What if you only have 16 downloads and no one Likes your videos? Does anyone believe that you are in pain? And is anyone hearing or understanding you? To this last question, Wittgenstein might say *Not really* or *Are you joking?* He might also say *Ja, ja*.

“Now, what about the language which describes my inner experiences and which only I myself can understand?” he asked in *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein did not answer this question outright, but he suggested that such a language does not bear a “criterion of correctness” and thus would “give no information.” A brief review of his biography also makes us suspect that if we could conjure the spirit of Wittgenstein in a séance, he would additionally warn us that a person with a private language is crazy and likely to beat up a hemophiliac child when in a bad mood.



It is too bad that Wittgenstein did not live in the age of the Anthropocene so that he might watch Lindsay Tunkl videos. Lindsay Tunkl shows us that private languages persist as inescapable parts of life. Indeed, her work reveals that the most compelling of all grammars remains the private language that we are each condemned to speak. This private language does not necessarily evidence murderous craziness, even if we use it to talk about the Apocalypse or to express “babbling lamb” desires for erotic possession. However, this language possesses no criterion of correctness except for its verification of our solitude.

Lindsay Tunkl teaches us that the community of empaths that Wittgenstein alludes to consists of people who speak their own grammars of solitude together. Every once in a while these individuals may understand each other. But a lot of the time, they don't. “Having a relationship” occurs when a person agrees to continue loving another person despite the fact that their reciprocal comprehension remains sporadic and without guarantee.



Art is like unrequited love.

As a former performance artist, I can tell you that there exists a lot of art that very few people look at. A huge number of artists work without any support at all.

Artists post their art to the web and wait to see if anyone can hear their private language.

Commenting on and liking videos, paintings, stories, and also other comments now form new practices of bridging this unbearable silence in the modern era.



For a short while, the 19<sup>th</sup> century novelists Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne provided each other with a life-sustaining community that proved even more powerful than that found in web commentary: They both loved and occasionally even apprehended each other. However, though Wittgenstein observed that reciprocal recognition must be manifested by people helpfully imagining each other's suffering, it should be noted that Melville and Hawthorne's corporate sympathy did not protect them from pain.

Melville lived near Hawthorne in western Massachusetts in 1850-1851, the same years that he wrote *Moby-Dick*. Melville was 31 and unknown. Hawthorne was 46, and had just published *The Scarlet Letter* to much acclaim. Both men were married, but this did not matter. They met often and walked in silence in the Berkshire woods, enjoying the sunbeams, the trees, and the sounds of the birds.

On November 17, 1851, Melville wrote Hawthorne: “Whence come you, Hawthorne? By what right do you drink from my flagon of life? And when I put it to my lips — lo, they are yours and not mine.”

We cannot know for certain the precise right that Hawthorne claimed when drinking from Melville's flagon of life. Though he wrote many letters to Melville, they do not survive, because Melville burned them. But by studying Hawthorne's actions and writings, we may discern that Hawthorne and Melville enjoyed some forms of agreement on this aspect of the human condition that Wittgenstein described as the *inner experience*.

We begin to suspect that that the two men shared some sort of private revelation when we learn that Hawthorne ran away from Melville. In early 1852, he moved himself and his wife, the dark-eyed Sophia Peabody, to the stevedore-less safety of Concord, Massachusetts.

That same year, Hawthorne wrote *The Blithedale Romance*. The novel concerns the relationship between a young poet named Miles Coverdale and one Hollingsworth, an older fellow with a vocation for penal reform. The men form a passionate attachment in the utopian community of Blithedale, but then have a savage falling-out over a disagreement about the socialist philosophies of Charles Fourier. Coverdale and Hollingsworth's spat, however, probably concerns more their romantic frustrations than their commitments to the universal laws of social progress. They break up, Hollingsworth taking up with a lady named Priscilla and Coverdale moving to the city, where he begins spying on strange married men.

Coverdale, the novel's narrator, admits that he cannot cope with his loss of Hollingsworth.

"The heart-pang was not merely figurative, but an absolute torture of the breast," he says.



