

Title: *Other Half*

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Big cities are lost and dissolving...and badly beset men live in them, knowing nothing of the divine earth, which outside stands vigil and breathes.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, from *Book of Hours*

I am crying for more and more disasters, for bigger calamities, for grander failures. I want the whole world to be out of whack, I want everyone to scratch himself to death.

—Henry Miller

We are merely moving shadows, and all our busy rushing ends in nothing.

—Psalm 39:6

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.

—George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

Only the city is real.

—Lawrence Durrell, *Justine*

Let there be night.

The Fourth paralyzed traffic, my cab at the ass-end of an unmoving vehicular herd, the flanking streets an arterial clog of men and women and children. “I’ll get off here,” I said, the driver laughing, as if I’d said something dirty. Hustlers hawked blinking accouterments: light-emitting diodes just so much flashy finery. The sky afire with ersatz firebolt and thunderclap, screaming the indivisible fusion of power and gunpowder. Every explosion an exclamation mark end-stopping empire’s death sentence. Dandelion globe-like affairs. Glittery spermatozoa-like explosions. Waterfalling stars. Weeping willow-like confectioneries. The infantilized raised their viewfinders, their self-reflexive embeddings as ephemeral as the smoke in their eyes, the blackened bits falling from the sky, the greasy stink of the food-trucks.

Walking away from the bursting bombs, all the patriotic paraphernalia—an Independence Day MADE IN CHINA—I saw the light show reflected on the faces of the souls I passed, their expressions changing with every explosion, every crackling colorful spray, as if I were looking behind myself in a movie theater, watching the audience watching, light and shadow distorting their faces, exaggerating certain features, obscuring others. Ghostly disturbances: solitaires, couples, threesomes, legions emerged from nowhere, no-when, hints and missing persons meeting at this illuminated nexus. The fanfare, supposedly celebratory, supposedly joyous, was a rebuke, to believe, to be happy—to forget, in other words, forget the pain and loss and grief that make up a life. Criminals all, and I couldn’t tell the persons of interest from the known associates.

My name is Ernesto Gonzalez. Call me Ergo, everyone else does. My body is brown, like everyone else living and dying in the Anthropocene, my skin’s shade, in my case, roasted sesame seed; and my body is male and it is slim, lanky, even; and I have my hair, all of it, and I keep it severely cropped, the texture like superfine sandpaper grit. I am not “visibly” anything, that is, I’m often confused for being from somewhere else, all of which still means that for many others I’m

still someone, no, some *thing* distinctly other. I have a face that compels people to ask me if I'm okay. Resting sad face, I guess. My parents are from "la Isla," as my father would refer to it. I was named after him. Friends and family called him Ern. He loved the island as you love a dream, an idyll verdant with fruit you could pluck from a tree. It broke his heart to see how "the Empire," as he called it, allowed it to rot, to go bankrupt, to devolve into chaos, a chaos that ripped the island apart, thousands fleeing the island for the mainland, where they were blamed for all kinds of problems. How to kill an island: Control imports and exports. Drain its brain. Allow little to no representation. Tax it to death. Etcetera. Hurricane U.S.A., in other words, which has pummeled Puerto Rico for over a hundred years.

Here, in this city of the damned, I find myself, lost among the lost, my apartment no refuge but maybe a fortress, everything sleek, charged, machined, aerodynamic, everything coalescing into a metallic beast about to take flight, everything connected, safe in an electronic cloud, a data fog of innumerable zeroes and ones aggregating into something you might call safety, security, ease, and comfort. Reified poetics of the pressurized cabin. An expensive monument to fear.

I scrolled through my recent calls, quickly inventoried the names, guessed their likely messages: Silvio Play calling from Germany, offering tales of debauchery from his latest tour. Another of Alison Wonderland's elliptical updates on her "work-in-digress," as she called it. A conference voicemail from the Elliotts, the producing, writing, directing, and starring team of *Everyone Is Gay*. A comedic rant from Victorioso, performance artist extraordinaire. Lastly, there were messages from A-Z: a certain Angelica, a woman I was "seeing," and a certain Zenith, a woman I was also "seeing." Sandwiched between them, a certain Geeta, another woman I was "seeing," who wouldn't have sex with me, though, until I promised "exclusivity," but who allowed me, as she'd say, to "diddle her girlie bits." The comparison to food is not lost on me, but I made it anyway, which should tell you something. On the question of seeing and being seen, you could

say each of us was seeing what they wanted to see. You could say we were engaged in mutual and consensual hypnosis. You could say our diminishing frames of reference resulted in decreased visibility of the self and the other, the I and Thou. You could say we were losing ourselves in each other. You could say I was the flaming boulder and they its respective crash site. Neither of my sons had called. “You have memories to look back on today,” my machine, my ancillary consciousness—such as it is—said. Max Morales posted: “There ought to be daily burnings of the American flag, or annual ones at the very least.” “Talk about fireworks!” Emily Baum commented. Wonderland posted: “I’m near Coney Island Beach, where, having yawed toward the maw—the famed and still unrepaired sinkhole—a short while ago, I saw people stuff hot dogs into their mouths as quickly as they could, the eaters competing against each other to see who could eat the most of said hot dogs, a vulgar, gluttonous display that strikes me as quintessentially American (the gristle, fat, and offal-based ‘food’-product processed and shaped into a pink phallus itself a micro-version of America) as does my watching the disgusting event in complete horror and with a kind of hyper-critical relish (no pun intended!). Just chanced upon the nearby vendor with this oddly appropriate sign.” The appended photo showed a hot dog stand with a banner above it reading: “YOU CAN’T SPELL SAUSAGE WITHOUT USA.”

And so it was critical to find the perfect piece for my exit. Or, should I say entrance?

## **07.05**

Weather report as bloodsport. They had predicted a sixty percent “above-normal” hurricane season, but, aside from several minor storms, things in the Atlantic had been pretty quiet. I loved that phrase “pretty quiet.” Almost redundant, in a way, at least until you recalled all those ugly quiets. I spent the morning returning every call. My work was “cut out” for me: I had all the necessary fragments, and now I had to seam it all together—“togethering,” this is what I did. The

night before, V posted a video of himself pouring lighter fluid on an American flag and setting it on fire. All you could see of him were his hands and arms but you could hear him say, “My kind of fireworks.” “No, it isn’t,” he’d said to *The New York Times*, who’d asked if the video was part of his ongoing *America* series. “Call it ‘Spontaneous Combustion!’” he’d gone on to say.

The doorbell rang, intoned, really, a call to prayer, and it could only have been Bree, and it was, her wide smile taking over her face, wrinkles winching together, its spread something like wood grain, her mouth a knot in its center. “Going to let me in, Ergo?” she said, walking past me before I could stupidly say, “Thought you’d never ask.” She was dressed in her usual dingy browns, “earth tones,” she called them, whatever brightness in the colors long bleached out by the unrelenting sun, under which she’d usually spent hours and hours. Close observers would notice the dirty fingernails, the scuffed-up boots, the “white” weathered hands: telltale signs of the gardener. “You haven’t watered the plants!” she said, picking up the metal jug beneath the assorted pots on the living room’s windowsill.

Bree was the only person who knew about the Project: the search for the perfect song to live within, for eternity, imaginary place that it is. The idea was inspired by *After Life*, a Japanese film not to be confused with the middling American movie of the same name. “Premature-retirement folly,” Bree had said, referring to said Project. She never wanted to talk about it but I’d usually talk about it anyway. “You have to live in the moment,” she’d say. “The future is imaginary, largely illusory.” “Now’s the time, eh?” I’d say, and then whistle Bird’s tune, the circumstances of the genius’s death—as they invariably did whenever I thought of him—coming to mind.

But you are in the present only in passing.

It would be only a short while before Bree would ask if I’d spoken to my sons, and by “spoken to” she’d mean “told,” the answer, like so many things, “written all over my face,” as the

tired expression goes, but in any case I was easy to read. “So?” she said. “I’m the one that’s gonna die—” “Stop,” she said, her hands waving me away. “Hendrix,” I said. “I know.” Scanning me top to bottom, she sighed, saying, “You’re still young, your whole life ahead of you.” “I know,” I said. “Middle-age is a life half-lived.”

I caught Bree up on my trip from one turbulent conurbation to another, on what the specialist in Chicago had said, which was no different from what the doctor here had told me: fornication. The specialist had ruled out pesticide exposure, mercury poisoning, syphilis, and shingles. “Good to know what it isn’t,” Bree said. “It is what it isn’t,” I said, nodding, and told her the doctor hadn’t ruled out skin cancer or diabetic neuropathy. I’d tried reading the doctor’s “white,” freckled face, read past her practiced indomitability, to find the doubt, the fear she wanted, needed, to keep hidden, but I couldn’t find it. She was good, expert at hiding what she thought, but this didn’t mean it, thoughts of the worst, wasn’t there.

So they would continue: the itches—unscratchable ones I couldn’t stop scratching—would persist. Intertwining lines were “tattooed” all over my arms: an epigraphy of the body: inscripture? I’d been the poster child for medical care avoidance but endless scrolling through search results and text-volleying—talk, reply, talk, reply, etc.—with chatbot doctors had only made things worse. “You have to see somebody,” an ex had said. “I’m seeing you,” I’d said. The topical cream and weaponized antihistamines would continue to give me temporary relief, isolate the itches, perhaps keep them from spreading all over my body. No side-effects, yet, but life is a side-effect of life. There was also the question of whether the sickness would turn into something far worse, whether it would further degrade and degrade me. “We’ll have to keep an eye on it,” my “black” doctor here had said, her use of the royal “we” doing little to assuage my worry, little to make me feel less alone, a state I’d previously always felt more than comfortable in. Strength in numbers? Tell that to the ninety-nine percent!

I told Bree I'd thought today was yesterday, which had made me feel both an odd sense of nostalgia and that, for a moment, I'd been ahead of my time, if only by a day. Night silence weighing on me, I keyed up "Air on a G String," a song, a fragment of a composition, okay. It can still bring me to tears, especially if I focus on the lower register, hold onto it, not exactly following it but *allowing* it, to take over, have its way with me, whereupon the melodic lines, the ascensions and descensions, its various overlappings and intertwinings, will slice and slice away until I weep. It's the perfect piece to be looped, put on "infinite repeat." Music can be a kind of thermal conductor, enacting its own physics as it transfers energy from a hotter body to a colder one, serving also as a kind of physic: a cathartic unlike any other.

Everything happens for a reason for no reason.

"Hey, stranger," Angelica's text read. "Stranger than nonfiction," I responded. "When will I see you again?" she said. "Whenever you like." "Up to me?" "Up to you." "Up to no good?" she said. "And no god," I said. Semicolon and close parenthesis from her. She was "swamped with work," so we'd meet in a few days. Logistics for meeting followed. I scrolled through some status updates. Ruth Larsen posted a picture of a dirty, bloodied boy or girl, hard to tell, but definitely a refugee. "So! Many! Feels!" she wrote. "The fuck does that even mean?" read the first comment. "Millennials making everything about them," read the next. It got worse from there. Digital bloodbath, in other words. Molly Ringworm reminisced about an archaic social media site modeled on the six degrees of separation concept. "My self is still out there," she posted. "And I want her back." "Kind of scared to share I'm dating again," Greg Kim posted. This last post made me happy. Greg's husband had died a few years ago and I knew how hard it was to put yourself "out there" again, especially if you were using an app, the process almost literalizing the term "meat market," reduced intimacy to shopping, at best, or a videogame, at worst. Cecil posted: "Wouldn't it be

great if websites that use ‘cookies to ensure you get the best experience’ used actual cookies?” “Yes, but chocolate chip,” Emily commented. “You can have your cookie and eat it, too!” Cecil replied. I preferred oatmeal raisin.

I walked to the park, the distance itself a hike. It was something I did. Walk, walk, walk, to clear my head, I’d always say, say to myself. But what does that mean exactly? How do you do that anyway? It’s not like you can erase what’s on your mind. Psychogeographical letdown grumpily trudging along, I was approached by a kufi-crowned man, tall, mahogany, all forehead and outcropping limbs. “Need a map?” he said. Passing him, I shook my head, and he said, “What’s your name? Where you from?” Still walking, my back, at this point, “facing” him, I said, “I’m nobody from nowhere,” whereupon he immediately responded, “I love you.” I laughed, and he laughed, the interaction reminding me to send Wonderland an editor’s solicitation to “tell a love story in six words.” Taking out my machine, I texted her. “Love at first flight makes lovebirds,” she texted back, almost instantaneously. “That was fast,” I responded. “Used to winging it,” she texted. Semi-colon and close parenthesis from me.

Sitting on a bench, I looked at the pond, the murky muck of it, watched the ducks, the swans, those foul fowl. A man, entrails gray, sat on the bench beside me, his smell more metallic than merely muskily perspirant. He said something about shit smeared on the ground. It looked like someone had stepped in the mess and then dragged their foot for about a foot. “Disgusting,” he said. I grunted in reply. Moments later, I saw him stand and walk toward a garbage can from which he grabbed a plastic cup. He walked over to the pond and dipped the cup into it. Returning, he poured the water onto the smear, turning it into a brown soup. Dissatisfied, he walked back and forth from the pond to the soup, pouring water on the mess, diluting it until what was there was washed away. Satisfied, he walked away. Away, away, always away. A text from V: “All the world is staged.”

“Call me V,” Victorioso had said when I first met him. “V for victory?” I’d said. “No, V for *me!*” he’d responded. I wasn’t sure if it was a joke or not but his Wikipedia page listed his full name as “Victorioso Francisco Isidoro Luis García Ramírez de Arroyo y Velázquez.” “Is that your baptismal name?” I once asked V, thinking of Picasso, who had been baptized as Pablo Diego José Francisco de Paula Juan Nepomuceno María de los Remedios Cipriano de la Santísima Trinidad Ruiz y Picasso. “Yes, but baptism by fire!” V answered. He had been wearing a t-shirt with the Puerto Rican flag on it, its red, white, and blue replaced by the Pan African red, black, and green. I hadn’t known what to make of it. “All Puerto Ricans are African,” he’d said, answering my face.

Walking back to the apartment, I heard some fireworks fizzle and fart, the street a museum of discards: a baseball cap here, a newspaper there, bottles and cans and cigarette butts everywhere, vestiges of last night’s revels, yes, but something darker, too, ominous signs, like blood in urine, mucus in stool. I’ve always wondered about people who set off fireworks the day after the fourth. Do they deliberately keep a bunch of bottle rockets, M-80s, Lady Fingers, and whatnot stashed away to set off the day after? Their own private celebration of freedom a last effort at independence? Spray-painted on a wall, in block letters: “WE’RE FUCKED.” Okay, tell me something I don’t know! Two lumberjack-looking twenty-somethings approached. “Ran out of beard oil,” one of them, a gangly “white” man, said. “Sucks,” the other one—“biracial,” half “black” and half “white,” from the looks of it—said. “Big time,” the “white” one said. I liked that phrase, “big time,” what it suggested, the unassailability of seconds turning to minutes turning to hours, etcetera, the unceasing march of time toward...toward what? What was there was washed away. It is what it isn’t. It was what it wasn’t. Away, a way.

Later, before dozing off, I scratched my arms until I unwittingly drew blood. “Need to take care of myself,” I said aloud, abruptly stopping. “Somebody has to.” I laughed. I drowsed. And ugly quiet engulfed me.

You come upon a red-tailed hawk in the park pecking away at something in the grass thirty or so feet away from you. A throng of “black” men—Jamaicans, you guess from the flags on their jerseys—are watching, too, several inching toward it the same way you are. And you’re arrested by feelings of lack, by the absurdity of *feeling* a lack, somehow touching a missing something, one big nothing. A crazed calliope sings in the air: other birds whistling warnings. A smaller bird—a swallow?—periodically swoops past the raptor, pestering it, the bigger bird hardly taking notice. You would think the predator’s presence would make this a no-fly zone. Was the swallow risking everything to protect its young? You marvel at the hawk’s size, its focus, its regality. No aerial display here, but its movements are no less impressive. And you laugh at the way the hawk hops on the ground, nonetheless backing away when it approaches. You think about the hawk thinking, about the way it thinks, how it resides in a zone of cold logic, where image and meaning are fixed ideas, solid, everything strictly denotative, with no room for connotation or ambiguity. The hawk hardly registers your creeping around it, though. Gray feathery tufts pock the ground, bits of bone, fleshy globs, organic orts sparkling like garnets. You imagine the bird rushing up into the air, swooping down, slashing you like a sickle, its talons clenching onto your left shoulder as its beak tears into your neck, severing your spinal column. And you remember another time, where you chanced upon other birdwatchers, their telescope aimed at a massive, metallic globe, where another hawk—a mother this time—circled around her children nestled within the orb’s stainless steel network. Your older son, a toddling ball of energy, was with you, and he wanted to see the birds,

too, and you lifted him up to the lens, whereupon he instantly crowed, saying the birds were “Too close, too close!” Something solidifies then dissolves. Time dilates, bends, reprises.

## 07.06

I was the itch’s bitch. I awoke to a world of pain, *my* world of pain. All life is suffering, etcetera. Buddha-lite speak. Ignoble lies. Perhaps I was trivializing things. Was I in pain or *a* pain? I scratched my arms as if there were something buried beneath it, the dermal layers like dirt under which some darkling thing lived. A worm, a slug. Noxious gas?

I had toyed with the idea the itch was “merely” psychosomatic, had even entertained the idea it was somehow connected to my ideas about “race,” ideas I’d cobbled together from a variety of sources, V and Wonderland among them. Du Bois’s “badge,” etc. Hall’s “floating signifier.” Beneath the skin is the schema, no, strata. Beneath the trauma is the transformation. Behold the episteme in the ecumene! That is, I was playing with words, which should tell you something. But what were ideas about “race” but discursive play with texts, texts without text, readable only in the sense of what we read into them. Worse, a pathological obsession with surfaces.

I thought of calling Sarah, my ex: the first woman I’d dated months after my wife died, the woman I shouldn’t have dated, the woman who shouldn’t have dated me. Calling her was a stupid idea. I had no shortage of them. I was hungry but I couldn’t get myself to eat—maybe the meds were killing my appetite. Maybe it was just my state of mind. State, okay, but one in perpetual overthrow. Dragging on some clothes, I lumbered outside to the corner store, where I buy my nicotine-substitute. On the corner, a stocky Eastern European—his swollen face pocked with red blotches—shoved his way past the latest wave of mad-at-the-worlders. A tiny, nervous woman, with faded-to-seaweed green tattoos snaking her otherwise pasty limbs, crossed the street with her terribly messy terrier-mix, a plastic Elizabethan collar ringing its neck, its pink tongue a wilted

petal. Overheard: “‘Bout to put a pipe to his ass.” A text from V: “Violence is the voice of duplicity,” a message so apt I looked around to see if he was hovering around, his lanky, leather-clad frame, his afro’s springy helixes mushrooming out, the grand gestalt of him making him easy to spot. “¿Qué es eso, un astro?” my late grandfather had said to my father after first seeing his afro. Made V an easy target, too, which reminded me of *Headshots*, one of V’s earliest installations, where he replaced the nondescript heads of shadow targets with the faces of the hundreds of “black” men and women who’d been murdered by cops in the previous year. Mounted in a huge warehouse, the portraits had been arranged and hung horizontally in multiple rows, like a Victorian-era gallery, each of the portraits perforated with bullet holes, each one set within an ornate, gilded frame, “haloes,” as V called them. Greg was dating again, yes, which was a good thing. It was three years since Barry, his husband, had died. He deserved to be happy. Who didn’t? Some people were appalled at his choice. I just thought of him, the boyfriend, as a transitional object. Yes, Greg was dating a doll. But so what? Remember the study some years ago that showed that four in ten adults still sleep with a Teddy Bear? “Everything is new under the sun,” I posted on Play’s portals. “Good one!” Play texted. And the “Likes” poured in. If only his followers knew that Play had outsourced his media “presence,” something most celebrities did anyway. “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!” Then again, they’d probably love it, see it as yet another play on surfaces and layers, filters and screens—humbug as new drug.

I passed the naked yoga studio, the artisanal mustard shop, the hot yoga studio, the “speakeasy” boasting “bespoke beverage programming”; the Snowga studio, where local “animals strike curious poses” in freezing temperatures; the microbrews bar, where “Broga Night: Beer and Yoga for Dudes” was a big draw; and the pre-school for adults, a “safe space” for story time, finger-painting, napping, and rounds of Duck, Duck, Goose. The bodega, appropriately enough, was on the corner. Actually, it wasn’t a bodega but a simulacrum of one. Red and yellow, plastic

and aluminum awning? Check. Mustachioed Dominican clerk? Check. Plastic cuboidal shelves full of gum and peppermints and gobstoppers and lollipops and whatnot? Check. Silky cats silently slinking through cramped aisles? Check. Urban planning as carefully controlled nostalgia.

The local superhero stood at the store's entrance. Garbed in his usual attire—sky-blue body-length tights spangled with white stars, and red gloves and boots, a glittery red cape draped behind him—he stared ahead, through his Luchador-like mask, slowly moving his head from side-to-side. He nodded at me as I walked past him. “Stay strong,” he said, slowly but no less urgently. There was a wintry vacancy in his eyes. Made me angry. No, I made myself angry, thinking about what had likely produced him: a steady diet of decades of assembly-line movies, capitalist claptrap, crap like the insufferable *Infinity Saga*, like the innumerable reboots of Superman and Batman and Spiderman. I used to read comics, anything with fallible nobodies who saved the world from what, in hindsight, were the harebrained schemes of an idiotic and easily foiled arch-nemesis. Comics were smarter these days, more sophisticated, but so much good it did me now. Forget about the garbage movies, though, the empty dream factory, the blockbuster schlock, cinematic chintz! Rage swept over me, hate in waves, the superhero's standing there a gross reminder of what I trafficked in: engineered personas, and petty dreams, wet with desire. With his global gut and post-industrial hunch, the superhero was probably in his forties. I used to be amused by his antics, which he performed with a seriousness only a child could produce. Yes, he was childlike, floating along in whimsy. So what the fuck was wrong with me? Overheard: “And I was trying to be nice today.”

I smiled for the store's camera. The news, or what passed for it, was on a screen behind the counter, a talking-head saying something about a bomb at a train station. They were calling it an IED; and I marveled at the term, what it suggested about improvisation, how dangerous it could be, ought to be, maybe. Leaving the store, already opening a pack of nicotine gum I'd just purchased,

I glanced over at the “superhero,” nodded again. “Pay attention,” he said. “Good advice,” I said, heading back to the apartment.

Chewing the gum, reveling in my apartment’s circumambient noise, I emptied my inbox, made some calls. V had signed off saying, “I fear, therefore I’m American,” his scratchy laughter something like a death-rasp. I sat down to watch the news, which was one of the few things that made me feel something, cut through the numbness intermittently descending on me throughout the day. Rage and fear. The screen screamed images of unending war. Targeted killings. Indefinite detentions. Mass shootings. I turned it off, but images and sounds from years past haunted me: the Dodge Challenger inching, reversing, then accelerating into a crowd of protestors; the video of a father of four, toppled over by cops, throat vise-gripped in an illegal choke-hold, crying out I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe; the cop brazenly asphyxiating a man with his knee; all the killings of unarmed “black” people gunned down by the police; nine “black” believers gunned down by a psychopath; the torching of “black” churches, each building a giant KKK-inspired burning cross, a bonfire of hatred. Yes, arm teachers; and while you’re at it, arm pastors and churchgoers, too, and movie theater, hotel, and casino personnel, and all their patrons, and schoolchildren, from daycare to elementary through high school. Oh, and anyone who lives in a private home, since the vast majority of mass shootings take place there.

My stomach was tight with, what, fear, dread, sadness? I’d never felt so paralyzed before. I’d never cared much. What was it? The illness?

You can’t leave the past in the past; it can’t be buried, it always rises from the mud, emerges like the monster it is. History is a catalogue of violence, and any attempt at making sense of violence, to make it cohere into even a semblance of something rising above mere narrative,

something resembling objective truth, would be an act of magic, that is, of resurrection, of bringing the dead back to life.

“Let Us Go into the House of the Lord” played. Twenty-one minutes of body and soul. It is the supreme expression of Pharoah Sanders’s approach, featuring extended multiphonic caterwaul undergirded by complex, interweaving polyrhythms. Listening to it, I feel immediately suspended, floating. Listening to it, I keep thinking I don’t have time. But no, it’s not that I don’t have time. I *can’t* have it, so, yes, I don’t have time, it has *me*.

Later, I walked around the park, walked for hours. I saw a “white” woman, all angles, twirling around, her arms in the air, her eyes closed, her ruined hair hanging like straw. I thought of cheering her on as she danced but I didn’t want to interrupt. I saw two “white” kids, a boy and a girl, playing soccer with what looked like their grandparents but in this neighborhood, with all the career-driven sociopaths having their fertility drug-produced births well into their forties and fifties, you could never really say for sure. The grandfather, or father, took possession of the ball then kicked it through the goal and they all screamed and laughed. I’d been ignoring the various notification beeps all afternoon, eventually just muting my machine, but I finally sat on a bench and responded to the various texts and emails. “Starting to feel like we’re in a movie,” Zenith texted. “Who’s playing you?” I wrote. “The French woman who’s in everything,” she responded, immediately. “Was in a movie with the guy in that chartbusting pirate series.” “The actor who’s forever young,” I wrote back. “Like the man who never ages while his portrait turns decrepit.” We liked to do this: sometimes avoid calling things by their proper names. “How about you?” she texted. “The guy who made his mark as a supporting actor,” I responded. “He emerged as a lead. But he’s dead, now. Overdosed.” “So, who?” she wrote. “The British guy. The one who played the evil sorcerer in all those movies.” “You-Know-Who?” “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.” She laughed and I

laughed. “Let’s have dessert,” she wrote. “Crème brûlée?” “Yes,” she responded. “I like the hard exterior and the soft inside. Not a metaphor.” We set up logistics, signed off. “Only you can see this unless you share it,” my machine asserted. Arash Farrokhzad posted about the fatigue he was feeling: “ALL BECAUSE OF A FUCKING TICK!!!” he posted, all-caps his. “Just found out my mother had a seizure and her partner is taking her to the hospital,” Stella Estrella posted. Requisite sympathy followed. “Mercury? It’s Earth that’s in retrograde!” Max posted. No, I thought. Memory’s in retrograde.

The rigmarole, the raw material that makes up daily life, persists, through terror, through anguish, through heartache, through every uncertainty. Buses and trains make their stops. Cashiers scan and bag your snacks. Parents drop children off at school, give buoyant encouragements, offer farewells: hugs, kisses, or high-fives. Dogs are walked. Cats are fed. Our daily bread. Death is all around, but the awareness of it is muted, obliterated by all the comings and goings. This surrendering to the day-to-day, this ignoring of the various pains, is what constitutes sanity. I don’t think about death, therefore I’m sane. You only die once. Shortly after I unmuted my machine, a text from V: “All narrators are unreliable.” He didn’t want me to respond. I hoped he was collecting these aphorisms, would present or perform them in some way, like that artist who, years ago, had put clever messages on the movie theater marquees on Forty-Second Street. A “white” woman shoved her way past me. I can’t tell you how many times a person, usually a “white” person, usually a “white” woman, shoved their way past me, stepped on my foot, etc., some of them even smilingly and disingenuously saying “Sorry!” after they’ve shoved their way past me, stepped on my foot, etc. There is an allegory in this.

Back at the apartment, I searched for more news about the subway bomb. Apparently, taking it apart, the Bomb Squad discovered it had all the materials necessary for an explosive except the explosive. Arming switch. Digital clock circuit board. Spaghetti mess of wires. No

bomb, though. “All Guts and No Gory,” the local tabloid headline tastelessly announced. Per my machine’s request, I “enabled” my “location settings,” the signal beaming thousands and thousands of miles up, piercing through the atmosphere and all the other spheres and respective in-between pauses, the whizzbang wizardry bursting into outer space, where an orbiting satellite received it, immediately pinpointing the exact dot where I was standing—and I still felt lost. News flashed about another sinkhole appearing on one of the city’s streets. Bizarre footage of a “black” woman sunk in asphalt, the bottom half of her body in the waist-wide hole. ““No ambulance!”” she’d cried. ““You know how expensive that is?””

Middling through your forties, you take your sons, one about seven, the other ten, to the Garden. The “white” tour guide, all spindly limbs, is waiting under a tree. Her hair’s dyed a toxic orange, and she’s chatty. “I’m a mutt,” she says, referring to her Italian-Irish heritage. You feed her questions to keep her talking. She’s a retired science teacher, volunteering now at some of her favorite places, namely, the library and the Garden. A few others join you: a dowdy *All About Eve* introvert; another father, a Japanese man, maybe, with a strollered toddler; a “white” German couple, man and woman, their glowing smiles slightly offsetting their military miens. She’s a good guide, peppering her talk with tidbits from the Garden’s history, expertly identifying the various plants, flowers, and trees, striking a mournful note around trees felled by the superstorm that wreaked havoc on the garden the year before. You listen attentively, but it isn’t until you arrive at the Japanese garden that you awaken from your default mode of ironic detachment. According to her, there are five elements necessary to the construction of a Japanese garden: Earth, Light, Air, Sound, and “Borrowed Scenery.” Control, unity, and continuity—this was perfection. Every element working together to create a kind of continuum. Later, you watch a Japanese film, feeling stupid, but doing it anyway, your experience in the garden trumping any feelings you might be

having, of exoticization, of romanticization—which of the two was worse you didn't want to even speculate about, you were already beating up yourself more than you deserved, anyone deserved. The film, known as *Wonderful Life* in Japan but changed to *After Life* for Americans for obvious reasons, rips you apart, the film's whimsy-tinged melancholy mirroring your general mood.

## 07.07

Current events is a daymare from which I am trying to escape. Call me Stephen Dedalus Redux. I thought of myself as an interiorized outsider, at least until I reflected on the ones truly deserving of that name—the dispossessed, the tortured, the illegally imprisoned, the illegally deported, the illegally executed, the stateless. And what state was I in, eying myself in my surroundings?

The morning news told the story of a young commuter who'd been beaten up by a police officer after he'd used his plastic magnetic card to swipe another commuter through the turnstile. The "white" officer claimed the "black" man had sold a fare to the other person—a "white" woman—an act that was apparently illegal. In any case, the officer alleged the man had tried to attack him as he was writing out the summons. Cellphone video captured by a "white" bystander revealed a different story. The footage was horrifying, showing the officer body-slammng the man to the ground. It looked very much like a much-rehearsed so-called professional wrestling routine, except that in this instance instead of swiftly and magically recovering after being pummeled, the victim simply remained on the floor unconscious. In America, a "black" life is matter, that is, the life of the so-called other is matter, but only primarily in the sense of the question what's the matter, that is, it is so-called law and order's reason for distress, its primary problem. Among this infernal country's pathologies is that we are but skin, that is, our body-wide dermal enclosure is what defines us, which flies in the face of science, of course. Skin accounts for only sixteen percent of a person's body weight, weighing in at about twenty pounds on average. Whatever the

percentage, it hardly defines us, has any bearing on who we actually are. But who are we? Dust, ash, in the making, the unmaking.

My machine sounded. It was my mother, stepmother, actually, but the only mother I really ever had. “Hello, hello!” she said. “How are you?” “I’m okay,” I said. “Just okay?” she said. “No, not *just* okay,” I said. “I’m *okay* okay. Okay?” “Okay,” she said, laughing. “We haven’t heard from you in a while.” “I know. Been busy. How are you?” “We’re *okay*,” she said, laughing again. “We’re keeping busy.” “How’s your shoulder?” I said. “Bad, but I can brush my teeth now. Reach for things without too much pain. Drugs and exercises must be working.” She’d recently been diagnosed with diabetes; and “frozen shoulder,” where decreased joint space caused painful inflammation, was one of the complications. “Doctor says mine’s a mild case,” she said. Another six months and I should be fine.” “Six months. Damn,” I said. “Six months isn’t forever,” she said. “Who’s that?” my father said, in the background. “It’s our son,” my mother said. “Our son? What son? We have a son? Put him on speaker!” “Hi, Dad. How are things?” “He doesn’t call for weeks and when he calls he asks how are *things*?” “He didn’t call,” my mother said. “People aren’t things,” he said, overlapping with what she just said. “I called him,” she said. “Things are things,” he said, the tautology nevertheless filling me with uncertainty, with dread. “How are *you*?” “I’m okay,” I said. “Just okay?” he said, making my mother and me laugh. “What?” he said. “Nothing,” I said. “You had to be there.” “Be where?” “Beware of Dog,” I said. “Beware of *God*!” my mother said. “Let’s not go there,” I said. “You get a dog, yet?” my father said. “No, I travel too much,” I said. “And I don’t have the space for one.” “Make space!” they both said, making us all laugh. “You need to make room for love,” my mother said. “How are you, Dad?” I said. “Me? Alive and kicking. Got my best friend here so what more do I need?” “We have fun together,” my stepmother said. “He’s glued to the news, though.” “She’s right,” he said, laughing. “Can’t help myself.” “News is always bad news,” she said. Couldn’t argue with that. We talked for a while longer, both

of them somehow avoiding bringing up my sons, and asking when was I going to fall in love again. “Many Rivers to Cross” is another song that comes to mind, its plaintiveness, its earnestness. The organ swelling in the beginning sets the proper tone, the meditative solemnity, suitable to the occasion. The voice, fragile, yes, endearingly veering slightly off-key as it strains to hit the higher notes, to sustain them.

I left the apartment to meet Angelica for arepas. Orange-gold sun. Birds being birds. An old man hawked and spat a yellow gob into the street. I’d forgotten my shades so I was squinting at everything. “Different day and age,” a “white” woman eying a screeching, “white” toddler said. “Different day and age. Do whatever the hell they want. And they wonder why.” She was bristly-haired, her skin like melting wax. “Teach them fucking manners!” she said to the air.

Angelica, graphic designer, fashionista, diehard vegetarian, who loved her weekly food co-op shift, was running late, as usual, so I asked the waiter to seat me somewhere with a view of the door so I could see her walk in. When she finally arrived, I couldn’t help marveling at her, how powerful she looked in her tight camisole and tight jeans, her heels click-clacking on the tiled floor. “Still buzzed from yoga,” she said. “Good to see you,” I said. “Good to be seen,” she said. “I thought you’d be all geared up.” “Stretchy pants in public?” She laughed. “Can’t wear them too long,” she said. “Skin needs to breathe. Or else.” “Or else what?” I said. “Ass acne,” she said, pointing at her butt, laughing. “Have to keep my J-Lo assets tight, though!” she said. “Hispanx?” I said, which made her laugh. Like my father, and almost every other Spanish-speaking person I knew, Angelica hated the term “Latinx.” The waiter came over. Angelica ordered the Portobello mushrooms and I ordered the chicken, which I ended up finding bland. The beer, though, was especially bright. “It ain’t easy,” she said. She was telling me about her kids, about mistakes she’d made at the end of her marriage. “Divorce makes you do things, stupid things. That feeling of being alone, that you’re going to be alone forever,” she said. “I dated like crazy, when I should’ve

been alone. I wasn't ready. I'm ready now, don't worry!" She laughed. "I dated this man, who ruined me. Almost. I almost made it happen, the worst of it, made it a possibility, by dating him, when I'd known I shouldn't have, but I cut it off before it got really bad. It was bad but it could have been a whole lot worse. Whenever we went out—it didn't matter what we were doing—we had to go to a bar afterward. I just thought he had a tolerance. He would drink and drink and drink. I was always a lightweight. He would be all sweet and kind, and then, after the first few drinks, he'd withdraw, seethe, brood. I can't believe I asked him to live with us. What a mess." She shook her head. "My daughter still shudders whenever she thinks about it," she said. I leaned toward Angelica's brown face, small birthmarks and moles dotting it like raisin bread, and kissed her, her lips warm and wet. Her daughter was in her twenties now, studying to be a historian. Angelica's twelve-year-old son had only a vague sense of that time.

I was stupid for cleavage, and Angelica knew it, her tight-fitting shirt and slightly tighter bra making her breasts bump together and I couldn't help but stupidly think of fruit. And my thinking about it made me think about that Regina Spektor song where she sings, "Summer in the city, means cleavage, cleavage, cleavage." "You can look," she said. "What?" "Come on!" she said. "I look, too. Boobs always win." I laughed. "Look," she said, "we look at each other, nothing wrong with that—men looking at women and women looking at men and men looking at men and women looking at women." "And men looking at men and women and women looking at women and men." She laughed. Exactly, she said. "People can be such prudes, especially women. Nothing wrong with looking. I mean, a glance is okay. Staring's creepy." "Okay," I said, laughing. "We all look, nothing wrong with that," she said. "It's *how* you look when you're looking. I mean, I'd be bothered if you *didn't* check me out," she said. "But what about how *they* feel about it?" "People are going to feel what they're going to feel," she said. "I know looking can feel like copping a feel, like someone's copping a feel, okay, I get it, but you can't outlaw looking, I mean, you *can*, but

you shouldn't. You know I check you out, right?" "I feel so objectified," I said. She laughed, which made me laugh. "That's just it," she said. "Nobody can make you an object, not really. In their own mind, maybe, and as long as it stays there, as long as they don't do anything with that, as long as they don't harm anyone else, I don't see what the problem is. People rarely give context when talking about this stuff—and forget about nuance!" "What we talk about when we talk about lust!" I said. "Degas said we were made to look at each other," she said. "Anyway, most of the people complaining are women, and, you know, most of the time they're right—there's some kind of predatory behavior going on or whatever, especially when they're talking about a stranger. She can feel it, being reduced, being oppressed by the 'objectifying gaze,'" she said, air-quoting the final phrase. "Terror and desire," I said. "She's afraid, is what you're saying?" "We're all afraid. We're all dying. Our death is always staring at us." "And we see that when somebody's checking us out?" "Something like that, yes. 'Checked out' means death, right? I can only say what happens to me, it's not something I can turn off." "Getting turned on?" "I can see how someone can get turned off by someone getting turned on. They seem to be saying, 'I desire you,' but what you really hear is 'You're going to die.' I was at a party once, and my girlfriend at the time was complaining about someone catcalling her, and then another friend, a woman in her sixties, responded, 'Don't worry, when you get to be my age, no one will look at you!'" She laughed, which made me laugh.

