PLEASE STAND THERE AND LOOK DIRECTLY INTO THE SUN

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PLEASE STAND THERE AND LOOK DIRECTLY INTO THE SUN

A Thesis
Presented to
Eastern Washington University
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Masters of Fine Arts Creative Writing—Non-Fiction

By
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Spring 2017
THESIS OF RAJAH BOSE

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MASTER’S THESIS

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The Perfect Photograph

Antonio moved to the area for the same reason I had—he needed work. Pasco offered it. The city was nestled near the southern part of Washington State in a triangle of cities surrounded by a vast farming landscape of apple orchards and asparagus fields that were fed by water from the Columbia River. Many of the men and women who worked those farms had followed the harvest up from Mexico through the pepper fields of California to the pear orchards of Oregon. Some were chasing a dream; all were looking for a paycheck.

I'd found mine as a staff photographer for the local newspaper. Being paid to take pictures had been my dream since I'd picked up a camera, and the paper had given me that break. I'd come to The Herald to practice my craft and to get to know a community I'd never visited, though it was less than two hours from where I grew up. The area seemed to have the things that made for good photojournalism—a diverse and increasing population, a rich high school sports tradition, and a thriving newsroom. It was just a matter of showing up.
The Herald’s office was across the river from Pasco in the neighboring city of Kennewick where the paper had served the region for 60 years. As other news companies around the country were folding under the weight of the internet, The Herald had just completed construction on a new two-story complex and was working at a capacity the paper had never experienced. The cities had grown into one another, and the reporters had turned their focus on that economic explosion—a city and newspaper that were beating the odds, together. It was the effect of the explosion that should have attracted the paper’s attention.

When I worked there in 2007, Pasco’s population was almost 50% Spanish speakers, while just across the river in the paper's front yard, it was well under 20%. Of the 71 police officers in Pasco, 12 of them spoke fluent Spanish. If you had read the paper, you might never have known those statistics, but it wasn't for lack of work on behalf of the newspaper—the numbers would also show that the paper reported on just as many Pasco stories as they did the other cities. It wasn't that the numbers lied, it was that they couldn't show everything. The community trusted The Herald for decades. Not because their reporters had investigated possible government oversights or challenged the police and politicians, but because they hadn't. The paper sold it as an ideal place to live: salaries in the middle-class continued to rise while crime fell and a two-story house just stayed cheap. The schools were good and there were 300 days of sunshine. Life was comfortable. I'd joined in on that comfort, rented a place with a small yard for my large dog and filled my home with the usual Costco paraphernalia.
Antonio had moved to Washington with his wife. They started a family, and he worked in the orchards not far from his home in Pasco. His friends had picket fences and called him Toño. He made enough money to send some home to his parents in Mexico who hadn't seen him since he'd left home almost ten years prior. He labored hard in the orchards, but he knew it was how you got ahead. The dream remained a dream if you didn't work for it.

It was just as easy to get comfortable at the paper. I'd walk the newly carpeted hallways and sit in conference rooms and stare at the floor to ceiling foam-core mounted images that had been hand-selected by the editors. There were dozens of photos of construction sites under great expanses of blue sky, speed boats skipping across the mighty Columbia River, farmers out standing in their fields inspecting their crop, cats and dogs in various humorous situations, orchards with a rainbow of colorful fruit, and every possible angle of the bridges that held the cities together. I didn't have to ask for the formula for the perfect photo—it was written on the walls of every room in the place. They were the types of images that the designers put on the front page, and they kept the letters to the editor positive. If the readers were happy, the editors were happy, and everyone was satisfied.

The editors kept me busy driving over those bridges every morning to shoot my handful of daily assignments that I tried to turn into photo awards. These were portraits of
the moms and pops at the downtown businesses, kids playing on the new playground equipment, or another Kennewick High School football hopeful. I arrived early and stayed late, and composed every picture as if it were an opportunity, for me.

After practice one afternoon I was chatting with the high schoolers about where they liked to kick it. I told them about a fresh spot in Pasco I liked. They looked at me like the thought of driving over a bridge hadn't crossed their minds before. "We haven't been there since we were kids," they told me and laughed. Their reaction surprised me, but it shouldn't have. They had what they needed down the street at the Taco Bell, or at the Zoomies store in the mall. They were satisfied too.

I didn't blame them for wanting that comfort, or not knowing about the taco trucks I'd discovered, but it disappointed me that I couldn't share the world I'd come to know. The journalist was a witness to the history of their community, capturing the stories of the place and people for the permanent record. But we were also part of that community and the ones who had the ability to share and inspire connections within it. Journalism school called us the gatekeepers, the people who held power to decide what the readers knew. The definition usually placed that authority in the editor's pen, but it began with the reporters on the ground. If the high schoolers in Kennewick didn't know about Pasco, then their parents probably didn't either, and it was likely the same for the exploding population on the other side of the river.

I asked my bosses if they had considered printing a Spanish translated version of *The Herald*—the potential for new advertising business seemed strong, at least to me.
Apparently, they'd looked into it a few years back and found through their research the
Hispanic population wasn't interested in reading. They were certain it would fail.

The same year, a small group of business owners started *Tú Decides (You Decide)*, a bilingual newspaper that opened down the street from *The Herald* and grew to a distribution of twenty thousand copies. The problem *The Herald* had wasn't with the language barrier, but with attempting something new, something that made them uncomfortable. I didn't blame them for what they couldn't see; it was simply something they couldn't translate for themselves.

I worked with the paper’s only Spanish speaker as we looked for stories never told in the area. Her Peruvian background helped us meet migrant field workers who lived on the farms where they labored and slept in makeshift shipping container homes that the farmer provided. We found a locally owned Pasco hotel where dozens of tenants, once homeless, had found a home. The editors told us the stories weren't relevant, and sanded them down until they were satisfied, and then published them in what amounted to a brief the length of an obituary. After a few similar episodes, the bilingual reporter was taken off the Pasco beat and within a few months had left for a job across the country.

Members of Antonio's family had been arriving in the area for more than three generations. They'd become part of the community and built homes where their kids would become citizens, and start businesses and families of their own. His family had grown to more than fifty strong and spread throughout the area. Though he was in the
country illegally and didn't speak English, Antonio had helped many of them get work and find that comfortable life—the dream that had brought them. He never found it himself.

On many of my afternoon drives through the rolling suburbs I'd swing through downtown Pasco and park in an empty lot across the street from a Mexican bakery. On its outside wall was a mural of two palm trees on a beach that looked like it was painted from a cruise ship brochure. That block of paradise didn't have the necessary components of the formula—no construction workers, no riverboats, no farmers stroking their asparagus, and no cats. But it had the promise of something more. It had elements I could juxtapose a little wit onto if only someone would stroll by with an umbrella or come out from the bakery for a break. I was certain I wouldn't get that picture on the conference room wall but thought I might challenge the formula. I hoped the editor would get the joke, but I knew I was only working for my own victory—to prove I could do it, and maybe pick up a first place award somewhere.

I'd imagined my future photo, the baker sitting hunched over on a crate smoking the last cigarette on a brutally sunny afternoon as if under the shade of the two palm trees, while I'd wait across the street in my car. As I did, I ate bollos de queso (bread roll with cream cheese and jalapeño baked inside) and a churro for lunch. The street was vibrant with the colors of a city south of the border—window fronts of teal quinceañera dresses and bejeweled jeans stretched onto voluptuous mannequin asses, advertisements in
Spanish for long-distance phone cards, and a Mexican grocery store with vegetables I'd never seen outside of Central America. Like a gringo sipping on horchata, downtown Pasco was refreshingly unexpected in an otherwise repetitive cloning of suburbs and big box stores. I wanted to capture a slice of that paradise, but in three years of sporadic visits to that empty lot, nobody walked by those palms. By then I'd grown comfortable in my life but was no longer satisfied with my work assignments. When the opportunity came, I moved on to a more productive job in a bigger city without having made that photo.

In early February 2015, in the middle of one of the mildest winters on local record, Antonio was walking downtown past the long-distance ads and the dresses that likely reminded him of home. He'd recently fallen from a ladder and broken both of his wrists. He couldn't work, and while he recovered, a fire claimed his home and all his belongings. Days later his wife left with their children. Frustrated and alone he had stood in the street at dusk near the Mexican grocery and thrown rocks at passing cars. Three police officers responded, approached Antonio, chased him across four lanes of traffic, drew their weapons, shot 17 rounds, and killed him in front of that bakery with a rock at his feet. He was 35 years old.

I was also 35 when I returned to Pasco a few days later. The police were withholding a statement, and the community was growing more frustrated. It had been ten years since I'd worked there, but the city was as I'd remembered. I was assigned to
photograph a rally and demonstration in Antonio's name for a national paper and found a
crowd of field workers, family members, neighbors as they walked arm-in-arm through
downtown. They stopped in front of the bakery where he was shot, raised their signs and
shouted, "We are all Antonio." The lot across the street where I had waited countless
afternoons was overflowing with a dozen television satellite trucks and a few
recognizable TV personalities who had only days earlier held their logo-ed microphones
at the scene of another police shooting on the other side of the country. I hadn't seen
anyone from *The Herald* since I arrived.

The reporters fixed their makeup in the trucks' side mirrors and stood under
massive diffusers and spotlights that overpowered the sun. Behind them, the protestors
had blocked all four lanes of traffic and taken to the roof of the bakery. I could barely
make out the building's wall from the lot, and as I made my way through the crowd, it
was evident that the palm tree mural had vanished. They'd been painted over in bright
orange that covered the wall and reflected the heat of the late afternoon onto me and the
hundreds who had taped their signs to what had become a memorial. Children stuck their
fingers into holes in the façade to see if they could find any remnants of the bullets that
hadn't reached their target. I asked them if they remembered the palm trees. They turned
and gave me an empty look I had seen before. They said they had no memories of such a
place. I wondered if I had ever really been there before.

Antonio’s mother had traveled from the outskirts of Michoacán, Mexico, where
he was born. She’d left when she’d heard of his shooting and it had taken her two days to
arrive. It was the first time she had seen him in a decade and their reunion was at the morgue.

As the sun set, those who remained burned candles wrapped in the images of saints that glowed like stained glass in a Catholic church. I crouched down beside what looked to be one hundred of those candles and made a picture of Antonio's mother kneeling in the place where her son had bled to death. She covered her face with a shawl, the arms of her nieces and nephews wrapped around her. As she wept, they trembled together and she looked up at them as if she were going to ask a question.

I knew what the photograph was as soon as I'd taken it. I didn't have to look at the back of the camera to know it was better than the umbrella woman, or the disheveled baker, or any I'd imagined while I had waited on that block of paradise.

All those years I’d tried to imagine ways to fight the formula had been a trivial way to spend my time—eating cheese rolls in my car while I'd tried to sum up my frustration with my creative limitations and a job that promised to be an outlet for exploring ideas but had only led to dull interpretations of issues that nobody seemed to want to consider seriously. The rules had embittered me against that system which had tried to define what a great photo was, and what story should be told. I sought to redefine it for them, but I had gotten lost in my own translation. I had been in the way of the story I was attempting to tell by incessantly trying to make a picture that I could hold as an
accomplishment of my ingenuity, but only partially revealed the layers of complexity that were involved.

