

Spring 2018

# Notes for a speech: stories

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NOTES FOR A SPEECH:

STORIES

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A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

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By

Matthew Greene

Spring 2018

THESIS OF MATTHEW GREENE APPROVED BY

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MASTER'S THESIS

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## **The Bachelor Party**

Jim's bachelor party was going great until he lost his leg. We had to run all over town looking for it, ANNOYING everyone by saying, *Hey, excuse me miss, have you seen a leg? It's like white and covered in human hair?* But we were drunk as hell already so we still had a great time doing it, and, you know, if one adopts the right state of mind it can be quite pleasant to inquire all over town about human hair, cricket song and tufts of yellow grass blustering in the breeze, the dry heat warming your britches...

But after a few minutes or hours or something we had to give up the search because—wouldn't you know it?—it was time for our river rafting adventure! We all biked from Porkly's to the Adventure Outfitters, the sun, at that point, still a mean motherfucker barely halfway through his daily, and we took turns towing Jim on his red wagon with a jump rope that we'd gotten from some STUPID kids that shouldn't have even been playing over by Porkly's anyways, idiots!

Didn't they know what kind of town we lived in? I knew a man who was shot dead just for looking at a stranger the wrong way. Well, that, and probably meth withdrawal. So we just about had to go right up to those damn kids and ask them, *Don't you know what kind of town this is?* And the one kid said, *Go away*, and we said, *Shut your trap and you'll learn you something*, and this other kid said, *Fuck off, we ain't afraid of you*, so I said, *We ain't afraid of you children neither*, and Jim said, *A man once lost his life on this very intersection—what on EARTH are you doing playing out here with a WAGON?!* The biggest kid spit on the sidewalk and we said, *Don't you know what kinda men go to Porkly's?* And the big kid looked us over and said, *Losers, looks like*,

and then he kicked Jim in his one leg real hard-like. Knocked him over. They made a break for it—only, they forgot their jump rope and wagon. IDIOTS!

Anyways, when we got to the Adventure Outfitters, Jim's pal Bob was waiting for us. He leaned against the facade of the storefront in his wayfarers and leather jacket, smoking a Lucky. *I'm Bob*, he said and I thought, *This guy's cool*, and I thought, *I hope he's a liberal*. Because everyone else in the posse was not, except Jim, who'd grown up with the boyos. I was new to town and from the big liberal city where I was pretty much a BIGOT BY COMPARISON, if only on account of my LACK OF VOLUNTEER SHIFTS (I had generally put in 8 hours per week, which I split between the non-profit art theater and the non-profit writing center for troubled youth—neither much of a charitable act so much as a hopeless resume booster), my MODEST COMPOST PILE, and my INABILITY TO CARE FOR A KOMBUCHA SCOBY, plus my cisgender heteronormative white maleness—sometimes I think they ought to ROUND UP THE LOT OF US and send us to some big OUTDOOR BEER GARDEN where it's always a little too cold and there's a plastic cup full of beer in each of our hands, and we don't know how it got there and we don't much like how it tastes, but we keep drinking while reruns of NFL games are projected AD INFINITUM on the whitewashed wall of some FACTORY-CUM-BREWERY—but here in the small town to the east I was just another rich-looking person, by comparison. Cashiers at stores would tell me, *You're not from around here are you?* One time a homeless man told me, *You look like you got a lot of cash on that outfit, son*, and then I scurried away down an alley. My friends said it was because I looked so Jew-y and I said, *I don't look Jew-y!* and I said, *Technically I'm not even Jewish!* and they said, *Well, in this town you may as well be*. It was true that my dad

had been raised Jewish but we'd only celebrated Hanukkah and none of the other holidays and he was also active in a Blackfoot religious community. Sometimes I fought back the desire to tell cashiers and homeless people about my childhood sweatlodge experiences.

I looked at Bob and I said, *Nice to meet you*. He tapped on his Lucky and I said, *You're not from around here*, and he said, *Born and raised*. Jim leaned-in and told me, quiet-like, that Bob had been raised a Jew for Jesus. I asked Jim when our friend in common Donald was coming and he said, *Not till after rafting*, and I wanted to say, *Hoooo boy*, but I opted not to because the last thing I wanted was to POTENTIALLY HURT JIM'S FEELINGS.

*You guys must be the bachelor par-tay*, the lady at the Outfitters' front desk said and we said, *Oh yeah*, and she said, *I bet*, and we said, *Oh yeah, you know it!* and she said, *I had a feeling*, and we said, *Yeah baby!* and she said, *Could you guys please sign these bodily injury waivers?* and we said, *Ohhhhhh yeeeeeeah*. The whole time she didn't take her eyes off Jim's stump. *And remember to mark down all pre-existing conditions!* she said.

We got suited up in waterproof booties that fit all the way over our shoes and our LIFE PRESERVERS got us real excited for the adventure at hand. We all chatted in LOUD VOICES as we blasted off to the lobby where we met a couple families who were already suited up and GOOD TO GO. Altogether as a group we got our safety talk and went over the itinerary with this real, real SEXY GUIDE LADY, but she appeared to be a member of the LGBTQ+ Community which I want to fully support the rights of and DEMAND MY PEERS RECOGNIZE THE MULTITUDE OF BIAS AND



MICROAGGRESSION folks face daily—MAY I STAND IN SOLIDARITY AND BE THE BEST ALLY I CAN, but I am, I fear, not a good enough one yet, as evidenced by my disgusting hormonal appraisal of the guide lady, sorry; although I did get the feeling my fellow bachelors may not have shared my opinions on trying to be less bigoted human males—did I mention that Jim was a good friend, a true pal, but that out of the whole lot I'd only met Jim's dad George before? George was among our rank despite his having been satisfactorily married for decades and not, technically, eligible to par-tay bachelor-style. Plus, I'd heard George say a few things, you know? A couple racist jokes, a bit of homophobia, not a fan of immigrants...but it didn't feel like my place at the occasion of the bachelor party to start a discussion of values and beliefs, and, plus, George was a nice guy, nice as can be, with a big healthy smile... So anyways she was this real, real SEXY GUIDE LADY that was not interested in any of us but probably feigning some interest or enthusiasm in the patriarch-types for tips, oh would she get the tips later, oh yeah, and then she wrapped her talk and said, *ARE WE READY TO ROLL?!* and we said, *Oh yeah*, and the two families said, *Oh yeah*, then she said, *I CAAAAN'T HEAR YOU!* and we all said *OH! YEAH!*

So we filed onto the bus where there were even more SEXY GUIDE LADIES in ORANGE LIFE PRESERVERS, oh yeah! Only we carried Jim up the bus steps because he was having trouble hopping up on the one leg. The next thing was, we got a FREE BUS TOUR and learned the story of our little city's history—that it was just a sad town until the 60s when a whole wagon train of hippies and environmentalists and just generally cool people came and made the place something, really something. Something, that is, until BUSINESS INTERESTS came and RUINED THE BEAUTIFUL

ENVIRONS and all the jackalopes and marmots and fuck if I know had to skip away to safety. That was when the city fell into URBAN DECAY, until one fine day the environmentalist hippies went to TOWN HALL because they had a BIG BIG IDEA—what if the city THREW ITSELF A BIG FAIR, took all the smelly factories and rusty train tracks and dead bodies and TURNED THEM INTO A PARK THAT IS ALSO A CITY CENTER?! Long story short, the whole world came to see how NATURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL THE CITY REALLY WAS HAPPILY EVER AFTER.

Except the whole story they told us was all LIES. Jim, always the feisty one—we're sure gonna miss him, we had told him that many times, that once he tied the knot we were gonna miss him so very much and he had said, *Where am I going?* and we said, *Hahahaha waaaching whipash whooposh! Harharhar just kidding bro she's a good girl that Lisa*—Jim for one couldn't tolerate the guides' LIES about his hometown sitting down so he TOOK A STAND, which was awful hard for the guy what with the bus zipping down our potholed roadways and Jim there on just his one leg. The head guide said, *Sir, could you please sit down while the bus is in transit?* And he said, *Sure, sorry,* and took a seat, but then he said, *I just wanted to say, I'm from this town and I don't think any of what you guys said is true.* They said, *Sorry guy,* and he said, *It sort of hurt my feelings,* and he said, *This is MY bachelor party,* and they said, *We are SO sorry, we're not from here, you see, we travel the rivers from town to town on our expeditions, following the seasons insomuch as the waterways are navigable by raft, travelling in this here crew from crick to crick from April through July or August, depending on annual regional rainfalls, and please, sir, please tell us the REAL history of your town as filtered through your white cisgender heteronormative assigned-male-at-birth subjectivity.* He

did, he told us of the Wild West years and how it's said that BUTCH CASSIDY QUIETLY LIVED OUT HIS OLDER YEARS HERE IN SECRET and of the logging and mining days and the TRAGEDY OF THE DECIMATION OF THE NATIVE PEOPLES and how the big brick hotel from 1914 was once home to BING CROSBY HIMSELF not to mention the POET VACHEL LINDSAY and it had the first AIR CONDITIONING WEST OF THE MISSISSIPPI, but that it had been truly a long slow decline ever since that air conditioner was installed. He said that there never were any hippies but that gosh darn it he wished there were and he'd sure as hell liked to have met them, and, by the way, did anyone have any ibuprofen? Needless to say, the whole ordeal was A WONDERFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCE FOR US ALL.

Our bus trip also provided the occasion for me to get to know Carl and Jonathan while George and Jim and Bob gabbed in the row ahead. I found conversation difficult with these two. They were aww shucks types, you know? The kind of guys who you can't get a peep out of and maybe they smell the Jew on you and is that why? But then our bus had to take a detour on account of the Pride Parade and Carl said, *When do WE get to have the STRAIGHT PRIDE PARADE?* and Jonathan said, *HARHARHARHAR*, and I said, *Isn't that every day?* and they seemed to sober up real quick and in an angry way, so I brought up the upcoming football season, but, alas, it turned out they were gamers.

Eventually we made it to the launch site and then we got a SECOND SAFETY TALK, this one FOCUSED ON RAFTING TECHNIQUE and EMERGENCY PROCEDURES and what to do if we saw INJUNS HAHA, SHE WAS ONLY KIDDING, YOU GUYS. *Peeps gon' pop out in the rapids, like maybe OL' ONE LEG OVER HERE*, the guide lady said and I thought, *Ohh no!* But we bachelors muttered

things under our breath like, *Oh yeah!* and, *Here we go!* And I was also worried about her use of the word PEEPS and made a mental note that I hoped she wouldn't be the guide in our raft.

She was the guide in our raft and her name was Melissa or something. She thought that it was really really cool that we were on a bachelor party. Melissa or something had jokes. She may, in fact, have had all the jokes, but the jokes she chose to use were the tacky and offensive ones that George just gobbled up and we mostly chuckled at, our unique subjectivities landing across a full spectrum of comfortability. It bothered me that she had made some assessment and decided these were the jokes we either desired or perhaps deserved.

—*Why did the sheep farmer run out of condoms?*

—*What do you call a prospector done ate his dog?*

—*Miso horny! Me. So.*

—*It was a GAY washing machine.*

—*What's worse than a yuppy with one leg?*

—*What did the illegal immigrant spider say to the horse that had an abortion?*

On the occasion of these jokes, as I said, George just had himself a laugh riot and Jonathan did a lot of snickering sort of like Skull on the Power Rangers only more actually scary. Carl was silent but occasionally he'd turn back for one reason or another while Melissa or something was joshing us and I could see a little smirk. Jim, well he'd laugh and that didn't make me feel too comfortable, but then he'd scratch the red bumps forming where his leg had been abbreviated and he'd offer his own less bigotry-type counter jokes, subject changers, along the lines of:

Melissa or something: *The wall is great but I wish I could wall off all the Mexican food that's deported me...to the toilet! Especially if I'm going to have to share the bathroom with someone who might be—*

Jim: *One time I had diarrhea!*

None of us thought Jim was much of a joke-teller but that was great because it meant he was ready to be a Pop-Pop! It was kind of a bummer though when he started calling all of us Huck, Melissa or something included, because it had weird RACIAL IMPLICATIONS on account of Jim's being the sort of white dude whose favorite rappers were WHITE GUYS WITH DREADLOCKS.

We realized that Melissa or something was a Mormon when we steered ourselves out of the path of an abandoned vehicle and George said, *Looks like they had a few too many pints!* and Melissa or something asked George what a pint was.

—*You'll have to come out with us tonight so you can find out,* George said, and that made me feel UNCOMFORTABLE because at least Melissa or something's disgusting jokes were, probably, for tips, targeted for the audience, and at least none of us were directly victimized by them the way George was sort of PREYING on her, but then again who knows? Maybe he wasn't suggesting he'd get her drunk and have EXTRA-MARITAL PENETRATIVE INTERCOURSE with her, maybe he didn't even want to unfurl his worm at her in the moonlight, spray his ol' white mucus into and on her secret-parts, maybe he just wanted her to have a good Christian night out after all, a drunken one, maybe that was his kind of Christian. Regardless, it seemed that Melissa or something was adept at brushing it off in a way that both acknowledged and suggested she was flattered by his interest, but that she was maybe 20 and on break from college

and he was maybe 60 so they'd better not. George, though, he didn't give up. He mimed slow dancing with his paddle and said, *We're headed to the big show tonight! You ever been to the music festival in town? It's a great one!* I thought she'd deflect the comment but she said, *Ooooooh, music! Will there be dancing?* But before George could answer Jim interjected with a lame joke about how Mormons must like dancing on account of not getting to FUCK until they're married.

—*Good luck dancing on that gam!* Melissa or something said, and I had to hand it to her, she was sharp. When she wasn't ribbing the disenfranchised, she told us wonderful stories of Salt Lake City, of statues that spoke in many languages about the miracles of Latter Day Jesus, and how He wandered the desert for a long while until He founded Arches National Park, or something, and about not drinking caffeinated soda, and how her dad was a cool guy who was really supportive but it was getting harder and harder to relate to him. She ignored a couple comments about the underwear, and we rafted past boulders and some tires.

The time blew by on the breeze of Melissa or something's jokey rapport, and she even managed to learn us a thing or two about our local basalt rock having been shaped by ancient lava flows and about flammable tree sap and about the nesting habits of the hooded merganser. We all thought Jim was liable to fly out of the raft when we hit a bumpy rapid (on account of how we were supposed to tuck our feet into the crevices of the raft to brace for impact) but we said, *WOOOOOOOOOO!* as we crossed it, and the only person from our expedition to fly out was a middle-aged man from another raft, to whom we said, *HAHAHAHAHA LOSER!* as we splashed him with our oars.

By the time we were back at Rafting Outfitters HQ, we weren't drunk anymore, and that was a problem, so we put dry socks over our numb little toes and put our wet stuff into plastic bags from the grocery store and donned our bicycles and shot off into the evening. It was my turn to tow Jim around, so of course it was my FUCKING responsibility when he said, *Hey Matt, I think I lost my eyebrow*, and so we stopped. But we'd already blasted quite a distance since the Adventure Outfitters, and I said, *Do you really want to go back? It could be anywhere. And, Are you sure you didn't lose it on the river? What does an eyebrow do, anyway? It's not like you lost a leg*, and he furrowed his half-haired brow, and I said, *Jesus can't you take a joke? C'mon, lighten up dude, tonight's about having fun*, and I think he really just wanted someone to give him a pep talk, because he wasn't going to go back for an eyebrow, and if we were going to go look for something it would've been the leg that must've been somewhere by Porkly's. *C'mon man*, I said, *The gang's gettin' way ahead and we got some hoppy IPAs with our names on them.*

The first stop on the post-raft barhop was a brewery by the river on the eastern edge of town. We sat out on the back patio and warmed our toes at the firepits. A country musician shredded and crooned or whatever, and me and Jim had our hoppy IPAs and George said, *I don't much go for the hoppy stuff*, and we looked at each other and said, in unison, *Figuuureeees*, and, *Adults!* and George said, *Millennials!* and Jim said, *Hey, Dad, I'm no millennial*, and I said, *Well, technically*, and Jonathan and Carl and Bob mumbled about their preferences for lagers, and it was basically split across political affiliation with liberal hop guzzlers and conservative lagerinos. Why was that? In many ways I was a LIBERAL ELITE, and I was, at that time, about to enter a MASTER'S PROGRAM IN

A NON-PROFESSIONAL FIELD. I noticed about then that my toes had migrated from near the fire to the grate that enclosed the fire and Bob pointed out the nice grill marks all over the bottom of my still numb feet. I was worried that I hadn't noticed, and Bob said, *HARAHAAAHAARHAR*, and so did everybody else and I thought, *What the hell?* and I joined in.