Angelica asked about my trip to the doctor, asked what the prognosis was. I shrugged. "No, you can't do that," she said. "What?" "That," she said. "You can't do that. You can't keep me out." I shrugged, again, and then told her, almost verbatim, what I'd told Bree. I could see Angelica's breathing quicken, her eyes glass up. "I'm sorry," I said. "You're sorry?" she said. "You don't need to be sorry." "No? What do I need to be?" "You need to let me in," she said, and then she burst into tears, her chest heaving and shoulders shaking. Scooting over, I threw my arms around

her, and held her, tightly, rocked with her, until she stopped shaking. “You need to let me in,” she whispered. I nodded, still holding her. “Okay,” I said. Music swelled around us. “And you need to let *me* in,” I said, after a while. “Creep!” she said, lightly elbowing me in the ribs. My pocket vibrated. I took out my machine. It was Grey Madder’s people. “Sorry, I have to take this,” I said, already standing up and heading outside, tapping green for the call.

Madder was a popular, late night teevee tastemaker. He wanted V on his show. They would email me the contract after we hung up. I told them I’d look it over and get back to them in less than twenty-four hours. There was a text from Youssef, an old friend, my oldest friend here in the city, asking when we were going to hang out. I didn’t respond.

Angelica’s twelve-year-old was with his father for the night, so after finishing our meal, we took a cab to her place, where we watched *Not for Everyone*, one of her favorite shows, where people competed with each other to prove they led the strangest life. They had celebrity judges, each one of whose respective stars had long dimmed. There was a couple who subsisted completely on recyclables, all of their income derived from cans and bottles they exchanged for coins, their clothes picked up at thrift stores, etc. Even their house was made mainly of junk, but it was not only completely functional but actually beautiful, light pouring through bottle glass windows onto hammered tin and whitewashed planks, refurbished furniture and refinished appliances. They were competing against a man who lived in his apartment with life-sized dolls. He kept calling them his “roomies.” “He wins if they’re anatomically correct,” I said. “Ew, gross!” Angelica said. “Question is, how are they going to find out?” I said. I told her about Greg, about his romance with a doll. “Sad,” she said. “Kokoschka had a doll,” I said. “What, who, the artist?” she said. During World War I, Kokoschka, had had an affair with Alma Mahler, the Viennese-born composer and socialite. She’d broken things off with Kokoschka after two years, claiming his obsessive passion was overwhelming her. Devastated, the artist commissioned a renowned dollmaker to construct a

life-sized replica of his “beloved.” The doll, bright white, its head and breasts and hips stuffed with cotton wool, became the talk of the town, Kokoschka rumored to have even brought it to the opera with him. One evening, Kokoschka, “cured of his passion,” threw a garden party, got drunk and beheaded the doll, pouring a bottle’s worth of red wine all over it, finally, to simulate blood, supposedly. Obsession and misogyny—the stuff of so-much so-called art.

The food had made us lethargic and the drink made us loquacious, and so we sprawled out in bed and talked into the night. Little things. Big things. “Thinking of cutting my hair,” Angelica said, obviously lying. “Hair today, gone tomorrow,” I said, nonchalantly. “I thought you liked my hair,” she said, mock disappointedly. “I do,” I said. “Love your mermaid hair.” “Saying it smells like seaweed?” “Only between your legs,” I said. Laughing, she punched my arm, threw herself on top of me and pinned me down with her arms, her black hair cascading over me. “Your hair smells good,” I said. “Flower extracts?” “Horchata,” she said, brightly smiling despite her graying teeth, her protuberant incisor she called her “outstanding.” “And rum cake.” Angelica wanted to be a nutritionist.

Waking in the middle of the night, I turned toward Angelica and watched her breathe, the sight of her chest rising and falling as soothing as watching water rippling. And there was her hair, a black, furry animal, and I thought of touching it, but, thinking she’d wake up, I refrained. I found an email from a magazine editor saying another of Wonderland’s short stories had been picked up, by one of the last glossies that still published fiction. It was from her *Book of Suicides*, the collection she was working on “to escape the Beast,” she’d say, referring to her novel-in-progress. I shot her an email with the news. Two words back from her: “Great. Thanks.” Emma Grainger posted about her father dying just before he had a chance to empty the contents of the family house, which he’d sold several weeks ago, Emma saying she felt very much the gravedigger as she sifted through her parents’ things, as she decided on what to send to the local donation center, in the end

selecting three things for herself, photos of which she posted: a Talavera platter purchased by her mother when their family visited Puebla, Mexico decades ago, its characteristic blue-blue branchings blazing from the screen; her father's pocket watch, which had belonged to *his* father—"Just wound it and it still works!"; and a singing bowl her parents bought in Nepal, their last trip together, a year or so before she passed. "I felt horrible," Emma wrote. "Then I saw that everything I'd chosen was a circle of some kind."

### 07.08

Memory isn't a lane but an uncontrolled multi-intersection. Years ago, when I was a boy, my parents had taken me to a specialist to have my hearing checked. I'm not sure why, and I don't remember much about that day, except for walking down a long corridor, the walls made of glass, the one to my left darkened, the sun shining through the wall on my right. They led me down this corridor to a room with a vacuum-pressurized door, or at least that's how I remember it. The door suctioning shut, all the air sucked out of the room, some part of me sucked away, too, a part I've never recovered. I couldn't hear anything outside, not a single thing. It was as if the entire world had been obliterated for me. This was sometimes how it felt to be in my apartment. I couldn't hear the neighbor next door, the "Latinx" reporter, whose beat was financial news. I couldn't hear the couple below me, two "white" women, one a media critic, who worked from home, mainly, and taught an occasional class at one of the city's over-priced art colleges, the other woman a CTO at a large magazine conglomerate. I couldn't hear the lawyer and her daughter, who lived above me, the "white" woman whose husband—now estranged and living elsewhere—had lost one of his arms after jumping in front of a train. A miracle he had survived. Maybe the iron horse's jockey had seen him jump and slowed down. The husband had recovered, physically, at any rate, but it

wasn't clear if the rest of the family, especially the lawyer and her daughter, had recovered, from the anguish and shame, from the fallout.

I was supposed to meet Geeta at the Met for a tour a historian friend of hers was leading. Geeta, jittery and sometimes volatile, who medicated for anxiety she'd suffered since adolescence—her India-born mother and father, physician and lawyer, respectively, demanding demonstrable evidence of excellence from her at every point of her life—was also taking medication for a recent attack of insomnia. Geeta lawyered for one of the corporate firms that had been wiped out by the attacks on the Towers. She was important; people answered to her. Her boss, worried he might lose her, had encouraged her to spend some money, to “plant some roots,” so she bought an apartment on the Upper East Side, and had recently had it gutted. Geeta had been demanding me to make up my mind. Didn't I see myself with her? No, I didn't see myself with her. I didn't see myself with anybody. “We're playing,” she'd say, by which she meant my fingering her a few times, she reciprocating each time by repeatedly pumping my penis a few times, frustrated, though, that she hadn't made me “explode.” “Not fair!” she'd say.

I arrived at the museum early, beating everyone by hours. I hadn't been to the massive art museum in a long while, surprised they'd stopped using the small metallic admissions buttons, tags, or tabs, or whatever you call them, replacing them with nondescript stickers. There was yet another van Gogh exhibit, this one centered on his preoccupation with flowers. Mine was a stilled life, and even as I once again reveled in the artist's paintings' dense surfaces, their animate palpability suggestively redolent less of floral perfumatics than toxic solvents and fixatives, I couldn't see these paintings, *regard* them, the way they deserved—so I walked quickly through the galleries, out past the exhibit-related swag: the umbrellas, mugs, magnets, sketchbooks, postcards, posters, and whatnot, away from their attendant hustle, and ended up at a retrospective

of Mariko Kitano-Novak, an artist from Detroit, that scorched-earth city. Though I'd heard of her, through V, I wasn't familiar with her work.

The first gallery featured *Face Value: Body Positive/Body Negative*, an installation of thousands of selfies, all taken from cellphones over a decade, each one the size of a handheld screen. There was an eerie quality to the portraits. Perhaps it came from seeing photo after photo, where at least one arm was missing, each picture slightly off-center, the expression of each face invariably wavering between coldly rehearsed and oddly sincere. I was most taken, though, by two of her most recent pieces: *Attack in the Anthropocene*, a film featuring an epic battle between Gaia and Burning Man. The production value was low-grade *Godzilla*—balsa wood cities, cheapjack backdrops, and rubbery costumes, with hand-held puppets for close-up shots. Gaia lost. The second piece, another film, was a split-screen depiction of an ice skating rink. The right side was a first-person point-of-view shot, of a woman skating, presumably wearing a body camera facing outward. The other side was discontinuous but also from a first-person perspective, but one that kept changing. The shot would shift whenever it reached a certain point, only to be immediately replaced by a similar shot that would change once it reached that selfsame point. It took several viewings to realize the shot changed whenever it reached the person who was skating on the other screen, all of which leads you to reconsider the discontinuous shots, not as first-person views, but third-person views that continually affirmed the person on the other screen. It raised questions about identity, the construction of it, the grammar of the self, of being, of becoming. We like to think the “I” comes first but it is the other, the one outside us, who declares you a “you,” affirms that you exist, helps you identify people and things outside yourself. Only then do you begin to distinguish yourself as an individual. What was it the drug-addled *enfant terrible* had written? “I is another”? “I is an other”? “I is someone else”? The film was called *Life*. Clever, I thought, for wasn't life simply scraping around in circles on thin ice? A text from V: “You can be so driven

you're simply tiresome." Good one. I was tired. I muted my machine. Kim Kinney posted about George Harrison's *All Things Must Pass*, saying, "I'm feeling all the feelings." "My day: escapism through cabin porn," Stella posted. "Eating blocks of cheese is how I self-medicate," Minna posted. "What you miss is what you get," Max posted. "The local Chinese food restaurant's cashier misheard my name this evening," John posted. "'Non' does feel appropriate, though. Perhaps I can use it as a nom (or non) de plume." Greg was posting a lot of photos of and with his doll, which looked lifelike, its, that is, *his* fixed, moist stare notwithstanding, the silicone skin, which was actually warm to the touch, or so he claimed, radiating warmth, a warmth Greg's usually blanched face mirrored. The doll was programmable, too, from an app on your machine. You could even have conversations with it, with *him*, and he would respond. It freaked people out, no bots about it.

Pocketing my machine, I walked down a corridor toward a curtained entrance, where one of Kitano-Novak's films was playing, a technically clever but largely unrealized piece that spliced together films about the end of the world, about some version of the apocalypse, each one beginning or taking place primarily in New York City. *Armageddon*, *Deep Impact*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, etc. Various monuments are destroyed, some repeatedly. Absent, however, was any depiction of the destruction of the Twin Towers. This absence only made the omission a kind of looming sub-textual presence, which I guess was the point, however obvious.

The medicine was working but I couldn't help feeling that the subdermal itch was merely inert, nevertheless readying itself to assert itself at any moment, the feeling, the dread almost as bad as it actually occurring. My scratched-up arms looked better, reminding me of Cy Twombly's scribbles, no, like Joseph Beuys's, his blackboards. Life imitating art imitating life, etcetera. Cy. Sigh. Beuys. Buoy. Muse. Museum. I had to get out of the dark rooms. And it wasn't easy. Why do people throng in exits? Walking past the swag, I walked into a much larger space, breathed

easier, and quickly found a bench, where I sat and watched. People-watching is what makes us human. What other animal gazes so attentively at its own kind, and at such long lengths of time, scrutinizing faces and bodies and attire, eavesdropping on their words, making whole stories out of what it sees and hears?

Deciding to sit there until Geeta arrived, I checked Play's portals. "Go ahead, make your day!" had been shared over ten thousand times. Checked my texts, found one from Youssef: "Avoiding me?" "Sorry," I said. "Extremely busy." But I *was* avoiding him. He was a mathematician, a failed one, or at least that was how he described himself. Debauched is how I'd describe him. Last time I saw Youssef, he'd shared that he was frequenting a massage parlor, where they'd conclude by servicing him with a handjob. "Every story needs a happy ending," I'd responded, stupidly. Weeks before his admission, Youssef had shared that he was spending time with an ex. I asked him how things were going. "I'm going to let you into the inner circle," he'd said. "We sometimes meet up to watch each other masturbate." "Um, okay," I'd responded. "T.M.I.?" he'd said. "Sometimes knowing is not the battle," I'd said, playing off something said in a cartoon series I'd only watched in reruns with my boys.

"You're early." It was Geeta, her voice deep and creamy. A jogger and spin cyclist, Geeta was statuesque, but Rodin-statuesque, thick yet supple, her muscular, cello-brown legs rippling up from her power pumps, the heels clacking like hooves. How appropriate she was a Capricorn, not that I knew anything about astrology. "The worm, etcetera," I said. "Ha!" she said. "Ha, ha!" I said, and we both laughed. "Geeta!" a high-pitched voice called out. Turning around, Geeta squealed, ran over to the other woman, arms outstretched for a hug, which the other woman received stiffly. Geeta brought her friend over to me, quickly introducing us to each other. Jessica seemed cool—brainy, her stylish glasses adding more slants and facets to an already angular face. The contrast between Geeta and her was palpable. Jessica was "white," tall, and ironing board-

thin, her pale blue eyes darting underneath her glasses' cat-eye frame, her keratin-treated, dead leaf-brown hair tightly wrapped into a bun. Dark brown and arguably squat, Venus of Willendorf-type breasts protruding from her chest, wavy, black hair kissing her shoulders, sharp bangs a stage valence over pencil-thin brows, her expressions less theatrical than granitic, Geeta exuded strength and confidence, and, when she let her business-cool demeanor down, an arousing sexiness that matched her voluptuous physique. Geeta was wearing stripes, blue and white horizontals. Once worn, a horizontal-striped shirt can't properly be called that, the body "distorting" the lines, suggesting the term "undulantal," which might not be the clunky contrivance I, at first, thought it was, an actual horizon also, arguably, only illusorily straight, these thoughts doing nothing to explain the "emotional physics" of said wavy lines on this man.

Moments later, the rest of the entourage arrived. The theme of the tour was fakes, and Jessica would show us various counterfeit sculptures and paintings, forgeries, etc., that the museum had unwittingly acquired. Americans, even supposed citified sophisticates, like the lawyers and bankers who were on the tour with us, don't really observe things, regard things. cursory glances and quick scans, and then they're off to the next thing. Passing over each artwork—so quickly you weren't sure if they had even seen what they saw—they were channel surfing, even in so-called real life. Seeing can be another kind of blindness.

But it was Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo," a paean for the altering of the self, which kept coming to mind. It took a block of stone, hardly discernable as a whole, to teach the poet that your self is at best a fragmented thing covered in light. And there's a moment in the poem where the observer becomes the observed, where the headless, limbless, illumined, and seemingly unseeing thing sees you, demands that you take stock: "You must change your life." The command kept echoing in my head. If you want to change your life, break it into pieces, no, realize it's already broken, something you can't ever piece together into a whole. But how could I, self-

described City Man, who thought congestedly, my mind crowded with ideas and images, a confusion of both, which, yes, reflected my surroundings, my life on an archipelago, each tiny island just one powerful hurricane away from being destroyed? I couldn't hear anything, the voice was, not loud, but insistent, quiet but no less accusatory. I'd forgotten how to breathe. I had to leave the museum, so I hurried out, out of the gallery where a fake Rembrandt hung, past the schoolchildren barely under the control of their teachers, my skin tingling, my eyes and mouth dry, and I was gasping, hurrying down this corridor and that corridor, down this flight of stairs, down another flight of stairs, almost stumbling at the bottom, the huge waiting area on the first floor, where throngs swarmed, milled about like glazy-eyed farm animals, and then I was outside, in the "open air," the noisy surround congested, though, with tourists and hawkers, hypercritical worldlings and other familiars; and I kept walking and walking, until I found myself at one of the piers along the Hudson, thinking about how these post-millennial years will be remembered as, among other things, the age of algorithmic dating, the duck-faced "selfie," and the "definite-maybe"; the age of the digital troll and the conservative-liberal; the age where tiny smiley faces and whatnot were people's entire vocabulary; the age where being "white" means never having to say you're sorry, where being rich and "white" means you didn't do anything wrong in the first place. Roethke's "heat-maddened summer fly," I was happy to finally be out of the museum, hearing Spanish and French and Chinese and German and Japanese and Arabic, and other languages I couldn't identify, not to mention many English varieties. The high-strung execs-cum-zipping cyclists, -hyper-accessorized joggers, -eco-friendly, non-toxic mat-carrying power yogis. Walking past a little "black" girl, who was walking backward, I overheard her say to her grandmother, "I'm brave." Yes, this was courage: going forward without seeing where you're going, only where you've been.

“But you blew me off,” Geeta said, later. “I deserve better than that.” She was right and I said so, keeping to myself how I didn’t regret leaving the museum, leaving without saying goodbye, and walking around for hours, ignoring her calls and texts. “I’m not your ‘perfect little silly,’” she said, and hung up. “So, will there be a Better Judgment Day, too?” Nester posted.

## 07.09

Sometimes the space between a cry for help and a cry of hope is a *cri de cœur*. I woke up to news that the “MetroCard Swiper”—the newscasters’ name for him—had awakened, which was good news; the bad news was that he was paralyzed from the neck down. His name was Darnell Collins Wright. He’d worked as a custodian in a public school. There was a teacher from the school on the screen telling stories about him, how much Wright had cared about maintaining the school. Celebrity politicians raged away. “Black lives matter,” a woman on another screen said. She’d long abandoned radical politics for warmed-over reform. The slogan still had resonance, of course, implicit within it the notion that all lives matter, which all the “all lives matter” and “blue lives matter” people seem to never grasp. The problem with it, though, is that it was one mechanism among many that arguably inadvertently kept us in the “black”-“white” binary this infernal nation has always been stuck in. Another screen said: “Death rate in the U.S. highest it’s ever been, due to rise in deaths from suicide, Alzheimer’s disease, and drug overdoses.” I scrolled past one selfie after another, revulsion spreading all over my body, all over my skin, one “amputee” after another, and I hated myself for it, that I couldn’t help it, that I couldn’t help it in the same way I couldn’t help the abjection I felt whenever I saw an actual amputee, the disgust with myself for feeling that way, each of these photos conveying a kind of emotional amputation, each photo screaming, “Here I am!”; each one a surface, a dream, an idea, an ideal, a creation of sorts, but always with something

missing, something you can't ever see, something that can't be captured, but revealed nevertheless, a yearning, a loss, a violence, a void.

Talking heads blurted from one of the screens. Another fake bomb had gone off. The plastic faces faced off about whether these "explosions" could be regarded as terrorism or as merely pranks. "Well, if this is supposed to be a joke," one of the bloated besuited men said, "then this one's a dud." "Pun intended," the other man said. Pundits, indeed. Thom posted: "I dreamt I ate a Greek salad and spoke in Agamemnon-sequiturs." Wonderland posted: "I'm abandoning my novel-in-progress to start writing another called IMPURITY. In it, the Internet comes to life and eats up living dead white male writers and delivers a novel-length Bernhardian screed about it."

*Ping!* "You around?" Zenith texted. "Yes, come over," I responded, and she arrived three hours later, directly after what she called a "soul ceremony," where she and others were led through a series of dances, each corresponding to different waves, from longitudinal to transverse to surface to mechanical to electromagnetic. She returned from it a "hot mess," laughing at my wincing at the tired phrase, her yellowish-brown hair still wet, her black tights and sports bra soaked through.

"I like this shirt on you," Zenith said, unbuttoning it. "They say clothes make the man," I said. "It's why I don't wear distressed leather," each of us removing clothing from the other, our hands getting tangled in the various textiles, the velocity growing and then slowing as it invariably does, each of us taking our time as we explored every part of each other. I was indifferent to her smell, a mulchy, autumnal odor, but she seemed to go crazy over mine, rooting her nose around my armpits and neck, sniffing my genitals and my anus as if she were gathering chemical information, about diet and feelings and whatever else. Zenith was slightly cross-eyed, which made it hard to be sure if she was really looking at you, and her eyes were different colors. "My father's are blue," she'd say, "Mother's brown."

I loved going down on Zenith, first hovering around her belly button, building anticipation for both of us, then tonguing circles around her clitoral shaft, every so often flicking my tongue against it. I lapped at her, like a dog at its water bowl, made a meal of her moist groin, until her legs quivered, and then I stuck a finger inside her, while stroking her clitoris, whereupon her shudderings excited me to such a degree I hardly cared whether or not she reciprocated, but enjoyed it when she did, her attentiveness to my own risings and fallings keeping me hovering over orgasm, which we both wanted to delay as much as possible. We could go for hours like that, dancing, one making a move, the other responding in simpatico, a thrust here, a step there, push and pull, tensions, expansions, resolutions, each movement blurring who was “lead” and who “follow,” the two of us a living arabesque of spins and dips—penetration and engulfing being almost beside the point, but we’d almost invariably get there, as we did that night.

Z’s body was a warm, supple mass of thoughtful and responsive movements. She was so sure of herself, what her body and mind could do, the pleasure she could bring to herself and her lover, to me, within a zone of fuzzy boundaries, physical and mental, the organic fusion of it all. It turned me on hearing and seeing her get turned on from me just caressing her, especially around her sacrum, the bottom point of it, near the top of her buttocks.

Finished, we “stewed in our juices,” as Zenith liked to say. Our pillow talk was always an odd affair, this time finding us talking about Jewish alternatives to Zionism, about Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “sprung” rhythm, and the latest crop of presidential candidates. “You ever wonder why we evolved to this point?” she said. “Of ‘what’s the point?’” I said. “Of being able to live only on this planet,” she said, “surrounded by a vast, no, endless void.” “Because a disease needs quarantining?” I said. She laughed. “Nice view, though,” she said, pointing to the window, from which a starry night gleamed, a rare sight for this earthbound creature.

“You like Girls with Mustaches?” Z said. “Why? Planning on growing one?” I said. She said they were a band, who were “making some noise” in the city. She asked if I wanted to see them, and I said yes. “Mind if we get meta?” she said. “Let’s,” I said. She said she was of two minds and maybe even two bodies. She said she was fine with allowing “whatever it is we’re doing to be whatever it is,” but that she wasn’t sure what it was, but that she was fine with that as long as I was fine with it, too. At the same time, she thought she was allowing our relationship to grow into something largely if not entirely imaginary, but she was fine with that, too, as long as what was imaginary wasn’t obscuring what was reality. I had a hard time following her and I told her as much. “Being and becoming,” she said. “Always precarious to balance.” I nodded, not really knowing how to respond.

I’d met Zenith about a year ago, at a backyard party in Bed Stuy. We were both waiting in line for barbecued chicken or something. “I’m a mermaid,” she’d said, a response to my bemoaning the weather, how we only had a few weeks of summer before the fall gloom fell, and how much I loved the beach. “I love it, too,” she’d said. “Where do you go?” “Coney Island,” I’d said. “I love it, grimy as it is.” Mermaid, yes, I’d thought, watching her walk back to her seat in the backyard, the aquatic sway of her hips and legs, her tawny if a bit scraggly hair waterfalling over her shoulders.

“Did you hear about the woman who was fatally beaten by her husband,” Z said, “who spent her final moments video-chatting with her family?” I saw blood. I saw tears. I didn’t want to hear about it. “She kept saying, ‘I love you,’” she said. “Her parents and daughters saying it back to her over and over.” Tragedy makes good television, I thought. “That’s beautiful,” I said, thinking about Youssef’s bird, an African grey parrot who also said, among many other things, “I love you,” over and over again. Later, we watched the latest episode of *Everyone Is Gay*. It centered on Bella, who was in the process of undergoing breast augmentation. It was her next

brave step away from life as a man named Bill. The show's second season already surpassed the first, upending expectations, the respective metamorphosis of the principals, though gradual, captivating viewers nationwide, bible beltters and rainbow children alike. Zenith, a self-described queer Jew, loved the show. I told her how I'd flown out to meet the Elliotts, about a year ago, immediately after watching a few of their home videos online, just before they'd gone viral, and fortuitously before someone else swooped in to help them negotiate the many options that subsequently flooded in.

The show maintained its original no-frills aesthetic, biting dialogue, and utter viscerality. It was sometimes painful to watch, which made it harder to turn away. My favorite parts of the show were the moments where people were permitted to say the most hateful things to the Elliotts without commentary, the smart editing allowing for silence to weigh in, which made the haters look even more ridiculous than they'd already sounded. It brought to mind archival footage from the Civil Rights Movement that captured red-faced racists spewing their venom, how horrible they appeared to many of their contemporaries, yes, but how monstrous they appeared to us now.

"We need to talk," Geeta texted. "Whenever you like," I responded, shutting off notification sounds. "Haven't been there, haven't done that," Max posted. "Apartment-hunting in NYC is its own distinct humiliation," Arecelis posted. "For the working poor, that is." "Living just enough..." Jericho commented.

Zenith asked if everything was okay, her eyes still fixed on the teevee screen. Shrugging, I kissed her cheek. She turned and kissed me back, on the mouth, her lips warm and wine-wet. Bella was meeting with plastic surgeons, one of whom gave her a thorough breakdown of the many options available. There were saline- and silicone-filled implants, textured and smooth and round and shaped implants. Then there was the question of technique. The incisions could be placed in the underarm, near the areolae, etc. "I want the largest cup size possible," Bella said. "Sounds like

me as a teenager,” Zenith said. “Sounds like me now,” I said. “Huh?” “In my hands,” I said. “Above me. Etcetera.” “Out of control!” she said, laughing, lightly elbowing me in the ribs.

By the end of the episode, it looked like Bella, who had a tight “skin envelope,” was going to have saline-filled implants in the sub-muscular region. It would be a staged procedure: taking several sessions to complete. “She’s amazing,” Z said. The show was followed by a documentary about a community of men who lived as dogs. Growing out of a BDSM community in the Midwest, the group met regularly. They wore tight rubberized outfits, spiked collars, and leather leashes. Ate from bowls. They even had handlers. Most of them were men. “All men are dogs, after all,” Z said at one point. “Bow wow wow yippy-yo yippy-yay,” I quoted aloud. The relationships between “dog” and their “owner” didn’t always correspond to submission and domination dynamics. I dozed off when Sam, a human Labrador, was being punished for peeing on the floor of his handler’s apartment.

## **07.10**

Sunlight made a mural of the apartment. I made pancakes and banana-strawberry smoothies for breakfast for us. A “Happiness Engineer,” Zenith had brought her laptop so we spent the day together working and eating and having sex. Geeta called in the afternoon, but I didn’t pick up. “Can’t talk now,” I texted. “How about tomorrow?” She didn’t respond. Eveline posted: “The cat woke me up this morning by scratching on the sliding glass door. He wanted to show me the bird he killed. The finch was browner in death.” Jessie “drunk bought an animatronic gorilla head.” Thom posted: “I dreamt the Yes-Man and the Naysayer had a child named May Bee.” A former client was selling shit. It’s been done was my first thought. Sometimes you have to laugh, to keep laughing. V posted: “Everyone will be a world famous meme for 15 seconds.” Memes, like genes in the body, selfishly seek to replicate themselves, mutate, and in this case replicate a replication,

in the body politic, that is, the body impolitic. The word itself, “meme,” enacts what it does, what it is—it’s all about me, me. A screen said: “On average, there are one hundred twenty-three suicides per day.” One hundred twenty-three. Per day. One hundred twenty-three!

“Wow! Incredible story,” Z said, looking up from her laptop after reading an article I’d forwarded to her about Greg and his doll. “Creepy?” I said. “A bit, yeah,” her eyes glazing. “What?” “Nothing, it’s just—it reminds me of when I was a kid, a little girl, really.” “Okay,” I said. “Now that’s weird.” “No, nothing like that,” she said, laughing. “When I was, like, four, my sister, Maya, and I shared a bedroom—she’s older, she must have been, like, twelve at the time—and she wanted her own room and everything, of course, and anyway, she had these dolls. I loved those dolls.” Z sighed, transported by her own words, stories always a kind of time machine. “Our father was in sales, and he would take these business trips all around the world, and he’d always bring back a doll for her, but she’d never play with them, just keep them on a shelf, too far off the ground for me to reach, and I would just look at these dolls, gaze at their costumes and their hair and their accessories and whatever. I really wanted to play with these dolls, especially this one doll who wore this cascading gold gown, and her hair was fastidiously coiffed and had these long black pins in it, but Maya never let me play with them. Anyway, at around that time I was having problems sleeping, and my parents tried everything they could to help me, and they’d even send Maya in to our bedroom to help, and so she’d read to me, but I’d still just always get up in the middle of the night, and then, one day, my parents took me to this child psychologist and the psychologist told my parents I was fine, they just needed to set some ‘boundaries’ for me—I found this out later—and the psychologist—I can’t remember if it was a man or a woman—the psychologist told my parents to lock me in our bedroom at night so I couldn’t get out. Can you believe that?” “Fuck,” I said. “I know, right? Anyway, one night, I was lying there in the dark and I just felt weird and I looked around in the darkness and looked up and I saw this glint—it must

have been moonlight—but I saw this glint and I realized it was a pair of eyes, doll’s eyes! And I just started screaming and screaming and then I was pounding and pounding on the door and screaming for my parents to let me out of the bedroom, and they just...” “What?” She sighed again, her eyes marbling. “They just ignored me,” she said, finally. “Fuck.” “Fucking ignored me, yes. Anyway, the next night, my sister came in to read to me like she’d been doing—and you know what, she didn’t really like reading to me, but whatever—and after she was done I told her about the dolls, how they were looking at me at night, and she laughed, saying, ‘You’re so silly! They’re just dolls.’ But I kept going on and on about it, and so she finally said, ‘Okay, I have to tell you something, but it’s our secret, okay?’ I must have nodded or something, so she said, ‘You’re right, the dolls are alive but they’re friendly and they won’t hurt you and they’re here to protect you at night.’ I remember feeling better about it all, and my sister finally rose from the bed. Standing by the door, she said, ‘They’re your friends,’ her hand on the light switch, ‘Except for Samantha’—this was the one with the gold dress—‘She’s mean, sometimes,’ she said. ‘Especially if you don’t go to sleep,’ her eyes glaring at me. ‘If you don’t sleep, she’ll take out her pins and poke your eyes out.’ And then she switched the light off and shut and locked the door.” “Fucking cruel,” I said. “Big sisters are the worst,” she said, “especially at that age.” “I’m sorry,” I said. “She denies it to this day,” she said.

After Z left, I stepped out to pick up a few things at the pharmacy. There was a sign for flu shots in the establishment’s plate glass windows. Already? Or had they simply not taken it down from last year? The doors whooshed open, the half-orbicular ceiling camera panning, tilting, and zooming. The temperature was air-conditioned arctic. All the patrons wore the face of knowing what their dollar was worth. The employees looked bored, as if they’d actually been pierced by a twisting tool, had a hole drilled through them, each face a tunnel, a vacuum. The establishment was less pharmacy than variety store, as much haberdashery as it was stationery store as it was

grocery store, where you could find items as disparate as pliers and lice control medicine and shoe polish and aspirin. Funny how there's always an aisle called "Feminine Hygiene" but never one for "Masculine Hygiene." Shelves of boxed detergents and bottled shampoos and conditioners. Columns of cakes of soap. Canisters that dispense vivid gels and creams. "Woman are unclean" was the sexist message. What would be on the shelves of a Masculine Hygiene aisle? Beard oil? Mustache wax? Anti-perspirants for scrotal sweat? Refrigerators housed American dietary "essentials": eggs and milk; soda and beer; cold cuts and processed cheeses. I opened a few umbrellas, testing their shafts and springs, each one a lesson in planned obsolescence. I chose the most compact one, which opened with a pleasant swish.

The shiny-boxed condoms were lined up like a forward guard, Trojan and Durex and Lifestyles—and Sir Richard's? An alarm rang when you lifted up the plastic shield covering them, chiming like a musical birthday card. I laughed at the likely unintended connotation, and perhaps warning—the thought of bringing another human into this lost world the best prophylaxis.

I walked the first-aid and skin care aisle, like walking a plank. I couldn't help myself. Scanning the shelves for something new, something I'd somehow overlooked, I saw plastic bottles of antiseptic cleansers and foaming liquids and decolorized iodines and topical antiseptic germicides. Boxes of nitrile gloves and antiviral facemasks, and creams that "reduce the appearance of stretchmarks and old and new scars." Oils for uneven skin tone, aging skin, and dehydrated skin. Gels that "hydrate and restore elasticity." Anti-fungal creams. Anti-ringworm creams. Calamine lotions. Moisturizing creams and lotions. Rash relief sprays. "Liquid bandage," a kind of magical mixture of chemicals that creates a polymeric "skin" over minor cuts and sores. Aerosol cans of analgesics and skin protectants. Hydrocortisone creams with or without calendula. Creams, lotions, sprays, etc., to combat psoriasis and eczema. Bottles of coconut oil and bottles and jars of shea butter and cocoa butter. A slew of herbal remedies: cooling menthol, colloidal

oatmeal, witch hazel, and aloe vera gel; and tiny bottled tinctures of arnica, basil, calendula, chamomile, comfrey, evening primrose, green tea, juniper berries, lavender, licorice root, marshmallow root, nettle, plantain, and St. John's wort. The frequent use of the phrase "maximum strength" minimized me, weakened me.

Queueing up to pay for my items, I realized today's theme was protection. An employee—his umber face deeply pitted, like a honeycomb—asked how my day was, before he directed me to one of the automated kiosk machines, or whatever it is they call those things, to pay out—Who needs cashiers, anyway?—I offered my usual "Okay," which means absolutely nothing, and then I asked him the same question, to which he responded by spreading his arms and opening his palms out, indicating where he was, and then saying, "Living the dream." Happy to have made the visibly tired cashier laugh after he caught himself seriously answering my jokingly asking what time the twenty-four-hour pharmacy closed. A "white" woman behind me shoved past me. "Excuse you," I said, calmly. "Excuse me?" she said, turning around. "Exactly," I said, calmly. "What?" "You shoved me." Calmly, always calmly. "What—oh, I didn't see you!" "Exactly." "I'm sorry," she said. I said nothing. "I said, 'I'm sorry.'" I said nothing. "Now who's being rude?" she said. "That would be you," I said. "Whatever, dude," she said. I said nothing, but, dude, I really dislike that term; I've always disliked the term, and other terms like it, like "bro," "guy," "pal," "chief," and "bud." Sensing the woman was about to go full Karen on me, though, I dropped it.

Exiting the store, I saw a familiar figure lumbering toward me: the "superhero" emerging, flowing forward, like lava, slowly, inexorably, exuding mute power and dull light, passersby stepping aside to stare, at his bestarred garb, his waving cape, stare at his mask, and peer into his eyes, those green spheres, the sun abaft an orange lozenge falling through the esophageal confines formed by the buildings on either side. He waved to me as mechanically as a windshield wiper.

“Have a good day,” he said. “Thanks,” I said, waving back, wondering what he called himself, wondering about his backstory—every superhero has one, right?

Geeta called again. “I’m freaking out!” she said. “What’s happening?” I said. “Open your ears! I’m freaking out!” she said. “I can’t do this,” she said, hanging up, whereupon I immediately called her back. “Yes?” she said. “What’s going on?” I said. “How can I help?” “Help?” she said. “You can’t help. No one can help.” She was crying now. “I can’t sleep,” she said. “I haven’t slept in three days. And these panic attacks.” “Have you seen a doctor?” “Doctor?” she said. “Who do you think’s done this to me?” She explained how she’d recently switched to Klonopin from Ativan, because she recently developed a tolerance to the latter. “Call your doctor,” I said. “Already have,” she said. “Going to see her tomorrow.” “Good,” I said. “Anything I can do?” “Like what?” she said. “Anything,” I said. “I can come over.” “No,” she said. “I just need you to be here for me.” “I’m here,” I said. “Good,” she said, hanging up.

Speaking of meta, I watched a video of a “black” man watching an old viral video of a “double rainbow,” where you only see a close-up of his face and hear the sound of the video he’s watching, the video playlist directly afterward playing another video of a person watching a video, this time of a “black” woman passionately singing and then climbing onto a table and then falling off, and all you could see was a close-up of the “white” woman’s face, see her face scrunch up and her eyes water as she bursts into laughter, and I couldn’t help laughing, even, or especially, as I thought of someone watching a video of me watching a video of a person watching a video, the sequence repeating itself, recurring into another useless *mise en abyme*. Another screen said: “On average, there are one hundred twenty-three suicides per day.” One hundred twenty-three. Per day. One hundred twenty-three!

**07.11-12**

America: where the construct is the real. Even more so if and when taken on the road. Silvio Play was a human doll, a perfect man. Over the course of a decade, he'd undergone multiple surgeries, sculpted his body, squared off every curve, turning him into a "real-life" action figure, Mr. Right in the flesh, however manufactured. The last time his "career" had any traction was when he'd courted, married, and divorced Pomp Adore, a human Barbie. Engagement ring, wedding ring, and the suffering, as the song goes. Play had had "work" done, a lot of work, to achieve his chiseled look. Rhinoplasty, gluteoplasty. Implants everywhere: buttocks, pectorals, shoulders, thighs, biceps, triceps, calves. Brow shavings and lifts. Cheeks and lips augmentations.

Play was dying now, and we were making the most of it. The media was eating it up. Sales for *Primp & Circumstance*, his cologne line, had spiked. Etcetera. Etcetera. Jericho posted: "Here's what a happy man looks like: He's smiling, holding his daughter's hand as they circle around a skating rink as the sun slowly sets; smiling afterward, too, at his daughter's nascent feminism when she remarks that a 'Caution: Men at Work' sign should read 'Caution: People at Work.'" "

Play had said he "needed" to see me, so I red-eyed out to Munich. I hate flying but why go into that now? And does anyone really love flying? Especially as a passenger? Air travel imprisons the imagination, stifles the brain, all thought seemingly vacuum-wrapped in plastic like they do with luggage at airports as a security precaution. I hated airports. The canned everything about them. The climate-controlled but still cold, stale air. The stalled time you find in malls, too. The processed food courts and the nauseating smell of pretzels, cinnamon rolls, artificial oils, and processed meat substance. The zombified travelers. The pilots and their sunshine smiles and glittering silver sunglasses. The dainty stewards zipping along with their little wheeled suitcases, their airbrushed faces belying their disdain for you and yours. The manufactured surge of urgency.

The aura of out-of-time-ness and in-between-ness. The silent scream of time, how it binds, unwinds, evacuates. And the longer you spent in an airport the more funereal it felt, dread floating like an airborne disease. You felt like everyone and everything were calling out for a massive malfunction, praying for a pilot to lose control, for a wing to fall off in mid-air, for a colossal blast, a fireball screaming across the sky.