Antonio and his entire family had paid for that simplification, not for my lazy afternoons waiting in that empty lot, but for the idea that I could wrap the entirety of a relocated culture into a juxtaposition of palm trees against a desolate concrete sidewalk. They were served no better by my whimsical interpretation of their daily reality than by the paper who retooled and appropriated their story into the formula and wrote it into the historical record. I had not pursued the serious story or pushed my editors harder to look at their community. I hadn’t known Antonio, and I hadn't tried to know him.

That picture of the family lit by the prayers of their community would be seen by millions the next day as they woke to their morning paper or tapped into the link on their iPad. Those readers would be pulled from their comfortable morning routine to consider the suffering of a family. They might have imagined it was their child or their father on that street corner. They might have been angered by the injustice, or the trigger-happy cops, or the immigrants who were destroying the country. Then they would flip to the next page and return to their doughnuts and Americanos.

Antonio's family would find no comfort or artistry in a photograph of their pain. It would not help them to know of the awards I might have won with it. None would talk about how they could feel the agony that had been captured in the mother's questioning eyes. They wouldn't reach out to tell me what it meant to them, and I would never get to explain to them how long it had taken to make the perfect photograph.
Old Timer

“We both have truths
Are mine the same as Yours?”

- Pontius Pilate from Jesus Christ Superstar

Cowboy Randy bowed his head into his Stetson and paused to pray before he asked us all to do the same. I could still see his eyes peek over the back of the brim. He was a compact man who looked to be in his mid-50s with a chest that bulged like an alert cobra. His skin was severely lacking moisturizer and stained maroon, but his eyes were bright blue. He was watching Anna and me as we stood together in a dirt field under an expanse of Oregon sky. We were surrounded by a dozen more cowboys and a scatter of cowgirls standing beside their horses. An equal number of spouses and a few girlfriends were preparing lunch in the back of a Ford F250 that looked like it had lost its tailgate some time ago. A gaggle of children clung to the tight denimed legs of their mothers while a few older ones held their thumbs in their front belt loops and leaned against the fence which encompassed us. We were at the yearly branding on Randy’s farm, a family affair with all the fixins of a Saturday afternoon barbecue at the park, except with more testicles.
I was standing alongside a young, trim kid with a scar on his left cheek who’d introduced himself as Tex just a moment ago. He’d given me a head-nod-once-over which made me realize the jacket still lacked the authenticity of being dragged by a bull: Cowboy 101. It was sharp around the seams, and would have still had a price tag hanging off the elbow if Anna hadn’t snapped it off as we’d moseyed up to the branding.

I abided the request and took off my cowboy hat, the one I’d jimmied out of the back of the closet the evening before, and held it under my arm against the crisp fold of a new canvas jacket. On the way down Highway 97 to this ranch in Oregon, we’d stopped at a Big R store, the Bed Bath and Beyond for a family with a herd of Holsteins. I’d bought a Carhartt coat to bolster the facade I was trying to pull off—the largely invented backstory where I was good friends with the farmers’ sons in the small town where I grew up. The Oregon cowboys knew few of the families that owned the wheat farms in my town. They also knew it was home to one of the state’s biggest universities. I was trying not to tell them it was where my father worked as a professor and where I’d made it to my 30s without bucking one hay bail.

Anna and I had worked together a few years back in our newspaper days. She was the agriculture reporter then; I was the photojournalist. Sitting in our newsroom cubicles, she never stopped pitching me new ways to get out of town—to find the real stories. We’d both dropped the newspaper habit a few years prior, but we’d held onto the road trip remnant, circling our journalistic wagons every other summer and heading out to tell the big stories. She’d switched jobs to become a public radio reporter and that
summer we were out on the range trying to scare up a story that the city folk hadn’t heard about between episodes of Car Talk and that garden show. Public Radio listeners loved stories like this, where they could flaunt their open-mindedness and give them talking points for their next dinner party that challenged the trailer load full of stereotypes they had, but tried to avoid mentioning. I knew this because we’d driven a good portion of the way listening to Oregon Public Radio and hadn’t stopped talking about how much we loved Ira Glass’s incredible vocal range. We were out in America’s backyard looking for the real story behind the western folklore or how one of the cowgirls put it: “the story of where y’all’s food comes from.”

I pulled out a pen from my jacket and wrote a few notes to myself about the wide open sky and the mud, the blood, and the bulls, and the beer. It sounded more like I was scrawling the lyrics to a country song from a 57th-floor studio in New York City. I took a few photos, but they were no more insightful. I was struggling to see what was in front of me.

Anna was raised out there, not on that ranch, but another one with a bigger house and less cow shit. She’d left her heels in the car and kicked through the manure and spit with a pair of knee-high leather cowboy boots. She’d told me a few times how much you could tell about a man by the cowboy hat he wore. I believed her, but, to me, they all looked like Tim McGraw.

I’d spent a week planning the look I’d have on the road trip. I’d added a few new items on the drive down, but hadn’t upgraded the black Adidas sneakers to a pair of
pointed-toe leather boots which every grown man and woman in the corral was wearing. Anna had spent a month trying to make enough contacts this far from her home ranch to wrangle a good story out of the area. When we’d rolled into town a few days earlier, the only one we knew was Patty, the owner of the diner. It was the beginning of the summer and we knew stories were happening all over the area, but it was impossible to know where to start. There weren’t any public relations outfits or press agents in the area, in part because Patty did the job for all of them. She’d warned us as we walked in, as if she’d already sniffed us out. “Some journalists from the city were just here trying to tell our story.” We bellied up to the diner bar and asked for the freshest cup of her finest coffee and clarification. The journalists she was talking about had been there a few months ago, possibly years, but they’d left a foul impression.

When someone, journalist or otherwise, had stumbled onto a view of that country life, they knew they liked what they saw—they wanted in on a postcard or over their mantle. Some even wanted to give it a try. Most just wanted to take a piece of it home with them, with a good story from the ranch. The city journalists who had been there before us had stirred up something awful with a few of the ranching families—they’d embellished some details about one farm or got caught writing between two brother ranchers. Regardless, they’d started a feud between clans over some he said she said, and then walked away and watched the ratings for their story go through the roof from their condos in Portland. The town had been slow to let it go. We’d sucked down 47 cups of coffee bean bathwater over two days and listened to the saga before we were deemed
trustworthy enough, before Patty would give us the keys to the city. Finally on day two, as we were settling up our tab she let us in. “Give Randy a call,” she said, “he knows you’re coming out.”

Randy finished his prayer and everyone in the circle made the sign of the cross, their Stetsons landing on their chest signaling the Amen. Those hats had been ordained with the sweat of a hundred brandings, but they were crisp and clean around the brim. I replaced my bent and slightly yellowed hat on my head and rolled my shoulders back to adjust the cameras which hung off each shoulder, resting my thumbs on their triggers, ready to draw. I watched as in a single maneuver, the cowboys lowered their heads into their hats, swung their legs over their horses, and secured their ropes onto the saddles. As
they took off to retrieve the herd, their horses kicked up a cloud of mud and dirt around
Anna and me.

Randy strolled over and stopped, leaving only a few inches between the two of us. His smaller stature made the move seem less imposing, but he was trying.

“We ain’t gone have a problem here, ain’t we?”

“Don’t see why we would,” I said.

“Didn’t think so,” he laughed and elbowed me in my side leaving a dent in the jacket. “Nice threads,” he said without a hint of mockery. I was suspicious of his intent. I felt like a New York mob henchman relocated out West.

“This old thing? I just picked it up. Hope it don’t get dirty.” I smirked back at him and a spray of wet dirt whistled over our heads from a passing horse.

“No chance in that,” he said as he reached into one of the blue coolers at our feet and pulled out a chilly Busch tall can.

“Have one if you want, just don’t go fishin’ around in the other cooler,” he said as he winked at Anna. I knew what was in the other cooler, but they both thought the city boy would wince when they opened it up and showed me the disembodied sacks of masculinity. I did. Randy flipped it open and shook the cooler around a bit, as we watched them jiggle around in their own blood. “Just be ready when we grill those boys up later,” he said.

I smiled back and asked him where the Tabasco was.
“Don’t got none of that,” he said, “but there’s plenty of catsup and mayo in the pickup if you need it, if the girls’ll let you have any.”

He waved us off and turned to walk away as he slipped his folding knife from the small pocket on the side of his pants. He flipped it open and turned back to us.

“Don’t you go where we can’t see you, don’t look a bull in the eye, and don’t be talking to my wife, unless you wanna leave without that shiny coat.” He wasn’t smiling as much anymore as he made his point with the end of the knife. I nodded without lowering my eyes.

When I was ten, I’d found a similar knife in my parent’s dresser drawer. It was my father’s, and if he had ever used it, there was no evidence. I had taken it from the box and pulled it open with two fingers. The action was smooth as the blade was sharp—it glimmered. I’d found out later it was a gift from his father-in-law who was a farmer, and something my dad had seemingly never had much use for. His tools of choice were the pen and pencil in his shirt pocket and a black comb in his pants. As he’d gotten older, he stopped carrying the comb, but if you needed something to write with, he always had two options. They were silver and heavier than you’d expect by their thin profile. When I pulled one from his pocket to write something, it slid through my fingers. They took practice to use.

The knife was cast with a roughened tactile casing and I felt stronger letting it rest its weight in my palm. When my parents weren’t home, I’d sneak into the closet and release the knife from its cardboard safe. Its name, pressed into metal on its molded
The exterior was *Old Timer*. The knife made me feel uncomfortable, scared of its sharpness. Within there was a power and maturity I was unsure of, a responsibility I wasn’t yet ready for. I ran the blade along a sheet of paper and gripped the base and threw it against the wall of my room until I learned how to make it stick every time.

I asked for a knife as soon as my parents would let me get my own. I got the most impressive Swiss Army setup I could with a multitude of more than forty tools. I immediately tried it on the wall, but it was just a jumble of unbalanced metal. I tossed it in a bag instead and found it years later in a drawer with the *Old Timer*. I hadn’t found much purpose for either of them. The tools I began to use were the ones of my father—adding the camera with its multitude of features. Together the pen and the camera were a practical art, documenting and interpreting simultaneously and instantaneously.
“Those the only rules we got out here. O’er than that you can do what you want,” Randy said, as he flipped the knife in his hand. His blade looked as if it had been dulled and resharpened hundreds of times, resembling only a small portion of the original metal. It could have been another *Old Timer*, but any marking of a logo had worn off. It had seen such a different world than my father’s knife. It had changed so many lives.

“Thanks sir, I’ll make you look good,” I said and pretended to take a picture of him, feeling ridiculous by the gesture even as I did it.

“Jus trying to keep you safe, boy,” he looked up and squinted. His mouth hung on the end of ‘boy,’ as if the sun had stunned him. The horses were on the horizon, bringing a herd of what looked to be a hundred head.

Once they had the cows and young steer calfs inside the corral, the cowboys began their work. The horses danced around the perimeter, separating a calf from his mother and into a stress run. Ropes fell slack in their hands and the horses jumped to a full gallop. The ropes became lures released overhead. One rope would land horns, the other a back leg. The horses would rear back and the calf would collide with an invisible wall.

A man on the ground approached with two large strides and pressed his boot to the calf’s neck. The branding iron was pulled from the fire where it had been laying for an hour, the smoke and sparks churned the ash into a small cloud. The end was as red as
the calf’s shaking tongue as the man scalded the hind leg flesh with the iron and the calf screamed. Randy took his pocket knife from his jeans and knelt over the calf which had quit resisting since the brand had burned ownership into its hide—Randy’s ownership. The calf’s mother could no longer do anything for her son. Randy took the blade of his knife between his teeth unfolded it under his blood encrusted fingernails and in one sweeping motion ran it’s edge against the bull’s belly and released its testicles.

