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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I've been working on this book officially since 2016, and unofficially (as you'll soon read) for my whole life. I've spoken to, read, and corresponded with hundreds of people about all things Bittersweet. Some of these people I mention explicitly; others informed my thinking. I would have loved to name them all, but this would have produced an unreadable book. So, some names appear only in the Notes and Acknowledgments; others, no doubt, I've left out by mistake. I'm grateful for them all.

Also, for readability, I didn't use ellipses or brackets in certain quotations, but made sure that the extra or missing words didn't change the speaker's or writer's meaning. If you'd like to quote these written sources from the original, the citations directing you to most of the full quotations appear in the Notes at the back of the book.

Finally, I've changed the names and identifying details of some of the people whose stories I tell. I didn't fact-check the stories people told me about themselves, but included only those I believed to be true.



*Sarajevo Requiem* by Tom Stoddart, © Getty Images

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## PRELUDE

### The Cellist of Sarajevo

One night, I dreamed that I was meeting my friend, a poet named Mariana, in Sarajevo, the city of love. I woke up confused. Sarajevo, a symbol of love? Weren't Bosnia and its capital, Sarajevo, the site of one of the bloodiest civil wars and ethnic cleansings of the late twentieth century?

Then I remembered.

Vedran Smailović.

The cellist of Sarajevo.

...

It's May 28, 1992, and Sarajevo is under siege. For centuries, Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs have lived together in this city of streetcars and pastry shops, gliding swans in parkland ponds, Ottoman mosques and Eastern Orthodox cathedrals. A city of three religions, three peoples, yet until recently no one paid too much attention to who was who. They knew but they didn't know; they preferred to see one another as neighbors who met for coffee or kebabs, took classes at the same university, sometimes got married, had children.

But now, civil war, and an ethnic cleansing of Bosnia's Muslims. Men on the hills flanking the city have cut the electricity and water supply. The 1984 Olympic stadium has burned down, its playing fields turned into makeshift graveyards. The apartment buildings are pockmarked from mortar assaults, the traffic lights are broken, the streets are quiet. The only sound is the crackling of gunfire.

Until this moment, when the strains of Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor\* fill the pedestrian street outside a bombed-out bakery.

Do you know this music? If not, maybe you should pause and listen to it right now: [youtube.com/watch?v=kn1gcjuhlhg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kn1gcjuhlhg). It's haunting, it's exquisite, it's infinitely sad. Vedran Smailović, lead cellist of the Sarajevo opera orchestra, is playing it in honor of twenty-two people killed yesterday by a mortar shell as they lined up for bread. Smailović was nearby when the shell exploded; he helped take care of the wounded. Now he's returned to the scene of the carnage, dressed as if for a night at the opera house, in a formal white shirt and black tails. He sits amidst the rubble, on a white plastic chair, his cello propped between his legs. The yearning notes of the adagio float up to the sky.

All around him, the rifles fire, the shelling booms, the machine guns crackle. Smailović keeps on playing. He'll do this for twenty-two days, one day for each person killed at the bakery. Somehow, the bullets will never touch him.

This is a city built in a valley, ringed by mountains from which snipers aim at starving citizens in search of bread. Some people wait for hours to cross the street, then dart across like hunted deer. But here's a man sitting still in an open square, dressed in concert finery, as if he has all the time in the world.

\* This work is commonly attributed to Tomaso Albinoni, but was probably composed by Italian musicologist Remo Giazotto, possibly based on a fragment of an Albinoni composition.

*You ask me am I crazy for playing the cello in a war zone, he says. Why don't you ask THEM if they're crazy for shelling Sarajevo?*

His gesture reverberates throughout the city, over the airwaves. Soon, it'll find expression in a novel, a film. But before that, during the darkest days of the siege, Smailović will inspire other musicians to take to the streets with their own instruments. They don't play martial music, to rouse the troops against the snipers, or pop tunes, to lift the people's spirits. They play the Albinoni. The destroyers attack with guns and bombs, and the musicians respond with the most bittersweet music they know.

*We're not combatants, call the violinists; we're not victims, either, add the violas. We're just humans, sing the cellos, just humans: flawed and beautiful and aching for love.*

...