I couldn't get a seat in first class so I ended up in economy or coach or whatever, seated between two people who actually knew each other, who would periodically speak to each other over me, until I asked if one of them wanted to exchange their seat with mine, to which they declined. I did get a chance to read from Hopkins's journals, where I found the following line: "What you look hard at seems to look hard at you." I'd like to imagine Rilke finding inspiration from this line to write "Archaic Torso of Apollo"—where so-called subject and so-called object reverse positions. I was overjoyed when the plane finally landed, not only because we were on the ground "safe and sound" but also because the torture of two sets of parents doing nothing to quell the cries of their wailing children for hours had finally ended, making my arrival and exiting of the plane so much more of a relief.

I was supposed to meet Play at St. Peter's Church, or "Alter Peter," the church, predating the city's founding in 1158. It was just steps from the Marienplatz, where the Rathaus-Glockenspiel plays. Play had strict instructions for me: "After you come in, bear left, follow the aisle until you come to a glass coffin." The directions weren't necessary. Standing at the entrance, I quickly spotted Play, his bleach-blond hair flaming out in the dimness. He was flocked by fans, who obscured the actual attraction: the skeleton of Saint Munditia, who—which?—was dressed in a transparent and gem-studded body-length stocking, her glass eyes staring above, reverentially. They say she had been beheaded in the third century, martyred. She looked lovely, considering.

One by one, fans stood beside Play and snapped, no, *tapped* photos, or someone—a friend or stranger—took on the task, some of them thrusting their machines out before them on extendible selfie sticks. Play’s pose was exactly the same for every shot: poised, relaxed but confident, his sunny expression never wavering. He could have been a waxwork, fixed forever in a perfect moment, unflawed, his smile’s wintry glint, the knife-edged angularity of his features, the stove-range blue of his eyes, the sheer constructedness of his visage, his posture, the knowing imposture of it, ironically making *you* feel deformed, unreal, that it was *you* who were the freak, *you* the freak of nature and nurture. The attentive viewer, however, would notice something odd, maybe even wrong, and perhaps some fans would notice it before posting their photos on their requisite social portals. Something in Play’s face. It was thinner, yes, but there was something else. Some would mistake it as the camera capturing him mid-blink, but others would see it: the newest alteration. “So you did it,” I said, embracing him.

Years ago, when Play and I had first met to discuss the terms of our business relationship, I’d mentioned Thom Yorke, the power of his lazy eye, how that almost-squint was a visual manifestation of a particular melancholia, the cold sadness, the isolation borne of beholding cold bleeping screens, all the keypad clicking—the sound like sped-up teeth chattering—an ennui belying a kind of violence and bitter restlessness. Play had argued with me then, saying Yorke ought to have had it fixed, but, after he’d learned of his own illness, which upended many of his notions about longevity, and, ultimately, control—over his appearance, his identity, his place in the world, his already overextended fifteen minutes—Play decided to surgically alter his left eye. It would be the “chink in the armor,” he said, the first signal of his deterioration, underscoring how his body was something ultimately out of his control.

We exited as the bells tolled five o’clock, signaling the end of the workday, the beginning of eventide. Taking me by the shoulders, Play turned me around to face the church, told me to look

up, pointing at the figures framed by the copper or bronze detailing patinaed green, these bordered by soot- and rain-stained stone bricks. How beautiful corrosion looks! A wiry reticulum covered the figures, to keep pigeons, the caustic threat of their guano, away from the figures—I counted about ten—behind it. They were frozen, arms and legs aloft, as if in mid-dance. A large bird, a raptor of some kind, maybe, also netted, sat atop everything, and then the clanging began. It was a shrill, slightly discordant sound. Horn players, swords at their sides, were the first to move. Their brassy blast sounding the start of a military procession? Knights on horses replaced them, and that's when I noticed the two figures hovering above them. A king and queen? Jesters, musicians, and flag-bearers arrived. The horsed knights appeared again and one of them rammed his lance into the other, the loser falling forward, laughter replacing the chattering around us. The music stopped and then resumed moments later. And then the dancers began their dance, which reminded me of Barynya, the frenetic Russian folk dance. The mechanized procession ended and the crowd applauded, and Play said something, but I hadn't been listening.

Play's use of the universal sign for drinks made me think we'd go to a biergarten or rathskeller or something, so I was surprised when we stopped in front of a health food restaurant. We went inside and sat down, and he ordered wheatgrass shots and arugula salads for us. We clinked glasses, and he told me about the early warning signs: the frequent need to urinate, especially at night, which he'd ignored because he didn't think it really meant anything. He said the tumor had at that point already caused the prostate gland to swell. He told me about the lab tests and the imaging, about the medication he was taking. He told me about surgery and radiation, the pros and cons of both.

I thought about telling him about my recent diagnoses but decided against it. He was the one facing "certain death"—was there an uncertain death? I was simply managing a chronic illness, one that was inconvenient, yes, but hardly debilitating, at least not yet. There was no comparison.

This is what I was telling myself. Instead, we spoke at length about the licensing of his image to a toy company that wanted to make dolls of him, the irony not lost to either of us, including a memorial edition, to be released soon after he died. ““Capitalism is death,”” he said. ““So let’s make a killing!”” I shuddered to hear myself quoted.

Back at the hotel, I became aware, once again, of my body, of my hands, my fingers, my middle finger, tautening, a kind of electric shock shooting through it and up my arm, making my heart beat faster, making the air in the room—I didn’t know what to call it—foamy? asthmatic? I had to get away, so I walked out, out of my room, into the hallway, not bothering to wait for the elevator, and walked down five flights of stairs, walked through the lobby, walked through the entrance, walked directly into traffic, horns beeping, cars swerving around me, and I kept walking, an imitation of someone walking, neither fevered poet nor humble contemplative but a simulation of an ineffectual man out for an evening stroll to get a breath of fresh air. Spray-painted on a wall, in block letters: “WE’RE FUCKED.” Okay, I got it, I got it, already. A text from Geeta: “She switched me back to Ativan. A higher dose. Feeling better now.” “Great!” I responded. “Relieved.” No response from her.

On the flight back to the city, mixing spirits and scripts, I drowsed into blankness, hours later waking to the steward’s gentle shaking of my shoulder, her voice calmly coaxing me to wake up. New York City: where supermodels will find it in the size that fits you. New York City: where people talk about their ex-exes.

Arriving at the apartment, my head in spin cycle, I lumbered into bed, carefully rolling onto it, like a scroll unfurled. I took out my machine, searched for Starship’s “Sara” and played it. What, was I twelve years old? “Different spelling,” I muttered. “Sara, Sara, no time is a good time for goodbyes.” “This is stupid!” I said. “Okay, I’m turning it off,” I said, and did, and charged the

machine. Lying in bed, once again, I looked out the window, fixed my eyes on a square of black night, and listened to the sky's silence for a long while, until I fell, once again, into a dark torpor.

### 07.13

The sun scolded the infernal city awake, drones arising to the hive, electronic webs and fields afire, three-ton juggernauts overtaking the roads, me tapping the snooze button for another five minutes of blankness, tapping it again for another five, and tapping it again for another five, before finally shutting it off and rising, my coffee already brewing, its morning-glow aroma floating, the machine I'd somehow—muscle memory kicking in?—programmed the night before softly purring. Fuzzy-tongued and still woozy from last night's nip bottles, I lumbered over to the bathroom. “Something's not right,” my machine said. Nester posted: “Yes, but what are you purge-watching?” Thom posted: “I dreamt my eye pod opened up into unblinking omnivision.” I scheduled two posts for Play's portals: “We are, each of us, each other's significant other” and “You die your own death, so live your own life.”

Breakfast was the same: Egg-on Schiele and Francis Bacon, an omelet with pork chunks splashed with a pungent piping pepper sauce. And there was the coffee. I'd be on my second cup by nine. “I have a hard time believing it,” Max posted, “but Wittgenstein's final words just before falling unconscious and then dying were supposedly these: ‘Tell them I've had a wonderful life.’” “What about your last words,” Orkideh asked. “Mine?” Max said. “Well, it was fun while it lasted.” There were seventy-five responses so far. I didn't “react.” Sheila Pérez posted about how she'd been groped the previous night. A woman asked what she'd been wearing, and people went berserk, the response as damning as it was overwhelming.

There was the question of Zenith's husband. She'd brought it up, again, on the machine, yesterday, saying she'd like us to meet, for me to meet him. “I tell him everything,” she'd said,

which was fine with me, even if I wasn't sure what she'd meant by "everything." Weeks ago, she said he was an architect, albeit one "with his head in the clouds," a reference to the highly virtualized infrastructures he was building for large nonprofits. She seemed proud of him, notwithstanding the social anxieties that kept him confined to their home, an old townhouse they'd bought when they were "just kids," as Zenith had described it—a reference to that famed memoir by a Blake-drunk singer-songwriter?

The weather was on. The remnants of Hurricane Julia had hit Iowa and Wisconsin, two states that rarely saw "tropical systems." Sea surface temperatures in the tropical Atlantic were higher than normal, which the meteorologist said didn't "bode well for the Bahamas, the Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico." Uh oh. "Weather changes moods," etc. I keyed up Nirvana's "In Bloom," the song always making me feel better, only to make me feel worse. It rocks, etc., but the video for it, the "all suits" version, that is, is a masterpiece, a profound artistic statement, its satire absolutely corrosive. Hilariously self-deprecating and intelligently critical of the celebrity-industrial-complex. Tense harmonic pleasures, its dynamics carefully orchestrated, its "sweet" harmonies in the choruses oddly discordant, the feedback-drenched anti-solo yet another attack on rock conventions. And, damn, Cobain's comic timing as he sings "Bruises on the fruit. Tender age in bloom" is impeccable. Just look at his face, his bright smile! Also, hilarious in this version is how the camera doesn't bother to capture his hands as he solos. Absolutely brilliant. The other version is transgressive in its own way, the moment where Cobain gets hit in the groin especially powerful in how it once again subverts the superficial macho muscularity of the song. Cobain's expressions throughout are so funny they make me sad.

I fired up a playlist Z had sent to me. Live recordings of Girls with Mustaches. She'd made a point of mentioning again that they were unsigned. Underpinning the guitarist's bluesy sludge were frantic rhythms, where chattering rim clicks and off-kilter cymbal hits abounded. Above all

this, floated the singer's singular rasp, she intoning lines like, "Even free isn't free" and "Choose your own redemption." My favorites were "Exercise your demons," and "Better to not know than know," and "The more things change, the more things change," "All land is no man's land." And the funniest one? "Everything is relatives."

The nicotine-substitute gum was doing nothing for me, and I refused to buy one of those electronic cigarettes, which doled out your dose carefully, the threat of seizures and tachycardia and high blood pressure, of coma and death hanging over your head like a cloud—ha ha—and I hated the idea of sucking on plastic, hated having my poison of choice delivered in anaesthetized form. There was no romance to the object, so I caved: I went out to purchase a pack of cigarettes. Paper and tobacco, fire and smoke—perfectly atavistic. One deep drag and I'd feel centered again.

The "superhero" wasn't at the bodega. Probably busy fighting crime, I thought. I missed him, and I wasn't sure why. V posted: "'Whatever' isn't clever." "Mood Enhancer #284: The Yin Yang Yoga workshop I just came back from," Frank posted. "Talk about restorative."

Wren Lerner had dropped me as soon as he'd achieved fame. "The purging," he'd called it. Made sense he was selling shit now. In art, as in everything else, nothing comes from nowhere. There's Piero Manzoni's 1961 artwork *Merda d'artista*, for instance. And there's Belgian artist Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca*. Perhaps most famous is Chris Ofili's painting of the Virgin Mary with a breast sculpted from elephant dung, and other pieces, like *Bag of Shit* and *Shithead*. And there was his *Shit Sale* in 1993 in London, where he sold bits of elephant shit. Last words? How about "'Here I go again on my own...'"?

Later that afternoon, I met Victorioso at his place in Sunset Park. He couldn't shake my hand, pointing to his arm by way of explanation. "Tennis elbow," he said. He didn't play the sport, though, instead likely hurting his arm from repetitive stress on his wrist, the consequence of always being on some laptop, using some electronic device, his fingers always sliding away on some

trackpad. You'd think he'd be more careful after hurting his leg a few years ago. I'd broken my elbow as a child and it certainly made me cautious. I still remember the exact name of the bone I broke: olecranon, the proximal extremity of the ulna: the bony point of the elbow. I still remember being given anesthesia, the feeling of "going under." I remember how swollen my arm was after they took off the cast, the rankness of it, the nasty pus dripping from the unscabbed-over bruise, like fried pork chop fat. I remember how I howled whenever anyone or anything touched the tenderest areas of the scar. Then there was the dead skin that had flaked off from all over my arm.

V had hurt his right leg during *America #2, because of America #2*. One afternoon, after a week or so of performing the piece, he'd heard a terrible sound, felt a tear in his knee. Ignoring the pain, he continued performing, and simply worsened the damage, the doctor, post-MRI, telling him he'd torn his ACL and that he had to have surgery, where an allograft would be used to repair the torn ligament, his body using the allograft as a kind of scaffolding on which a new ACL would be built. He didn't know at the time that an allograft was donated tissue taken from a cadaver. Before day's end, there would be at least five cute cat photos and at least one cat-related meme posted by "friends" on "Fakebook"—V's preferred name for the social media portal—and he would "like" every single one of them.

*America #2* had been a failure, a critical one, though. There was power in series, an "accumulative" one: V knew recognition would come if he kept going, persevered past the lack of recognition. The piece was one he'd developed in graduate school. A map of the world was drawn on the floor of the glass box he'd built; he'd copied it from the Gall-Peters Projection, the controversial map that more accurately depicted the size of the continents, those massive landmasses that had formed the supercontinent Pangaea. During his hours-long performances, thousands of ants were released into a room-sized, transparent box, where V, fitted in combat boots, would stomp on the insects until the floor was a black mess.

The following *America* piece was a success. For it, V had once again built a glass house but this time he'd hired assistants who joined him in the space to spray paint the walls with racial slurs. After they were done, V reached into a wooden crate, grabbed a stone and hurled it at each of the glass walls, shouting, "People in glass houses should throw stones!" By the time he was through, all that was left was the house's metal frame. Well, that's what everyone thought, until he started throwing stones at the ceiling, eventually shattering it into a million pieces, too.

*America #1* was closer in spirit to his current piece: #27. It was the jumpstart of V's career. Some of his critics called it "torture porn." Some called him a "masochist." They missed the point: It was the viewer who was implicated. He debuted it at his gallery in Chelsea. "Viscereality" was the term he'd coined for the impetus, the philosophy behind the performance, not to mention all subsequent pieces in the *America* series.

V's apartment overlooked Greenwood Cemetery. "I feel more alive among the dead," he would say. Our "business" conversation was brief, with V outlining plans for his next exhibition, me taking notes for the press release. He was surprised when I brought up Puerto Rico. I was surprised! "Weather isn't merely an event anymore," he said. "It's a weapon." He went on to talk about "geo-engineering" and "the sinister side to techno-fixes" of global warming. "Did you know World War One Britain tried making artificial clouds," he said, "to confuse German planes?" I shook my head. "How about Operation Popeye?" he said. "U. S. Air Force rainmaking operation during the Vietnam War." I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "It's true," he said, answering my face. "They extended the monsoon season. Softened the Ho Chi Minh Trail, caused landslides." Glaring, he said, "Their slogan was 'Make mud, not war!'" "That's hilarious," I said. "Some bullshit," he said. "Speaking of bullshit," I said, before leaving. "What do you think about what Lerner's up to these days?" "Man, what these white folks won't waste their money on!" he said,

quoting and laughing. “Berger predicted it, you know.” He said he’d find the exact reference and send it to me later.

Zenith had been encouraging me to see her healer, and I’d been dodging it, taking exception to the designation, the religiosity of it, the phoniness of it, but then I figured, what the hell, it couldn’t hurt, and, apparently, I was becoming adept at clichés at every turn. Her healer was a medium, and a “psychic surgeon,” something I’d never heard of, the idea laughable even as fantasy. And his name was Lovetron! In any case, I called to make an appointment. It rang once and someone picked up. “Fear nothing,” a woman said, and I wasn’t sure what to say, so I said nothing, and my silence was met with silence, and I wondered how long it would be until someone said something. “How may he help you?” she said, finally, and the necessary words came out of me and the appointment was set for tomorrow. Zenith had said Lovetron was always booked solid and it would likely be weeks before I saw him. It was “meant to be,” Zenith texted after I’d texted I’d be seeing him the following afternoon. “He moves in mysterious ways,” I responded. “Yes, He does,” she texted. “And She.” “What do you think about these sinkholes?” I texted. “What sinkholes?” “Opening up all around the city.” “I don’t watch the news!” “Right! Sorry!” “For fuck’s sake,” Lori posted. “What’s happened now?” Bob responded. I suspected it was about the election but I didn’t follow up. These sinkholes, though. For fuck’s sake.

Evening found me at my neighbor’s, the financial news reporter. The apartment was a Spartan set-up, its austerity deeply contrasting with its owner, Chuck, a functional drunk, whose ruffled clothes and shaggy hair still made him seem cool. His spitfire gabiness would certainly make for an interesting evening. I’d arrived late so a few people were already leaving when I came to the door. “Bravo!” Chuck said, waving me over to the bar, where he fixed me a drink. Bourbon neat. “You remembered,” I said. “What kind of host would I be if I hadn’t?” he said, his movie star smile

glinting. Chuck introduced me to some of his colleagues, so-called millennials, whose sentences always annoyingly ended on an interrogative upswing. Made me itch, or maybe that was the illness. Hard to tell sometimes. “Where are you from?” one of them asked. “Here,” I said. “Here?” he said, tributaries of broken blood vessels on his “white” cheeks. “I’m American,” I said. “You look Mexican,” he said. “Are you Mexican?” “No,” I said. “You look Mexican,” he said. “Are your parents Mexican?” “No,” I said. “They’re from Puerto Rico.” “I knew it!” he said. Immediately turning away from him, I walked over to the balcony, where I found another neighbor, the lawyer. “Don’t jump,” I said. It was a stupid thing to say. “Don’t be stupid,” she said, her words slurred enough for me to know whatever I’d said would unlikely be remembered. “You’ve been away,” she said, turning back around. “I’m always away,” I said, sidling next to her, looking down at traffic, the network of blinking lights. I’d forgotten her name. Candace or Blair. “I’m sick,” I said. “Aren’t we all,” she said, clinking my glass. “How’s your daughter?” I said. “How are your sons?” she said. “Good point,” I said. “We are a society in decline, my dear,” she said. “And I’m inclined to believe you,” I said. She laughed. “What we need is big time change.” That phrase again: “big time” again, looming over me, like Big Ben, hours windmilling away. It was Chuck. “And that’s not going to happen,” I said. “So let’s line them up and blow them away,” she said, “for what they’ve done.” Laughter all around. The sound of glass shattering. “Animals,” Chuck said, walking back into the apartment proper, and I followed. “Bye,” she said. Morgan, her name was Morgan.

A bearded boy was toeing a paper towel to swab the mess on the floor. Refreshing my glass, I met a “black” woman, Helen, who was originally from D.C. Our talk meandered, drifting from the upcoming election in November, to Helen’s cats, to how much D.C. sucked, and back to the election. “They’re all the same anyway,” Helen said, lamenting about the candidates. “Paper cut-outs, you know?” She used my grunt as a launching pad for another fusillade. “Jesus, it’s so

hot,” flicking her dreads behind her with a quick sweep of her hands. “And our country’s fucked.” Reminded me of the graffiti that seemed to be following me.

Back at the apartment, moving my machine from one hand to another, I scratched my arms. Max posted about the “singular moments of aerial sculpture” in soccer. I tried to make sense of it. One hundred and twenty-three people. One two three. Fuzzy math. I couldn’t make sense of it. I walked over to the counter where my meds were. I swallowed two pills for the itch, one more than I was supposed to. *The Itch*. Sounded like a title for a cheap horror flick from the fifties. There would be a whole franchise. *The Itch*. *The Return of the Itch*. *Revenge of the Itch*. Sitting back down, I counted aloud: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three, thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty, forty-one, forty-two, forty-three, forty-four, forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two, fifty-three, fifty-four, fifty-five, fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight, fifty-nine, sixty, sixty-one, sixty-two, sixty-three, sixty-four, sixty-five, sixty-six, sixty-seven, sixty-eight, sixty-nine, seventy, seventy-one, seventy-two, seventy-three, seventy-four, seventy-five, seventy-six, seventy-seven, seventy-eight, seventy-nine, eighty, eighty-one, eighty-two, eighty-three, eighty-four, eighty-five, eighty-six, eighty-seven, eighty-eight, eighty-nine, ninety, ninety-one, ninety-two, ninety-three, ninety-four, ninety-five, ninety-six, ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred one, one hundred two, one hundred three, one hundred four, one hundred five, one hundred six, one hundred seven, one hundred eight, one hundred nine, one hundred ten, one hundred eleven, one hundred twelve, one hundred thirteen, one hundred fourteen, one hundred fifteen, one hundred sixteen, one hundred seventeen, one hundred eighteen, one

hundred nineteen, one hundred twenty, one hundred twenty-one, one hundred twenty-two, one hundred twenty-three. I wept until I slept.

#### 07.14

In an earlier episode of *Everyone Is Gay*, arguing with someone about something or other, Bella said, “Don’t fuck with me!” icily. “I’ve killed men meaner than you.” Bella had been a Green Beret. The “white” man, arms as thick as his fleshy neck, stepped aside. “But not as ugly,” she added. She had the kind of strength and stamina of a person who could run marathons without training for it; and she had done just that, recently, in fact, and in one episode in the second season she said she’d sign up for an Iron Women race once she’d fully transitioned. Leaving the military, she became a blacksmith and built a forge on their property, where she “beat plowshares back into swords.” She loved to read, mainly fantasy, but you could find Foucault, Haraway, Sedgwick on her shelves. Yoko posted: “Believing women is my kink.” Thom posted: “I dreamt I respected a drunkard’s right to booze.” Michelle posted: “Some animals shouldn’t have pets.”

The building where the “hospital” was located was a nondescript corporate monstrosity among other cuboid eyesores of glass and steel and reinforced concrete. Not a rock pigeon in sight. “I let Jack come inside me all the time,” a “white” passerby said into her machine. I didn’t need to hear that, but, no, good for her! And for him! I felt anxious. Stupid. “The fuck am I doing here?” I felt dumb asking the question, aloud, no less. I needed to get off the street, away from the eddies of people and machines, people and *their* machines: cerebral prostheses connecting an imagined future and deeply embedded past, the fleshy assembly a cyber-cult of the numina. Machines and their people, in other words. And whatever it is about warm weather that prompts blastings of music by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, please, please make it stop.

The building's lobby was strangely empty. And unusually quiet, which made me ever more aware of every sound: my breathing, my shoes padding across the floor, the elevator's button slick click, the hydraulic whoosh of its ascent. Coming off the elevator, I felt like I'd stepped into a void, a blank expanse, a bright but warm light emanating from the floor, walls, and ceilings. Transported me back to the afternoon I went to see a Gerhard Richter exhibition in Chelsea or the Upper West Side, the elevator opening directly into a gallery, where you were surrounded by a series of squeegeed paintings, each one largely a large field of zinc or titanium white or both, where bright bits of red or orange or yellow or pink or sky blue poked through. They were framed clouds, squares of smoke, gauzed-up wounds.

I wasn't sure which direction to walk so I walked forward until two white chairs, which faced each other, came into focus. I sat in the first chair I came to and waited. It was a climate-controlled space, perfectly attuned to whatever body was in it, immediately adjusting to whatever bodies followed. I felt the space sensed how much I disliked the icy temperatures of stores during these sweltering days. In moments, an apparition appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. As it neared, I saw it was a person, barefoot and dressed completely in white, a veil covering their face. They sat down in the other chair, saying nothing. The silence, though palpable, didn't feel heavy, didn't feel directed toward me—it just was. Once again, I could hear my own breathing. After a while, I felt silly, and I began to laugh, silently, the fear I'd burst out with gut-busting guffaws making me laugh even more, still ever so silently, shoulders shaking, tears streaming down my face. Moments later, my machine pinged and I finally laughed aloud, and I felt like I'd been holding my breath underwater for too long and had emerged from the depths to suck up oxygen. My laughter subsiding, time passed and the silence ensued again, poured in, really, like invisible liquid. I muted my machine. After a long while, a voice behind the veil said, "Greetings." "Salutations," I said, stupidly. Long pause, as if our greetings were being mutually received,

absorbed, transformed into something else. “The entities are here,” the voice said. “Do you feel them?” A soft voice, in the shallows of their natural register. “To which entities are you referring,” I said. Were we going to wax philosophical, discuss the existence of distinct beings and things? “They are all around,” the voice said, removing the veil, revealing a man’s pudgy brown face, his crossed-eyes and serene smile strange but oddly comforting. Was this Lovetron?

We sat there, in total silence, but silence is never total—I could hear myself breathing. I could hear him breathing. What was I doing here? I wasn’t a believer. I thought about the report I’d heard about the teenager diagnosed with diabetes at four whose parents refused to give him allopathic care, instead opting to “treat” him with homespun remedies and prayer. And so, he died. The mother and father, certain their heavenly father would resurrect their son, didn’t immediately report the death. They relented after three days, the length of their god’s death before supposedly resurrecting, and finally called for an ambulance. The EMT workers reported finding the teenager weighing about thirty pounds. I imagined them picking up the boy, who weighed nothing and everything. After a while, I felt drowsy, could feel my eyelids closing. “You’re letting go,” Lovetron said. Silence again, and I dozed, my head falling and then jerking back up several times. “Let the healing begin,” he said, standing up and stretching out his arms, gesturing for me to stand up; and I complied. We stood face to face. He breathed in, deeply, and then he embraced me, heat suddenly spreading over me, clothing me, enveloping me, really, as if I’d been submerged in a pool of warm water. Strange as the feeling was, there was still something utterly familiar about it, but I couldn’t place what it was. Lovetron remained there for what felt like a long while hugging me, and I was receiving it, not wanting him to let go, and then I was weeping and I couldn’t stop and he continued to hold me, not simply waiting for me to stop but just simply being there. I finally stopped, and then, after what again felt like an age, he let me go, saying, “May you always flow.” I thanked him and left.

The streets were empty and soundless. “If there’s no language for it, did it happen?” Max posted. The question intrigued me, unnerved me the more I tried to answer it. Come evening, V’s latest show would be opening. I wanted to invite Angelica, Zenith, and Geeta, thinking it would be great to have them all there. It was a crazy idea and I’m not sure why I’d even considered it, how I thought it could even work. Z, though, would not only have been fine with it, she would have loved it, enjoying not only finally putting names to faces, but taking sincere interest in the other two women. Angelica and Geeta would have refused outright, the latter taking great offense, something I didn’t want, but what did I want? In the end, I went alone.

You enter the gallery, where you see a long, thin red carpet leading from a door to a cordoned-off area about ten-foot square, velvet ropes signaling posh club exclusivity. Once the gallery reaches capacity, the lights dim until the room is completely dark. For some minutes, you wait until you hear a door open, people walking in, the door shutting. You listen to the sound of something scraping across the wooden floor, the door opening again, people walking out, you think, the door closing again, whereupon a spotlight hits the door. A majestic fanfare sounds as the door opens again and a man, a “Latinx” man wearing an orange jumpsuit, is hustled in, strong-armed by two beefy-looking men. They seat the man in the chair, strap his arms and wrists down on the steel armrests, scalloped to fit. They strap his waist and neck, shift orange pads to the sides of his head, which they also secure with various straps. You think about rollercoasters, the headrests installed on the more extreme scream machines to prevent whiplash. After they finish, the men—one “black,” the other “white”—stand next to him, flanking him, and they wait, and you wait, the silence interrupted by the occasional cough from someone in the audience. You can’t help merging with the crowd, feeling as if your breath, your heart were beating to the same rhythm. When the music ends, the door opens again, and another man walks out. Dressed in scrubs, he rolls out a cart

full of medical paraphernalia. There are tubs and tubes, boxes and bags. He sets it beside the strapped-in man. He walks out, only to be replaced by a “white” woman wearing a white lab coat. Standing before the cart, she snaps on surgical gloves, expertly handles the various paraphernalia, drawing a long, straw-thin tube toward the seated man. She sticks the tube into the man’s right nostril and slowly pushes it and pushes it in. He screams. Someone in the audience cries out, too. A “black” man storms out. A “white” woman storms out. Unaffected, the doctor continues feeding the tube into the nostril until it finds its proper length of about three feet. Finished, and seemingly unmoved by the man’s screams, the doctor draws out another tube from the cart and repeats her actions but with the left nostril. The man screams again. An “Asian” woman storms out. And you’re crying now. Done, the doctor pumps one of the devices on the cart, and you see a pasty white substance flow into and up the tubes and into the man who continues to scream, the men beside him staring blankly ahead. After about twenty minutes, the woman stops pumping the liquid and removes the tubes. The tubes are blood-smeared at their respective ends. The doctor doesn’t wipe the blood or the substance trickling out from the tubes. She simply places them back on the cart, snaps off her gloves, and walks out, only to be replaced by the technician, who rolls the cart back out. Then the beefy men unfasten the network of straps, lift the exhausted man, his face a mess of tears and blood and “food,” the men carrying him out through the door. The whole thing makes you ill. Makes you sick of this country, its fraud, its violence, its hypocrisies, its sense of entitlement and privilege, its sense that it is exceptional, makes you fatigued and disgusted by it, emotionally, mentally, and physically. The sickness-inducing is everywhere, though. Awareness, examination, and critique, not to mention compelling art in every form, are the best antibodies, you think. Those are the good ones, the exceptions that blah, blah, blah. They are beacons. They are models. They are guides. They are what democracy looks like, not to mention what kindness, truth, beauty, generosity, love, and every other good thing look like. The horror show you just

witnesses, that made you weep, that implicated you—that’s America. Not all of it but a big part of it. This country is the world’s cancer, metastasizing uncontrollably, you think. Hope? Hope can be another kind of dope. The lame duck POTUS, the latest dealer of American optimism, sold it, millions bought it, a host of zombies. When a politician says, “Let me be clear,” get ready for some deliberate obfuscation. When she says, “Make no mistake,” you’d be mistaken believing she wasn’t about to make some. This country stands, primarily, for its own interests, and will do whatever it takes to protect that self-interest. Democracy? What a laugh. Liberty? What a laugh. Fraternity? Justice? Peace? This country doesn’t stand for any of those things. To the rest of the world, America is one giant sledgehammer. I’m with them, you think.

### 07.15

Better to love unrequitedly than to like indiscriminately. I met Zenith in the city, after her tai chi class. We were trying to “get out there and do stuff,” her friend’s recommendation for getting us out of the bedroom. Doing things together, making decisions together, and talking about it—this was “the cake of a relationship, sex the frosting.” So we’d meet at Union Square and take it from there, or as Z had said, “Let’s just see what the day brings us.” V posted: “My, how time lies!” Thom posted: “I dreamt John Waters resurrected River Phoenix.”

Arriving early, I walked over to the farmers’ market in the historic public plaza, passing tented stall after tented stall of artisanal fruits and vegetables, of freshly baked breads and sparkling jars of honey and maple syrup, finally finding my beloved ground cherries—yellow-orange orbs of vegetabular delight—at one of the stands. Watching me fill up a paper container, the farmer—a leathery-skinned, flannel-wearing “white” woman—asked me what I do with them. “This,” I said, picking one up, pinching the papery husk from its bottom and popping the edible globe of joy into my mouth.

I saw a thin, skinny “white” person of indeterminate gender walking an army of dogs, leashes radiating out from their long pearlescent arm, the variously-sized dogs keeping step with them and each other, the smallest some kind of terrier-mix, the largest a Black Lab. A group of “Asian” teens shuffled past, bouncing in their outsized embubbled sneakers—rubber-leather potentialities of velocity, force, acceleration, and momentum. There was a greasy guy selling pretzels, his shiny metal cart covered with stickers of flags from all over the world. Hundreds of people swarming in the sweltering heat, thought bubbles popping up above their heads: “Goddamn heat.” “Scallions, all-purpose flour, sesame oil, what else?” “Good to be outside.” “Tired of being alone.” “Taking up the whole fucking sidewalk!”

Z met me with a flood of words. “I’m taking it as a sign, an ominous one, perhaps, that my paperback copy of Borges’s *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* has completely fallen apart. Then again, it might be a positive sign. Might actually have finally broken free of the labyrinth. Speaking of reading, earlier today, I posted a comment, where I said ‘I was a reading’ instead of ‘I was at a reading.’ I corrected it but I like the idea that I *was* a reading: a performance, an interpretation of myself.” I laughed, and she caught herself. “Am I talking too much?” “No,” I said. It was always an outpouring with Zenith and I liked it. “Hello, handsome,” she said, embracing me, making me laugh again. She was always a bit formal in public, in private, the best lover I’d ever had. She was ten years my senior. And then later, “Saving a glove because you think its ‘partner’ might one day appear sometimes results in finding you have three left-handed gloves in your possession, which, after you’ve had a big laugh over it, makes you think the whole futile effort was worth it, if only just to have had that laugh.” I wasn’t really aware of my surroundings until Zenith stopped to pet a dog, a huge Rottweiler, whose sheer muscularity, wall of tense flesh, most people would find intimidating, a response its owner—a “white” man as tiny as his smugness

was large, boutique tattoos spilling down his arms—wanted to encourage. Z, though, treated the big beast as if it were a slobbering puppy.

I asked Z about her mother, who suffered from dementia and was having difficulty moving around, her limbs atrophying, and the drugs—which eased the sharp pains she'd been feeling in her legs—also made her a bit wobbly. “‘Weebles wobble, but they don't fall down,’ my mother said. Can you believe it?” Zenith was also stressed about her father, who was also slowly “falling apart.” Her mother had always been stingy with affection, but something had changed since she became ill. There were days now where she didn't want to get out of bed. She'd scoff at the doctors and nurses and more nurses, anyone but Zenith, responding to admonitions with terms of endearment she'd never heard her mother use toward her before, making Zenith cry, their unfamiliarity making everything strange, putting every question into question.

Following our afternoon ramble, we went to the latest neighborhood in Brooklyn teeming with hipsters, hirsute creatures sporting long, patriarchal beards and/or ratty hair and/or tight-fitting clothing, their bodies inked with ironic tattoos of meaningless images, silly cartoons, vacuous thoughts. We were going to see *Girls with Mustaches*, and Z was already ecstatic.

There was a lot of wood paneling and fixtures in the bar, the whole space antiqued to look like a speakeasy from the Prohibition Era, a wholly imagined one. It looked more like the obviously fake set of a teevee show to me; still, it was pretty well done. We arrived in the middle of a performance of a “Eurasian” woman, who, surrounded by gadgets and laptops, triggered beats and samples with both her hands and feet. An expert “juggler,” she created an eclectic soundscape from nature, of waterfalls and oceans, of various animal sounds: barking dogs and whistling birds, over which she'd sing simple melodies with an Appalachian lilt.

Zenith usually didn't drink but today she was drinking a glass of cab, dark ruby. “Robust,” she said, smiling. I was sipping bourbon. “My parents were never demonstrative,” she said, as we

watched the performer break down her gear. “But now my mother’s the sweetest thing. Yesterday, as we ate dinner with my brother who’d just arrived in town, she put down her fork and said, ‘Love is everything and I love you with everything I’ve got.’ It startled my uptight brother but I was really enjoying this new being in front of us.” Overheard: “He has a quarky sense of humor.”

The club was full by the time Girls with Mustaches ambled onto the stage, the conversations around us sounding as follows: “And, so, actually, um, like, um, like, like, like, actually, whatever, awesome!” These were the clickers and swipers, the scanners and skimmers, the gamers and bingers—Generation Gist. I watched the band silently set up, strap on their guitars, fiddle with their laptops, etc. Then, darkness, a single circle of light on the singer, a pale “white” woman, who stood in front of her microphone, eyes closed, teetering between grace and lethargy, her hair, dry and prickly, a discarded nest. “I’m waiting,” she said. “Waiting for the world to stop.” A series of clicks sounded. The guitarist, a “black” man, played some dissonant chords, the bass player, “Latinx” maybe, playing a syncopated line, holding it all together. “Stop world, stop,” she sang, the soundscape swirling, building and building, striking dissonances playing against each other, the tones resolving here and there, weaving an intricate mesh of chaos and order. Dozens of peoploids took out their machines to record precious moments no one would ever see—another moment of sad communality, banal commonality. Fallout of a millennial crash that never happened.

The rhythmic displacements and odd-times, architectonic in their complexity, were making me queasy. I felt sick, down to my very bone marrow. I turned to look at Zenith. Tears dribbled down her chin. The music continued, sped up, rose to an excruciatingly high-pitched caterwaul roaring in my ears, sounding like airplanes taking off; and, after what felt like hours, everything fell silent again. “Let’s go,” Zenith said, grabbing my hand, leading me out of the club.

We ended up at my place, where we went directly to the bedroom, slowly stripping off each other's clothes, hands all over each other, skin against skin. She enveloped me, and I couldn't tell who was pulling whom, who was pushing whom. How things flicker in and out of view: random incoming, sudden surrounding. It's a lousy, passing salvation, I know, futile like grasping at a dream you never dreamed.

Later, sweaty and blissful, Z palped my left forearm, followed the many lines I'd scratched there, read them as if they were braille. Felt good. "Want to talk about it?" she said. "No," I said, queueing up the next episode of *Everyone Is Gay*. Angelica called. "Going to take this," I said, and Z waved me off, her eyes on the screen. Angelica caught me up on a business trip. "What should I feed my children tonight?" she said. "Ramen, with eggs," I said. "Mix the egg while the ramen's cooking. When the ramen's almost done, pour the egg into the broth until the eggs congeal into curds. Ladle it into bowls, sprinkle it with chives, and then, bang!" "Yum," she said. "They won't eat the chives." "Just yours, then," I said. "When am I going to see your face?" she said. We set up logistics. The episode was almost over when I returned to the bedroom. I asked Z if she was up to see a movie, a disaster flick I hadn't seen yet. "I love Morgan Freeman," Z said. "First 'black' POTUS," I said, air-quoting "black" and queueing *Deep Impact*, a passable thriller from the late nineties, which neither of us had seen. A massive comet is careering toward earth, threatening an annihilation the movie refers to as E.L.E., i.e., extinction level event. A space shuttle armed with nuclear missiles is launched to intercept the comet. They successfully destroy half the rock but a massive piece crashes into the Atlantic, causing a tsunami that overwhelms the East Coast, including New York City. "They decapitated her," Z said, referring to the Statue of Liberty, which had just been destroyed by the massive waves. "Comets know how to get a-head," I said.