He stood and walked over to me, his hand full of blood. In it was his open knife and the young bull’s manhood. He tossed the bloody skin mass into the other cooler along with dozens of others from the day. “We don’t actually eat those,” he said, and laughed as if he was telling himself a joke. “But go ahead if you’re feeling like it.”
I was only slightly relieved that we weren’t going to be dining on nut sacks. The other part of me wanted to reach in and pull out a set and throw them in a pan over the open coals. Not for the story it would have made back home, or because it would have proven some version of masculinity that I needed to verify to myself. I knew that reaching into that cooler or biting into a chewy ball would likely only prove that I was desperate for the favor of the cowboys, but I wanted to overcome any stereotype that I was wearing. I wasn’t going to let them make any assumptions of who I was.

Anna and I had come looking for someone to show us that world, someone to explain it to us. But we came with our lenses up. We arrived dressed how we assumed they would want to see us. I bought a pair of boot cut jeans and came out looking like Garth Brooks. Nothing I could wear or say out on that ranch would have made me any more cowboy than my limited understanding of what a cowboy was. My authenticity shown like a bent Stetson.

Randy and the cowboys knew why we’d come, and they’d put on something of a show for us as well. Not a fictionalized version of themselves, but one that was romanticized and fed into the expected narrative, right down to pretending they ate the Rocky Mountain Oysters. I suspected that every rope toss or steer chase had a little bit of the rodeo in it, a little performance.

Both sides were performing our routines—I’d cowboy’d up and Randy had ribbed me about my duds. He’d pulled out a knife, and I’d shown him my camera. Initially I assumed I was supposed to impress him with my knowledge about country life, when
what I was there to do was to admit that I would never actually understand what it meant, but was willing to try.

I’d used my tools to interpret what I saw and came away with a version of what I had already known. The work of the camera to attempt to explain a person or a place is feeble if the user does not understand how to use it. The camera isn’t the speaker as much as it is the translator. It cannot easily capture the standoff between cultures because it isn’t equipped to. It can bring us closer to worlds we cannot easily access, but only if employed by someone who is listening, or knows how to.

Randy tipped his hat toward Anna and turned back to the middle of the corral. A young steer was already roped, tied, and branded, waiting for the transition from youth. I
made a photo as Randy wiped what blood remained on his blade onto the leg of his jeans.

Suddenly I felt parched and exhausted by the late afternoon sun. I checked to make sure Randy was distracted before I walked over to the two coolers, but he was watching me under that white brim while he used the blade to scrape the dirt from under his fingernails, waiting. I smiled at him with a nod and hoped I could remember which one the beers were in.
Homecoming

"Don't limit a child to your own learning,
for he was born in another time."

-Rabindranath Tagore
Where the Ganges River meets the Bay of Bengal, there is a line in the water where the brown silt from the Himalayas meets the tan silt from the ocean. Our wooden boat the size of a small ark slowed and rocked on that border, as much a dividing line as any created between countries. We were an island on that vessel, our five-person family—my Indian father, my Czech-American mother, and their three adult children. Out there, in a sea of suspended fine particulate matter, was where my father decided it would be best to leave my grandmother.

Many years before that day, my father and his parents had awoken before sunrise and taken a taxi in the moonlight through one of the largest cities in India—Kolkata. At the airport gate, he said goodbye to more than fifty family members who had come to see him off to America. At the end of the receiving line, he expected his mother but didn’t find her. The stewardess rushed him onto the tarmac, and he wondered how she could have left without a goodbye. As he walked up the corrugated metal steps to the plane, he heard her laughing inside on a personal tour from the captain.

She was a small woman with dark hair like motor oil, tied into a braid which draped the entire length of her back and she looked at her son knowing the next time she would see him he would be a man. But then he was still a boy at 19, with his hair soaked from the month-long downpour.
On the plane, he found his seat and peered through the porthole. His mother stood under the black umbrella, the extra fabric from her sari pulled across her face as the rest of the family waited inside the terminal. The plane taxied away, and he watched until he could not tell if she was there or not. She watched as his plane climbed the cascade of clouds to find the sun which neither had seen since the monsoons began.

My family and I landed at the Kolkata airport in India at the end of 2011, at the beginning of a three-week journey. We’d been there before together, and we knew from my father to keep tight together and hold our bags close. We passed through the hyena den full of taxi cab drivers as they grabbed at us and our bags, trying to lure you into their cars. My father—once bigger than his children, now the smallest—took the lead and pushed through most of them, turning to warn us multiple times to hold tight to our bags.
Eventually, he chose one of the drivers, and soon the five of us were stacked inside a cab, arms and bags interlaced with one another. My father was in the front passenger seat talking with the driver in a language I didn’t understand, as my two siblings and my mom packed the backseat like a small young family on a summer road trip.

We weren’t young anymore, or small. I was 33, and my siblings and I were well into our professional careers. My parents hadn’t retired yet, but they were past the age when people usually do. We’d planned this trip for a year, sorting work and school schedules to find a time that worked for all our hectic lives. As adults, our family had traveled a few places together—a cruise to Alaska or a vacation to Hawaii, but we hadn’t been back to India together for more than a decade. My sister, brother, and I had jumped on and off buses and rode motorcycles in countries across the world by ourselves—we were seasoned travelers, comfortable in unknown situations. But in India, we were tourist’s in a way we hadn’t been anywhere else in the world. Our comfort wasn’t reliant on our ability to maneuver through traffic or read a map of —the city—in India our father was our tour guide of a country to which he had written the roadmap. With him, we were mere children again.

Back in The States, my father had the expert approach of hands-off parenting. For our entire lives, my mother had made our meals, taken us to school, and shuttled us between sports and music lessons. We had the childhood you see on Leave It To Beaver where the mother stayed home and raised the children, and the father made money at work and came home to do more work. It was an entirely normal childhood for the
1950’s, but when we lived it in 80’s it was different than most of our friends. It wasn’t that my father was absent, he just wasn’t around, and when he was, there was always a newspaper or magazine to be read. I have a few memories of playing soccer with my dad in the backyard, but every one of those has a photograph associated with it, so it may have been the only time it happened.

It wasn’t until we had become adults that my father began to engage with us—that he finally saw us. Around the same time, we had also left home for school and jobs, and the time we had with our parents was limited to holidays and trips took together. My father had returned to India on a quest of his own—to bring his mother’s ashes home. But I was on a different journey. One that I was just realizing—I’d come to find my father.

He had left his childhood home on a plane at 19 and never really returned. Since then he’d traversed the U.S., from Berkeley to New York to the heart of the Midwest where he met our mother and I was born. As the family’s first child, my father immediately took me to see his parents in his homeland, and we had since returned a handful of times as a family.

It wasn’t until returning as an adult that I realized my grandmother’s death meant a possible end to an identity problem I’d carried since I was a child. I had been told I was Indian for as long as I could remember, I just never had the proof.

These are the things about me that are Indian:

1. My first name.

2. My last name.
Anything else I’ve claimed about my Indian-ness for the past three decades has been done solely for personal gain. Whenever possible, I checked the boxes on applications noting “Asian,” “Indian,” or when those were not available, “Pacific Islander,” because it sounded close enough. I’ve used it to get into schools, or onto lists for job interviews that I wanted, but for which I didn’t think I had a chance. I figured it was a warranted use—I’d spent enough time eating curry, playing Indian music, making curry, listening to parents talk about their overachieving kids, praying to gods, and eating more curry to give me the necessary Indian credentials to pass, at least on paper. The only problem was that nobody outside of my family had ever identified me as Indian.

In school, they name called the other kids with similar identity problems Oreos and Twinkies—Blacks and Asians who had color on the outside but were just as white as Bing Crosby inside. For us Indians, the best term they had was the ABCDs, American Born Confused Desi. (Desi is the loose term for the people of the Indian subcontinent.) None of my Indian friends knew you could make fun of ABCDs, likely because every Indian kid in the city was fluent and had parents who still played Hindi music in the car and decorated their homes exclusively with artwork of the Taj Mahal and women carrying clay pots on their heads. If those kids had known, I would have been their primary target.

The issue wasn’t if I was a confused Desi, but if I was Desi at all. In comparison to the other kids who were questioning their identity, I’m white on the outside and white
on the inside, but I have a father who’s brown. I look like a Midwest farmer with a healthy tan—tall with wide shoulders and a mix of features that are tough to identify.

At one Hindu religious ceremony/potluck in our hometown, to which our family would go every few months, my sister and I were standing back watching the Brahmin priest complete the prayer ceremony before the meal. As he was finishing the blessing, an Indian chap, likely a student from the University, approached us with suspicion. He asked politely if we needed any help. We laughed and explained that we were there with our father, the short dark brown man across the room. We told the man that most certainly understood everything about the Goddess Durga, and the significance of her ten arms, and definitely did not need any clarification as to why there were so many offerings of fruits and flowers all over the floor. “Ahhh, Professor Bose’s kids, so wonderful,” he said and continued talking. He was speaking in Bengali, and so we stared at him until he finished and then politely explained that we had just come for the curry.

To most people, I’m as much Indian as I am Italian or Texan, Persian or Mexican, or, once, Eskimo. I’m brown in the way that most of the world will be in another hundred years of race mixing, which is to say—I’m beige.

Though my looks are deceiving to many, the most definitive reason I am never identified as Indian is that I don’t speak the language, or rather, any of the 22 official ones of India. Bengali was my father’s, a language spoken by more than 200 million people in the world, but not by me. My dad hadn’t taught it to us as children, and I hadn’t learned it on my own since. In most situations, my lack of Bengali didn’t set me apart from my
friends, and I rarely thought about my bi-lingual inabilities. With my Indian family, though, I was an outsider.

My grandmother had come to live with us in the States after her husband, my grandfather, had passed away. I lived in the same town during a few of those years as I went to college just down the road from my parents’ house in Eastern Washington. While my brother and sister set out on courses similar to my father to campuses across the country and abroad, I stayed close. I would visit with my grandmother often, and we would sit together in her room at my parents' house. I would ask her about the Bengali movies I’d bought for her on the internet or the fish patties my mom had made her that she had barely touched.

“Bangla, Bangla!” she would say, hoping that I would finally learn her language after a quarter century of failing to. It had been the way we’d talked to one another since I had been young. She would pretend not to understand, telling me to speak Bengali. I wouldn’t, and she would eventually come around to talking to me in her increasingly limited English. It had been funny to me then, but now I realize the frustration she would have had, not able to completely understand or communicate with her blood. While that frustration was directed towards us, the children, it was also at her son who had allowed us to live our entire lives without the ability to really know her.

When my grandmother was living with my parents, I considered that it might be the last chance I would have to learn my father’s mother tongue. I began to spend
afternoons with her, listening to a set of tapes at night and practicing my conversational skills in the daytime. I could see that my taking an interest changed the dynamic between us. I would come home after class or work and sit on the floor of her room at my parents' house and go over pronunciation. She would explain her Bengali movies, and I’d ask her about my grandfather. She would smile when I came back the next day.

That lasted less than a month. Other pressing school deadlines loomed, and I grew embarrassed by my inability to overcome my struggle, to ask my grandmother how she was in her language. I wanted the solution to be easy, just to understand as my cousins did with their parents, like every Indian kid I knew did. They had the language down so well that it was an annoyance for them to have to speak it for their parents. For me, I only wanted to know what they were saying—to be included in the jokes or listen to the lyrics of a song or pick-up on what their parents were nagging them to do.

