

TRICKSTER HERMENEUTICS: FRICTIONS

by

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Trickster Hermeneutics: Frictions

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Abstract:

A long thought entirely contingent upon its discursive context, which, here, does not exceed two decades of uninterrupted memory. Before that, the ocean. Central discursive formations include: family life; church and religion; higher education (post-structuralism); the so-called Canon and its *literary theory*; syntactically intrusive 20th and 21st century fiction writers; supermarket receipts; weddings; old photo albums; childhood sweatshirts all chewed up at the collar—that stuff the author might qualify as *familiar*. Like all friction, this is a coming of age friction. A particular attention is paid to praxis—a truth evident even in the collection’s title— though straying too far into the territories of *hope* and excessive optimism is, frankly, impolitic (post-structuralism). Cultural hybridity performs literary hybridity, and also the inverse is true. From this nuance stems the subtitle. To intimate more by writing *The Dilemma of The Hyphen*, or *Fiction and Nonfiction*, etc., would be particularly egotistical and offensive; indeed, implicit in each friction is an apology to its reader—for not remembering everything, first, and for not bothering to, second. This thread of neuroticism must recur. Insofar as the collection participates in the generally off-putting discourse of metafiction, it seems appropriate that its abstract mention—therefore perform—as much. You have, just now, been warned

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As soon as we renounce fiction and illusion, we lose reality itself; the moment we subtract fictions from reality, reality itself loses its discursive-logical consistency.

–Slavo Zizek

What does it matter how many lovers you have if none of them gives you the universe?

–Jacques Lacan

Maymoon Safaraz

Mr. Dawson

Advanced Western Humanities

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Contemporary Treatment/s of the East Considering One Cultural Item or Icon

In answering the question “(1) Pick one Cultural Item or Icon which Reflects Contemporary Treatment/s of the East and (2) Critically Explore this Item/Icon’s Contribution to the Contemporary Treatment/s”, it’s important to first know your terms and conditions. For example, the Eskimos have over 40 different words for snow, but we in America only have the one, maybe a few more if you think about it, but still alot less. So the East in this paper will be defined to be Iran and Iranian peoples (which Standpoint Theory says I can talk about, like you said that day after the Mesopotamia unit), and the Cultural Item or Icon will be defined to be the 1992 Disney movie *Aladdin* (it’s important that everyone be on par with the subject, so *Aladdin* which many people have seen or at least heard of, is a good choice in the discussion of *broad* Treatment/s of the East, and more specifically for this paper, Iran and Iranian peoples).

Citizens of America do not know alot about Iran and Iranian peoples. For example, after 9/11, I wasn’t checked at the airport when my brother Nima and I would fly to Maryland to visit our father, but Nima *was* asked to go to the side almost every time and let a tall man with a black screening baton pat him down, even touching his private areas, which if you ask me should be a violation of his Right to Privacy or something but who knows, I’m no lawyer. That is important because it shows how

some racist ideas that are Structural (like you said) are very buried and sometimes have to do with your gender, for example the airport guards were not as worried about me being a terrorist, as a girl, but Nima they were worried about. The same in *Aladdin*, where the character Aladdin is seen to be more of an “American” character Simulating the East (he has what you called The Ethic of Colonialism), but Jasmine is quiet and submissive and waits for Aladdin to take her away on his “magic” carpet, and later to be saved by him from Jafar; even Jafar exercises his power in order to get more power or the girl’s love, like all men, even Aladdin. So really, Contemporary Treatment/s of the East should be considered alongside with sexism in *Aladdin*, therefore the Critical Lens that I will use to Explore *Aladdin’s* Contribution to the Contemporary Treatment/s deals with forms of both racism *and* sexism, because they are linked.

In America, it’s always the women who are at a disadvantage. You can see this everywhere. Like in *Aladdin*, obviously Jasmine doesn’t have what you called in class a Subjectivity or Identity, because she is passive and doesn’t control her own actions; she just does what’s best for Aladdin and/or her father, the Sultan. What was funny when you told us about Subjectivity and Identity is you were standing over Tracey Paar’s desk the way you always do, with your left foot on the ground and your right extended all the way up on her desk, your crotch in her face, and you were talking in that soft way you talk to all the cheerleader girls who you make sit in the front row, them smiling big white teeth and fingering their blond hair cutely.

Or for another example when my dad came to America after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, he needed American citizenship so he married my mom, who now is alone and really doesn’t like men very much. It’s always easy for someone to say, “I

don't blame her" but I think it's more complicated than that. My father came to the U.S. with another man whose name was Mostafa, and both of them married young American girls, then left their wives for money or drugs or other women. And you can't just blame them either, because I don't know about Mostafa but my father was really alone in this new country and he didn't have a lot of friends due to cultural barriers and language, which are important you always say, so you can see why he would turn to what you in class once called Distraction. It's funny in life how many tricky situations you'll discover that don't offer any easy person to blame.

Racism tends to hurt women more than men. Like in class, you could put me in the front row and I wouldn't admit it publicly but on the inside (and I guess in my papers too) I would admit to feeling really special. Not that you'd do that because my hair's not blond and I don't lick my lips and make dumb comments in class like Tracey Paar, but you can see how for Nima he just has to spend a few extra minutes at the airport, but for me I have to sit in the back of the room and look at Tracey's hair up front bobbing perfectly when she giggles at something you say, and I have to imagine what she's thinking she would do to you if she weren't doing it to Josh already.

The racism that made my father so lonely, that made him do the things he did—that racism didn't harm him the worst; it was my mom who was most hurt. Because for her she was a young American girl who married an Iranian man who she thought loved her too, and maybe he did, I'm not sure. You can't really ever know with your parents, you can just go off what they tell you, which for my mom is she wishes she never married my father, but I don't know if she means that exactly. Seems to me if your emotions can be so heavily affected by someone that you say you wish you never knew

them, you're probably just saying that because it's how you cope with not being around that person anymore. Like when Josh broke up with me for Tracey, I said I didn't like him anymore and that I liked this other boy from A.O., Justin, but really I was just saying that so I wasn't embarrassed about Josh's getting licked by Tracey on the back of the neck, so obvious to everyone, in the hallway outside your classroom. These are Themes or Motifs of how women are Silenced by the Male Gaze.

It is interesting that so many young American boys but especially girls like the movie *Aladdin*. First because American boys must see themselves as Aladdin himself, the hero of the story, and second because American girls must see themselves as Jasmine, who is in need of saving by Aladdin, the hero. This is a Double Bind. After watching the movie, boys see themselves as people who have to go out and be strong and courageous and overcome obstacles, and girls see themselves as just another source of help to the boys, even sometimes creating the obstacle itself and at the same time being one possible reward for overcoming it (after all, much of Aladdin's time is dedicated to saving his love, Jasmine). It's one of those examples of *say one thing, do another*. Like when you say boys shouldn't look at girls Objectively, and then you always look down Tracey's shirt during lecture, eyeing her black lacey bra, we all know what you're thinking in your head and that what you're saying about Oppression you don't actually believe, because if you did maybe you wouldn't be looking at freshman girls even if they are dating Josh or taking Advanced Western Humanities. But then that's how men of your age group are, and usually it doesn't matter if the wife knows because she just counts herself lucky that her husband isn't a drug user, or cheating on

her, but I would bet more often than not he is, this being America where men are adventurers like Aladdin, with the Ethic of Colonialism.

Racism is a cycle. Nima won't visit my father anymore since my mom told us why he left, and I sometimes also think about not visiting him, but I figure if his problem in the first place was being lonely, then doesn't not visiting make it worse? At least it's less trouble at the airport, Nima not being there. I figure once my father loved my mom even if he was lying to himself, because he used to call her Maymoon even though her name is Cynthia; he called her that so much they decided it should be my name, too. You don't name your only daughter a cute name used for your sweetheart if she's not your sweetheart; you have to live with your children's names. I think this shows that my father wasn't intending to mess with my mom from the start, he just did because a culture he didn't understand was weighing down on him for so long and ignoring him. Last time I visited my father in Maryland, his new wife called me into the kitchen for a girl-to-girl; she smiled at me and put her soft, young hands on my soft, young hands and she said, "Sometimes in his sleep he calls out for you, Maymoon; he says *Maymoon, Maymoon!*", which I didn't explain to her but I knew, I understood, and I was smiling back at her, because when my father used to call out *Maymoon, Maymoon!*, it was never for me.

One interesting thing about the lamp/Genie in *Aladdin* is that Aladdin can't wish to kill someone, can't cause someone to love him, and can't bring someone back from the dead. It's funny because these rules seem to exist only so the Protagonist has something to work for. For example, if Aladdin was allowed to use a wish to kill someone, he would kill Jafar from the start and live happily ever after. If he could bring

someone back to life, the stakes would be lower, because anyone could die and Aladdin could just bring them back. If Aladdin could wish for Jasmine to love him, Jasmine's love would not function as a viable reward at the end of the story. What's so interesting is that the lamp/Genie restrictions suggest Aladdin's basic, driving desires: to kill Jafar, stay alive (immortality), and to woo/win the girl. This reveals something about American culture because the goals of our stories, our Cultural Aesthetic, suggest our deepest desires, you say. Aladdin, like most men, is concerned with sex and power. In this way he reminds me a lot of Josh, who isn't a bad person but was just manipulated into thinking a certain way by Tracey and high school culture, just how my father was manipulated by American culture to think and act a certain way that now negatively affects my mom. It's hard to blame any one person.

If Aladdin was popular, then it reflects and maybe even has defined our culture's Treatment/s of the East. The critics liked *Aladdin*. The film review website Rotten Tomatoes said that 92% of critics gave *Aladdin* a positive review based on a sample of 49 reviews and the average score being 7.9/10 (wikipedia). Among the "Top Critics" *Aladdin* has a 100% positive review rating from eight critics (wikipedia). What's also interesting is most critics' favorite character was the Genie (played by Robin Williams), who if anything represents only the Discourses of racism and sexism that have been talked about so much above, mostly in the paragraph before this one. Some critics argued that the film was racist, but mostly those voices were drowned out in a vast sea of praise.

You say we need to write up One Potential Answer to Reversing the Contemporary Treatment/s but from where I stand I can't see how, if even the person

who gave us the assignment can't recognize how he himself is kind of similar to Aladdin. I mean, it might be easy for you to write in the margins of this paper how I'm combining sexism and racism unfairly, but that's just your opinion and certainly it can't trump mine if you buy Standpoint Theory, which I'm not sure you do but from your class comments it appears you do. So maybe the best place to start in finding One Potential Answer to Reversing the Contemporary Treatment/s would be to put me in front and move Tracey Paar to the back, behind Josh, so that neither you or Josh can stare at her as easily. Maybe I could talk to Nima and tell him he should come to Maryland with me next time, but I don't think he could because he's an attorney and he has a family of his own. The way I see this paper ending is like all the other essays and manifestos you've had us read, which attack all these so-called Oppressions but don't ever offer any real way to get around them.

In conclusion, *Aladdin* is a film about heartbreak and the Double Bind, which is true to life because it both reflects and begins to define how our culture treats the East and women, groups that are linked not only in the film but also in real life by a Theme or Motif of being brushed to the side, where they are searched ruthlessly by tall men with black screening batons, where they are patted down, touched all over, even in the private areas.

Missed Connection

That language was a dialect called metaphor. You said, *tell me the truth*, so I lied. Though even then I could not love you, my eyes so dimmed by the liminal light of darkness unanchored, of transitive verbs, of women whose names were Truth and Light and *objet petit a* but whose praxes unbinded our hearts before binding them. Wisdom languishes in the reassurance of retrospect. You said: *are we there yet?* and I, holding you, said: *no*. It is not darkness which denudes a place of its light. It is time spent in darkness. Having not seen for so long one cannot be expected suddenly to see. But aphaeresis is not negation, does not denude a word of its light, and so only now can I tell you the truth in words which is this: *you are beautiful*. Like this thing called *moon*. Like this thing called *metaphor*. Like this thing called *bird* which is not a shadow but casts one, so that even in that darkness I still can think of you.

X To Reload

For Banana Fone

I was sixteen when I first played Banana Fone. His real name was Will, but everybody called everybody by their gamertags. I won't say I thought much of Banana Fone that first game because I didn't. He was like his older brother JORN0RZ—they learned fast but it'd take them till Halo 3 to rival my brother and me. My brother (RtF x Mendoza) and me (Pypr0524), we were brothers long before Xbox united us. That goes a long way in-game. We smoked them five flags to one that first time, and I remember the last cap: Mendoza put down the flag before scoring and threw two frags on either side of the base entrance; whatever was left of J0NZ0RZ and Banana Fone flew all the way back to their outside base wall with a loud thud. Frag grenades have a blast radius that stickies don't. That's one thing new players don't know. I sat above the elbow watching with a sniper rifle. "A good place to spawn-camp red team," Mendoza said. "You should always play as blue on Lockout. I mean just look at the sky. It's so blue. It's so obvious. You jump and they can't see you."

"That's fucking bullshit," JORN0RZ said, hearing Mendoza from around the corner and screaming from the kitchen. Mendoza and me had put our smaller television on the counter for JORN0RZ and Banana Fone to use. The first rule, Mendoza had once confided in me, looking wry and villainous, is you give the other guys the smaller T.V. And the second rule, he said, is to meditate right before the game starts, to clear your mind of all the ghosts who stand between you and the game. That's how he said it.

“J.B.!” my mother yelled. “Language!” This was her house and we were eating her homemade pizza—*Mommios*, she called it, mocking my father’s *Daddios*—and she was an Evangelical.

“It’s enough I let you boys play this violent game.” She never called us by our gamertags.

My mother had been watching the game from our television in the living room. It doesn’t look so violent from the winner’s screen. That was my idea. Mendoza nodded and thanked me for my input when I shared it with him. I was sixteen and he was thirteen but still I felt proud for his approval. He was the best, but I would never admit it to him or anyone else. It was just something we all knew. Halo 1- 3 and then later ODST and Reach. It didn’t matter. Mendoza was the best. Everybody wanted him on their team.

“This time we play blue and shields at 50%,” JORN0RZ said. “And Banana Fone’s new so we all gotta play a handicap.”

“I don’t need that!” Banana Fone said hotly. Banana Fone was Mendoza’s age. They were the same height but short compared to their classmates—Mendoza with long black hair, Banana Fone’s hair short and kind of a dirty blond. Banana Fone had freckles like his brother JORN0RZ. JORN0RZ and Banana Fone, like Mendoza and me, were three years apart. I met JORN0RZ in middle school playing for Mr. Rose’s chess team. We switched between first and second board on our trips to Columbus for tournaments; I remember, near Whitehall, JORN0RZ used to roll down his window to smell the bread baking at the Wonder Bread factory on 270. Sometimes, during lunch in middle school, he and I would go to Mr. Rose’s room and play speed chess while Mr. Rose ate his lunch and listened to talk radio and told us about current events. That’s how we heard about 9/11, from Mr. Rose. Some days he’d stare past his radio out the

window, at the rolling hills and the perpetually lugubrious sky, and he wouldn't say anything at all. He'd just stare blankly, rubbing his red beard. That's what I imagined a grown up looked like—a grown up in Ohio anyhow.

“No handicaps,” I said. “We'll switch teams. Mendoza and Banana Fone vs. Me and JONZORZ. Kids vs. adults, younger brothers vs. older brothers.”

They smoked us. Mendoza defended Banana Fone by shooting through and around his uplifted arms, Banana Fone carrying our waving flag through the arid hills of Blood Gulch, back to his base. Didn't matter whether red team or blue team, they beat us. I said I'd never play against my brother again.

By the time we were all in high school JORNORZ and Banana Fone had become pros. That was Halo 3. The four of us started a clan—unaccountably called *The Triumvirate*—and we rose fast. We all had our designated roles, tailored to our strengths as players. Banana Fone, a close-range player, rushed in first with rockets and shotgun. His job was to get the flag and cause as much damage as possible on his way. If he died, he was supposed to press X and rush back in as soon as he re-spawned. JONZORZ and Mendoza followed behind with Battle Rifles. They had the best mid-range shot and the highest controller sensitivities: they would clean up. If it was a smaller map, like Beaver Creek, my job was to escort Banana Fone back to the base and to pick up the flag and return it myself if he died during the commute. On larger maps, like Vahalla, I'd set my sensitivity low and I'd snipe. That's when I'd play best—when I was shooting my enemies from far away.

We'd play at JORN0RZ's house because by then JORN0RZ and Banana Fone had outgrown my mother's Puritanism. Mendoza and me liked to get out of the house anyway. When our father was home—which was more often those days—our parents were yelling at each other in the basement. JORN0RZ's parents had a big, quiet basement with a big projector television and long, black, leather sectionals. One large region was devoted to a winery/brewery and kitchen for party-throwing—decorative redwood cabinets and marble floors, large distilleries for brewing and serving beer, the black countertops beneath them cold and smooth in the basement's muted light. Some nights instead of going home I'd lie on the cool leather and tell Mendoza to tell our father I was spending the night.

“Don't tell mom,” I had said, sitting up suddenly. “She won't let me stay.” My hair fell down below my eyes.

“What about me?” Mendoza said.

“It's my turn,” I said. “You can spend the night next time.”

“What am I going to do?”

“Dad's making Osh. You like Osh.”

“No I don't. You like Osh more.”

“I'm older so I get to choose who stays here and who goes home to eat Osh. This week, you're the Osh-eater.”

During the first week of July, the summer after my senior year of high school, *The Triumvirate* sat behind only StK (Shoot to Kill) and Spartan117 in the online Leaderboards on Bungie.net. We knew the guys from StK. Most of them lived in Pickerington—another Columbus suburb—just ten miles south on 270; we met them one year at the Ohio State Fair. I remember thinking it was strange that two of the world's top three Halo clans lived within ten

miles of each other in Ohio. I had suggested to J0RN0RZ that we send StK a message and challenge them to an in-person LAN.