Two months ago, in his apartment, Brandon helped me cut and shave my hair. I have an idiosyncratic hairstyle, where I buzz the right side of my head in a circular pattern and grow the left side long and braid it with beads.

Brandon brought a wood stool from his kitchen and put it in front of his bathroom mirror, which hangs above his sink. He took off his white Oxford button-down, and I took off my Quiet Lightning T-Shirt. I never wear a bra. We smiled at each other in the mirror and laughed.

I sat on the stool. Brandon had previously removed his electric razor from the cupboard below his sink counter. He now picked it up off the sink's ledge and flicked it on. He bent over me, buzzing my hair into the circle configuration. His fingers touched my scalp and my cheeks very gently.

I felt the feathered wings of my spirit terrifyingly expand like the wings of those emotional angels described by Plato in *The Phaedrus*.

I didn't say anything. I just looked at him.

My heart beat and beat.



Eight weeks after that, though, Brandon and I "crossed wires." We sat in his living room, on the sofa covered with the fuzzy fabric. With the aid of his iPad, Brandon attempted to show me a two-minute clip of young violent people dueling with big glow sticks. He explained that he wished me to watch this atrocious preview because he felt very excited about the release date of a film in the *Star Wars* franchise called *Rogue One*.

*Rogue One*, as I quickly learned in enormous detail, is a prequel to the Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia and Han Solo tale. It tells the doomed love story of two attractive interstellar Resistance Fighters who waste a lot of time misunderstanding each other's private languages via interminable debates over a primordial, tech-savvy version of Fourierism that requires the subservience of individualism to the greater good. The female eventually submits to the ideology of the male, which causes them to deeply and hysterically fall in love. The female and the male then perish *demi-in flagrante* while getting planet-bombed by the Empire.

"Here, look," Brandon said, pressing the iPad up to my face.

I have already mentioned Brandon's physical attractions. The chest muscles and the tallness, etc. These gorgeous temptations prevented me from caring about *Rogue One*. All I wanted to do, as Brandon leaned close to pressure me to watch interstellar decapitations, was nuzzle my mouth into his warm, musky neck, and to bite him and maybe lick and also perhaps in my enthusiasm leave a hickey.

So, instead of admiring the iPad, I pressed my mouth directly under his jaw. I tried to kiss the tender flesh next to his thorax. This stimulus caused Brandon to swiftly jerk his shoulder up so that my face, briefly if brutally, smushed between his head and shoulder. Brandon then snapped his head away, leaving me squish-eyed and politely smiling as I sat stiffly next to him.

"No, come on, watch it," he said.

"Okay," I said.

Nodding, I observed the space murder.

"See?" Brandon said, raising his eyebrows. "Can't wait."

My eye hurt.

"That's really neat," I said.



I cannot say for certain what exactly Brandon had in mind when he said *See? Can't wait*. I suspect that he attempted to communicate to me a hope that we shared similar cultural and aesthetic values that would bode well in our future together as man and wife and the parents of a small, intelligent brood of children. He also, of course, could have simply meant that he felt impatient to see the film.

I can say for certain, however, what I meant when I said *That's really neat*. I did not mean *that's really neat* in the least. I actually meant: *I cannot believe that you are more interested in watching fucking television than you are in me*.

For a moment, I also meant: *I sort of hate you right now*.



What had passed between us to explain this deterioration? What sin had we committed to fall from our psychic declarations of love in the bathroom to the depths of our mutual ignorance in the living room?

Earlier in our relationship, when Brandon had cut my hair, our Plato-like passion to fuse into one person had impregnated every moment with agreed-upon meaning. But then, love cooled. And once this horizontality began to dissipate, a creeping hierarchy of affection started to reveal discrepancies, that is, the existence of our separate private languages.

On the sofa, we had a choice to endure the risks of empathetic imagination, as Wittgenstein teaches us. For example, I could have submitted my ideology to the male's, like in *Rogue One*. Or, Brandon could have seen a look of disappointment flash across my features and said, *This heart-pang is not merely figurative, but an absolute torture of the breast*, like Hawthorne wrote in semi-code about Melville. Or, we could have stared into each other's eyes and said *I will always love you*, like Lindsay Tunkl sang as she drowned in a bowl of water in *Is This What Feeling Feels Like?*

None of that happened, though.