There were many reasons to learn the language on my own, but doing so also meant constantly admitting my inability to communicate and understand. Not a single Indian person I knew had to study the language—it was just something they understood. Every fumbling question or misunderstanding I had only made me feel as if I would always be the ABCD. I began to avoid it all together which was more of a rejection to my grandmother than if I had never tried at all.

She never got over it. Though we continued to talk in English, she began to look to my father when she needed a translation of what I had said. Then she would either nod or shake her head. This crippled form of communication was how she and I
communicated for five years—through my father. He was the last connection I had to half of my family lineage, an entire history hidden behind the wall of a language I didn’t know, or want to. Though I spent many years with grandmother, what I knew about her would ultimately be what my father had told me.

When it had become too much for my parents to take care of my grandma at home, they moved her to a place a few blocks from their house, with a group of people from around the world. The house was filled with half a dozen parents of other adults who had come from other countries to find work in The States. Her caretaker from Nairobi, Africa, had married a local man and they’d built an entire facility in the basement of their house to care for people who were also far from home—a refugee camp
for the ex-pat elderly. It was a humble but beautiful place, where people could live their last days in comfort with others from across the world in the same situation. And for those same reasons, it was also a sentence of solitary confinement.

My father would visit every day after work, sit with her, talk about India, and ask how she was. He would ask his friends who also spoke Bengali to stop by and say hi, but they were busy with their own families and could usually only come every other month.

“Khuba bhāla?” (Very good?), he would ask his mother.

She would shake her head, “Na, na bhāla.”

For my grandmother, she no longer had a home—the house in Kolkata was no longer suitable for her to live on her own, and where she lived near my parents she had nobody but my father. Unless he was with her, there wasn’t a person she could talk to.

My father is five-foot-three, and I am an even six feet. I don’t look like my grandfather, but I have his height and square shoulders. As a child, I would sit with him when he and my grandmother would stay with us. I didn’t know then about how he had trained as a young man to be a boxer or that he had risen through the steel factory company ranks to become the first Indian manager in my father’s hometown. He was a hometown hero, but I just knew him as a charmer, methodical and precise, and he was continuously teaching. He told me, “Always remember two things.”

1. “It is important to have strong stomach muscles.”

2. “You must do better than your father has done.”
I’ve failed in achieving six-pack abs, but I still hope that I have the ability to do better than my father. It’s a task which seems more unlikely with every passing year. My dad refuses to retire and has continued to improve in his field. Around the time of our trip to India, he had taken an appointment to The Department of Energy, which meant that he worked for the President.

Whether or not my grandfather had given my dad the same advice, he had certainly lived up to it. My father was the first of his family to leave his country for a better education, and he stayed when the only jobs seemed to be anywhere but India. He’s studied Electrical Engineering and has become a foremost expert in the power grid. He’s been on CNN and quoted in the Washington Post when a journalist needs to understand why exactly the lightbulbs aren’t working.

His success was part of the so-called sub-continent brain drain that crippled India’s economic growth for a generation. India gave up its most promising children, hoping they or their children may someday return home. It is this increasingly smaller world that my father grew into. He established himself in The States and helped an endless supply of family and friends gain access to education and work. He became the model of the new immigrant, trading his progress for a loss of his culture.

On the same trip, my father also visited with India’s equivalent to the Department of Energy in New Delhi which handled the country’s power grid. He didn’t tell any of us, but he’d been invited by the agency to help consult on strategies that the country needed to implement to enter into the next generation of energy growth for India. He didn’t ask
for money or credit; it was merely the completion of an unspoken promise he’d made by leaving decades earlier.

When my father took my grandmother’s ashes from the cardboard box where he’d transported them from the States and let them fall from the plastic bag into the water, I tried to focus, but I couldn’t tell the gray sky from the beige water that accepted those ashes as their own. It was one of the few times I’d seen my father cry, and I wonder now what he was thinking about at that moment.

Was he considering the sacrifice she had made, allowing him to follow his own father’s dream in trade for a lifetime of short visits? Was it that he had gone looking for something greater than what his father had done and found the sacrifice he’d made had not been worth it? Was it that it had been? Was it that after fifty years away, India was now less of his home than the one he’d made for himself and my mother? Was it that no amount of guided tours through the country would give his children any more of an idea of where he was from? Was it that the place he once knew as home, was now as much a memory to him as his own mother?

Years later my mom would say it had been the wrong place—that my grandmother would have wanted to be with family instead of at the bottom of the Bay of Bengal. It was likely her way of coming to peace with what we all felt guilty about—how my grandmother had spent her last years alone in a house full of people. It had been the end of the sacrifice she’d made—sending her boy into the world, allowing it to take him,
praying that maybe someday he would return, and hoping he would never know what it felt like to not have a home.
Ibox: Zero

Some time ago I lost all my email. Every message I had sent or received for the past twenty years going back to the day I got my first circumcised version of my name smashed against an @ and the acronym for the school I was attending.

I clicked undo, pressed ctrl-alt-del, and said a prayer to St. Anthony (the saint of lost things). I called tech support and trolled the trolls on the internet. I even searched Yahoo answers.

I’d been trying to reduce the number of messages I’d been receiving from Uncle Sam and a Nigerian Prince, both of whom were sending me notes about my penis size. In a double-click-mishap, I moved my entire Inbox to an imaginary location. That accident resulted in the disappearance of seventy thousand messages, or the entire online history of me. I had suddenly and unexpectedly achieved the goal so many of us strive for: Inbox: zero.

As I was considering what I had just lost—group email chains from my boss, a quick note from my mom asking how I was, 2 a.m. work requests, witty banter with the girl I’d spent hours crushing on, an embittered rage of correspondence over something
political with a former friend, I remembered a moment years earlier when I returned home one evening to an unexpectedly open front door.

At first nothing was out of place, but eventually I noticed the fire-proof lockbox where I had kept a dozen notebooks was missing. In those books were my concepts for short stories, pages of dialogue for films, first drafts of poems, epiphanies and other non-drug fueled visions, detailed descriptions of dreams, and hundreds of brilliant opening sentences of unwritten bestsellers. They were my life’s would-be-work, a collection of the words I’d written thus far, and they were likely already sitting at the bottom of a lake, or on the floor of a stolen ’82 Tercel heading into the sunset.

I grieved the loss of those ideas for years, often dreaming that I’d just misplaced them in the basement and would wake to the reality that they were even further forgotten. I wrote a Craigslist post asking for their return with a reward, but didn’t publish it. I considered going under hypnosis to try and recall some of the poems or thoughts, but eventually realized I was only holding onto the idea that what I’d lost was important to who I had been.

At the time of the robbery I’d recently ended a relationship, and the two events unfolding simultaneously felt serendipitously catastrophic. It was my ten-year fire, flashing across the forest floor and destroying three-story-getaway-cabins and single-wide-trailers alike. It was a reminder that things like this happen to everyone, and I was not in control of any of it.
Today, I’ve tried to regain control by capturing or saving those thoughts and memories into apps that are synced to a network of satellites and server farms. I no longer worry about losing these memories because they’re safe in the cloud.

When the internet was in its infancy, information was being added slowly without oversight. It wasn’t until years later, in the late ‘90s, when people began to realize that as information was removed or individual hard drives and web pages died, so did the information. Experts say that it was the greatest destruction of information since the burning of the Great Library of Alexandria. It resulted in the creation of the Internet Archive (also called the Way Back Machine, a throwback name to the time machine that Rocky and Bullwinkle used to solve crime) which allowed anyone to travel back through time to see how a single page on the internet looked at various days since it was created.

Living in a digital society means consistently, almost neurotically, adding words, images, and videos into our cloud memories. Adding pictures from yesterday’s barbecue, starting on that next great novel, or writing a short meta essay quickly adds up. With so much more being saved, we rarely have the time to make decisions about what to delete and what to keep. It’s best just to save it all. The computer was invented with the promise to simplify our lives, yet it spills more data into our digital memory every year. As we add, the easier it becomes to turn even more of ourselves over to the cloud. Where reading a book or sending credit card information on a device once felt uncomfortable, now it has become routine.
As we adapt to working with this system of saved memories and online data, our minds become less capable of handling the increasing amount of words, photos, and videos that we are saving. I am currently creating, recording, and storing more parts of my life into digital memories every month. For photography alone, I have more than two dozen hard drives of images I’ve taken, full to the terabyte brim. Each contains hundreds of thousands of pictures, likely topping more than a million in total. Of all those images I’d be hard pressed to show you twenty I like, but sorting through those dozens of drives would be such an overwhelming undertaking that I don’t even consider adding it to my to do list. Not only do I not have the time to go back through the thousands of events, my mental ability to keep track of so many folders, assignments, and pictures is already reaching its breaking point.

The camera is the most prolific documentary device humans have ever created. Since its introduction less than two hundred years ago, it has spilled into all parts our lives. We fill our surroundings with cameras—camera phones, security cameras, web cameras, and the occasional old-fashioned digital camera—constantly documenting and digitizing our memory. What these devices have in common is they condense all of our visual communication into the language of zeros and ones—terabytes and petabytes. The problem is, it seems less and less likely that the humans who invented those cameras will be able to appreciate all of the information they are saving. The only entities that could process such an opulent amount of data would be the machines which are storing them.
Soon the cloud will likely contain every piece of information ever created. We will have the ability to read every book, or see every historic moment, search every word that has ever been quoted and find everything I have ever said, written, watched, read, eaten, or created. It will be an exhausting amount of information to process.

Naturally there will be a digital system to help our increasingly feeble brains do just that. We’ll be dependent on that system and how it decides to curate the information and show us what was important. It’s true that the victors write the history books, but then it must be found by the correct search terms.

Without clay pottery, entire civilizations would have been lost from our history books. Most of the artifacts that we have found were not left as time capsules for future historians to find, only kitchen utensils accidentally sitting in the right place to not degrade past our recognition. It is by these pieces of past creation that we define entire groups of people, their desires, ethics, what they ate, and of course, their stories.

I’ve written hundreds of ideas into tattered pages of notebooks and never looked back for them. I deleted thousands of emails and a few weeks later I had thousands more to worry about. I saved a million photographs and left them to decay on hard drives in a desk drawer. Yet it is the dozen notebooks that I grieve—for my loss of who I was, ideas I had selected as special. Had they not been taken from me, I would not have valued them as much. It’s their absence I mourn, the physical space they held feels more empty in their absence.
What I’m working on now—my digital self—has the potential to survive into the next millennia. It will live on forever, accessible to future generations in a way that has never been possible—to mark my place in history. The physical representation of my ideas, my handwriting, my doodles in the margins, my erasure marks, are now digital fonts and graphics pasted into online documents, and they will last forever. Just as long as it isn’t interrupted and destroyed by a solar flare, a forgotten password, or an unfortunate double-click deletion incident. In which case you’re likely reading this entire thing on a clay bowl that you found on a dry lake bed near a box of worthless journals.
Becoming Herod

They brought Him to me in skinny jeans, beaten and rejected by the same people who had called Him Savior only days earlier. I had asked him to prove Himself, show me his magic and his miracles. He'd refused, so I too had beat him, and he'd cowered as the stage
lights threw my shadow across His blood-stained v-neck. He was a pitiful sight, and it made me reconsider the last months and then the thirty years that had brought us to that place. He and I had been there before, not this young man before me, but the man he represented. I'd been amazed and confused and frustrated by Him since I was first able to question my faith. For years, I'd been contemplating what I might say if I was ever face to face with Him—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then I was there with the words that I'd carried since they were a child's words. As I opened my mouth to lash Him with bitterness and contempt, Jesus lifted his head to look at me, not with anger, but understanding. And then I forgot the words I had waited so long to say.