“None of that lagging bullcrap Mendoza and me saw at the fair,” I said. I still wasn’t swearing. “A real, honest challenge.”

J0RN0RZ messaged Zyos—their best player, the top ranked individual player in the game—and they arranged the challenge. They agreed to meet us at J0RN0RZ’s house in New Albany.

“That’s good,” Mendoza said, looking up from his Geometry equations the afternoon before the game, sipping from a carton of Hi-C. “It’s good to have home-couch advantage.” The sun was setting through the kitchen’s sliding glass window and through the few drooping trees comprising our backyard. With Columbus city engineers’ permission, corporate developers had converted two acres of our land into two acres of condominium complex. They had also bought out the farmers who grew corn and soy behind our land. It was a commercial addition crucial to the property value of the area, the developers said. They called the complex The Green.

My mother was watching television zombie-like in the living room that late afternoon—an old Seinfeld rerun even I had seen before. Below the dingy kitchen linoleum, from the basement, my father played Iranian music in his darkroom. Mendoza looked at our mother watching television, quickly, then looked back at me. “It’s actually really good to have home-couch advantage,” he whispered, as if attempting to conceal the magic of this maxim twice imparted. “And make sure J0NZ0RZ gives them the smaller T.V. That’s the first rule.”

That night Mendoza and me slept with our controllers in our hands. We had bunk beds. I could hear my mother screaming faintly at my father in the basement, my father screaming back or turning up the music to drown her out.

“Your hands will be more used to the controller in the morning,” Mendoza said, looking down at me from the top bunk, his hair long snakes hanging down. He was smiling, I could see. We still had a nightlight.

“I’m sure I’m gonna drop it as soon as I fall asleep,” I said.

“No, your fingers automatically tighten when you sleep. I promise they do. You won’t drop it.”

I thought that was a ridiculous promise to make, but on Saturday morning, the day of the challenge, I woke with my controller still resting firmly in my grip. My fingers felt wiser than they had the night before, too, more closely attuned to the controller’s cool black plastic and grey triggers. I didn’t tell Mendoza he was right.

We were all playing on the same screen. The four of us played on the black leather sectional and with the large projector in J0NZ0RZ’s basement. We set up our opponents—Zyos, Hotshy, Stk Ogre 1 and StK Ogre 2—with a smaller but substantial television in the winery/brewery, far enough away that we’d be out of earshot. Zyos and Hotshy were in their early or mid twenties. The Ogres were in high school; they were twins; it was eerie to see them playing together, how they never spoke, how in sync with one another they were, how precise, even more than me and Mendoza.

We were tied at two flags and it was first to three. We were red team. I was sitting on their teleport exit so they couldn't get through, sitting there with a sniper rifle watching Banana Fone drive a Warthog hard at blue base. Mendoza rode shotgun with rockets. J0NZ0RZ at the .50CAL. J0NZ0RZ knocked down both the Ogres when he exploded their hog with a well-placed burst to its gas tank. When Zyos came out of the base with a shotgun, I got a piece of his head with a round from the sniper and suddenly we had a couple seconds where we were up four guys to Hotshy. Converging on blue flag. And we all knew Hotshy couldn't shoot for shit.

“Go!” J0NZ0RZ said. “Go I got the turret!”

“I'm driving,” Banana Fone said. “You fucking go!”

“I have the turret! Go before they spawn! Banana Fone—fucking go!”

Mendoza jumped out of the hog and into the base. He was good at ignoring incorrigible lines of argumentation. He cleared the base of Hotshy quickly and effectively with a frag and a quick headshot from the B.R. Zyos and the Ogres had just re-spawned by the time Mendoza exited the base with blue flag.

“Banana Fone, drive! Fucking drive!” J0NZ0RZ yelled. He was taking fire from Zyos and the Ogres.

“We don't have Mendoza yet!” Banana Fone said.

“Drive!”

“We don't have Mendoza yet!”

Mendoza entered the passenger seat with blue flag at the moment when Zyos' sticky grenade landed on the .50CAL and blew up the hog. Triple kill. I was firing clumsy potshots from my sniper rifle when he killed me too. J0NZ0RZ stood and threw his controller on the carpet.

“Fucking Banana Fone I said fucking drive!” His face was so red.

“I couldn’t drive! We didn’t have the flag!”

They were both standing and yelling at each other. J0NZ0RZ picked up his controller from off the ground and began shooting Banana Fone. Banana Fone picked up his controller and began shooting back. When they died they re-spawned and kept killing each other, swearing and cursing and yelling about Zyos and defending against the oncoming counter-attack. Mendoza and me stayed focused. We protected the base. It seemed the Banana Fone/J0NZ0RZ feud had cooled until Banana Fone, with what should have been my sniper rifle, shot J0NZ0RZ through the back, and J0NZ0RZ—dead, waiting to re-spawn—stood again, his eyes this time bulging red, and threw his controller hard at Banana Fone’s hot and freckled face.

The next morning, Mendoza and me and both our parents went to church. I think my father would go mostly to meet potential clients. He ran his own photo business, Accent Photographic, which had been significantly more profitable before the advent of digital photography and its supremacy over film. What little hair remained on his bald head had begun to turn white. His mustache, once a rich brown, had grown coarse and gray. The wrinkles on his forehead had multiplied, the bags under his eyes grown in size and in color, tending farther toward black. He was older, somehow, suddenly, when I glimpsed him nodding off that Sunday while Pastor Peas droned on about infidelity, and hell. My mother would poke him in the leg with a pen but he wouldn’t sit up, most of the time. Mendoza kept passing me notes throughout the sermon.

Those two really need to get it together or we have no chance, was his first note. I noticed Pastor Peas was sweating.

MLG's still months away they'll work things out, I wrote back. MLG was a professional gaming league I was hoping to enter with *The Triumvirate*. Sometimes they held tournaments in Dallas or Atlantic City.

I don't think they'll ever be good together. What about the other day in the basement?

That was just one example. They've been good together plenty of other times. Like at the fair.

Before passing this note to Mendoza I looked up at my mother to confirm she wasn't looking. She was looking, zombie-like, at the podium behind which Pastor Peas was closing in prayer. Unusually, she had not bowed her head. She just kept staring at the podium. I handed Mendoza the note.

Mendoza looked at it. He paused, considering, then wrote back. *Not in a long time they've been good like that.*

The Triumvirate split the next week, exactly one week after the StK massacre. Banana Fone left to start a rival clan called *X to Reload*. They were just okay.

"You could join, Pypr," he offered. "We could use a long-range shot." I noticed his freckles were already starting to assimilate into the rest of his face.

"I don't know. I'm off to college in a month or so and I don't know if I'll have access to Live there anyway."

"Yeah, college. Mendoza know you won't have Live?"

"Haven't told him yet."

"Will you?"

“Don’t know that either.”

Banana Fone looked up and held my gaze. Then he said: “Tell him sooner instead of later. That’s an older brother’s job.”

I remember thinking that was wise.

Mendoza and JORN0RZ and me were sitting in JORN0RZ’s basement talking about the split a few weeks later, about the future of *The Triumvirate*. Banana Fone was playing with *X to Reload* upstairs. JORN0RZ had been mixing vodka tonics with lime from the basement’s massive winery/brewery.

“Fuck him,” JORN0RZ said. “We don’t need a forth.” He took another swig from his drink. He was tipsy.

“Of course we need a forth!” Mendoza said.

“We are *The Triumvirate*,” I added, and tried to smile.

Mendoza looked at me, disappointed. “Why won’t you guys be more serious?” You could see in his eyes he was pleading.

“Serious?” JORN0RZ said. “I’m dead fucking serious.” He emptied his glass and gave Mendoza a mock salute. “Anyway, Pypr’s off to college in a month. And I’m getting into Call of Duty more and more these days.”

“C’mon, JORN0RZ!” Mendoza said. He was shaking. “You said you wouldn’t play Call of Duty anymore! If you play other games your hands will get used to that game’s control style! And Pypr said he’d get Xbox Live in his dorm room. Right, Pypr?” He looked at me.

“Don’t kid yourself, Mendoza,” JORN0RZ said. Pypr’s not gonna play in college. He’ll be doing other things”

“No, he’ll play,” Mendoza said, looking to me for support. Tears were beginning to well up in his small brown eyes.

“We’ll have to see,” I said. “We’ll have to see how it goes.”

He was stunned. Literally paralyzed, for a second, it seemed.

“You guys,” he said. His tiny voice was faltering. Tears streaming down his face. JORN0RZ, laughing, got up off the couch to mix another vodka tonic. He asked whether I wanted one.

“None for babies,” he said, looking at Mendoza. I said I’d try a drink. It was the first time I had said yes to a drink.

“You guys,” Mendoza said again, looking not at us but at the floor. His face was crimson and wet. Again he paused after the word guys. I could tell he was using the pause to figure out what he’d do at home without *The Triumvirate*. After a few seconds more of staring at the floor he wiped away his tears and yelled: “you’re just—you’re just—you’re just two drunks, is what you are! And you don’t care about *The Triumvirate* or even your own brothers!”

With this he got up off the couch and left. He slammed the door at the top of the basement stairs. Me and JORN0RZ heard his little footsteps banging loudly on the hardwood floor above us. We laughed.

I left for college in the fall. I never did figure out how to play Halo in the dorms, although I didn’t try very hard either. Mendoza called me asking about it—at first every day, then every

two days, then once a week. Eventually he stopped calling altogether. I figured he had stopped caring about Halo, or, if not, that he had given up on me, relegated me to the ever-expanding category of *lost cause*. I was in college, I thought. I couldn't be a gamer anymore.

The night I found out about Banana Fone I was sitting in the bleachers at a high school football game. My university didn't have a football team so I'd go to the high school. I didn't care for football—I liked to get away from campus. I didn't have many friends and I couldn't smoke cigarettes on campus without earning a handful of demerits and a fine I couldn't afford. I had begun smoking and drinking heavily as a sort of reaction against that conservative environment. I had also begun swearing.

“Little bitch,” I said to my brother when he called. “What's up?” I was drinking gin and tonic from a flask concealed in my coat. It was halftime. Home team was losing. They always lost. I never thought of them as my team.

“It's Banana Fone,” Mendoza said. “Are you sitting? Are you sitting down?”

I said I was. He explained it to me, but I don't remember what he explained. What I know I learned later, and even that stuff is vague and contradictory. It's important only that he died and didn't re-spawn.

I went back to Columbus the next day. I stopped at the drive-through on my way out of town to pick up a pair of Mike's Hard Lemonades for the road. I was a beginner so I liked Mike's Hard. I knew enough to avoid the gas station in town, though. That made me feel good. Knowing stuff like that. On the road, tipsy from the drinks, I called Mendoza and said I wouldn't be stopping at home, that I was going straight to JORN0RZ's. I was afraid to face my mother, to talk to her about her own recent tragedy—her divorce. Too, seeing the awesome Columbus skyline as I passed it on 270, smelling the bread baking in the Wonder Bread factory,

it made me want to see JORNORZ again right away. Mendoza said he'd meet me there. I wasn't swerving out of my lane, so I didn't think I was drunk. I called JORNORZ.

"Yo, my man," I said when he picked up bluntly and said "What?" "I'm in town. What are you doing tonight?" I said. I thought I sounded really stupid. I thought he'd think so too. I had hardly spoken to him in a couple of years. I was still on 270, in the right lane, merging onto 161 east, heading home.

"Pypr, I can't talk; I gotta go," JORNORZ said. He hung up. The reception was bad so I figured he was in his basement. When I called back he had turned off his phone.

JORNORZ didn't want to talk about Banana Fone.

"We got some games to win tonight!" he said when I met him and Mendoza downstairs. "*The Triumvirate's* back, motherfuckers!" He was drinking vodka tonic out of a large, glass boot. His eyes were red and puffy. He looked high.

"Pypr, can I offer you some? Mendoza?" Mendoza shook his head. He looked much older than I had remembered. He was growing a patchy beard and the hair on his head was short, very short—buzzed, practically. And he was big. His biceps I thought must have tripled in size since I had last seen him. He looked so tired, too, like he hadn't slept in days—like he couldn't sleep in our old home anymore, not since our father left it. Left him.

I told JONZORZ no thanks, that I had drunk enough, but he mixed me a drink anyway. "You're a newb, Pypr. C'mon! Prove yourself!" JONZORZ handed me the drink before bending down to plug in my controller.

I looked at Mendoza curiously while J0NZ0RZ set up the game. Mendoza looked over his shoulder, quickly, then texted me.

Not handling all this very well.

How can you handle something like this? I wrote back.

I don't know, Pypr.

J0NZ0RZ handed me a controller.

“I know it’s not the one you’re used to, but it’ll have to do tonight.” His eyes were glossy when he laughed.

“And for you, Mendoza.” He got on one knee and extended a controller up toward my brother.

We played better than we ever had. But this time, for the first time, J0NZ0RZ led our team. He set his controller sensitivity to ten so that he could play both a mid- and close-range game: he was able to clear opponents with both the B.R. and the flag, carrying it back to our base on his own unassisted, dropping it when doing so would allow him to kill multiple opponents quickly. I kept drinking, helping myself to his parents’ wide selection of liquors between games. I liked pretending I owned his parents’ winery/brewery, that it was mine, that I was hosting guests. Mendoza was watching me, measuring my level of intoxication. He had never seen me drunk.

“Fuck,” J0NZ0RZ said after we won another game in Beaver Creek. It was early in the morning. J0NZ0RZ had just drained what was left in his glass boot and had gotten up to mix more vodka and tonic.

“We keep playin like this we could get to the top tonight.”

Mendoza nodded. I nodded too. I leaned back on the cool leather sectional and took a sip from my drink. I closed my eyes. I imagined what it would be like to be the best. The glory that would accompany it. The places we'd go. MLG Tournaments in Dallas or Atlantic City. A free flight to Vegas, maybe, one year. Who could know? I saw Mendoza and J0NZ0RZ were staring intently at the loadout screen, lost within it, hardly blinking, pondering this future too. Then I took another sip and put the glass back on the carpet. I opened my eyes widely and gripped my controller, studying its subtle contours with my fingers. I was meditating. I was clearing my mind of all those ghosts who stood between me and the game.

Ammeh-Joon

You think Ammeh-Joon's gift is a mistake. You think maybe she mistook you for a cousin she liked more, had put the cousin's money in your envelope, the one with your name scribbled sloppily upon it—marks hardly distinguishable because her language, her native language, is not English.

But there is no cousin; there is no mistake. Ammeh-Joon gives you fifty dollars and means to, General Grant looking up and through you at some distant battlefield. Your younger brother receives so much less. Twenty dollars: General Jackson whose eyes must manifest destiny.

This makes the difference.

Makes the difference because your brother is more obedient, and loves more. Because he gives chances and hates it. Because like you he clings so desperately to Western notions of fairness and equality.

Makes the difference because Ammeh-Joon is family. Aunt Joon. Great Aunt Joon, to you and your brother, but you call her Ammeh anyway. Everyone calls her Ammeh, as if there's something inherent about her—essential to her. The birds know it. They sing loudly when she goes outdoors, when she tosses them Cheerios and wheat bread as if she worries for their hearts. And she does worry for their hearts. She won't say it but it's there, swallowed up by the brown of her eyes, a maple-leaf brown, close to sienna.

Makes the difference because she has children, two of them, both sons. Because she watched them play soccer in the streets and alleys behind her house in Shiraz. Because she watched them kick a carefully crafted wad of paper back and forth, against the bakery walls, over

the house, through any particular set of slanted trees. Watched them pack their bags and buy plane tickets and leave for England, for Sweden, for the United States—countries unscathed by their failed revolutions.

Your brother says she should know better. You agree but say nothing. You smile at Ammeh-Joon, then at your father, also the older of two sons. You will ask him later about the discrepancy. He will tell you to enjoy the cash, to spend it well, to cherish the bill because it represents burden, engorged expectation, a lifetime of disparate experience, a culture you can't understand.

Text Message

“So explain it to me again,” Val said, giggling. Though she was flirting with Andy, these giggles stemmed from a different place of anxiety, from the inevitable conversation she would have to have with her father later that night. “You burned her hair how, exactly?”

I was tired of the story. Val had asked Andy to repeat it at least three times since we had arrived, which, admittedly, might have amounted to a handful of minutes or a moderate number of hours. I was jukebox high. Really up there. Val had told me she met this guy Andy from work who could get us real hash. “Some real shit,” she said, “none of that compacted keif bullshit—real shit. Burn it off the paperclip shit. Take our minds off tonight’s phone call shit. The good shit, like we had that time in L.A. And anyway Andy’s ripped, and I don’t mean high.”

This was better than that time in L.A. So good I had forgotten about the conversation with Val’s father. So good I didn’t mind listening to ripped Andy’s story the first couple times he repeated it. How he had said “Bombs away!” and lit the Bunsen burner and set fire to poor Kinsey Parker’s hair—why he told us her name as if we knew her I don’t know—and how Miss Parker, amid her understandable panic and fear, banged her head against the sink attempting to put out the flames and fell, unconscious, to the floor of Apple 156, Principles of Chemistry for Non-Majors, taught by PhD Candidate William I. Jones.

“She was totally knocked out?” Val asked again, pulling at the bottom of her floral blouse to reveal more of her tanned chest, scooting up closer to Andy through the thick haze of hash smoke orbiting his apartment, the smoke searching fruitlessly for some draft to carry it outdoors; I remember thinking how me and the smoke had that in common. It was around midday.