**Steve·dore** /'stēvə,dôr/ *noun*

1. a person who loves you by fucking you so blindingly hard and passionately that he or she destroys the separateness between you.



There are three types of language. The first type of language voices a fellow-feeling. One need not say a word to pronounce this idiom. Wittgenstein says that this expression is *none too easy* to achieve, but Brandon and I effortlessly spoke it when we looked at each other's reflections as he buzzed my hair. I know that the message that passed between us signaled *I love you*.

When Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne walked together in the Berkshires, they, too, co-wrote the story of their fatal love by marking their footprints into the leaf-mold of the Massachusetts forest. I cannot say if it was none too easy for them to do so, but the violent queerphobia plaguing the United States at the time (and, now) suggests that they had to fight to secure these precious moments of affective telepathy.

Lindsay Tunkl and her lover also spoke this language in *This is How the iPhone Didn't Save My Love Live*, where she clamored at her, him, or them via text to return her devotion but only silence followed. Like Brandon and me in the bathroom, and Melville and Hawthorne in the forest, Lindsay Tunkl eventually understood the magnitude of her beloved's message. It created an arduous yet necessary mutuality between them.



The second type of language bears words whose meanings arrive corroded and warped, but partially understood. This is the language of *Ja, ja*. Lovers live in terror of this vocabulary. It is the patois that leads to heartbreaking disagreements over Fourierism, singing *I Will Always Love You*, and drowning. *Ja, ja* has double, triple meanings, untrue meanings, builds false hopes, and lays secret traps. A person may hear a phrase spoken in Language Number 2 and believe that

they discern an existential *yes* within its syntax, but later realize the damnation of their dreams. A particularly exquisite suffering ensues.

When Melville asked Hawthorne *by what right he drank from the flagon* of his life, Hawthorne replied with a Yankee *Ja, ja* by fleeing the soft mossy forests of the Berkshires for the redoubts of Concord and then writing *The Blithedale Romance*. In so doing Hawthorne tried to convince Melville that he had no idea what in the hell Melville was talking about but simultaneously also explain that he would love Melville for the rest of his life.

In my case, I fear that when I said *That's neat* about the *Rogue One* prequel, and actually meant *I sort of hate you right now*, I cracked the mechanism that translates Brandon's and my words when we speak to one another. I worry that the injury I inflicted on this love technology continued to lethally spread and widen in the months since our conversation about *Star Wars*, since I did not immediately superglue the damage with sex or authentic ideological submission. Thus, when I made erotic overtures to Brandon this evening, and he responded by saying *Wait* and *Hold on*, I am scared that what he actually tried to tell me was *Stop, I do not want you anymore*.



The third type of language cannot be understood, either as a single or double entendre. This private language is the shibboleth of a different type of wasteland. In this dialect, the word *Stevadore* may be written by an island castaway on a paper scrap that is then stuffed into a bottle and thrown into the ocean. When a beachcomber on the mainland sees the bottle bobbing in the water many months or years later, and opens it up, he reads the word and thinks that it refers to a character out of a novel by Herman Melville that treats the themes of masculine madness and whales. The castaway remains on her faraway sandbar, unable to translate her nouns and verbs into shapes that will attract a rescue party. She sits on the beach and contemplates Tsunamis and Nuclear Blasts — the end of the world.



It is 4:16 in the morning. Brandon's breathing remains deep and steady. In Los Angeles's pre-dawn, sepia light, I can make out the hedgehog spikes of his hair. I smell his skin, the clove of him under his cologne. He moves lightly. The cotton sheets make crinkling noises.

I want you to love me like a tornado, like a plague, like a fire.

I want you to destroy me with your light saber. I want to have your baby.

I lean over to him again. "I love you," I say instead. I say it now so that he can hear it.

Brandon's rhythmic breathing stops. He shifts and turns toward me. He reaches out under the sheets and grasps my thigh.

"Yeah, I love you too," he says after several seconds. Then he falls silent again.

I look out of the transom window, at the blue-opal sky captured in a windowpane.

I don't really know what he means.



Lindsay Tunkl, keep working.