A few months earlier I had been standing in front of the photography class I taught at the Jesuit Catholic College where I work. I was lecturing about the importance of correct exposure, but my mind was elsewhere, wondering if the students could see any remnant of the eyeshadow I had been wearing the night prior.

I was playing King Herod in the school's production of Jesus Christ Superstar, the rock opera that reconsiders the last days of the life of the world's most famous prophet. While I hadn't contemplated if there was a need to take on a full method transformation into the role, rehearsals were taking up most of my evenings, and I'd arrive in class the next day still wearing much of the stage makeup. The students hadn't mentioned it, but they had seemed more intrigued with my explanation of depth of field.
Herod had a reputation as a callous and pompous king, ostentatious and, depending on your version of history, effeminate. In the musical, he surrounded himself with an entourage of concubines and man whores and lived among them as a modern celebrity might. Our director had designed a rendition around an 80's hip-hop theme. Herod was based on Rev Run of Run-DMC, a rap group who established hip-hop in the mid-80s and lived to become the godfathers of the genre. It wasn't Rev that the character was built from, but the nature of celebrity.

In Herod I saw a man who feared that people saw him as transparent and weak. The problem he had was that he had acquired his power through birth, only able to retain a portion of the dynamism and cruelty his father had wielded as he executed many members of his people and even one of his ten wives. Herod Jr. succeeded his father after his death and began his reign with something to prove. He likely thought those around him saw him as a fraud.

It was my first time on stage. I was vulnerable, working with some of the same students from my class. I was just a part-time photography professor who couldn't hold his students' attention unless we were having a conversation about the photos in their Instagram feeds. Most lectures I felt like everything I was explaining was regurgitation of a flimsy understanding that I had of the topic that could easily be exposed with a little independent YouTube research. But every Tuesday and Thursday they took my understanding as truth, rarely questioning or bothering to read the book. If I said it, it was
gospel, and they were mere parishioners. I wondered if anyone around me ever saw me as a fraud.

Here's my secret: I've never taken a photo class. I don't have a degree or certification in photography, or design, or any relevantly related field. I can't explain to you how a lens works. I've won a few photography awards along the way, but they weren't that important, and there were many years between them. Somehow I've been teaching beginning photography courses for the past five years and built a reputation that I know what I'm doing.

On the stage I was stripped of that power. I was among cast members who had taken private voice lessons, studied modern dance in Italy, played Hamlet off-Broadway, and could cry on demand. On that stage I had nothing to teach. I was the student.

Early in rehearsals, I was struggling with my solo. More than a solo, it was an entire song, where Herod was the center point, and not a single other person uttered a sound. It was called “Herod's Song”, and I would sing it on the freeway and in the break room while waiting for my coffee to brew. Eventually, I grew confident I had memorized the lines well enough to add a few comic elements into my routine. I began to try them out in front of the crew and at parties as a preview trailer to tempt friends to come to the show. But when I was standing in front of Jesus, I would often lose my place, restart verses, and forget entire lines. I had little confidence that I could deliver them once the stage lights were on.
After rehearsal one evening, I was walking across campus with Jesus, who we called Mitch, but looked like a Jesus with black hair. He was far younger than me, but I suspected he had something I needed. He had performed a musical in high school and seemed confident even though he was struggling with the falsetto solos that were prevalent in *Superstar*. He was frustrated with his physical limitations but knew that he would get though it. I told him I was having similar feelings, except I knew my limitation was self-imposed and that I felt that the entire cast was judging me.

"Would it be ok if I gave you some advice?"

"Of course," I said, trying to disguise my anxiety with the suaveness I'd seen him pull off backstage in the make-up room with a few of the other cast members.

"When you're on that stage, don't think for a moment that any of us are hoping you'll screw up. We're all behind you. I'm on your side."

I considered the possibility that Jesus and Herod could have been friends, and secretly supported one another. I wondered about the history that might have been written if a leader with even a trivial amount of power allowed himself to admit such feelings to himself and others—to those whose opinions had defined that power with their adoration. Would such an admittance of vulnerability have boosted Herod's influence or destroyed it?

I thanked Mitch for his advice, and he let the words roll off his shoulders like someone who had been Jesus for years. "It's what we're all hoping for one another," he
said, and tucked his thumbs under his backpack straps and strolled off toward a group of his friends, his long hair catching the streetlight’s glow.

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Spending most every evening rehearsing Jesus' story was a constant reminder of my former life. I'd signed up for all of it when I was younger—I did the after-church classes, attended youth group on Sunday evenings, though mostly because the girl I was secretly in love with would be there and we would cram together on broken couches, hoping our knees would occasionally touch. I went on the annual ski trip with the church and drove across the country for a mission trip to Mexico where we helped build houses for people less fortunate. I now wonder how much assistance a gymnasium full of 15-year-olds could offer in the construction of a house.

I would often pray for that girl, and hope that we would find our way to one another, that she would someday see me as more than a friend. From the day we'd met, she'd been dating an older guy, but I was certain she was who I was meant to be with. I was also confident she would eventually see it that way, but I knew she might need a little more convincing. So whenever I had a birthday and blew out those candles, or bowed my head in church, I would ask for just that. I didn't tell anyone my feelings, especially not her, but I prayed for it every day.

One particular Easter, around the same time, I was sitting in one of the front pews where my mom would always camp during the most popular masses. It was Good Friday, the day that marks three days before Jesus would rise from the dead. It was the day that
he would be dragged through the streets, forced to carry the very cross he would be nailed to. At the end of this mass, the church would fall silent, no music, or singing, or chatting with the girl you were crushing on as you walked out together. It was expected that the entire congregation would leave in silence, contemplating the gravity of the moment. For the first time in my life, I realized the symbolism, and the feeling was wrenching. I stood, holding myself up by the wood pew, not merely considering, but feeling the rejection that a person would feel as friends, students, family, and those who had only days earlier lined those same streets to adore him now spat and cursed his existence.

The feeling was overwhelming for me, and I wept uncontrollably, as I had when I'd lost grandparents, or would later lose close friends, or realize that the girl would never be mine. To feel that adoration and that empathy now seems impossible, but when I was the last one in the church that evening, there was no worse pain that I could imagine.

My mom thought my intense reaction was my version of stigmata, the bleeding palms that some believers experienced when they are meant for a life of service—she thought that I was meant for the priesthood. For many months afterward, I also considered it a sign, always looking for another that I couldn't blame on hormones or a fever. I never found it, and by the next Easter, I no longer felt the same.

There were other reasons I stopped going to church during college, but largely it was because I'd met a new girl who had other plans for Sunday morning. I'd also begun to see that same belief as weakness in others. If I heard someone was a devout follower of
Jesus or worked with a youth group on weekends, I would immediately put distance between us.

I began to see those who put their faith into this fantastical story of zombie-turned-God as simple and complicit. Those who claimed that their belief in Him was the only action necessary to be saved. I had little respect for those who argued that with a simple declaration, you would find yourself among the angels in the afterlife. They were as selfish as I was, and yet somehow claimed favor over me. How was that fair or just? I no longer felt an emotional draw towards a religion of exclusion, and I continued to push it further away.

I'd used prayer to get the things I'd wanted for so long. Many of them were trivial things I'd asked for—a Nintendo or a pay raise. I'd offer an exchange in return—a promise that I would stop stealing money from my mom's purse or turn my sinning ways around. Those prayers had mostly all been answered, but I never held up my part of the bargain. It taught me that I could get what I wanted with no repercussions. Eventually, it led me to the conclusion that I could benefit from the prayers without the faith in the system that created them.

The next time I saw Jesus was as we walked into rehearsal together. I asked him about his weekend, and he answered quickly about a party or something stereotypical of what college kids did, and left to warm up with a group of women in the far corner of the theater. As we approached the point of our scene together in the second act, I watched
him as he effortlessly moved between the cast members. He would place a hand on
someone's shoulder when he would talk with them, or they would reach out to him as he
passed. He was beloved there, in that theater, on that campus, in a way that I could never
be. I wanted to believe he was tricking them all, that he was as much a fraud as I was, but
he moved so effortlessly between young women and older priests that I couldn't find the
evidence.

Herod only had one scene, which allowed me a lot of free time during rehearsals.
I tried to connect with the guys in the dressing room but found I was still largely an
outsider in that world. I blamed it on my role as a teacher but knew that I had always
found it tough to fit in. I sat in the audience and watched the cast run their scenes and
wondered if my time had passed.

Mitch was still struggling with his solos. In his most difficult scene in the Garden
of Gethsemane, Jesus questions his purpose and asks his Father why he must sacrifice
himself. His soliloquy song starts in a standard octave for a tenor and steps itself up over
a period of seven minutes into a register impossible for anyone other than Freddie
Mercury. For months, I would watch Mitch reach for it every night and fail. With every
week, it was becoming more apparent that it wasn't something that he could practice
enough. I not only doubted him, I believed that he wasn't capable.

Every few days we would be scheduled to run our scene together. As it opened,
Herod was lounging on a throne made of two concubines, or freshmen as they were
known to the cast. I stood up and strolled over to Mitch, expecting his acknowledgment.
He avoided eye contact and so I took his cue and started the scene. As the insults progressed, a few stage kicks and throws were required. I caught his shoulder with the bottom of my shoe and sent him sprawling across the floor. The director didn't cut, so I hurled a few minutes of the scripted insults at him. Afterward, he stood up and rubbed his shoulder and gave me a side glance. I apologized for the accident, and he waved it off as he retired backstage.

The next few months dragged on as if I was waiting for the arrival of the savior. Nightly I would stress about my solo, and every night I would improve on a single aspect of the performance. While at home with my girlfriend I would rehearse the songs for her. Eventually, I began going off script, adding new gestures and dance moves to the interaction with Jesus. Every practice would add another brick to my confidence, another inflation to my growing ego. As we would sit to put our shoes on every evening, I'd try to catch Mitch as he was leaving, but he was often surrounded by a gaggle of underclassmen and women.

By the morning of opening night, I'd run the scene flawlessly a half-dozen times. As I strolled across campus between classes, I felt as if I were walking on water—cast members would give a nod in the hallways and shout across the quad.

"Yo Herod! It's gonna be an epic night."

We arrived early to the theater to stretch and get the last pep talk from the director. One of the Jesuit priests who oversaw the theater program finished with a prayer as all 48 of us stood in a circle with joined hands. Mitch was beside me, his hands cold and
clammy. When the blessing completed and we both let go I wiped my palm against my
days. The crowd began to shuffle in and we all disappeared backstage to prepare. All the
men suited up in our costumes and met the women in the makeup room. Mitch was in the
center with three or four women draped around him helping to apply his eyeliner as he
kept them laughing. I found an open mirror and tried not to stab myself in the retina.

We all took the stage for the overture. I danced my way through a few of the
numbers as a backup dancer, usually in the back line to avoid any extra attention. From
the stage, it was difficult to see into the audience, but every so often I could make out a
co-worker or my partner in the front row.