After a couple rounds, we shot over to Pratzel's Pizza Barn and Pretzeltorium, and they whipped out pitchers and an order of hot wings and a platter of their Famous Pratzel's Pretzel Bites with Dipping Sauce. The marinara was good but I couldn't eat the PESTO because of my ALLERGIES but the star of the show was Jim chomping down hot wings and sucking the meat off the bones. *BUT YOU DON'T EAT MEAT JIM?! we implored, and he said, I do today!* and we said, *HUZZAH!* and George gave his son a few supportive fatherly pats and back slaps, and Jim said, *Just don't tell Lisa*, who didn't eat meat either, and Jim winked and I winked and George winked and Bob winked and even Jonathan winked and Carl did not wink and that struck me as odd. What Carl did was gnaw contemplatively on a toothpick while he took a long look at Jim sucking on a wing bone before he said, *Eat enough maybe you can grow that shank back out*, which was sort of a downer.

But the pizza came and we ate and ate and still there was more and, just as I was feeling vomity-full, in burst Donald. Donald was a Southerner and a big man with a threatening smile like John Goodman and he scarfed up our leftovers, said, *What's next?* He had a look about him that said he was hunting for trouble, but the kind of trouble that boys get into and then later gentlemen. Donald and Jim and I all liked to hang, so that made me real relieved about my prospects for the rest of the night. Donald said he was



sorry but he was late on account of work and we all said, *No problem bro*, and, *No bigs duder*, and I did too although I knew for a fact and Jim knew for a fact that Donald didn't have a job, unless you called mugging tourists who took wrong turns and stealing parked unlocked cars a job, and you probably should call it that because it wouldn't be easy and because I reckon nobody chooses robbing and stealing for a living unless their SOCIAL AND MATERIAL CONDITIONS demand it.

Donald refused the bicycle component of the bachelor party, so we made quite the posse, what with one-leg Jim on his red wagon and Donald on his motorcycle, his big black unbuttoned button-up blowing in the wind with each rev forward. Donald would gambado front to back to front, waiting for the gang like a beacon as we headed west across town to the Goat brewpub.

We sat on the patio at the Goat and my toes were not numb but I did notice that there was a toe on the pavement and I assumed it had to be Jim's but I didn't say anything. Bob made jokes about Jim's last week of freedom because EVERYBODY KNOWS that once you tie the big knot, together as a team, bride and groom, because they always buy SUCH BIG FUCKING KNOTS, JESUS, and after they cut into the white cake, then the next thing that happens is that the bride uses her shrink ray and then puts the groom in a little box (in this case she had saved an old Celestial Seasonings chamomile tea box for the occasion) and then he's stuck in the box forever and is her PRISONER and he can't do GUY STUFF anymore like look at pictures of lizard nips and owl tits or go to Hooters to eat Buffaloed chicken parts and watch the big game with his bros or trade a team of handsome stallions for a customized, flame-licked 2018 Honda

CRF250R dirt bike with powerful Unicam engine technology and twin-muffler exhaust system. Poor guy, he already lost his leg.

I'd had quite a few beers by that point and my words were starting to slur but I'll do my best to reconfigure the rest of the night in terms of normal human consciousness, whatever THAT is, but if I'm being honest it's all sort an ecstatic applesauce, you know? One of many colors, some of which don't yet have English names.

*WE MEN*, I announced and that grabbed everyone's attention, *ALWAYS TRYING TO PIN EVERYTHING DOWN LIKE BUTTERFLIES IN A ENTOMOLOGIST'S BOX. WHY CAN'T WE OPEN TO THE WILDNESS OF REALITY? WE MAKE THE WORLD INTO OUR BINARIES SO THAT WE CAN CRUSH ONE TEAM AND RIDE THE TIDES OF VICTORY.*

*Dude*, Bob said.

*I mean Lisa HAS already bought her shrink-ray*, Jim said, *And she's most of the way done with the chamomile tea. Been drinking it every night.*

*Hey, slow down! I'm a Republican!* Donald said and then he gave me a fatherly back pat and said, *Lemme buy you a drink, my unstable bud*, and that cleared the air real nice-like because I'd never been to a bachelor party before, and I guess I hadn't realized how much it was all kind of swelling up in me. Epiphany-wise, I filled the lightbulb of my noggin with thoughts about how bachelor partays could all be about brotherhood and family and bros and beers and just having a good time, and that I COULD OPEN MYSELF UP to enjoying it even if Jim had lost a leg and an eyebrow and a toe. Donald bought me an IPA which was awfully thoughtful of him, but Carl was maybe looking at me funny and Jonathan was whispering something in his ear.

After that last round we hopped on our bikes and chased down the buzzing golden eye of the setting sun. Great sheets of mauve and cerise blanketed the skyline with coils of cloud heated orange ablaze in the toaster oven of the West. We rolled to Bob's dad's house, where Bob had been living since coming back from the big city and he was doing some programming on the side to help out you know? We all parked our bicycles and motorcycle in Bob's dad's garage, and we strolled over the few blocks to the music fest and I didn't say anything at the time, but I saw an ear of Jim's there on the pavement, and I also saw Donald grab a wrench off the work table in the garage and put it in some interior pocket, but I didn't want to let that DAMPEN THE MOOD.

—*You think we might see Melissa or something?* George said and then he made a joke about a blind ferret that had sex with every hole in a block of swiss cheese.

—*Nah, Jim said, I think it's late enough that she ought to have started her Mormon hibernation!*

They both had a real good laugh across the reproductive chain, father, son, and we found our way up into the thronging of the crowd. Jim pulled himself up into the bed of a truck for a better view and I grabbed an empty keg and started pumping it in the air like a fist to the beat of the music because that seemed like a REAL SOLID THING TO DO right then. George leaned in and murmured something to me about being careful, that if the keg fell on Jim all the king's horses and all the king's men, or something. It was funk music, by chance, and there was a CeeLo-looking dude singing in a too-tight pink polo that couldn't quite make it over his belly. George and Jonathan and Carl were quiet and on their phones but Bob thought he could maybe get us backstage. Then Bob did get us backstage and there was this bartender from one of my regular drinking spots pleading

with the bouncer-guy to let him in, and this bartender was always a shithead to me so I waved and said hello and he didn't recognize me in the context and I said, *NINKASI!* which was a private joke between us because he'd once shouted *NINKASI* at me as I left the bar because I'd asked to taste every single beer on tap and then ordered a Ninkasi Tricerahops, which, if you don't know, is a top-notch mid-range Double IPA, albeit a tad vegetal for my palate. He looked crushed so that had me AMPED, and Jim and I made friends with a dude in dreadlocks and then Jim and George and this gentleman and I all smoked a joint and I looked back and Mr. Ninkasi was still there, sort of forlorn-like, and I said, *Jim, where are Carl and Jonathan and Bob and Donald?* And Jim pointed out that Bob was up on the stage itself, networking or something, but the others were a mystery.

—*What are we smoking?* George asked.

—*You just smoked weed, dad,* Jim said.

—*I haven't done that since the 70s!* George said. *Or was it 1983, in Tracy's van at the Beebo's Show?*

—*Is that a band?* Jim said.

—*Maryjane!* George said. *Ha! Far out man.*

We all said many thanks to the gentleman in dreadlocks and SWORE HIM AN ALLEGIANCE OF HONOR AND FRIENDSHIP, and of course I never saw him again but I guess I can't speak for George HAHAAAAHA. *This is wholesome as hell,* I was thinking when Jim's phone buzzed and it seemed the young Republicans had consolidated at the Trattoria around the corner for some BUD LIGHTS and, here was the big twist—the bride Lisa's bachelorette party was there too! I said, *Isn't that like bad luck to hang with the bachelorette party?* and George said, *Chill out, Matt!* So we corralled

Bob and headed Trattoria-ways, but it seemed there was a line to get in and we four were stuck on one side of the partition that separated the crowd from the eatery's patio, and on the other side were our pals and all the ladies and there was something SACRED AND HORMONAL about the whole setup. But then I made eyes with Jonathan and noticed he had A LARGE HANDGUN.

—*You and I got something to settle, Coastal Elite!* he said.

—*Me?* I said.

—*Yeah you, the Bernie Bro in the Columbia fleece,* he said and then he said, *I'm gonna blast you old-fashioned ways and then I'm gonna blast the other leg off Jim for inviting ya 's!*

Jonathan was sort of snuffle-cackling.

—*Whoa cool it guys* George said, and he had himself the chortle of a middle-aged man happy to be baked.

Jonathan tossed me a sawed-off shotgun, but I told him I was STRICTLY AGAINST GUNS and that I would vote to get rid of them, just like in the UK, if only I had the opportunity, and he said, *Suit yourself,* and then cocked the gun with this cool hand motion and a kind of a clicking sound and I said, *Hey, well, can I at least consult the other liberals or whatever?* But I looked at my pals and they sort of shrugged and looked away. I managed to catch Bob's eye and he said, *That's the way it is around these parts, we settle things like men,* and then Jim made a joke about my needing a lawyer and that I ought to know some good ones on account of being Jewish. Everyone laughed, except I, of course, did not. Donald gave me a supportive back pat and he told me to take a knee. I did, and he said, *Look, boy, this here looks real tough, and I don't think there's*

*any chance of you winning this here duel, and I know we have our differences and I do, in fact, take issue with you wanting to consult the liberals on account of it making me not feel too included, and if I'm not mistaken, didn't I just buy you one of them hoppy beers, and shouldn't that count for something? But hey, I do wanna help ya, so here's what I say. I say you tell him how you're feeling, just like they taught you in that city you're from and were raised up in, you tell Jonathan and whoever else is listening what's on your mind and maybe he'll take a liking to ya,* he said, and then he gave me a big sensitive-type look and I noticed my wallet was missing but that wasn't really important at the time.

*Prepare to duel, IPA-drinker!* Jonathan said and the crowd parted so as to make for a DUELING SPACE and I said, *I've got something to say!* A HUSH came over the assembled revelers, and I saw clearly the faces of everybody, Bob and Donald and Jim and George, Jonathan and Carl, Lisa and her bachelorettes, and, wouldn't you know it, Melissa or something and the other guides in their dancing clothes and orange life preservers, all with lips sealed, waiting for my last words.

*Listen up!* I said. *I ain't never been to no bachelor party before and I may never be to one again. The whole idea always seemed real gross to me, what with how some guys get strippers and such, and even when I was a kid it seemed off. I remember asking my mom when I was just a rugrat, sayin, Mom, hey, why do people have bachelor parties if they really love each other? And she said, hey, son, that's not what it's about. And that ain't been what tonight has been about at all. Wouldn't you know it, I sure as hell think I've grown tonight. Because tonight was about friendship and love. And helping your buddy raft even if his leg, eyebrow, and ear fell off. And laughing at morally questionable*

*jokes just because you like a guy. You might be thinking that I'd say something about how we're not so different and that y'all are good people, but if these are my last words, I sure as hell ain't gonna lie to ya. See, the thing is, I got real strict beliefs, politically and such, and I really think we're all quite problematic, morals-wise. We go around reconstituting hierarchy with our jokes and our votes and how do you think everybody else feels? But DAMMIT I LIKE YOUS, and then I took my shotgun and threw it down in protest and Jonathan raised up his weapon and fired—*

—and confetti and little toy snakes shot out and one of the snakes sort of glanced off my cheek and made a squeaky noise and Jonathan said, *HARAHAAARHA!* and George and Jim and Donald and Bob and Carl and the bachelorettes and the guides said, *HARHAAARHA!* and George said, *Now it's a party!* and Jonathan sidled up to me and gave me some fatherly pats and slaps and said, *Now whatsabout you and me get us a couple IPAs huh? I bet you could recommend a damn fine one.* And soon enough George busted out the cigars and Reddi-whip brand whipped cream aerosol can and we all had a grand old time peppering each other with tobacco and dairy but UH OH—

—*YOWWWW!* Jim howled and it seemed he had lost all his fingers! Now this was TERRIBLE, one can make do without a leg but without fingers? Gee whiz! But we left no stone unturned as we went all over town, everyone in that crowd, and everybody said, *Not again! Gee whiz!* And, *Fingers this time, that IS rough!* But it was nice wholesome fun for everyone and we all figured they would turn up in the morning with daylight and everybody sober. Donald vowed to make a few phone calls especially on account of the payday he'd struck in that crowd, figuring he owed it to the universe, and George said that Tracy had an in with the police and they could put out an APB in the

morning... So we went back to our merry-making and drank fermented grain and fermented corn and the bartender blew the keg and I had to drink a Bud Light! What a sight that was! Everyone had a laugh and then Jim said, *OOOOOOOH NOOOOOO I can't believe I lost my*—and we were all thinking, *Okay this is getting tiresome*, but, hey, it was his party—*PENIS!* And he dropped trou right there and sure enough just a couple saggy balls and some human hair! Oh boy! But, what was that behind his back right there in his new shiny metal fingers? His penis! So we all had a good laugh and took out ours and waved them around and lifted them high into the air as high as we could and touched penises up in the stratum of the sky, my penis and Jim's penis and George's penis and Carl's penis and Jonathan's penis and Bob's penis and Donald's penis, all our penises touching like the end of a huddle, and then, wouldn't you know it? We shot out separate lasers in every color imaginable which crossed streams and combined into the single biggest heart-shaped pigskin the grid-iron has ever seen **HAPPILY EVER AFTER.**



**Shazaam!**

## I

Shazaam crosses his arms. He studies the deck of his ship and the great expanse of desert, considers that all of this is contained within a lamp, crosses his arms again. Is it possible, Shazaam wonders, that the world he travels to when he leaves his lamp, with all its many people and animals and cities, is merely the inside of another lamp? Shazaam realizes his arms are at his sides, so he crosses them. He uncrosses his arms and strokes his goatee with his right hand. Crossing his arms, he studies once more the wide expanse of desert.

#

Freud suggests that false memory is often a result of repressed childhood trauma, but more recent thought ascribes false memory to general mental disorder, especially Post-Traumatic Stress. In 2010, an alternative to false memory was popularized in the nefarious corners of Reddit by so-called “paranormal consultant” Fiona Broome, one of thousands who claim to remember Mandela’s death not in 2013 but in prison in the 1980s. Such mass false memories prove the existence, for Broome, of alternate realities.

#

In the opening shot of the Hollywood movie *Shazaam!* (1994), Anna spins and spins with her plastic doll. She holds the doll’s hands in her hands and twirls round her room. When she stops, the world spins without her. This she does again and again, until thoughtlessly her grip on the doll loosens and it flies across the room, smacks against the wall. The doll’s right arm is bent backwards, its head snapped back, and a leg has fallen off. She takes the doll down to her father, but he says he’s too busy fixing dinner to help

her, that it doesn't look good but that they can get another doll. Anna cries and cries, until her brother shouts at her to shut up, and she runs to the safety of her room, cradling the doll in her arms. She tucks the broken doll under the covers, gently caresses its hair, kisses its brow. Then she goes about her room, trying to forget her troubles, briefly picking up her old Teddy, then setting him down. Suddenly, as if in a trance, she feels her attention drawn to the closet. Buried under old shirts she finds a strange golden lamp, superficially Middle Eastern...

## II

Shazaam crosses his arms. He wonders why he lives in a ship surrounded by sand. He strokes his goatee and considers going for a walk. He considers that perhaps inside each grain of sand, there is, however small, a lamp, inside of which is another ship surrounded by sand and another Shazaam. Shazaam feels very big and also very small.