“Totally out.” Andy laughed, signaling that Val and I might do the same, that the story had reached its conclusion/climax and that if we expected anything more we’d be let down; it appeared as if this sub-textual gesture was one with which Andy had grown quite familiar. Then Val laughed vigorously, throwing her hair around her head and panting at Andy as if she’d just fucked him hard but wanted more. She looked into his bloodshot eyes through the smoke and held his gaze for what, to me, seemed enough time to have actually fucked him. *Mine*, her face seemed to say. *You’re mine. Not Kinsey Parker’s.*

Andy had a nice apartment. Nice for an undergraduate male, anyway. Not rich, not like me and Val, but nice. Anyway his family had more money than mine, and they paid for everything. Everybody’s family paid for everything at NYU. Even Val’s. Especially Val’s. Edward White, father of Valerie White, owned the largest publishing company in Connecticut, estimated by business appraisal websites to be worth billions, of which \$48,000 per year—\$4,000 on the first day of each month—was deposited into my bank account so that Val might earn her undergraduate degree in—get this—*General Education* by “whatever means necessary, honorable or otherwise.” That’s how Mr. White had said it. *Honorable or otherwise.* I understood right away where Val inherited her lexical imprecision.

“So it’s not like all fucked, or it is you said, her hair I mean? I can’t remember what you said.” Val coughed. She scooted closer to Andy, almost in his lap. She began rubbing his leg with her left hand. Andy looked surprised and uncertain of what to do. I laughed to myself through the hazy circles of hash smoke and those of my own inebriation. He was dumber than Val’s usual picks. He wouldn’t do, I would tell her later. Find some other guy from work. Toby or Jerry. I like Jerry. Your dad will like Jerry too. God knows we need to placate your dad right now.

“Umm, Val, what’s up? Are you okay?” Andy said, pulling his leg away. “What the frick are you doing?”

“Nothing,” Val said quickly, shooting straight up as if she suddenly remembered she was late for an urgent occasion. “Tommy, it’s time to hit the road. Como se dice *hit the road* en Espanol?”

We left.

Val had been in her last semester at NYU when she was expelled. Despite her non-committal major, she had dived headfirst into the world of literary criticism when, for a English class, she submitted a keen rumination on the abstract syntactical devices of author Jhumpta Lahari, extolling Miss Lahari’s complex syntax for functioning as an oblique, entertaining and discursively significant performance of the actual content of her stories. The essay was witty and playful and written by me. But three months later I was sitting in the audience at the 46th Annual Vancouver Conference for Emerging Literary Critics listening to Val read a forty-five minute essay entitled *Destroy This Temple: (Re)imagining Interiority in Contemporary American Weird Fiction*. The honorable Mr. White was sitting next to me. We both kept smiling at each other while Val read words she struggled to pronounce.

“That’s my boy,” Mr. White said after the reading, patting me on the back. “And that,” he said, looking to Val smiling up on the stage to the sound of a thunderous applause, “is my girl.”

I was proud to be part of the family. Mr. White was a stout man, older than you’d expect, with a grey beard and thick bifocals. He always wore a suit. Even at home, cooking or playing piano for his wife Rhonda—even then he wore a suit, usually with a gold tie. “Iran’s president

says he won't wear a tie because it's a western invention," he said once. "Then that's precisely why I shall wear one, and twice as often." I remember thinking then, when I heard that, how I had thought of Mr. White as my father for as long as I had known him.

"Did it seem like I didn't know what I was talking about when I read it?" Val asked her father after the panel.

"Fooled me, darling," Mr. White said. Val smiled and hugged her father. She had short, curly, brown hair and high cheekbones. Eyes that grew deeper when you looked into them. She really did love her father, which is rare for a twenty-two year old girl—rare for anyone.

"Tommy?"

"Couldn't have read it better myself," I said. I winked. It was understood between Val and myself and Mr. White that any external sign of intimacy shared between Val and myself did not, and never could, amount to an internal—real—sign of intimacy; ours was a superficial yet secret business relationship, some kind of paradox. Nothing more. I looked up at Mr. White—I was always looking up to him—and winked at him too, for good measure.

Later that night, hours after the panel discussion, Val snuck out of her hotel room to visit room 454, the weekend residence of Dr. Paul Dunning, director of the Writer's Workshop at George Washington University, to "secure business opportunities," Val said later. That evening, Val admitted to Dr. Dunning that I had written *Destroy This Temple*, and that I had written all her assignments since her first essay in freshman composition. And not three weeks later Val and me were sitting in her penthouse wondering how to tell her father that, seven semesters and \$160,000 after that first essay in freshman composition, Val had been expelled for plagiarism. Dr. Dunning lost his position, as it was revealed in the subsequent investigation that he had acquired this information while sleeping with Val, and that he had decided to reveal it to NYU

via a not-so-anonymous email sent only *after* Val had refused to sleep with Dunning a second time.

“He was a real creep,” Val had said. “Called for weeks.”

I didn’t response and we sat there like that for a while, thinking to ourselves, then finally Val suggested we visit Andy for the hash. After Andy’s inglorious performance—and our inglorious escape—Val and me sat on a bench in the park to watch tourists snap stupid photos of hungry, gawking birds. The sky was pregnant with rain clouds.

“You could marry *frickin’* Andy,” I said. Val smiled. I felt better seeing her smile.

“Seriously, you think dad can get me out of this one?”

I said I didn’t know.

“What are you gonna do?” Val asked.

“Go home, I guess. Back to my mother.”

“Where’s your dad?”

“Dead. Leader of some rebel group somewhere. I don’t fucking know.”

“Oh,” Val said. “I didn’t know that. What does your mom do?”

“Nothin—same as me.”

“You write my papers.”

Three boys jumped up and down at the top of the slide, screaming something silly. Then the two larger boys pushed the smallest into the slide headfirst. The smallest boy screamed, but he was laughing when he came out at the bottom. Val watched the boy climb out of the slide and back to the top, to his friends, all of them giggling. There was a fierce wind blowing in the park; it blew the smallest boy’s long hair fitfully. Val was staring at the boy’s hair. The clouds moved quickly overhead.

“I want to go somewhere,” Val said suddenly, getting up off the bench with an abruptness comparable to that with which she had exited Andy’s hash den. She walked briskly to the car. It was after 5pm, getting dark.

We drove through the rain. I asked where we were going.

“Remember that seafood place in Atlantic City?” she said.

I nodded. That was years prior, when Val and me were in high school. Mr. White had given me a hundred dollar bill and said, “Take her someplace outside the city.” It was Val’s idea to drive to Atlantic City. For dinner we went to this dimly lit seafood joint on the boardwalk. Henry something’s. We both got the buffet, which Val said was stupid because we could share. It didn’t matter because the waiter wouldn’t accept my hundred dollar bill, said, “fifties or lower—restaurant policy, sorry,” so Val and me said we’d have to get the credit card from the car. She went to get it, then I ran out after her. We laughed about it all the way back to New York.

“That’s where we’re going,” she said. “They had good hush puppies.”

I said I couldn’t remember the hush puppies. We hardly talked after that. She did ask me for the hash oil, every twenty minutes or so. She would unscrew the lid, heat the vile, then poke her cigarette down into the oil. She handed me the hot vile when she was done. I looked at her skeptically.

“Oh,” she mocked. “Hi, dad! I got expelled from college in my last semester and, also, I’m calling you from a New Jersey jail.” My laugh was non-committal; I was picking this up from her. Her phone kept vibrating but she didn’t answer it. She just checked the number—every time—then put the phone back in her pocket. I kept thinking it was Andy calling, wanting

to apologize for the ignorance he had exuded so painfully at his apartment earlier that day, wanting her to come back to him for the night.

She pulled into a parking lot by the boardwalk. It was still raining.

“Go pay the man,” she said. “I need to call Rhonda.” She always called her mother by her first name.

I went to pay the man. He asked if I knew whether the rain would keep up through the night. I said I didn’t. I said sorry I didn’t. He asked how long I wanted to keep the car parked in his lot. I said a few hours. Just long enough to eat, I said. Val was still in the car. I could see her silhouette through the vague light emanating from the boardwalk. I dipped a cigarette into the vile of hash oil and lit it; I began walking. “Meet me at the joint,” I texted Val. Immediately she texted back. “Had to go in hurry, dad sick, going to hospital, will be in touch.”

I stopped walking right there on the boardwalk. I saw the hazy circles I had seen earlier, in Andy’s hash den. It was late—after eleven. The boardwalk was filling with sloppy drunks and dejected gamblers. Bright lights and angry music shot out of bars, night clubs, casinos when customers opened and closed their large doors. There was an old man fishing from the boardwalk, not moving, waiting stupidly for a bite which would never come. His feet dangled over the boardwalk and rested in the water. He looked like somebody who has just stopped believing in something important, something foundational.

I tried to call Val. No answer. I texted her, “call me ASAP,” but she didn’t call. Didn’t even text back. When I tried calling a second time her phone directed me to voicemail. I became angry and sad simultaneously. I dipped a cigarette in the hash oil. I lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply, holding it in my lungs until I thought I’d black out. There was no smoke when I exhaled. I began walking. Walking east. I shut off my phone. Part so Val couldn’t contact me,

although I knew she wouldn't try. Mostly so I wouldn't know the time. I avoided thinking about Mr. White, about his being sick, about what this would mean for me, and about whether anything Val had ever told me had ever been true. I just kept walking.

I walked until I reached the beach. A wide, long beach. The tide was out. I walked to the water and wet my feet. There was a half moon. I was struggling to breathe there was so much wind. I took a cigarette out from my pack and dipped it into the hash oil. I put it to my mouth but couldn't get it lit with all the wind. I cupped my hands around the cigarette and with my right thumb flicked the lighter. I unzipped my jacket and put my head inside, cigarette first, trying to ignite it that way. I dropped the lighter into the water. I retrieved it quickly but it was too late. I threw the lighter as far out into the water as I could. The wind was loud and cold. Wind blown inland from the waves. *Ocean wind*, I thought. I took off my shirt and jeans, threw them away from the tide, on the beach, then ran out into the water to recover the lighter. When I couldn't run, I swam. I had thrown it far. When I couldn't touch the bottom I dived, feeling the ocean floor, desperate for the lighter. I swam farther out and dived again, pulling out fistfuls of sand and sediment from their temporary lull on the seafloor. Something grazed my foot while I was down there. I rose to the surface, inhaled. Was surprised by the sound of rain on the water. I swam farther out and dove again. This time I held a deep breath. I kept swimming down but I couldn't find the bottom. I held that breath. I would keep swimming down. I would hold the air in my lungs for as long as I could, until I couldn't hold it any longer, until the half-light beaming down uncertain, a vague semicircle of haze.

ATM

It was past sundown and Carson was speeding ten over on US-95, going home. He lived in Orlando. He had told his wife Lauren he was spending the weekend with an old friend from his college days whose name was Antonio. He had said Antonio was an Italian exchange student assigned to him through Alabama's Office of Admissions, and that during Antonio's brief stay in Tuscaloosa he had given him a proper introduction to American culture in a city which—he smiled at his wife—so properly typified it. Lauren smiled too, but she didn't believe him about Antonio. Carson understood. He was happy she didn't pursue the subject. He said he would be back by Sunday night, which he thought more than enough time to return home, a safe estimate. He intended to return earlier, Sunday afternoon, maybe. He had been invited to his former fiancée's wedding. Her name was Kelsey and she was marrying a woman named Jennifer. He would leave mid-reception on Saturday, find a hotel room and drink two bottles of cheap Shiraz on the veranda. He would fall asleep early and get back before Lauren returned from church in the blurry heat of an Orlando afternoon. As it turned out, Carson drank three bottles of cheap Shiraz on the veranda. He woke in his north-Miami hotel room long after Pastor Martin had finished another of his dreary sermons for Lauren in Orlando.

He was almost ninety miles outside Orlando when his front-left tire blew out and his car rumbled forward in the emergency lane for a full two minutes before coasting to a stop half a mile outside Fort Pierce. The sun was almost completely set. Carson had never been to Fort Pierce but he had passed it several times commuting from Orlando to Miami on 95. Carson had moved to Orlando ten years prior, after Kelsey cut off their engagement. They had been dating for six years and engaged for one. Kelsey invited Carson to her apartment in Miami on

weekends for the first few months after they separated. They would mix strong drinks on Kelsey's patio and listen to the ocean, talking like they used to, like when they first met.

At the wedding reception Carson mustered what little courage he had and told Kelsey she looked beautiful. He had been drinking on the drive over from the ceremony to the reception, over Biscayne Bay and to the beach.

"And I love the tent; great weather for an outdoor reception." Carson looked down so that Kelsey couldn't see his face. The moon was orange on the water.

"It's Jen's wedding," Kelsey said. "She made all the decisions." Kelsey looked into the reception tent. Jazz music poured out from somewhere inside. Carson looked up again.

"Didn't want to risk all that time, if you had second thoughts?"

Kelsey feigned a smile and straightened his tie. "You look good, Carson," she said. "I always loved this blue dress shirt."

Then she met Jennifer at the tent's entrance and together they walked inside to the roar of jazz and applause.

He was still wearing the blue dress shirt when the car broke down outside Orlando. He was also wearing his favorite black dress pants, with the crisp fold and thin white pin stripes. The shirt was wrinkled. Before walking into Fort Pierce for the tire, he put on his smoking jacket and sat on the back of his car, dividing his time between a Pall Mall and the last of the joints he had rolled before leaving for the wedding. When he finished both he flicked them onto the road, first the cigarette—a glance to confirm the road was clear—then the joint. He began walking.

At the first gas station the attendant told Carson that Phil's, three blocks west on Main Street, would be his best chance for a tire after ten. Carson asked to use the telephone. He

dialed his home number to explain the tire to Lauren. When Lauren didn't answer, Carson called again, and when again she didn't answer he thanked the attendant and left for Phil's. He did not leave a message.

When he arrived at Main Street he jumped into the tall median strip, walked through the small palm trees and purple dogwoods planted by city beautification engineers, and from there, in the median, he saw Phil's. There was an almost-full moon directly overhead; cylinders of gray light fell through the palms in the median and the dogwoods performed in silver-dollar spotlight. The lights were off inside Phil's. The sign was lit—the capital 'P', anyway—and parked in front was an old black sedan. Carson could not see inside the car. He checked his watch and thought the car might belong to Phil himself, Phil leaving for the day, going home. Carson ran through the empty street and stopped walking only when he was ten feet from the car. The back license plate was absent, Carson noticed, but before he associated this absence with danger a short man—Cuban, Carson thought—stepped out from the car, out from the passenger-side door. The man was wearing a long black trench coat. He had large, pierced ears, and scars and bruises on his face. Carson noticed a black handgun holstered loosely beneath the trench coat. The man was looking at Carson, considering him.

“Timothy,” the man said, extending his hand. The man's hand was shaking. His accent was strong. “Or just Tim, for you and the rest of Jefe's people. Whichever is good for you and Jefe.”

Carson didn't speak. He shook the man's hand. There were no cars in the street or, for that matter, any other place Carson could see. The moon was bright. It was hot outside but there was wind, crisp Florida wind—summer wind—and Carson's hair fell over his eyes, one way then another, fitfully. The palm trees hissed. The black sedan was humming softly, and through

its tinted windows Carson noticed movement, in the driver's seat. After shaking Tim's hand Carson put his own hands in his pockets so that Tim couldn't see them trembling. He had the feeling Tim wasn't the man's real name.

"We should go, amigo," Tim said to Carson after some time of standing there. "Lucie P.D. out to prowl, you know?"

Afraid, Carson nodded and entered the sedan through the door Tim was holding open for him, the back-right door. He was high from the joint, and he thought complying with an armed man's request a smarter option than arguing with the man or asking stupidly for a tire. He entered the car with a final glance at the sibilant palms waving in the median.

The driver was young woman with heavily pierced hands. She wore a University of Florida tee shirt and black sweatpants, the white drawstring undone, resting on her upper-thigh, teasing. She wore a ball cap that said *Gainesville* on the front. Her grip around the steering wheel looked uncomfortable, Carson thought, metal pulling at her skin as she slid her clinking mass of hand up and down the leather of the wheel, making turns. Carson noticed through the dim light that her eyes were a dark shade of brown. Her black hair was long beneath the baseball cap and her complexion was dark.

The woman was driving slowly. Carson's first guess was that the woman was a prostitute, that Tim was her pimp, and that they had mistook Carson for a potential client. He opened his mouth to explain this mishap but at that moment Tim extended his left hand and placed it on the woman's thigh, fingering the drawstring, and the woman slapped her right hand of metal across Tim's face.

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry," Tim said. "I don't mean to—" and the woman slapped him again, harder. The back of Tim's head hit the window, cracks shooting out from the contact

point like trains leaving Chicago—every way, every direction. He recovered slowly and rubbed his broken face.

“I’m not your sweetheart,” the woman said. Her voice was low. She put her right hand back on the steering wheel and stared out blankly at the road. The car turned into a small subdivision. Tim turned to Carson.

“You can see she’s worked up,” Tim said. “One night trying to bash in an ATM. We’re not professionals, you know? Not like you—not like Jefe’s people. Mr. Anybody goes loco. But like we told Jefe, we got the box; we got his money inside there. We’re just grateful to have you, and grateful to Jefe for sending you.”

The man spoke to Carson nervously, and Carson’s own nervousness began to decrease. Carson nodded at Tim and smiled a small, dismissive smile. The corner of Tim’s left eye was trickling blood down his face.

“Let’s just see what we can do,” Carson said neutrally. It bothered him to see Tim’s mutilated face light up when the moonlight flashed in through the car windows. Tim nodded at Carson, still trembling.

