Harry Styles Fields a Question

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Sometimes we stumble inadvertently upon a great question, finding one that captivates our attention and wakes us up.
--Narayan Helen Liebenson, *Magnanimous Heart: Compassion and Love, Loss and Grief, Joy and Liberation*

A gull flicks its head at me through the window. With its beak and yellow eye, it makes its needs known. It hammers after the bag of cashews I throw on the sill at work. Silly bird, can't open a window with a beak. Worse, placing its hopes in me. I think, "Sacha's been feeding the birds." I don't wonder if this is true. I barely notice I'm thinking it.

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Squat light poles line the walk behind the hospital. I pass beneath them on lunch but only notice them on the return. I imagine how the fixtures, topping the poles must seem to the gulls at night, when the bulbs flicker warm in their casings, the flat, high perches of them a dry revelation. I remember the floor of a friend's renovated bathroom, how I wanted to pull my socks off and lay my whole length along the heated tile.

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In an hour-long talk by Buddhadasa, assigned by Tuere months ago for class, a single sentence lifts above the rest: "…[T]here is only pain in attachment." This *sounds* true but sticks in my craw. I don't actually believe it. I change some words and make a question. The question I *think* I should ask: *How does craving interfere with awareness?* (Or compassion, or other wholesome qualities.) My real question: *What's so bad about craving*?

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I am at work with Sacha. Because we share a job, and cover every day between us, we are rarely together. I am happy. She sits at our desk because she's on shift and I'm only here for a meeting. We talk about family dynamics and Thanksgiving. A gull lands on the cement ledge behind her, out the window. When it squawks, she swivels around in our chair, then back. "You're feeding the birds," she says. But I'm not.

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Harry Styles dropped his third new single yesterday. The title sounds much like the title of an old Prince song, so I like it before even hearing it. His new album is out in a week, and reviews are cropping up online. I have four tickets to see Harry Styles at the Tacoma Dome next fall; I only need two but panicked. None of my middle-aged friends want to go with me, but they will see. He will wrap his manicured nails around the mic', and flash his sequins and his love for his mother, and everyone will understand. Harry Styles is going to personally bring back the Tacoma Dome.

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I take another late lunch. Passing again beneath the lights I look up, *really* look. They're wrapped in giant needles. I call my brother, who works in industrial lighting. They're called *bird spikes,* Mike tells me, and are sold as an accessory. Do the lights get warm on their poles the way I've imagined, I want to know, and he says, "Yeah, sometimes they're vented, and that's why you need the spikes, so the birds won't nest up there."

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More and more, I notice a pain in my chest. It feels like a hole or a maw, ringed in fire and crowned with a Shop-Vac. It leads its own melodramatic and hungry life. It leads *my* life. While searching out the first amateur clip of Harry Styles at the Jingle Bell Ball in London, before the official video is put up, I am aware of the phantom arm of craving pawing out of my middle. I want to say it's like a drunken co-worker at a holiday party, but that doesn't give it the respect it deserves. It *hurts*.

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It's so painful I visit Tim. I believe practice is pulling me in the right direction, but I had not expected my *body* to hurt or, frankly, to cry this much. Tim reassures me I am on the path. I thought I had just been suffering, but it's possible I am learning something, the *truth* of suffering. This, he tells me, as if I am hearing it for the first time—and in a way I am—is The First Noble Truth. This is *just* different enough from *mere* suffering that I take heart. I continue practicing with Harry Styles, who continues answering my question. I read ahead on truth number two. I thank the gulls with a sprinkle of nuts out the window.