#

A 2010 study examined the case of the clock at the central railway station in Bologna, which had stopped ticking after being damaged by a bomb in 1980. Ninety-two percent of subjects remembered the clock as never again working, but in fact the clock had been fixed days after the bombing, only to be stopped by the state government in 2006 as a memorial. When there is too much to notice, sometimes the brain fills in gaps. If there is stucco to your left, and stucco to your right, but a tapestry covering the wall in front of you, you would likely assume that behind the tapestry there is, in fact, stucco.

#

As soon as he's got his hands on the lamp, having won the contest of tug-of-war with his sister, Anthony falls onto his rear. "Ouch," he says. They study the lamp

together, the curvature of its spout. “Is this Pop-Pop’s?” Anna wonders aloud. “Could’ve been Mommy Dearest’s,” the boy says, and they are visibly overcome by sadness. Anna runs her fingers around the lamp’s smooth surface. POOF! A blast of pink smoke issues from the lamp and Shazaam appears. He is dressed in a purple vest and puffy pants, with a gold turban and pointy gold shoes. Hooped earrings dangle from his lobes. Shazaam smiles, crosses his arms. “Heya!” he says. “You kids got any turkey wraps?”

### III

Shazaam crosses his arm and studies the monotonous painted dunes. He uncrosses his arms and rests his hand on the banister. There is no clock in this world inside the lamp, no way to measure the passage of time except in exhaustion. Does time in the lamp correspond to time in the world above? And, if so, is it a one-to-one relationship? Shazaam decides to pass some limitless interval reflecting on his last visit to the world above, however many years ago it was, if only because there is little else to do. Typical that the girl would waste a wish fixing her doll, he thinks. He wonders what her next wish might be. A wind gathers dust. Perhaps the girl’s world exists in a lamp, which in turn exists inside another lamp, and so on. Alternatively, he feels that, if he were to reach out, he could touch the dunes and that they would be one flat surface, a facade. Is there something beyond the dunes or is his lamp filled with only sand, sand and his ship with its many books? While Shazaam often feels trapped in the confines of his lamp, he considers himself no less trapped than those above.

### #

Some consider the Hollywood film *Shazaam!* proof of the Mandela Effect. Directed by Andy Tennant and purportedly released in 1994, the film starred the

actor/musician/comedian David Adkins (better known as Sinbad) as the genie. On the cover of the VHS tape, of which you may find dozens of different versions on the internet, Adkins stands with his arms crossed, smiling. He does this in every iteration. Those who remember *Shazaam!* suggest that, at some point in the early 2000s, two alternate universes became merged together. *Shazaam!* truthers, like pop-psychologist Carol Peters, suggest that they were likely born in a different reality than those who do not remember *Shazaam!* Peters and other *Shazaam!* truthers claim that at some point their universe, one in which Mandela died in prison and Adkins starred in a film called *Shazaam!*, collided with one in which neither of those events happened. A more plausible theory is suggested by Dr. Henry Roediger, however, in an interview with *The New Statesman*. He refers to *Shazaam!* as an example of what he calls the “social contagion of memory,” which others have labelled “memory conformity.” One’s recollection influences another’s, spreading like an infection.

#

Shazaam strokes his goatee, scratches his head, crosses his arms. He and the children are gathered at the family’s backyard pool, where they’ve just finished sharing pink lemonade and string cheese. “No can do, kiddo,” he says. Anna cries and her brother consoles her. “Certain wishes may not be granted,” Shazaam says. “There are rules,” he says, and he winks so that the audience knows he is lying. Why is he lying, for what reason? This remains unclear to most viewers. “Sometimes I wish I’d never found your smelly lamp!” Anna shouts. “Not my fault you don’t keep it clean,” Shazaam says, because this is, after all, a romantic comedy. “Bazinga!” Anthony says. “And,” Shazaam says, “You can wish that at any time!” “Well,” Anna says, sniffing, “If you can’t bring

Mommy Dearest back to life, can you find a new wife for Pop-Pop? He is so sad.” “Not if I want to keep my license,” Shazaam replies, winking once more, and, intuiting the girl’s inability to understand his brand of humor, he adds, “Just kidding about the license.” Shazaam takes a knee and the children follow suit. “You see, children,” he says, “Love is tricky. It has a magic all its own, far more powerful than mine.” After a period of contemplation, Anthony says, “Dude. You kind of suck.”

#### IV

Shazaam crosses his arms. He is lonely. Perhaps he is lonely because there is no one to embrace him. Shazaam remembers Mandy, his first and only love. The smell of her perm, the lipstick red of her convertible, her preference for French cigarettes and Symbolist poetry. She had three wishes. Money. Fame. Her third wish was that Shazaam might stay forever with her. He hadn’t known how to grant it. He tried with all his might, crossed his arms, nodded, but all he’d mustered was the album *Barry Manilow II* on cassette. POOF! He never saw Mandy again.

#### #

According to supposedly first-hand accounts from truthers, test audiences took issue with Shazaam’s refusal to reanimate the children’s dead mother, saw it as too cruel for a children’s film. The entire premise of having a genie help a mourning family move on to a new mother rubbed most the wrong way. The studio suggested reshoots with a mother-centric storyline that Tennant rejected as “being too Jesusy.” The disagreement, ultimately, was the cause of the film going straight-to-VHS, according to Peters. In a canonical essay-by-way-of-Reddit-post authored by Peters under the username C4R0L\_P\_B3L13V3R, he credits the fact that the film went straight to VHS as a reason

only some remember it. “If Tennant agreed to the reshoots,” Peters writes, “and *Shazaam!* had a theatrical release and marketing with trailers and TV spots, it’s easy to imagine that there would be thousands, if not millions, who realize they were born in an alternate reality. But, of course, we can’t discount the fact that somehow the film *had* to go straight to VHS, that MKUltra or other techniques were used to intervene in the production of the film by some entity (perhaps the CIA) with a scientific knowledge of the coming dimensional collision. Could such a knowledge have been key to resignation in 1994(!!!) by CIA Chief R. James Woolsey Jr.?!?”

#

Pop-Pop sits alone in the garage listening to Meatloaf, the hood of his 1984 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme propped open, a wrench in his limp hand. The children peer through the doorway that leads back into the living room, unsure if he’s noticed them or not. Pop-Pop sighs deeply and puts a hand on his knee. The open garage door reveals the street beyond and Pop-Pop gazes vacantly at the cookie cutter houses, each charming in its own way, but only a little. Pop-Pop sighs deeply. He looks at the framed portrait of his Margaret on the supply shelf and thinks about how great his life once was. Pop-Pop knows he needs to move on, that too much time has passed for him to still dwell on Margaret, but he can’t help it. He sighs deeply.

V

Shazaam uncrosses his arms and goes down to the galley to make a snack. He retrieves two slices of bread from the fridge and places them into the toaster. Sliding the lever to plunge the bread down, Shazaam experiences a wave of satisfaction. He crosses his arms. He uncrosses his arms and peels a banana, slices it into medium thick cross-

sections. He scans the pantry until he finds the honey, and then places it next to the toaster. Next, retrieving a jar of peanut butter, Shazaam is overcome with satisfaction. He smells burning. He wants a turkey wrap, but that is impossible in his world. Sometimes, Shazaam would like to slap whoever made the rules, whoever constructed reality. He crosses his arms.

#

USC Race and Ethnic Studies Professor Priya Makan says that it is basic racism at play in the case of *Shazaam*. In 1996 Touchstone Pictures released *Kazaam*, starring NBA superstar Shaquille O’Neal as a genie. On the poster art and VHS cover, Shaq is dressed in a gold turban and gold vest, his torso emerging from a tornado of pink dust, set on a purple background. The other protagonist is a lonely boy who doesn’t know his real father, who is skeptical of his mother’s new fiancée. That children, the target audience, might confuse “K” for “Sh” seems logical, that they might confuse one famous African-American celebrity for another an easy leap, especially given that David Adkin’s stage-name, Sinbad, comes from the protagonist of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, with its genies and magic carpets. Adkins even played a genie in a 1996 commercial for TNT. “White people all are all kinds of racist,” Makan says. “Kids are dumb.”

#

High up near the rafters of the food court, Shazaam and the kids watch their dad chatting with his date from the safety of Shazaam’s magic carpet. “She’s pretty,” the brother says, and the sister shushes him. Shazaam assures them that no one can hear them, but as he says it the woman glances up in their direction. Her attention is diverted by something their father says. “Hubba hubba,” the brother says, and Shazaam elbows

him affectionately. “See,” Shazaam says, “No wish needed.” “Hey!” a voice shouts. It’s a security guard, and he points up at them. “Come down from there!” the security guard shouts. “I thought you said no one could see or hear us?” the brother says. “My bad,” Shazaam says, “I thought you had wished that or something. But you definitely didn’t, I just wanted you kids to quit your yammering!” Shazaam looks at the camera. “Heeeeeerrre we goooooooo!” he shouts, and they begin a dazzling getaway through Macy’s, the kitchen at Sbarro, and Bergman Luggage.

## VI

Shazaam doesn’t know if he can die. He goes down into the galley and plunges a knife into his heart. Neon green blood gushes about the cutlery and marbled countertop, the white tiled floor, but Shazaam feels nothing in particular, not even lightheaded. He crosses his arms. In the silverware drawer, blood congeals around the forks and spoons in knotted clumps. Shazaam pulls the knife out of his chest and places it in the sink, sighs. He crosses his arms. He uncrosses his arms and grabs the knife. “Time to wash the dishes,” he says.

## #

Another explanation held by Truthers is that *Shazaam* is not proof of alternate realities but instead proof that we are all living in a computer simulation. Mass false memory is actually a byproduct of a glitch in the program. Dr. Nicholas Bostrom of the University of Oxford suggests as much to *Scientific American*, saying that if we are capable of such a simulation today, why is it so preposterous to suppose that a civilization might be simulating the lives of its forebears? In German director Rainier Werner Fassbinder’s 1973 TV-movie *World on a Wire*, a computer simulation forecasts the next



twenty years in order to anticipate future economic trends. Frustrated with their limited existence, the film's protagonists, referred to as identity units, attempt to escape into reality. It is, then, at least unnerving that University of Maryland physicist James Gates claims to have found remarkable similarities between the language of code and the behavior of quarks and electrons. Eminent celebrity astrologist Neil deGrasse Tyson even went so far as to claim the odds of our universe being a computer simulation at 50-50 in a 2016 debate held at the American Museum of Natural History.

#

Shazaam and the children have landed in jail for reasons that are not made certain in the film. Instead it's left to the imagination of the viewer to fill in what happened with the gang and the mall cop. "Look at the mess you've gotten us into this time!" the kids say in unison. "I'm not the one with two wishes left," Shazaam says, glaring at the little girl. "That's not fair!" she says. "I shouldn't have to use a wish to get us out of dodge, it's all *your* fault!" she says. "Oh sure," Shazaam says, "Blame the person of color." "Dayuum," the boy says. "Watch your language," Shazaam says, visibly irritated by the white child's use of African-American English. "And besides," Shazaam says, "It seems like things are going well between your dad and that woman."

## VII

"Do you ever get lonely?" Anna asks Shazaam. They fly across the sandy dunes inside the lamp and it feels to her oddly like they are stuck in place, that the landscape below is turning with the clockwork of a treadmill. She'd asked her second wish be a visit to his home. "Oh, sure, at times," Shazaam says. "But I've got my books, books and TV. It keeps me busy." "But don't you ever want something more?" she asks. "Like

love?” she asks. “There was a woman once,” Shazaam says, his eyes trained on the horizon. “I won’t make that mistake twice,” he says, and he crosses his arms.

#

Quantum physics suggests that there could be infinite possible universes. In one, I am sitting at the river, having a picnic, reading Millhauser’s *the Eighth Voyage of Sinbad*. In another I am a famous surgeon, and dead, and in another I am completely naked, as is everyone else. Our bodies look exactly the same, only we have bright blue feelers sprouting from our temples.

In our immediate real material world, it is a simple fact that there are those who remember *Shazaam!* and those who don’t. The answer to this whole puzzle would be quite simple if you could only wrap your head around the fact that Jimmy Hoffa directed the moon landing, that Avril Lavigne was replaced by a doppelganger pulled through some dimensional rift, that Mattress Firm’s decades of money laundering is key to both the FBI’s Russian collusion probe and Obama’s birth certificate, that government scientist Frank Olson jumped from a 10th story hotel window in 1953 *not* because of LSD, *not* because of the guilt he felt for developing chemical weapons, *not* because he knew chemical warfare had been waged in North Korea, *not* because he was a victim of CIA mind control, and *not* because he realized he had somehow travelled into a different dimension where children’s books and movies were slightly different, but *because* he alone knew what I know now, that the Great Artificial Wireless Digitizer (GAWD) on which all simultaneous realities are computed is, in fact, running out of juice, that it only takes B-batteries, and whatever happened to those?

#

At the pool party for the girl's seventh birthday, everybody's there, her brother, her dad, her new stepmom, Shazaam. After much convincing, involving the comic disappearing of a trash can and the accidental reappearing of its contents all over the driveway, the parents are made to understand that Shazaam is in fact a genie, and he is tasked with decorations. He whisks up balloons and streamers and strings of white lights, a bouncy castle, and a real T-Rex that he has rendered unconscious but tells the family is inflatable, with a wink to the audience. They drink root beer and eat cake. Children, classmates, and neighbors swim and swim. Pop-Pop barbecues. "Looks like it all turned out," Anthony says. New Mommy Dearest brings out freshly baked cookies. "I think I'm starting to really like that lady," Anna says. Shazaam gathers the children in for a hug. "About time you make your last wish so I can poof out of here," Shazaam says. "Awww man!" the children say in unison. Shazaam savors a bite of cookie. "What would *you* want?" Anna says. "I want my last wish to be for you. As a thank you." "You know," Shazaam says, "I really envy your ability to die." Anthony elbows Shazaam in the ribs. "What a downer!" Anthony says, and he pushes Shazaam into the pool. Anna pushes Anthony into the pool and Pop-Pop pushes Anna into the pool and New Mommy Dearest pushes Pop-Pop in before cannon-balling in herself. Freeze frame.

Chlorine-blue water hangs in the air. Anthony's hand is stuck in the act of a splash, Anna's hands cover her face. A fly is locked above the cake, its wings frozen, unnoticed by all but Shazaam. He finds he can move freely. This has never happened before, this freezing time business. He moves Anthony's hand to the top of his head, just to see what might happen. Nothing happens. The hand sits on Anthony's head. In his stomach, Shazaam feels the sands of the lamp calling, or maybe it's too much sugar from

the cookie. Everyone is spoiled by everything, Shazaam thinks, and only he is worried that they exist inside a lamp, or a television set, or a computer simulation, or, worse, that they don't exist at all.

### **Something Must be Done!**

I remember the one they called the Big One! I was apartment hunting at the time, seeing a unit in Greenwood. It was ugly—teal carpet, plastic bookshelf, but I did like this old wood arm chair. I remember trying it out and running my fin along the grooves of a lion carved into one of the armrests.

“Does it come with the unit?” I asked the landlady.

“You betcha!” she said.

She had metallic bluish scales and a beehive hairdo. I thought that if I couldn’t get the apartment, maybe I could get a date.

I needed a place after holding out the longest of the old gang. At first there’d been a gaggle of us aspiring-types, Alan and Nathan and Susie and Drew and Tina and Tammi, a couple Jeffs. We rented an old house and waited tables, landscaped part-time, made latte foam art. We watched Romanian New Wave films and read our sound poems to one another. Rent was split equally, which is to say nobody paid.

But then, as if overnight, we got older. Jeff and Tammi and Jeff and Tina shacked up and wanted to procreate and buy new houses with fenced off enclosures to keep their young from escaping. And so it went. Everyone got a job with a tech company or they ran away to the edge of civilization, or both. Soon enough I was the only sockeye left in that big house, just me and my *ideals*.