After Z left, I keyed up Bill Evans's "Peace Piece." I could live in this surround all day every day forever. Such an evocative composition, aural glass, really, its ostinato of two chords

like the sound of someone walking, but without metronomic regularity. This is no march, but a reverential amble. Evans composed it as he worked out an introduction to another song he had been intending to and would later record, Leonard Bernstein's "Some Other Time," but it is "Peace Piece" that implies some other time, suspended time. I imagine Evans, hunched over his piano, playing those two chords, swaying to the ambiguous lilt, the lift of the major seventh, the fall into the suspended ninth's ambiguity, allowing the melody to be released from the chords, as if they were breathed out from them, birthed from them, only to dissolve, rearrange itself again, shatter into spiky bits. I didn't want to think of his sadness, his slow suicide, the years and years of anguish.

## 07.16

Every day is a vivisection. A lost cause is still a cause. *Ping!* Geeta. "Hey." "How goes it?" I responded. "Great! I'm in L.A." "Cool. What's the occasion?" "Visiting an old friend." "What are you guys up to?" "We're out. Eating. Drinking." "Highlights?" She sent a photo. "Oaxacan Old Fashioned with maple cured bacon." She was in the background, clinking her glass against another, the glass and man's hand in the foreground bigger than her face. "Lost count of cocktails," she texted. "Head spinning, yet?" "Getting there." "Drink some water," I responded. "Yes, Dad." "Your head will thank me tomorrow." "Want to know whose hand that is?" "Okay." "Okay?" "Yes." And then no response. Cody's thinking about the "psychosomatic implications of memory foam." Toni just watched the first episode of a British soap opera's sixth season, saying, "Yes, my eyes did glass up when Mrs. Hughes and Carson kissed." Clip responded that he was watching the fourth season of an overrated sitcom: "Can't say I love it or even like it. But I'll eventually watch every episode." Stan Zhao posted about Ivelisse Colon, the missing girl. Lots of sad faces. Where was she? I thought back to how worried I'd get about my boys, the fear a vise tightening my

insides. Thom posted: “I dreamt I encouraged you to ‘van Gogh for it!’” Max posted: “Anyone recall where Barthes describes style as a kind of varnish masking a text’s discontinuities, that is, the work of writing?” No answers, yet. Geeta’s calling me “Dad” reminded me of how she’d complain about her parents, about how conversations with them always ended up with their asking when she was going to finally get married, when she would finally have children. “God, the last thing I want is a baby,” she’d said, more than once. “Can you imagine me with a baby?” I couldn’t, actually, but wisely said nothing every time she’d asked. Some people should not have children. Abortion should not only be legal but mandatory in more cases than we’d like to admit, and with the world population increasing and resources diminishing, mandatory abortions and sterilization will likely become standard practice. But who was I to judge? Not like I was a great father or anything. “Men don’t ever have to deal with this,” she’d say. “You can squirt into us whenever you want, no matter how old you are.” I didn’t say anything about how children begot by older men were more likely to have autism spectrum disorders or schizophrenia or Down syndrome. The clock is ticking for everyone. Women, though, have it pointed out to them all the time. “I love Mom and Dad, but they can be so aggravating,” she’d said. “And then there are all the aunts and uncles. I mean, they’re the ones who pushed us so hard to have a career. It’s probably why I’m so crazy.” “You’re not crazy,” I’d said. “You’re so sweet,” she’d responded, “but you don’t know me. I barely know myself. Sometimes I feel like a failure. Nothing’s ever good enough. I don’t even like my job. I mean, I’m great at it, but I don’t love it. I don’t know what I love or if that even matters. I’m good at it. I’m successful. I’m a powerful woman, you know?” “And with great power comes great responsibility,” I’d responded. “Spider-Man?” she’d cried, hitting me with a rolled up magazine. “Voltaire, I think,” I’d said, recalling to myself something Wonderland had said, something like, “It’s not only absolute power that corrupts absolutely. Power, unless it’s shared, is always illegitimate. So power isn’t the answer, it’s the problem.”

V's interview with Grey Madder was airing in the evening. I stepped out of the apartment for a smoke. I hated the smell of cigarettes, which was why I always smoked outside, whatever the weather. It's probably what keeps me from becoming a shut-in myself, why I walk so much. Lucas posted: "After yet another close call with death while crossing the street when it's my light, I'm convinced that when I go it'll be because of some self-absorbed idiot driving their two-ton juggernaut with one hand while holding their phone with the other and ramming into me: if nuclear or climate change catastrophe doesn't get me first, but then I'd be in good company." The update received over a hundred "likes" and other semblances of emotions. "You look both ways before crossing the street, right?" my therapist once asked me. "Not always," I'd said.

After his rather lengthy introduction, Madder turned to V, but before he could ask a question V began speaking. "We emerge to a set of problems, a metaphysic mathematics, to solve, or at least boggle over." Madder, unruffled, said, "And what is your set of problems?" "We are creatures, each one of us, of excess, of distance, each symptoms of the other." V could throw out lines like this all night, though it was difficult to discern whether they were spontaneous or rehearsed. It might have had something to do with his smile, a beatific half-smile. And the new beard was obscuring more than just his face. "I'm not a snowflake, a thing in itself," V said, "but a snowball, an amassing of things in themselves, one that's got a chance in Hell because Hell isn't about heat but cold, cold fucking cold." There was no backdrop. Everything behind them was dark, black. No table either. This was all part of the agreement I'd arranged. V was dressed—as he'd been for his recent performances—in an orange jumpsuit. It looked like he was undergoing an interrogation, which was the point, I thought. "What is a work of art?" Madder asked. "Art is work. My work is art. I make art. Art makes me. My work is to work hard and do hard work. My work is to continue to continue, to pursue and persevere. That is my work: the art of work." Madder, still seemingly unfazed, said, "I don't understand." "Good. Understanding is finality.

Understanding is closure.” A text from Zenith: “He’s incredible.” “Nonpareil,” I wrote back. I missed what V had been saying about the *America* series. “What’s next for you?” Madder asked. “I’m looking for a place from which I can think and see,” V said, “yes, especially to see. I’m interested in non-progressivist history: history that emphasizes contingencies, delays, and dead-ends.” “Akira Kurosawa, the great Japanese director, once said, that being an artist means never averting one’s eyes,” Madder said. “Yes, but being, being *anyone*, means never averting one’s eyes,” V said. “The trouble is we are all prisoners of sensibilities, slaves to susceptibilities.” “How do you free yourself from the prison-house?” Madder asked. “By paying close attention,” V said. Now that sounded familiar, I thought, the local “superhero” immediately coming to mind. “For instance,” V went on, “You hear the Irish singer singing, something about foghorns whistling, and you’re feeling odd, a feeling you don’t often feel: you feel loved, and a woman near you says something that sounds like, ‘When people tell the truth they change their mind,’ and then, later, you find yourself smiling at three people. They were closed-mouthed smiles. Instead of quickly looking away, though, you wait, looking each person in the eyes, and then each person smiles back, and you find yourself happy in those moments, and you think they were, too, if only for a few seconds.” A text from Zenith: “Where’s he going with this?” “Sometimes,” V said, seemingly answering her, “going too far is not having gone far enough.” “Whoa!” Z texted.

Z called me when it was over, asked me about Lovetron. “Did nothing for me,” I lied. “Nothing is something,” she said. “Maybe,” I said. Long pause. I told her I’d see my doctor in a few days. “Want me to come with?” she said. I said I’d go alone, not bothering to tell her I didn’t want to go at all. “It’s a prelude,” I said. “To a kiss?” she said. “Yes,” I said. “Kiss of death.” “Not funny,” she said. I laughed. “What are you up to?” I said. “Finishing up my costume,” she said. “What’s the occasion?” I said. “For the parade, remember?” “Uh, oh yeah.” I said. “Mermaid Parade, right?” “Can’t wait,” she said. “We win every year.” “Who?” “The Octopussies,” she

said,” explaining how various groups yearly competed for best theme, costume, dance, etc., and how her group had been awarded first prize in the overall category for many consecutive years. “Trout of This World” was one of their first hits, each mermaid a fish out of water swimming in space. Their recent theme, “Licensed to Krill,” was a crowd favorite. “And people got it? “Got what?” “It came out in the eighties!” “I know!” “What?” “The movie!” “Oh, *Licensed to Kill*,” I said, “I was talking about the album.” “Which album?” “*Licensed to Ill*,” I said. “By the Beastie Boys!” “Oh,” she said. “And everyone still got it?” “Everybody knows the remake!” “And you win every year?” I said. “Yes!” she said. “Sounds fishy to me,” I said, making her laugh. “How many clams did you have to hand over to the judges?” “Alright, enough!” she said, laughing. “Puns are the worst,” she said. “You should talk!” I said, remembering their theme for this year: “#MeTuna.” “You don’t think you’re going to get in trouble for it?” “I don’t know,” she said. “I hope not but I hope so.” We hung up, and I clicked on the “Death Clock,” the “Internet’s friendly reminder that life is slipping away...” I plugged in my date of birth, my age, sex, and body mass index. Same as before: twenty-eight years. Not bad. I watched the seconds count down for a while, then clicked off.

### 07.17

Tell the weather not the news? It’s all weather, the atmospherics of fear, of dread. In a day or so, Hurricane Martin would hit Dominica, Puerto Rico, and St. Croix. They were predicting the devastatingly powerful storm would be worse than Maria, the category five storm from which my father’s beloved island had never recovered economically. Speaking of perfect storms, without conferring with me, V had set up a series of performances, but outside of his gallery, outside of its “confines,” as V described it. He was calling them “Pop-up Art”: one-off performances enacted in temporary spaces. *America #28* “featured” V getting waterboarded, his waterboarding assistants

also inviting audience members to participate. And people in large numbers, unsurprisingly, perhaps, would line up for the opportunity to almost drown another human being.

The local news had picked up on these pop-ups, which were occurring with greater frequency, and would send out crews to capture the terrifying footage of V, dressed in an orange jumpsuit, strapped down on a cot, one or two people holding a cloth over his face, and another person pouring water from a plastic jug onto his face, V inhaling the water, V gagging, V attempting to break free while muffledly screaming, “I’m drowning! Drowning!” I watched one of the broadcasts. The setting was dank and dark, in what looked like a warehouse, a couple of lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling. Countless machines were capturing the performance, a performance somewhere between real and unreal, real in the sense that V was actually experiencing what waterboarding victims experienced but unreal because the circumstances were different, because of V’s complicity, because of the event’s performative aspects. Maybe this was an extension of V’s “Viscerality” concept. The spectators brought to mind the photos of gawking crowds at lynchings, which brought to mind the artist who’d edited the victims out of such archival photographs to foreground that the conditions that made such murders possible are still very much present today, which brought to mind the “black” American’s erasures of a “black” South African’s iconic photographs of the Apartheid era, the last of which further complicated the incredibly polarizing debate about cultural appropriation. “I’m growing a beard,” V’s voicemail said, “the goal something patriarchal, of biblical proportions. You might say I’m letting myself go, and perhaps I am, but the question is where.” A screen said: “Refugee crisis a goldmine for European shelter entrepreneurs.” Things were going from worse to worst on la Isla, the growing crisis stateside escalating, especially in the Keys, where many displaced Puerto Ricans were going. Thom posted: “I dreamt I swallowed Sting’s message in a bottle and realized how fragile we are.” Youssef posted a video with his talking bird. “I love you,” it said. “Good morning!” “Have a nice

day!” It was amazing. Took me a minute to realize that it was Youssef talking with the bird, since you couldn’t see him in the video. How had I not known about this? “She understands me,” Youssef commented on the post.

The missing girl was still missing. Eleven, Ivelisse Colon had last been seen leaving her house in the morning, two days previous. The photo they were using was one she’d posed for at her middle school. “She’s described as a dark-skinned Puerto Rican female,” went the newscaster’s taxonomy. “She’s four feet and eleven inches tall, weighs ninety pounds, and has curly black hair and green eyes.” Her eyes were enormous. “Dark-skinned”—the phrase weighed on me. Dark? Compared to what? Was there a phototyping scale to which they were referring? But it was the suffix “skinned” that bothered me even more. The layers of it, ha. Another sinkhole had opened up, this time in Prospect Park, near the ballfields. It was about eleven feet in diameter. My stomach lurched. The number was uncanny, filling me with dread, my eyes “robbed,” as Freud would say, the idea that the girl had been swallowed by the earth, the unlikeliness of that pointing to the logical possibilities: an accident, a kidnapping, rape, and murder. I thought of the “white” boy who, years ago, had been kidnapped in Borough Park, on the first day he was allowed to walk on the streets alone. How his dismembered body had been found in a refrigerator. An equanimous voice said something about “cover collapse.” Muting the screen, I called V, and he said he wanted to meet sometime in the afternoon. Agreeing, I headed to the train station, where I saw a busker singing “The Heart of the Matter,” a bland song by Don Henley, an artist I don’t particularly care for, but the “black” singer turned it into a kind of spiritual, and you know what, it worked on me, unraveled me a bit. Transfixed, I almost missed getting on the train toward V’s neighborhood, almost as far north as you could go in the city. “Not quite the outskirts,” he’d say. “But close, that is, *far* enough.” Everything seemed so much bigger there. The sidewalks seemed wider. The streets were full of people, the overworked and underpaid invisibles: cooks, cleaners, and cashiers; waiters,

drivers, and messengers; fast-food workers and line operators; salespeople and security guards; bartenders and telemarketers; information desk clerks and parking lot attendants; burnt-out adjunct professors on public assistance; disillusioned millennials defaulting on unpayable debt.

V arrived, “NOPE” printed on his t-shirt, a smile still evident beneath his lumberjack beard. “A variation of ‘I would prefer not to’?” I asked. “Nope,” he said, and laughed. I’m not what you’d call short but standing beside V you might think me a dwarf, his energy so intense you could use him to power a city grid. “You okay?” I said. “Looks like you lost some weight.” “No,” he said, curling his arms over his head. “Weight of the world on my shoulders.” He laughed again, the sound of it always warm, robust even. I suggested we get some lunch. “Maybe later,” he said. “Let’s go for a ride.” “Ready?” I said. “Ready to die, brother.” “Funny, you always struck me as more of a Tupac fan.” “Ever tell you I saw him once?” “Biggie?” “Yeah, in concert,” he said. “It was a package-type thing. They had all kinds of heads rolling in. Wu Tang. Busta. Biggie closed the show. It was at the Beacon Theatre, and they dropped the curtain right before his set. When it rose—boom!—the crowd went bananas. Biggie was behind this oversized desk, I mean, it was massive, and there was a spotlight on him, and there was some kind of orchestral thing playing and whatnot, but when the boom bap hit, he went into it—I can’t remember what song it was—and then he took out money, a bundle of it, and tossed it into the audience, people jumping over seats to catch it, I found out later they were one dollar bills. All that jazz about the ‘benjamins’—whatever.” “No biggie, huh?” “Not funny,” V said. “Anyway, he does another song and then the curtain goes down again and everybody’s screaming. After a minute, they raise the curtain and now there’s a huge movie screen—I’d never seen one so big—and they end up playing the video for the song Biggie just performed. And the crowd went nuts.” “Crazy,” I said. “So, yeah, I’m ready.”

Once we were on the train, he told me the plan, the purpose of our trip. “We’re going to reenact the journey of the Warriors, from the movie.” “Warriors! Come out to play-ee-ay!” I said, wishing I had three glass bottles for my fingers to clink. A “black” woman sitting across from us read from one of the local tabloids. On the cover, two deaths: a public school principal who’d thrown herself in front of an incoming subway train after her tampering with her school’s standardized test results had been exposed; and a young socialite who’d run into large planters lining the roof of a posh high-rise in the city and falling to her death many floors below. Beside the woman: two gender-fluid, “Latinx” teenagers, tethered together by shared earbuds, their eyes closed, each one alternately tapping a combat-booted foot.

A “black” man boarded at the next stop and sat down near us, and we watched him uncrease the edges of a round aluminum foil takeout pan, releasing the greasy smell of fried dumplings, each of which he deftly dipped into an assortment of ramekins filled with hot sauces and such precariously balanced on his lap. “Stand clear! There’s another train directly behind this one.” Annoying as the conductor was being, I preferred an actual person shouting instead of the canned electronic voices that usually came on.

The train slid into another station, and the two teenagers debarked, still oblivious to everything but whatever music they were listening to, oblivious to maybe even each other. Finished with his dumplings, the man licked his crinkled fingers and wiped them on his jeans, his post-feeding face glazed. “Stand clear of the closing doors!” the conductor shouted.

Arriving at Stillwell Avenue, V and I said goodbye, and I watched V step into a Manhattan-bound train. Leaving the station, I walked toward the beach. Passing the Coney Island Sinkhole, and briefly peering into its darkness, I imagined a giant, oozing Lovecraftian creature emerging from it. All the explanations for the sinkholes weren’t convincing. All the talk about changes in groundwater levels, sudden increases in surface water, the speculation about acidic rainwater

seeping through surface soil and sediment until it reaches soluble bedrock. Etcetera. That is, the more empirical evidence I'd see given for them the more resistance I had to such explanations. Illogical, I know. How many sinkholes had appeared? Three? Four? But that wasn't the question. The question was how many more would appear? Maybe they were connected to my itch. What had seeped through my skin and into me? I wasn't making any sense. Dread weighing on me, I felt nauseous. I looked at my hands, which were gripping the barricade surrounding the sinkhole. Veins were popping out. Maybe something wanted to come out of me, too. Some kind of ichor-dripping monster. I wasn't make any sense. Breathing in and out, slowly and deeply, for a while, I felt better, and started walking again. Coming to the Hot Dog Eating Contest countdown sign, I watched the seconds decrease, drawing an easy correlation to the Death Clock. What drove these people, these "athletes," to force-feed themselves? It made sense the event is held on July Fourth—conspicuous consumption, indeed.

Coming upon the boardwalk, I saw the following magic-markered on the hardwood slats: "SOMETIMES I DON'T REMEMBER WHO I AM," thinking I may have written it, but I couldn't recall if I had or not. I saw signs for a sand-sculpting competition, and remembered chancing on the event many years ago. One sculptor had built a life-sized elephant. It was lying on its side, and its verisimilitude was such that you could imagine it rising from its side and lifting up its trunk and trumpeting. Overheard: "How are you?" "Oh, you know." "I don't know. I haven't seen you." "I hate this heat." "I love it." Play called, said he saw V's interview with Madder. "Good stuff," he said. "'Stuff' doesn't quite cover it," I said. "You know what I mean," he said. "Good," I said. "Yes, good," he said. "When am I going to be on?" I told him I was working on it, working the "death angle," etcetera. "Good," he said. "Americans live for death." Hard to argue against that, so I didn't. I asked him how he was "holding up." "I feel like I'm always on hold," he said. "Waiting for something to happen." "The inevitable," I said. "Something like that," he said.

“Maybe something else. Doesn’t matter what, though. It’s the waiting I’m getting at.” I told him I’d let him know when I knew about the Madder show. And we signed off. Frank Jarman posted: “Mood Enhancer #285: Carousing with some crazy medical students from Poland.” Overheard: “Forty-ounce a day, boom, that was my breakfast.”

I walked toward a man sculpting a centaur, the horse part of the body lying on its side, the man’s torso and face pressed against the sand, his arms thrown out in front of him. It looked as if he’d been spat out from the ocean, baking half-dead in the sun. As I watched, several people came over, and asked the sculptor what it was. They didn’t understand what he meant when he told them.

I lost count of all the leather-skinned, lizard-brained lechers leering, their eyes carving women up like slabs of meat. “It’s a much grayer world,” someone said. “I mean, it’s much more dramatic.” Maybe I misheard her, I don’t know.

Leaving the sand-sculptures, I walked past a group of people dancing together without music, or at least that’s what I thought until I saw they were wearing headsets. There was a deejay, too, who wore the same headset, her head bobbing to the music she was creating for the silent discothèque.

Someone was on their machine everywhere you looked, each one raising it to their face, like a mirror, a mirror mirroring a mirror mirroring a mirror, each one posting status updates and comments as if to say, “I am here. I matter,” as both declaration to others and reminder to themselves, a denial, however virtual, of death, in other words, every image, every vanity shot a death mask. I checked my machine. Attention economy? Attention-deficit economy is more like it.

The shore was lined with people. Bare-chested boy or girl throwing sand in the air, their diaper seawater-engorged. Barefoot but otherwise fully-clothed Orthodox Jewish children, knee-deep in the ocean, laughing with one another. Barefoot but otherwise fully-clothed “Latinx” family

shoving water at one another. Barefoot but otherwise fully-clothed “South Asian” couple sitting on the sand, allowing the surf to wet their feet. Two “white” detectorists sweeping their electric divining rods back and forth over the sand. Squat, pot-bellied, “white” photog snapping shots of a young, “black,” bikini-clad woman, the man a hired-gun, from the looks of it, his lengthy, erect telephoto lens all over the woman’s body, her “white” girlfriend holding up a reflector behind her like a silver sun. “Put some sunscreen on,” someone said to someone else. “I’m so hot I can’t be burnt,” said someone else responded. “God, you’re so pale,” a “white” man said. “Calling me a vampire?” another “white” man responded. “Something like that,” the first “white” man said, the other grabbing him, saying, “Come over here!” and playfully biting his neck.

There are two things I always think about when I look at an ocean, which is what I was doing now: standing where the ocean lapped and thinking about what I always thought about when I looked at the ocean. Weeks after my wife died, I plunged into the Atlantic Ocean on New Year’s Day, sloughing the previous year’s exoskeleton, of pain, sorrow, madness, into the intensely frigid water of the ocean, emerging from it a man renewed, once again wide awake to what would likely be a world of pain, sorrow, madness, etc., but a world perhaps intermittently interrupted by bright moments of joy and delight; love, wonder, and laughter; acts of courage, integrity, and profundity; a year not without fear but with less of it, perhaps. The other thought I thought while facing an ocean was the thought I was having now: me walking into the crashing waves fully-dressed, walking and walking until I was totally submerged, and continuing to walk until I couldn’t anymore, until the ocean dragged me away, my pocketed machine, its alloys and oxides, its polycarbonates and shiny wiring long outlasting my skin, tissue, organ, and bone.

**07.18**

Menopausally balding, suntanned, strands of hair hanging from her chin, Dr. L. Finn, greeted me with a practiced smile, her insomniac gray eyes wincing at me. “How are we today?” she said, raising an eyebrow, vermicularly. Funny how she, too, used the royal “we.” Did every health practitioner, after looking at me, anticipate some resistance, some kind of fight, subsequently feel compelled to call upon necessary backup? “We’re dying,” I said. “No, cure for that,” she said, laughing. “It’s a prelude, right?” I said. “We’re talking music now?” “No, me,” I said. “Maybe,” she said. “But too early to tell. How was your visit?” I told her what the other doctor had said, which was pretty much what she’d told me already, and was basically telling me again. She checked my vitals. Drew some blood. The usual. “See me in about a month,” she said, handing me a script for my meds. And that was that.

I hadn’t heard from Bree in a while. She didn’t text or email, had no social media “presence” whatsoever, so you had to give her a “ring” or a “buzz”—as she would say—so after my afternoon constitutional I rang her doorbell. No answer. I pictured the cats on the other side, slowly opening their eyes, and sourly closing them again. Where was she? I pictured her rectilinear face, knobby nose jutting out between juridical eyes, her skin as worn as her old jeans. I scrolled on my machine. Thom Joyce posted: “I dreamt I rolled *Leaves of Grass* and smoked it.” Max posted: “Isn’t everything as much an idea as it is a whatever?” Jessie “drunk bought a life-size cardboard standee of the band Kiss.”

I watched, helplessly, as Hurricane Martin roared ashore Puerto Rico. Winds at over a hundred fifty miles per hour. Harrowing showers. Ravaged palm trees. Roofs ripped away. Windows smashed. That evening, the apartment froze. I called my parents. “Hello, son,” my father said. “Watching the hurricane?” I said. “We are,” he said. “And praying,” my mother said. “Praying

won't do you no good," I quoted, everything for me always a reference to something else. What was wrong with me? "What's that?" "Nothing," I said. "Hardly any of us over there, anymore," he said. "Almost everyone's here," she said. "Everyone left," he said. "I know," I said. "Still hurts," they said. I keyed up a site for hurricane relief, donated some money. "You taking care of yourself, son?" my father said. "As best I can," I said, lying. "Good, good," he said. "I'll let you go," I said. "Love you, son," they said. "Love you both," I said, tapping off. Seconds later, Led Zeppelin's version of "When the Levee Breaks" flooded in. My skin percolated. I scratched and scratched but caught myself before I broke skin. I rubbed my arms with one of the emollients, breathed in its minty scent, feeling oddly soothed.

The apartment was cold from the air-conditioned air, but this wasn't what froze but simply the climate in which the freezing occurred. But what do I mean by "froze"? It wasn't as if chemicals or ions or elements or whatever had bonded or whatever it is it had to do to alter its state or form from one to another. But which one was it, "form" or "state"? And here we come to the question of what was altered. This form or state of what? Movement? Energy? Programming? It was a screen that had frozen, that is, as I understand it, a series of operations was not responding to my input: a series of operations had stopped operating. And so I shut the mothership down, which I thought of as less a perfunctory act of giving up than an act of faith, in the idea that what had been started and then frozen could then, after having been shut down, restart, resuscitate, so that it could, once again, operate. As a child, as a believer, I believed faith was a substance, a series of proofs of unseen things. I'd long since rejected this idea as it pertained to gods and monsters, and ghosts, holy and otherwise, and miracles, but had regained, or perhaps always retained, a faith in unseen operations. Restarting didn't work, though. Nothing was refreshed. It remained frozen. But if it couldn't be unfrozen, was it really appropriate to say that it was frozen? This question kept me up. Ping-pong of the brain. I found no satisfactory answer.

Hours later, the machines turned on again. And I was relieved. And then I felt nauseated. Was I that weak, that dependent on connectivity? I searched for Ray LaMontagne's "Sarah" and played it. Lifting, elegiac. Perfect. I was standing up, arms in the air, one arm curled up, the other beneath it, as if I were holding her, Sarah, my ex, and she me, and then we were dancing, dancing across the floor. One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three... "Pacing the floor," I sang along, "want to call, but I can't so I hang up." It was too fast for me. I lost my footing and fell forward—my hands slapping the floor before my head slammed against it—and I laughed and laughed, tears coming to my eyes. Lying there, I closed my eyes, breathed in and out deeply, and tried not to think.

### **07.19**

Waking life is sometimes just another sleepwalk. Come morning, I called Zenith, told her about the difficult night I'd had. Commiserating, she asked about the itch. I told her I was doing everything I could. "What about phototherapy?" she said. "Very San Francisco," I said. She laughed. "Silicon Valley, to be specific," I said. "No, no," she said. "Should I buy some crystals, too?" I said. "Burn some sage? "It's not like that," she said, explaining how ultraviolet light was used for rashes and other skin conditions. "You can do it at Sloan Kettering," she said. "Not going to happen," I said. "What?" she said. "I'm not going to a cancer center," I said. "Oh, got it," she said, going on to talk about this theory, about how each of us is a window, divided into four panes. The first is the "arena," through which you and others can see. The second, or the "façade," is the pane through which you alone have access. The third, the so-called blind spot is the pane through which everyone, excepting you, can see. And the last is unknown, the pane through which no one has access. "But what if your window's been smashed?" I asked. She thought for some moments,

then said, “You make another window.” “Not jump through the hole?” I said. “Not funny,” she said. I didn’t tell her about Sarah, my silly fall the night before.

After we hung up, I turned on one of the screens. A report about a U.S. government targeted killing of a supposed terrorist. We had killed civilians. Old news. No one cared about it anymore and hardly anyone had ever cared about such things. Then, a feature about the latest refugee crisis, the worst in decades. Following this, a report on another supposed suitcase bomb left on an underground subway platform. But this one wasn’t a dud, not really. Once the Bomb Squad or whatever arrived, the “bomb” engaged, but instead of exploding, it gently broke open and “uttered” a single word: “Psyche!” Funny, I thought, but still terrifying. Was this some kind of taunt, a threat that meant more than silly tomfoolery? There was another report of another sinkhole, this one occurring on one of the city’s parkways. They showed aerial footage of asphalt quickly crumbling, like black crackers, the maw swallowing two cars, which ended up killing both drivers, the single passenger in one of the cars the sole survivor. They said it had been caused by a water main break. V posted: ““And the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up...”” Turned off notifications of people marking themselves “safe during The Sinkhole on the Belt Parkway, Brooklyn, NY, USA.” Max posted: “Max Morales marked everyone unsafe during the Anthropocene.” There were logical explanations for the sinkholes but the frequency of their appearances, the thought of them, the wreckage unnerved me. They could happen anywhere, at any time. Speculations like V’s weren’t helping, but I couldn’t help thinking he was right, that this *was* some kind of punishment. We were only point zero one percent of all living things, but we’d caused the loss of eighty-three percent of all wild mammals and fifty percent of plants. And this didn’t even account for what we’ve done to the water and sky and everything else. What greater pestilence than us? Planet Earth was fighting back! We’re fucked, indeed.

It was a rainy morning. Hot, though. I stood outside my building watching the rain. There was an eloquence to its fall, its gentle percussing somehow saying, “I am music, too. Dance to me!” I was fuming. Another city had succeeded in legislating against transgender people, locking them out of restrooms corresponding to their identity. Nonsense claims about pedophilia, etcetera. Made a note to talk to the Elliotts about it, to ask if they would be addressing it somehow on their show. No one was posting about Ivelisse Colon, the missing girl, anymore. I searched for her name. Nothing but the same local newspaper report. The same photo, her massive eyes event horizons.

Called Bree in the afternoon. No answer. Thought I’d try again later. Should I be wondering if she was okay, I wondered, which made me feel bad, the confusion of it, the thinking about feeling instead of just feeling. Thinking about thinking—there’s a kind of anemia to it, no, a complete bloodlessness to it, bone sucked of its marrow. Thom posted: “I dreamt of a world where art is life-support.” Art is food? Who’d said that? Checking my machine, I found it: Wonderland had said it in an interview, in the midst of the contagion years ago: “My heart goes out to all the artists right now who are struggling to make ends meet or struggling to make anything, or both. Regarding the struggle to make things, let me say this, fallow periods are sometimes necessary. Respect it, if that’s what it is. That is, do everything you can to plow and till the field even as you necessarily leave it unseeded. But how do you know if this, whatever it is, is such a period? Hard to say, but here are some things to remember as you figure it out or not: Art is food. That is, it’s absolutely necessary, not some decorative frill or gratuitous thrill. You’re a farmer. Get to work. Also, eat and eat well, lustily, and without apology. I’m still talking about art but do this with your other meals, too. Moreover, be honest. Be fearless. Go crazy. Disobey. Do something every day for someone else. This could be a meal. Express gratitude for what you have, even if it’s ‘only’ for the vision of a future feast.”

I told myself I wouldn't look at the baby. The baby who had drowned. But there I was calling it up onto a screen, the terrible image that highlighted the sick intensity, the utter tragedy of the refugee crisis. I scrolled past image after image of bodies, the drowned Sub-Saharan African migrants recovered from shipwrecks in Mediterranean crossing attempts. Swiveling my chair away from the screen, I tapped a button on another screen, muting everything in the apartment, and wept.

The day dragged on. Later, Crawford, V's lawyer, called, from a police station in the city. V had been arrested. The charges? Public indecency. Once again deciding that gallery spaces were too confining, V debuted *America #29* in a public park. You could call it a variation of #28, but that would be belittling it.

"I'll text you some footage," Crawford said. Bluetoothing the video over to one of the larger screens in the living room, I told Crawford I'd meet her at the station. The event had been captured by one of the spectators in the park. V, outfitted again in an orange jumpsuit, his hands shackled behind his back, was led by a "white" man and a "black" woman—both in top-to-toe black, wearing shades—to the center of the playground. You could see children on the swings. Everyone's eyes were on V, who was laid onto a bench by the man and woman, V's head slightly lower than the rest of his body. They put a towel over his face. The woman grabbed a nearby plastic jug and began pouring water onto his face. You could see V's body cavorting, hear him spluttering, as she poured and poured, the woman eventually emptying several gallons over his face. You could see her only in profile, her face as impassive as a coin's bas-relief portrait. There were a lot of people watching. Someone cursed. You could feel their shock, but they didn't do anything. They watched. I watched them watching. Who was watching me? *A mise en abyme par excellence*. The woman hovered the jug over him, allowing every drop of water to fall before she walked away. When she finally did, the man picked up another jug and poured its contents over V, whose muffled screams were so excruciatingly piercing that somebody off-screen must have

called the police at that moment, because minutes afterward you could hear sirens in the distance, the volume increasing until you finally saw all the flashing lights, saw the cops jump out of their cars, saw them grab the man and woman dressed in black, one of the cops removing the sopping wet towel from V's face. You couldn't hear what they were saying, but, soon after unshackling V, they cuffed him along with his assistants and led them all to the idling squad cars.

By the time I arrived at Central Booking, V had already been released and was smiling when I arrived, Crawford, dour as always, sitting beside him on a bench. "Free speech," Crawford said, standing up, tall, russet, in de rigueur black. "Clear-cut case," she said, her teeth and eyes as bright as her lips, brows, and lashes were thick, her face betraying an exhaustion borne of always having to prove her intelligence exceeded her runway model beauty. Relieved, I shook Crawford's hand and embraced V, who had just sprung up. And then I remembered why Lovetron's hug had felt so familiar. Amma! Of course! She'd hugged over thirty-three million people by the time I'd met her. "How are you?" I asked. "I'm good," V said, sounding buoyant. "You look good," I said, and he did, his eyes alight, his white bite of a smile beaming. "If a bit scruffy." "Ha!" I told them about the report I'd heard earlier about an organization of "white" people, who intended, as their spokesperson said, to "serve as human shields for communities of color under siege." "About time," V said, and laughed. "I swear it sounded like something you'd come up with," I said. Crawford had worked for years at the Center for Constitutional Rights. This kind of case was cake for her. "I'm not going to say behave yourself," she said to V, who was smiling, widely if not a bit wildly, "But I will say, be careful." "I always take great care," he said. "Oh, I know you do," she said. "Take care you don't paint a target on your head." He laughed. With that, she shook our hands and said goodbye and walked away. I didn't say anything to V about how the mainstream news was covering his arrest, how they were calling his performance "another stunt." He'd heard it before, anyway. Something else was happening though: he was taking his performances to scale,

increasing his reach by crossing the breach. Hadn't he once described galleries a kind of cage, museums a kind of cemetery? "Have everything?" I said. "Yes," he said. "Made it easy for them," stretching his arms out and slowly spinning. "Already wearing prison garb." He laughed. His assistants had been released as well, the charges against them likewise dropped. "Had a stressful day," someone said, "so—" "Pizza!" their friend responded. "Exactly!" "Hey, what do you think of Jenny Holzer?" I said. "One-hit wonder," he said, "which I think was one of her points. Anonymity, sameness, group-think." He laughed. "You only have to do it once, though." "Do what once?" "Get it right." "It?" "Exactly," he said. "That's it." He laughed again. "Pollock's drips. Warhol's soup cans. Kara Walker's silhouettes. Agnes Martin making the same less-is-more painting for fifty years more or less. I'm not interested in that, though. Having a signature." Overheard: "I was about to deck him and whatnot." Retro-slang, weird.

It was sweltering outside, a concrete and asphalt oven, everything and everyone wilted. "Let's get you in a cab," I said, touching V's shoulder. "That's okay," he said. "I'll walk." I watched as he walked away, his sprightly step in mad contradistinction to the turmoil likely roiling inside him, the ideas he wrestled with like so many fallen angels, not that I knew what was going on his head, his gnomonic texts, notwithstanding. I watched him merge into the cityscape, turn into another throbbing swatch in the grid. A text from V: "Sometimes, you have to break the rules before you can know them." The city sounded around me, traffic's flat blat, hollowly indifferent, an unceasing movement toward discontinuity. "Milk is stinky," a school-aged girl said to her father. "Juice is sticky."

Later, I streamed an interview with Play, who was in Paris now. "I'm staying positive," I heard him say. "How do you do that?" his interviewer—a sharp-featured "white" woman with a severe haircut—asked. "By living *now*," he said. It was hard to watch, to look at him, his sunken cheeks. His clothes seemed too big for him. "Now's the time," he said, winking at the screen.

I searched online for news about Mātā Amṛtānandamayī Devī, popularly known as “Amma,” meaning “mother,” to see if she was still alive. Years ago, Sarah took me to see the globe-trotting guru I’d long scoffed at. The line to get hugged by Amma at the Center for Ethical Culture was huge, and so we waited for hours. I’d wanted to leave, and almost left several times, Sarah somehow managing to convince me to stay. “What have you got to lose?” she’d said. Nothing but my patience, maybe my mind. I was exhausted by the time it was my turn, so my guard was definitely down, but I was still surprised by Amma’s hug, how warm it was, how generous it was. The feeling was the feeling I’d felt when Lovetron hugged me, a feeling of at-oneness, of what I’d once heard called “cosmosis,” a feeling of connection, of order and beauty, a feeling I’d go on to skeptically explain away. I turned off the screen, only to turn it another one, to watch another version of the city being destroyed. “Having trouble focusing?” my machine asked. “Look for patterns.”

## **07.20**

The wreckage in the wake of Hurricane Martin was enormous. Worse than after Maria even. Houses reduced to planks. Boats thrown onto shore. Airport landing strips destroyed. Tons and tons of ready-to-eat meals, generators, offices for three logistics hubs, and satellite equipment for emergency response teams had been airlifted to the island. “Everything is gone,” a man said. “Everything but us.” Looking away, he said, “And the dead.” I turned off the screens and readied myself for my lunch with Wonderland.

The rendezvous was Wonderland’s choice. It couldn’t have been any other way. She was early, as usual, already seated, as usual. Ostensibly about her book, the “conversation” would be a monologue, delivered by her, where she would at best only tangentially refer to her project. I’d

serve less as springboard than killing floor upon which she would assiduously chop up any number of ideas, and there would be many.