The woman pulled into a driveway leading to a small house. She did not speak to Carson. Carson kept his hands in his pockets, but he was no longer as nervous as he had been. Tim opened the car door for Carson, and Carson thanked him confidently, approaching the house, following behind the woman with metal hands. Carson had always feigned confidence believably, a trick he had learned during his many years with Kelsey, both before and after their separation.

Carson had feigned confidence when he met Jennifer, too. The day before, at the wedding. He had been walking alone through the church basement before the ceremony when Kelsey, sitting with Jennifer, spotted him and called out his name.

There was a laptop sitting on Kelsey's lap. Kelsey and Jennifer were sitting together on a bench, downloading wedding songs for the reception.

"Unorthodox," Carson had said. "Seeing each other before the ceremony."

"Carson," Kelsey said to Jennifer. "This is Carson."

Jennifer nodded an *it's-good-to-finally-meet-you* nod and extended her right hand. Carson looked at it before shaking it. After she shook his hand, Jennifer replaced her hand on the laptop, scrolling between songs on the mouse pad and banging words into the keyboard. The laptop was still in Kelsey's lap. Jennifer spoke to Carson without making eye contact with him. Her hands danced over Kelsey's lap and Carson imagined her playing an instrument, a piano, into Kelsey's body. He imagined Kelsey throwing her head back, her eyes rolling up, moaning quietly, Jennifer finding the notes between her legs.

The ATM was set up in the middle of the living room.

"Just getting it in and out of the truck took half the night," Tim said.

"Good," Carson said.

Tim looked at him. Carson thought Tim looked frustrated, but he couldn't tell exactly, not with the scars and bruises.

"If it's heavy there's money," Carson said. "If there's money you can pay Jefe." He wanted to reassure Tim, who was still trembling.

The woman with metal hands remained silent after entering the house. She proceeded through the living room and into the kitchen to mix a drink. Tim followed her and made his own drink. He offered to make one for Carson.

“Gin, if you have it,” Carson said. He had not drunk since Miami.

“Excuse my wife,” Tim said to Carson when he returned with the drink. “It’s been a week and a half since Jefe cut us off. No one wants to sling your way when the boss isn’t happy.”

Carson looked over at the woman. She was sitting on a stool in the kitchen sucking out of a glass bong stem. The kitchen light was flickering. On the counter around her were ChoreBoy Brillo pads and dozens of Bic lighters. Carson looked at Tim.

“No worries, amigo. We’re not inhospitable. She’s pulling on resin, or trying to. If we had any, amigo, I’d offer you some. Like I said, Jefe’s sending his rocks somewhere else until we bust up this box.” He kicked the ATM.

There was a sledgehammer and a screwdriver resting against the base of the machine. Carson picked up the screwdriver and attempted to wedge it up the bill dispenser. When he couldn’t, he asked Tim to hold the screwdriver in place while he hit it with the hammer, wedging the screwdriver into the card slot. These, Carson thought, seemed to be the two weakest areas on the machine, the bill dispenser and the card slot. Carson slammed both with the hammer for over an hour before giving up. He was sweating. When he finished—when he resolved his approach wasn’t working—he turned to Tim and his wife. He shrugged.

“I will need more alcohol,” Carson said.

Tim smiled and ran to the kitchen to mix Carson another drink. The woman leered at Carson before approaching the machine herself. She still hadn't spoken to him. She punched the machine with both hands, hard, and the machine rattled. She turned to Tim.

"I swear to God," she said. "I fucking swear to God."

Tim returned to the living room with Carson's gin. He turned to his wife, who was already looking at him. Her eyes were red and swollen.

She said: "You can't get in by morning I swear I'm leaving you. Won't ever hear from me again." Her voice was deep and commanding. She banged her hands against the machine again.

"You always say that," Tim said. "Always have something to bitch about but never any follow through."

The woman swung a metal hand at his face but Tim was prepared. He ducked and backed away from her.

"This time," she said approaching him, "I'll tear off that face of yours." She was taller than Tim by a half foot. Her piercings glinted in the dim light of the living room as she backed Tim into a corner, towering over him.

Carson turned away. When he and Kelsey were engaged, near the end, their mutual friends had told him he was being too controlling, that Kelsey was becoming frustrated at his draconian approach to their relationship. He was not draconian, he thought. He was jealous, wanting to keep Kelsey away from other men, from other hands, but no more than this. When she was late returning from work or the grocery store he would sweat and start breathing heavily. He would sit on the patio and would stand abruptly when he noticed headlights coming down the road. He would call her multiple times and demand reassurance. He had even paid a co-worker

at the accounting firm, Bill, to follow her on weekends when she said she was going out with her girlfriends. Bill's reports were never interesting, never once suggested that Kelsey was untrue, but Carson couldn't be convinced.

The woman with the metal hands went to bed after hitting Tim on the top of the head with an especially thick ring pierced into her thumb. Somehow, Carson thought, it seemed merciful, hitting him with only the one ring, holding back the full force of her hand, the entirety and eternity of her metal.

Tim sat awake with Carson, drinking gin. They were sitting together on the living room's sole piece of furniture—a stained, mauve couch.

“Can I ask you something?” Carson said. He put down his drink.

“Anything,” Tim said. “Anything for Jefe's people.”

“Your wife, are you happy with her? *Being* with her, I mean.”

Tim stopped trembling. “The love of life, amigo. And she loves me too. Lucky to find that, you know?”

“And she beats the shit out of you everyday,” Carson said.

Tim looked down at his shoes. The ATM sat listening to their conversation in the center of the room, also curious. Tim touched his hands to his own face.

“She likes to be controlling,” Tim said. “And I like to be controlled. It's good to know when you don't have a choice, when you know exactly what you have to do. Do you know this feeling?”

Carson emptied his glass. He nodded. He clenched his fingers into a fist and stared at the ATM. Tim dozed off after thirty minutes. When Tim was fully asleep, Carson leaned into

his face to examine his scars. They were deltas, Carson thought. He traced his fingers through the lines on Tim's face and he was not afraid for Tim to wake. He wanted Tim to wake. He considered rousing Tim to tell him something, to tell him anything, but he didn't know what to say. He thought of Kelsey and how he didn't know what to say to her either. He traced a final line through Tim's face—a long, slow line—and then got up off the couch to mix another drink.

He approached the ATM. He picked up the screwdriver and placed it into the card slot again. Then he held the screwdriver in place with his left hand, and with his right he picked up the hammer. It was too heavy for one hand but he swung it anyway. The first blow struck his left hand, missing the screwdriver, but Carson didn't flinch or recoil. The screwdriver fell to the floor. Tim was sleeping. Carson picked up the screwdriver and swung at it again, harder, this time hitting his target. His hand was bleeding. Kelsey had soft hands, he thought. She would need a man with rough hands to balance her out. The warped card slot held the screwdriver in place while Carson beat it deeper into the machine. He would get to the money, he thought; he would get to the money for Tim.

Carson beat the screwdriver into the card slot until it wouldn't go farther. He stood before the ATM panting, his two hands holding the hammer, his left still bleeding. He didn't want to go home. He didn't want to see Lauren and have to explain why he had returned so late. Or what had happened to his hand. He swung the hammer at the ATM's computer screen and the fiberglass cracked and dented. He swung again. Kelsey had told him she didn't have any idea what she wanted, but she did. Carson swung at the screen again and the fiberglass shattered, coating the floor. She knew exactly what she wanted, Carson thought. He swung again. Copper wires shot up from the broken screen. He swung again.

The familiar green of circuit board. He swung at it with as much force as he could muster. Tim did not wake. Carson wondered whether Tim's wife was awake, whether her metal kept her awake at night. He kept swinging. Green chips whirled around him, thrown against the walls of the living room. The walls were speckled with blood. He smashed away the circuit board and kept swinging. He would get to the money, he thought; he would get to the money for Tim.

Missed Connection

You are a language whose logic eludes me. This because the urgency of love is, in the first place, a vague process of re-mediation. You had asked me to trace a line across your belly with the callous tip of my thumb, to trace is coolly, as if water, as if unaffected by the lofty baggage of representation, or the black suddenness of remorse. In the classic sense, a *zeitgeist*. We recreated tenderness so as to reify pain: not once, or twice even: our dilemma's origin is recursive. Despicable to *know yourself*, yet worse to be the *master of your days*. Glancing backwards over life, you return to unrelated action. Eager to see who knows the night. Still on the go. Still going.

Trickster Hermeneutics

In Richmond two summers ago this hipster-turned-concierge asked me to describe in great detail whatever run-ins I've had with direct or structural racism. He urged me to focus particularly on the post-9/11 racial discourse of the so-called *Dangerous Muslim Figure*. We were sitting in The Jefferson Hotel—in its rustic restaurant, *TJs*—and looming over our heads was a large marble statue of Thomas Jefferson himself. He looked scholarly and professional and his nose was sharp like mine. There was probably a book in his hand. I can't remember.

I told the man no, that I hadn't experienced racism, that I couldn't think of a single story, direct or structural, that might satisfy his needs.

"I don't *need* you to have been the object of racism," the man said. "I'm just surprised, is all."

I was surprised too. Surprised because I learned, then, that the easiest, most natural thing to do when asked this question is lie. I could have described a day shortly after 9/11 when a wrinkly old man at a rest stop had learned I was Iranian when my best friend mentioned it, how the man said, "we know what you and your people did to America," or how that same best friend said after my grandfather's death, "at least it's a Towelhead who bit the dust." I could have discussed with this overzealous concierge those instances where I envied my *American*-looking classmates, or when I pretended I was one of them. When I pushed the cartilage of my nose up into my brain so that my nose might appear smaller. How I would tell people I'm Latino, or, in a more hostile place, Italian. How I had internalized a kind of racial hierarchy in the first place. But I didn't say these things because I didn't know whether it's at all appropriate for a twenty-something Iranian-American male—born to an Iranian immigrant and his deeply patriotic

American wife—to argue that he had experienced racism while he attended an award-winning public high school in the US, during our contemporary age of PC, toleration, emphasis on self-esteem, immersion in hyperreality.

A quick summary of the story of my parents' marriage would read like this. In the fall of 1979 at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, they met. My father left Iran on a student visa just before the climax of the Iranian Revolution, before Khomeini ousted the Shah and established Iran's contemporary theocracy. My father was 33, had long black hair, was an instructor of a section of Intro to Photography while he completed his graduate work at Ohio State. My mother was 21. Although she had lived in Columbus with her parents, her family had lived in West Virginia for generations and were, as is typical of farmers in West Virginia, very proud West Virginians, and so even prouder Americans. My mother had enrolled in my father's Intro class and had asked him a question about lighting, once, and from this first interaction they arranged a date, which would turn into a second date and a third until six months later they were engaged to be married, catalyzing my father's application for naturalization and his more general quest for cultural assimilation. My brother and I were born a few years later. After 24 years of marriage, they divorced.

After the conversation at TJs I asked my brother the question posed originally to me.

“Racism? Nah. Not like dad,” Matt said. He was speaking in what I sensed was a mild and new Southern accent. *Not like dad* referred to my father's early interactions with my mother's parents, how they would hide in their bedroom and peer out at him from the top of the stairs, how my grandfather had told his friends after learning of my parents' engagement, “Shelly's marrying a black man.”

“I bet you think this is pretty racist, though,” Matt said. He turned his laptop screen to me so I could see. He was graduating from high school and had created a Facebook group for the celebration called “A-RAB GRADUATION”. There was a picture of his face wrapped in what one was supposed to recognize as a turban. There was a graphic of an AK-47, too. Matt was laughing.

“You know we’re not Arab?” I said.

“Close, anyhow,” he said, his accent growing thicker word-by-word. “Nobody knows the difference. And anyhow, A-rab sounds funnier than Persian.”

The accent joined a long list of alterations Matt had made to his character that summer. The scared, scrawny, socially awkward little brother with long silky hair—the brother I had known before leaving for college—had changed into someone else entirely. He was big, for one. Had put on probably twenty pounds of muscle via protein shakes and disciplined trips to the gym. He had become a car guy, too. Could tell you whatever you could think to ask. He would buy a car, race it for a few months, then sell it and buy another. His childhood passivity and anxiety had been replaced seemingly with a newfound sense of confidence, maybe feigned; I don’t know. His music was loud, usually country or hip-hop. He would sing along with the artists as if he had written the lyrics in the first place. As if they were his. His hair was short, too. Really short. Pretty much buzzed.

A more accurate summary of the story of my parents’ marriage would read like this. In the fall of 1979 at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, they met. My father left Iran on a student visa just before the climax of the Iranian Revolution, before Khomeini ousted the Shah. 33, my father had long black hair, was a Photography instructor while he completed his graduate work. My mother—much younger and born to very conservative West Virginian

parents—had enrolled in my father’s Intro class and had asked him a question about lighting, and from this first interaction they had arranged a date, which would turn into an engagement six months later, catalyzing my father’s application for naturalization and his more general quest for cultural assimilation. My brother and I were born a few years later. Matt and I both learned Farsi before we learned English, and both of us *unlearned* Farsi when we began elementary school. Due to some barrier whose nature fundamentally eludes me, my parents drifted apart in the early years of their marriage and resolved separately to ‘put up’ with one another until their two sons had left for college, thereby mitigating the effects that their many bad choices together might have inflicted on their otherwise innocent sons. And so after 24 years of tired marriage, they divorced.

In the summer of 2008, moments before what should have been my fifth-ever plane ride—and because before each of my previous four flights I had been *randomly selected* to have my bags searched by a security person—I responded to the security person’s fifth and inevitable proclamation with what I thought was an ambiguous retort: *of course*. This was Dayton, Ohio, where airport security officials enjoy especially keen Dangerous Muslim Figure radars. More detail concerning our subsequent conversation would work only to convey my ugly personality and the unfortunate fact that this particular security person in Dayton didn’t share my opinion that the response *of course* could signify anything more than *of course you’re harassing me again because I look vaguely ethnic, with my long aquiline nose and thick black beard and thick black hair down to my shoulders*.

“Well that was stupid,” Matt said. “You should have shaved.” We were riding back to Columbus from Dayton International in Matt’s new S-2000, an impractical two-door convertible manufactured almost exclusively for those experiencing their so-called mid-life crisis.

“You really don’t think about yourself then, do you? About who else you are?” I said.

I wasn’t asking him a question. Matt understood. He understood that, like him, I too was reading from a script. My script wasn’t cars and country music, didn’t concern the regalia of Americana. My script was academia and literary theory, and I became especially indignant when, in class, we discussed race theorists and theories, because I thought such indignation implied an intimate, personal connection to the theory. Never mind I’ve never been outside the States. Never mind I’m more familiar with Spanish than Farsi. That I haven’t spoken to my father in years.

“When I applied for colleges I played up the Iran thing because that’s what OSU wanted to hear,” Matt said. “Something, I don’t know, cultural.”

I had played up the Iran thing too. I had written a college application essay that he used as an example for his own. We wrote about an occasion when my great Aunt Ammeh Joon had visited from Tehran, bearing monetary gifts in small white envelopes for my brother and me. My gift was fifty-dollars; Matt’s was twenty. In the essays, we argued that Ammeh-Joon’s discrepancy was a culturally and personally significant moment, the moment when we realized that cultures are different, and that these differences matter, and that no matter how significantly the great forces of assimilation modify one’s character, or one’s personality, that ultimately these differences are salient and sacred, things to cherish, even when one can’t fully comprehend why.

“But that was a bunch of bullcrap,” Matt said. “Like this country music thing. Like this car.”

He had, then, I thought, justified my own violent appropriation of theory. Along with everything else.

A more accurate summary of the story of my parents' marriage would read like this. In the fall of 1979 at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, they met. My father, 33, left Iran on a student visa before the climax of the Iranian Revolution. He taught photography while he completed his graduate work. My mother, younger, had enrolled in my father's class and had asked him a question about lighting, and from this first interaction they had arranged a date, which would turn into a marriage shortly after. My brother and I were born a few years later. We both learned Farsi before we learned English, and both of us *unlearned* Farsi when we began elementary school, right around the time my father was dismissed from Columbus State University for sexually harassing a young woman. He denied the young woman's claims but, still, he wouldn't allow my mother to attend the hearing, this being especially odd to my neurotic mind for a number of reasons, the most significant being that her presence might have helped him avoid dismissal. Shortly after his dismissal, my father began amassing drug debt. Tens of thousands of dollars of drug debt. My friend Andy Show said he saw my father milling around downtown Columbus once, looking disheveled and terrible. I denied it. My parents drifted apart after my father's dismissal but resolved separately to 'put up' with one another until their two sons had left for college, thereby mitigating the effects that their many bad choices together—and alone—might have inflicted on their otherwise innocent sons. Matt and I learned of my father's drug debt the summer before I went to Richmond. Shortly after, having completed 24 years of tired marriage, my parents finally divorced.

"I guess I don't blame dad," I said.

"I guess I do," Matt said. We were riding in his car heading someplace unimportant, Randy Travis singing about Conway Twitty on the radio.

"This despite the loneliness of a new place?" I said. "Racism and all that?"

“Loneliness, racism—these ain’t got nothin to do with it.”

I looked at him but did not speak. Then I looked at my lap. I remembered how the security guard at Dayton International was shaking after my comment, how he had apologized when he finished searching my bag, how he looked so embarrassed and ashamed while he did it, how he kept saying it was his job, it was his job. How he pulled out books or DVDs from my bag and discussed them with me. *I see you like House*, he said. *I like House. You know it’s based on Sherlock Holmes, right? A reader like yourself would know that, I’m sure.* I remember how I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of forgiveness because he wanted it so badly. I wondered what it would have been like to join my brother at his A-RAB graduation party. What it might have suggested about me if I had.

Matt was already staring at me when I looked up again. He was smiling a little bit too. He could see I was starting to get it.