One day, as I watched a Dziga Vertov film and smoked French cigarettes, a notice was stapled to my front door. It said the building was to be leveled to make way for condos.

“Hey,” I asked the Greenwood landlady, admiring her red velvet mumu and muscular pectoral fins, “Is there any way a guy like me, with no credit and a part-time job, might skip to the top of the application pile?”

She started wiggling her tail. Only it was less a wiggle than a vibration. Her fins sort of swiveled around. I'd never seen anything like it but I felt the situation demanded adaptivity, so I tried doing it too, this mating dance, if that's what it was. Only it wasn't that at all, it was the earthquake getting started.

“What's going on!?” the landlady shouted. She pressed her fins against her beehive hairdo to keep it in place.

And since I didn't yet know the magnitude of what was happening, I said, “What do you *want* to be going on?”

She reached out and touched my fin, then pushed me aside and hurried to a door frame. I crouched under a table. There was a cracking sound like a roar and out the window I could see trees ripped in half right up the middle. Buildings tumbled over like dominos, or even blasted off like rockets. I had never seen that before! The whole apartment building crumbled around us and everything was pulverized, save her door frame, my table, and the old arm chair.

“Phewph!” I said.

“I'll say,” she said.

It occurred to me that the landlady and I might be the last two salmon alive.

“All around us the city has been decimated,” I said. “And yet your lovely hair remains untouched.”

Only she didn't hear what I'd said because a chasm had ripped open and we hurtled away from each other.

“What?” she cried out.

“I said, your lovely hair remains untouched!”

Magma oozed in cute patterns, a fern, a heart, the Amazon logo. I saw brunch spots, charcuteries, and tapas bars swallowed by earth.

Since the unit had been leveled, I immediately resumed apartment hunting. There was no time to lose! Usually they give a place to the first schmo who shows up and submits an application. In fact the Greenwood apartment was the fourth place I'd looked at that day.

The Smith Tower was knocked sideways, resting at a 45 degree angle on a pile of rubble. Seeing that the building looked abandoned, I took up residence in the penthouse. So maybe I was squatting, but at least I didn't move into a historically cohousing neighborhood and drive up the property value.

The place needed redecorating so I appropriated a couch from this condo, a laptop from an abandoned houseboat. I collected the old armchair from the chasm ridge, which, as it turned out, was some kind of antique. According to a plaque at the feet of the chair, it was a gift given in 1914 by the last Empress of China, Cixi, to the mayor of Seattle. It took a while to bolt everything down so it wouldn't slide across the hardwood to the ground-facing windows, and even longer to get used to the pull of gravity as I cooked up breakfast, took a sideways shower.

Word got out about my new digs and, by the weekend, everyone wanted to see me. I threw a big party. The Jeffs and Tammi and Tina even drove in from the suburbs.

“Poetry is the ecstatic rendered into static,” I said.

“Property is the illusion of time as capital,” I said.

Everyone applauded. We toasted cocktails with fennel vinegar to praise Tina’s new self-composting toilet, Tammi’s new job in HR, Nathan’s new boutique haberdashery.

The next day I saw a salmon come sniffing around the place, so I went out on the balcony and shouted, “Hey you! Yeah you! Scram! These are my digs!”

Others came by from time to time. If hollering wasn’t enough, I’d slap my fins against my chest, or throw some garbage at them, or recite sections of the manifesto I wrote in college for a course in sustainable urban planning...*Lichen for every rooftop! Kombucha mothers for every closet! Recalibrate root chakra from consume/decay to ferment/foment! We ARE the automaton!*

Weeks passed, and my parties became a big deal. Every Friday night we’d dangle from ropes to keep from falling and drink and talk, looking down at the rubble below. But, at the end of every night, after the guests had left, there I would be, holding onto a support rope, all alone.

One day I saw the landlady wiggling her tail fin below my window.

“Yoohoo!” she said.

I ignored her and returned my attention to my crossword puzzle and bagel.

“Yoohoo-oo!” she said.

When I let her in, she said she wanted me to rent her a place in the tower. As the only occupant, I guess I was the de-facto landlord.

“How’s your credit?” I asked.



She touched my fin.

“You may move in to my own apartment!” I blurted.

Her name was Shirley. We both loved Don Quixote and vaping CBD weed. She was a poet, and when she read to me I would become lost in her voice...*“I met a fella in the reefs/Full caudal finned—a sprite most fair/His lateral line was long, his operculum was light/I even awed his nares.”*

Shirley was good with a hammer. She went about fixing up the place, making new floors that were flat instead of slanted, filling in all the cracks in the walls.

Life was good. Sometimes I did get anxious and think about all the folks who had occupied the building before the quake, but why was the Smith Tower any more theirs than mine? *Predatory capitalism?* Typewriter and firearm magnate Lyman Cornelius Smith died before the construction of his tower had finished. I did hope all the old occupants weren't dead, but I had no intention of giving up my penthouse.

Our days were leisurely. Shirley would write for a few hours while I diddled around in the kitchen, experimenting. I made all kinds of things with my abundant free time, Taiwanese plankton omelets, plankton mofongo, planklax cured with brandy and dill. After meals we'd stroll the avenues, or what was left of them, and talk about capital-A Art.

“BOMB Magazine has gone corporate,” Shirley said one night.

“Yes,” I said.

I reached for her fin, and she squeezed.

But, as the weeks passed, Shirley grew distant. My affection grew and grew, but I wasn't sure the feeling was mutual. Some nights she spent hours drifting around the penthouse as if in a fugue state. I hoped it was a poet thing.

"What's wrong?" I asked her one night. She'd been gazing out at the landscape beyond the windows for fifteen minutes.

"Don't you worry about them?" she said. "All those citizens out there."

"Sort of," I said, and then realized that wasn't a very nice thing to say. It was true that not everyone was doing well after the quake. Some had no choice but to live in tents or caves.

"Something must be done!" I said.

We invited over my old pal Alan, who had also done quite well for himself. He'd claimed the Kingdome and ate all the hot dogs and nachos he wanted, took in ballgame after ballgame.

"There must be a great leap forward!" Shirley said.

"We must do something!" Alan said.

"Something must be done!" I said.

Alan and I put up flyers all over town, on telephone poles and coffee shop bulletin boards, in the windows of patisseries and brewpubs. We took out a full-page ad in the local weekly, which said, "SOMETHING MUST BE DONE!"

We held our meeting at the Kingdome on the turf of the playing field.

"Something must be done!" I told the crowd. Almost everyone in town had turned up, even Susie and Nathan and both Jeffs and Tammi and Tina. In the spirit of camaraderie and togetherness, we sat in a large circle, seminar-style, and Alan facilitated

the discussion. A redistribution of wealth was settled on, with, of course, a few exceptions. For example, the Jeffs and Tammi and Tina didn't want to give up their nice new houses and I quite liked my penthouse. But I gave up all the other floors, on the condition I was made emperor, which, we all thought, seemed fair given that I had organized the meeting. All food resources were shared from then on. Some fished for plankton while others farmed zucchinis and kale or foraged berries. Others scrapped the rubble. We melted steel into ore, which we used to make pedestrian bridges. Only it didn't go so well. I picked the most festive designs and they turned out so flimsy that they'd crumble under the weight of a single pedestrian.

Shirley had a way of finding new problems.

"I thought you should know," she said. "No one can find parking in Greenwood anymore!"

"Oh boy," I said.

"Something must be done!" Shirley said.

"Something must be done," I said. I imagined a great parking structure that rose to the heavens, and then remembered our massive lumps of ore. After the bridge disasters, I hid the ore on Mercer Island, well out of view. I was a lousy emperor.

Shirley left to go read. She'd been reading Proust. I wish I could I say I never had the patience, but I never even picked it up. Shirley had thought we might read it together, but I told her it was baseball season.

Lapping back and forth across the living room, I looked at the lamp and the table as if they might divine what needed done. I started reading the plaque on my chair, and

saw some small text I hadn't noticed before. It explained that those who sat in Imperial Wishing Chair should whisper the name of the one they'd like to marry.

I took a seat.

“Shir—” I began, but was interrupted by a terrible shaking.

It was another earthquake, this one worse than the last! Or maybe I'm remembering it all wrong, maybe the Big One didn't hit at all until I lived in the Smith Tower, and the first was just an ordinary earthquake. Either way, my whole life crumbled in front of my eyes. I clung to a banister and felt that I was falling, that the whole building was resuming its journey from vertical to horizontal. When it was over, I found myself resting in a pillow of Smith Tower dust.

I set off with urgency to find Shirley, swimming through the rubble as fast as I could. There were many survivors. I'd run into them and reach out, cry “Shirley, my love!” and they'd say “Buzz off!” or “Surely not!” or “Surely you jest!” Finally, I gave up and surfaced at the top the pile, just in time to find Shirley dragged away by a pair of plate-armored geoducks.

“Where are you taking Shirley?!” I cried.

The geoducks took over the whole city, just like that. They'd been planning for eons, waiting for the right moment and now that the quake had freed them of the muck at the bottom of the Sound, the geoducks grew tall and strong, sprouted many limbs with which they grasped spears, shields, and pistols.

My empire lay in tatters and many of my fellow Seattleites had been taken as prisoners of war, destined for the work camps or the coal mines.

For days I scrounged for crusts of bread and slept in parks where fallen trees formed natural shelter. I never stayed in one place for more than a night. Alone, shivering, I'd hear a noise and hold my breath, unsure if the wind had shifted or a geoduck approached.

Soon enough, I was discovered, but by Tina.

"Well, hello, stranger," she said. In her fin was a plankton sandwich.

"For me?" I said.

"Yah-huh."

Tina organized the forces of the rebellion in shadows, joining together not just our urban imperial socialists but the fascists of the distant suburbs too, who, I've neglected to mention, had established their own far bleaker society in the days after the first quake. But if there was one thing we could all agree on, it was that we hated geoducks.

"I can almost taste it," Dirk said, the leader of the fascists, a Chinook with throbbing muscles sculpted by years of the paleo diet. "Grilled geoduck. Geoduck sashimi. Geoduck linguini."

"In squid ink sauce!" I chimed in.

"Shut up!" Dirk said.

Tina patted my shoulder. "There, there," she said.

I had to admit, they cut a fearsome duo, the two of them.

Dirk and Tina trained us for weeks at a makeshift camp, near Marysville, due east of the Walmart on 64th. In a grassy clearing surrounded by green belt, we learned to army crawl, to slit a geoduck's umbo off clean, not to fire until we saw the whites of their

shells. We ate nothing but hemp protein powder, slept for no more than two hours each night.

“We will prevail!” Dirk and Tina chanted.

“We will prevail!” we chanted back.

One night I caught a flash of the two of them making out. The wind blew open Dirk’s tent flap...but that’s neither here nor there.

The time came and we made our attack.

The geoducks had built a seemingly impenetrable cube-city in the old Pioneer Square, a three hundred-story superstructure in which they all lived. Other land was devoted to agriculture and to exploiting the area’s natural resources. The great forests of the North Cascades had been totally decimated—turned into bookshelves the geoducks sold to a foreign furniture company.

Assault rifles strapped to our backs, we rode BMX bikes from camp to I-5 and hid under overpasses, waiting for geoduck patrols to pass. When we got to the city we stopped at Discovery Park for egg white omelettes and black coffee—efficient fuel. At the end of the meal, Dirk and Tina brought out bottles of Syrah to enliven our spirits. We raised our glasses.

“Lock and load!” Tina said.

“Lock and load!” we said.

I had been assigned to a flank that was to head due east and then make camp on the top of Beacon Hill. When the time came, we would set out for the Cube just as the first attack force rushed from Discovery Park.

Only we never made it there. As we slurped the last of the wine, geoducks came at us on all sides.

Dirk fired round after round, crying, “Ahhhhhh!”

A spear shot through his midsection, and he fell to the ground. All around us, they slashed off our fins and slit us at the gills. We were no match for the geoducks. I felt a blow at the back of my head and thought I was done for.

I came to in a prison cell. A single dull light bulb flickered on and off. I figured I must have been somewhere in the innards of the Cube. Soon, I heard someone approaching. The slatch at the bottom of my cell door opened, and there appeared the collected volumes of “In Search of Lost Time.” I picked up “Swann’s Way” and felt butterflies.

“Shirley!” I cried.

“Sssssh,” she said. “Not so loud.”

I wanted so badly to see her face.

“Open the door,” I said.

“That’s not possible,” she said.

“But—”

“Don’t ask too many questions. You wouldn’t like the answers. We all have to adapt.”

“Shirley!” I cried.

“Just know I’m doing all I can,” she said.

Her visits were infrequent, without pattern. Always she wanted to hear my progress with Proust, but, even in that horrible cell, I couldn't muster the patience. I tried to lie my way through conversations.

"I just got to the part where they go bowling," I said.

"Bowling?"

"With bumpers."

Shirley told me all about the geoducks' lives inside the Cube. They drank a lot of soda, mostly Pepsi and Mountain Dew. They didn't go out much. They'd get up, drink a Rockstar and go to work (they were mostly programmers and engineers), then they'd commute up or down the Cube back to their housing cubicle, where they'd microwave something for dinner (usually a Hot Pocket) and pass the night playing computer games and chatting with each other on something called Reddit. It disgusted me.

But not Shirley.

"How would you like to live in the muck? For generations?" she said.

"I thought they liked it there."

"I've learned their language," she said. "They speak in code. C++."

I imagined them stomping around hallways, self-important erections in diaper shells.

"Good for you," I said.

"I told you I'm doing all I can."

"Oh," I said. "Great."

When Shirley next visited, it was to tell me there was someone else.

"All because I can't stand Proust," I said.



“Of course it's all about you,” she said.

“How did you meet him?”

“Mortimer was my minder in the labor camp. Our first date was at Red Robin on the 264th floor.”

“Why do they keep me here?” I asked.

“They don't think you're fit for the mines,” she said.

“And you? Why have they spared you the mines?”

“I swore allegiance to the geoduck way.”

I was speechless. In fact, I took a vow of silence. I went on a hunger strike.

Shirley next visited with Mortimer. When I saw them entering my cell, side by side, I had to admit he was a handsome geoduck. Certainly better looking than I.

He said he could arrange for me to swear allegiance.

“Never!” I shouted, and then blushed because I had accidentally broken my vow of silence.

The punishment for refusal was execution.

Guards dragged me into an ornate chamber filled with the skeletal remains of other salmon. A small crowd had gathered. Most had snacks, popcorn, tortilla chips, soda. Shirley and Morty sat next to each other and at least they had the decency not to eat.

I was put in a stiff chair—the old Wishing Chair. My fins were cuffed to the armrests and I was gagged.

The death squad raised their spears and pistols. Shirley broke out sobbing.

The chamber doors flew open. Tina appeared, guns blazing, the forces of the rebellion behind her.

“Eat lead!” she cried.

Dirk charged in, a knife in each fin. He had a robotic midsection.

“Sashimi-time,” Dirk said, spitting in various directions.

Or maybe *that* was when the Big One hit, right after they'd put me in the chair and the cavalry arrived. I remember everyone sort of stumbling around, not sure if they should still be fighting. But, come to think of it, maybe it was all one long earthquake, maybe we'd been shaking the whole time...regardless, their city was swallowed by the depths not a moment after I slipped out the backdoor.

The quake pushed Seattle up on a tectonic ridge where it drained of water. On Yesler Way Orcas flopped from side to side. A giant squid slapped anything and everything in reach with his enormous tentacles, and Dirk got stuck in a suction cup. I watched in horror as the squid pulled Dirk into its mouth, chewed once with a loud crunch, and swallowed.

From wide seismic fissures, I saw emerge figures the horrors of which the surface world had never seen. Their gnarled appendages sprouted into five digit clumps, two of which had opposable thumbs. And they had reeking belly buttons holes stuffed with wax and smegma. And their ears! Gross!

Before I could ask these monsters what they were called, I was pulled away by the riptide of a seismic tidal wave. I waved goodbye to Seattle for good, and hello to a passing humpback whale, which sang its greeting back at me. I had no idea what she was saying.