I wouldn't mind, though. How many people could say they spoke with a genius on a regular basis? "Regular basis"—such a strange phrase, clinical, lifted perhaps from jargon-laden research papers. And the term "genius" is thrown around so indiscriminately as to render it meaningless and therefore useless, but there was hardly a word more adequate to describe Wonderland. Her books were evidence, but it was the quality of her thinking overall, in every manifestation, in every setting, its force, the tsunami-like relentlessness of it, that solidified it. Thom posted: "I dreamt that Johnny Appleseed, Jack and the Beanstalk, and Jimmy Crack Corn all went organic." I skimmed an article about white hoods being placed over Confederate statues all over the south. Authorities weren't sure whether these acts were "perpetrated" by one person or a group.

Wonderland was tall, her hunched posture only making her that much more imposing, her age less indeterminate than irrelevant, since it was her eyes that overwhelmed: two watery orbs popping out from her face, their power like aggies knocking away mibs and ducks. Her dreadlocks massed onto her shoulders like a harassed nest. She'd recently come into the habit of calling herself "other," a term she argued was far better than "false and insidious terms," like "biracial," "mixed," "person of color," the last the target of much criticism from her, "What am I, a coloring book?" she'd said in a recent interview. "We're so invested in false designations, false descriptors, like 'white' and 'black,'" she'd said, her air quotes almost a martial art. "It's ridiculous. Red-skinned people? Yellow-skinned people? You even hear people talk about olive-skinned people. 'Jesus was olive-skinned.' Green-skinned. Jesus was *green-skinned*? Etcetera."

Wonderland lived in an "intentional community" in Bushwick called the "Zone," which was devoted to the eighties, to recreating it, its residents living as if the decade had never ended.

I'd never been there but I could easily imagine the future shlock of neoliberalism's dawn: permed bouffants, mohawks, and hi-top fades; designer stubble and banana clips; doorknocker earrings and thick rope chains; neon bangles and bright jelly shoes; scrunchies and scrunch socks; studded belts and fingerless gloves; brash blazers with shoulder pads and red leather jackets with functionless buttons and zippers.

Once the waiter arrived, Wonderland without consulting with me said, "We'll have the grilled asparagus with almond-parsley gremolata and the caramelized red and yellow onions and asiago cheese" to the waiter, who had, in odd synchrony, just sidled over to our table. And then the torrent ensued with Wonderland describing an incident where a "black" man who'd been pulled over for a minor traffic violation and who ended up being assaulted and then found dead, of suicide, according to the police, after which she carefully broke down the various wrongdoings of the officer, placing the whole tragic event in the context of the generalized assault on "black" bodies, which has its roots not only in slavery, after which she talked about the recent spate of murders of transgendered people, and the silence surrounding it, connecting this to an overall "fear of the so-called Other in American society," how much of this was rooted in Pauline Christianity, after which she astutely analyzed the looming bankruptcy of Greece, connecting it to the bankruptcy of Puerto Rico, after which she brought up the devices that enabled you to manipulate how you hear the world, connecting this to cyborg theory.

"But what does this have to do with the novel?" I said.

You couldn't call the pause that followed "pregnant" since it felt like something, a desired something, had just been aborted, but in any case it had a mass and weight to it. "Good question," she said, standing up, then sitting down. "Any extended piece of fiction—call it a 'novel'—is a collection, a confluence of forces, of arguably artificial ones, like time," she said. I nodded, not really knowing what she meant. "Among the many things that make writing a near impossible task

is that what you think of as your writing is also, and arguably entirely, what you're not writing," she said, detouring away, I thought, from what she'd been talking about, the so-called collection of forces. Maybe she would circle back to it.

"You can describe something with inordinate detail," she said, "the throbbing, auroral-pink of a just-budding cherry tree standing before the brown, crosshatched backdrop of thousands of intertwining branches, a mist of twisting twigs, thousands of creatures, mites and nits, gnats and ants, quarrelsome squirrels, a host of birds, each seemingly scatterbrained thing singing and flitting about, nearby an American Robin bathing in a puddle, something you'd never seen this type of bird do, steps away the so-called abandoned garden you hope the city's government never repairs, the bricked floor destroyed by all kinds of green growth, the sense of ruin mirroring your own sense of falling apart, and there are the boys, each one no more than seven, running after a remote-controlled car, their control freak of a caretaker operating it, allowing it to tear up the winter-scorched lawn, the machine's buzz disrupting the normally quiet—by city standards—environs, in the distance the man you, long moments before, had stopped to ask about the dog he was walking, this dog resembling one from the animal rescue shelter you had, weeks ago, volunteer-walked, a white and speckled black dog, an Australian Cattle Dog-mix, you think, who had walked beside you, careful to never spring ahead, which had made you think it was trained, you subsequently getting it to heel and give you its paw, to fetch a branch you'd thrown, its leash trailing on the ground as it bounded back and forth, this conversation reminding you later about another conversation you'd had, this one with someone you'd just met, someone you were considering dating, this person asking you if you liked dogs, you responding that you liked big dogs, you thinking aloud, as you tended to do, how strange it was that there were no toy 'roarers'—lions, leopards, jaguars, tigers—reverse-metamorphosed into something cute and tiny. 'Dogs, yes,' you say, 'Chihuahuas, no,' since you thought of them as more rodent than dog, 'They're de-tailed

squirrels, really—leggy chipmunks.’ ‘How about cats?’ your possible lover asks, you saying, ‘No, that is, until I cat-sat an indoor-outdoor,’ this cat having left you a mouse directly under the beam shot from a track-light your friends had asked you to always leave on in the foyer during the evening, your possible lover then recounting a story of how they’d once punished their cat by locking it in the kitchen, next day finding the cat waiting for them to arrive home, whereupon it jumped on a shelf, lifted up a front paw, waited for them to look at it, whereupon it toppled over a potted plant, the sheer hubris and intelligence of it making your companion laugh at the recounting, saying they ‘loved that cat.’” Wonderland, pausing, folded her arms, and said, “See what I mean?”

“No,” I said, making her laugh.

“Imagine literary art constructed as an open problem or question,” she said, “in the mathematical and scientific sense, as an accurately stated problem that has no solution, yet; where ‘problem,’ ‘question,’ ‘solution’ are broadly and imaginatively defined; where ‘solution’ is thought of as a series of explanatory acts, as deliverance of persons and places and things and ideas, as a condition of being dissolved or brought to an end, the latter being another kind of beginning.”

I couldn’t follow her, and I said as much to her, but she wasn’t listening. Would we get to talk about *Book of Suicides*, and what about the novel-in-progress? Maybe we were already talking about them. I had been wondering, though, if her obsession with these suicides was a prelude to one of her own. “You have to stop confusing the writer with the written,” she said, as if reading my mind.

Later, Wonderland sent me an email with “A Necessarily Short Disquisition on Time, As It Relates to the Novel” as the subject heading. I opened it, read the first line (“One way to destroy an idea is to unquestioningly submit to external ideas about what form that idea is allowed to take.”), closed it, clicked on the Death Clock, plugged in my date of birth, my age, sex, and body

mass index. Twenty-eight years. Laying myself down in bed, I watched the seconds count down, the digital equivalent of sand grains falling in an hourglass. I fell asleep with my machine heating up my hand.

## 07.21

Maybe art is both toxin and cure, like a vaccine. I accepted Geeta's invitation to see *Ain't I a Woman*, a one-person performance of the life of Sojourner Truth. Controversy surrounded the production following the director's decision to cast a "white" man as the lead. "So, he's in drag?" I'd asked. "Yes," Geeta had said. "But that's not what's most annoying." "Is he in blackface?" "Of a kind."

The theater, a shadowy, cavernous space, swallowed us. A refurbished ruin, its décor was a melded pastiche of Art Deco and Neo-Grec, each of these decorative styles themselves pastiches. Gaudy gilded plaster moldings. Oiled hardwood floors. Brass staircase rails. Chalky Corinthian columns and scarred walls, years of paint scraped away. "No photos," a "white" usher said, handing us programs. "And turn off all electronic devices." Another "white" usher led us to our row.

"Great seats," I said, sitting. "Thank you," squeezing Geeta's hand. "They're okay," Geeta said, craning her head toward the front, where there were some empty seats. "I'll be right back," she said. Someone's machine chimed. "Turn off your phone, please," a voice said. "I'm getting ready," a "white" woman behind me said. "Don't want to crinkle once the show starts." It sounded like she was opening up a sandwich, the smell of tuna, onion, and mayonnaise making me hungry. "No food in the theater," a voice said. "Ugh," the woman responded, putting it away. Any moment now, she'd go full Karen on us. "You are what you beat," I posted on Play's feed, and then muted my machine.

“No luck,” Geeta, returning, said. “Show’s sold out,” explaining how she’d checked to see if there were any cancellations. “These are great seats,” I said. “Whatever,” she said, a phrase I hated but I let it pass. “I hate being on top of the actors, anyway,” she said, crossing her arms. The lights slowly dimmed and then everything went dark and then a single light on the stage, where the actor held us in thrall for two hours.

The performance was incredibly moving. Even after having been prepared for the “displacements” of sex and race, what many arguably rightfully were calling “erasures” of black and female bodies, I was still alternately discomfited and disorientated, which is what art should do, right?

Sidestepping through the exiting crowd, Geeta and I went to a bar nearby for drinks. A glass of cab for her, bourbon neat for me. “What did you think?” I asked, Geeta’s stiffened body leaving the theater already having at least partially answered that question. “Think?” she said. “I don’t know what to think,” her eyes glaring. “I’m livid. I mean, the nerve,” she said. “Nerve, indeed,” I said, meaning the opposite of what she’d meant, the noise around us filling in the space between us. There was a talking head on the goggle-box. Couldn’t make out what she was saying. “Crazy thing is, I cried,” Geeta said. “I mean, I was so mad—here’s this man playing a woman, first of all, and then he’s white, and we’re supposed to imagine he’s black. I couldn’t understand it.” “Believable, though,” I said. “Yes, that’s the strangest thing about it,” she said. “I fucking believed him.” “Uncanny,” I said. “It was like watching Noh, as careful, as subtle as that.” She agreed. “But I’m still pissed,” she said. I nodded. I understood the conflict, the double-mindedness of it. “It should have been a black woman up there,” she said. “Maybe there was,” I said. “Certainly felt that way to me.” “But her skin, *his* skin,” she said. “I saw Truth up there,” I said. “Truth?” she said. “Sojourner Truth,” I said. “Right,” she said, laughing.” She went to the bathroom. “We believe every connection brings the world a bit closer,” my machine said. “And that’s something

to celebrate!” Jaron posted: “I’ve got a hacking cough, the kind that makes your teeth hurt, and makes you feel like your ears are getting zapped by an electric cattle prod.” Ashleigh posted: “I’m drinking a tea called ‘Tension Tamer’ and hoping that it works.” Overheard: “You’re sixty,” she said. “You can’t wear that skirt.” “Sixty, exactly,” she responded. “Old enough to wear whatever the fuck I want.”

Geeta returned, and I was on my second drink. “We make quite the pair,” she said. I nodded, not knowing how to respond. “I can talk to you, though,” she continued. Everything, though, was in that “though.” “Men at work—and yeah, it’s mostly men so whatever—they don’t have anything to talk about, I mean, they talk about things, things you’d expect. Sports and television.” “Most people do,” I said. “Can’t really fault them for that.” “Sure you can—I can,” she said. “They don’t have a clue about art, about music, real music, and forget about literature.” Geeta had written poetry as an undergrad, and maybe she still did for all I knew, and I wanted to know, but she always veered away from my queries about it so I just stopped asking. Wasn’t sure how she reconciled her critiques about “race” with her job, which, arguably was economically exploitative, the victims, by any measure, disproportionately “people of color.” It was a conversation I was wise to avoid. So we’d circle around it by talking about other things. It’s generally how we dealt with our relationship. Once you start questioning motivation, intimacy stopped, at least with her, and neither she nor I wanted that. “I love your frontal lobes,” she said. “In spite of everything.” You had to love the qualifications. “Kiss me, you fool,” she said, so I kissed her on the mouth, softly, slowly increasing the pressure, and then kissed her cheek, which I found unusually pillowy, and then traveled up her neck, sniffing as I kissed. “Speaking of lobes,” I said, chewing the skin around her earrings. She pushed me away, laughing. “Take me home,” she said.

Taking out my machine, I reserved a taxi with Luft, one of the corporate monster app-based transportation networks. Our car arrived in minutes. Once the car was moving, Geeta put her sweater over my lap. Slipping a hand underneath it, she rubbed my penis over my pants, and I was instantly hard. She kept talking about the show, and I said nothing, looking out the window, as her hand slowly and assiduously rubbed back and forth, the streets outside a blur of lights and colors and shapes. I wondered about the cab's camera, how much of Geeta and me—what she was doing to me—was being recorded and stored, and yes, disseminated, ha ha.

“Hello, Philippe,” she said to the uniformed man opening the door of her building for us. “Good night, Ms. Geeta,” he said, a long scar screaming from his face. “This is my friend Ergo,” she said. “Good night, sir,” he said, quickly sizing me up. “Doesn't like me,” I said, on the elevator. “Who?” “The, I don't know, security guard?” “Philippe?” She laughed. “He's just being overprotective.” “Where's he from?” I said. “East Flatbush?” she said. “Originally,” I said. “Haiti,” she said. “Ah,” I said. “Makes sense.” “What?” “The scar,” I said. “Too young for the Tonton Macoute,” I said, “but maybe from one of the newer but equally terrifying death squads.” “Philippe used to be an engineer,” she said. Pained me to think of how many former doctors and teachers and architects were working in the American empire's service industry. Pained me to think of how underpaid all of them were.

Geeta was having work done on her place, that is, the kitchen had been completely gutted and was slowly being remade and would have the best of everything. She'd taken command of the whole design. She knew exactly what she wanted and always made it happen, impressively. Except for her love life. “I can never get what I want,” she'd say. “And what's that?” I'd say. “Well, if I knew what I wanted, I would have it,” she'd say, her face the confident sheen of someone who always got what they wanted.

I glanced at the drawings on the table that the interior designer had left behind, Geeta's markings all over the vellum. "Want a drink?" she asked, already pouring some bourbon for me. She also poured herself a shot, which she peremptorily knocked back whole. Sidling over to me, she pushed me toward the couch, pushed me down, then straddled me. She took off my shirt, kissed my face, my neck, licked my nipples, which I didn't like but I didn't say or do anything to let on. I reached up to touch her, and she pushed my hands away. Taking off her shirt and bra, she grabbed my head and thrust it between her breasts. She was strong. I wasn't sure where she was going with this but I went with it. She jumped off me. Grabbing my hand, she led me to the bedroom. Standing against the bed, she slid off her panties. Laying down, she said, "Lick me." "With pleasure," I said, crouching, curling my feet under my behind, pressing my face against her body, her fleshy skin, smelling her, kissing her inner thighs, licking her clitoris, softly lapping at first, then in circles, then in figure eights, and alternating among them. Geeta moaned and moaned and yawned and moaned and yawned, and then, moments later, she was snoring, so I stopped, and laid down beside her. Restless, I rose again, retrieved my machine, and laid down beside her again. An article about "ghost words"—words without "established usage" that sometimes mistakenly make it into dictionaries—led me to an article about "paper towns" and other "map traps" to catch copycats. There was a billionaire whose new hobby was to turn these invented dead ends and whatnot into real things—subverting the subversions, yes, but far less imaginative. "Money can make anything happen," his actions seemed to say, that money is more powerful than the imagination because it can realize what the mind has imagined. But art is never about power but the subversion of it. Good art, at any rate. Following a link to an article about paper architects, I discovered the Soviet-era Russian architects who'd challenged notions of so-called unbuildable spaces, dwellings, etc., calling their visionary blueprints merely unbuilt, declaring that anything that could be imagined could and would be eventually realized, utopian notions, yes, but brimming with a kind of

exuberant hope of technology catching up with ingenuity, while simultaneously asserting it would always be behind it.

“Look at the moon!” Z texted. “Will do,” I responded, rising then walking toward the window, where I could see the orb blazing. “There’s a ring around it,” I texted. “Lovely, yes,” she responded. “Is it full?” “Almost,” she texted. “99.8%” Waning Gibbous,” my machine said. “Beautiful,” I responded. “A shining reminder that ‘almost’ is sometimes more than enough,” she texted. We wished each other good night, and I slipped back into bed with Geeta, her snore somewhere between wheeze and gasp.

I put my earbuds on, keyed up Max Richter’s *Sleep*, a melancholic lullaby lasting more than eight hours. “Dream 1 (before the wind blows it all away)” begins with what sounds like a heavily-reverbed keyboard, its throbbing chord clusters eventually introducing a simple, lilting melody that only really manifests halfway through the piece. Listening to it, I’m suspended. The section dissolves into “Cumulonimbus,” an appropriately-titled section, suggesting those giant, dense, billowy formations you look at lying down on a blanket in a park or beside a lake or at a beach, or from the passenger seat of a car or on a speeding train, which you try to make shapes out of, simultaneously ignoring their promise of atmospheric stability. The throbbing chords seamlessly give way to a trance-inducing drone that quietly implodes and explodes, but that doesn’t capture what’s happening. There are multiple drones happening, some appearing intermittently, others lasting for the duration of the section, for the most part, the whole sounding almost machine-like, only to taper off into “Dream 2 (entropy),” where the throbbing chords with its lilting melody reappear. It hardly suggests the lack of order or predictability characteristic of entropy, though. It’s actually a kind of restoration, returning you to the composition’s introductory figure. It’s also less reverb-drenched, which suggests a kind of solidity, or solidifying, at the very least. There is a breaking down, though, subtle as it is, one resulting in complete silence. “Path 3

(7676)” features vocals, which offer another very simple melody, the kind a child would make up, sitting on the beach, sculpting things out of sand or while watercolor painting, making whimsical shapes, a language all their own. Another voice appears, pierces through the other melody really. There’s a heavily-treated, maybe even slightly distorted, air-pump organ playing sustained notes, making these voices sometimes sound like they’re singing in the wind. The higher-pitched soloist disappears and another organ melody appears, the initial vocal melody continuing. At some point, I fell asleep, ear buds blossoming.

## 07.22

The sun painted the room red as I rose from bed. Geeta’s head was under a pillow. She moaned when I touched her shoulder. Rising, she sat on the edge of the bed, holding her face in her hands. “Head hurt?” I said. “Cinderblock,” she said, limply pointing to her head. “I’ll get you some water,” I said, slipping my boxers on. “Such a gentleman,” she said.

“Your walls are empty,” I said, opening her refrigerator, where I found a jug of distilled water. “Like your head,” she said. “I wish,” I said, pouring water into a glass. I found an apple, cut it into slices. “Thanks,” she said, after I handed her the glass. “No, thanks,” she said when I brought the plate of apples to her. “Not hungry.” I shoved a slice into my mouth, enjoying its crunchy lusciousness, its luscious crunchiness. “Just to be clear,” she said. “What we had last night wasn’t sex.” “Okay,” I said. “Okay? That’s it?” The space between us hardening. “What am I supposed to say?” “We fooled around,” she said. A shell, a wall. “Okay,” I said. “Sex is penetration,” she said. “Okay,” I said. “Why do you keep saying that? You sound like you’re saying ‘Whatever you say,’ when you say ‘Okay,’” she said. “So if I say ‘Whatever you say’ does it mean I’m saying ‘okay?’” I said. “Whatever,” she said. “So you say,” I said. And she laughed. “Okay,” she said, and I laughed. I crunched on another apple slice. “I love your shoulders,” she said. “Thanks.” “It’s

a compliment,” she said. “I know,” I said. “Hence my thanks.” “Always so edgy,” she said. “Not always anything.” “You know what I mean.”

I made coffee for us. We both drank it black. “Don’t tell me to have a great day,” she said. “Okay, I won’t,” I said. “So cooperative,” she said. “Something like that,” I said. We were quiet for a while. “Look,” she said, “whatever it may look like, I’m actually WYSIWYG.” “I like what you did right there,” I said. “What?” she said. “The repetition of ‘look,’” I said, “which might even be a form of zeugma, and then the variation of ‘look’ in the use of see, which is embedded in your abbreviation.” “You should’ve been a poet,” she said. “Thanks,” I said, almost fully dressed. I “You were really great,” she said, blowing me a kiss. Familiar flickering images. Was this a movie? “Rock on,” I said, opening the door, feeling even stupider.

As soon as I was outside, I lit up a cigarette, wishing I had another cup of coffee in hand. Goldfoil sky made my eyes teary, so I snapped on my sunglasses. The heat did nothing to slow anyone or anything. A bare-chested man in his sixties roller-skated by, his thong sweat-soaked, his huge earphones and snaky swerve marking him a seventies throwback, the decade of disco fever and the launch of *laissez-faire* economic liberalism—which of the two had the more devastating effect was still an open question. Jessie “drunk bought a ‘Complete Mountain Climber’s Kit,’ which contained a helmet, climbing rope, harness, belay device, locking carabiner, chalk bag, and chalk ball. Perfect for beginning climbers!” V posted: “Those who failed history are bound to rewrite it.” Thom posted: “I dreamt I discovered which animal a trombone is from.”

I walked to my favorite pizza restaurant, well, my favorite one nearby—well, it was a fifteen-minute walk away. A stampede of motorcycles passed. Shrieking and snorting. Road hogs, indeed. I saw a middle-aged “white” man push a “Latinx” girl, almost making her fall, another man, her father, presumably, getting in the “white” man’s face, saying, “You’re lucky I don’t rip your head off!” whereupon a ball-shaped “black” man told the “Latinx” man to respect elders, the

father laughing in his face, saying, “He just pushed my daughter,” the “black” man pointing to two cops nearby. “Cops?” the father said, laughing and shaking his head, his daughter grabbing his arm, pleading with him to let it go, the two of them finally walking off, the crowd thronging around them dispersing like billiard balls.

“Two slices,” I said to the pizza guy, who was wearing the red and white vertically-striped shirt you never see pizza guys wear anymore, not in real life, anyway. “Heat them up, please,” I said. “These just came out,” he said. “Of the oven?” “Where else?” “Okay,” I said, paying him. I brought the slices over to where the spices were. I grabbed a bottle of crushed red pepper flakes. “Don’t do that!” a voice said behind me. I turned and saw a young “white” woman with Down syndrome. She was sitting with an older “white” woman. “Oh, why not?” I said. “Because it’s too hot, silly,” she said. “Oh, I’m always silly,” I said, which made her laugh. “Mom, that man is so silly!” she said to the woman sitting at the table with her, making her mother and me laugh, the girl laughing, too, louder than her mother and me. Made me think back to when I was boy playing in a park with Richard, a boy with Down syndrome, how I chased him around in circles, Richard laughing and laughing, the sound of it aural gold. We called him “Richard the Lionhearted.” His death several years later crushed all of us.

Arriving back at the apartment, I called Zenith. “I almost like her better this way,” she said, referring to her dementia-suffering mother. “She grabbed my father’s hand and my hand and said she loved us so much. And her face was glowing with this light. Surprised me,” she said, sighing. “She’d never been demonstrative.” “Demonstrative?” I said. “She never showed us affection,” she said. “I mean, she did everything she was supposed to do. Worked. Provided. Outsourced everything else, though. Cooking, cleaning, getting us ready in the morning, getting us ready for bed.” “Sad,” I said. “Not really,” she said. “It was all we knew. And now she’s this whole other person.” We were quiet for a while. “Holding her hand, I said, ‘So nice to finally meet you. Where

have you been all this time?’ And she laughed, saying, ‘I’ve always been here. I’ll always be here for you.’” Z laughed and then burst into tears. “I feel so tired,” Z said. “Can’t wait for Norm to come.” Her brother lived on the left coast, in Silicon Valley—do they still call it that? “Tell me something happy,” she said. “Um..” “Come on, you can do it.” “You’re putting me on the spot.” She laughed. “Okay, tell me about something from your childhood.” “I have a bad memory.” “Something that made you happy.” “I have a really bad memory.” “You already said that.” “See?” We laughed. “I do!” I said. “Come on!” “Okay,” I said. “Remember the New York City blackout of 1977? I remember everything turning off, the suddenness of it, the sound of the looters outside, the sound of windows being smashed, the klaxon blast of alarms going off, and I had this plastic flute, and I was playing the flute, dancing around in my underwear, superhero underwear, and my mother and father were laughing, clapping, keeping a rhythm going for me, all in the dark, a flashlight spotlighting my every move.” “I love it!” she said.

It was night and I was walking again. A hot and sticky night where every room is an enamel-painted oven and air-conditioners sputter out, like discomfited newborns, and nosebleeds fall in thin rivulets and desperate men and women yearn for icicles and slush, and those same people walk in a fever dream, the asphalt spongy beneath their feet. It felt like I was wading through something, this something also seeping into me, but I trudged on. I saw a dark, blobby mass a block away, and it was moving, moving from the wall and toward the street and then back toward the wall, a smaller blob falling out from the larger one at moments. There was a dry sound, percussive, a thump like some plump thing had been dumped on the ground. Approaching, I saw the dark blob separate, break into parts, into bodies. And I could see them: three figures pounding on another figure, pummeling into him, and I saw stars, and colors—red, white, and blue—and I was running now. They were kicking him, the “superhero,” laughing at him, but all I could hear

was his whimpering, all I could see was the torn up suit, the shredded cape, the mask in a heap feet away from him.

The attackers looked up as I approached, my screams to “Get the fuck away from him!” frightening them off. Rushing to the “superhero”’s side, I struggled to lift him up, to prop him up against the wall. Grabbing his mask, I tried to wipe his face, a doughy mess, a mashed-up jelly donut. “No, no, no, no, no!” he said. “Don’t!” Avoidance of eye contact, body rocking, the exaggerated, frenzied way he spoke—signs anyone could read. He was an innocent, who’d likely been obsessed with caped crusaders with superhuman powers ever since he was a boy and had never grown out of it, largely because he couldn’t grow out of it. He swatted at my hand, finally grabbing the dirty mask, which he dragged over his head. I told him I’d call for an ambulance. Shaking his head, he said, “No!” over and over again. “Okay,” I said. “You’re okay.” Squatting, I said, “What’s your name?” “Starman,” he said, staggering up, “My name is Starman,” his crumpled body a broken jack-in-a-box. “Okay, Starman,” I said, bouncing up, putting my arm around him. We walked off, and I imagined someone behind us watching *us* slowly turn into a dark blob, merge at last with the darkness.

We finally came to the beat-up brownstone where he lived with a woman, his mother, I’d quickly find out. What happened was what you expected to happen. She opened the door—ghost-faced at the sight of him—whereupon he blubbered, and she cleaned him up, dressed the scratches and bruises. Leading him to his room, she invited me wait. She came out a short while later, saying she’d put him to bed. She was a short woman, muscular, though, with broad shoulders and beefy arms. A massage therapist, I’d discover.

A cat emerged, seemingly out of nowhere. I hated cats, but even I had to admit that, generally speaking, cats aren’t stupid. Vainglorious, yes. Passive-aggressive, yes. Takers who give only when they want something, yes. Bunting you with their heads, curling their sinuous bodies

around your legs, yes, which fools you into thinking you're receiving affection when they're actually taking it, yes, getting exactly what they need. She, the cat, was fat, too, obese and self-satisfied—American, in other words.

Starman's mother emerged from the bedroom, saw the cat hovering around its empty dish. She grabbed a tin can, and the cat leaped onto the kitchen counter, pressed itself against her arm as the opener teathed into the can slowly spinning open in her hands. She mixed the translucent preservative into the pink mash of fish-stuff, the smell of it disgusting, something in the processing, likely, the sliminess of it reminding me of other slimy things, like phlegm, reminding me I hadn't been sick for over three years. That is, until I got sick, a different kind of sickness.

I could hear *Everyone Is Gay* playing in the bedroom. "What do you think of the show?" I asked. She didn't want to talk about the show, so we sat in silence for a while, Bella and Frank's voices intermittently wafting into the air.

"I can't get Dominic to stop," she said, finally. "And why should he stop anyway?" she said, and I nodded. She wasn't really talking to me anyway. "It makes him happy," she said. She went on to talk about the "early signs," how his autism had revealed itself. That Dominic wouldn't talk until after he had seen his first superhero movie, how he'd developed a whole conversation style stringing together his favorite lines from comic book movies. Over the years, he added more and more phrases until you could hardly distinguish the lines from everything else. I left without learning her real name, without them learning mine.

### 07.23

I hadn't seen myself attending the block party in the Zone but there I was. "Peace, god," the first person I encountered said. Not so much throwback but readymade, the auburn-tinged man wore a bright baby-blue tracksuit, thin white stripes pouring down the sleeves like highway divider lines.

I flashed the peace sign, unsure if I was doing the right thing, and yes, “black” capitalist Spike Lee’s fraught “joint” did come to mind.

Few good things had come out of the eighties. It was the age of the Teflon POTUS, etc., after all, which is to say that whatever good happened was necessarily an exception to a shitshow. Then again, every decade has more downs than ups. It took Herbie Hancock’s “Rockit,” blasting through the air, to remind me of the decade’s Afrofuturism. Teenagers transforming their bodies into robots, every limb a place to energize, feet sliding across floors as if on ice. Turntables, mixers, and drum machines a fantastic dynamo propelling you across time and space.

There was graffiti everywhere you looked in the Zone, vibrating off bricks and concrete: outer space backdrops; neon-bright requiems in bubble letters; action figures exploding in splatter-paint splendor; angular, geometricized configurations—“wildstyle”—the alphabet as three-dimensional optical illusions. People writing—or “bombing,” as the artists called it—themselves into existence. A group of boys and girls were swiftly twisting Rubik’s cubes, their hands a blur as they competed to see who’d solve the puzzle toy first. There was a bank of arcade videogame cabinets, where a balding “black” man expertly maneuvered a ravenous yellow disc through mazes to eat pellets and ghosts, stretching a case-quarter to last forever. I stopped by a crowd gathered around another gamer, her bronze face fixed on the screen, a beatific smile crisply pulling at her lips. Carefully choosing her cache of weapons, gear, food, and teammates, she pressed the blinking bright orange button, which set off the mission. A jewelry box’s plaintive waltz segued into whistling, swoops accelerating until it screeched, like a braking train. An army of stick-figures bounced across the apocalyptic city’s yawning wasteland, concealing themselves behind overturned automobiles, garbage receptacles, and other debris. Catching them in her cross-hairs, she eliminated each of them easily, her elongated fingers masterfully tapping the assorted pushbuttons and joysticks. Moments after walking away, I could hear her audience whooping.

Giving up finding Wonderland, I walked over to a makeshift stage, where a crowd was gathering. There were two turntables on the stage and a mixing board, huge speakers flanking the equipment. Moments later, I realized why I'd come to the Zone, why I was meant to be here: Meet Blank, virtuoso on the "wheels of steel," who expertly manipulated electricity, rode waves of feedback and distortion, his name, I'd come to discover, always preceded by one of the traditional honorifics: Grandmaster, Grandwizard, Cutmaster, Mixmaster—whatever, they all applied. Standing on stage, Blank wove his thigh-length dreadlocks above his head, the resulting form resembling a samurai's helmet, bunched strands thrusting out from both sides. "This is not the page you were looking for," my machine said.

Silence—Blank, head down, standing before his equipment, everyone rapt. Slipping a headset on, he grabbed a record from a crate, slipped it out of its cover, set it spinning on one of the turntables. "Make some noise!" the speakers blurted out, another record already out, placed on the other table, both discs spinning, like grooved mandalas, like a wheel of fortune, a boom bap beat sounding, Blank extending the refrain, setting it askilter, intersecting the composition with the question: "Where are you?" Calling out Brooklyn, the Bronx, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island, Blank switched back and forth between two spinning disks. "Back up! Back up, motherfucker!" the speakers blurted. He danced on an array of stomp-boxes: digital delays, distortions, echoplexes, wah-wahs, slowly layering sorrowful hums, sobbing swells, which resounded like appoggiaturas, Blank interlacing Delta blues knife-slicing slide guitar glissandos and quivering quarter-step-bent gut-strings and arpeggiated tone clusters.

Time dissolved as Blank merged Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway's ecstatic version of "Come, Ye Disconsolate" with Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's euphoric yearning and celebrating, metamorphosing from this visionary incubator to symphonic swells and then a waterfall turning into a rain shower, percolating into tympani, Blank's left hand changing the rhythm from boom

bap to 7/4 time, introducing a slippery sitar figure, pitch-shifting it with his feet, the playful alap transfigured into bubbles popping, a glass bottle clinking intermittently, Blank's eyes rolling into his eyelids until they became red slits, freshly cut wounds, his lips quivering, prayerfully, Blank mouthing or whispering something—supplications?—his left hand releasing a metronomic beat while his right manipulated the record's micrometric grooves, bleeps and blurts sounding like R2D2 blowing up.

I took out my machine to record the performance, quickly pocketing it again after seeing no one else had taken out their machine, throwing me back to concerts where uplifted flickering lighters were the norm. "Let them know what time it is," the speakers shouted, Chic announcing the answer: "Good times! These are the good times!" Blank placing disks with pieces deliberately cut out of them so that melodic and rhythmic fragments would repeat, Blank sampling sounds with the snap of a foot pedal, the array of machines a magnificent blender also comprising echo chambers, compressors, backward-simulators, and revolving Leslie cabinets, and reverbs pushed to extreme wetness.

Sweat pouring from his head, popping off his fingertips, Blank used the liquid to ease squeaks into the mix. Scenes from classic kung fu flicks playing on a large screen behind him, he improvised soundtracks for the choreographed fight scenes. Trash can beats exploded into laser beam blasts. His left hand pounded a bass drum pattern while his right hand punctuated a shotgun snare. He smeared on Chuck D preaching: "Refuse to lose..." and "Hear the drummer get wicked!" He layered on a drum solo—by Tony Williams, I'd come to learn—then, "One, two, three, four, five, six, do it!" and then through it all, out of synch: "Can you count?" "Five, five, five against one." Raising his arms, he repeatedly clenched and unclenched his hands. Moments later, he squeezed liquid from two plastic bottles onto his turntables, the liquid splashing from them. A lit

match. Turntables on fire. Screams. From us? From the speakers? I couldn't be sure. Then there was smoke. And Blank was gone.

I immediately searched for Blank. I saw ten people sitting down, each one cradling a blue-light emitting machine of some kind—the screen generation. Overheard: “The only animals we ever had was two iguanas.” Overheard: “I'm leaving. You have no respect for my time.” Made me think of Wonderland's essay about time, where she writes: “Time: Some would say it's a prison while I think of it as a prism, a prismatic continuum, a malleable one, time shaping *us* as much as we endeavor to shape *it*.”

I finally found Blank, standing against a wall, shadowed, smoking a cigarette, two women approaching him. “We loved your set,” the “black” woman said. “You really took us somewhere.” The “white” woman nodded and smiled, her face flushed with red wine afterglow. The two women eyed each other and giggled, their girlishness now belying their passage through the nebulous thirties. “Thanks,” Blank said, stomping out his cigarette with a brisk twist of his steel-toed boots. “State of emergency,” Blank said. “Yes,” the “white” woman said, puzzled, a Bodhi seed bracelet slipping down her wrist. “Sometimes you have to simply stand out of the way,” he said, “allow things to unfold, flower, happen.” He shook their hands, began walking off, and I approached. Facing him, I rattled off some praise. Looking me over, Blank said, “I like music that sounds like falling down or, rather, the sound of the potential energy of something about to fall. The fall, if it happens, will be hard and it will hurt. I want to suggest, reproduce the sound of that imbalance, of the struggle to gain equilibrium and order.”

I wasn't going to keep up.

**07.24**

I hear you, Allen Ginsberg, but I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by television, social media, the internet, superhero movies, and spectator sport politics, etc. Walking around since morning, I didn't know where I was. I stopped at a corner store for coffee and cigarettes, its security camera making me feel insecure. I'd been recorded several times that day, at various intersections, at my bank's ATM, etc., and I'd be recorded several times more before the day was out. There were two millennials working behind the store's counter, one of them actually working, though, since the taller of the two, "white" and burly, took people's orders and got started on them while the other, "white," waifish, neckbearded, dug coins and bills out of a big plastic jar. Flattening the bills and placing them in a pile, Neckbeard separated the quarters from the rest of the coins, piled them into groups of four, seemingly oblivious to the crowd of people who'd since joined the line, the other worker rolling his eyes at the other guy but not saying anything, so I didn't say anything either, much as I wanted to. Max posted: "What's the link for the stripes and stars 'gallantly streaming'?" Jessie "drunk bought a NoPhone," a rectangular simulacrum of our machines. "It's the new Pet Rock!" she posted. Thom posted: "I dreamt you called me on the xylophone."

Geeta texted me a link to an article detailing how the playwright of *Ain't I a Woman?* had objected to the casting of the production we had just seen. "It's a slap in the face of black women," the playwright said, "and not just black female actors, who already struggle to get roles in an industry privileging white people over everyone else, but black women everywhere." The article went on to tell how the playwright subsequently added a clause to the play's licensing agreement stipulating that the role of Truth must be played by a "black" female actor.

There were various groups calling for boycotts of the show. It reminded me of the brouhaha over *Open Casket*, "white" artist Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till, and the protests when it

hung at the Whitney Biennial back in 2016. The peculiar properties of *succès de scandale* brought more attention to the painting than it would have likely received had it simply been ignored. It's a messy painting, Francis Bacon-lite, etc., though, but fixed in my mind is the image of people standing in front of the painting, intentionally blocking it from view, a misguided protest against the painting's supposed aestheticizing of "black" trauma, the spectacle an odd form of censorship, a kind of collective imposed blindfolding on others, a spectacle bringing attention to itself and away from a conversation on past and ongoing violence against "black" bodies, not just shootings, which get the most attention, when they get attention at all, but also the violence of nearly fifty percent of "black" children under six living in poverty, the violence of forty percent of the nation's homeless being "black" people although "black" people make up only thirteen percent of the population, the violence of "black" people being incarcerated at more than five times the rate of "white" people. Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

Putting on some of Blank's music, I turned all the screens to black. I couldn't hear anything but I felt something. Subsonic frequencies. "If you already know where you're going," Blank had said, "you haven't let yourself go." I closed my eyes, tried to let go, failed. I turned on my machine, found no messages, turned it off, closed my eyes again, drifted, the music throbbing. I opened my eyes, turned on my machine again. No messages. Turning off my machine, I closed my eyes again, telling myself not to turn my machine on again. I turned my machine on again and I clicked on the Death Clock, plugged in my data. Twenty-eight years left. I watched the digital "grains of sand" fall. What doesn't kill you weakens you for something that will. The music throbbed and I thrummed and I dozed off.