A more accurate summary of the story of my parents’ marriage would read like this. In the fall of 1979 at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio my parents did *not* meet. My father never left Iran on a student visa because Khomeini never ousted the Shah. My father never taught photography while completing his graduate work at Ohio State. My mother did not enroll in my father’s photo class so she had never asked him a question about lighting, and due to this lack of interaction they did not go on a date, and so they did not marry. My brother and I were not born. We did not learn Farsi and so we could not unlearn it. My father was not dismissed from Columbus State for sexually harassing a young woman and so he did not deny the young woman’s claims. Because my father was not dismissed, my mother’s absence at his hearing is not a nagging reality causing my neurotic mind to question whether my father was committed to

his family even from the start. Andy Show—who is not my friend because I do not exist—did not see my father milling around downtown Columbus, looking disheveled and terrible. My parents did not drift apart after my father’s dismissal and they did not resolve separately to ‘put up’ with one another until their two sons left for college. Matt and I, not existing, did not learn of our father’s drug debt the summer before I did not visit Richmond. And my parents, unmarried, never divorced.

This Bum Smells So Bad He's Covering His Own Nose

Sometimes I think everyone is so stupid.

Then, shortly after, it strikes me how I shouldn't be thinking this way, how thinking this way leaves the universal *you*, I don't know, existentially unsatisfied. Or at least that's what people say, people I respect, too, so I can't just go disregarding their wisdom without reconfiguring the whole goddamn worldview. Then, after all this strikes me—when I'm left in that strange place, *struck*—some bum walks in and starts talking to me about something which I don't register, or understand, because he smells so bad, and while I'm thinking about how strange it is that olfactory offenses render me so inattentive I'm also questioning my own smell, whether *I* might be the one exuding the vile offense, and what it would mean for me, to me, in my head, today, if I were. Then suddenly the bum stops talking and looks at me all expectant, and I say, *Yeah, Yeah, or anyway I'm with you*, to which he says, *You one of those crazy people?*, and, nodding, I say, *Crazy got nothin to do with it*. Like I'm in a fuckin movie or something. Like I'm some hero in a postwar movie. So I *strut* away.

Later via dark chocolate I've ingested too much caffeine—because nobody ever told me dark chocolate is caffeinated—and I've popped a couple of melatonin and they're working against one another, the dark chocolate vs. the melatonin, but what's preoccupying my mind now is whether I'm bleaching my skin with all this fucking melatonin, and, if I am, am I doing it intentionally, or am I just trying to sleep, or do I generally put up a guise of insomnia so that I have a socially acceptable reason to bleach my skin? Or maybe all that science just applies to frogs. Then my brain starts shutting down because melatonin's half-life is longer than caffeine's, but not that much longer, so while I'm *nodding off* I'm also nodding to the gods of anxiety,

impelling them to intervene, who do, as is their wont, and I wake many times screaming like my father used to scream when he was coming down from a coke binge, and I wonder what that means, or whether it means anything at all, and I wonder too why the dark chocolate/melatonin binary leads so immediately to some vague rumination on/of my father who has, by now, long disowned me.

I get up, shower. My heartbeat slows. Like always I'm lying in bed. I sneeze and imagine the bum says, *God bless*. I put two books on my chest, in case those gods return, and there, naked, dripping—waiting for the morning mildew—I expire, dream, and this last act happily because I know faintly and again that I won't remember the day and its neurotic overdeterminations until the sun recalls them cruelly in the morning.

Radiation around the heart

My girlfriend Kim and I are sweating on the grey limestone edge of a water fountain in Grants, New Mexico, wishing we were together somewhere else. The fountain is a limestone statue of a native warrior holding a circular shield to the sky, attempting feebly to block the attack of an enemy, perhaps, or the blistering and unmitigated New Mexican sun. The water in the fountain doesn't flow; this is typical in Grants. Kim and I have ordered a pizza and we are waiting outside Pizza Hut while it's prepared, tossing pennies into the fountain, from dullest to most lustrous, making wishes which are mostly silly. That's what's happening when this disheveled man, accompanied by his limping dog, surprises us both by placing his rough hands on both of our backs.

Disheveled isn't the right word for this man exactly. He is unwashed and unkempt and so merits the descriptor, but I am more interested in other things. His eyes, first. They are the brightest hue of blue I have seen. Radiant like sapphire but brighter. One of them, his right eye, looks unflinchingly at me, into my right eye, while the other moves spherically and randomly in so many directions—upward then left and quickly jolting right, even backwards sometimes, so that I see only ivory while the pupil, unseen, contracts to consider the dark recesses of the brain. I have had friends who call this phenomenon *Crazy Eye*, but I don't say this to Kim. It would seem, to her, like a racially motivated joke, some kind of under-thought and gimmicky idea riffing on Crazy Horse—this being especially true under the statue of the unnamed native warrior. I get carried away in this kind of thinking for a moment and, still looking into this man's bright eyes, I don't think to ask him his name.

"I am Louis," he says. "This is Blue Eyes," pointing to the dog.

He speaks slowly and tentatively so that I understand that English isn't his first language. He bends to scratch Blue Eyes behind the ears and I notice that Blue Eyes' eyes aren't blue.

"You live in Grants, or no?" Kim says. The way she asks, you can see she hopes he doesn't. She says sometimes, *nobody should live in Grants*¹.

"I live in Grants," Louis says, still bending to scratch Blue Eyes, "but my home is with my family in Oklahoma."

Louis puts his hands on his knees and pushes himself upward, toward the sun, to stand. The sun has tanned his skin auburn. This—considered with his skin's rough, wrinkled texture—renders any attempt to determine Louis' age an inefficacious and silly indulgence.

"You are Cherokee?" Kim says.

"I am from Puerto Rico," he says. "Far from here."

Louis reaches behind him and into his backpack. He pulls from it a six-pack of beers, PBR, says, "would you like to buy? Would you like to buy these from me?" The way he's looking, I can see he's pitching the offer more to me than to Kim.

I say no. He hands me the beers so that I can feel them. It seems important to Louis that I feel them. I feel that they are cold and I am surprised. I am curious. I wish I could pause real life, save all progress up to that point, then proceed in a hypothetical reality, a *Safe Mode*, where

¹ Grants, New Mexico, nicknamed *The Uranium Capital of the World*, began as a railroad camp in the 1880s when three brothers from the Grant family were awarded a contract to build a section of the new Atlantic and Pacific Railroad through the region. The town prospered after the completion of the railroad due primarily to railroad logging in the nearby Zuni Mountains. The decline of the logging industry in the 1930s correlated with Grants' general industrial decline from the 1930s to the 1950s, when tourism and agriculture were the city's only major industrial drivers (Grants earned the more flattering nickname *Carrot Capital of the World* during this period). The 1950s brought Grants its most memorable industrial boom when Paddy Martinez, a Navajo shepherd, discovered uranium ore near Haystack Mesa, sparking a mining boom that lasted until the 1980s. The collapse of the mining industry in the 1980s pulled the town back into depression. Those who visit Grants today will note this sense of depression and despair in the town's decaying architecture; its myriad run-down or shut-down hotels; the apathy of its citizens; even in the tap water, which will often cause those who consume it to become ill due to high levels of radiation.

I can ask Louis about the cold beers, or why he has named his brown-eyed dog Blue Eyes, or how old he is, or how he came to Oklahoma from Puerto Rico, or whether he did, or whether this slipperiness is intentional, as if he knows that conflicting details can overwhelm whatever links people want to make between race and character, between ethnicity and personality, and more importantly I want to ask him *why?*, then wait and listen while Louis tells me what it is I feel I need to know, no matter how long it takes, then finally I will nod, will Revert To Saved, will go back to real life where I haven't asked these questions but I know their answers.

“I am hungry,” Louis says. “You must buy this beer so I can eat.”

When I ask Kim about the history of uranium mining in Grants she says, “Okay. But it’s not just mining. It’s everything.”

She teaches high school English on the Laguna-Acoma reservation twenty miles east of Grants on I-40. She says that her students, who are all native, give up long before she meets them in the ninth grade. Most won't graduate; many won't survive. In 2003, in April, five different students on five different nights laid down on the railroad tracks running just north of the Laguna pueblo and died. In class, one student asked Kim why she's working with them, because “most of us will go to prison.” They are ninth grade students who average a third grade reading level, but they don't say jail; they are precise; they have learned that in Grants you don't go to jail. You go to prison.

Many Laguna-Acoma students and many more Navajo—farther west on I-40—are raised by their grandparents. Of the 18 (of 42) families who showed up for Kim's first set of parent-teacher conferences, over half of them were attended by students' grandparents. There are many

reasons for this, but one is uranium mining, which most heavily affected the generation of natives who worked in the mines from 1944-1986, when four million tons of uranium ore was extracted on Navajo lands in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. Due to high rates of unemployment among the Navajo Nation, most miners were Navajo men attracted to the guarantee of a high-paying job with benefits. Susan E. Dawson's study *Navajo Uranium Workers and the Effects of Occupational Illnesses: A Case Study*², to which this essay frequently refers, mentions too that many Navajo believed their work in the mines to be a matter of national security—a patriotic duty.

Employees in these mines were not the only Navajo susceptible to radiation-related illnesses. Homes were often built with contaminated mine waste rock; water was extracted from contaminated water wells. “One worker,” Dawson writes, “who was suffering from cancer of the mouth and whose wife had already died of cancer, was relocated by the government three times because his hogan and subsequent two government-built homes were constructed from radioactive materials.” Moreover, miners’ families often traveled with miners and lived in on-site housing. Families often used water from the area for drinking, bathing, washing, and household uses. Dawson’s study indicates that many still-living family members recall when their children used to play on the tailings and minewastes from the worksites, or used the mines themselves as play areas. Dawson’s study goes further: “Forty-two of the workers (97.6%) wore their dirty workclothes home for their spouses to wash with the family laundry. Some of the spouses who washed the family clothing said that they had rashes after finishing the laundry.” One woman reported how she would place carnotite uranium rocks on her windowsills because she thought they were pretty; she said she would also bake them to see whether they would

² Access this study in its full form here: faculty.washington.edu/stevehar/Dawson.pdf

change color.

The effect of radiation on the Navajo Nation has been devastating. Rates of lung cancer—virtually unheard of among the Navajo before 1944—skyrocketed among miners, who were often required to enter blast areas before the silica dust of radioactive decay had fully cleared the mine. Non-miners, even after the uranium industry’s decline in 1986, saw increased rates of lung and blood cancer due to the estimated 22,000,000 tons of tailings left in many western states; 220 acres of tailings have contaminated New Mexico’s Four Corners region alone, according to Dawson’s research. Radiation related health issues affected even the unborn. Many families in Dawson’s study reported a sharp increase in birth defects among the Navajo, one of them stating, “My sister gave birth to four children that were not normal—two kids died ... and two are disabled now. One [is in a] wheelchair and the other one is on crutches. And my mother died of a blood disease.”

Dawson’s research reveals that when her Navajo respondents were asked whether they would support a uranium mine in their area today, 41 (95.3%) responded they would not support it; three said they would do so if it were safe; two were unsure; and one said he would support it if people were compensated.

Kim says she wants to buy Louis a pizza so she goes inside, orders something. Louis and I sit with our backs to the wall and those passersby who make eye contact give us dirty looks. Louis looks at me and asks what tribe I’m from.

“No tribe,” I say. “My father was born in Iran. Far from here.”

“Then you are the Tribe of Iran,” he says. “Your mother was born in Iran?”

“No.”

“Where was she born?”

“Ohio.”

“What is your name?”

“Michael.” I’m embarrassed I haven’t already told him.

“Michael,” Louis says, nodding. “Of the Tribes of Ohio and Iran.”

For a long time after this Louis doesn’t speak. Kim has returned and he’s grown quiet. Blue Eyes keeps digging at his paw and Louis rubs it gently, searching for the source of his dog’s pain. There is a slight breeze. Kim says she asked the cashier to keep our pizza warm in the oven until Louis’ pizza is ready. That’s when we’ll part ways.

“I live only two miles from here, just down this road,” Louis says, pointing west into the sun.

“Oh—” I say, feeling stupid right away.

“Do you live alone?” Kim says.

“I live with my brothers,” Louis says. “Many of them.” He looks down at the cement we’re sitting on but doesn’t stop massaging Blue Eyes’ paw.

“Blue Eyes and I have walked for many days.”

Kim slowly shakes her head *no*, so that I can see. I see also how much this hurts her. It is understood between us that if Louis asks for a ride, instead of merely hinting at one, that I should tell him *I’m sorry, no, we must leave*.

“When I lived in Oklahoma I was one of many sons,” Louis says. He is still looking at the cement, still massaging the paw. “But out here it’s bad. It’s just no good. It’s just bad. Do you know this?”

Kim and I nod our heads slowly and we don't know what to say, so like Louis we look down.

Follow I-40 west to Church Rock, New Mexico—not far from Grants. In 1979, the New Mexico Environmental Improvement Division licensed the United Nuclear Corporation to operate the Church Rock Mill, where waste from ore extraction was processed. Wet sand and mill liquids were deposited into lined lagoons, which were separated and contained by earthen dikes. According to a 2007 study published in the *American Journal of Public Health*³, “This earthen dam had been identified by United Nuclear Corporation’s own consultant, in addition to state and federal agencies, as being built on geologically unsound land. According to these groups, the soil under the dam was susceptible to extreme settling that was likely to cause cracking and structure failure. In fact, large cracks were observed on the dam in 1977, but were not reported to the appropriate authorities.” The article continues:

In the early morning hours of July 16, 1979, less than 4 months after the highly publicized release at Three Mile Island, the earthen dam at the Church Rock Mill failed. The amount of radiation released at United Nuclear Corporation was *larger* than the release at Three Mile Island. The 6-m-wide dam breach sent approximately 1100 tons of radioactive mill waste and 95 million gallons of mine process effluent down Pipeline Arroyo and into the North Fork of the Puerco River. This tremendous flow of water backed up sewers, affected 2 nearby aquifers, left pools along the river, and transported contaminants 130 km downstream to a point near Navajo, Arizona.

³ *The Sequoyah Corporation Fuels Release and the Church Rock Spill: Unpublicized Nuclear Releases in American Indian Communities*, Doug Brugge, PhD, MS, Jamie L. deLemos, MS, Cat Bui, BS. Access this article in its full form at: ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1963288/

In August of the same year, the “chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council’s Emergency Services Coordinating Committee sent a telegram to the Governor of New Mexico requesting that he declare a state of emergency and that McKinley County be declared a disaster area.” The Governor denied the council’s request while mine process effluent continued flowing down Pipeline Arroyo and into the Puerco River. Instead, government actions were taken to *reopen* the Church Rock Mill. David J. Hann, who was executive vice president and chief operating officer at United Nuclear Corporation, in his Oct 22 testimony to Congress, said that continued delay “will force us to reduce our workforce substantially, resulting in severe hardship to the local community.” And on November 2, 1979, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission granted Hann’s wish, allowing the Church Rock Mill to resume operation “with discharge allowed into the central tailings cell and burrow pits, a process that led to widespread groundwater contamination and placed the United Nuclear Corporation Church Rock Mill on the Environmental Protection Agency’s National Priorities List in 1983.”

The article speculates that the Church Rock spill did not receive nearly as much public attention as the Three Mile Island incident because “incidents in low-income, rural, American Indian communities have not attracted the same attention as have incidents in communities with people of higher socioeconomic status such as Three Mile Island or incidents that affected White victims such as Karen Silkwood.”⁴

Kim has gone inside to retrieve the pizzas and Louis is looking at me now. I am petting Blue Eyes, who is still digging at his paw.

⁴ The authors add: “because the [Church Rock] spill happened in the immediate aftermath of nationwide coverage of the Three Mile Island release, the muted coverage and response is particularly striking.”

“There’s a place,” he says. “Up there.” He points to one of the mountains above the Acoma pueblo. Kim will tell me later that it’s sacred.

“Where a man will sell you petote. I can show you,” he finishes. He is looking into my right eye with his right eye. He is lonely.

I say no but I am imaging this journey. Climbing this mountain with Louis and Blue Eyes as the sun sets, getting to the top where there is a man sitting on a rock, I think, just sitting, just waiting for someone to happen by and purchase his peyote. In the vision it’s a cool night and there’s a colorful sunset; Blue Eyes’ paw is not hurt. Louis, his skin isn’t so rough.

“We are in a hurry,” I say to Louis. The door to Pizza Hut opens and we both look up at Kim.

“We must go now,” Kim says, handing Louis the pizza.

Louis opens the box and breathes deeply the smell of pepperoni and sausage, relishes it. Tears begin to form in his eyes. He looks down and I can see, now, that he will not ask us for a ride. And that I, being small and afraid, won’t offer.

“Oh,” he says, crying so loudly now. “Thank you. Thank you. I really fucking appreciate it.”

Kim and I look down, not knowing what to say. We pet Blue Eyes and say goodbye. We wish both of them luck. We get in Kim’s car and drive away, Louis still crying so hard we can hear it, hear it above the car’s steady rumble westward, rumble home.

In Dawson’s study a Navajo elder asks for help. He says:

We, the elderlies, that resides around here don’t know what was good and worst about the uranium. There were several death in this area that was affected by radiation or cancers. We need

help. I lost my wife last year [to cancer] and now I am 87 years. My wife would have been 70 years which made a lot of difference. I am lonely and can't get anywhere without her help. I was hurted and miserable.

Clearly information inaccessibility contributes to the composite travesty that is uranium mining on native lands. Many Navajo were unaware about limited government compensation programs (which in many states carried with them only a one year statute of limitations). Some in Dawson's study reported that they had to pawn jewelry and other goods to pay for funeral expenses and medical costs. "One widow," Dawson writes, "when asked why she did not file for benefits, explained that she felt intimidated by the process because of being told she had to write letters."