Eventually I relocated to the warmer waters of San Pedro Bay and found that I liked it. In fact, I hadn't realized how much of a downer Seattle was, all cold and grey. It was so nice to live in a place where nobody cared about indie rock! Plus, there was no rent! I think that's why most salmon live at sea, nowadays.

I met a nice lady named Shir, and maybe she reminded of my Shirley (she too loved literature) but I didn't hesitate when she proposed.

One day, hundreds of years later, I saw my old wishing chair all barnacled-over on the seafloor. We were on vacation in the Marianas Trench.

"Hey, Shir!" I said. "Look at this!"

But before she could swim over, there was a thundering boom, and the tectonic plate shifted right there in front of me.

"Something must be done!" I cried.

## Emil Cioran at the State Fair

### I.

Emil Cioran, deceased Romanian Fascist aphorist, appears in the pink of dusk at the state fair. He is this year's celebrity judge for the Horse Costume Contest, which will occur the following evening. The fair has promised that in forty-eight hours he will, again, be dead.

#

Word spread quickly after the first press release. *Emil Cioran—Returning from Death for Exclusive Two Day Engagement!*

No one is certain how they have managed the feat of reanimation. The fair has been mum on specifics. There are rumors of CIA sniffing around the fairgrounds—sightings of men in black.

#

Perfumed reporters in poorly ironed shirts, leftist activists in tight pants, bearded academics, and members of the Anti-Defamation League have come in disbelief, in protest, out of curiosity. They want to know why the fair has invited an Anti-Semitic self-proclaimed “Hitlerist,” who once said the only problem with killing oneself is that one was always too late, a man who said he envied cannibals not for the pleasure of eating a man, but of vomiting him.

“I thought we had put monsters like him to bed,” says a reporter from the Washington Post.

“I’ve spent a career inducing seizures in mice and attempting resuscitation, and a state fair beats me to the punch!” says a biologist from SUNY Stony Brook.

“Academia is late capitalism’s collaborator, its factory,” says a member of Antifa. At times the crowd seems on the verge of weeping, brawling, making out.

#

The fair has assigned young Vinny as Cioran’s personal assistant, a third grader from the Scholars of Excellence Program.

“What is that on your t-shirt?” Cioran asks on the occasion of their meeting.

“Thomas,” the boy says.

“But he is a train!”

“Is there anything in particular you would like to do at the fair?”

“How many times may a man savor the release of his own death?”

The air is thick with hay and manure.

“My education has not yet prepared me to answer such a question,” Vinny says.

“But as a Scholar of Excellence, I might say your arrival marks a new dawn.”

#

Some suggest that Cioran never really died or that this man is Cioran’s identical twin. Others say he appeared from a wormhole, drove a 1992 Buick Roadmaster onto the grandstand, or descended by parachute while snacking on kettle corn. Some claim all three genesisises as fact.

#

In front of the corn dog booth, Cioran addresses the crowd.

“A pure funfair would favor recreational coffin-making,” he says. Cioran then assumes a stoic posture, but he is unable to stand completely still on his quivering legs.

Bits of bone protrude at the knee and ankle. The questions glance off him unanswered while black saliva oozes from a hole in Cioran's cheek.

Vinny shrugs for the press.

After a time, Cioran offers what he qualifies as a rather adequate recipe for lemon bars.

#

Cioran rides the rides as a demonstration of the futility of living. For a time he pulls clumps of hair from his head and, at the top of the circuit, sprinkles them down on the crowd below. The inevitability of death is contradicted only by the Nietzschean eternal recurrence of the Ferris Wheel. If everything has happened before an infinite number of times, and will happen again, then we must continue dying forever, having made the same mistakes again and again and again.

"Weeee," Cioran says.

#

Vinny carries with him Cioran's moleskin notebook and a Motel 6 pen with which Vinny records Cioran's observations and aphorisms.

In his short stay, Cioran hopes that he might generate, if not a new book, then at least a chap or pamphlet.

"What about this for a title? *Death and Death Again.*"

"Excellent, sir."

Cioran takes in deep satisfied breaths, which cause a skin flap on his neck to vibrate.

"Vinny, that's not how you spell death."

“Sir, why is your face covered with band-aids?”

#

Observation: “If there is a God, or any such Divine Entity, then the Tilt-a-Whirl is His most perfect creation. We must all, in our own little sneakers, strive to occasion such vomiting.”

#

“Why have you returned?” a reporter asks.

“In order to pen my final book.”

“And why do that at a fair?”

“For the horses. And also for the children.”

“And why 48 hours?”

“Living is unbearable.”

“How did the fair first reach out to you?”

“Email,” Cioran says. He wonders if the man can possibly believe anything he’s saying. Cioran wondered the same thing in 1934 when he published *On the Heights of Despair*, and it continued to nag him until his death. He would wake at 4 in the morning in his green silk pajamas, and toss and turn. He wonders if this man knows about the silk pajamas.

#

Cioran strolls the arcade with its flashing green and pink lights and needling keytar rhythms.

A child fails to win an oversized stuffed dog. He looks pleadingly at his father, who hands a game attendant a five dollar bill. Then another.

#

Vinny only speaks when spoken to.

“Do you eat?” Cioran asks him.

They have now been together several hours.

“For nourishment,” Vinny says.

His bowl cut is combed tidily, his Thomas shirt tucked evenly around the waist of his jean shorts.

“Isn’t it past your bedtime?”

“I live for my work,” Vinny says.

#

Aphorism: I smoke Mavericks for reasons of aesthetics. My favorite poem is the Surgeon General’s Warning.

#

Cioran kisses the prize pig.

“She’s a beaut,” he says.

#

From the window of his provided room at the Motel 6, Cioran observes the yellow light of the parking lot. The parking lot is still. No car or person has entered or exited since Cioran took his position at the window.

#

His room is their most luxurious accommodation. There is a full bed. There are a lamp, a phone and an alarm clock on a nightstand. There is a flat screen TV atop a short entertainment center with a Blu-ray player and cable box. There is a transparent plastic



stand with a piece of paper that advertises free HBO. In the drawer of the nightstand is a Bible, a phone book, a binder advertising local businesses. At Professor's Pizza, a man might get the toppings he wants at the price he deserves. Shake your rear with live music every Friday. Pitchers of domestic beer half off on Tuesdays. It is Tuesday.

Cioran has not eaten in decades.

#

Cioran turns on the TV. He tells himself it was pure accident, that his finger slipped on the power button. He tells himself that he can't possibly avail himself of his book's full potential without a bit of current events, a little popular culture.

Cioran watches HBO until, as if in a trance, he dials up Professor Pizza and orders delivery. Pepperoni with mushrooms and, as a last second addition, pineapple chunks.

## II.

On the morning of his second day, a mass of children await Cioran at the grounds.

"Shoo!" he tells the children.

"Get!" he says. "Only Vinny!"

They are unphased.

"Are these your friends, Vinny?"

Vinny shrugs.

#

Mr. Cioran is seen taking his constitutional in the cool of morning. Vinny hurriedly scrawls Cioran's observations. As they wind through the aisles of food vendors, the crowd of children grows.

#

“Read that back to me.”

*“I do not forgive myself for beans and boards.”*

“Being born,” Cioran says.

Vinny adds an annotation. He writes with such gusto his bowl cut flutters with the stroke of the pen.

“...Again, please. Read that back to me.”

*“I do not forgive myself for being boring.”*

#

Cioran strolls the amateur art. Each watercolor he claims as proof of the failure of democracy.

#

“Tell us,” a reporter asks. “Your thoughts on being plagiarized by *True Detective?*”

“I find Mr. McConaughey an adequately handsome mouthpiece. Plagiarism is a function of Capital. Detectives are idiots in that they search endlessly to find what they already know: man is cruel. Here, have a lemon bar.”

The journalist refuses.

“Is there cable TV in hell?”

“The only hell that exists is the act of speaking with you.”

#

He peruses the goat barn, the milker cows, beefers. He pets the Toggenburg goats and the Jamnapari goats. There is a long line to have your picture taken with the baby albino gator. He waits. He waits and waits. The children wait but not in the line. They

wait for what, exactly? Cioran enjoys the waiting—the ripe smell of hay, shit and dander, the fresh disappointment in each person’s face as they hand the gator, jaw banded shut, back to its handler.

#

Emil Cioran assumes the reins of the teacup ride. Each child spins in silence, one at a time, while Cioran decries the parents’ online purchase histories.

“Barking motion sensor! *Eat, Pray, Love!* Truck Nutz!”

Vinny writes a note about the recurrence of the teacup to ask Cioran later: *more or less eternal than Ferris Wheel?*

“I am your God,” he tells each and every child, “and I am disappointed.” He gives them a fresh broom and a newsboy cap in one of three shades of brown: russet, sand, fallow.

#

“Tell us,” a reporter asks. “Did you not perish on June 20th, 1995, in Paris, France, at the vine-ripe old age of 84, as described by your obituary in the Independent?”

“I will only answer open-ended questions,” Cioran replies, and he then offers a wet cough for the newsmen. Cioran’s chin is affected with spittle.

“Then,” a reporter asks, “Might you enumerate for us some of your myriad gripes with the Hungarian and the Jewish peoples?”

“*Pálpustai* is surprising pleasant on toast. Some of my best friends are Jews.”

#

The children deconstruct the wooden roller coaster without the use of tools, reconfigure it into an effigy of the existentialist Lev Shestov.

“It would be tedious to burn such a structure,” Cioran says, and the children tirelessly rebuild the roller coaster. Upon their having finished, Cioran lights a corn dog as if to smoke it, gums the nub. The children’s eyes glimmer in the light of the ember.

#

“I ceased to love myself the moment I leached off another living being; I did so with my first breath,” he tells *Democracy Now*. “Everything I do is for the children,” he adds.

#

He decides to ride the bumper cars. The children maneuver their cars to allow Cioran to most easily T-bone them.

#

There is a dusty field with a baker’s dozen horses, all glammed up. There is a horse wrapped in the American flag and another painted red, white, and blue. There is a horse with Superman’s cape, a horse with a chef’s hat, a horse in two matching pairs of Air Jordans, a horse in rouge and lipstick, a rainbow horse, a Space horse in spacesuit, a gentleman horse in top hat and monocle, a disco horse, a horse in a nun’s habit, a horse made up like the star car from the film “Cars,” a horse with a fedora and a cigar.

The children fill the bleachers, sit perfectly still.

#

A fair employee explains Cioran’s duties. Cioran must invent sufficient categories for each horse to leave a winner. The employee’s name is Jeff. Jeff wears black jeans and a pearl-snapped black button up. He has a bolo tie and black Ray-bans. He has a name tag that says: “Jeff, Middle Manager.”

“For example: best superhero horse,” Jeff says.

“I will do no such thing,” Cioran says.

On his signal—Cioran raises his hand in the Quiet Coyote gesture—the children storm the field and steal the horses. Cioran rides off on the gangster horse, the cigar having migrated from the horse’s mouth to Cioran’s. After a few puffs, he lends the Fuente Flor Fina to Vinny, his best boy, his number one. Vinny rides the “Cars” horse, puffs and puffs.

#

The sun has nestled into the horizon and the fair glows in twilight.

“Vinny!” Cioran cries. “I am hungry!”

The children applaud carefully.

“Sally forth!” Vinny says, and, in the dying light, it is as if, on his t-shirt, Thomas has become righteously angry.

They ride, Cioran in front, Vinny at his side, the children following. Those who do not have a horse of their own are dragged along in bumper cars.

#

Cioran coerces the friendly youth at the popcorn stand to imbue the vegetable oil with musk from a deer. How lucky the deer in question, the corn to be masticated, Cioran considers. He considers himself in need of an elephant ear, also.

#

They ride into and through the house of mirrors. Reflected ad infinitum, they are not a crowd but a force.

“Every event is the catalyst of infinite possible failures. Each moment not lived is the perfection of not having failed,” Cioran says.

Cioran still considers himself in need of an elephant ear.

#

“Tell us again, please, Mr. Cioran,” the children plead in their various decorative accents. “Tell us once more the story of the failure of Fascism in the 20th century.”

“I am tired,” Cioran replies. There is a sore on his left arm that secretes a brownish pus.

“We would like to hear,” Vinny says. He holds the notebook and pen at the ready.

“Maybe tomorrow,” Cioran says. He imagines powdered sugar melting into a hot elephant ear.

Vinny scowls. Vinny and another child, a girl with light-up shoes, share a knowing look.

#

Emil Cioran exhales while eating his elephant ear. There is no paucity of powdered sugar on his motorcycle jacket.

#

Cioran comes upon the prize pig. It smiles at Cioran. Did it smile at Cioran?

He spits in its eye.

#

Cioran asks the children where he could, in the service of replacing his jacket, find a haberdashery of repute.

Vinny knows. Of course Vinny knows.

#

He suggests to the children that they kill themselves, but then counters that they should have already. Each person's suffering is a unique monad, as inaccessible as anyone else's.

"There is no God in the abyss," Cioran says. "Only total, shared suffering—the ultimate freedom."

In the moleskin, Vinny writes: *phoning it in?*

#

"Was death as wonderful as you'd hoped?" says a member of Antifa.

"I have overcome the fair! I *am* the fair."

"And death? Did you overcome death?"

"Death is nothing to be overcome."

"Could you elaborate?"

"I could," Cioran says.

#

Aphorism: Nothingness is not a matter of submission. It is total.

#

"I cannot decide if I need another elephant ear," Cioran says.

"The stand has closed, sir."

"Could they open it?"

"I will make you an elephant ear."

"Vinny, I must tell you something."

Vinny places the Motel 6 pen in his mouth to demonstrate thoughtfulness.

“After death there is nothing. Not even an abyss.”

Vinny removes the pen from his mouth.

“Imagine blackness, but without the black.”

“Am I supposed to write this down?” Vinny says.

“I wanted you to know, Vinny. Just you.”

“Blackless black. Good,” Vinny says. He holds the pen at the ready. “The freedom of release.”

“Good...” Cioran says, but he doesn’t mean it. Vinny knows he doesn’t mean it, and Cioran knows that Vinny knows from Vinny’s scowl.

Vinny hands the moleskin and pen to Cioran.

“Goodnight,” Vinny says.

### III.

Cioran arrives to the fair mid-morning in his new motorcycle jacket. He is surprised to find neither Vinny nor the children waiting for him at the entrance to the fairgrounds. Without Vinny, the moleskin notebook feels heavy in his hand. No matter, Cioran tells himself; he has big plans for his last day.

#

On oversized clock says 9:37 am.

Cioran doesn’t know if they will come for him or if he will drop dead.

#

Once inside the fair, now unprotected by his entourage, he is set upon by the reporters, activists and academics.

“My final act will take place at the grandstand,” Cioran tells them. “Sunset.”



#

He wins the fair raffle and fumes quietly. It is a daily raffle. He has won two hundred dollars and a large stuffed bear. The bear has the name Terrance stitched into his chest and forehead.

#

The problem of the Free Market, Cioran tells an interviewer, is that it is an imperfect machinery in the production of despair and alienation.

He is worried the interviewer will ask where the children have gone. He is worried that Vinny has forsaken him.

#

Cioran is nauseous. He is weak. He wants an elephant ear but feels his body will not receive it kindly. His shoulders hurt and so does his head, his neck. All of him hurts.

“I don't need Vinny!”

“What?” says the youth at the popcorn stand.

#

Cioran eats a chocolate-covered strawberry kabob. Then another. Then another.

#

Cioran urgently needs to relieve his bowels. He stumbles into the cement restroom and, so distracted by gastric tension, fails to notice Vinny and the other children enveloped in tobacco haze, exchanging Little Red Books and Lucky Strikes.

The children gather round Vinny's phone to watch Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise*.

“Imperialism lays down the law,” Vinny says. He paces the room, back and forth, back and forth.

“The jester is king,” the children say.

“Let us sing,” he says. “Let us sing: Mao, Mao!”

Passing his shit is so excruciating that Cioran feels the need to examine it before flushing. The feces is sludgy green with red streaks.