Information without discernment is the very definition of glut, and malaise its consequence. There was a party out on Strong Island—isn't that what Chuck D called it?—at an "oceanfront" dive

peering into a mere horseshoe of a dank bay chockablock with docks built with what, from a bleary-eyed distance, looked like notched miniature logs. “Drinks and conversation”—it was Blaine’s phrase, Blaine the eldest son of the owner of a used car dealership. The Germans were drinking White Russians. We were breathing Scotch from the Premium Quality Stainless Steel hip flask we’d been trading off, it being already drained of its six-ounce capacity.

Blaine left me with a friend of a friend of a friend, who told me she was enjoying “a rare night away from the kids.” She said they’d had three and I could already feel myself shrinking, wondering what it was about me that made people feel they could share the worst of the worst with me, dragging me down into their sinkhole. Had another actual one appeared? I wanted to take out my machine to find out but now this friend of a friend of a friend was telling me how the child had died of Cockayne syndrome. “Old age,” her husband said, turning away again, toward the bar. “Jokes,” she said, her cheeks pitted, like a bruised peach. “It’s how he copes.” Her resolve a shield. Some people don’t so much change the subject as change the object. I didn’t know what to say. Better to not speak your mind lest you empty it, so I just listened while she showed me photos of the baby. Its skin looked gray, but it seemed happy, the parents, too, until you registered their eyes, which betrayed fatigue and unfathomable sadness.

The weight of memory—how do we bear it? What are we without it, without the stories we build from them? Mere storage-houses of sensations? Arash came to mind, his chronic illness, the Lyme’s Disease, his life wrecked by a tick. Yet another argument against camping, not that I needed any more of them. The woman told me the story of her failed marriage, the story now, after its many retellings, a burnished thing, an object marked by its compression, its logic of inevitability, its epiphanic frisson. Overheard: “Bag your ball of sunshine lest I get all cloudy in your face.” At least I think that’s what I heard. I finally pulled myself away from the woman, and looked for Blaine. I found him with one of the Germans, the only single one, the other two

unhappily married, each one publicly complaining of sex without orgasm, their respective husbands at “Man Camp,” a debauched weekend of Jell-O shots and gunplay.

I left without saying goodbye, and headed to another party, walking distance from this one. The house was dilapidated. The word “clapboards” came to mind. A barking pit bull “greeted” me at the door, his owner saying, “Shut up, Brutus!” Holding him down by the neck with one hand, he extended the other in greeting. “He’s really friendly,” he said. “Once you get to know him.” Overheard: “I’m a gracious loser.” A “white” man and “black” woman playing Backgammon, a game I’d always disliked, because so much was left up to chance. Sure, a great deal of skill was necessary to become an expert at the game, but the expertise entailed an ability to navigate random results, the tumbling of dice and cube. I preferred chess, which had no *deus ex machina* to waylay your well-played plans. Three “white” women puzzled over a five hundred-piece puzzle of a rustic scene: a dilapidated farmhouse, beside it a rusty silo. Made me think of a movie where one of the characters jumps into a sorghum-filled silo, suffocating as he sinks into the grain. I sat with the women for a while, enjoying the mild satisfaction spreading over their faces every time they properly affixed a piece within the whole. Looking behind the box’s lid, I found someone had written: “Missing 1 piece.” “Makes it a bit more challenging,” one woman said, without lifting her head from the table, where clumps of pieces formed some understory here, and a blue blotch hovered in what would eventually become a robin’s egg-blue sky. “When you think of it,” she added. Overheard: “Suck it up, bitch!” “Yeah, put your big-girl thong on!”

Entering the living room, I found all the furniture covered in aluminum foil. “Because of the cat,” a “white” woman said, pointing at a tuft of fur on the floor. “You’re drunk,” she said. “What makes you say so?” I said. “The sternness,” she said, which made me laugh. “I’m Ergo,” I said, extending my hand. “Are you packing?” she said, surprising me. “No,” I said, but thinking I had a “lion in my pocket, and baby, he’s ready to roar,” as Prince sang. “I feel safer knowing there

are people around carrying.” “Guns?” I said. “Yes,” she said. Jeez. She walked me to the backyard, where there was a massive pool, partiers ringed around it. “And, I just want you to know—forget it,” she said. “Forget what?” “Look, I just want you to know I don’t just go around wearing my bathing suit in front of just anybody.” “Understood,” I said. “It means, ‘Sexy,’” she said, pointing to the Chinese character tattooed on one of the love handles bulging out from her too-tight, acid-washed low-riders. She was a pear-shaped woman: a small head atop a fairly thin torso above massive buttocks. “Yeah, no,” she said. I wanted to go home.

She left to get a drink. I saw another pit bull. It was chained to a pole. It growled intermittently but it was otherwise calm. And then, glass smashing and people yelling. And then I saw it, the other pit bull crashing into the backyard, its owner scrambling behind it. In moments, it was on top of the other pit bull, which went berserk. The two dogs locked onto each other, and everyone around them was screaming. *I* was screaming. A mountain of a “white” woman sprung toward the dogs, a metal folding chair in hand. People were screaming at her, and I couldn’t tell if they were warning her off or encouraging her. She lifted the chair over her head and brought it quickly down, smashing it against the head of the dog whose teeth were locked around the other’s neck, the dog finally letting go only after it had killed the other dog, blood, its own and the other dog’s, covering its face, dripping from its teeth. I don’t remember how I got back to the apartment. “See more memories,” my machine said.

## 07.25

“Ah, you’re a man of words,” Zenith had messaged me before we’d ever met. I’d written something about her eyes. She’d said I had “smiley-eyes,” to which I responded, “Yes, but more besides, like a certain devil-may-care élan and an unrehearsed sensuality.” We joked about men having to make the “first move.” “I am a man of words, indeed,” I’d said. “And actions, which

some say speak louder than the aforementioned, but I say words are speech acts. Ha! Speaking of words making things happen even when they themselves are a happening, what say you to meeting up for a beverage, adult or otherwise?” We had a great first date, a rarity. Like most first dates through online dating, we talked a lot about online dating. Z was interested in the “art and Eros of conversation,” where people are unafraid of intimacy, each one confidently speaking body and mind. “From there, anything is possible,” she’d said. We both loved Monty Python. Her favorite skit was the Proust recitation one, mine the “Ministry of Funny Walks” bit, John Cleese at his physical comedy best. “Speaking of Proust,” she’d said, “his convolutions are a kind of time-and-space travel,” which launched us into sharing traveling stories. Having been to “thirty countries and counting,” she definitely had me beat. “Do layovers count?” I’d asked, jokingly trying to boost my number. Talking about guilty pleasures, she said she liked *Home Alone*, but the only thing I could remember about the movie was its poster’s reference to Munch’s *The Scream*. I remarked on how often the gesture appeared in art history, about *Matthias Grünewald’s Head of a Crying Child*, about Bacon’s popes screaming in cages, the painter inspired by the silent scream in Eisenstein’s *The Battleship Potemkin*. Later, I recalled and texted her a list of other *cris de coeur*: the nameless woman in Arnold Schoenberg’s *Erwartung* and Klytemnestra in Strauss’s *Elektra*. Z loved birdwatching, and I told her that all I could identify were blue jays and rock pigeons. She mentioned many other local birds, like red-winged blackbirds, European starlings, and red-tailed hawks.

It was still light out when I lighted out to Zenith’s house, where I’d finally meet her husband, Harry. The taxi app said I’d be there in less than half an hour. A text from Wonderland: “I plan to write a Victorian-Modernist mash-up and call it ‘When Dickens Comes Home to Proust.’” “Ha!” I responded. “Among the great things about writing a novel, that ever-malleable narrative vehicle, that container of multitudes,” she texted back, “are all the crazy ideas, whether

thematic, linguistic, or structural, that pop into your head, not to mention all the voices you hear and images you see and feelings you feel.” Sounded like she was procrastinating but who was I to say anyway? Sheila posted: “Tonight, I met a post-doc who’s researching animal motion, particularly, bat flight. Pretty batty, huh?” Hundreds of reactions. Thom posted: “I dreamt a time where all glass ceilings are shattered so that we may finally reach for the sky.” Bryan posted: “The earth will open its mouth and swallow the next ten thousand people who use the phrase ‘just sayin’.” Made me think of the sinkholes, the thought filling me with dread once again. I searched online for causes and read about “karst terrain,” and “soluble rocks,” like limestone and gypsum and dolomite, and then searched for and read about areas in the city built on such terrain, which made me feel even worse about it all, and then I realized the taxi was idling in front of Zenith and Harry’s.

Zenith greeted me at the door. She was wearing a white dress; one of its thin straps fell, loosely, from her shoulder. “Welcome,” she said, hugging me, and kissing me, wetly, on the mouth. She tasted like red wine—dark and earthy. I expected an alcove upon entering, instead walking into a huge living room whose ceiling reached up two floors. A majestic staircase seemed to pour down from above. There were stained glass windows everywhere, and the last light of day shone through them. Choice art hung from the walls. There was posh furniture I’m sure you weren’t meant to sit on, to use in any way. “Hello, hello!” cried a voice from the back of the house, where the kitchen lay. It was Harry, who soon emerged, his hands outstretched. “Great to meet you,” he said, shaking my hand. POTUS was on the goggle-box. Hair blown back, by a fan, her bottle-black tresses waving, mirroring the flapping stars and stripes flags in the background. It looked like a shampoo commercial. Fortunately, the sound was off. “Oh, don’t you just love her?” he said. “You’ve really put yourself out,” I said, surveying the dishes on the table. “Oh, I had nothing to do with it,” Zenith said, pointing at Harry. “He hates having me in the kitchen.”

It was a sumptuous affair. A gourmet meal of several courses. By the time we were drinking the dessert liqueur, we were all sufficiently soused. Zenith was talking about how they'd bought the house many years ago "for a song." "We'd have to perform an opera now," Harry said. "You have an amazing house," I said. "It's the tree in the backyard I love most," Harry said. "I was sitting outside this morning looking at our lacebark elm, wondering where all the birds end up." "In the fall?" I said. "No," he said. "When they die. You see so many of them but you rarely see a dead one. Where do they go?" "Maybe they just disappear," Zenith said. "There should be piles and piles of them," Harry said, and we all got quiet. "Talk about a flight of fancy!" Zenith said, finally, and we all laughed.

"You're probably wondering why I can't leave the house," Harry said. "Harry," Zenith said, squeezing his thigh. "You've got everything here," I said, stupidly. "That's the problem," he said. "Having everything." Z said they'd "discovered" the place years ago. "You heard that? 'Discovered'? Has the ring of the conquistador, doesn't it?" "Silly man," Z said, nudging Harry with her shoulder. Z said it was their dream-house as soon as they saw it. "Money pit," Harry said. "But it was worth it," Z said, Harry going on to explain how different the neighborhood was back then, how it had been a working class community. "All but gone now," he said. "Extinct," I said. He laughed. "Apt phrase," he said, explaining how it had taken years for him to realize what they had done: the displacement they were helping to accelerate, the fallout, the resultant suffering. "That's when I started going to group," he said. "Group?" I said. "GA," he said. "Gentrifiers Anonymous." He'd been feeling a great deal of guilt about their having bought the house, how they helped make it impossible for others to find affordable housing. He hated going outside and encountering yet another neighbor who was moving away because they could no longer afford the cost of living on their street. But then he started feeling guilty about no longer feeling guilty.

“Show Ergo your art,” Z said to Harry, his nightlight eyes quickly flicking on then off. “My *junk*, you mean,” he said, laughing. “He doesn’t want to see that.” “Didn’t know you made art,” I said, genuinely curious. “He’s really good,” Z said, playfully shoving Harry, who pretended to fall over. “Take him downstairs!” she said. “Yeah,” I said. “Show me your ‘junk’!” I said, scare-quoting the obvious double-entendre, Z shrieking, saying, “You’re so bad!” “Shamone!” I said. “What?” “You know,” I said, shambling across the floor in my best approximation of a moonwalk, singing in falsetto, “Because I’m bad, I’m bad. Shamone! Really, really bad,” ending with grabbing my “junk” and shrieking. I was drunk, no question. “Alright,” Harry said, laughing, “Come on!”

“Light’s downstairs,” Harry said, opening a door into darkness. “So watch your step and hold on to the rail!” “Will do,” I said. “Here we are,” Harry said, turning on the light as we reached the floor. Took a moment for my eyes to adjust but then you could see them: famous paintings three-dimensionalized: sculptures of van Gogh’s *The Bedroom*, Dalí’s *The Persistence of Memory*, Hopper’s *Nighthawks*, Wyeth’s *Christina’s World*, Rousseau’s *The Dream*, Munch’s *The Scream*. “These are great,” I said, looking at the sculpture of Matisse’s *The Red Studio*. “Impressive, really.” “Thanks,” Harry said. “It’s all too much,” he said, quoting the Beatles. “What do you mean?” Shaking his head, as if he were trying to rid something from it, a memory or whatever, Harry said, “I’ve always loved this painting. It’s kind of, like, a mini-retrospective. Matisse put in a bunch of paintings he’d painted earlier that year,” pointing now, “*The Painter’s Family*, *The Pink Studio*, and *Interior with Aubergines*. Still entranced by the Islamic art he’d seen on his recent trip to Spain, he was transforming space, making everything surface, pattern, decoration.” “And then you reverse-engineered the process,” I said. Harry stared at the painting, saying nothing for a while. “It’s all too much,” he said, finally. “The clock doesn’t have hands,” he said, pointing to the Matisse. “Really got to me, you know?”

I asked him why he'd started making the sculptures. "It was a long time coming," he said, laughing. "I'd been staring at our empty walls," pointing upstairs, "right after we moved in, thinking about how to fill them. And then the idea came to me." "I didn't see any upstairs," I said. "Did I miss them?" "Oh, no," he said. "They're all down here. I can't bring myself to bring them upstairs. They belong here." He looked at me. "Underground." "I don't understand," I said. "It's all too much," he said, going quiet again. "They call this 'outsider art,'" he said. "And it is, and I am. An outsider, yes. We don't belong here. We pushed out other people. People of color. Families, you know? Where did they go? I worry about them." He looked at me and his eyes glassed up. "You know, there are over a million homeless people in the United States," he said. "Sad," I said. "Sad, yes," he said. "But what about you? Are you sad?" "Sorry," I said, "I mean, what can you do?" He withdrew into silence again. "And there are over eighteen million empty homes." Sighing, he brought me over to his worktable, where one of his works-in-progress sat. "Trying something different," he said. It was the cover of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* come to life, the beginning of it, since only the burning bright baby blue sky and the first row of luminaries had been made. "Sri Yukteswar Giri, a Hindu guru." Harry said, pointing at it and then the other figures one by one, "Aleister Crowley, Mae West, Lenny Bruce, Karlheinz Stockhausen, W. C. Fields, Carl Jung, Edgar Allan Poe, Fred Astaire, Richard Merkin, Alberto Vargas's *The Vargas Girl*." He paused again. "Leo Gorcey had been removed from the cover, but I put him in again. And there's Huntz Hall, Simon Rodia, and Bob Dylan." "How long have you been working on it?" "Time out of mind," he said. "Huh?" "Dylan reference, sorry! Comes from the American idiom, from the south. The 'distant past beyond memory.'" "Beyond memory," I like that," I said. He went silent again. "Anyway, a long time," Harry said, after a while. "I lose track of time down here." "Track of time," I said. "Makes me think about trains." "Yes," he said, an event horizon pulling and pulling you into his silence. "What train travels down a track of time?" I said, finally.

“Train of thought?” he said, making us laugh. ““Revolutions are the locomotives of history,”” I said, quoting Marx. “We all want to change the world,” he said, quoting the Beatles’ “Revolution.” ““To everything, turn, turn, turn,”” I said, quoting part of the Byrd’s almost-verbatim quote from the *Book of Ecclesiastes*. “Ready to go back upstairs?” he said.

We found Z sprawled on the couch dozing, but she snapped up again as soon as she heard us. “What do you think?” she said. “They’re great, right?” “Definitely,” I said. “I really wish he’d let me showcase them,” she said. “Not a chance,” he said, twisting open another bottle of Montepulciano. “And I don’t just mean around the house,” she said. “A show, yes!” he said. “And call it ‘The Superb Vistas of Death,’ after Whitman.” “Yes!” I said, Z simultaneously saying, “No!” “A new movement!” Harry said. “Imposter Art!” We laughed. “But even that’s been done,” he said. “Done to death.” “It’s all too much!” Z and I said, simultaneously, and we all laughed again.

We talked for a while after that, finishing the bottle of Montepulciano. “I’m feeling sleepy,” Z said, stretching her arms up, which I read as a cue to leave. “Wow, it’s past two,” I said, keying up my preferred ride-hailing app. “What are you doing?” she said. “Please stay.” “Yes, you’re totally welcome,” Harry said. “Thanks so much,” I said. “Had a wonderful evening but I need my own bed and pillow.” My car arrived minutes later and both Z and Harry walked me to the front door. Z hugged and kissed my cheek. Harry clasped my hand, but then surprised me—and maybe even himself—with a hug, too. “You’re good for her,” he whispered in my ear.

## 07.26

To pay attention is to seethe, to mourn. Over six hundred people have been killed by police so far this year. Over two hundred of those people were “black.” Today, I saw news about a group of children playing cops and robbers in a playground. The “Latinx” girl and two “black” boys were

pretending, using their hands as guns, making shooting noises with their mouths. Someone called the cops to complain about the children, the “noise” and “roughhousing.” Arriving on the scene, the cops—both “white”—immediately started shooting at the children, killing one of the boys, who was ten years old, and wounding the other two children. Madness. The story was so absurd it sounded made up. The footage was awful. I wanted to talk to someone, then I didn’t want to talk to anybody. I felt like neither silence nor noisy rage was the proper response to what had happened, but that both rage and silence simultaneously expressed was. I couldn’t take another day of people posting videos, of alternate videos that painted an even gloomier picture, of the family wailing and demanding justice, of community leaders calling for action. It was like watching the most insane television program. Tune in tomorrow for the next episode of *Death by Cop!* There would be the petitions and the rallies and the protests but nothing would be done. But what was I doing? V posted: “Sweeping generalizations betray broken brooms.” “Did a bunch of assisted head- and handstands at yoga class, tonight,” Z posted. “Fun to get a new view of this topsy-turvied world!” Thom posted: “I dreamt we didn’t wrap ourselves in creature comforters and insecurity blankets.”

I couldn’t eat and I felt confined in my apartment so I went outside. I went to the park, where I once again found myself sitting on a bench not so much waiting but trying to get away from waiting and it sometimes worked, things, conversations, or whatever interrupting me from that gnawing feeling. I scratched my arms. Popping two capsules of my meds, I stood up again, and continued walking, without destination, without thought, really.

I was walking alongside the main inner loop along Park Drive, bikes passing me with a shushing swish. Passing the Bandshell, I saw some joggers ahead, two “white” women. One of them looked like Sarah, her long legs unmistakable, but I wasn’t sure, so I walked faster but they were too fast for me, so I started running toward them, after them, after her. “Sarah!” I called out as the women ran, parabolically, away, from me, I kept thinking. “Sarah!” Out of breath, I slowed,

stopped, bent forward, put my hands on my knees, and tried to catch my breath, a stroller strongwoman zooming past. Looking up, I saw they were long gone. Thinking they'd make another loop around, I thought of doing a one-eighty, so they'd be running toward me this time. Nearly getting hit by a phalanx of spandexed cyclists, I walked away from the loop instead, and walked into the denser part of the park.

Later, sitting in a café, I overheard a couple talking to each other, their rumpled clothes signaling this was the day after a fling or whatever. "You seem nervous," the bearded boy said, sounding as if he'd just woken up. "What do you mean?" she said. "You're all fidgety." She laughed, and said, "You're not what I expected." "What? That I'm Jewish?" he said, laughing. "No," she said. "Yeah, I forgot to put that on my profile. Well, we've been texting a lot. There's that." She laughed, and several beats of silence ensued. "I'm not exactly sure we're compatible," he said, "but you seem like an interesting person."

I couldn't bear to listen anymore so I asked a passing waiter of indeterminate gender for the check. "Up front," they said, pointing at the counter. I waited in line, where a "white" woman backed up into me. "Excuse me," I said. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said, fake-smiling. "Are you?" I said. "Sorry?" she said, instantly grimacing. "You said that already," I said. "Whatever," she said, turning away. "Exactly," I said. "You don't have to get hostile," she said, facing me again. "Hostile?" I said. "Are you okay, miss?" a "white" man nearby said. "Is *she* okay?" I said. "*She* bumped into *me*," I said, keeping my voice low. She huffed. "Apologizing only *after* I'd said something," I said. "Oh, whatever, dude!" she said, taking out her machine, keying something into it. "Look, buddy," the "white" man said. "'Whatever'? 'Dude'?" I said to her. "I'm not your buddy," I said to him. "Just leave her alone," he said. "Leave *her* alone?" I said. "Tell her to leave me alone," I said, taking my wallet out, pulling out some bills, and placing them on the counter. "I'd tell you to go fuck yourselves," I said into the air, "but that's probably as good as it gets for

you.” There was laughter, and the woman was still on her machine, saying something about a “black man, maybe Hispanic.”

Angry, walking as quickly away from the café as I could without drawing attention to myself, I could still hear the laughter. Had they laughed at what I’d said? Were they laughing at me or with me? Did it even matter? My face was burning up, my whole body was burning up. Was that a siren? Blocks away, I was still shaking. Angelica called. “What’s up?” she said. “Not me,” I said. She asked what was wrong and I said I didn’t want to talk about it but was happy to hear from her. She told me she was doing okay. She told me about a friend of hers who’d been cheating on her husband and that she’d “made” her leave the “other guy.” I asked her what she meant, and she said that a few days ago Vera met her for dinner at a sushi restaurant and had arrived drunk and so she said they would take it to go. There was a wait and things got ugly. “I couldn’t believe it,” Angelica said. “Vera was waving her arms around saying, ‘What are we invisible?’ Then she turned to me and said, ‘What’s wrong with us? Two women who can’t get a man.’ I was so shocked.” Angelica had rushed them both out of the restaurant. Back at Angelica’s, Angelica “basically forced Vera to drink some water.” “But how did you convince her to leave the lover?” I asked. “Okay, so she got a text from him while we were sitting there and I took the phone away from her and texted him, saying it was over.” “And how did that go over?” “Well, he laughed.” “Laughed?” “You know—‘LOL.’” It got worse from there, Vera texting her lover that it was Angelica who’d written it, the lover saying Angelica was just a “cold bitch who couldn’t get a man.” Etcetera. “What about the husband?” I said. “Why doesn’t she just leave him?” “She’s afraid,” Angelica said. “They have two sons, so she says she’s staying for their sake but it’s really just fear that’s keeping her stuck.” Angelica admitted that she’d done the same thing, that she’d made the same mistake, staying in a relationship that made her miserable, so that she wouldn’t hurt the kids. Etcetera. Vera ended up leaving Angelica’s place after sobering up, apparently

“hooking up” with the inamorato later that night. I told her that the closer a person is to you the less likely they are to follow any particular advice you may offer to them even if it’s in their own best interests. But who can determine what those best interests are anyway? “What am I supposed to do, let her destroy her own life?” “It’s tricky,” I said. “Sometimes what looks like a cry for help is simply a cry for attention. She may have been saying she hated this guy but maybe she came to you to tell her that she was desirable, that her life had passion or whatever,” I said. “Sometimes you just need to listen and let the person do what they’re going to do because that’s what they want to do anyway.” “So what do you want to do?” she said. “About what?” “About us?” “I want to take it one day at a time.” Silence on the other end. “I don’t know if I can do that,” she said. I could hear noise on her end. People talking. “What’s that in the background?” “TV,” she said. “A dumb fantasy thing.” “Are there dragons in it?” I asked. “Yes,” she said. “Ah, then it can’t be that dumb.” She laughed. I thought about telling her about my decision not to see any more doctors but decided against it in the end. Better to end the conversation with laughter.

I thought about my sons. I thought about how I’d never sat down to have that conversation every “Latinx” or “black” father has with their children, but especially with their sons, about how their bodies were targets, of violence, of government-sponsored violence. I worried about them in a way I never had before. I kept seeing their faces whenever I heard news about another person guilty of nothing being torn up by police bullets. I thought of calling them but I didn’t. I searched for Elvis Presley’s “Surrender.” “This video does not exist,” the site said. I searched for Bacon’s *Study for a Portrait*, also known as *Business I* or *Man’s Head*. Here is a man wearing a charcoal suit and tie, and white collared shirt, his screaming face scumbled with a range of grays, the glasses on his face practically melting. He’s all surface, a breath of a sketch, a ghostly, ghastly hint barely emerging from the background blackness. There’s a blue curtain behind him, its translucence doing little to nothing to cover up whatever it is he’s doing, whatever’s being done to him. Rape?

Torture? Both? He's boxed in, in any case, the familiar line drawing of a box enclosing the man's head, the two-point perspective of the box disrupted by another square, contravening the entire surface's spatial constraints, the illusion destroyed, the man's body itself a series of triangulations. A study for a portrait, maybe, but really an interrogation of occlusion, obscurity. It is an impossible picture. True to life, in other words.

### 07.27

Boredom is a privilege. Angelica invited me to a backyard barbecue party her sister was throwing in a couple weeks. I agreed to go, the image of the last party I attended searing my mind. "No funny business, though," she said. "What do you mean?" I said. "I mean, no kissing or whatever," she said. "I don't want to do that to my son." "Understood," I said. "You need to be around family," she said. "Even if it's not your own." "I don't know about you, but capitalism is killing me," Max posted. "Actually, capitalism is killing all of us, so never mind."

I went to the city. Gallery hopped in Chelsea. Hardly anything grabbed me and nothing moved me and by that I mean disoriented me, reconfigured me. Just as I was about to give up, I chanced upon a video dismantling Woody Allen films. I'd never cared for his films, finding them only sporadically funny, the production of which seemed to be the trend with most movies these days anyway and by that I mean the last twenty to thirty years, and Allen's movies were a major source for the template. Allen is often lauded for capturing a quintessential New York City, something I always find laughable. His city is completely unrecognizable to me, which wouldn't necessarily be a problem if his city weren't so claustrophobically insular. In any case, the video artist had collaged together every time a "person of color" appeared in Allen's films. There were the odd number of appearances of a "black" maid serving all the guests at a dinner party from *Hannah and Her Sisters*. And most tellingly, the moment where a "black" man bumps into the

Allen character, who turns around but doesn't say anything. I left thinking it was the funniest Allen movie I'd ever seen, that is, the only Allen movie I found even remotely funny. Later, I chanced on a group show, called "Extreme, and Scattering Bright," which included two of my former client Lerner's shit containers, the nearby placard reading, "Right: Donald Trump, January 20, 2020-January 27, 2020. Left: Stormy Daniels, c. October 2011." Talk about a shitshow!

## 07.28

It was the age of the wound. I ran into Starman's mother at the supermarket. "How's he doing?" I said. "Lousy," she said. "Come and visit sometime." "I will," I said. "Faith," she said. "Sorry?" "My name's Faith," she said. "Ergo." Smiling, she walked away. It was freezing, the air conditioner on full blast. With its *parfumerie*, chocolatier, café, chic sushi bar, luxe housewares, and artisanal and farmstead cheese with attending *maître fromager*, "supermarket" didn't quite capture the experience of the store. Supermarket as slow suicide, thus bespoke Zarathustra.

Heavy heat hit me as soon as the doors slid open to let me out, the contrast momentarily disorienting. I was tempted to go all the way to Sunset Park for a piragua, a pyramid of shaved ice saturated with a syrupy substance of your choice in a plastic cup. It made you thirsty as soon as you finished it. Glorious, in other words. I loved the vibrantly painted pushcarts, too, where a huge block of ice glowed, a towel covering it to slow down the melting. Another day, maybe.

My skin percolated again. The sensation on my skin wasn't so much crawling, or ants walking all over it, but something like static, what you'd imagine all those dots from in-between stations on old televisions felt like. Early Duke Ellington filled the air, the music the very definition of buoyancy. Snapping basses. Slippery altos. Growling bugles. Max posted: "Trending: binge-reading!" Thom posted: "I dreamt the United States of America finally unfurled its true flag: skull and crossbones." Dean posted: "Somebody find me a man-sized hibernaculum." "Life is

unplanned obsolescence,” I posted on Play’s feed. “Too dark?” Play immediately texted me. “Maybe,” I said. “I’ll take it down.” “Never mind,” he said. “You need dark to see light.” Then, moments later, “I’m going to post that!” “Bob Ross said it first,” I said. “Who’s that?” “One of my favorite painters,” I texted, sending him a link to the video where the line more or less appears. I watched it myself, Ross’s tone a soothing contrast to his otherwise sad statement. It brought Romeo to mind: “More light and light; more dark and dark our woes!” It brought Rothko to mind, the artist who summarized his own work as “tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on,” which makes me think of his late paintings, especially, their deep purples and dense blacks.

I swallowed two more capsules for my itch, put on some clothes, and left the apartment, and headed to the city for a meeting with Wonderland’s editor. Speaking of Wonderland, she posted her “Best Summer Reads” on her social media portal as “Books written by women. Books written by people of color. Books written by LGBTQ writers. Books written by immigrants.” “Why?” a hotshot editor responded. “The answer is self-explanatory,” Wonderland replied. “But if you need to ask why, you might need to read more books of the type mentioned in the list.” In a separate comment, she wrote, “I’m essentially an anti-essentialist. That said, ‘strategic essentialisms’ (as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would say) are not only useful for an array of purposes, but absolutely critical for many for survival within the ‘white’ supremacist capitalist patriarchy (as bell hooks would say) within which we all live.” Overheard: “I know you got a cigarette for me.” Overheard: “I totally bought some skorts. Last night, at like eleven o’clock. Bought, like, four of them.”

There was so much turnaround at the publishing house. I always expected that everyone would be different every time I visited. Debra Russ, Wonderland’s editor, was one of the corporation’s few constants. As was her Spartan office, an unusual site, every other editor’s office

filled with hastily shelved books—galleys and finished copies—and piles of manuscript folders on their desks. I felt tired but my heart was racing. And my skin was burning.

“Why, hello there, my good man,” Debra said, extending a hand, which I immediately took and shook. Her language always seemed lifted from a Victorian novel. “Always a pleasure to see you.” “Likewise,” I said, sweating profusely. “I have recently returned from Paris,” she said, launching into a long story about the restaurants, the boulevards, the cafés, the museums, all the smokers, how much slower things were there. She had gone to visit with her French counterpart, ostensibly to discuss progress on translations of a few of the press’s books, but they mainly went out for wine and cheese and bread. “I have been following Allison’s progress,” she said. “You have?” I said, surprised since Wonderland kept more or less mum with me on her novel. My body falling apart, I was somehow keeping it together. “Oh, I was referring to her ‘suicides,’” she said. “Is she okay?” “She’s fine,” I said. “I am so worried about her,” she said. “The brilliant ones are the first to depart. Stars just before going supernova.” “Chaos giving birth to a dancing star and all that,” I said, paraphrasing Nietzsche. “How’s that?” “She’s fine,” I said, stupidly. “That’s good to hear,” she said. “A relief, really. Please give me her best,” she said, standing up, offering her hand again. “Good to see you.” “Likewise,” I said, shaking her hand as I stood up to leave. I was trembling.

Lurching outside, I flagged a cab, told the driver to take me to the nearest emergency room. The world was a blur.

## **07.29**

Who’d have thought you could overdose on a topical anesthetic? Collapsing at the registration desk, I had been rushed to a bed, where a nurse injected me with something that brought me back from the brink. For several hours, they monitored my vitals, registered my past medical problems

and current medical complaints, questioned me about medications and allergies. They finally released me once the doctors had determined my overdose had been accidental. Exhausted, I'd returned back to the apartment, where I'd fallen into another dreamless sleep.

Convalescing in bed, I watched the next episode of *Everyone Is Gay*, which opens with Frank and Bella getting ready for the day. Rising from bed, Frank took his nightshirt off, revealing two scars on his chest, from the breast removal surgery he'd had done, which had been documented in the show's previous season. "I'm closer to having the body I'm meant to be in," he'd said. He'd long rejected "Francesca," his birth name, and had long been going as "Q." A couple of years ago, though, he'd rechristened himself "Frank." Later, Bella said, "Can't wait to get this thing hanging from me off me," intending to keep all of the glans, though, but reshaped as a clitoris, the skin of the penile shaft inverted to form a vagina.

From one of the screens: "All *that* really helps my bottom line."

Ping! A text from Wonderland: "I don't want to write Hemingway's suicide." I was about to respond when she texted: "Which means I ought to write it." I was about to respond again, when she said, "Thanks. Later." And so I left it at that. V posted: "It's always now more than ever." Thom posted: "I dreamt I tattooed your body with Monet's water lilies." From a screen: "Let's go places!"

### **07.30**

Call it "humanertainment." This is what Silvio Play offers. Anyone can be somebody. This is what he gives to his fans. Belief. His illness seemed to put all of that to question. His mortality put everyone's mortality into question. And so everyone followed his every move, now more than ever. He was breaking all social media records. His tweets were retweeted and retweeted and retweeted. Play wasn't much of a writer, not much of a thinker, either. That wasn't his strength.

So I wrote most of his posts and tweets and whatnot. He was always in the right place at the right time, though, and now something was wrong but somehow this was the right place for him to be. “Everything is new under the sun” was particularly popular. So was “Go ahead, make your day!” I stared at the screen, at a social media prompt, “What’s on your mind?” “Cerebrospinal fluid,” I answered aloud, louder than I would care to have admitted. “Random generators of everything,” I said. “Chupacabra sightings,” I said. I had to get out of the apartment. “It takes a village to praise an idiot,” V posted. Thom posted: “I dreamt I went to the heartland of Wonderland and Neverland.” From another screen: “Expect great savings and a whole lot more!”

Still exhausted from the overdose, I still found myself taking a train to Angelica’s family’s barbecue party. I felt the machines all around me, the surveillance technology recording everything, the thousands of cameras on the city’s streets, its train and bus stations, bridges and tunnels. Security trumping liberty. Knowledge and consent out the window. It made me feel even less here than I thought I was. If you’ve lost yourself, can facial recognition technology help? There weren’t that many people waiting on the platform. I saw a “black” father and his “black”-“white” “biracial” daughter watching a few “white” teenagers horsing around the platform’s edge. The girl was pointing out how easily one of them could fall into the tracks. “And then, boom, Emergency Room,” she said. I laughed when she said it and so did the father, who said, “I love the way you put it.” “What?” ““Boom, Emergency Room.”” She laughed, then said, “I got that from you, Daddy.” Then they both laughed again.

Slummy towns and filthy factories are the first things you see as you enter the so-called Garden State. Talk about irony. Z texted me: “Where are you?” “In-between,” I texted back. “The ‘and’ of ‘to and fro’?” she responded. “Something like that,” I texted. “On a train.” “I love trains,” she said. “I’m thinking of a word but I can’t remember it.” “Stop thinking about it,” she texted, “and it’ll come to you.” “It’s an old word. Primeval. Sanskrit, probably.” I was sounding like an

idiot, I know. “Disturbances of the mind. Literal translation: whirlpool.” “Vritti,” she immediately responded. “Yes!” She sent a winking smiley face. “See your face tomorrow?” she texted. “I’ll be there, flippers flapping,” I responded, and I was definitely looking forward to attending the Mermaid Day Parade. She responded with a string of emojis: mermaid, fish, kiss mark, rainbow, balloon.

Angelica’s three sisters and two brothers were there. Several children frolicked about in the huge backyard. Linking an arm in one of mine, Angelica brought me around to meet everyone one-by-one. Dot, her older sister, was all grabby, which embarrassed Angelica, and so she quickly got me situated among the men, proud, bulky men, who measured a man’s worth by what he had and what he knew about sports and beer. “What can I get you?” Kent, Dot’s husband said. “Bourbon neat,” I said. “Sorry,” he said, “we drink beer.” “Anything Belgian,” I said. “Heineken good?” “Close enough,” I said. The other men were talking draft picks and batting averages and whatever, and I quickly lost interest, the smell of cooking beef wafting over from the barbecue pit making me hungry.

“Hot enough for you?” Kent said, handing a bottle to me. “Love summer,” I said. “Can’t stand it,” he said. He was going to say how in winter you can always add another layer but in summer you could never get cool enough. And he did. And then he and the other husbands started talking about sports again and one of them brought up salary caps and the others exploded on him, saying the next thing he was going to do was suggest the government should start divvying up wealth. They were talking around each other. Maybe some bad blood would bubble up and explode all over us. One could hope. And then another brought up how their state was considering raising the minimum wage in the same way New York State had. “I don’t see why a burger flipper now should make twice as much as I made when I was asking people if they wanted fries with that.” “Yeah,” I said. “Why should we reduce infant mortality rates when so many people in the past

died young? Why should we have labor laws today when fat cats were free to exploit workers in the eighteenth century?" They laughed and I laughed, they for different reasons. I walked over to the grill to get a hamburger.

Dot walked over to me. I couldn't tell if her dress was rumpled or merely ruffled. In the few minutes she had me, she told me of her love for travel, not because of the places, but because of the timelines, the maps, contingencies, weather. She told me about this book she'd just finished reading that collected words for which there was no equivalent in any other language, conjecturing that *le mot juste* was sometimes so difficult to find precisely because it was "impossible" to find—because it only existed in another language. "Sometimes I think I'm oversharing on social media," she said. "Better joyrider than roadkill," I said, sounding like Play even in my intonation. "Excuse me," I said, pulling out my machine to post it on Play's portal. "Good one, thanks!" Play texted me. Scheduled several others: "You're not alone...in being alone." "The medium is the dressage." "It's not me, it's you."

Marina, Angelica's other sister, rescuing me, brought me over to some lawn chairs, where we sat. She was a speech pathologist. She talked about her patients, how they loved her. She was making a difference in people's lives, like the college kid who'd rammed into a cab door opening onto traffic, his skateboard raging away, his head slamming against asphalt. His speech might be forever slurred. "So young," she said, tears welling. "Having fun?" Angelica, appearing out of nowhere—but where is nowhere?—asked, her sister using the heel of her right hand to blot the welling tears. She walked toward the children, who were playing freeze tag.

"Good to see you," I said, meaning it. "Good to be seen," Angelica said, squeezing my hand. "Good to be out of the house," I said, meaning that, too. I didn't share how uncomfortable I felt, though, how family gatherings gutted me, especially now, as I thought of all the missed opportunities. How I'd ghosted my own children.