Even scientific information was concealed from the Navajo. Dawson writes, "in exchange for the mining company's list of miners' names [in order to perform studies on the miners to determine the effects of radiation] the US Public Health Service agreed not to divulge the potential health hazards to the workers while they were monitoring their health, nor to inform those who became ill that their illnesses were radiation-related." Medical information was often concealed from those who were suffering, either intentionally or because many physicians on Navajo lands were unfamiliar with what many perceived simply as a new, unexplainable medical phenomenon. After the effects of radiation poisoning finally became clearer, one Navajo in Dawson's study said his physician told him he was suffering from "radiation around the heart."

Kim is driving home. I am looking at the mountains above the Acoma pueblo, where Louis said he could get me peyote. In my mind I am not in the car. In my mind I am up there. I have hiked up there with Louis and Blue Eyes because in my mind I am not afraid. I am bold. I have

paused my life in the car, saved it, and now I'm in *Safe Mode*. On the hike upward Louis tells me the beers are cold because, with him, beer remains cold. He says he is young, very young, maybe younger than me. That actually his name is Blue Eyes. That he never lived in Puerto Rico but spent all his life in Oklahoma. He says yes, his slipperiness is intentional, that conflicting details challenge assumptions about race, personality. We are at the top of the mountain when I ask him *why?*, but he does not respond. He is looking at me with his right eye, holding my gaze, but with his left he is looking not into the dark recesses of his brain, or down—but instead up, into the sky, to the sun, wishing he could be even farther up there, farther above the ground, away from this blistering place and everything it has done to him.

Missed Connection

I'm preparing for a conversation I'll have in two weeks, preparing to prove that no two things are coterminous, that parallel lines will somehow, in some otherworldly permutation of the prescient, cross. To believe it you must disbelieve it, disbelieve belief. My father was a new Hegelian; he said: *son, the higher you climb up the mountain the more of the valley you'll see.* He did not read Hegel, and I think it's for the best. He said October is the only important month, the best time to change direction, to go east again. I swear I'd do it if I could. Here's what I know for sure: you have to make things happen in October; what and why don't matter. They are outliers, coincidences, important to no one and nothing.

I will not read Hegel. I will not disagree with my father. I will not swoon. No matter how the light hits the stained-glass window, I will never again hang my aviators on your jeans, on the bottom where the seams have ripped.

Night Stock

A barely-past-middle-age woman, newly divorced, having just completed another of what she considered a jejune and unnecessary day of work, processing claims, glided absentmindedly out of cold October wind and through the automatic doors of a supermarket whose name distantly reminded her of the small town in West Virginia from which she had fled twenty-five years prior, seeking college and the fame and glory so often promised to an American girl capable of accomplishing anything, as her father would tell her. At that moment, through the same automatic doors, a bearded man, bum-like, wearing a messy mustache, entered the supermarket one pace behind the newly divorced woman, not noting any sense of childhood nostalgia linking him to the place.

The barely-past-middle-age woman recognized the man, bum-like, as one of the regulars sitting outside the supermarket, having glimpsed him occasionally after long days of jejune work on her way inside, but never speaking to him, or even at him—violating protocol by abandoning her usual, conservative rant about the laziness of homelessness—fearing danger from this particular bum-like man, quickening her pace, on every occasion, as she walked into the supermarket, grimacing at his smell, most noticeably, and his appearance, less noticeably, both of which, she thought in the haze of absentmindedness only lately affecting her, she knew strangely as something *of before*, a whisper of some old friend or acquaintance distantly removed by time and its consistent effect on the human mind's ability to recall.

Between these two there existed, some uncertain number of minutes past midnight, only the camaraderie shared by those who enjoy their shopping at night, in empty supermarkets, alone. The barely-past-middle-age woman began like most customers in the Produce

Department, consciously resolving to comply again with the store's expectation that one begin in Produce, wend next through the Deli/Bakery, then through Drug/GM, where the store's real profit derives, then through the aisles themselves, perusing the more common and necessary pantry items, and ending finally in Dairy, always on the wing, joining Front End on the opposite wing in flanking consumers between the sounds of chiming cash registers and the mechanical open and close of the dairy cooler doors, their thuds, the sounds of Night Stock replenishing milk. The florescent lights hummed overhead, which the barely-past-middle-age woman also noticed, drawing from this second conscious recognition the sort of pride to which an absentminded, newly-divorced person might cling; she had only recently had to shop for herself, and had only rarely been to this particular supermarket. The man, bum-like, wandered unpredictably through the aisles, clawing at the pantry items which filled them with color, breaking open bags of flour and chocolate chips and peanuts, not noticing the hum of lights or manner in which he was expected, by supermarket strategists now long asleep in New York City penthouses, to advance through the mess of commodity.

Considering the hum of florescence above her, the barely-past-middle-age woman intuited for the first time the sameness of life, and more significantly she recognized the ubiquity of this sameness, which manifests everywhere, she knew, and for everyone, for richer or poorer, and she understood, standing in the Deli/Bakery, where the lights are loudest, that every person's story, regardless if not because of its derivative, is the same. The man, bum-like, metaphysically simple, engaging the supermarket far less existentially, coated in the whiteness of flour, hobbled toward the barely-past-middle-age woman from a distance, moving slowly, his eyes bloodshot and bulging, causing the barely-past-middle-age woman to forgo her search for fresh focaccia—a useless endeavor anyway, she knew, so many hours after the baker's departure—and to leave the

Deli/Bakery altogether, allowing the man, bum-like, to pursue whatever of his devices he enjoyed while wandering the supermarket so late at night, coated in the whiteness of flour.

Laboriously, the barely-past-middle-age woman pushed her cart through the store's script, not seeing the man, bum-like, but sensing his gaze, through eyes bloodshot and bulging, both of them unmistakably alone. The woman hurried her cart through the script to aisle six, Foreign Foods, where she stopped honestly to consider the supermarket's vast selection, hers being a diverse and progressive town, in part why she had decided despite her parents' outcry to move there with her husband, now estranged, in the first place—twenty-four years prior. The barely-past-middle-age woman removed a heavy sack of white rice from the shelf, examined it, then placed it back on the shelf gently, remembering her estranged husband's dedication to perfectionism, or what she had mistook for perfectionism, and his adage *basmati makes the best*, which he thought clever and pithy, this alliteration, and at which she herself had laughed, humoring him, although sometimes laughing honestly, his accent so funny to her, so endearing before he lost it assimilating into American life and language. This innocence, which had attracted her to him, existed before the now-estranged husband discovered and began to experiment with what the conservative, barely-past-middle-age woman considered the *vices* of her great country, uninhibited and free.

The man, bum-like, stumbled around the corner of Foreign Foods, entering it, more coated in white, his eyes bloodshot and bulging, and the barely-past-middle-age woman, jolted out of memory of her once-helpless husband, now estranged, stepped back from the non-basmati rice and looked hawk-like for the basmati, herself recognizing, after her failed attempt two nights prior, that only basmati makes good rice, or stands a chance, her ability to prepare it being

severely inferior to that of her estranged husband, and falling—in what she considered an easy, torpid generalization—into a category which she recognized conveniently as *notwithstanding*.

Also notwithstanding, below the florescent lights, was the woman's nagging memory of her now-estranged husband, whom she considered in her *Mind's Eye*, and imprecisely, to be her *late* husband (this despite his now-estranged dedication to perfectionism, or what she had mistook for perfectionism). Notwithstanding her night of recognitions. Notwithstanding the letter she had found in an old shoebox, written by her now-estranged husband only weeks before he had proposed to her, the letter written to another woman, Marlene, asking Marlene to marry him quickly, receiving from her a swift and unequivocal rejection, with wet, green eyes, and hair that curled instead of fell; notwithstanding her life as backup plan. Notwithstanding his tens of thousands of dollars of debt. Notwithstanding his shame. His leaving the diverse and progressive community because of it. Leaving her. Notwithstanding that *she* should have been the one to leave. Notwithstanding his too-bald head or his again-helplessness. Notwithstanding this other man, bum-like, who stood before the basmati nagging her too, with his presence, his lack of it, his overall lassitude—the figment of a vague, October nostalgia.

The barely-past-middle-age woman waited, becoming angry at the man remaining there, bum-like, standing before the shelves which harbored *her* basmati, different-sized brown sacks of it, the man looking at the sacks but not moving, not clawing at them as he had with the flour in Baking Needs. The barely-past-middle-age woman—also not moving, not knowing what to say to a man, possibly dangerous, covered in flour, at a supermarket, past midnight—stared at the man, bum-like, who himself kept staring at the basmati. The florescence hummed through stale light. The barely-past-middle-age woman approached the man slowly, hobbling; she left her cart in front of the non-basmati. She noticed the man, bum-like, wore a thick scarf—dark green—

made of wool, not dissimilar to a scarf her husband, now estranged, acquired in Sweden, where he lived for two years before coming to America and, by marrying (her), secured American citizenship. She watched flour fall slowly from the top coils of the man's scarf to lower coils, falling more quickly from the scarf's lacy edges onto the man's coat, scattering out deltaic, dusting the man from top down—an hourglass of white sand. She watched flour pass even more slowly through the man's thick, wiry beard—originally black, she knew—the flour dusting the floor beneath them; the barely-past-middle-age woman could not discern the remarkable origin of so much flour. The man's eyes were still bloodshot, still bulging, although he seemed more lucid, the barely-past-middle-age woman thought, immediately regretting the extreme obviousness of this observation, the man no longer clawing at flour but staring passively at rice.

“Sir?” the barely-past-middle-age woman said, knowing—in the same haze of absentmindedness through which she knew the man distantly—that he would not respond. Close enough to see the flour falling off the man, the barely-past-middle-age woman could also see the man's confusion, his crazy eyes bulging even when glimpsed in profile, his overall helplessness in white. The barely-past-middle-age woman felt a sudden sadness, as suddenly as she had noticed the humming florescence above, which replaced her anger and transformed it, as sadness does, to sympathy for the man, bum-like, which she had never felt prior, for him or any other man, and this sudden sympathy alarming her, by violating her long-standing conservative sensibilities, the barely-past-middle-age woman attempted to link in her *Mind's Eye* this suddenness of emotion to her conscious recognition of sameness in the Deli/Bakery, and the feeling she endured whenever she saw this man, bum-like, who, through her haze of newly-developed absentmindedness, recalled a friend or acquaintance distantly removed.

“Sir?” the barely-past-middle-age woman said again, this time placing her hand on the man’s shoulder, now standing only one pace behind him. Again the man, bum-like, made no response. The barely-past-middle-age woman began shaking the man gently with the arm she placed on his shoulder, remembering her now-estranged husband’s perfectionism, or what she had mistook for perfectionism, and rocking the bum-like man she said, “Sir? Sir?”, again and again, white flour still pouring out from the man’s mangled hair, down his wiry beard, through the thick coils of his scarf, scattering out deltaic onto his coat and finally the salt and pepper floor, checkered.

“We can go,” the barely-past-middle-age-woman said, rocking the dusty man more vigorously, trying to shake off the white powder snaking down him, not succeeding, the lights humming above her. “We can go together; we don’t have to stay here anymore!” the barely-past-middle-age woman said, now pushing the man into the shelves which harbored her basmati, different-sized brown sacks of it.

“We can go!” the barely-past-middle-age woman repeated. “We don’t have to stay here anymore!” The barely-past-middle-age woman was flailing even more vigorously, pushing and punching the man harder into the basmati. *“We can go we can go we can go!”*

It was at this time, while the barely-past-middle-age woman was suggesting—with a violence deemed by her to exhibit sympathy—that she and the man *could go*, that the Night Cashier, having just completed the 1 AM Till Exchange, per protocol, resolved to abandon the superficial, perfunctory post at U-Scan assigned to him, and to walk from his flank at Front End to aisle six, Foreign Foods, to determine, first, per protocol, the source of what had by then become a long and loud disturbance, and, second, to *Take Care* of this disturbance, pursuant to the restrictions

of protocol, all of them written by supermarket strategists now long asleep in New York City penthouses.

“Ma’am?” the Night Cashier said, running around the corner of Foreign Foods. The barely-past-middle-age woman continued flailing, continued yelling at the basmati, not noticing the Night Cashier despite his geographic proximity. “Ma’am!” the Night Cashier said again, restraining the barely-past-middle-age woman by grabbing her arms and pulling her away from the sacks of basmati, some of them ripped open, spilling out long grains onto salt and pepper supermarket tile, checkered. The Night Cashier, larger and stronger than the barely-past-middle-age woman, subdued the woman easily and effectively, violating, he was sure, some standard of employee-customer protocol.

“Ma’am,” the Night Cashier said a third time, exasperated, exhaling the sounds, lying back on the cold tile, the barely-past-middle-age woman locked against him by the neck, resting on his chest, both of them panting, lying down, looking up, alone but for the thuds of Night Stock replenishing milk.

The barely-past-middle-age woman—hearing the thuds, glimpsing the florescence—began again to squirm, to kick and bite the Night Cashier from her subdued position, the Night Cashier holding tight, refusing to release a woman who, he was sure, would continue to terrorize the supermarket, breaking its tranquil script, unless swiftly and unequivocally ejected, stood, the barely-past-middle-age woman still in his physical command, and dragged the squirming tangle of middle age through Foreign Foods, violating protocol, past the non-basmati, past the woman’s cart parked before it, past Front End and to the automatic doors through which blew the cool wind and whisper of October, its vague nostalgia, smells of a diverse and progressive town,

where he ejected the woman, swiftly and unequivocally, and, violating protocol, locked the automatic doors behind her.

The Wind

For BW

Calo didn't notice his apartment door left slightly ajar when he skipped energetically down the stairs and past the smiling marble statuettes leading to his residence on an especially cold October evening belonging to the Wind. Prairie Wind, Calo thought; *fitful and unforgiving*. Calo hadn't seen his roommate Candorous for an indeterminate number of days, so noticing the door left ajar might have shocked him at first, had he noticed it, until the carefully constructed algorithms of his obsessive Superego would have rationalized the occurrence thusly: *the Wind in these parts can do anything*. It was a rationale with which Calo had grown quite familiar, one used by him often to deflate those nagging ambivalences which, he concluded, must accompany modern life for *all* the twenty-somethings of South Charleston, Ohio; growing up, the Wind seemed always more fierce on those sordid farms. On his seventh birthday, his father had told him the Wind had carried their money away and so, *ergo*, Calo couldn't have a birthday cake. An indeterminate number of years after his seventh birthday, per Calo's tenuous memory, his mother had used the Wind to explain the unexpected disappearance of his father. He remembered his first girlfriend had said she was leaving him for the Wind and that his first wife had said the same. It had seemed to Calo that only Candorous was immune to the great kinetic power of this Wind, but upon Candorous' sudden and unexpected departure, some unclear number of days (or was it weeks?) prior, Calo returned to his windswept rationale, that *the Wind in these parts can do anything*, a maxim whose status after so many years of exhausted use and reuse had passed in Calo's mind from *rationale* to *obvious truth about the human condition imparted by time*. There is no escaping the Wind, Calo knew. So he could only be afraid.

Not having noticed the door left ajar, it would have been impossible for Calo to have noticed the glass of ice water which had been placed meticulously and intentionally on the top of the door, leaning at a slight angle against the white panels above the frame so that at the slightest irritation the glass would fall on and soak the unsuspecting door-enterer below. Drenched and shivering, standing in his foyer, hearing the Wind howling around the rough contours of his ears—his ears now red with cold—Calo wondered how he, and not the Wind, had been first to trigger this simple and goodhearted prank. Calo wondered too: *who do I know in this small town well enough that he might feel comfortable to engage me in such a lighthearted and juvenile way?*

Later in the evening, while pondering these questions and trying to remember what Candorous had looked like, before Candorous left unexpectedly, Calo peered up at the large brown clock sitting above his fireplace on the mantle, sitting tame like a stuffed lion's head. The only light in the room emanated from a derisory fire burning stupidly in the fireplace; Calo was drinking wine. The Wind was tapping at the windows with dead leaves and Calo's mind was a grey and torpid haze. He noticed the minute-hand on the clock turning not forward, as he remembered minute-hands to turn (?), but backwards, slowly (re)winding the hour-hand backwards too, click after loud click, and click. *The Wind!* Calo thought suddenly, quickly placing his glass of wine on the coffee table and rushing to the clock on the mantle as if swiftness in this matter might prevent whatever damage a rogue minute-hand presents to an otherwise good clock. When he lifted the clock to his face to examine it more closely he noticed no irregularity—that time was moving forward once more, and loudly, at its regular (?) speed. He sighed with relief. He finished his wine and ran to bed, laughing loudly like the clock.

The next morning before rushing out the door for work Calo cut a pepperjack cheese sandwich and left it on a ceramic plate on his dining room table. He opened and closed his apartment door behind him and only the smiling statuettes saw him wink back at the building before skipping around the corner brightly to work, whistling a tune whose name eluded him but whose sounds were old and familiar and maternal.

At work Calo stared at his computer screen and wondered about Candorous and the pepperjack cheese sandwich. He trapped a spider in a glass used typically for water (the glass Candorous had left on the doortop!) and throughout the day he played with the spider, cutting off bits of its long legs slowly, between long intervals of time, until the spider constituted only a black fuzzy ball the size of a pencil's eraser. Calo watched the ball tremble. *Perhaps a reasonable thinker could attribute the mysterious opening of the door to the Wind; perhaps a reasonable thinker could attribute the glass of ice water to the Wind; the Wind in these parts can do anything!* Calo located the spider's black eyes. He held his pencil's eraser above the spider and very slowly he began to push down on the trembling ball of fuzz, its eyes pleading up at him for relief, bursting with black fluid and fear. *Stranger things have happened.* When the spider popped and spilled out the yellow content of its abdomen Calo laughed childishly and reached for his glass—Candorous' glass!—then placed it gently in his backpack. He fled home through the violent Wind.