A few months later. The civil war and ethnic cleansing rage on and the foreign correspondent Allan Little watches as a procession of forty thousand civilians emerges from a forest. They've been trudging through the woods for forty-eight hours straight, fleeing an attack.

Among them is an eighty-year-old man. He looks desperate, exhausted. The man approaches Little, asks whether he's seen his wife. They were separated during the long march, the man says.

Little hasn't seen her but, ever the journalist, asks whether the man wouldn't mind identifying himself as Muslim or Croat. And the man's answer, Little says years later, in a gorgeous BBC segment, shames him even now, as he recalls it across the decades.

"I am," said the old man, "a musician."

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## INTRODUCTION

### The Power of Bittersweet

Homesick we are, and always, for another  
And different world.

—VITA SACKVILLE-WEST, *THE GARDEN*

Once, when I was a twenty-two-year-old law student, some friends picked me up in my dorm on the way to class. I'd been happily listening to bittersweet music in a minor key. Not the Albinoni, which I hadn't heard back then; more likely a song by my all-time favorite musician, Leonard Cohen, aka the Poet Laureate of Pessimism.

It's hard to put into words what I experience when I hear this kind of music. It's technically sad, but what I feel, really, is love: a great tidal outpouring of it. A deep kinship with all the other souls in the world who know the sorrow the music strains to express. Awe at the musician's ability to transform pain into beauty. If I'm alone when I'm listening, I often make a spontaneous prayer gesture, hands to face, palm to palm, even though I'm deeply agnostic and don't formally pray. But the music

makes my heart open: literally, the sensation of expanding chest muscles. It even makes it seem okay that everyone I love, including me, is going to die one day. This equanimity about death lasts maybe three minutes, but each time it happens, it changes me slightly. If you define transcendence as a moment in which your self fades away and you feel connected to the all, these musically bittersweet moments are the closest I've come to experiencing it. But it's happened over and over again.

And I could never understand why.

Meanwhile, my friends were amused by the incongruity of mournful songs blasting from a dorm room stereo; one of them asked why I was listening to funeral tunes. I laughed, and we went to class. End of story.

Except that I thought about his comment for the next twenty-five years. Why *did* I find yearning music so strangely uplifting? And what in our culture made this a fitting subject for a joke? Why, even as I write this, do I feel the need to reassure you that I love dance music, too? (I really do.)

At first, these were just interesting questions. But as I searched for answers, I realized that they were *the* questions, the big ones—and that contemporary culture has trained us, to our great impoverishment, not to ask them.

...

Two thousand years ago, Aristotle wondered why the great poets, philosophers, artists, and politicians often have melancholic personalities. His question was based on the ancient belief that the human body contains four humors, or liquid substances, each corresponding to a different temperament: melancholic (sad), sanguine (happy), choleric (aggressive), and phlegmatic (calm). The relative amounts of these liquids were

thought to shape our characters. Hippocrates, the famed Greek physician, believed that the ideal person enjoyed a harmonious balance of the four. But many of us tend in one direction or another.

This book is about the melancholic direction, which I call the “bittersweet”: a tendency to states of longing, poignancy, and sorrow; an acute awareness of passing time; and a curiously piercing joy at the beauty of the world. The bittersweet is also about the recognition that light and dark, birth and death—bitter and sweet—are forever paired. “Days of honey, days of onion,” as an Arabic proverb puts it. The tragedy of life is linked inescapably with its splendor; you could tear civilization down and rebuild it from scratch, and the same dualities would rise again. Yet to fully inhabit these dualities—the dark as well as the light—is, paradoxically, the only way to transcend them. And transcending them is the ultimate point. The bittersweet is about the desire for communion, the wish to go home.