Later, I was standing alone against a fence, and one of the children came toward me. “Why are you here by yourself?” she said. “I’m my own best company,” I said. “What’s your name?” she said. “Ergo,” I said. “What’s yours?” “Kestrel.” “Nice to meet you, Kestrel,” I said. “I like your shirt,” pointing to the cartoon drawings of sushi on it. She looked a smile at me. “I love sushi,” I said. “Me, too.” “What’s your favorite?” “Any kind of nigiri,” she said. “Mine, too,” I said. “Want to play chess?” I love the game and so I agreed and walked over to one of the tables where there were some boxes of games and art supplies for the kids. She lost the first round, and immediately said, “Again?” I agreed, and beat her a second time. “Again?” she said. As we reset the pieces, she said, “Daddy always lets me win.” I laughed, and she said, “One day I’ll beat you.” I laughed again, knowing that if she did, the victory would be that much more meaningful for her. There would be no question whether or not the win was an earned one.

### **07.31**

Sunny, bright, and breezy, it was a perfect day for a parade. Surprised symphony strings weren’t swelling in the background. A “white” man passed by, his boobs covered with tattoos, his chest one big goofy face. Tat for tit? No judgment. Surf Avenue was packed. Like sardines, as the cliché goes, but appropriately enough, nevertheless. Men and women and boys and girls glazed with suntan oil or caked with sunscreen. Countless girls and women with constellations of glitter on their skin. Flashy tiaras and glitzy crowns and sparkly sequins everywhere. Shiny tridents, beaded necklaces, shell-encrusted umbrellas. Men and woman letting their beer bellies hang out. There were witch mermaids and clown mermaids, and half-naked mermaids, starfish and shells covering nipples, flesh-colored thongs barely covering pubic bushes. There was even a Cat in the Hat mermaid. Only a few mermen, but a number of men dressed as Aquaman—must be a movie out for the character. There was a family, all of them in all gray, the mother an octopus, the father a

narwhal, and their child a fantastic amalgam of the two. Overheard: Woman: “Oh my god, I love your boobs!” Mermaid: “Thanks, they’re my treasure chest!” Several leather-vested motorcycle gangs were in attendance. I’ve always hated Gloria Estefan’s “Conga” but it felt like the perfect soundtrack for this event. “Latinx” woman with “Weekend Hard!” on her t-shirt. Mirrored bustiers. There was a dunk tank, a line of people ready to get their chance to dunk a “white” man in a three-piece suit into the water. “White” man wearing a giant white shark with a bloodied baby doll clenched in its teeth. Fat “white” man shoving a ketchup, mustard, and coleslaw-covered hotdog into his face. “Signs, signs, everywhere signs”: signs for fresh hot kettle corn; signs for cones, shakes, and choco-sprinkle sundaes; and the Hot Dog Eating Contest countdown board. Fat “black” woman shoving a mustard-covered hotdog into her face. Sleazy crew of pirates, one with an inflatable mermaid on his back. “White” man wearing a lobster on his head. Bad tattoos everywhere. “Latinx” man with an albino snake scarved around his neck, coiled around one of his arms. Another “Latinx” man wearing a t-shirt that read: “Straight Outta El Barrio,” the design modeled after the “Straight Outta Compton” logo. Overheard: “I ain’t no mermaid’s tadpole.” Huh?

A month or so ago, a sinkhole opened up on Surf Avenue, and the city closed down the street where it appeared, for repairs, forcing the parade organizers to postpone the parade until today. The eleven foot by twenty-two foot hole had since been completely repaired. While not exactly fresh, the new asphalt was easily distinguishable from the surrounding old. I bought some cotton candy, immediately stuffing a pink tuft into my mouth, enjoyed its effervescent vanishing—vanishing effervescence?

Found a spot where I could actually see the parade, which began with a procession of vintage cars. Man singing: “Drive! Drive! My baby drove up in a brand new Cadillac. Yes, she did! My baby drove up in a brand new Cadillac. She said, “Hey, come here, Daddy! I ain’t never

comin' back.””” A rockabilly song by Vince Taylor and his Playboys, recorded by the Clash on *London Calling*, my machine said. And then, the seemingly endless line of floats and marchers and dancers and musicians. There was an assembly of generic mermaids, store-bought costumes as garish as they were unimaginative. They had fish-shaped bubble guns. Thousands of bubbles in the air floating and popping. They threw t-shirts into the audience from the nearby aquarium. Slightly out-of-tune marching band, all-purpose aquatic garb on everyone. Bikinied women playing with beach balls, throwing beaded necklaces into the audience, armpit hair making its own statement. Fife and drum band. “Chihuahua Nation and Friends” featured said dogs and others unhappily wearing fish-related costumes. Group of dancers wearing USO performer outfits. A group called “Wu-Tang Clam” passed but they didn’t really do much with the concept, perhaps because the source itself was already so elaborate. A troupe of mermaids, one with a sign reading, “Legalize Seaweed,” another with one that read, “Reefer Maidness.” A “white” woman cleverly dressed as a siren, luring careless sailors onto rocks with a marvelous crown of six police sirens sounding and flashing from her head. Irene Cara’s “Flashdance...What a Feeling” controlled the airspace. “The Ruth Wader Finsburgs,” eco-mermaids holding signs reading, “Seaquality for All!”; and “Reel Justice,” a hook for the “J.”

And then the Octopussies came into view, each woman wearing a blue fish costume, their menacing caudal fins swaying behind them, a vehicle with a banner with “#MeTuna” written in large red block letters following closely behind. And then Rihanna’s clever revenge fantasy “Man Down” blasted from the vehicle’s speakers, whereupon all the women in the group swayed to its gentle lilt, bounced when the four-on-the-floor pounded, the crowd screaming every time several of the woman held up a sign reading “MAN DOWN.” They’d edited out the N-word section, reminding me, though, of Suge Knight notoriously saying he preferred the term since “we not from Africa, we Black,” going on to say, “Even Africans don’t call each other ‘African.’ If they from

Kenya, they say, ‘I’m Kenyan,’” reminding me of Wonderland’s aversion to the hyphenated compound as well, and her controversial public response to the term. But what about V, who said all Puerto Ricans are African? How about science, which says every human, past and present, shares an ancestor who lived in Africa about sixty thousand years ago?

They’d walk a couple of blocks and then perform their dance again. They ended up being awarded second place, which surprised me, since they were easily the best group. Meeting Z near the end of the parade, I said, “You were robbed!” hugging her, making her laugh. “Oh, it’s okay,” she said. “It’s all for fun.” “How’s Harry?” I said. “Harry’s Harry,” she said, laughing. “He’s home, watching the live feed of the event.” She stretched her arms into the air, saying, “I’m exhausted.” “And I think I got a little too much sun,” I said. She took out her machine, secured a Luft. “Can we drop you off somewhere?” she said, walking toward the car. “I’m good,” I said. “Love you,” she said, hugging me. “Love you, too,” I said. “Not the band!” we both said, simultaneously. Yes, never the band, limousine liberal Bono the very definition of sanctimonious. Wading through the crowd, I saw the shark hat guy again, a busty “white” woman taking a photo with him, his cupped hands hovering around her breasts. “Me tuna!” she cried.

Frank called to tell me the network had received a warning from the F.C.C., saying *Everyone Is Gay* would be given an NC-17 rating, the network saying they would have to pull the show. Bella and Frank wanted to go public with the information. After consulting with Crawford first, I suggested they only threaten they would be going public with the information. Crawford would look over the contract and then write a letter to them. Thom posted: “I dreamt I ran out of breath and you called me the Great Gatsby.” Jessie “drunk bought a blood puddle pillow,” which makes it look like your head’s lying in a pool of blood. “Can’t wait to scare the crap out of, um, someone.” From a screen: “It’s time your Wi-Fi got a big upgrade.”

Late afternoon found me venturing outside again to see how Starman was doing. Music was pumping from somewhere on the street—Stevie Wonder singing “Signed, Sealed, Delivered, I’m Yours.” It’s one of those songs that will change my mood from whatever it is to total delight. It isn’t so much what is sung, that is, its lyrical content, but *how* it’s sung: the various melismatic elongations, the bright and punchy riffing, the percussive interplay with the back-up singers and the descending bassline (the electric sitar-guitar unison line making it infectiously weird), the vocal exuberance perhaps having something to do with the song being the first single Stevie produced on his own.

Faith, Starman’s mother, answered the door. “Thanks for coming over,” she said. I asked how he was doing. “Not good,” she said. He’d shut himself in his bedroom, leaving only to “pee, poop, shower, and brush his teeth.” I knocked on his door. No response. “Dominic?” I said. “Starman! My name is Starman!” “Starman, yes, sorry!” I said. “Thought I’d check in.” “Go away,” he said. I wanted to tell him I missed seeing him. “The world needs you, Starman” I said. After a while, he opened the door. He sat on the bed, lowering his head, not wanting to look me in the eyes. “The bad guys won,” he said. “They win if you let them,” I said. “They beat me up. Hurt me,” he said. “The fight isn’t only physical,” I said. “There’s also the battle of the heart, of the mind.” “They hurt me bad,” he said. Silence wedged between us. I wasn’t sure what to say. “The world needs you, Starman,” I said, again. “I need you.” At this, he looked up at me. “They hurt me,” he said. “They hurt me *bad*.” “I know,” I said. “They hurt me,” he said, his voice rising. “They hurt me *bad!*” he shouted. “The bad guys won!” he shouted into my face, and so I stepped out of the room, whereupon he slammed the door, still shouting. I spoke with his mother for a few minutes before leaving. She thanked me for coming, and then I left.

On the street, I watched a woman do chin-ups on a traffic light. Her arms were massive, each chiseled muscle quivering with energy. A truck passed, spray-painted on the long white

trailer, in huge block letters: “WE’RE FUCKED.” Was it everywhere? Was it a secret message to me? I felt my machine vibrate. It was Zenith. “What’s going on, Z?” “Harry,” she said, her voice hoarse, as if from crying. “What about Harry?” “He’s...he’s gone,” she said, starting to cry. “Gone? Where?” “He left,” she said. “He’s out. No idea where.” I told her everything would be okay. That it was a good thing he finally left the house. “You don’t understand,” she said. She was right, I didn’t understand. I offered to come over. To help find him. She was happy to hear it.

Descending into the subway, I saw a figure, shrouded from head to toe, in what appeared to be burlap, its arms raised, hands cupped for coins. Seeing it was a woman, I walked past her. I thought I’d misheard her say, “He put a song in my heart,” until she repeated it. She was emphatic, coldly so. It must have been a Tom Petty song. What could be worse?

Zenith burst into tears as soon as she saw me. Embracing me, she said she was going out of her mind. She reminded me that Harry hadn’t been out of the house in over a year. She had no idea what had inspired him to finally leave the house. She had no idea where he’d gone. It was as if he were a house cat who’d somehow escaped and would likely get hurt out there, get into a fight with a street cat, a feral beast, or worse, get run over by a car or something. I asked if she’d reached out to any of Harry’s friends or family. “Friends?” she said. “*I’m* his friend.” “And his family?” “Out of town, out of mind.” She said they’d had breakfast together, and that she returned early evening to find the house empty. “So you didn’t have a fight or anything?” I said. She shook her head, started crying again. Sitting beside her, I wrapped an arm around her, rocked her. I told her I was happy to go look for Harry or stay while she went out to look for him. She said she’d “go nuts” if she simply waited for him to return. “You go then,” I said. She nodded, thanked me, wiped her face, grabbed her keys and purse, and rushed out.

Z had laughed when I asked if she’d called Harry, explaining how he’d long given up machines. “Lonely person devices,” he called them, which I recognized as a phrase borrowed from

Frank Zappa. He'd likely suffered from "nomophobia"—no + mobile + phone + phobia—another of the diseases peculiar to late capitalism, an "illness" where anxiety ensues upon absence of a signal, running out of minutes or battery power, etc., and so gave the machines up. Standing up, I looked around, surveying the space for a clue to where Harry might have gone, or at least a hint toward the motivation for his having left. The house was immaculately maintained, nothing seemed out of place. I looked at one of the paintings on the wall. Expressionistically abstract, it looked like someone had projectile vomited on it. Zenith wouldn't have appreciated the observation. I scanned their library, something I gravitated toward doing whenever I visited someone's home. Personal libraries, of whatever medium, were becoming increasingly rare. I no longer kept very many books in the apartment, either. There was a time when there were books everywhere in my home, though, especially when I was younger, when I had a family of my own. Over the years, I'd gotten rid of bookcase after bookcase of books. Now, I read most of what I read on various machines. I loved having a library at my fingertips, conjuring it with my fingertips, but there was something oddly wonderful about seeing all of these spines buttressed together. It was like seeing hundreds of minds at work.

I sat down with a book about the intertwining of nature and architecture. Each erudite and impassioned essay was buttressed with diagrams, drawings, models, and photos of doors and floors, arches and altars, castles and caves, bridges and niches, cells and shells, roofs and rooms. Here, ears became tunnels, eyes portals, and mouths entrances. Huts echo bower birds' nests. Phallic spires court vaginal apertures. Towers mirror a mullein's vertical inflorescence. The book's message was clear: Take shelter from the rain under a leaf. Look toward the light pouring from the dome's oculus. My eyes glazed after a while, and I dozed off, my machine intoning, jolting me awake. It was Z. "Any luck?" I said. "No, and I'm not sure what to do." I suggested she come back, and then we could switch places. I could hear some noise in the background. "Where are

you?” “At the beach, by the ocean.” Signing off, I looked for something to drink. Finding their bar, which was stocked with an array of bottles of wine and spirits, I poured a glass of scotch. I sat there, looking at my drink: liquid gold in limp light.

After a while, the front door clicked and Z walked in, hunched over, her eyes red and puffy. “He’ll turn up,” I said, walking over to her. Nodding, she hugged me. Tired, she took my hand, led me upstairs, to one of the guestrooms, where we took off our clothes and climbed into bed. She curled into me and quickly fell asleep. I took out my machine, clicked on the Death Clock, plugged in my data. Twenty-eight years. I watched the clock count down for a while and drifted off.

When I woke up, Z was gone. I dressed and went downstairs, where I found her speaking with two cops, one “black,” one “white.” It looked like they were already wrapping things up. The “white” cop looked at me slant-wise but said nothing. “We’ll do our best,” the “black” cop said. She thanked them and they left. “He’ll turn up,” I said. “Stop saying that,” Z said. “Okay,” I said. Sighing, she grabbed my hand, saying, “It’s just that when I hear that phrase, ‘turn up,’ I see him turned face up on the ground, in an alley, beached, like a whale or something—dead.” “Fuck,” I said, wrapping my arms around her, saying I’d stay as long as she needed me. Thanking me, she pointed me toward the kitchen, where we soon after sat at the table drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. I touched her hand every so often but she was unresponsive, which was understandable. “I’m glad you’re here,” she’d say every time I touched her, by way of apology it seemed.

I’d been surprised to see the cops. I mean, people leave their spouse or whomever all the time. “Bipolar 1,” Z said, responding to my surprise, going on to talk about the months of Harry’s extreme mood swings, the months of emotional highs and lows, less rollercoaster ride than pendulum swing. We sat in silence for a long while. “He took money out from the bank,” she said, finally. “A lot.” I nodded, thinking it was a good sign, that even if he were on some bender or whatever, he’d likely holed himself in a hotel or something.

I suggested we go for a walk but Z declined, saying she didn't have the energy. I offered to go out to look for him while she remained at the house. "Good idea," she said, thanking me, and so I left. I went to a bunch of bars in the neighborhood, showing various bartenders a photo Z had sent me of Harry. She'd done the exact same thing, apparently, so I walked around aimlessly, thinking a random approach made as much sense as any other.

Where would I go after I'd escaped from a jail of my own making? What would I want to see? Who would I want to see? The local animal shelter came to mind, so I went there first. The Illustrated Man, the owner, was there. I hadn't known how much of his body was tattooed until I'd seen him one summer, the months he dressed down to speedo and flip-flops. I used to take my kids to the shelter all the time when they were growing up. We'd volunteer-walk all kinds of dogs. It was a no-kill site, and they took in dogs not only from kill states around the country, but from countries around the world. I signed up to walk a dog, grabbed some treats and a couple of plastic bags for the poop. One of the workers, a man with a claw for a hand, the middle finger on it missing, finally brought me a dog. "What's its name?" he said. "This one's Charlie," he said, handing me a thoroughly roughened beast.

## **08.01**

Another day, another mass shooting. You would think school shootings were the worst of possible places for shootings to occur. What's worse than a high school shooting? A middle school shooting? Surely an elementary school shooting is worse than that? No, a daycare shooting is worse. Of course! The question is silly, really, the idea that any loss of life could be worse than another. But we act like it's somehow worse. My god, all those children! Their lives ended before they really got started. Horrible! How could it get any worse? Well, how about a maternity ward? This is what happened: Marla Johnson, a "white" woman, age thirty-five, entered Lowell Hospital,

carrying a large black duffel bag, a large knapsack on her back. Taking the elevator, she unzipped her bag, took out her Colt AR-15. She started shooting as soon as the elevator door opened onto the floor she'd chosen. Firing about one thousand bullets in six minutes, Johnson killed six nurses, two doctors, five pregnant women, one woman who'd just given birth, and one newborn. Following the bloodbath, Johnson dropped the rifle to the floor, took off her backpack, unzipped it, retrieved a Glock 19 from it, placed the barrel to her left temple and pulled the trigger, instantly killing herself. The hospital's closed-circuit cameras had captured the carnage. Hackers managed to get the grisly footage so now it was everywhere. Malcolm posted: "Trigger warning: Legislators won't pass sensible gun control legislation after this massacre." Thom posted: "I dreamt I was the boy who cried Virginia Woolf." "Here is my Love," read Zenith's post, a photo of Harry—smiling and standing in front of one of his painting-sculptures—attached to it. "Help me find him." I shared the photo and muted my machine.

The apartment, sensing I'd left, had put all the screens to sleep, the phrase "power dressing" floating into the air, like an afterthought. I couldn't help but think of salad sauces and the worst of the eighties whenever I heard it. Almost the end of her first term as POTUS and they were still talking about her fashion choices. The newscaster's went on to talk about the upcoming "Healing Session," POTUS's name for her intermittent gatherings that were patterned after the long-defunct show that had made her famous.

I finally agreed to meet up with Youssef. "Where do you want to meet?" "I'm open," I said. "In that case, how about I take you to a party?" "A party?" "Yeah, a party." "I thought you hated parties," I said. "I did, and I do, especially political parties." He laughed. Youssef was, to say the least, socially awkward, a phrase used to describe so many behaviors it ends up being less descriptive than you think. In any case, he had this stare that always made people feel

uncomfortable, especially women. It's why I always hung out with him alone. I thought it might have had something to do with his heavy marijuana use as a teenager. "It's helping me with my fears," he said. "What is?" "The party," he said. "Helps me with my casadastraphobia." "I don't know what that is." "Nobody does," he said. "Imagine feeling the sky might suck you up toward it, like a giant vacuum cleaner." He bark-laughed. "Scary." "Tell me about it. A few months ago, I looked up at the sky and just panicked and ran into this store and I didn't want to leave. It was a women's shoe store. They must have thought I was some kind of freak, picking up every shoe one by one, examining it, questioning the clerks about the materials of the shoe, about its design, its designers." He laughed. "I know more about women's shoes than probably anyone this side of a cobbler would want to know. The parts and whatnot. The anatomy of a woman's shoe. Counter, heel, heel cap, sole, outer-sole, vamp, toe box, platform, inner platform, insole, lining—and that's just for high heels." "Definitely more than I want to know," I said, laughing. "I know," he said, "and that's just the parts, the parts of one shoe, then there are all the different types. Like ankle boots, ballet flats, boat deck shoes, bowling shoes, clogs/mules, cowboy boots, espadrilles, flip flops, galoshes, high tops, jellies, jump boots, kitten heels, loafers, mary janes, moccasins, mukluks, oxfords, platforms, runners, saddle shoes, sandals, slingbacks, slippers, sneakers, spool heels, stilettos, t-straps, and wedges, and that's just what I can remember. Can you believe that?" "What, that you can't remember the rest, or the amount of types shoes?" "Yeah, my memory's slipping," he said, laughing. "Wait, did you just list the shoes in alphabetical order, too?" He laughed. I'd known Youssef since high school, and I recalled the year he'd read every volume of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Every week or so, you'd catch him with a volume tucked under his arm. He'd quote facts from it throughout the day, at lunch or gym, in the halls in between classes. Most people found it annoying. I thought it was cool, well, until it got to the point where he couldn't stop himself from always quoting. More annoying, though, were the months in our first

year when he went around asking people what their favorite whatever were. And it was always a cascade, one question after another, barely a breath left between them for answers. “What’s your favorite word?” “Shampoo.” “Favorite food?” “Lentil soup.” “Favorite day of the week?” “Saturday.” It got to the point where I told him I didn’t have a favorite anything every time he asked, which was often, until he finally stopped asking me.

Youssef thought at first it might have been a problem of balance with his eyes, with his vestibular and kinesthetic systems. “Raw fear,” he said. “Was out biking once and I looked up at the sky and felt like I was going to be lifted into the clouds, through them, up and up and up, and all the cars and trucks and taxis and bikes and motorcycles, too, everything that wasn’t somehow fastened to the ground, everything lifted into the sky. It’s against the law of physics, of course.” “But not the imagination,” I said. “Not sure it’s my imagination,” he said. “Anyway, I’m getting better. Without meds.” He laughed. “Without *more* meds,” he added. “This party is certainly helping.” “Of course!” I said. “It’s indoors!” “Whatever,” he said. “Are you coming or what?” “Sure thing,” I said. “Text me the details.” “Will do,” he said. “Oh, and bring pajamas.” “Wait, what?”

## 08.02

The train lumbered forward like a thirsty pachyderm. “Oh, she’s amazing,” Youssef said, responding to my question about his bird. “She’s twelve year’s old. She speaks about three hundred fifty to four hundred words. She puts together sentences. She knows what she’s saying. I can have conversations with her. She’s very smart. She understands me.” “What’s her name?” “Laura.” “Why Laura?” “Because she’s Laura, I don’t know,” he said, laughing. “Maybe it has something to do with Bright Eyes,” he said. “One of my favorite bands.” I didn’t know the band, so he explained how a woman named Laura appears in a few of the band’s songs. “Anyway, every day,

at night, when Laura wants to go to sleep, she scolds me, she says, ‘It’s bed, it’s bed, soon, soon, it’s bed!’ When she wants something to eat, she says—she knows certain words for food—she says, ‘Cookie, cookie for you!’ She once bit my nose, which she knew she shouldn’t have done. She bit it, and I said, ‘Ow!’ And she said, ‘I’m sorry. Are you okay? I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry.’ She’s very smart. When I’m leaving the house, she says, ‘I’ll be back soon. See you soon!’ It’s kind of like having a little human in the house, but who doesn’t speak the full language. Yeah, Laura’s very smart.” He told me many African Grey parrots have some of the cognitive abilities of a five-year-old human. “There were studies done on this one parrot named Alex, by this scientist named Dr. Irene Pepperberg. Alex could pick out colors and shapes. He could count. He could reason.” “When did you get her?” I said. “When she was a three-month-old baby.” “Wow,” I said. “I had no idea.” “One day, I was in a bird store, and I saw Laura there, and the connection between us was immediate. It was very deep. I sensed she could feel it, too—I could definitely feel it—and I immediately bought her and brought her home, where I had to hand-feed her with a syringe, which contained a formula I’d squirt into her mouth. She bonded very closely with me.” Youssef sighed. “Maybe you’re ‘becoming-bird,’” I said. “Deleuze would be happy.” “Maybe that’s why the sky’s pulling me up,” Youssef said.

We finally came to our stop. It was one of the few areas in the city left untouched by gentrification, at least externally, as I’d come to discover once we arrived at our destination. On the outside, it looked like a derelict factory of some kind. Moldering stones atop tangled masses of grass and weeds. Rats scurrying about. The entrance and lobby were dirty and dilapidated, too, and the freight elevator was a frightening reticulation of steel bars and wires. We rode it several floors up, and it opened onto a massive, multi-roomed, marble-floored loft. Men and women were sprawled in various configurations on couches and chairs, knotted together against the walls and on various cushions and rugs on the floor.

A tall, snazzily dressed “white” man came forward. “Greetings,” he said, stretching his arms out. “Welcome to Big Hug!” And I imagined him bursting into song, something operatic. “My name is Mathias,” he said, “and I am your host.” He directed us to some changing rooms, after which we were given nametags, and led us toward a small room, where other pajamaed people sat on the floor on a variety of mats and cushions. There were about thirty people in the room, five of whom—two men and three women—were morbidly obese. There were three transgender women and one transgender man. There were at least five people in their sixties, one woman in her seventies, maybe.

“It releases oxytocins,” a “black” man said. “Exactly,” a “white” woman responded. “But then you find people who don’t want to do that for that long. They’re like, ‘No, get off me!’” Laughter. “And I’m like, ‘No, you have to do it for at least fifteen minutes.’ And they’re like, ‘No, I don’t want to.’ And I’m like, ‘Damn, give me my drug!’” More laughter. “The hug drug!” More laughter. “So, yeah, a place where people want to? I’m in.” “Wish there was music,” someone said. I had my head down, just listening to the voices, not caring where they came from. “The other day, I was at work, I lost my cellphone, and I was like, ‘Okay, I lost my cellphone,’ but then after, like, a day, I was like, ‘I lost my life,’ because you don’t realize before you lose these things how much of your life is on them. So when I lost it, after, like, the second day, I thought I was going to lose it but, you know, after the third day, I was actually glad to be away from it, because I was, like, actually reading things, signs and billboards and stuff.” “They need to make ones where you can only talk.” “Dumb phones!” Laughter. “This is your brain. This is your brain on apps.” More laughter. “There must be something like that out there.” Yes, the irony of the so-called Connection Age is how disconnected we are from each other, from authentic intimacy. Atomized as we are, you might say we’re living in a new Atomic Age. Life as digital dispersal. Youssef had gone to the bathroom and was now other side of the room.

“What’s up, Ergo?” a pudgy “black” man beside me said, looking up from my nametag. “Hello,” I said, looking at his nametag, which read, “Josh.” “Been here before?” “No, first time.” “You’re joshing!” I said, stupidly. “Sorry?” “Sorry! You?” “Oh, I’m a regular,” he said. “Can’t get enough. How’d you hear about it?” “My friend brought me,” I said, pointing to Youssef, who was holding a “white” man’s hand. “How about you?” “Oh, years ago I used to go to this thing called the Pajama Party and then I stopped going and then I started thinking about it all the time and so I went online and found this.” “There going to be a pillow fight today?” I said. “No,” he said, seriously, “it’s not that kind of thing.” He seemed bothered. “This is a peaceful place,” he said, rising. “Oh, sorry, I was just kidding.”

Some minutes went by, and I was getting anxious. An “Asian” woman beside me introduced herself, and launched into her story: “I’ve been coming to this for years. Ten years now. I’m from Philly, and I’ve been to Big Hugs in New York, in Jersey, in D.C., and the suburbs of Philadelphia, but they don’t happen too often there, so that’s why I travel so far for them, and I’ve been to Big Hugs where there’s six people and Big Hugs where there are as many as forty-five people. They’re all different. When you have fewer people, it’s a lot more intimate, and you’re very connected to everybody at the same time, and the energy is just very quiet, and, you know, I went to one where there were nine people, and they had somebody there whose personal energy was very...large? And it just changed everything. I mean I liked the energy there and it was still very intimate but it was just very, you know, she was just very...out there? And very, you know, ‘This is me and I don’t care and I’m here,’ and they didn’t care what anybody thought about them and they were very open about it—they were very...themselves?” “Sometimes, you wish people wouldn’t be themselves,” I said, laughing. “And in larger Big Hugs there’s a different dynamic,” she continued, unfazed, “a lot of moving from this group to this group to this group, you know, moving around to find a...the right, uh, fit? And sometimes you find a fit right away and you’re

cuddling for almost the entire time. I've been doing this for, like, three years, so I've been to, like, twenty-five of them, something like that, and in that time, they've all been different, and I know people who've been to, like, hundreds and they say the same thing. It's been around a long time and it's entered the popular culture and it was even on an episode of *CSI: NY*. The person who'd been murdered had been to a Big Hug that weekend and they thought it might be connected to that. And it's been on the Late Show. One of them, anyway. And there was a study about casual touch and they were in Brazil sitting in a café watching people, watching friends talk, and over the course of one hour they counted over a hundred casual touches between friends. And in London, it was zero, and zero in New York, too, so America is one of the highest least-touch countries. The more casual touch your culture allows the less you need parties like these. You have to be open to the energy, to whatever it brings. I just wish there were more in Philly. This one just happens once a month. I mean, they have one that happens more frequently but it's a men's only party, so I can't go to that one. I wish I could facilitate one but I can't do it, I couldn't take the stress. I've been up since two and traveling since four and I got here around eleven."

"That's dedication," I said. "It's so, so worth it," she said.

"Hello, everybody," Matthias said, explaining how it was time to get started. "In order to be fully present and available for someone you have to have really strong boundaries and you have to have a really strong sense of who you are and your ability to hold a space for someone. You have to really listen to people and you have to honor what they're looking for and at the same time be really clear with boundaries because then, when there's a really safe container, a lot of great things can happen. This completely changed my life. Before this, I was just like, 'Well, I'll just do whatever *you* want to do, whatever makes *you* happy,' and never did I give myself the space to explore what *I* wanted. We're all going to introduce ourselves, and let's practice active listening, put ourselves in the headspace of empty mind, and then you'll hear something completely

different, because it's like, 'When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.' So we're going to go around the room and introduce ourselves."

I put my head down again, just listened to the voices: "First time here for me. I just wanted to try something different, to get out of my discomfort zone." "I'm here because I like to cuddle in real life. I keep running into people who don't. So a whole room of people who want to, I'm like, 'Yeah!'" "I've been to lots of Big Hugs and they're always relaxing." "I've been coming to Big Hugs on the East Coast for three years and I come because I have lots of issues with PTSD and agoraphobia and it helps to settle me and I use it as therapy so that my mental issues don't win." "First time here," I said, raising my head. "My friend over there brought me," pointing at Youssef. "From Connecticut. I enjoy these, so here I am." "I come here to relax. I love to cuddle." "I got out of a long-term relationship about a year ago because I realized I was asexual but I really enjoy physical touch, so this is right up my alley." "I just really love touch, and I really like to take care of myself, and it's really awkward in New York sometimes, you know, when you're alone, and you don't have many friends, and then you meet someone, and say, 'Hey, nice to meet you—hold me!' You laugh, but it's true, so yeah, I'm just a giant Care Bear." "I love cuddling and I feel I really have a lot of touch needs, I mean, I have a lot of touch needs." "I like cuddling, but I kind of like being in a space where I can say no." "I'm a massage therapist. I teach yoga and partner yoga. I'm a doula and an herbalist and I'm going to acupuncturist school. So touch and bodywork and consent in relationships is kind of my jam."

Matthias then led us through three exercises, the first of which had us turning to the person on our right and saying, "May I hug you," with the other person having to say no, and we had to say, "Thank you for taking care of yourself." And then we were asked to turn to the person to our left and do the same thing except reverse the roles. And then we had to go through the same process but say, "Will you hug me?" After this exercise, Matthias said, "In general, saying no is difficult,

and many of us aren't comfortable saying it, so we couch the 'no' in some kind of humor or deflect it somehow because it's easier. But know that 'No' is a complete sentence." He smile, the silence something warm. Okay, you've all done the hardest thing here. You've all rejected someone twice and were rejected by someone twice." Smiles all around.

"That's it," Matthias said after stating the rules. "Are there any questions?" Smiling, bodhisattva-like, he scanned the room. "You're welcome to use the other rooms, where there's more space." I immediately stood up and walked into one of the darker rooms. It was empty. A few candles flickered. I sat down on a velvety divan. "Keep your clothes on at all times," Matthias had said. "You don't have to cuddle with anybody ever. Ask for and receive a verbal yes before touching anyone. Ask. Specify. Listen. Respect. Care." Moments later, a svelte, "black" man approached. "May I?" he said, gesturing to the seat beside me. "If you're a yes, say yes," Matthias had said. "Yes," I said. He offered me his hand and I took it. We sat there in silence for a while. I felt his hand warmly throb in mine. "What do you do?" he said. "I connect," I said. "People, places, and things." "What about ideas?" he said. I laughed. "That, too." "Thanks for this," he said. "It really helps." "Helps?" I said. "With the refugee crisis," he said. I asked what he meant, and he explained that he "felt things deeply, too deeply," to the point where it completely burdened, overwhelmed him. "You helped me," he said, standing up. "Thank you," he said, and walked away.

I sat there, watching, less waiting for something to happen than simply allowing whatever to whatever. A "white" yuppie approached me, "Is it okay if we talk?" "Yes," I said, inviting him to sit beside me. "Where are you from?" he said. "'It ain't where you're from, it's where you're at,'" I said, quoting Eric B. & Rakim's "In the Ghetto." "Truth," he said, falling into contemplative silence. "How about you?" I said. "Where do you live?" "I'm living in Newark now," he said, "and it takes me about an hour to get to the city. The area I'm in is not super exciting but there's good people around. But I miss the natural beauty of the south. I'm used to being around heavily forested

areas. I was born and raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. But then I moved to New Orleans, which is quite forested, too. Nice weather to me. Lived there for four years before moving to Newark.”

“Never been.” “It’s beautiful. Put it on the list.” “And what do you do?” “I’m a flight attendant.”

“Flight attendant, wow!” I said. “Good one,” he said. “How often do you fly?” “I’m on eighteen days out of the month. So, in fact, today, I could’ve been sent somewhere. I went to the airport and was on standby for, like, four hours. My wife is going to Dublin tonight with our roommate.”

“That’s interesting,” I said. “And you’re okay with that?” “Oh, yeah, sorry, they’re both flight attendants, too.” “Oh, I see.” “Yeah, they got assigned the same trip to go to Dublin and they’ll stay there for a night or two.” “Wow, why didn’t they take you?” “Oh, no, that’s how it goes. It’s normal that we—we’re on reserve. New flight attendants—that’s us. We’ve just been doing it a year and a half—they just send us where they need us, and it’s very rare that we’re on the same flight. But they just got lucky.” “So do they have Big Hugs in Louisiana?” “New Orleans is kind of a bastion of liberal thought, but no, they don’t have them there. I’m thinking I’ll start one if I ever go back.” “How did you hear about it?” “Oh, I go to this bi Meetup—a discussion group for bisexuals—and someone there mentioned these parties, and so now I’m here.” “You?” “Oh, my friend Youssef brought me here.” “Can I hold your hand?” “If you’re a no, say no,” Matthias had said. “If you’re a maybe, say no.” “No,” I said. “Thanks for taking care of yourself,” he said, standing up and walking away. Waiting a short while, I went to another room where two figures were lying intertwined on a large, plush couch, cushions all around them. “I’m sorry I gave off that vibe,” one figure said. “Oh, don’t worry. I do empathy work,” the other responded. “You weren’t letting on. I just thought I’d check in.”

I found Youssef in another room. A “white” man was embracing him and weeping. “Shh,” Youssef consoled, stroking the man’s head. “I believe you.” “Thank you,” the man said. “You don’t know what this means.” I passed another couple, two women, one of them, the smaller of

the two, on the other's lap, almost cradled. "In China, Northern Chinese and Southern Chinese look down on each other." "Why do they look down on each other?" I couldn't hear the answer, but heard the word "stereotype." It's all too much. I was losing my bearings. Maybe that was a good thing. I had to leave. "You are always free to change your mind," Matthias had said. I didn't want to disturb Youssef, so I took out my machine, texted him that I was leaving. After securing a taxi, I left the party.

Outside on the street, I dared not look up, fearing phobias might be contagious, and maybe they were. I kept my eyes closed the entire ride. They were probably being drawn into a circle again by now, Matthias saying what facilitators say after such gatherings: "If you can slowly segue into a seating position, please do, and if there's a person sitting next to you, or energetically lengthening, please, if you want to, extend a hand toward that person, and if there's a hand that wants to hold your hand you can do that and then after you do that, do it again with the person next to you, and then close your eyes, just close your eyes, and release your tailbone, spine, and neck, let your spine lengthen, put a little more space between each vertebra, draw your shoulder blades up, back, and down, and just release them." And I was doing it, following the imagined instructions. He'd continue: "Let your neck get a little bit longer. Notice if your tongue is at the top of your mouth and just release it, and soften your face, your jaw, your eyes. And then, begin to, without changing your breath, notice it, notice the inhalations, and notice the exhalations. If thoughts come in, allow them to pass, as if they were drifting on a cloud; let them drift on by without attaching to them, and then bring your attention and awareness back to your breath. On your inhalation, you can say to yourself, 'Let,' and on your exhalation say to yourself, 'go.' Inhaling 'Let.' And exhaling 'go.' Inhale, deeply, through the nose, and then exhale through the mouth. Again, inhale through the nose, even more deeply, and exhale through the nose. Inhale through the nose, and exhale through the nose. Inhale through the nose; exhale through the nose.

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.” I breathed in and out, feeling better, more myself, whatever, whoever that means. He’d continue, his face beatifically beaming: “And now, allow your eyes to open. Take a moment and look around. Silently thank everyone in this room for sharing in this experience with you. And as you’re ready, and if you want, you can let go of the hands. There is a beautiful song, by Krishna Das, I think, I’m not sure, but it ends with the mantra ‘Lokah Samastah Sukhino Bhavantu,’ which means, ‘May all beings everywhere be happy and free.’ By saying this, you then have to ask where your part is in that, so it’s important to also say, ‘May my thoughts, words and deeds contribute in some way to freedom and happiness for all.’”