He couldn't stop laughing. He was right! He was right about Candorous—it *was* a game! He was there. Candorous was there. He was *around*. He was *home* somewhere, unseen. The pepperjack cheese sandwich had been eaten while he was at work and in its place a large 'C'

carved into the ceramic plate. *C is for Candorous*, Calo thought, laughing, prouder than death, sitting in the wooden chair at the table and tracing the cool C with his forefinger; he could not contain his smile. He could hear the clock on the mantle ticking loudly, clicking loudly. This time the clock ticked faster than he thought he remembered clocks ought to tick (?), accelerating at an exponential rate so that Calo had to lean through a vague dizziness onto the table, and, steadying himself there momentarily, he noticed one of the chair's four wooden legs had been filed down to its flimsy core, noticing this only seconds (?) before the chair snapped below him with a tick much louder than the now-slowng ticks of the mantle clock. Calo fell stupidly to the floor. He was there, on the floor, for an indeterminate amount of time. He examined the ceiling from the floor, admired its stucco, remembered Candorous had decided on the stucco and had regretted it later. *Or was it somebody else who had regretted it?*

Perhaps a reasonable thinker could attribute the mysterious opening of the door to the Wind, and *perhaps* this reasonable thinker could attribute the glass of ice water to the Wind, but to attribute this filing down of wood to the Wind would require a kind of truth-perversion which even the time-warped sons of South Charlestown could not summon.

And besides, Calo thought: *the C*.

C is not for Wind.

The next day before he left for work Calo draped random corridors of his apartments in a transparent plastic wrap, on which he had deposited a sticky residue like glue but more odorous. Candorous would appreciate the prank when he walked unknowingly into the traps! Would be impressed at Calo's dedication to their game.

When Calo returned home through the Wind later that evening he noticed the plastic wrap had been torn down and on those corridors on which Calo had placed the plastic wrap

originally there were now small footprints walking up and down the vertical walls, resembling the small prints of cats or rabbits; Calo smiled at the assurance of such ingenuity and helped himself to a glass of wine. Though he sensed its presence, through a grey and torpid haze, tonight he could not hear the clock. Tonight he would focus on outperforming Candorous, whose paw-print prank had quite outshined the exorbitant simplicity of Calo's odorous plastic wrap prank. Calo's focus was so great, his attention so devoted and distended to the task of out-pranking callous Candorous—who was not dead!—that he neither saw nor heard the modest bits of pebble, mica, which the Wind's tremendous momentum had blown into the glass windows of the apartment while Calo resolved that the best prank would be one which instills in Candorous not lightheartedness or joy but fear; Calo remembered the spider and its eyes drowning against the weight of the eraser. He laughed.

At the dawn of the next morning Calo rose early and set to work hunting the cats of his neighborhood. He disdained the Wind (it had taken so much from him!) but he endured it to hunt the cats. When he had strangled enough cats Calo returned home with their carcasses and strung them up in his apartment from the stucco ceiling; Calo had always liked the stucco. He remembered Candorous had decided on the stucco but had later regretted it.

Or was it somebody else who had regretted it?

When he returned home from work later that evening Calo saw in horror that alongside the cats there were now other dead animals: mostly dogs, Calo noted, but exceptions abounded and were first to catch the eye: two pigs, a heifer, large carrion birds with dead tongues rolling lazily from dead mouths. Calo found a white pony strung up by its frail hooves to the ceiling fan in his bedroom. When he flipped the switch to the ceiling fan the pony swung wildly like a dark and malfunctioning merry-go-round car; its eyes were dead and white. He had again been

outdone. He retrieved his last bottle of wine from the kitchen and fell onto his bed, below the pony still spinning wildly; he drank from the bottle until he fell into that spinning place of slow-ticking clocks and Wind.

In the early morning when he rose Calo's actions were quick and intentional. He sewed a large, durable cloth sack in which he placed heavy rocks of disparate shape and color; bits of mica clung to his sweaty palms. Above his apartment door—the same door above which Candorous (it must have been Candorous!) had placed the glass of ice water—Calo screwed in a large hook and threaded through it and to the doorknob a durable cord of twine which connected finally to a small contraption controlling the gravitational inclination of the sack of rocks; a separate cord of twine connected the sack of rocks, inversely, to a hook which Calo screwed into the ceiling a few feet in front of the door; at the bottom of the second hook, in the very center of the foyer, in front of the door, a noose hung still, eager for the prank. Calo had envisioned it thusly: Candorous, assuming Calo had left for work, would enter through the door to set up his next prank and his entrance would cause the sack of rocks to fall swiftly to the ground; the falling rocks would pull the rope hanging in the center of the room upward and Calo, standing on a wooden chair, waiting for Candorous, would be hoisted upward by the neck. He would try to smile so that Candorous would be afraid.

The perfect prank! Why hadn't he thought of it sooner? What a mockery! All those foolish and lighthearted pranks! Candorous would surely understand Calo was mocking him. He would understand. There was no question in this matter. The best prank is one which is paralyzing and to which the target of the prank cannot respond.

What is more paralyzing than death?

He could not say how long he would have to wait. This is the great compromise of life. It was fitting, somehow, to him—that he would be hanged unexpectedly, without warning, as quickly and unexpectedly as Candorous' recent (?) ascent, or his father's departure an indeterminate number of years prior. *The mockery*, he thought. *One must not forget the mockery*. Again he could hear the clock ceremoniously slowing the pace of its ticks. Standing on the wooden chair (he had checked and double-checked the four legs for weaknesses), Calo could see the entire room: all the cats of South Charleston hanging upside-down by their tails, stale blood dripping from their eyes; large carrion birds with dead tongues rolling lazily from dead mouths; the clock had almost stopped ticking entirely and Calo's mind was a grey and torpid haze; he had forgotten—like everything else—to switch off the ceiling fan in his room. He heard strange music from outside his apartment, a tune whose name eluded him but whose sounds were old and familiar and maternal. *The Wind*, he thought. *The Wind in these parts can do anything*. He looked out past the window to the left of his door and saw the statuettes eyeing him curiously, containing their dumb smiles a little, and Calo smiled back at them, just a little, his small heart pulsing inside his small chest like warriors whose philosophy is anticipation and anxiety and whose weapon is the steady drum of war. Calo was a cold warrior. The noose around his neck was cold. *Where's Candorous?* Calo remembered the fuzzy ball of spider and imagined its long legs detached and flung far from its dry and punctured corpse; he saw those thin legs shaking like eager bones; sticks that beat the drums; the Wind as loud as the drums *it was soon*. He had been outpranked and so, *ergo*, the limbs of his dry and punctured corpse would shake like eager bones. *The Wind in these parts can do anything*. The doorknob rattled a little when the clock stopped its slow tick; Calo was still and focused, waiting; he eyed the sack of rocks like a warrior whose philosophy is anticipation (*one always returns to one's burden*). The doorknob rattled

again, as if Candorous was struggling with the lock (?). *Stranger things have happened.* Calo looked outside the window the statuettes smiling at him broadly winking their gray and wistful eyes confirming the presence of callous Candorous who would trigger the rocks, Calo's burdens gathered together in a sack more tenuous than memory; *One must not forget the mockery* Calo looked into their eyes the small eyes of the statuettes eyes *fitful and unforgiving* and he began to imitate their smiles the sack slams to the floor *The Wind! The damned Wind!* a pressure on my (?) neck the door left slightly ajar this strange pain deep, I say: *smile, you fool! Smile if you remember how to smile, Calo!* my small eyes fill suddenly with black fluid and fear, pleading for relief, and I am lifted—I am lifted up, straight up, and away from this spinning place in South Charleston of maternal music and eager war drums, of slow-ticking clocks and the Wind.

Missed Connection

Hypothetically, go to New Mexico. Drive south on 25, get lost, return. Change the route, risk the mountain—a thing of the west. Do not breach Del Norte, a city of misnomers. Stopping at the bar, not having reached or breached it, drink “hypothetical”, hypothetically, so that the barman says: *Son, time to leave, time to go home, can you drive?* Nod and say no, say: *I am not your son.* Find *A-Okay* where the bums sleep in the winter, where dreams disjoint and fizzle into coarseness, where sand falls through an angry bourbon haze. Being an *ish* life where sand falls through an angry bourbon haze.

Bridge

I was sitting on a beanbag in the Shabadogi family’s basement when this frequent guest of theirs came thumping down the stairs. His name was Navid and he was staying again with the Shabadogis for Thanksgiving. Navid was an army guy, I had once gathered. I had seen him wearing camouflage one year and assumed he was an army guy, anyway. He stayed with the Shabadogis when he couldn’t afford his own place—which was often—and because my father absolutely *had* to spend each Thanksgiving with this family while I was in grade school, I had met Navid many years prior and knew him marginally. My mother put him up once too, a couple years back. He slept in my room because I was in college. My mother says she’s not sure, but she thinks he stole my calculator—one of those expensive graphing calculators I didn’t need anyway because I had graduated from high school and you don’t need that kind of calculator after high school.

“Yo,” he said. “What’s cooking tonight?”

I assumed he meant *what are you getting in to?* instead of *what’s for dinner?* because Mrs. Shabadogi made the same thing every year for Thanksgiving dinner: a massive Honeyball turkey and an equally massive vat of basmati with saffron. Some years my father would prepare kabob. Every year Mrs. Shabadogi would say: *two cultures united in love and through food*, referring to her own happy and interracial (I guess) marriage and that of my parents, who did not seem happy, at all, but smiled anyway. The husbands were born and raised on the same street in Tehran. Coca-Cola Avenue. Mrs. Shabadogi would hand the carving knife to Mr. Shabadogi, who would cut and distribute the turkey while my father scooped rice onto the plates in an

almost holy way. Like deference to basmati and saffron is the sixth pillar of Islam. My mother prayed for all of us in Jesus' name, which made everyone uncomfortable.

"Same as every night," I said. "Same old thing every year." My response was ambiguous in case my interpretation was wrong. I had become quite familiar with this kind of neurotic interpersonal nuance.

"I'm betting *you'll* get cooked," he said.

I looked at him strangely and waited for him to continue.

"The rest you're fooling, maybe, but me—I know reefer."

Pot was my primary coping-mechanism for this kind of so-called *family reunion*. I knew he knew. Had seen him smile slightly when I'd come in from the cold, an hour or more after leaving for a *walk*. Smelling like Christmas. I would be paranoid usually, but with Navid—I thought I could trust him with this. I thought it had something to do with the camouflage.

"You smoke?" I said.

"Used to," he said. "Then I had to grow up, you know?"

"You know where I can score around here?"

"I know the place. If we leave now we can make it back before dinner."

So we left. I told my mother that Navid and I were going on a walk and she nodded, said be back by nine. It was seven. We walked down Monroe toward Tackett, turned left on Helmke before the bridge, away from Ellicott City. Once, when we were younger, Mr. Shabadogi, Navid and I threw pennies into the water below the bridge and wished we weren't spending Thanksgiving in Baltimore. Wished to be someplace warmer, too. These are the things we wished out loud. But we were also wishing things internally. Me, that my nose would shrink. That me and some popular and attractive American singer like Aaron Carter would become

friends and we'd hang out together thinking up lyrics or talking about girls. Or whatever. That night, the first night on the bridge, I can remember two other things about it: it was snowing big wet snowflakes and I was about to lose a baby tooth. I remember when I pushed on it with my tongue, Mr. Shabadogi told me not to force this kind of thing. That the body works on its own timeline.

Navid and I stopped at the bridge again, now many years later, and we looked at the snow gathered on the thin layer of ice that had formed above the water. Navid had a long aquiline nose like mine. He looked more Persian than me, too. He spoke fluent Farsi. When he wasn't wearing camo, he dressed in that classy American way Iranian immigrants often dress. Except he wasn't born in Iran. Like me he hadn't even been there. One other thing about Navid, he always smelled good. Always.

"You remember when we threw pennies into here?" he said. He was staring at the ice, just staring at it. Not blinking. The silhouettes of tall trees hunched over us. You could smell firewood burning somewhere, which made me sad inexplicably.

"No," I lied.

"It's all the same," he said, still staring at the ice. "Eighth is forty and I can't imagine you'll need more than that before Saturday. This guy, call him Muscle."

"Muscle," I said, and nodded, trying not to laugh. We left the bridge, kept walking. Again it was snowing big wet snowflakes. The moon was full and you couldn't hear cars rumbling ahead to D.C. It seemed as if everyone was where they wanted to be.

Muscle waved to us from a screened-in balcony above his front door. I couldn't make him out exactly but I could see he had a long black beard. He seemed much older than me and

Navid, too. He gestured warmly for us to help ourselves inside, make our way upstairs, to the balcony. I could smell his pot burning from downstairs and I wanted it.

“Muscle,” he said and extended his hand to shake mine. Beneath the ruddy light of the balcony I could see why he was called—or called himself—Muscle. His arms were massive. His beard was even more impressive from up close, extending out in every direction like Marx’s beard, but more. He looked dirty but I couldn’t tell for sure with the light so dim. I couldn’t place his accent.

“Navid says you’re a potential client of mine,” Muscle said. “How long you in town?”

“I need just the one bag. I go back to Ohio this weekend.”

“Just the one bag,” he said, stroking his beard, looking at Navid sternly as if disappointed, but still with a slight smile. Like my response was funny. Like it offended him.

“Sit,” he said, pointing to a chair in the corner. He nodded at Navid to sit too, who did.

“I almost forgot my manners.”

He passed me a glass pipe and when I felt it I remembered the coldness of Baltimore in November. I had forgotten, meeting Muscle. Forgotten I was shivering. I lit the pipe while Muscle and Navid watched eagerly. Against physiological impulse I managed not to cough. I was afraid Muscle and Navid could see how hard I was trying.

“Thanks,” I said and passed the pipe back to Muscle, who did not hit from it but instead passed it to Navid. Navid looked at it momentarily before accepting. He lit the pipe and blew the smoke slowly up toward the one light of the balcony, where it twisted around and into itself, then he handed the pipe back to Muscle and spoke to him in a language which I did not recognize as Farsi. Muscle said some things in this language too. Then Muscle handed me the pipe with a smile and I hit it again.

Navid looked at me, said: "I'll be right back."

I looked at him strangely and waited for him to continue.

"Need to warm up my hands," he said. He stood and went inside.

"You're not from around here?" Muscle said when we were alone.

I shook my head. "Columbus. Visiting the Shabadogis for Thanksgiving." I didn't know whether he knew the Shabadogis.

"Ah—Thanksgiving," he said. He pulled out a sack he had weighed out already and handed it to me. "It'll be forty," he said. "The view up here is free."

I handed him forty dollars and he looked at it before accepting, like how Navid had looked at the pipe.

"Let me ask you," he said. "What else you got?"

I said I didn't understand.

"Credit cards? Cell phone? Maybe more cash, even."

"I won't be needing anything else," I said. I was looking inside for a sign of Navid, a sign that he was about to return, but there were no such signs. I began to shiver more violently.

"Of course you need something else," he said. He stood up and walked behind me, put his hand on the back of my chair. For once I was grateful to the cold for masking my fear, my shaking hands. I tried to stand to face Muscle but he pushed me back down into the chair gently, then he said again:

"Of course you need something else."

"I need to go. Dinner starts at nine and Navid and I promised we'd be back by..."

"Navid will tell them you'll be late, so I ask again: what else can you give me?"

When I didn't say anything he leaned his head forward and looked me in the eyes, his face so close to mine. I could see so many wrinkles on his face. He was older than I had thought originally. Forty, maybe. His breath smelled like cigarettes and Crown Royal and I knew, then, that Navid would not return. Muscle put both hands on my shoulders, still looking at me from close.

"I know, I know," he said. "I know."

"What do you know?"

"How it's so cold. How it's not fair. How you're a kid and I'm not."

He was still looking into my eyes so I narrowed them as if still unsure. But I wasn't unsure. I was feigning something. I needed time to think.

"How this will go from pleasant to ugly if you don't give me what I want, starting with that wallet you had out a few minutes ago."

Mechanically I reached for my wallet, handed it to him. I did not look at him. He opened my wallet and withdrew my Driver's License.

"Persian," he said. "Very nice."

I still wouldn't look at him.

"And Visa. Even better. What's the pin?"

When I didn't respond he put his hands back on my shoulders and asked, gently, again:

"What's the pin?"

"8730."

"You're not lying to me?" he said. "Remember, I know where you live..."

"I don't live there anymore."

"I know where your family lives, then."

“9988.”

“That’s my boy. And a phone?”

I withdrew my phone and slapped it into Muscle’s massive palm.

“You want my coat too, or can keep that?”

“Smart,” he said. “You’ll be fine. Now go, and remember.” He tapped my Driver’s License against my shoulder and I understood I wasn’t to mention anything about him or Navid to the Shabadogis. Then I got up and left and never saw or heard about Muscle again.

After some time of walking I found Helmke. I picked a direction and headed that way. When I didn’t come across the bridge I changed direction, still high, anxious about the trees which seemed to move of their own volition overhead. The trees still hunching. Cars still not rumbling to D.C., or back to Baltimore, on the highway. Firewood still burning somewhere so I can smell it. Me still sad about it. I walked past driveways I didn’t recognize, mailboxes beat off their posts by pre-teens itching to rebel against something. I was about to turn around again when I saw the bridge.