As the cast rushed between scenes and costume changes I peered through the
curtain as Mitch began his solo in Gethsemane. As the song built to its crescendo, the
prayer climbs past the octaves that Mitch had struggled with in rehearsal for months. I
was nervous for him; I wanted him to get it. I suppose I prayed for it. Then, as if he had
the ability all along, he hit the note and collapsed.

By the time I sauntered onto the stage as King Herod I was cocky, each arm
draped over a woman half my age. I reclined against them, my fingers laced in their hair,
the stage was dark. Suddenly the lights were up, and Jesus was thrown at my feet by the
Roman guards.

I stood to get a better look, my fingers catching in the tangles from my freshmen
concubines. As I approached Jesus, I could see him as both the sophomore and the Son of
the God. I danced around Mitch and showed him that I had what it took to own that stage
—to claim it from him. I ran my hand across his face and asked if He would change Herod’s water to wine. I questioned aloud if He could take a walk across Herod’s swimming pool. I promised Him his freedom if he could show me even the slightest hint that he was who everyone said he was, that He could create miracles of even the most insignificant kind; that He would answer even the simplest prayer to prove that He was there. I asked Him to perform for Herod, for me.

Let me be completely transparent—through this entire process, I didn’t believe I was becoming Herod. I knew exactly who I was when I’d tried out for the role—a young professor struggling to gain the respect of both his students and peers, and a grown man still grappling with a faith he’d denounced, not outright, but through years of ignoring it. I went in disoriented and came out with a clear understanding that I was still just as confused. I knew that Mitch wasn’t Jesus, only someone who represented Him to me, a man who was struggling with his own identity. Jesus and Herod, Mitch and I—we were only characters that could be used to illustrate a really complicated problem of identity. Who was I, what did I believe, and why was Jesus’s story so complicated.

I was Herod as much as Mitch was Jesus—we weren’t, and we would never be. But during the preparation for that play, the long weeks of rehearsals, the constant reminder of my lapsed faith, and the nights I would wake up in a stress dream about failing on that stage, I constantly questioned which character I had desired to become and which I was turning into.
Those rehearsals didn’t convince me to go back to church on Sunday mornings, but they reminded me that my struggle with the redemption story—the sacrifice story—Christ’s story, had never left me. I’d never solved it, or answered the question that had come to me as an emotional adolescent kid. All of it was still inside me, unconsciously, looking to find a way to convince me to solve it, or to at least acknowledge it was there. I hadn’t imagined when it might reveal itself, but when it finally did on that stage, I felt as if I had no control over it—as if it was happening to another person. In processing it—writing about it, trying to get my mind around it—I could find only trite and expected language to explain my epiphany. How had Jesus and Mitch, He and he, two men, simultaneously held that stage? How had both of them spoke to me, and listened at the same time? I didn’t know those answers, because I hadn’t realized it had happened until weeks later. Even now, I’m not sure it did.

I had heard the stories of the miracles so many times as I’d prayed at the padded kneelers of my town's only Catholic church. I'd let those ideas dissolve into me as I placed the bland wafers on my tongue. I'd endured those stories my entire life, and found them to be more illustrative and less impressive the more I'd heard them. On that stage I wanted Him to show me something in return for all those years. I was no longer singing at Mitch, but at Jesus, insulting his appearance and his strength. I was suggesting that I had what he didn't, that my maturity and the adoration I had from my fans, my students, put me far above him. Then suddenly he looked up and met my mocking with his eyes,
and for the first time since we had begun preparing for this showdown, I had nothing to say. The words I'd memorized were gone.

It was every stage performer's fear. I no longer remembered the next verse of the song. The band played on. So I kept singing. Thinking back now, I couldn't tell you what words they were, but I know they weren't the ones scrawled onto the pages of my libretto. Instead, I was trying to figure how I was going to fix this, how I was going to make amends for the months, of putting distance between the two of us. How I could bring it back, to end it the way it was supposed to be—the way it was in the book—the way that the Apostle Luke and Saint Andrew Lloyd Webber had intended.

I was imagining a moment that was quickly approaching—only a few minutes from when I had gone off book—the music would stop, and the crowd would be as silent as a photograph of the two of us on that stage. Rajah and Mitch. Herod and Jesus. All four of us were there simultaneously and if I stopped singing, the entire musical—the cast of 48 and the band holding the whole thing together—would be stranded. So I kept singing.

I looked down on Mitch, the tattered Jesus, whom I had deserted years ago, and I said a prayer to Him. I asked if He would give me the ability to finish this song, to help me remember the words that I'd suddenly lost, to save me from the embarrassment of failure in front of everyone who had come, the students, teachers, co-workers, friends, and family.
My mom had always said that the church isn't a place where you could go—not even a place at all. The church was us—my students, co-workers, parents, friends, and the cast. We were the individuals and the body, simultaneously. When I had told my fellow church members that they wouldn't regret it if they came to see an amateur take the stage in a student performance of one of the most popular musicals of all time, they had believed me and come without question.

When I prayed in the theater that evening, I didn't make a deal with God, or Jesus, or Mitch. I didn't bargain with them, the way that I'd always done, promising my redemption. I just looked down at him and hoped He knew I was sorry for doubting. For assuming he had intended the worst for me, or for blaming Him for the way people had used his name for their gain. I had done the same thing after all.

Mitch looked up, and I could see he wanted what I wanted; He wanted to be free of all of it; he wanted people to know Him; he wanted to transcend that place.

So I gave it to them.

The music ended, and His limp body was dragged by his arms to his crucifixion as the church watched from the shadows. It reminded me of that Easter Sunday when I had felt an empathy that I would never feel again, a level of compassion I felt I was capable of no longer. I didn't weep. Instead, I held my head up, into the lights as pride washed over me while I listened to the cheers that told me I had won.

When it was over there wasn't a person who seemed to have noticed my failure. My family and friends who had traveled across the state to see me; my students who
would continue to hold my glance after I ditched the eyeliner; my partner who was sitting
in the front row with my mom; my co-worker who would hug me in the hallway a few
weeks later with tears in his eyes; they would all tell me later that it was the greatest
rendition they'd seen. I tried to tell them I hadn't remembered the song, that the whole
performance had been a fraud, that it hadn't been me on that stage at all, but they wouldn't
believe a word.
To Do List

I wasn’t listening. I was researching the internet for quotes to use in a story I was writing.
I was doing that as I worked through the nuanced syntax of an email to someone I didn’t
know that well, all the while looking up a recipe to make for dinner with the four
ingredients left in the house, and that was between trying to decide how to write a tweet
that simultaneously made me look intelligent and effervescent. I was also talking to my
mom on the phone for the first time in a month. I was getting stuff done.

Her voice was faint as if it were coming through a tin can with a string that
stretched the 90-some miles between our houses. I crushed the phone’s incredibly quiet
speaker against my ear. She sounded like the parent voices on Charlie Brown, disjointed
and wobbly. It was likely a glitch in the matrix, or just a typical iProduct—over
promising and under delivering. I figured then was as good a time as any to get the
problem fixed, so I clicked over to the company’s website and found the page so I could
log-in and sign-up for a time-slot that would allow me to skip past the four hundred
people that were always waiting outside the store. I didn’t see a time that fit my schedule,
so I opened a few other windows on my screen.
“Did you read my email? I sent it earlier today, but maybe I should have face
booked it to you.”

I hadn’t. There just wasn’t enough time lately. Life was littered with the almost-
done and the about-to-finish and the I’ll-have-it-on-your-desk before-you-get-to-work-
tomorrow. I hadn’t adequate time to finish the entire video *Cat Wearing A Shark Costume
Cleans The Kitchen On A Roomba*. It wasn’t on my To Do list, but only because it was
buried in another window behind the 17 I had tabbed out. Admittedly not much had
happened yet to the feline living as shark protagonist, but with ten minutes of the video
remaining, there was still plenty of time left.

I clicked through a few of the dozen tabs in my browser: a page of Ben Franklin
quotes, a story about the Iraq war (the recent one), and that hilarious sharkcat, paused in
the middle of an open sea of linoleum. My mom was still talking in my ear, which was
sweating from the heat buildup and numb from being crushed against the unforgiving
Gorilla Glass™.

“It’s about what your representative up there was saying about the coal trains. I
can’t believe she’s still in office. Have you got your ballot yet? You need to go and check
with the voting office to see why you haven’t got a ballot.”

I wasn’t going to the polling office. I was worried about coal trains, and the
Supreme Court’s decisions, and what Donald Trump said, and a bunch of other items
from my feeds, but there was so much to get done. I needed to get back to it. I tapped the
speaker button, put my phone on the table, and got back to work.
“We saw your pictures in the paper here. I told the neighbors, and they said they’d already seen it. They said that Harshini, she’s the daughter at Harvard, no wait, that’s her brother. She’s at MIT. Well, not anymore, she just got a job at Microsoft, and they said she is just loving Seattle. But anyway, they liked your picture of the kids on the swing set. They said you really know how to catch a moment.”

I scrolled through Instagram. All those moments, everyone unique and important to someone. I swiped them away, pausing on a few for which I had a professional appreciation. Most were only two-inch square frames of cliché brags about conquering mountains or brunch. Some of the people in the photos I recognized, but mostly it was pictures of overly saturated omelets, and silhouettes of people standing on stunning snowy peaks looking out at other more stunning snowy peaks. I <3-ed a few and went back to my other screen.

“Did you get your taxes done? You should call them and see why they haven’t sent your refund.”

In reality, there was no refund, but I’d said there was last time I was on the phone. I told her I was sure the check was in the mail so maybe she would rest easier.

“In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.”

Thanks Ben. I closed the lid of the laptop and threw it in my bag. I filled it with a few other things I couldn’t do without that day—some cameras and some other things with screens. I tossed a book on top, in case I found the time.
I’m incredibly bad at multi-tasking. It exploits my weakness for distraction, the simplest of stimuli can derail even the most focused projects. I’ve been told that women are better at it, something having to do with how their brains are wired with connective tissue instead of ……

“We’re leaving the country next week. We’re headed to …”

She told me where they were going, but I wasn’t listening closely enough. It sounded like someplace in Eastern Europe. When we were kids, my mom would try and call my dad for dinner. She would yell from the kitchen of our four-room house. We would join in, calling him, running through the house and jumping on the couch screaming his name. He wouldn’t hear us until my sister and I would flop onto his lap, pulling down the business page of the newspaper he had been diligently reading for the past three hours. He finally looked up with surprise as if he had only just noticed we were there. We were boggled as to how he couldn’t have heard us, or how he could focus on something for so long.

Nowadays my parents were always jetting in one direction or another. My father, still not retired at 71, traveled as if it were his job. He’s a professor of Engineering, but he has more mileage than Bono. When he goes abroad my mom often joins him. She’s the distraction that gets him to visit a museum or the park. When he goes without her, he’s all business.
“We were just talking to your sister yesterday. She’s just as busy as you. Our kids, so many things going on. Did she tell you about the school she’s designing? It’s made to withstand a tsunami.”

I checked on a text with my architect sister that I realized I hadn’t answered for a week or so. I send her a message back.

I’m on the phone with mom, getting caught up on your life.

I hear you’re building a school for tsunamis.

Another phone call made itself quietly known and I glanced at the number, didn’t recognize it, and tapped it to voicemail.

“How’s Ellen doing? Did she like the sweater?”