If you see yourself as a bittersweet type, it’s hard to discuss Aristotle’s question about the melancholia of the greats without sounding self-congratulatory. But the fact is that his observation has resonated across the millennia. In the fifteenth century, the philosopher Marsilio Ficino proposed that Saturn, the Roman god associated with melancholy, “has relinquished the ordinary life to Jupiter, but he claims for himself a life sequestered & divine.” The sixteenth-century artist Albrecht Dürer famously depicted Melancholy as a downcast angel surrounded by symbols of creativity, knowledge, and yearning: a polyhedron, an hourglass, a ladder ascending to the sky. The nineteenth-century poet Charles Baudelaire could “scarcely conceive of a type of beauty” in which there is no melancholy.

This romantic vision of melancholia has waxed and waned over time; most recently, it's waned. In an influential 1918 essay, Sigmund Freud dismissed melancholy as narcissism, and ever since, it's disappeared into the maw of psychopathology. Mainstream psychology sees it as synonymous with clinical depression.\*

But Aristotle's question never went away; it can't. There's some mysterious property in melancholy, something essential. Plato had it, and so did Jalal al-Din Rumi, so did Charles Darwin, Abraham Lincoln, Maya Angelou, Nina Simone.

But what, exactly, did they have?

I've spent years researching this question, following a centuries-old trail laid by artists, writers, contemplatives, and wisdom traditions from all over the world. This path also led me to the work of contemporary psychologists, scientists, and even management researchers (who have discovered some of the unique strengths of melancholic business leaders and creatives, and the best ways to tap them). And I've concluded that bittersweetness is not, as we tend to think, just a momentary feeling or event. It's also a quiet force, a way of being, a storied tradition—as dramatically overlooked as it is brimming with human potential. It's an authentic and elevating response to the problem of being alive in a deeply flawed yet stubbornly beautiful world.

\* This conflation of melancholy and depression follows a long tradition in Western psychology. Freud used the term “melancholia” to *describe* clinical depression: “a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity.” The influential psychologist Julia Kristeva wrote in 1989 that “the terms melancholy and depression refer to a composite that might be called the melancholy/depressive psychosis whose borders are blurred.” Try typing “melancholy” into today's PubMed search engine and you pull up articles on . . . depression.

Most of all, bittersweetness shows us how to respond to pain: by acknowledging it, and attempting to turn it into art, the way the musicians do, or healing, or innovation, or anything else that nourishes the soul. If we don't transform our sorrows and longings, we can end up inflicting them on others via abuse, domination, neglect. But if we realize that all humans know—or will know—loss and suffering, we can turn *toward* each other.\*

This idea—of transforming pain into creativity, transcendence, and love—is the heart of this book.

...

The ideal community, like the ideal human, would embody all four Hippocratic temperaments. But just the way many people tend in one direction or another, so do our societies. And, as we'll see in chapter 5, we've organized American culture around the sanguine and the choleric, which we associate with buoyancy and strength.

This sanguine-choleric outlook is forward leaning and combat ready; it prizes cheerful goal orientation in our personal lives, and righteous outrage online. We should be tough, optimistic, and assertive; we should possess the confidence to speak our minds, the interpersonal skills to win friends and influence people. Americans prioritize happiness so much that we wrote the pursuit of it into our founding documents, then proceeded to write over thirty thousand books on the subject, as per a recent Amazon search. We're taught from a very young age to scorn our own tears ("Crybaby!"), then to censure our sorrow

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\* No one has expressed this idea better than the musician Nick Cave, in his Red Hand Files: [theredhandfiles.com/utility-of-suffering](http://theredhandfiles.com/utility-of-suffering).



for the rest of our lives. In a study of more than seventy thousand people, Harvard psychologist Dr. Susan David found that one-third of us judge ourselves for having “negative” emotions such as sadness and grief. “We do this not only to ourselves,” says David, “but also to people we love, like our children.”

Sanguine-choleric attitudes have many advantages, of course. They help us throw a ball to second base, pass a bill through Congress, fight the good fight. But all this vigorous cheer and socially acceptable anger disguises the reality that all humans—even, say, online influencers with impressive dance moves or the fiercest “takes”—are fragile and impermanent beings. And so we lack empathy for those who disagree with us. And so we’re blindsided when our own troubles come.

The bittersweet-melancholic mode, in contrast, can seem backward leaning, unproductive, and mired in longing. It yearns for what could have been, or what might yet be.