#

The fair does not allow re-entry. Cioran exits, circles the parking lot, then purchases two new tickets.

“You do not need to pay,” the attendant says.

“I insist. Two please.”

Cioran places a hand on his stomach, as if this will help the pain.

“The bear doesn’t need a ticket.”

“Two please.”

Cioran does this five times.

#

In the parking lot, Cioran comes across a group of bachelors at the age of their physical peak. Joining them for conversation and victuals, he discovers they are acolytes of online gaming, men of some preference for flavored vodkas.

In his moleskin Cioran jots: “The Ubermensch does not play Xbox.”

#

Aphorism: In the Fascist state, there are no ‘dudes,’ only Philosopher Kings and the Proletariat. In the Fascist state, use of computer games would be strictly regulated. In

the Fascist state, the only vodka produced would be flavored with cabbage. The Fascist state would have HBO available only for Philosopher Kings.

#

Cioran straps into the roller coaster with full-stomached optimism. He is confident the previous issue was the fault of the kabobs. The elephant ear will not fail him.

He scratches his ear and a bit of lobe flakes off.

Terrance the bear gets his own seat.

#

“The indictment of birth is having to make an endless string of choices, each one more tiresome than the last,” Cioran says, interviewed live by the local NBC affiliate.

“The indictment of birth is awaiting annihilation.”

“And that's a good thing?” the reporter says.

“It is a thing,” Cioran says. The Tilt-a-Whirl tilts and ferris wheel recurs and he can hear popcorn pop, a moo, the distant needling of the keytar.

“A good thing?”

“*The* thing.”

#

Backstage, Cioran is almost ready to begin. A man in a ten-gallon hat with a flame-licked guitar is Cioran's warm-up.

When he is certain no one is looking, Cioran gives Terrance a hug.

Cioran pats the prize pig on the rump. She has been leashed and tied to the leg of a table.

“Atta girl,” Cioran says.

#

Unbeknownst to Cioran, the children sit criss-cross-applesauce under the grandstand bleachers and engage in political dialogue.

“Cioran’s Nihilism is a natural result of encountering truth in anti-truth, in the expression of misery as nationalism,” says the girl with light-up shoes.

Above, the bleachers are filled with heavy bodies in sweat shorts and tank tops. They watch as the musician croons odes to white male frailty.

“Fascism and Cioran’s mopey existentialism are pathetically mismatched,” Vinny says.

“His is a yearning for the simplicity of oligarchy,” says a boy with a rattail.

#

Cioran takes the stage with the prize pig. He lights a Maverick, eyes the crowd. His face is worn with stubble. He drops his pants.

#

“Each aphorism a misguided outburst of phallogocentric assertion,” Vinny says.

“Foucault might express Authoritarianism as a natural discourse of discipline and punishment, but culturally we have moved beyond such structuralist attitudes,” says a girl in pigtails.

“In a Deleuzian control society such as ours, Fascism’s panopticon is not necessary,” agrees a boy with thick dangling boogers.

“The problem,” Vinny says, his tee’s emblem of Thomas the Tank Engine as if ablaze in the new dawn, “is, well, *duh*. Who cares?”

#

Cioran fucks the prize pig.

Finished, he says, "I've had better."

"Encore!" the crowd cries. They want more. More and more and more and more and more.

"To live!" Cioran cries. "Life is the beauty of garbage! Of refuse!"

The crowd whispers dissent.

The sun sets.

#

Cioran, strawberry margarita in hand, festers during happy hour at Professor Pizza's. An ashed Maverick dangles from between his lips.

Cioran orders another margarita. Jeff, Middle Manager, appears in the doorway. He wears a lab coat and stethoscope, holds a syringe filled with glowing green goo. He eyes Cioran.

"Four-fifty," the bartender says. Cioran reaches for his wallet, but his arm falls to floor. He feels his head topple from its perch.

#

His field of vision somewhat impeded by his own two standing legs, Cioran still makes out the legs of the other patrons, their stools and chairs, the grey and black carpet flecked red, which smells like sweat, beer, and detritus. He takes a big whiff. And another. He reaches with his tongue, but can't touch anything except his leather boots, which taste sweet.

#

Cioran is overcome by a flash of light. He sees a wheel spinning inside a wheel. He sees a large peanut. He doesn't remember this happening last time. He remembers only being, then not. He sees Vinny and the children, convened under the bleachers.

"Fascism's only capacity is failure," Vinny says. He rises.

"That Marxism has so far failed has no bearing on Marxism's future," says the girl with light-up shoes. She too stands. She moves to Vinny's side.

Cioran sees Vinny watch as his father says, *god dammit*, and slaps the toaster oven, the microwave, the hood of his Geo Metro, sees Vinny's father sit in silence after his mother asks if the grilled shrimp is satisfactory while Vinny keeps his head down, his gaze focused on his dollop of mashed potatoes, sees Vinny returned his book report on *The Mouse and The Motorcycle* and feels how expectant Vinny is, how eager for Mrs. McIntyre's feedback on his post-colonial analysis of Cleary's text in relation to the Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, and how the teacher had given him a B and only marked the page for its sloppy penmanship, sees Mrs. McIntyre makes a show of giving Snickers bars to the perfect girls with long blonde braids for their book reports, which, Mrs. McIntyre tells the class, exceeded expectations, sees Vinny work tirelessly in the den completing letter tracing exercises while his father watches *Family Feud* until Vinny's penmanship is perfect.

Vinny kisses the girl with light-up shoes.

He lights a Lucky Strike. The girl cocks a beretta.

#

Cioran's head rolls.

"Goal!" someone shouts.

He is raised into the air and his mouth is filled with peanuts. A peanut is jammed into each of his ears and nostrils.

“Baseball!” Jeff says. He picks up one of Cioran’s leg to use for a bat and assumes the stance of a hitter.

The bartender brings Cioran’s head to his chest, looks Cioran in the eyes.

“Here comes the curveball.”

#

Cioran never liked baseball, but spinning through the air, feeling firsthand the swooping drop of what bartender describes as ten-six movement, he hopes that he might be invited back next year.

He feels his skull crack.

“Outta there!”

## **Dodger Dogs**

### Game One

Randy Newman and I cruised above Los Angeles in his flying red convertible, top down, holding hands. For the first time in 30 years, the Dodgers had reached the fall classic. That night they won the first game of the 2017 World Series. It was hard to believe. In fact, looking down at the smog below, we knew it was hopeless. That's what it meant to be a Dodger fan.

“I'm dying,” Randy said.

He unbuckled and drifted up toward the stars. I followed. My floating limbs felt weightless, almost numb. Randy's convertible slowly fell toward the sprawl below.

“You can't die,” I told him.

I saw a shooting star. Could I wish for Randy and the Dodgers at the same time?

It was so close—victory—my mouth-hole stuffed with Dodger Dogs, the crowd roaring.

“I love LA,” Randy said.

#

### Game Two

I bought us a round of Montejos and Dodger Dogs, squeezed relish and crayon yellow mustard till it was just so.

When I returned to our nosebleed seats, cardboard tray in hand, Randy said, “I wanted the Wetzel Pretzel dog.”

“Fuck off,” I said.

He crammed the whole doggie in his mouth to spite me.



“I got a lady down in the lower deck,” Randy said.

“A lady?” I imagined a big nasty redhead—all bikini and tanning oil under her Puig jersey. I imagined nipples smeared with Heinz ketchup and white onion.

“Where do our dreams come from?” I asked him.

“She works concessions,” Randy said. “We can get all the beer we want. She got a system.”

Randy touched my arm and there was a flash of white light, the sound of a rabbi crying out, clenched fists—blammo, just like that, we were on the lower deck.

“You are some kind of Randy Newman.” I put my hand on his shoulder.

“Takes all kinds.”

Down there everybody was tan, slim, their hat brims bent and not flat like mine, a swagger to their walk as if they’d ruined paradise because they didn’t know what else to do in Los Angeles. But a person could do anything in Los Angeles. I thought Randy and I were gonna do all of it.

“Come back in five minutes,” Randy’s lady said. “The manager will be on break.”

She was maybe six feet tall and wore aviator frame glasses.

We found seats at the bullpen and watched Dodgers closer Kenley Jansen warm up. Listened to the snap of the heater in the mitt, watched the spin on the cutter. I imagined the Astros’ shortstop throwing his bat into the dirt.

I held our seats while Randy brought us beers the size of babies. Pizza, Dodger Dogs, nachos.

Only it didn’t go how I imagined it. Their shortstop singled to left field off Jansen. The ball rolled in the outfield grass and the tying run scored.

“I think I shit myself,” I told Randy. And he didn’t say anything, but I knew it was killing him too, despite the tough guy routine. I wanted to hold hands with anybody, everything.

“Hey you,” I said to the big, mean-looking guy next to me. “You wanna hold hands? The stress is killing me.”

He said nothing but slid his hand over mine. We twined fingers.

Blammo, blammo, blammo, blammo. Four Houston dingers, each one bigger than the last. The final home run carried to the parking lot, broke a windshield, and the car alarm hung in the air. Series tied.

“Dodgers always choke,” the big guy said.

I pulled my hand away.

Randy coughed blood all over his Hawaiian shirt.

#

### Game Three

“*We was born to ride,*” Randy sang, and we pushed 100, our nasty doos whipping in the jet stream as the convertible whizzed through the clouds above Houston’s distant suburbs, the Woodlands, Spring, Aldine.

Randy had got us seats at Minute Maid Park.

“What an ugly name for a ballpark,” I said.

“Ain’t nowhere like Dodger Stadium,” Randy said.

Then Houston proper—all sweat and tragedy. The stank of commerce. Even the hurricane had been commodified. A billboard here: *Sell your ruined home!* There: *Lease in Sugar Land!*

I hadn't believed in God until I met Randy, till he set me straight. We both worked after-school care jobs for the LAUSD in Westlake, somewhere in the no-man's land between Koreatown, Little Bangladesh, and the pupuserias of Rampart. At 2:45 we'd corral the middle schoolers into the parking lot to play sports, or help them with their algebra homework. Then we taught our "enrichment" courses. I taught comics, Randy taught music. Sometimes I heard the blast of horns from Randy's room while I droned on about gestural figures or the space between panels. Then we fed them a few pretzels until they either got picked up or walked out into the night.

"It's all Old Testament," Randy told me. "Wrath and plagues. The vengeance of a chorus of airborne stones."

Randy had just knocked the wind out of a sixth grader with a dodgeball.

I said, "Aren't you a little old for this gig?"

"Takes all kinds," he said.

Randy and I hit it off fast like a montage—after-work beers, chili burgers at Tommy's, Dodger games. There were always Dodger games.

If it rained we'd take the kids into a portable. We had one deck of playing cards and no other activities save crayons and construction paper. After about thirty minutes they unscrewed table legs if we hadn't put a movie on. During a rainy stretch, Randy and I organized a Speed tournament. We promised Little Caesar's for the winners. Our whole after-school gang hovered around the one deck each afternoon while the players' hands flew to the draw pile. We cut our lessons short to make time for the tournament.

"These kids can't fucking play anyway," Randy'd said. "I just stand there and pretend it's genius while they bang out their atonal noise."

I made a bracket with red construction paper and stuck it to the wall with masking tape. We watched their names travel across the paper toward the championship. The stakes were real. We felt the highs and the lows. We believed.

On the ground in Houston, we got pork ribs at a juke joint.

Randy picked up a rib bone and chucked it into a garbage can across the room.

“I ain’t afraid of no Bossman. Let me meet that bigot. Let me hit Him in his face.”

“You think He’s got a hand in it?” I said.

“You’re damn straight,” Randy said. “That’s why it’s always the bad guys win the Series—Giants, Cubs, Royals.” He wiped the sauce off his mouth with his shirtsleeve and picked at his teeth with his index finger.

I took a swig of beer and let the suds cool my porky mouth-heat.

“Don’t fucking matter, kid,” he said. “Let Him catch us. We were born to ride.”

Randy put a buck in the touchtone, played Merle Haggard’s “I’m a Lonesome Fugitive.”

*“I’m on the run, the highway is my home,”* Randy crooned.

I was out of beer.

“Ain’t nothin’ like a good tough,” Randy said. “But he’s no Don Fagen. Fagen got the jazz and he got the yacht rock, you know what I’m saying?”

I didn’t. I wanted to say, *Teach me!* Instead I bought us a round.

“Rikki Don’t Lose That Number—what a fucking ballad,” he said.

We got so drunk the game didn’t even happen—only it did. Dodgers lost.

#

Game Four

I woke up with my hand in Randy's in a Motel 6 somewhere near Galveston.

I kissed him on the ear.

"You ain't dyin'," I whispered.

I decided I could will him back to health. I decided that if the Dodgers won, we'd go on forever, him and me, no off-season, no winter.

Across from the motel was a donut shop where I got us a box of crullers and two oversized Styrofoam cups of coffee that tasted like earwax. It felt good to be able to walk and buy food, like I was living right.

When I got back, Randy was up and dressed.

"New strategy," he said. "No road trips. God can't see us on the West Coast. What He can't see, He can't punish."

Randy snapped his fingers and we were back in Los Angeles, at a wing joint in Koreatown.

"I'm going out like I fucking mean it," he said.

We made friends with a gaggle of suits, put back round after round of soju and Hite. With each dozen wings we grew an inch, until we were ten feet tall, the lot of us.

"There's too much blood in my bloodstream," Randy said.

"We're gonna ride this feeling," I said. "Until we can't ride it no more."

Randy smiled. "Stop quoting me."

I felt like I was really coming into myself.

On TV, an Astros slider didn't break. It crossed the plate flat and slow, no spin, no drop. Joc Pederson barreled it and you could hear a home run off the crack of the bat. Outta there. Dodgers won.

We wept, jumped for joy, cried in righteous fury, ran down 6th Street shirtless, let the warmth of night absorb us.

“Two-two, baby!” Randy said.

We all piled in his red convertible, top down, me and Randy up front and the Korean businessmen in the back.

“Crank the Beach Boys!” Randy said. Just like that, Sloop John B was on the radio.

I could never tell when he was fucking with me. I said, “Brian Wilson got his beach ball and his other beach ball, you know what I’m saying?”

Randy put his arm around me, howled, “Drinking all night,” five times.

“Let’s get in a fight!” Jinyu said. He was the tallest and handsomest of the suits.

When the time came, we broke into one hell of a round. Two motorcycle cops joined in. The fatter one had a nice baritone.

We cruised from the South Bay to the Valley, from the Eastside to Westside. Everybody happy, the sun rose like yellow mustard.

#

### Game Five

We went to the Gold Room to watch game five. A man at the door wanted cover.

“World flipping Series,” he said.

Inside, there weren’t free peanuts and there weren’t all-you-can-eat-tacos and there weren’t any brown people.

“This place has fucking changed,” Randy said.

The old square TVs had been replaced with flat screens. We watched Dodger ace Clayton Kershaw with the glance to first, the wind-up—fastball—Gurriel ripped it all the way to space, where it made two full orbits before it came back down in my beer.

Randy kicked a stool over and then another.

We went out back and did lines of coke off the lid of a dumpster.

“Goddam gentrification,” Randy said.

I felt the rush hit like a knot furling and unfurling in my stomach.

“Let’s blow this joint,” Randy said.

We drove up Mt. Wilson and listened to the game on the radio. It got worse and then it got worse and then it got even worse. We didn’t stop at the Observatory, went higher and higher, up into the clouds, up into the cosmos.

“Somewhere out there in that big strange universe, Vin Scully is still riding a radio wave calling Kirk Gibson’s 1988 World Series walkoff homer,” Randy said.

“Matter of scientific fact.”

“I was born in 88,” I said, and a galactic silence hung between us.

“*In a year that has been so improbable, the impossible has happened!*” Randy said, quoting Vin.

They played video of that homer at the ballpark whenever the Dodgers needed a rally. Gibson hobbled around the bases on two injured legs, the dugout cleared.

“I hoped Vin might come outta retirement, call the series,” I said.