A few weeks’ prior, my parents had met her parents at a dinner party at our house. We’d made vegetarian something and got them all talking about their mutual interests. The entire event had been a first for me after years of long-term relationships. This one had entered the lesser known adult stage where we coordinated a comparison of parents so both sets could get a reasonable idea if their quality child rearing was going to be slowly unraveled by the other parents’ mediocre work. Speaking of unraveling: the
sweater was a Christmas gift that my mom picked up. She’d bought Ellen as many presents as she had given her own kids, which I took to be a good sign. I hadn’t seen the sweater since, though.

I knew the parent dinner date had been a success when my sister told me how happy our mom had been. I wasn’t sure how to interpret it. My mother has never been one to increase the pressure on the subject of childbearing—there were no side comments at Christmas about when she was going to get grandkids. I assume she was just thankful that I’d found someone to remind me about my to-do list.

My mom is healthy for her 70-plus years, the one who takes the shovel away from me when I’m trying to clear her driveway of snow to do it herself, or takes my dog for a walk at 4 a.m. because she doesn’t want to bother me from sleep.

She grew up on a farm with five siblings and a single mom. They had nothing, the kind of nothing where dinner was often a bowl of milk soup. I don’t know anything about nothing. I have had all the things I needed and a surplus of love, and I never considered either a luxury.

“Look at me; I’ve just been yakking this entire time. You should tell me to be quiet. I’m just over here talking and you’re not saying anything.”

It was nothing new for either of us, but we pretended it was. The days when I relied on her for my breakfast or picking me up were long behind us, and we were still years from when I might have to do the same for her. For now, we were both adults and trying to figure out what responsibilities still existed between the two of us.
We said our loves and hung up.

I swiped over to see what call I’d missed and found a new voicemail from an unknown number at the top of the list in a bolded font and self-important. It was something about signing up for a new opportunity in the—I sent it into oblivion. The messages below were my saved voicemails from my friends and family. In the middle was an old one from my mom who had called to ask how to fix the computer a few months ago. It’s a call I’ve answered dozens of times, which meanders from confusion to frustration with her computer. I couldn’t tell what the problem was, but she was desperately trying to explain it.

When I heard it the first time I almost swiped it away, but just as I was going to she got distracted from her computer issue and told me I needed to make sure to get to the dentist to get my teeth cleaned. It’s something I need to be reminded to do—nobody else in your life cares about your teeth like your mom. It’s enough reason to keep it, just in case it’s the last thing she ever tells me to do.

I archived it and swiped back to my tabs to see what else I needed to get done.
Wishes

A letter arrived a week after Thanksgiving. Inside, secured by two pieces of tape to the back of a cereal box, was a turkey’s furcula. I hadn’t been expecting it, but it was exactly the thing my mom would send.

The furcula is the clavicle of a bird, and the bone that gives it the ability to fly. Through history, the bone became known as a soothsayer, a prediction rod, an oracle hovering just above the heart of every bird right back to it’s dinosaur ancestors.

The British referred to this brittle bone as a merrythought, which they had borrowed from the Prussians who used the goose version to guide their raping and pillaging of neighboring villages. The furcula rarely disappointed in delivering expert military advice. Prior to that, important medieval folks would scatter the bones of the goose on the ground after their St. Martin’s Day feast to decipher what weather the winter would bring.

Furculas have a long history of helping decide which parts of the world would be conquered, what crops would be planted, and which adulterers needed to be burned at the stake. I used it to ask for things I wanted. Things like Gameboys and R.C. Cars, and occasionally for a comfortable life with a house, a loving partner, and a few kids.
My family called it the wishbone, and in keeping with the ancients, we had tried to hold true to the traditions. For years my mother had saved the bones and had given them to my sister and me a few weeks after Thanksgiving. The two of us would stand in the kitchen, make a wish, then pull from the ends of the two bowed legs. The pointed arch would flex and then snap in two. Whoever held the larger stake would see his or her wish granted. The family had entrusted the future to the desires of eight-year-olds.

At our recent holiday gathering, the Thanksgiving table had been decimated, and the family was strewn through the house across couches watching football and reading magazines. I put the wishbone behind the sink where I would look to find it in a month, and we all settled in to observe the thirty-days-of-pie-consumption. By Christmas, the bone would be ripe for wish granting.

Ellen, my girlfriend, had come for the holiday and was sitting with my family reading a magazine about the first Americans. She blended in well with us, made us laugh, could discuss politics, and knew to stay out of the conversations which would end in arguments. She had already found herself part of the family. It was only I who was dragging my feet in making her a part of it.

Later that afternoon, I stuffed the last of the yams into a Tupperware and the remnants of the pumpkin pie into my mouth. I scoured the countertop for the wishbone which had gone missing. Eventually, I asked my mom where it had disappeared to.

“I must have thrown it away,” she said. “It’s probably just in the outside garbage if you want to get it.”
I was disappointed. I could remember when my sister and I would take our two wishbone remnants and would run through the house, one victorious, and one crushed beneath a year’s worth of upcoming disappointment. I was disappointed that my wishbone tradition had been dashed, that we would have to wait another year to have our desires satiated, but not enough to go looking through the three-day-old rotting turkey carcass.

Ellen told me she also grew up with the wishbone tradition. She would sit across from her best friend and they would close their eyes as they made their wishes. She said after a few failed attempts they had figured out the secret—to always wish for the best for the other person.

Ellen was a good match for me; we had similar interests as artists, we had both traveled, and could easily find ourselves in a great conversation. We’d also found each other at a time in our lives when many of our friends were beginning to have kids, which had me incessantly considering something that Ellen had said in our first week of dating would be out of the question. She had told me while preparing dinner one evening that she never intended to have children. She liked them, but just never wanted to have her own. She had arrived at this conclusion a few years earlier with enough conviction to have a tubal ligation. She said it as she severed a carrot. I looked at her blankly. “I had my tubes tied,” she said.
When I was young, I was obsessed with predicting the future. I had a few ways of
controlling my fate, often clutching a coin in my hand or tapping my teeth in sets of three
while focusing my mental energy on a problem. These wishes, or prayers, or obsessive-
compulsive ticks were always centered around the desires I had to change my
circumstances—a school day delay or canceled orchestra practice.

I was wondering how I might change Ellen’s mind. I hadn’t brought it up of
course. My method was much more effective—by wishing it to happen.

A few days before the New Year, the letter arrived with furcula attached. I had
forgotten about it when we had left my parents’ house. Suddenly I saw a vision of my
mom leaning into the trash bin, covered up to her elbows in turkey skin, emerging
victorious. I took a magnet and attached the bone to the fridge so I wouldn’t lose it again.
I read it every time I checked the fridge. “For your big wishes,” it said. It was in my
mother’s handwriting, which she called chicken scratch.

My mom came from a large family and had three children herself. Though she
had never expressly asked about my interest in having kids, I could feel that she thought
about it whenever she saw Ellen and me together. I had always imagined my life as
mirroring the lifestyles I’d seen—car, house, marriage, kids. I’d never considered that
one of these things would not find its way into the checked box of life’s To Do list. I
hadn’t necessarily planned them, I just figured they would come in time, and they had,
for the most part. I had wished for them, and they had come true.
Ellen and I had been invited to a few parties around town that holiday season, and we thought it would be fun to see as many people as possible. We blew in through one friend’s front door and out the back of another. From one conversation about the past year to another about the year to come—hopes and dreams, stories and plans. Sometime just before midnight on New Year’s Eve, we found ourselves in a conversation about the longstanding tradition of breaking the Thanksgiving wishbone on New Year’s Day. Our friends all celebrated some version of the tradition in their lives, but not all were versed in the history of the furcula. Someone asked what happened when the top broke off and nobody received the winning end.

“It means both people get their wish.”

“No, it means that nobody wins. Your wishes are voided.”

The conversation was interrupted as an overanxious group with matching blue cups of gin & tonic pushed past us and up to the roof to welcome the New Year with the city’s fireworks show a few blocks away. Ellen and I stood on the crowded balcony space and watched as the city was illuminated by explosions of light.

Ellen’s confession in that first week of our relationship had set off a perpetual inner dialogue within me, but it had also allowed me to consider my envisioned life as one which had been wished on by a child. Since that first succinct conversation about childrearing, the two of us had revisited the topic a few times, often in brief conversations
over the course of the year. In one of the most recent versions, Ellen had said something completely unexpected. “If we had kids, would they be more like your parents or mine?”

She mentioned it as if it had just come to her at that moment, a passing thought, with no inkling that it was something that had taken months to consider speaking aloud. The suddenness felt like misdirection, like the setup to a joke, and I waited for the punchline which never came. I didn’t know how to respond. I had been living under the *coup d’es enfants* life for long enough that a regime change was now just as unexpected as the first. The last year of observing my friends’ children—running with them in the park, holding them in my lap, trying to talk to them in their secret language, having them change from giggles to inconsolable crying, immediately passing them back at the first sign of discontentment, trying to pull myself away when I finally had to leave their house—had given me no additional clarity on whether I wanted children myself.

My confusion on the issue made me wonder where my desire came from. The expectations of my life were not only my own, they also belonged to my mother and father, and their ancestors before them. I had, by birth, accepted that I was the extension of the family I came from, and that building onto that family meant considering the wishes of the ones who had come before me—my grandparents and parents, the Brits and the Prussians, and the medieval goose people.

The next morning at my house I woke up and went to the kitchen for a glass of water. There it was, the furcula, as ancient as it was new, taped to the letter held by a
magnet to the front of the fridge. Even from a distance it looked ready to break. Within its 
brittle shell it held my life, the dreams my ancestors had carried across continents, to 
which I owed a debt of gratitude. For my Nintendo and my first car, the parents I had and 
the life I was living. I freed it from its plastic tape shackles and retreated to the bed where 
Ellen was sitting.

We found the places where our fingers fell naturally along the brittle ridge and held 
the miniature dowsing rod between us. The bone was dried at the edges with 
cartilage and it crackled as we pulled. I looked her in the eye as the bone split and the top 
piece flew into the corner of the room behind the mirror, where we would never find it. 
We were each left holding a piece, both equal in size, both lacking the dominant crown of 
victory.

“So we both win, right?” Ellen said.

I guess it depends on what we wished for, I thought.

There are no rules to wish-making, or granting, but there can be a covenant in the 
act. So much of our lives are spent wishing for ourselves. It is when holding a wishbone 
that we are given the chance to look across at the other person and consider them, and 
what they might desire.

There’s a phenomenon that has happened to me a few times before. You can look 
at someone in a moment and suddenly see how they will look when they are old. I cannot 
be sure as to why this happens—if it has something to do with the physics of how light
bends or something more mysterious. On occasion, you can also see, at the same time, the child looking out as if they’ve been there all along, just watching it all happen. This experience is much rarer.

I could see young and old Ellen at the same time, sitting cross-legged on the bed wearing my sweatshirt, almost as if I had wished it as a child. Across from her was me, also two people—both the boy who had made that wish and the one who had stayed to see how it all turned out. I just looked at her and wondered if she could see them both as well.
Chiaroscuro

A painting technique developed during the
Renaissance that uses strong contrasts between
light and dark, often to dramatic effect.

It’s just a picture of a woman looking out a window.