But longing is momentum in disguise: It’s active, not passive; touched with the creative, the tender, and the divine. We long for something, or someone. We reach for it, move toward it. The word *longing* derives from the Old English *langian*, meaning “to grow long,” and the German *langen*—to reach, to extend. The word *yearning* is linguistically associated with hunger and thirst, but also desire. In Hebrew, it comes from the same root as the word for passion.

The place you suffer, in other words, is the same place you care profoundly—care enough to act. This is why, in Homer’s *Odyssey*, it was homesickness that drove Odysseus to take the final stage of his epic journey, which starts with him weeping on a beach for his native Ithaca. This is why, in most every children’s story you’ve ever loved, from Harry Potter to Pippi Longstocking, the protagonist is an orphan. Only once the parents die, transforming into objects of yearning, do the children have

their adventures and claim their hidden birthrights. These tales resonate because we're all subject to illness and aging, break-ups and bereavement, plagues and wars. And the message of all these stories, the secret that our poets and philosophers *have been trying to tell us for centuries*, is that our longing is the great gateway to belonging.

Many of the world's religions teach the same lesson. "Your whole life must be one of longing," writes the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a fourteenth-century mystical work. "Those who constantly cherish only intense longing to encounter the essential face of their lord will attain complete realization," reads the Qu'ran, 92:20–21. "God is the sigh in the soul," said the thirteenth-century Christian mystic and theologian Meister Eckhart. "Our heart is restless 'til it rests in thee" is the most quoted line of Saint Augustine.

You can feel this truth during those out-of-time moments when you witness something so sublime—a legendary guitar riff, a superhuman somersault—that it seems to come from a more perfect and beautiful world. This is why we revere rock stars and Olympic athletes the way we do—*because* they bring us a breath of magic from that other place. Yet such moments are fleeting, and we want to live in that other world for good; we're convinced that *there* is where we belong.

At their worst, bittersweet types despair that the perfect and beautiful world is forever out of reach. But at their best, they try to summon it into being. Bittersweetness is the hidden source of our moon shots, masterpieces, and love stories. It's because of longing that we play moonlight sonatas and build rockets to Mars. It's because of longing that Romeo loved Juliet, that Shakespeare wrote their story, that we still perform it centuries later.

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It doesn't matter whether we arrive at these truths via Pippi

Longstocking, Simone Biles, or Saint Augustine—whether we’re atheists or believers. The truths are the same. Whether you long for the partner who broke up with you, or the one you dream of meeting; whether you hunger for the happy childhood you’ll never have, or for the divine; whether you yearn for a creative life, or the country of your birth, or a more perfect union (personally or politically); whether you dream of scaling the world’s highest peaks, or merging with the beauty you saw on your last beach vacation; whether you long to ease the pain of your ancestors, or for a world in which life could survive without consuming other life; whether you yearn for a lost person, an unborn child, the fountain of youth, or unconditional love: These are all manifestations of the same great ache.

I call this place, this state that we’re longing for, “the perfect and beautiful world.” In the Judeo-Christian tradition, it’s the Garden of Eden and the Kingdom of Heaven; the Sufis call it the Beloved of the Soul. There are countless other names for it: for instance, simply, home, or “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” or, as the novelist Mark Merlis puts it, “the shore from which we were deported before we were born.” C. S. Lewis called it “the place where all the beauty came from.” They’re all the same thing—they’re the deepest desire of every human heart, they’re what Vedran Smailović conjured into being when he played his cello in the streets of a war-ravaged city.

During the past decades, Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah,” a ballad of spiritual longing, became a staple—even a cliché—of TV talent shows such as *American Idol*. But this is why tears of joy streamed down audience faces as all those contestants performed it for the thousandth time. It doesn’t matter whether we consider ourselves “secular” or “religious”: in some fundamental way, we’re all reaching for the heavens.

•••

Around the same time those friends picked me up in my law school dorm and I started wondering about sad music, I came across the Buddhist idea that, as the mythologist Joseph Campbell put it, we should strive “to participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world.” I couldn’t stop thinking about this: What did it mean? How could such a thing be possible?