“No dice,” Randy said. He opened the glove box and pulled out a prescription bottle.

“What’s that for?” I said.

“Blue ones for dyin’ slower. Red ones for the pain of dyin’.”

He tossed back the lot and belched.

The radio called it, Astros.

“Palmist said my life line ain’t where it should be,” Randy said. “Disappeared! I tell you what, Santa Ana wind blowing hot.”

I gazed out at the arms of the Milky Way.

*“In a year where that has been so improbable...”*

“Where’s the magic?” I said.

#

### Game Six

From the upper deck, I watched the players take the field at Dodger Stadium. One loss between the Dodgers and defeat.

Randy showed up in the second inning.

“I got holes and cups!” he said, and he lifted his shirt up and showed me the cupping marks.

“Isn’t acupuncture the kind of thing you gotta go in once a week, let it work over time?”

He patted his belly, and I wondered if that’s where the death was.

“Tie ballgame,” I said. I handed him a beer and proposed a toast to my first World Series.

“My last,” Randy said, raising a Montejo.

“You ain’t dyin,” I said.

“Sure enough,” he said.



I grabbed for his hand but he pulled it away.

“*Look at those trees,*” Randy sang. But the tune was all off, like some mopey singer-songwriter covering it at an open mic.

“*Look at that bum,*” he sang. “*He’s down on his knees.*”

“Ain’t no bum, Randy.”

The infield glowed under stadium lights.

“I know what’ll raise your spirits,” I said. “Let’s say the name of our favorite players. Over and over again.

“Puig,” I said.

“Kershaw,” I said.

“Justin Turner,” Randy said.

“Kenley Jansen.”

“Austin Barnes.”

“Sam.”

“Sam.”

“Yasmani Grandal,” Randy said. “Yasmani Grandal. Yasmani Grandal. Yasmani Grandal.”

The rain came down and the Dodgers were brilliant.

“Where does magic come from?” I said.

“Yasmani Grandal,” Randy said. “Yasmani Grandal.”

The Dodgers won, tied the Series.

“Miracles are real,” I said.

#

## Game 7

The sun rose like a spell wearing off. We got to the park early and assumed our perch in the nosebleeds.

“One game,” I said. “Like all of time for nothing but this.”

“Oh come on.” But Randy rubbed my head and elbowed me a little.

The game started and you could feel something rotten in the air. Maybe it was Randy.

The Astros scored twice in the first.

“I bleed Dodger blue,” Randy said. He pulled out a knife and slit his right palm. It was true. He smeared the blue blood as eye black, handed me the knife.

“True to the blue,” I said.

Mine was red.

One Dodger hitter set down after another. Puig licked his bat for good luck, took a bite out of it, popped up.

“*Look at that mountain,*” I sang.

“I love LA,” Randy said.

Randy put his arm around me. “We love it!” he said.

The Astros kept scoring, run after run. They got up five-zip in the second. I noticed some spittle at the sides of Randy’s mouth.

“We need some luck,” I said.

“Let’s go see my lady,” Randy said. “Good luck snacks.”

Again, the flash of light, the sound of a Rabbi crying...but she wasn’t at her stand.

“I’ll text her,” Randy said. The bad smell was getting worse.

We walked lap after lap. I wanted to remember every light bulb, every menu board, every stain in the bathroom.

His lady never made an appearance.

Just like that, the season left us. The Astros took the field and danced. The Dodgers disappeared into the locker room never to come back, not till next year, and maybe never.

“I always wanted to be in a string quartet,” Randy said. “Couldn’t hack it.”

In the distance, the hills had caught fire.

“It’s time,” Randy said.

We dug a hole at home plate down through the clay of the infield, past Elon Musk’s traffic tunnels, under the meeting place of the Pacific and North American tectonic plates, down where the Earth was hot with magma.

“Fuck,” I said.

Randy looked pale and thin. Sweat beaded his face.

“Fuck,” I said.

“Nasty, nasty, nasty,” Randy said.

We shook hands and patted each others’ asses. We said goodnight.

I climbed out, filled the hole with unused Dodger Dogs, “2017 World Series Champion LA Dodgers” hats I found in a shed, letters from school children: *Dear Puig, best of luck. #Puig Your Friend! Dear Kershaw...* topped it off with the Delaware River mud the league used to polish each and every baseball.

When I finished, the only other person on the field was Kershaw. He hunched over the dugout banister, head down.

It was cold. I had a long ride back on the Metro and work the next day.

It began to snow. Fat clumps drifted down and covered the infield dirt and outfield grass, the bleachers, the Jumbotron, the empty parking lot, Chavez Ravine, the Gold Room, Tommy's, the South Bay, the Valley, the Eastside and the Westside, the Imperial Highway, Koreatown, 6th street, the middle school, and Kershaw's shoulders.

### Notes for a Speech

Nothing felt familiar. The more I walked, the brighter and more crowded the station became. A minute's journey up a flight of stairs revealed only a longer descent back down. The corridor, impossibly tight in places, opened into wide halls with pristine storefronts and well-dressed commuters in Columbia or North Face jackets who seemed to appear just as I collided with them. I kept expecting to run into someone I knew.

My father hadn't been clear about where in the station I was supposed to meet him and my phone was unable to connect to the local network. A station clock said one time, my phone said another.

Even the famous Jack Gunter mural in the station's main promenade looked different. In the painting, a boy's hand rested on a cow as together they gazed out at the artist's vision of Seattle's distant future, a gorge where Ballard had once been, whose walls were lined with the rubble of the Kingdome, Dick's Drive-In, the Pink Elephant Car Wash. Though I'd seen the painting many times, that day it felt menacing, paternalistic, as if the cow didn't know what was coming.

I walked into one of the shops that lined the promenade, a 7-11, and asked the cashier if he had the time.

"That clock's broken," he explained. "It's almost eight, most likely."

"Hey," I asked him, the words surprising me as they came out, "Could you point me to where I catch the bus to Crown Hill?"

"The D Line?" he asked.

"It was the 15, I think."

"The 15 doesn't run too often anymore," he said.

“What year is it?” I joked.

“Do you need a ride, sir?” the cashier asked. I looked at his nametag: Derek. He could have been one of those kidnapers I’d read about. It was hard to believe that in Seattle, of all places, tourists were snatched off the street and taken to an ATM where they were forced at gunpoint to drain their bank account. Still, Derek had a job, although kidnapers must have jobs. He seemed like a perfectly normal guy, almost handsome in uniform, even if the company shirt didn’t quite fit him. He had a natural smile that put me at ease.

“Oh, no thank you, Derek. And you’ve got the store to attend to,” I said.

“They don’t care if I close for a few minutes. I do it all the time,” he said, and the next thing I knew, we were in his car, headed north on 15<sup>th</sup>. Derek insisted I sit in the back.

“There used to be a Denny’s right there,” I said.

“Oh *wow*,” he said.

“I mean, I don’t know if it was always a Denny’s. It had this angular roof. Maybe it was an IHOP.”

We stopped at a red light. Sculpted condo towers rose on all corners. It was hard not to admire their newness, their sheen.

“The cost of an urban city,” I said.

“What?”

“I wonder if that Denny’s might’ve been in the *Almost Live* bit about Ballard,” I said.

“*Almost Live*?”

Outside a Whole Foods, a kid hawked fried alligator heads in the fluorescent light of the entryway.

“It was a local sketch show in the nineties. Like *Portlandia*.”

“So what are you going to say at the rally tomorrow?” Derek asked.

I couldn’t remember having mentioned the rally.

“Did you recognize me from my blog?” I said.

“You really don’t remember me?” Derek said.

“You know me?”

“I mean. Not well,” he said. “*Derek*. Alan’s little brother. You guys used to come over all the time on weekends and smoke weed in his bedroom, like none of us knew what was going on.”

“I don’t remember Alan having a little brother,” I said.

“Here I am,” Derek said. “One time you drunkenly smashed my Legos. A whole village, gone, just like that.”

I laughed, trying to ease the tension, but when the light turned green, he drove faster than before.

“Maybe we can get a drink, catch up,” I said.

“I’d like that,” Derek said, and I could see a hint of a smile through the rearview mirror.

He didn’t slow down though, and, at that speed, it seemed we could easily miss a turn. Having to backtrack, he’d be away from work that much longer. I directed him as best I could, but the closer we got to my parents’ place, the stranger and more unfamiliar the streets became. On my phone screen, the city swelled and zoomed in and out, spun in

circles as the GPS struggled to locate us in the maze of spreading waterways, train lines and shopping malls. The underground network of arterial tunnels interlaced with above-ground streets on the flat surface of the map. As soon I saw a familiar landmark like Carkeek Park, it would swim away.

“We’re driving in a circle,” Derek said.

“I’m trying to use Google Maps,” I said.

“Let me see it,” Derek said, and he pulled over. “There’s no fucking *Norcross Way*. That’s why it’s not navigating. What the hell? Where are you trying to take me?”

He handed back my phone, and while I was certain it had been directing us, my phone agreed, now, that *Norcross Way* did not exist.

“Jackass,” Derek said. “Get out.”

“We’re so close,” I said.

“Get outta my fucking car,” Derek said.

I collected my carry-on and began apologizing.

He rolled down the passenger window.

“You piece of shit,” Derek said. “It was always like this. Never thinking about anyone but yourself. And here I thought maybe we’d get a drink.”

A gun muzzle poked out the window.

“Don’t you ever fuck with me again,” he said, and drove off, accelerating quickly at first, but he braked at a stoplight, and, as far as I could tell, observed the speed limit as he disappeared.

My phone buzzed. My father, *where r u? At station now. Been waiting.*



I assessed my surroundings and was reasonably certain I was close to their house. Just to be safe, I texted my father for the address. I said their street wasn't showing up on my phone, that I was sorry I hadn't seen him at the station, that I was walking.

*Your mother is working hard on dinner. Don't be late again plz,* he said.

I saw a bus stop with a wide, inviting bench decorated with the faces of real estate agents and politicians. My heart still pounded from the altercation with Derek. I decided to sit for a minute. Searching the map on my phone or perhaps drifting in and out of sleep, I was startled by a tap on my shoulder.

"I've been repeating your name over and over, did you not hear me?"

I apologized to the man. He was tall, unbrowed, cut from north Seattle Scandinavian stock. I realized who he was. My old pal Carl! We'd grown up together. In middle school I'd gone to his house to play with pellet guns. His younger brother hunted us like animals despite the fact that we outnumbered him. And later, in high school, we hot boxed my car and spent afternoons at WOW Bubble Tea, where they had Scrabble and played Christian rock we thought was funny.

"Oh thank God," I said. "I've gotten lost."

"I feel insulted you didn't recognize me," he said.

"I hadn't noticed anyone sitting there."

"It's funny how big this town gets and yet you still run into people all the time."

"I've been away so long. It's different since the quake."

"Is it? I wouldn't say so. But I guess I'm used to it. Seems to me it's the same old deal plus an expensive, ugly monument."

“I remember coming back from teaching English in Hong Kong. Seattle looked so tiny, an embarrassing blip. But later, when I visited for the holidays in grad school, Seattle was this huge, expansive place.”

“How transformative for you,” he said.

“You...take the bus now?”

“I think we all try to. Bus and train, bicycle,” he said, and he patted his road bike. The way he said ‘we’ sounded accusatory. “I think we’re gonna ban fossil fuel this election.”

“Actually, I’ve been invited to speak at the rally,” I said.

He fished out his phone and briefly thumbed around the screen.

“You know,” I said, “I’ve always loved trains. My mom used to drive me down to the yard at Interbay, when I was in preschool. She’d use it as a reward. I would stand on the bridge and watch the trains as long as she’d let me.”

“Weird.”

“In Hong Kong I loved taking the train. I took it everywhere. To work. Downtown. The market in Kowloon Bay. But soon enough I missed my Accord. Driving through the desert, or whatever, cigarette, music, gas stations.”

Carl didn’t seem interested in what I was saying. I had been rambling. Living alone, blogging for work, I wasn’t used to the back and forth of healthy small talk.

“How have you been?” I asked. Last I’d seen him he was working seasonally as a travel guide on trips abroad for wealthy teens. He had been thinking about going back to school. But that was years ago.

“Oh, pretty good,” he said, but the lines in his face said the opposite.

“Programming keeps me busy.”

“My phone says my parents’ address doesn’t exist.”

“Nonsense,” he said. “But maybe they got rezoned after the quake. Might be a different number.”

I checked my phone to see if my father had sent me the address. He hadn’t, but he had said that my dinner was getting cold. They’d already eaten. I wondered how he had already gotten home, felt that maybe I wasn’t so close after all.

“I’d love to chat, but this is my bus,” Carl said, and he began mounting his bike on the rack at the front of the bus. As much as I needed assistance, it was a relief that he was leaving. But then I found myself asking if he might help me find my way and he said sure. He paid my fare, his pleasure. He insisted my parents’ was more or less on the way, and we careened off into the piss-smelling night.

I admired the signs near the ceiling. Don’t smoke. Don’t eat. Don’t drink. Eric Ostergaard, King County Metro Employee of the Month.

“I had a poem on the bus once,” I told Carl, fingering my freckled plastic seat.

“You do know my brother killed himself, right?” he said.

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“Did you know?” he asked.

I felt like I knew and yet consciously I didn’t. Maybe I had known at one time, but the knowledge had slipped away, one of those things that escapes if it’s not part of your routine. The bus was that way, rich with familiar details that I couldn’t have

possibly remembered a week prior, the teal of the seats, the coin machine, the paper transfers clipped near the steering wheel.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You don’t know?”

“It must have been difficult, for your parents.”

Carl didn’t respond.

“How are your parents?” I asked.

In the space of his silence I heard the hum of the engine and the sound of the tires rolling along pavement. But then he pulled the cord and we stood to exit, staggering to the front door as the bus slowed.

“Thanks,” he told the driver.

“Don’t you need your bike?” I asked as the bus pulled away.

“Oh, no. There are so many routes now and each one is so short. It’ll loop back around in a few minutes.”

“I appreciate you helping like this.”

“No big. And your condition.”

I wondered how he knew about my condition. He must have read my blog, or maybe he ran into my parents.

Carl led me down the dark street into the saffron light of one streetlight then another. It was hard to keep up, wheeling my carry-on behind me, and I was afraid I’d lose him. At times he got so far ahead, his outline dissolved into a speck and disappeared altogether, but down the road I’d find him waiting.

“You don’t look fat,” he said.

“It’s been a long trip.”

“I bet. Say, we made it.”

Only we hadn’t, we were at *his* parents’ house.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Your fucking blog,” he said. “A big excuse to mitigate the guilt of your own white privilege by digging into everyone else’s.”

“I write about food. It’s a travel blog.”

“Don’t be so fucking cute. And don’t think I don’t catch all your smug references. The way you slyly piss on us, *our* supposed superiority. *Where I’m from they wouldn’t even look at tripe.* I bet you don’t even know why they’ve invited you to speak.”

It was true, I didn’t understand. But it felt important to say yes to them, and I wanted to support the cause however I could.

“You weren’t here for the earthquake. Now you have the nerve to show up as this authority...on *what*, exactly?”

My phone was ringing, my father, but before I could slide the bar to answer, I’d missed the call.

When I looked up from my phone, Carl was gone.

I decided the best course of action was to knock on his parents’ door. We had been close as kids. They knew me. They always liked me. His mom made her beef stroganoff when I came over and though I never liked it, I always asked for seconds, thirds.

The door opened before I could manage a third knock and an unfamiliar face greeted me—a short, older woman with pronounced cheekbones.

“I’m just finishing,” she said. “Feel free to come in and set down your bag.”

Inside, I saw that this *was* in fact my parent’s house, down to the art on the walls. I’d eaten starfish, pig bile, urchin; I’d drunk Scotch on the rooftop of the world’s tallest building; for a month I camped in the Guatemalan rainforest, watched my limbs swell with insect bites. But once this house was all I knew, the spacious living room where I passed what felt like a lifetime staring at the wood beams of the ceiling and at a sketch of a man and his child that, to this day, I believe to be my father and me, even if he says otherwise. I took my bag upstairs to my old bedroom with its scratchy off-white carpet and the constant, menacing tick of the T-Rex clock.