She is standing in her home on a sunny April day. It was the last frame I took of
her that afternoon, and likely the last I would. The sun is refracting through the glass and
landing on her face in the shape of a triangle. It covers her eye, and makes it glisten green
with a peppered sparkle caused by the shadow her eyelashes make across her cornea. Her
other eye appears dark brown in the subdued light where the direct sun doesn’t land. A
few inches of illumination begin at the eyebrow and fade off at the cheekbone to reveal
the light white hairs that are otherwise noticeable only under scrutiny from one of those
convex bathroom mirrors. The beam reappears on the same angle of trajectory just lower
over her left shoulder as it reveals a few dozen tightly woven braids of hair, golden
brown. The hair on her other shoulder is muted like that of her right eye—dark brown,
possibly black, depending on where you’re seeing her from.
Shooting through glass is a trick—an illusion that makes something appear different from what it is. It adds layers to an otherwise flat image. Those layers appear to be laid directly on top of the image as if someone had found a discarded overhead projector sheet and left it there. The layers obscure the frame, rearrange the light, and allow the viewer to read into what is otherwise just a two-dimensional remembrance. Those layers may not be intentional, but the photographer will rarely tell you they were not. They will likely explain that the additional layers added by the window—the glare from the sun, the reflection of a tree, the months’ buildup of dust on the glass—give a glimpse into the mind of the person. If the photographer explaining this to you has an unchecked ego, he’ll add that it also gives a glimpse into the mind of the photographer himself. Much of this can just be ignored.

It was the third time I’d taken her picture. As we were getting settled into her home at the beginning of the most recent visit I told her that I’d photographed her for The New York Times five years before and waited for any sign of recognition. The Times shoot had been long before the moment that changed everything for her. Back then she had been working in Idaho for the Human Rights Education Institute, an organization that had been started to stop the kinds of things that happen in Idaho. She had found herself at the center of the story (more often than as the curator of others’)—a noose left on her front porch or recollections of being followed home after work by an unknown vehicle. Every instance made the local paper, and they created a lore about her as the outsider, the black woman struggling to get by in the white world. At the time, the stories of race-driven
hatred fit the stereotypical narrative of the area, and the town reacted, surrounding her in a protective white barrier of support for her and her young children.

Standing in her house she didn’t remember me, but she knew some people I knew. We bonded over our common acquaintances and I reminisced for a few minutes about what had happened to me since we’d met the first time, and how I had ended up in her house taking her picture for the third time. As we discussed events from the last few years I was thinking about the second time I’d photographed Rachel. I knew that mentioning it might end the interview that hadn’t yet begun, so I kept quiet and talked about the weather. From inside the house I glanced out her front window and saw where I’d stood in the street behind my car a year earlier, holding my camera in one hand and a bean burrito in the other, as I took Rachel’s picture like a coward.
A photograph lies. It hides and distracts and chooses only a moment on which to dwell. It’s been edited, whether the colors have been saturated, the lights darkened, the darks lightened, the pixels of the image rearranged. It is the result of an arbitrarily or strategically pressed shutter button. It is the end of a selection process where images are compared against hundreds of others and deselected one at a time. At this point the difference between the final selection and the cutting room floor rejects is often as slight as a blink, a minuscule turn of the face, or an opening of the mouth. Even when the photographer is trying to document truth, he is always considering the rules of composition and art, and making selections based on those criteria and choosing images that tell the story he’s chosen to tell. Every photograph is the story of the person who made it.

My portrait subject was Rachel Dolezal. In case you don’t remember Rachel’s 15 minutes in the spotlight, she was the white woman who pretended to be black, or the Black\(^1\) woman who was revealed as white, depending on your point of view. After she had been exposed, everything dissolved, at least with respect to her life and credibility. The community of NAACP members and the white suburbanites who had been united as steadfast supporters distanced themselves from her. She lost multiple positions with the city and NAACP that she had held in town representing people of color. People couldn’t get over how she had misled them.

\(^1\) Dolezal, in the opening chapter of her book *In Full Color*, explains that she capitalizes the word black when referring to people, the same way you might Asian or Indian. It’s a contested issue in journalism, where most publications continue to use the lowercase, save a few magazines like Ebony with a targeted Black audience.
Rachel was being interviewed by Ijeoma Oluo, an African-American woman who writes about race for *The Guardian* and elsewhere. I had come on this visit with a writer to document the interaction between them, and to gather a few portraits.

On the wall above the kitchen table was a framed print of a painting depicting a dark-skinned child. The child, who seemed to be looking right through me, was framed with a white border and the title of the piece printed in small text underneath—*Taraja*. I couldn’t ignore that the name, likely the child’s, was strangely similar to my own. The image was painted on crushed eggshell, thousands of tiny cracks creating the soft dark skin and black eyes. The child, illuminated by a strong side light, wore a pensive expression. At the time, I hadn’t considered the painting’s shout-out to the Baroque period, the dramatic contrast of light play, or the deep sadness in the eyes. I had long known it as “Rembrandt Lighting,” after the painter who used the technique regularly for his portraits. I’d used it when photographing people when I wanted to work
quickly and make a quiet portrait without the distraction of lights and umbrellas. Light is how we painters and photographers create mystery and vulnerability in our subject. Every photograph, or painting, or portrait, or person is a mix of these two elements—mystery and vulnerability. The technique that had worked in the 17th and 18th centuries still worked today, and for the same reasons.

The second time I’d photographed Rachel was the day after she’d been exposed by a local television reporter. I’d received a half dozen phone calls that morning from news outlets across the world looking for any image they could get their hands on. By that afternoon I stood shoulder-to-tripod with TV reporters and photographers as we waited for someone to emerge from her house. I had thought about how much easier the process was when Rachel had invited me into her office. I thought about walking up and knocking on her front door, but instead I hid behind my car and ate my burrito.

I was uncomfortable, and hid my awkwardness by making jokes with the other journalists who were likely just as uncomfortable. I was hoping the reporter I was teamed with would call off the sting so I could just forget about the entire thing when Rachel stepped out her back door and got into her hatchback. As she reversed into the street I rattled off a few frames. She waved and smiled at the team of us as she guided her car down a canopy of cameras. I wished I hadn’t taken the pictures even before I looked at them. They felt like an intrusion, like I had hidden in the bushes at a fashion show with water balloons full of paint. I was paparazzi—a participant in the creating of a spectacle.
I had always thought that I would never lower myself to such a situation, become the type of photographer that suspended his ethics and responsibility to his subject, the type of cameraman who would sell someone out for a paycheck. Soon my phone rang and shook me out of my ethical trance. The editors were calling and I sent those pictures across the world, cashed the checks, and spent the money before I could consider the damage I’d done to Rachel, and myself.

I’d put myself in a tough spot accepting that blood money, and so I just omitted that part of the story when I told Rachel we’d met before. I still thought she might recognize my name from a byline, that she’d sat up at night with a highlighter and vowed vendettas against all the reporters who had portrayed her in a negative light. She hadn’t remembered any of it, and I wasn’t about to remind her. Photographs lie, but so do photographers.
In her house listening to the interview I sympathized with Rachel, or maybe I just pitied her. Whether or not she had created her problems, she was no longer in control of the final picture that was being made of her. The story that the Ijoema would write from that discussion would not solve any problems for Rachel. It might help sell a few copies of her new book, *In Full Color: Finding My Place in a Black and White World*, but the box she had found herself in two years ago and then continued to write herself into, was one that the media couldn’t ignore. For a few months it had been quiet for her, and for the public, but the first mention that she was working on a book a year ago, the circus had begun again.

Rachel had become a tragic character, and one who couldn’t help but be attracted to the media lamplight. Most people couldn’t understand why these stories kept being written, and why this woman kept flying back to get burned. How it had come to this?

I imagine she had become stuck in her white lie about being black. Black was her identity, but she couldn’t claim to be African American. She’d avoided the question, checked the boxes that asked for her identity, but she didn’t lie. Not completely. At first I imagine it was a small change in wardrobe and hairstyle. Likely it eventually landed her a job on credentials that were built on a common belief of who she was. From there she made choices to avoid an awkward situation. She was after all working with a group that she cared deeply for. What she had neglected to say had likely become a purpose as well an identity as the events and jobs stacked up. Every death threat, every job promotion,
they were all built on the same original omission. I can’t judge a person’s desire to identify with one group over another, to find acceptance and comfort when they possibly hadn’t been able to prior.

Her personal claim to an identity came at the expense of a group of people who felt dishonored, but moreover, lied to. It was the lies that people came back to, what had unraveled the widespread support she’d built for herself. Everything she’d ever claimed had come under question, from the braided corn rows to the twisted noose. It was all built on the same white lie. When I’d done the same to Rachel, it wasn’t because I felt that she didn’t deserve the truth, but because I didn’t want to deal with the consequences of my actions. I felt more like Rachel than I didn’t.

Nobody asks the photographer for his opinion. When the editor calls she just asks you to make her a picture. “Something with some good light,” “something moody,” “some action stuff,” but mostly “just some good portraits.” That was all I was trying to accomplish for Rachel’s photoshoot. It was only after the final image was created that we added our own interpretation. The layers that the dirty window add to the image are not a look into Rachel’s internal conflict, nor are they representational of what is going on in my head when I made the image. The layers are there for the viewer to see the things they are struggling with themselves. As if the layers are not in the image at all, but in front of us.

Before they took their seats at the table in the small breakfast kitchen, Ijeoma asked Rachel if she would like to sit with the soft sun rays on her. Ijeoma had been doing
her a favor, as well as me—offering Rachel the place that would quite literally put her in a good light. Rachel accused the light-skinned-for-a-black-woman Ijeoma of trying to make herself the darker of the two. She said it with a laugh, and likely intended it as a bit of levity for an intense interview that was not remotely finished. She took the seat without any other comment and as the two of them discussed and debated their ideas on race and blackness, I made a few action shots to document the occasion.

After the interview was complete I would ask Rachel to stand in her back window for a portrait. Studying the two images now, the one of the child Rachel had painted and the one I’d made of her behind the window, I see how similar they are. Both subjects are posed with their faces half hidden, half illuminated, both confronting the viewer—looking right into them.

I unknowingly may have stolen the idea for her portrait from her painting. It was an idea that she had taken from other painters who borrowed from artists going back hundreds if not thousands of years, before artists had the vocabulary to define dark and light, black and white. Rachel and I hid our subjects’ mystery in shadow, with light we illuminated their vulnerability.

Rachel had requested to sit in the shadow at the table because of its association with blackness, that she might appear darker than the woman sitting across from her. Rachel’s concern was with the interpretation people viewing the image might have of her—with her identity. As a painter who had studied and taught art, she must have realized at
some level that if she had been photographed in the shadow, it would be she who was hiding.

When I’d photographed her that first time, she wasn’t hiding. Her Black identity had given her a purpose, a fight that connected her to a struggle that so many people had faced. Being vulnerable then came with the support of her neighbors, her town, an entire race. Now her identity was one she was desperately trying to explain through her book and by accepting interviews that would rarely give her the attention she was looking for. She was without a tribe, looking for a group who believed in what she was fighting for—who believed in Rachel.

As a photographer, I didn’t have to explain those layers and complications in the image. I let the photograph tell its own story. When I photographed Rachel that third time through the back window of her house, I was only attempting to show her mystery and vulnerability—that dark and light. I wasn’t attempting to expose the lies or the pain she was holding, wasn’t trying to focus on the guilt or the loneliness. Those were for the viewers to articulate for themselves.

Only later when Ijoea’s story arrived on my screen in publication with the accompanying photograph did I begin to interpret the layers on Rachel’s shadowed face as a viewer. They were restrictive and made the image feel trapped within itself, wishing to escape its own constructs, bound by an idea of what it had proclaimed to be. The layers were brutally easy to see, but I couldn’t tell if they were hers or my own.
VITA

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Book List

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