I understood that this injunction wasn’t to be taken literally. It wasn’t about dancing on graves, or a passive response to tragedy and evil. Quite the opposite; it had to do with a sensitivity to pain and transience, and embracing this world of suffering (or of dissatisfaction, depending on how you interpret the Sanskrit in the First Noble Truth of Buddhism).

Still, the question persisted. I suppose I could have gone to India or Nepal to try to answer it, or enrolled in an East Asian Studies program at a university. But I didn’t. I just went out and lived life, with this question, and related ones, never far from mind: Why would sadness, an emotion that makes us glum and Eeyore-like, have survived evolutionary pressures? What’s really driving our longing for “perfect” and unconditional love (and what does it have to do with our love of sad songs, rainy days, and even the sacred)? Why does creativity seem to be associated with longing, sorrow—and transcendence? How should we cope with lost love? How did a nation founded on so much heartache turn into a culture of normative sunshine? How can we live and work authentically in a culture of enforced positivity? How should we live, knowing that we and everyone we love will die? Do we inherit the pain of our parents and ancestors, and if so, can we also transform *that* into a beneficent force?

Decades later, this book is my answer.

It's also an account of my passage from agnosticism to . . . what? Not faith, exactly; I'm no more or less agnostic than when I started. But to the realization that you don't have to believe in specific conceptions of God in order to be transformed by spiritual longing. There's a Hasidic parable in which a rabbi notices that an old man in his congregation is indifferent to his talk of the divine. He hums for the man a poignant melody, a song of yearning. "Now I understand what you wish to teach," says the old man. "I feel an intense longing to be united with the Lord."

I'm a lot like that old man. I started writing this book to solve the mystery of why so many of us respond so intensely to sad music. On its face, this seemed a small subject for a years-long project. Yet I couldn't let it go. I had no idea, then, that the music was just a gateway to a deeper realm, where you notice that the world is sacred and mysterious, enchanted even. Some people enter this realm through prayer or meditation or walks in the woods; minor-key music was the portal that happened to entice me. But these entryways are everywhere, and they take endless forms. One of the aims of this book is to urge you to notice them—and to step through.

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## Bittersweet Quiz

Some of us inhabit the bittersweet state instinctively, always have; some of us avoid it as much as we can; some of us arrive there when we reach a certain age, or after facing life's trials and triumphs. If you're wondering how inclined you are to this sensibility, you can take this quiz, which I developed in collaboration with research scientist Dr. David Yaden, a professor at Johns Hopkins Medicine, and cognitive scientist Dr. Scott Barry Kaufman, director of the Center for the Science of Human Potential.\* To find out how bittersweet you are, at this particular moment in time, please ask yourself the following questions, and indicate your level of agreement on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely).

- \_\_\_ Do you tear up easily at touching TV commercials?
- \_\_\_ Are you especially moved by old photographs?
- \_\_\_ Do you react intensely to music, art, or nature?
- \_\_\_ Have others described you as an "old soul"?
- \_\_\_ Do you find comfort or inspiration in a rainy day?

\* Note to psychologists and other scholars interested in exploring the bittersweet construct: While the exploratory pilot studies conducted by Yaden and Kaufman assessed preliminary aspects of the items, they didn't yet include other ways of validating them, such as focus groups, expert review, and larger sample exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. They encourage interested scholars to conduct more research on the survey items to further ascertain their psychometric properties.

- Do you know what the author C. S. Lewis meant when he described joy as a “sharp, wonderful stab of longing”?
  - Do you prefer poetry to sports (or maybe you find the poetry *in* sports)?
  - Are you moved to goosebumps several times a day?
  - Do you see “the tears in things”? (This phrase comes from Virgil’s *Aeneid*.)
  - Do you feel elevated by sad music?
  - Do you tend to see the happiness and sadness in things, all at once?
  - Do you seek out beauty in your everyday life?
  - Does the word *poignant* especially resonate with you?
  - When you have conversations with close friends, are you drawn to talking about their past or current troubles?
  - And this: Do you feel the ecstatic is close at hand?
- 

This last item may seem an odd question for an inventory of the bittersweet. But I’m not talking about an optimistic outlook or an easy smile. I mean the strange exaltation that yearning can bring. According to recent research by Yaden, self-transcendence (as well as its milder cousins, such as gratitude and flow states) increases at times of transition, endings, and death—at the bittersweet times of life.