I stopped walking on the bridge. Stopped there a third time. The moon was shining through the hunched trees and onto the snow resting quietly above the ice. Looking at the snow like that, seeing it glisten beneath the full and pale moon, the moon impartial to everything, I realized, then, that I wanted my wishes back. All of them. About my nose and Aaron Carter and the rest. I climbed down carefully onto the ice and stood there listening to it creak. Waited. My pennies would be deep beneath the ice, beneath the unfrozen water, beneath a decade and a half of sediment and all types of confusion and broken promises and broken dreams, and other *stuff* tossed flippantly from cars rushing someplace important on the highway. Stuff not forgotten. I would know which pennies were mine by their dates. I stood listening to the creaking ice and

inhaled the old smell of firewood. I was shivering. I was sure I would fall through, and was eager for it. I stood on the ice and waited—and waited.

SIMON

Steve had been sycophantic all night. But Sunil noted also how Steve's servile-to-downright-silly attempts at humor and flattery and impressiveness did not stem from a dark place of self-interest, as was the case with *all*—not almost all—of his Marxist friends at Cornell, where Sunil had just completed his first of eight undergraduate semesters, studying philosophy. Steve was unlike the Marxists. Sunil understood his flattery to be harmless—a common mark of the insecure—within thirty seconds of reacquainting himself with Steve, who, like Sunil, was *Back Home* for the holidays, and who, like Sunil, knew only one friend from his graduating high school class remaining in the small town from mid-December to early January. Steve had said, upon their almost standoffish reunion, “So I’ve been dabbling with different *perms* of postmodernism,” which comforted Sunil only after he had determined that “perms” functioned to signify the word “permutations,” and that one could construe Steve as weirdly honest in his absurd and sometimes sad attempts to impress. Sunil smiled at his shoes, knowing this about Steve, knowing him to be both sad and easy company, undemanding, like a slice of thin and unremarkable cheesecake.

Chiefly disciplined and an eager student, Sunil had not been home even once during his first semester at Cornell, not even for Thanksgiving, and trading “college” stories with Steve below the dim light of the town's only pizza parlor, two days before Christmas, Sunil realized that he did not, and never had, missed home while he was away from it.

“Let me ask you something,” Sunil said abruptly, interrupting Steve's explanation of Jean-Francois Lyotard and how his *incredulity toward metanarratives* might exclude certain

wholly faith-based epistemologies; Sunil had always known Steve to be an unreasonable Christian proselytizer.

“Fire away,” Steve said. He gestured his arms as if shooting a distant target with a large, bolt-action rifle. He laughed at himself, said “oh boy” quietly, then laughed again. He gestured rudely for the waitress.

“Do you ever, I don’t know, miss home while you’re away?” Sunil said. Brassy Christmas music droned through the thick air of the parlor. Something religious. Boys shot aliens with plastic guns at an arcade center in the corner. Through the window, Sunil saw that it had begun to snow.

“Of course I do,” Steve said, awkwardly emphasizing *do* so that the response sounded more like a question than an answer. Steve was wearing large, furry earmuffs, which made him more ridiculous. “Even when you’re away, home’s home. Always is.” Steve asked the waitress for two more Sierra Mists and he watched her walk all the way to the kitchen.

“I guess I’m wondering whether you feel guilty about all the time you spend *away* from home,” Sunil said, part curious, part in an attempt to divert Steve’s attention from the waitress, whom he was ogling, Sunil thought, too obviously and awkwardly.

“Still the sap,” Steve said, turning to Sunil. He laughed. “I think they’ve been hitting you a little too hard over the head with books out there in New York. Might could take some time down here to relax.” Steve gestured again for the waitress. Sunil sighed.

“How’s the old man?” Steve said.

Sunil nodded. Too vigorously, he thought. “Good. Contracting out in Salina. He’s good. Lots of time away from home.” He thought the response too mechanical. Steve was easy, good to exercise the *error* in trial-and-error, but others wouldn’t buy it. “You know, work’s

work,” Sunil added. He had decided before returning home to lie about his father, who had recently left his mother for a younger, prettier woman in Annapolis. He said it this way. He said, *Sunil, she’s younger and prettier and she lives in Annapolis. When you’re older you’ll understand.*

“Work is indeed work,” Steve said. “Work is work. Well said. Waitress! Waitress!” To Sunil’s consistent surprise, Steve was not being sarcastic. Sunil was reminded again of how grateful he was for the ease of such simple and predictable conversation.

After some time of mundane small talk the waitress returned to the table and Steve beckoned her closer to him with his long fingers. Steve wasn’t unattractive, Sunil noticed. This being one way he had changed since high school. In the dim light Steve whispered into the waitress’s small ear, and after a moment she pulled away, examined Steve, then nodded and bounced off to the kitchen. Steve was looking at Sunil, containing a dumb smile. He winked.

“Looks like it’s another early night for me,” Steve said. “Miss Pepperoni Pizza and I have a date.” Steve winked again, so slow it looked painful, said “oh boy” and laughed. Then he said: “You can walk to your parents’ from here, right?”

Sunil nodded.

“Right.” Steve stood up and put on his jacket. The music was still brassy and Christmas-themed. Steve gave Sunil a twenty-dollar bill. “Should cover your food and mine.” It didn’t.

“I’ll take care of the tip,” Steve said, grunting a manly grunt, then winked at Sunil a third time. He started toward the kitchen.

“Hey,” he said, pivoting. “How’s that old cat of yours? Was it Peter? Luke? John? You know I really can’t remember anymore.”

“Simon,” Sunil said, again too abruptly. He was surprised at his abruptness. “And he’s fine too.” This, too, was a lie, and this, too, surprised Sunil—that he would lie about his dead cat. Simon had been dead for seven years.

“Give him some good petting for me when you get home,” Steve said with a toothy and dumb smile, scanning Hound Dogs for the waitress, not making eye contact with Sunil. The music in the parlor had grown especially loud, though the lyrics were hazy and uncertain.

Sunil laughed at Steve’s syntax and said “sure thing.” He resolved to return a wink, finally, but he didn’t have the chance; Steve was already walking away.

Sunil had noticed Miss Bevelheimer on his way out of Hound Dogs. He had paid and even left a tip and had put on his coat when he saw her sitting at the bar alone. They locked eyes in the way that old acquaintances lock eyes, very awkwardly, then both squinted simultaneously and tilted their heads to one side as if to say, *I think I know you but who, from this distance, can be certain about old acquaintances?* The light in Hound Dogs hung low. The boys shooting at the arcade were gone.

Sunil approached the woman whom he thought to be Miss Bevelheimer. Miss Bevelheimer, his Kindergarten teacher fifteen years prior. Who was, at the time of Sunil’s studies with her, a young, newly minted elementary school teacher, who had taught Sunil how to count and read and, less directly, about what happens to little boys, and their bodies, when they see pretty girls. This is how Sunil’s mother had explained it. She said, *Sunil, this is what happens to little boys, and their bodies, when they see pretty girls. When you get bigger you’ll understand.*

“Miss Bevelheimer?” Sunil asked. Her cheekbones were high and her blouse hung low around her neck, so low Sunil could see most of her smooth and delicate shoulders. Because he couldn’t remember, Sunil couldn’t determine whether she looked better than she had in Kindergarten.

When the woman looked at him puzzled Sunil knew it wasn’t Miss Bevelheimer. He stayed and ordered a drink anyway, and when he had finished he remained, ordered a second drink, then a third, a fourth. A fifth. Vodka tonics. *I’m sorry I thought you were someone else.* No use bothering with flavor. He talked to the woman about mundane things about her dress her job those other trivialities whose sum total once vocalized amount to *now you know what it is I’m after in this place* and Sunil imagined what Steve was saying to the waitress or if Steve would risk opening his stupid mouth at all. *I’m Sunil pronounced Sah-Neil yes it’s a very Ethnic Sounding name how astute* forgetting the Marxists @ Cornell or what they’d say if they saw him abandon such ripe opportunity to berate this woman with Baker or Said or Adorno what’s the point it seems like everyone’s talking Adorno anymore *I’m chalk full of it to here with Adorno* Sunil told Miss Bevelheimer holding his right hand to the top of his head as if measuring himself and of course why not in salute? Brass is the sound of Christmas Sunil thought thinking himself a kind of Hound Dog distilled to Lone Wolf, Miss Bevelheimer gone, a Lone Wolf in a vast sea of brass and redgreen and Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall Come to Be the King of Israel! and *I think they’ve been hitting you a little too hard over the head with books out there in New York* he could, he thought, and he would walk to the house distilled from parents to mother and *How’s that old cat of yours? Peter? Luke? John? You know I really can’t remember anymore.*

He could not discern the distance or the time just that he was drunk. He was less drunk, he thought, on account of the walk. The sky was clear except for a bright moon suspended like a white bobber in the sky; it had stopped snowing. When he arrived at his mother's house, he noticed an old basketball resting on a pile of snow under the hoop. Invigorated by his arrival, he picked up the ball, shot at the hoop. He missed. His mother's wind chimes harmonized low A to D. Sunil remembered how his father didn't use words like "A" or "The."

The ball rolled under his mother's minivan, an old Mazda driven by her for *As Long As He Could Remember*. Sunil reached under the van but couldn't find the ball. He stood. He cleared the snow from off the hood of the van to reveal faint markings carved by him, into the paint, when he was much younger—ten, maybe, he thought, but he couldn't remember exactly when. He read his handiwork out loud: *Dad. Mom. Sunil. Matthew*. The yard was barren like yards can be in winter. Amid everything, Sunil had forgotten Matthew. How he was taking all this. He stumbled inside.

He was quiet, like always, but like always he woke his mother anyway. The lights from the Christmas tree were the only lights in the house to illuminate his mother and her long, felt nightgown, which, like the van, she had owned for *As Long As He Could Remember*.

"Mo?" she said. "Mo, where have you been all night I've missed you!"

"It's Sunil, mom. It's me, Sunil."

"I saw a special on Scotland I thought you'd like, Mo. Mo, do you remember in college when you'd talk about going to Scotland? Why don't we go someday? I miss when you talked like that."

She was having what Sunil and his brother once called “Mom Quakes,” although the increased frequency and magnitude of his mother’s so-called *Quakes* had caused the sons, since their father’s departure, to refrain from using the term.

“Mom it’s Sunil. It’s me. It’s not dad.”

“The cat, he bit me! He bit me today! Mo, you know how scared I am of him anymore? I want him out! I want him out no matter what the boys say! I have to check under the bed every night just to make sure he’s not lurking there waiting to bite me after I go to sleep. Oh I wish you could get home earlier.”

Sunil said nothing, approached his mother, placed his hand on her shoulder. He had forgotten his drunkenness but felt it now, leaning against his mother, attempting to wake her.

“Mom,” he said. “Mom mom mom,” he said and shook her. His mother was thoroughly asleep.

“Mo, I’m telling you I’m serious about this cat. He’s been nothing but trouble since the first day. What’d I tell you, not buying from a breeder? Didn’t I say this would happen? Didn’t I? Remind me what I told you. I’m serious. I’d like to be reminded.”

Sunil backed away from his mother.

“And don’t get me started about the boys. They don’t do anything. Seems like I’m the only one feeding the damn thing anymore. Might could let him die and be done with the whole thing.”

Sunil turned to leave, placed his hand on the knob. He would come back later.

“Mo!” his mother said. “Mo, don’t you leave me here alone again! Mo! Mo!”

Sunil shut the door behind him. He waited in the front yard by the car. His mother pounded on the door, screaming Mo. She kept screaming and pounding but she would not come outside.

Sunil leaned down into driveway to pick up rock through dusty snow. He rubbed it against another rock to test its sharpness, durability. It was so cold he thought he'd vomit. Once more he wiped snow from hood of van and placed his right hand below Matthew's name, looking blurrily @ letters. He worked quickly beneath pale moon, 1st carving S, his own 1st initial, then I, declaration of self; he wished he wasn't 1stborn. After I he paused to examine his work, to confirm it matched basic size of his original composition. He heard his mother screaming. He carved M. M is for Mo and Mom. M could also be for Matthew. He carved O & N. He stood back & tried to examine his work from afar. When he couldn't see his dead cat's name, he slumped down against car's tire, thoroughly drunk, & closed his eyes. Sunil felt cold. He wondered where his father met woman from Annapolis, or whether he himself would ever meet her. Whether he'd want to. He drew comfort from fact that he could return to these questions later, next day, after sun rose, when he would be older inevitably.

The Politics of Real Life

It's best classified as *scene*. *Story* implies subtext, emotional baggage, a sense of singularity which scene resists intrinsically. A photograph, for example, is *objective*, but to interpret a photograph a patently subjective process. These are the ambivalences of space and time.

Objectively, here's what happens:

A woman whom you've always already understood to embody a form called *Ammeh Joon* flies in from Iran. She is your father's aunt. Her form implies submission and placidity, and you always think of Nero's Christians marching onward toward the void. You're twelve and your brother is ten and you're both told Ammeh Joon will stay through Nowruz. On the first day, before Nowruz, Ammeh Joon hands you a white envelope on which she has written your full name sloppily in black ink. You're led to understand that this envelope is, or conceals, a gift. Your brother receives one too. Per Ammeh Joon's request you tear open the envelopes in front of her at the same time. Your envelope conceals a fifty-dollar bill; your brother's conceals a twenty. When Ammeh Joon leaves, after Nowruz, you and your brother ask your father about the discrepancy, to which he responds in a manner befitting whatever impulse your prose seeks to navigate at the moment and place of its composition.

Often you linger with the presidents. Grant looks through you and past Washington's whitewash to a distant battlefield where he feels *at home*. Jackson pontificates about land. Singularity emerges through the polyvalence of politics, but you don't buy it right away. It concerns duplicity, celebrates it vis-à-vis a tenuous link to race. In 1814, for example, the British burned the White House brown. If a subtext emerges it's in that kind of metaphor. You're white on the outside, you think. But on the inside. Well who knows?

When estrangement frames scene story happens. You call this the *retroactive* iteration. Usually, even, estrangement comes *through* scene, so you might more aptly call this the *two scenes* approach, where you pack the first with emotional urgency and you allow the second to exist—merely exist—after it. It's important to undo chronology. It won't work otherwise. Patriarchal dis/connection upstages cultural modes, but there exists some interplay at the conclusion, if only vaguely. You end with a lengthy cumulative sentence which accrues emotional baggage as it wends unpredictably toward the void of an empty page.

In the final iteration you have made your father a photographer. This to satisfy your reader's desire for (1) strong characterization and (2) the politics of real life, which one—though not you—might label more acutely *the politics of reticence*. In this iteration you and your brother walk to UDF on the corner of Hamilton and Warner—where you used to play *Swords* with the neighborhood kids—and, there, you each exchange your bills for some sugary drinks and a handful of smaller bills which the cashier calls *change*. Push through your impulse to ruminate on the nature of change. Ammeh Joon's bills prove more interesting. In the till, after you've relinquished them, they become your father's photographs. It's unreal, but don't explain this transfiguration. You're too near the end.

The bills are photos of dead leaders, obviously, of Grant and Jackson—but they are of Lincoln and the Shah and Khomeini too. They are unbiased. They are of a family trip to Yellowstone in the summer of 1998, before your father stopped going on family trips. They are those photos of the Tetons whose magnificence compelled your father to proclaim himself the greatest rival of Ansel Adams ever to have lived. To proclaim himself the greatest rival. They are of Ammeh Joon, or your father's college studio now gathering dust in Columbus. They are of Persepolis.

They are of two brothers cutting poison ivy with plastic scissors so as to carve a path through the woods. They are those boys playing *Swords*. Those boys waiting patiently at Abdee's while their father snorts coke in the back room. Those boys posing dumbly through the white dust of an old Hasselblad, clutching their cash, displaying it proudly, laughing at the man they call their father because he told them once, in a whisper, so urgently, that the only way to feign a smile is to laugh.

Missed Connection

I saw you sitting on a pile of dead things. You were just looking. *Looking for what?* I'd like to know. But I didn't ask because you don't ask someone why they're sitting on a pile of dead things, or what they look at when they do, these particulars being shrouded as a result of their own internal logic, and belonging, in this instance, to your alabaster eyes—a pair of bright, beautiful dead things. When you see someone sitting on a pile of dead thing, you just have to look back at them with eyes that don't water, which is what I did, mechanically, when I saw you last weekend sitting on a pile of dead things.

This was not the first time I glimpsed you sitting on a pile of dead things. When you roped me up, roped me out, roped me in, you were sitting on a pile of dead things. When you said, *I could take you all night long*, you were sitting on a pile of dead things. When you said, *The shadows that you're seeing might be silhouettes—yes!—even then!—*you were sitting on a pile of dead things.

Everything is a joke. But not the piles of dead things. Your love was a joke, a joke when you promised it, like all promises, like all loves, and lovers. A promise is a joke but not a dead thing. You must locate the differences between jokes and promises and dead things. You must say: *this is a joke, this is a promise, this is a dead thing which, when organized geographically with other dead things, forms a pile of dead things*. You must not allow yourself to love, or to talk very often, or to make promises. You must resolve instead that when you make the mistake of falling in love, or making promises, or chipping your teeth because desire is governed by the young and reticent—you must resolve in these instances to find dead things, to pile them, and to

sit on your pile like a mother chicken who knows, somehow, that her chicks are dead inside their shells.

You are dead inside your shell. I am dead inside your shell. The notion—no!—the fact of our estrangement is dead or dying inside your shell. I am self-aware inside your shell. I say my trochaic name from inside your shell: I say Piper!

I don't believe it.

I say: Piper Piper Piper Piper Piper!

When I am done with this saying of my name, this purging of trochee, this stuff which has overreached—when I have run out of things to say, memories to excavate, people to name after a first love—when I have shifted the you from me to you and back—it is at this juncture that I sit too on a pile of dead things, unmaking promises inside your shell.

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