As a child, I’d sometimes wake to the patter of my mother’s stalker’s footsteps on the roof. She would call the cops while my father grabbed a wood beam and turned on all the exterior lights, shouting to scare him away. Some nights my father ran outside and when the cops came they’d find him waving his arms and shouting. The police never caught the stalker, and, as years passed, they grew skeptical about his existence. One summer, the neighbors helped us dust the roof with flour and a few days later we found footprints. The cops said they could have been anyone’s. Then my mother saw her ex lurking in the parking lot at Fred Hutchinson, where she worked, and he didn’t. She got a restraining order. Still, the stalker visited at night. Sometimes, my mom would drop to her knees and plead through the roof, asking what she could do to make him go away. But then we adopted a dog and he vanished, just like that. Occasionally, years later, when I got up for a piss in the middle of the night, or when I lay awake in bed unable to sleep, I’d swear I heard him pacing above, even if I knew it was some kind of trick my brain was playing on me.

I set off to find the woman who met me at the door, who I assumed must be some kind of maid or housekeeper, although that was never a service my parents had used before, and, in fact, it seemed like something they'd find unsavory, politically, morally speaking. Possibly beyond their means anyway. I wanted to ask if my parents were around or if they'd gone out, if they left to meet me at the station, but she was nowhere to be found. In the kitchen it smelled strongly of salmon. They must have had it for dinner. I retrieved a beer from the fridge and drank in large, cool sips, let the piney resin of the hops linger while I looked out their front window at the dark street below. From this angle, the dip in the hilly road formed a wide grin with the craftsman homes warmed by porchlight as teeth, a mass of evergreens looming behind.

I noticed faint chatter coming from somewhere in the house. I hadn't seen or heard anyone when I'd looked for the housekeeper, but, nonetheless, the sound of voices was now definite. As I passed through the dining room, I looked instinctively out the glass patio doors to catch a glimpse of Sammy, our old malamute, who stayed in the backyard because of my mother's allergies, but of course she wasn't there. My parents gave her back to the shelter years ago, while I was away at college.

Drifting from room to room, I found the source of the voices in the den.

"There he is!" a man said. They all held drinks, beers, cocktails. Some had glasses of red wine. Altogether there must have been six or seven of them.

"Have my parents gone out?" I asked. Several of them laughed. They looked bewildered.

"You could say that," another man said. The light was dim and I struggled to make out their faces.

“And the cleaning woman?”

“Perhaps we have been a bit too ambitious,” said the first man. “A rest might do you well. It’s been a long journey.”

I thought of my warm bed upstairs and remembered the scratchiness of the blankets.

“It’s bizarre how your mother kept your room preserved like that,” the second man said. He wore a ribbed green Patagonia jacket and slim maroon jeans. “The T-Rex clock, the Griffey poster. It’s like some terrible museum of your childhood.”

“I’ve never been able to talk to her about it.”

“Well you certainly could’ve changed the decor,” the second man said.

“Oh but he’s always traveling,” said the first. “Traveling, traveling. Traveling and writing. Why doesn’t Mr. Important sit down with us and finish his beer.”

I took a seat on a recliner and felt I could fall asleep right there in front of these people.

“So,” said the first man, “have you planned your remarks?”

I felt a deep swirling guilt. “I might wing it. Sometimes I think better on my feet,” I said, but I could sense they were not pleased with this reply.

“We were just talking about getting drinks at Moon Temple,” a woman said. “We won’t bother you much longer. It was generous of you to have us.”

“Thank my parents,” I said, and I checked to see if I’d missed a text telling me they’d stepped out. I hadn’t.

“I always loved that dive,” I said. “We’d go there in high school. They didn’t ID.”

“You could come!” the woman said. “If you feel up to it, of course.”



“I thought it was demolished. Didn’t they build a shopping center?” I said.

“Of course!” the green jacket man said.

“We were being nostalgic,” the first man said.

“I’m afraid I don’t follow. Anyway, drinking isn’t good for my condition,” I said.

The woman who had seemed to invite me was eyeing my beer. I wanted to say, *cheat day*, that I had earned a little bad behavior after a long trip, but it seemed like verbalizing any of that would sound ridiculous. I smiled and matched her gaze. When we made eye contact I felt my face warp as if my mouth were a curvy line. I probably looked queasy. Maybe I was.

I hadn’t noticed how attractive she was, a slight lilt to her lips, the smooth, taut skin of her legs tucked behind her on my parents’ couch.

In fact, all of them seemed healthy and attractive, tall, well-dressed, hip but not obnoxiously so. There was a lightness about them, the way they moved, the sound of their voices, that made it seem like they’d never felt any real pain, any trauma.

“Your condition?” the woman said. “Sounds sexy. You got a tail? Bumpy rash?”

“I shouldn’t call it a condition. It’s nothing serious. I think I’m just tired, you know?”

She shot up from the couch.

“I want to see your weird bedroom!” she said. “Could you show me?”

I stumbled to my feet. The woman wrapped an arm around my waist for support.

“You OK?” she said.

The others sniggered, sipped their drinks.

I couldn’t remember a time I’d been so weak.

None of the others followed. We plodded upstairs and down the carpeted hallway, past the full-size cardboard Ichiro I'd been given for my 12th birthday, to my room.

"How chivalrous," I said as she held the door for me. I sat on the bed, exhausted.

She stood in front of the door, blocking any exit.

"I only asked to see your room to get you alone," she said.

I hadn't known anyone to talk that way.

"You're so stupid-looking!" she said. Her smile was mean but somehow inclusive, like we were in on the joke together, whatever the joke was. I didn't see how I was supposed to find my own face stupid, but the more I thought about it, the more stupid it seemed. I imagined my face, blank and open-mouthed, nauseated.

"Take your pants off," she said.

It seemed like the time to say something funny, blunt, to return the serve, but nothing came to mind. My brain was amorphous goop. I couldn't tell if she was being direct or fucking with me.

I reached down and fumbled with my belt. I couldn't get it unbuckled, in fact, I couldn't find the buckle.

"Jesus," she said, and in one motion slid my pants, belt and all, down to my ankles, where she left them perched on my shoes.

"Does your mom dress you?" she said.

I had no idea if this was romantic or something else entirely. She sat on the carpet next to the bed, looking up at me.

"How was *your* day?" I said. I wanted to sound sarcastic, or maybe self-aware, like I knew how inept I was at conversation.

“Another day in paradise,” she said, taking in the Griffey poster. “And the great travel blogger?”

“It's the strangest thing I...” I told her. “I kept running into people from my childhood. And right when I got off the train in Ballard, I had the gnawing feeling I'd run into someone.”

“You don't remember me?” she said.

I stood up, raised my hand as if in apology.

“Joking,” she said.

I sat back down.

“I heard you met my husband,” she said.

“Husband?”

“Don't be so old fashioned. Carl and I have a fluid situation.”

“Haha,” I said. “Funny.”

“Why is that funny?” she said. She stood and kissed me on the forehead. I attempted to kiss her and she pulled away.

“Carl?” I said. “Is your husband?”

“The man who helped you with the bus.”

“We went to school together. It's not like we just met. He never seemed like the open relationship type.”

The woman turned toward my dresser and pulled off her shirt. I was aware of my heartbeat as I looked at the skin of her back. There was a brown mole near her right shoulder. Even though she'd taken the lead with each step of our progressing intimacy, it

felt as if the act of looking at her was some kind of perversion, as if I wasn't entitled to the desire I felt, that maybe it was someone else's, that it belonged to someone better.

“Male gaze,” she said. Even without looking she could see through me.

“Did you study film?” I asked.

“I studied everything,” she said.

As if she knew where she was digging, she opened my t-shirt drawer and pulled one out, slipped it on. It was a shirt I bought in high school at Value Village, navy blue, with a stingray and the word Stingarees in yellow across the chest.

“What the hell does this mean?” she said, turning to face me.

“How should I know?” I said.

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. The shirt was big on her, made her look slim in the way thin people have of inhabiting clothes.

My pants at my ankles felt like shackles.

“You didn't tell me your name,” I said.

“Guess I haven't. So, what are you going to yammer about tomorrow?”

“I haven't figured that out,” I said.

“What do you think they want you to talk about?” she said.

“I think they want me to talk about progress.”

“There's progress and then there's progress,” she said. “We have both.”

She picked up a baseball from the top of my dresser and rolled it over in her hand.

It had been signed by the 1998 Mariners.

“You ever see a game at the Kingdome?” I asked.

“I grew up in Ohio,” she said.

“To get to our seats in the upper deck, we’d have to walk up flight after flight of cement ramps, back and forth, back and forth. My mom’s boss gave us tickets once, down in the one hundreds. She took me. But the seats were behind a cement pillar. There was a mounted TV so you could watch the game, but I had to crane my neck. I cried and my mom said we were going home and I pleaded with her to let us stay.”

“Are these the notes for your speech? Cement pillars? Dumb kids? Astro turf?”

“It was like a world inside a world in there. Could be 40 and rainy out, but it was always 70 degrees at the ballgame.”

“How do you think the Duwamish feel about your Kingdome?”

She began to trace her hand around my room, the dresser, the T-rex clock. “You know, the personal is not political for people like you.”

“I want all the white cis hetero men like me to go away, and also to be happy,” I said.

“Sure,” she said. “Typical.”

“I don’t feel good,” I said. I realized I was getting an erection and also that I might throw up.

“No! You might be dying,” she said. She eyed my crotch. “Looks like you’re serious.”

Talking to her was like being dragged in four directions at the same time. I wondered if she could be from the Opposition, although it seemed unlikely that the Opposition would be worried about what I had to say. In fact, the thought that anyone would take me so seriously felt ridiculous and narcissistic.

She held out the ball and I took it. For a second, I felt her fingers brush against mine.

“You hold onto a lot of junk,” she said.

I imagined bagging up the ball and the poster, everything, tossing it into the Ballard River Gorge, the cow congratulating me with an ecstatic moo.

“I don’t hang on to it! My mother does.”

The T-Rex’s arms had chugged well into the night. I wondered if I should be worried about where my parents were. They usually went to bed early.

“When you got here, did you see my parents?”

“Listen,” she said. She placed her hands on my shoulders and looked at me straight. “You haven’t got a chance tomorrow. You’re a dope.”

I averted my gaze and then looked back again.

“But what’s the big deal? Lots of people are. Tomorrow you’ll make a fool of yourself and then in a week it’ll be like it never happened. That’s how it goes. The Kingdome’s dead and your Seattle’s dead and you’re dead. Don’t bloviate. We all know what happened.”

“I’m not dead!” I said. “I have a condition. Well, sort of. They can’t even figure out what it is. And who doesn’t have a condition these days? Crohn’s. Gluten intolerance. Eczema.”

She squeezed my shoulder then stood up.

“It’s probably indigestion,” I said. “I eat like shit when I travel. I bet you’re on the keto diet or something.”

“He’s here!” she said. She shot out the door, and I heard footsteps moving rapidly down the stairs.

Had her phone buzzed, made a sound? Did the doorbell ring and I hadn’t heard? I had no way of knowing how much I wasn’t perceiving. Perhaps this was Carl’s house, after all. Maybe we both had Stingarees shirts, or maybe it was his all along.

I rose and made my way, shuffling in short steps, keeping a hand on the wall. When I reached the top of the stairs, I remembered my pants were at my ankles. With some effort, I pulled them up.

As I took the final step onto the main floor, I realized that Carl was going to beat me. Carl was going to stab me with a kitchen knife.

A clanking came from the basement, the violent smack of metal on metal.

I walked through the kitchen and headed downstairs, passing a stash of plastic bags, dog leashes, a cleaning bucket with rubber gloves and Clorox. The basement was cold and yet I felt protected by the depth, by the soil on all sides.

“This is where they have big events, like weddings,” I heard a male voice say.

The woman was there with a shirtless man. They faced away from me, their bodies obscuring something they were looking at. She reached for his hand, ran her fingers along his. He had a muscular back, strong shoulders and arms. I imagined how beautiful her and Carl’s children would be, could see them gathered at Alki Beach, skipping rocks as a family.

I took a step toward them. The man jumped, startled, and when he turned to face me I saw it wasn’t Carl, but Derek. They’d been looking at a village made of Legos.

“Your folks asked me to fix the water heater,” he said, reaching for a wrench that had been left on the washing machine.

“No judgment,” I said.

“What do you mean *judgment*?” Derek said. His nostrils flared.

She put her hand on his chest.

“Honey,” she said. “You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Look what you did!” Derek said. “Again!”

I followed Derek’s eyes and realized I had stepped on some satellite of the village. A hut lay in ruins, a tiny severed arm next to the remains of a chair.

He swung the wrench and I ducked, but I hadn’t been his target. With a loud thwack the wrench landed on the shell of the water heater, then again and again, denting the metal body.

“FUCK YOUR FUCKING WATER HEATER!” Derek said.

I vomited. They stared at me as if waiting for comment.

“I’ll clean that up later,” I said. I needed to lie down.

“Look what you did!” the woman said. I didn’t bother to look back, couldn’t tell if the words were meant for me or Derek. She was excited.

I left them there and labored up the stairs. I thought that as soon as I made it to my bed, I’d lie down on top of the covers, but by the time I got upstairs day was breaking over the evergreens across the street. Time had really gotten away from me. My mother had texted, *Good luck with your speech today!*



I wished my parents' weren't going to be there. They were liberal in the way older folks can be, the kind of people who qualified statements with, "I don't mean this to sound racist, but..."

Would I get to be like that? What would my generation's unrecognized bias look like? Maybe it was already spurting out of me and I didn't notice.

*Thanks!* I texted back

I took an aspirin and made eggs, overcooking them, as always. I threw them in the compost after a couple bites. The cleaning woman brought my suit and tie, neatly ironed.

"Thank you, Denise," I told her, admiring her cheekbones.

"You look like shit," she said.

"Couldn't do a cold shower."

Leaving my dishes in the sink, I took in my parent's living room one last time, inhaled a big breath of the woody air. As I finished changing, the doorbell rang, and I greeted the milkman, paid him for the bottles.

"I'll be leaving now," I shouted to Denise, and I strode through the door out into that great, vast mall. I was in awe of it all, the wide open plaza and its clean plastic tables, the ice skating rink beyond, and the choices, the immaculate menu boards up toward the high ceiling. A man could get Japanese curry, or Korean tacos, or Sbarro! And it would all come out exactly the same, every time, as if cooked on a conveyor belt. As much I hated it, I would've been lying if I said it didn't also arouse a certain comfort. I could walk up and order a bowl of ramen and the cashier would treat me the same as every other person, right down to the wording of his sentences, and, if he didn't, he could be fired.

I figured I still had plenty of time to prepare notes for my speech during the long descent down the escalators of the main atrium. *Seattle has changed so much*, I'd say. And then... Below, I could see them readying the stage, and already hundreds of bodies had filed in.

My phone buzzed. It was my father. *We've got our seats!*

I admired the panoply of light, glass, tile, the great pillars of jagged, whirring stone—a wonderful monument!—my finger tracing a circle on the handrail, while, blind with optimism, I was carried straight into the looming maw of the crowd. If only I'd thought to stop for a bite at the food court.

Party officials in formal suits ushered me onto the stage. I recognized some of them from my parents' den, but didn't see the woman. They whispered gratitude and encouraging words. *You'll be fine! What an honor. Don't worry about your hair, only the front rows will notice.*

I needed to lean on the podium for support and I began to sweat under the glare of the lights. A hush fell over the crowd. I heard a single cough.

My eyes followed a wave to my parents—there they were!—a few feet from the stage, near the front, their expectant faces mirrored by Carl, and his mean grin, sitting next them. Our eyes met and he lowered his hand.

“Seattle has changed so much, it's hard to remember what it used to be like,” I tried to say. But, though my lips moved, they produced no sound.

“Speak!” Carl shouted.

My mouth opened and closed.

## VITA

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