In fact, you could say that what orients a person to the bittersweet is a heightened awareness of finality. Children splashing joyfully in puddles brings tears to grandparents' eyes because they know that one day the children will grow up and grow old (and they won't be there to see it). But those aren't tears of sorrow, exactly; at heart, they're tears of love.

To score yourself on the Bittersweet Quiz, add up your responses and divide that total by 15.

If your number is lower than 3.8, you tend toward the sanguine.

If your number is above 3.8 and below 5.7, you tend to move between sanguine and bittersweet states.

If you score above 5.7, you're a true connoisseur of the place where light and dark meet.

Readers of my book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* will be interested to know that exploratory studies by Yaden and Kaufman show a high correlation between high scorers on the Bittersweet Quiz and the trait identified by psychologist and author Dr. Elaine Aron as "high sensitivity."\* Yaden and Kaufman also found a high correlation with the tendency to "absorption"—which predicts creativity—and a moderate correlation with awe, self-transcendence, and spirituality. Finally, they found a small association with anxiety and depression—which isn't surprising. Too *much* melancholy can lead to what Aristotle called the diseases of black bile (*melaina kole*, from which melancholy takes its name).

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\* Interestingly, they found no correlation with introversion.

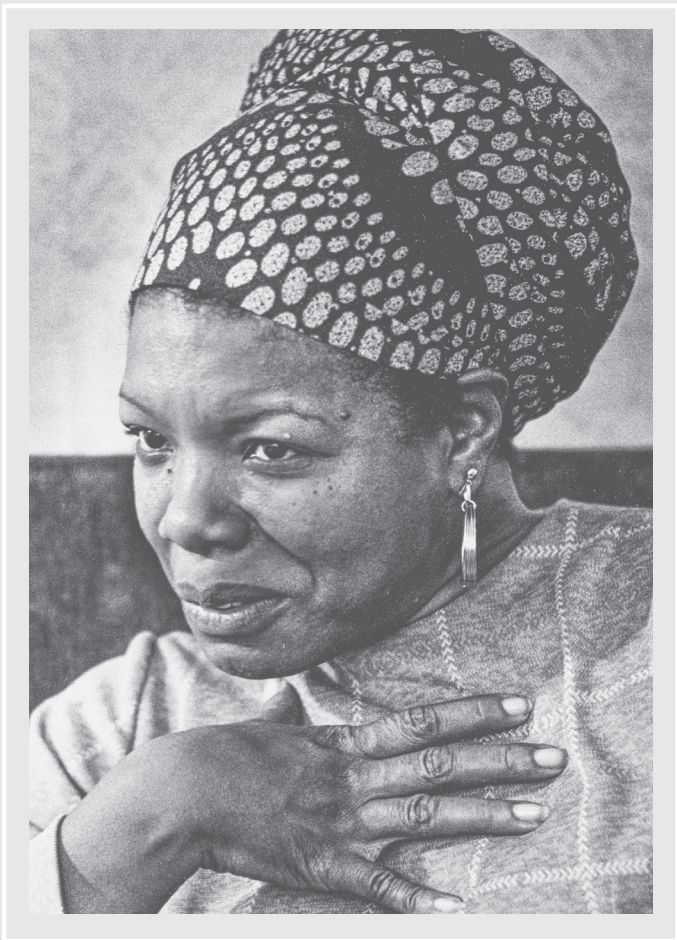


This is not a book about those afflictions, real and devastating though they are; and it's certainly not a celebration of them. If you think you're experiencing depression or severe anxiety, or even post-traumatic stress disorder, please know that help is out there—and seek it out!

This book is about the riches of the bittersweet tradition—and how tapping into them can transform the way we create, the way we parent, the way we lead, the way we love, and the way we die. I hope it will also help us to understand each other, and ourselves.



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PART I

Sorrow and Longing



How can we transform pain into creativity,  
transcendence, and love?

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