As soon as I was safe in my apartment, I turned on the goggle-box. It said, “That feeling, only better.” I turned it off again, and lay myself down on the bed, clicked on the Death Clock, plugged in my data. Twenty-eight years. 884, 739, 021 seconds. 884, 739, 020 seconds. 884, 739, 019 seconds. 884, 739, 018 seconds. 884, 739, 017 seconds. 884, 739, 016 seconds. 884, 739, 015 seconds. 884, 739, 014 seconds. 884, 739, 013 seconds. 884, 739, 012 seconds. 884, 739, 011 seconds. 884, 739, 010 seconds. 884, 739, 009 seconds. 884, 739, 008 seconds. 884, 739, 007 seconds. 884, 739, 006 seconds. 884, 739, 005 seconds. 884, 739, 004 seconds. 884, 739, 003 seconds. 884, 739, 002 seconds. 884, 739, 001 seconds. 884, 739, 000 seconds. 884, 738, 999 seconds. 884, 738, 998 seconds. 884, 738, 997 seconds. 884, 738, 996 seconds. 884, 738, 995 seconds. 884, 738, 994 seconds. 884, 738, 993 seconds. 884, 738, 992 seconds. 884, 738, 991 seconds. 884, 738, 990 seconds. 884, 738, 989 seconds. 884, 738, 988 seconds. 884, 738, 987 seconds. 884, 738, 986 seconds. 884, 738, 985 seconds. 884, 738, 984 seconds. 884, 738, 983 seconds. 884, 738, 982 seconds. 884, 738, 981 seconds. 884, 738, 980 seconds. 884, 738, 979 seconds. 884, 738, 978 seconds. 884, 738, 977 seconds. 884, 738, 976 seconds. 884, 738, 975 seconds. 884, 738, 974 seconds. 884, 738, 973 seconds. 884, 738, 972 seconds. 884, 738, 971

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**08.03**

As expected, the corporate media was once again focusing on the alleged motives of the killer instead of exposing the motives behind politicians' refusal to enact sensible gun control legislation. Did we really need to know that the killer suffered from lifelong depression? That she had gained a lot of weight because of the medications she was taking? That she had recently assaulted a woman in a parking lot who had asked her when she was due? "I'm fat!" she'd wailed, whaling on the woman. "Fat! Fat! Fat! Not pregnant!" That the shooter desperately wanted to get pregnant and that there was an association between her antidepressant use and decreased fecundability? And please don't tell me about petitions and phone calls and emails and other wastes of time. I can't take the hypocrisy of so-called legislators, who give all kinds of lip service but then do what amounts to nothing to enact sensible gun control legislation, the selfsame people, if we can call them that, who fight against universal health care, affordable housing, a livable wage, who have done what amounts to nothing to dismantle the prison industrial complex, who have combat boot-stomped all over my father's beloved island Puerto Rico, not to mention Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc. I felt sick. From a screen: "There's no going back. We've entered a new era." From another screen: "That call to let someone know you're okay might be the most important call in the world."

Late morning, retinally oversaturated from screens, irreality putting the question to physicality, I stood up, stretched, and touched my face, palped my fingers on my skin, like the pointy-eared alien on that famous space opera teevee series, when he was trying to form a connection, a bond with another person, a so-called mind meld. Moments later, I left the apartment, finally escaping its nebulous atmospherics, the ghostly colorations seemingly burned into the air itself.

Walking, I had this overwhelming feeling that when I returned I should clear out, like Harry, turn my back on everything I owned, turn away from my apartment and everything in it, since all of it was bearing down on me, crushing me under its weight, had been for all these months, no, all these years. I was at the extremities of this thing called life, a construction if there ever was one. What happened beyond it? I had to escape the changeability of everything, somehow combat the ongoing uncertainty.

Life is a pre-existing condition. I scratched myself, realizing I'd forgotten to take my medication. How long had it been since I'd swallowed one of the oblong gelatinous capsules? A day? Two days? More? I couldn't be sure. I could feel the sensation, the rippling under my skin, on my right wrist. I scratched and scratched it with no relief. I thought of turning back but I just kept walking. Where was I going?

It was hot. I was wearing a t-shirt and board shorts, sneakers and ankle-high socks. Sunglasses. I was prepared, at least, for the weather. I stopped at the bodega simulacrum for some water. But where was I going? I felt anxious, no, I felt something moving, something worming itself inside me, a tiny thing at this point but slowly but doggedly growing. Skin tingling and stomach churning, I kept walking, though, feeling cold despite the heat of the sun bearing down on me.

I saw a boy of about eleven moon two girls, whereupon I commanded him to pull up his pants, also saying he was being rude and obnoxious, and not even close to being funny. "Not funny! Not funny!" he shouted, nevertheless immediately pulling up his pants. "Boys will be boys," a woman said to me directly afterward. "Boys will be rude, stupid, or violent," I said, "if you allow, expect, or encourage them to be," my stomach knotting up again thinking about my own sons, boys no more, yes, but boys forever in my mind, forever frozen in the moment of my

having left them, abandoned them. Both my forearms were tingling, virtually vibrating, now. Would it finally break out of me, whatever it was?

It's not winters that determine what the city of cities is—its essence, and all that—interminable as they are, but its summers. The overall stickiness, the surround a kind of sludge where nothing seems to move. A friend once ribbed me for talking about “the city,” saying, “I love San Fran, too,” when he knew I was talking about New York City, explaining that in NorCal, when people say “the city,” they mean SF, reminding me that I wasn't immune to provincialism, that so many of us live in what we think are universes but are really just small circles where each one of us is the centerpiece, which couldn't be farther from the fact that we're all in this shitbang, each one of us a pile of fragments among piles of fragments, within the too-much-ness of now, the past forever erupting into the present, rupturing it, each one of us differing time signatures simultaneously beating and repeating, and it ultimately doesn't matter where any of us live as long as we can keep trying to live together. Maybe this was what it was, the skin thing: maybe the past—deeply embedded within me but still as unknowable as the future—was trying to break out of me. Scratching my chest, I imagined memory, that is, history—always a wholly constructed thing—bursting out of me, like the gooey xenomorph exploding out of John Hurt's character's chest in *Alien*.

In any case, New York City means walking down a sidewalk in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, where a boy of about seven, a stranger, scooters up to you, saying “Hello, Mister. Where are you going?” who, after your mundane answer, asks, “Do you speak Arabic?”; the boy disappointed when you say, “No,” but who lights up when you ask him if he does, giving him a chance to say, “Yes, and English and a little Spanish and Chinese”; it means picking up some dry cleaning from a burqa-enveloped Yemeni, who, after answering some of your questions about Eid, says you look Syrian; it means encountering a topless woman on a subway platform, whose whole upper body is

painted green, black swirls snaking all over her skin, the pixie smiling while shaking her more-than-a-handful breasts at you; it means seeing a free outdoor performance by a Fela Kuti tribute band, the musicians tearing it up, everyone around them dancing; it means all of this and more happening in one day. Anyway, as the song says, “It’s not where you’re from but where you’re at.” Was I remembering that correctly?

Hours later, smelling salt in the air, I realized where I had been unconsciously intending to go all along. Unconscious intent? Was that even possible? Standing a few feet away from the ocean, right before the damp sand begins, I peeled off my sweat-wet shirt, my sneakers, my soggy socks, tossed them into a pile. My arms and legs itching beyond belief, I ran toward the ocean, into it, splashing with every step, until I couldn’t. Thigh-deep, I finally dunked myself into the salty murk. Bobbing, I recalled the year I took the so-called Polar Plunge, where I’d sloughed the previous year’s pain, sorrow, and madness into the Atlantic Ocean’s intensely frigid but healing waters.

Coming out of the ocean, I felt better. Not quite the revelatory renewal of the wintry plunge, but it would do. I didn’t have my machine and I felt ashamed of the phantom feeling I felt in my fingers as if the machine were in my hand. I walked from one end of the beach to the other, passing lifeguards stupidly spinning their whistles, the string whipping around their middle and index fingers. At one moment, I stepped on something sharp. I yelled and saw stars. Collapsing to the sand, I removed this black, spiny pod-like thing from the ball of foot. At first glance, I thought it was one of those spiky gumballs, those brown seed-carrying hulls that fall from Sweet Gum trees. Examining it more closely, I realized it was person-made, a piece of plastic shaped into a floral thingamabob. Unable to discern its purpose, I pocketed it, resumed my walk, keeping an eye out for other ones. I did find a few more, which I’d subsequently showed to one of the lifeguards, asking her what it was. “Something the ocean spat up,” she said. “Exactly,” I said. “Makes me

think the ocean's getting revenge, saying, 'You fuckers and your single-use plastics, and your dumpings of same and more into me, look who's hurting now!' She looked at me pityingly, if not with some alarm, and I turned away, keeping an eye out for more of the damned things.

Back at the apartment, among my machines, I called Z. Harry still hadn't returned. Z told me about the emergency responders: the search-and-rescue team, criminal-investigations unit, drone unit, and emergency medical personnel. Multiple police and fire departments were now involved. Z was worried. She said there was nothing to do but wait, although I suspect she continued to check their joint bank account balances, to see if there had been any recent activity on their credit cards. She refused to cancel his access to any of these things, saying he'd come back when he was ready. From a screen: "Watch it on the go or anywhere at home!" I turned off the volume, and slumped onto the couch.

Lying there, watching amorphous shapes floating under my eyelids, I imagined finding Harry in Coney Island, on the beach, not beached and bleached as Z had worried, but simply sitting there looking at the ocean, his lips chapped, his face sunburnt. He wouldn't respond when I called out to him. He wouldn't even realize he was being called, because he'd forgotten who he was and everything about himself, that there was a woman who waited for him at their home, a home they'd built together. I turned up the volume of the goggle-box. "Beat yesterday!" it said, and I turned it off. Thom posted: "I dreamt I left Jacob's room and traveled on the waves to meet Mrs. Dalloway at the lighthouse."

#### **08.04**

I wasn't all there but I was doing my best to be there for Z. You do what you can do. Called her but it went right to voicemail. "Thinking of you," I said and hung up. I thought of calling my sons. I thought of calling Sarah. Instead, I ordered some meals to be delivered to Z's house. Some of her

favorite things to eat. Chicken and Poblano tostadas with roasted zucchini. Garlic and soy-glazed shrimp with charred broccoli and hot green pepper sauce. Farro and lentil mujaddara with sweet peppers, labneh, and almonds. You'd think I'd order something for myself but I wasn't hungry.

From a screen: "Expect great savings and a whole lot more!"

My portals were afire with outrage about the Lowell Hospital shooting. V posted: "Funny how many people shoot their mouths off when they talk about guns." V posted: "How many gun nuts need to crack before sensible gun control is enacted, at the very least, and guns are eradicated altogether, for that matter?" From a screen: "With every bite, I beg for more."

Had a song stuck in my head. By Girls with Mustaches, but I forget the title. The chorus is what kept coming back to me: "What you see is what you forget." I was troubled by the line, the singer sang it over and over again, slightly altering the melody and accenting different words each time. The first emphasis was on the first "what," the object that had been forgotten. She stressed "see" the second time, underscoring perception. She followed that with the first "you" and the second "you" in the next repeated chorus. Somehow, you didn't feel like she was milking it but instead trying to honestly ascertain meaning, to take responsibility.

Blank was in the studio, working with a band I'd helped to put together. From a screen: "The cloud for smarter business." V was on another screen, responding to the governor of Massachusetts, who, responding to the Lowell Hospital shooting, had said that "these senseless acts of violence aren't who we are as Americans." "No, these senseless acts of violence are *exactly* who we are as Americans," V said, "which even a cursory glance at history will reveal. Besides the fact that this country was conceived in violence, a violence that wiped out over ten million of the country's original inhabitants; besides the fact of slavery, which resulted in millions of deaths as well, besides the fact that violence continues to pervade this culture, Americans not only

engaging in violence, but relishing it—besides all that, every day, three hundred forty-two people in America are shot in murders, assaults, suicides, and suicide attempts, unintentional shootings, and police intervention; and every day, ninety-six people die from gun violence. Also, the U. S. makes up five percent of the world’s population but holds thirty-one percent of the world’s mass shooters.” Pausing, his eyes welling up, V said, “Deepest condolences to the family and friends of all of the victims. May we finally force this country’s government to finally stop failing us.”

Muggy, sunny, the day burned away all movement, of time, of bodies, but I was walking, feeling like I wasn’t walking. Overheard: “‘Rapey’? Hate that fucking word!” I hated it, too, its ironic cutesiness, its disturbing casualness. Message board lingo trivializing the horrific. Thom posted: “I dreamt of a world where love, peace, justice, and freedom aren’t fuzzy feelings but a living, breathing reality, where love means active expressions of compassion, where peace means an end of all war, militarism, imperialism, etc., where justice means that the rule of law goes straight to the top and where the prison industrial complex is utterly demolished, where freedom means we can all pursue what we love to do and without fear, where everyone is accorded the same basic human rights.” Dream on, Thom!

Come evening, I cleared out my inbox, and then something about the internet hit me, that with all its tabs and folders, the various document management systems, etc., we are actually trapped inside a massive electronic filing cabinet, our inboxes and mail and whatnot ensuring we never leave the office, the electronic rectangles we carry around actually portable cubicles.

Earlier, I called Z but she didn’t pick up so I left a messaging asking how she was doing, if she needed anything. Asking when I could come see her, I signed off. There was huge backlash against V’s chastising of the Massachusetts governor, who was up for re-election in a highly contentious close race against what many called an “alt-right monster,” one pundit saying that

people need to support the governor, etc. Later, V tweeted: “We don’t need graciousness. We need action. I’m not going to applaud people, especially politicians, for basic human intelligence and decency. Politicians don’t respond to support. They respond to pressure, to demands, period.”

## 08.05

Walking is thinking. I had been walking for hours, and somehow ended up in Sunset Park. A bodega to my right had huge carts flanking its entrance, each cart a squarish cornucopia. There were mounds of papayas and mangoes and apples and bananas. There were tubs of ice with cheap plastic containers packed with grapes, tangerines, cantaloupe chunks, and canary melon slices. There were hills of plantains, yucca roots, and ragged ears of corn, and a metal crate where a tower of newspapers yellowed in the sun. Exiting the store, a young woman grabbed a little boy’s forearm, reprimanding him, waves of denial flowing from his high-pitched voice. Memory flash: my mother shaking me, telling me to stop crying, making me cry even more. Shaking my head, I walked on. Through the slits of a botanica’s curtained windows I saw shelves of roots and herbs, candles and incense, and statues of Catholic saints. Fighting the temptation to enter it with hopes of finding some cure for my illness, I walked on.

I saw a red deflated balloon on the ground, its long red ribbon extending out completely flat. Taking a photo of it, I posted it on Fakebook with the title “Saddest Balloon in the World.” An hour later, it had received over a thousand likes. Sometimes we cry when we mean to laugh.

Early evening found me attending a Gentrifiers Anonymous meeting. I hadn’t told Zenith I’d be going. I wasn’t exactly sure what would happen. What was I hoping to find? Did I expect Harry to show up? That he’d be seeking some kind of absolution from confessing there? Thom posted:

“I dreamt of a lesbian, transsexual, atheist, Muslim, immigrant, former-prostitute, single-mother President of the United States.”

I walked in on a young, “white” woman talking about “land grabs.” She undermined her authority with the cadence of her speech, where every phrase would rise up, making it sound like it ended in a question mark. Her hair was held up with a pencil. She wore a ratty sweater, a Pentecostal-length skirt, and combat boots, the entire assemblage coalescing into Quaker punk rock or something.

Two people erupted about the so-called end of identity politics. Basically, a “white” woman was saying, “It’s the economy, stupid.” “You’re tired of being called out about your privilege,” a “black” woman responded. “It’s about the poor,” the “white” woman said. “It’s about a war on poverty, which disproportionately affects people of color, women, generally, and other disenfranchised groups. So let’s talk about that and not get bogged down in minor issues.” “Minor? Do you hear yourself?” “What?” “They’re all connected.” “Yes, so let’s stop the fragmentary approach.”

At the end of the meeting, I approached the facilitator. “Interesting meeting,” I said. “It’s necessary work,” she said. “Yes,” I said, “I can see that.” I asked if she’d seen Harry, showed her a photo of Harry, but she couldn’t recall having ever seen him before.

I took the train back to the apartment. There were two men at the other end of the car but I could still hear them talking. “Ever hear Coltrane playing ‘My Favorite Things’?” “The true sound of music.” “Shit is deep.” “Heartbreaking.” “Serious, man.” “Roll over, Rodgers and Hammerstein!” “Isn’t that the song where fucking Julie Andrews is singing to the girl who’s all torn up because her boyfriend dumps her or some shit?” “It’s alright, though, cause he turns out to be a nazi-sympathizer.” “A nazi’s a nazi.” “True, but, yo, I swear the shit actually works. I don’t

know about ‘noodles with schnitzel’ but I can roll with ‘silver white winters that melt into spring.’”

They laughed, and so did I.

Three hundred forty-two people in America were shot by a gun today, ninety-six people dying from the shot.

## 08.06

You hear them all the time, “dogs,” not without some irony, catcalling women, each one seemingly unaware of the power play, the fear factor, how stupid they sounded, how violent. To wit: Walking down the street, I saw a “Latinx” woman walking in my direction. She wore a black camisole and shorts. “Hello,” someone said. “Hope those straps are strong.” It was a middle-aged “white” man standing in front of a store. He was referring to the women’s bra. She said nothing. “Ooh, you’re fine,” he said, sounding even stupider. She said nothing, her face, though, crumpled, her eyes fiery. I turned around. “What, you can’t even say hello?” he said. “Stuck-up bitch.” She said nothing but kept on moving. “She doesn’t want to talk to you,” I said. “Was I talking to you?” he said. He was a big man, a wall, a boulder. “You weren’t,” I said. “But you are now.” I felt myself making myself bigger, as if he were some bear I’d chanced upon in the woods. Isn’t that what you were supposed to do? Rage coursing through me, I felt my arms rise slightly up, my legs spread apart, my feet plant themselves. You weren’t supposed to look a bear in the eyes but I glared at the man, waited for him to make a move. The woman turned toward us. Gently grabbing my arms, she looked me in the eyes, shook her head. I put my arms down. The man laughed. “Fucking pussy,” he said. “‘Whereof one cannot speak,’” I said, quoting Wittgenstein, “‘thereof must one be *silent*.’” Confused, he laughed again, walking away, though, looking over his shoulders once before disappearing around the corner. “Thank you,” the woman said. “No one’s ever done that for me.” “More of us need to,” I said. Shaking from the adrenaline, I took out my cigarettes. I offered her

one but she declined, saying she quit a long time ago. “What’s your secret?” I said. “Realizing I had to find my own way,” she said, explaining she’d tried the patches, the gum, the mantras, the shots, the hypnosis. “You have to find your own way,” she said. I nodded, pondering the admonition, imbuing it with meanings she hadn’t intended. “Speaking of which,” she said, “I must be on my way.” I lit up as she walked away.

I went to Z’s house. She’d been practically homebound since Harry left. We’d planned to watch the next episode of *Everyone Is Gay*. I wasn’t sure what was going to happen. I arrived to find Z hollowed out, her eyes scalloped. She sat down on the sofa and I sat beside her. She stood up and walked toward the window. Gazing out, she said, “I can’t cry anymore,” she said. “I’m sorry,” I said. “What are you sorry for?” “I’m sorry Harry’s gone.” She gazed out the window, like a forlorn film character, and then I felt stupid for thinking so, for imagining this was merely performance. “I don’t know how to talk,” she said. “Then don’t,” I said. Turning, she looked at me, the first time she looked at me directly since I’d arrived, and I could see her face change, unhardened a bit. She sat back down. “I need to do something but I don’t know what,” she said. “I know the feeling,” I said, side-hugging her in the half-light. Her hair was tangled and greasy, and she had a mildewy smell. “How about a bath?” I said. “That sounds nice,” she said. Gently grabbing her hand then shoulder, I brought her to feet and walked her upstairs to the bathroom. Sitting her on the toilet seat, I lifted the mechanism in the tub that would keep the water from going down the drain and turned on the hot and cold water, adjusting the knobs until the water was soothingly hot. Finding some Epsom salts, I poured some into the water and spread it around with my free hand. Turning around, I lifted Z’s shirt—one of Harry’s t-shirts, I thought, from the size of it—over her head. She wasn’t wearing a bra. Standing her up again, I rolled down her jogging pants, asking her how her run was, which made her laugh, just a single expulsion of air, but a laugh nevertheless. She

looked thinner, looked evanescent, really. After slipping off her panties, I lifted her into the tub and held her hands as she sat down, Z sighing as she slid herself into the water, submerged herself to her neck.

We sat there, in silence for a while. “You ever float?” she said, finally. “I can’t swim,” I said. I didn’t mention the time when I was a kid and my father took my sister and me to Disneyworld, about how I’d gone into the hotel’s pool unattended, and floated on my back, drifting to the deep end, where at one moment I panicked, flailed around, and luckily managed to grip onto one of the sides, staying there until my heart stopped hammering, until I breathed normally. “I mean in an isolation tank,” she said. I shook my head. “You should try it,” she said, going on to explain what she liked about it. “I’m enjoying this, though,” she said. “Be here now,” I said, quoting her, making her laugh.

After her bath, we went to bed and napped. Waking up, we watched *Everyone Is Gay*. Afterward, sensing she didn’t want me to stay, I reserved a taxi to take me back to the apartment. She was asleep again when I left.

We hit some traffic and the driver of a car beside mine gave a few bucks to a guy holding up a sign that read: ‘Why lie? I need a beer.’” “Let me off here,” I said, wanting to walk the rest of the way, my machine settling the transaction. I saw a bike chained to a pole, the remnants of a bike, its wheels and seat and pedals and everything else save the diamond-shaped, rust-covered frame gone. Even its fork was missing. There was an allegory to the U-lock’s presence, too. I took a photo and posted it on Fakebook, titling it: “Saddest Bike in the World.”

Three hundred forty-two people in America were shot by a gun today, ninety-six people dying from the shot. Harry Nilsson’s version of “Many Rivers to Cross” sounds like the ripping off of a scab. Dirge-like, it feels like it’s at least twice as long as Jimmy Cliff’s original. Nilsson shreds his throat singing this song, apparently never recovering from it, well, as far as the myth

about the performance goes. But perhaps “Don’t Forget Me” is more appropriate. Less boozy, less corrosive, maybe, but a blistering performance, nevertheless. Cellos and violas moan. The piano figure slices through. Could there be a more plaintive sound than Nilsson on this song? And he brilliantly undercuts the whole thing by saying that while he’ll miss his beloved when he’s lonely he’ll “miss the alimony, too.” Or perhaps I should go with Nilsson’s version of Badfinger’s “Without You.” Both of its songwriters committed suicide, years apart, the first in his garage, the second’s body hanging from a willow tree in his back garden. The first octave leap is a killer.

### 08.07

I woke to the sound of a river—simulated—coursing, the bay windows’ screen slats opening, allowing sallow bands of light into the room. I made a sandwich for myself: lox and scallion cream cheese on a roll. Packed some grapes as well. I packed the bottle of water I’d put in the freezer last night. It’d be at least partially ready to drink by the time I was sprawled out on the beach. I turned on the goggle-box. “Nasacort—Stops more of what makes you miserable,” it said. My machine told me that Nasacort was Triamcinolone, that is, “an intermediate-acting synthetic glucocorticoid given orally, by injection, by inhalation, or as a topical ointment or cream.” An over-the-counter nasal spray, in other words—oh well. I turned off the goggle-box.

Outside, now, waiting for the light to change at one of the crosswalks down from my apartment complex, I watched a yellow cab swerve toward the curb by a “white” couple who were standing there. The man who flagged it down opened the door for the woman with him. Opening the door for her, he helped her climb in the car, and shut the door behind her. They waved at each other, her eyes as bright as her smile was wide, his smile all teeth. “Cunt,” he muttered, facing away from the car as it drove away. This is my neighborhood, the people in it. I saw a can of Coke in the street. Rolled over by vehicles more than a few times, it was embedded into the asphalt,

horizontally, parallel to the sidewalk, so you could still distinguish the familiar swirly logo and wavy ribbon. I posted it on Fakebook, with the caption: “Saddest Can in the World.” “Talk about product placement,” Max commented.

It felt good to be still, to close my eyes, and listen, absorb the sounds around me, voices, laughter, surf sizzling in and out, seagulls’ squawking, the occasional sharp peep of a whistle, all the noises merging.

A couple of college kids settled their blankets and towels feet away from me. They kept saying they were “just saying,” saying it so often I thought my head would explode, gray matter pouring out of my ears and down my neck, like wet concrete down a mixer trough. Overheard: “The only thing worse than waking up to my face in the morning is not waking up at all.”

Back at the apartment, I responded to the toy company’s mock-ups of the Silvio Play doll. It had been my idea to model the action figure after *Pulsar: The Ultimate Man of Adventure*, a toy Mattel produced in 1976, likely trying to capitalize on the success of *The Six Million Dollar Man* doll released three years before. The figure’s torso’s made of clear plastic so you can see all his internal organs and there’s a button in the back for pumping “blood” through simulated arteries to the heart, and the head flips open so you can insert these lenticular “mission programming disks.” Oddly, the figure came with no real backstory, which arguably made it more interesting, since you had to come up with stories of your own. Imagine that! Was he some kind of human-machine hybrid, an extraterrestrial? A few months ago, I’d won an Ebay auction for one of the figures—it was in mint condition, and had the window box and everything. The company wasn’t going for it, yet, but I suggested they at least arrange the Silvio Play figure with its arms outstretched in the box, a circle surrounding it in the background, like Da Vinci’s famed *Vitruvian Man*.

Later, I watched *The Color of Pomegranates*, a remarkable film. The static shots and their often symmetrical compositions, not to mention the marionette-like movements of the actors, all contributed to a kind of overall flattening of the visual plane, almost freezing the “action” to the point where the film seems to resist the idea of film as “moving picture.” Watching it, I often thought of Persian miniatures and Byzantine icons, and elaborately constructed dollhouses and dioramas. The symbolism is definitely complex but by no means impenetrable, not that impenetrability is necessarily an obstacle to enjoyment.

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## **08.08**

“You keep calling them ‘refugees,’” V said. “They’re citizens.” “Oh, now we’re quibbling over words,” the “white” pundit said. “Words are all we have sometimes,” V said. “Let’s talk about the debt crisis instead of being sidetracked.” “Sidetracked?” V said. “You just used an inappropriate term that obfuscates rather than brings further clarity to the crisis at hand.” “These are human beings, is my point.” “Yes, but they are U.S. citizens,” V said. “And it’s the United States’ responsibility to take care of them. You’re treating them as if they’re foreigners.” “They speak Spanish, don’t they?” she said. “And English,” V said. “And Spanish is a language so prevalent in some parts of the United States that it may overcome English as the so-called standard language.” I muted the volume. My head was about to explode. Not sure how much mendacity and hypocrisy I could take. V was great, though, as usual.

I was in a Luft, heading downtown to meet with Crawford, and the driver was unusually talkative. “They do nothing,” he said. “Nothing, nothing, nothing.” He sighed. Originally from Jordan, he’d

since built a whole life here in the United States, he and his wife. Seven children! And his brother had ten. “I used to own this,” he said, waving his right hand in the air. He’d worked for years to finally purchase a prized taxi medallion that once had an estimated worth of around a million dollars. Peer-to-peer ridesharing transportation network companies had made it practically worthless and so he’d been forced to auction it off at a huge loss. “Would have killed him if they hadn’t killed him,” he’d said, referring to his brother, who’d co-owned the medallion. His brother had had the late-shift, the time of night when you picked up the worst of the city’s worst: the cocky, cranky, and or sleep-deprived; the asshole stockbrokers and investment bankers; the exhibitionist couples fumblingly groping, licking, sucking, and fucking in the backseat; the belligerent drunks, the infantile drunks, the violent drunks, the young and stupid and sloppy drunks, the last inevitably vomiting their falafel or spaghetti or whatever all over the backseat. “Nothing!” Three years ago, his brother picked up someone, who’d directed him to a desolate place, where the person robbed him and shot and killed him. “What about the DNA?” the man said, explaining how the police hadn’t found the killer and would soon more or less give up. “They don’t care about us,” he said. “But what can you do? They kill you one way or another way. Me? They kill me slow. Kill me piece by piece.” I asked him about Jordan, whether he’d gone to visit. “It’s a beautiful, beautiful country. You buy meat in the market. Killed same day. No frozen meat, like in America. No frozen food, the fruits and the vegetables—all fresh. What you buy, you cook. I was there, few years ago, before they killed my brother, but there were problems, there are always problems, and I couldn’t go, so I was in Palestine, instead. My wife, she’s from Palestine, so I stayed with her family, and oh, it’s nothing like here there. Here you work and work and survive, and there you live. You have to fight, yes, but you live. Here you fight and always lose. You lose there, too, but you live, you live.”

We hit traffic so we inched forward for a long while. “Shit!” the driver said, looking to his right. “What?” I said. “Another hole,” he said. “They don’t care about us.” “Like the Michael Jackson song,” I said. “They need to fix the roads,” he said. We were moving past the sinkhole now, which was still slowly widening. Lists and the false comfort they bring. Search-engineing results: cenote, sink, sink-hole, swallet, swallow hole, doline, depression. What happens when the earth opens up? ““Things fall apart,”” I answered aloud, quoting, ““the centre cannot hold.”” Eerie.

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## 08.09

The only thing the future holds is us captive. I was starting to think like V. This wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. Then again, I could hear him saying one of his favorite sayings as I thought this: “Great minds think unlike.” And this was one of his strengths, his “superpower,” to alter your thinking, your conventional mode of thinking, so that you thought like him, that is, unlike him, that is, you thought against, that is, thought differently than whatever, thought against unanimity. Conversations with V were always a trip, and arguments were always impossible since he’d often deliberately take an entirely different position just to fuck with you, fuck with the taking of sides, the diggings-in of heels. “The only thing the future holds is us captive,” I posted on Play’s feed. The reactions piled up. It went viral. It was sick. Made me sick. Sicker.

All the screens were on but nothing was on. Clicking about, I found a link to a series of photographs of famous tourist traps, monuments and such, where the photographer, instead of pointing the viewfinder toward the supposed object worthy of attention, toward the painting, sculpture, or whatever, places like the Eiffel Tower, the Great Pyramid of Giza, the Statue of Liberty—things we’d seen so many times even if we’d never seen it—he pointed the camera away

from it, as if the object were looking at the viewer, the camera capturing the surround everyone misses even when they miss the object they think they're all seeing but haven't seen because it had been mediated all along. What do we see when we are looking at things everyone else sees, have seen in the same ways everyone else sees them? The titles were bland, simply named whatever it was that wasn't being looked at. Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. Beijing's *Mausoleum of Mao Zedong*. Washington D.C.'s *The Lincoln Memorial*. I found *Wailing Wall, Jerusalem, Israel* particularly flat. At first glance, it was the kind of photo you'd discard. After studying it, though, the photograph comes alive. The picture plane's divided into three horizontal strips, which almost evenly delineate fore-, middle, and background, well, not quite evenly. In any case, the floor's grid of grey-bricked stones takes up the foreground, a gray, corrugated fence moves across the length of the middle ground, behind it some kind of housing, a partially obscured yellow bulldozer between it and the fence. I couldn't help thinking this might be some kind of act of solidarity, with the Occupied, with the residents of the world's largest open-air prison: Palestine. A young, hunched-over Jewish man is exiting stage left. Dressed almost completely in black, he functions very much like a silhouette on the page, a flattened figure. You could almost peel him off the picture plane. *Pyramid of the Sun, Teotihuacan, Mexico* shows a parched plot of land, rutted with intertwisting tire tracks, beyond the dirt a sandy expanse, thirsty trees tufting out here and there. The photographer's *Mona Lisa*, felt far too staged for me, too nudge-nudge, wink-wink. A woman stands in the center, taking up about a third of the photograph. We see her from behind, her long, slightly frayed hair hanging down to the middle of her back. She's looking at another painting, a gigantic mural I at first thought was Raphael's *School of Athens*, which was impossible, since the fresco was one of the decorations in the Stanze di Raffaello in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace. Search-engining it a bit, I found out what it was: Paolo Veronese's *The Wedding at Cana*. Beside the woman, in the blurry middle ground, stands a man, a father, presumably, with his two sons,

one of the boys looking away from the Veronese and away from the da Vinci as well. We're supposed to think of the woman as the Mona Lisa, that we're seeing her from behind, seeing what she sees, the woman a modern incarnation of Lisa Gherardini, the wife of Francesco del Giocondo, her arms, too, folded in front of her, her expression not only inscrutable but completely obscured, obliterated.

Later, I met with my ontologist. Avuncular but no less imposing, tall even seated in his chair, Dr. Ross looked at me, his gaze always a kind of unmasking. "It's the quality of your questions that matters most," he said. "What questions are you asking?"

"Am I going to die?"

"Yes," he said, "but you already know this. There are better questions." He was neither bored nor impatient, just stating the facts.

"When am I going to die?"

"I don't know," he said. "Why do you want to know?"

"So I can prepare for it?"

"You're asking me?" he said. Was I sounding like one of those post-millennial mopes, everything they say interrogatively upswung. Everything is "like," and nobody ever says anything: "Oh, I asked what he wanted to eat, and he was like, 'I don't know,' so, like, if you don't know, how do I, like, know, you know?"

"How do I prepare for death?" I said.

"Are you preparing for death?"

"I don't know."

"Who knows if you don't? Are you preparing for death?"

"Trying?"

"Are you preparing for death or planning it?"

“I’m not suicidal.”

“Can you prepare for something’s that’s unknowable?”

“How do you know something’s unknowable?”

“Good question,” he said, laughing.

“Tomorrow isn’t another day,” I said.

“Not yet.”

“Not yet.”

Moratorium on saying and/or writing any of the following: “Just saying.” “Thanks for coming to my TED Talk.” “Asking for a friend.” “I see you.” “Polar vortex.” “Hive mind.” “I can’t even.” “This!” “Now more than ever.” Three hundred forty-two people in America were shot by a gun today, ninety-six people dying from the shot.

## **08.10**

“This action cannot be undone,” my machine said. My arms were itching again, so I slathered on some cream, the only thing that brought relief, albeit of a temporary kind. That and my pills. Max posted: “We need a specific term for talking about what you’ve suffered instead of expressing sympathy for someone who’s shared a recent misfortune they’ve suffered. Something like ‘self-serving diversion’ but snappier.”

The screens were full of POTUS’s face. She had come to power with a huge public mandate and she had largely failed. The trickle-down theory of progress that her party had shoveled down the throats of their devoted membership proved once again to be a lie. Funny how breaking a glass ceiling results in a lot of people getting cut with the shards. I learned that from V. The previous administration had also been a complete disaster, but, like always, the so-called progressive wing

of this bird of prey had attempted to normalize the assault on the commons, the privatization of just about everything, had pushed a foreign policy you thought couldn't get any more belligerent but had. "Another world is possible," she said from one of the screens. It was a weak message. Of course another world is possible but what kind are you proposing?

I called up another screen where astronauts were hovering around in the cosmos. It was a history of space walks. Alexei Leonov floating above a swirling sea of clouds. Ed White somersaulting across a chunk of our blue planet, one of his gloves floating out of Gemini IV's open cockpit door. Clips from Buzz Aldrin's legendary, record-breaking EVA or extra-vehicular activity, including the "umbilical" or full, tethered walk. Aldrin and Neil Armstrong's moonwalk, which struck me as thoroughly haunting, almost creepy, especially the famous flag-planting moment, the astronaut duo evanescent, bobbing along the "Sea of Tranquility" like specters. It looked unreal, like filmic special effects—no wonder some people still think it had been faked.

After eating a bowlful of bananas and rasp-, blue-, and strawberries dolloped with yogurt, I stepped outside. The sun raged overhead and I could feel my skin baking. I stepped into the bodega to get a bottle of water, which I immediately gulped down. I felt the drones overhead, the many drones overhead, the meteorological ones with lidar scanners, yes, but also the surveillance drones, which purportedly helped to keep us safe. Something sounded, deep and full and reverberant, but I couldn't place its source. Maybe I imagined it, this notion filling me with something like dread, something like it because what was I feeling anyway, was I feeling anything, or simply performing, then assuaging that performed dread with distraction, and wasn't that what everybody else around me was doing? Distracting themselves from feelings of dread, performed or otherwise? Man does not live by dread alone.

I passed construction areas: orange cones and lights, bulky barriers, and flimsy fencing. The city's perpetual incompleteness the cause of its insomnia. Overheard: "Life's harder in real life."

I burst out laughing, the bearded “white” boy behind the voice scowling at me. I sat down on a bench, and watched a one-legged pigeon hop around. Two proselytizing Mormons approached me, our conversation ending quickly after the following exchange: “Any relation?” I said, pointing at one of their name tags, which read “Elder Van Halen.” “To who?” “You know, ‘Hot for Teacher’ and ‘Runnin’ with the Devil.’”

Wonderland was in the news. Asked whom she would be supporting in the upcoming election, she said she wouldn’t be supporting the “Patriarch-in-drag,” angering people in every direction. “Something died these four years but I’m hard-pressed to say exactly what it was,” she added. “Democracy? No, we’ve lived in a plutocracy for at least the past fifty years and an oligarchy for much longer. Critical thinking? Long dead. Nuance? Ditto. Truth? In a country built on lies? No, perhaps what died was belief in those selfsame lies about liberty and equality, safety and security, wealth and opportunity, etc. While this death has had obvious terrible consequences, e.g., despair, misdirected rage, and other forms of self-sabotage, and a moral vacuum which racist, sexist, imperialist predators are filling, etc., I think it’s ultimately a good thing, an opportunity for authentic radically progressive change.”

I had been as surprised as everyone else had been. POTUS and her opponent had been practically even in the popular vote but she had narrowly won the Electoral College. First female POTUS. Yadda yadda. The last four years had seen little to no change in women’s rights. Gender-based violence remained high. Workplace and educational parity had not been achieved. And maternal mortality rates had actually increased. And now she faced opposition from Republicans—surprise, surprise—who were a united front—surprise, surprise—as well as the progressives in this country, who were tired of being betrayed. Like any good Democrat, her first four years were a normalizing of the worst of the Republican administration’s foreign policy. It was almost with relish that she continued the wars in Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Syria. Palestine had been

almost completely taken over by Israel. The illegal settlements completely taking over the land. All with her approval, etc.

There was much celebration about the last glass ceiling finally having been broken. Hard to argue about symbols, about what their long-term effects might be. But what you could do was look at the record. It took four years to finally bring about a substantial raise in the minimum wage. This was touted as her administration's main success. Meanwhile, almost every social service, which had either been completely gutted or privatized by the previous administration, remained unchanged. Symbols in this case had very little impact in the short run. The idea that advancement in power by one woman would result in a kind of trickle-down power for all women was a false one. While there had been an increase in women's political representation and participation, this didn't result in dramatic changes in occupational segregation, the gender pay gap, and the unequal distribution of household labor. America is a conservative nation. Thinking that women in power would significantly change that was wishful thinking at best. It's like the calls for matriarchy to replace patriarchy. Yeah, good luck with that! Matriarchy means people like Ranavalona I, the Mad Monarch of Madagascar, in charge. Or Margaret Thatcher, Condoleezza Rice, Madeleine Albright, Isabella I of Castile, and Queen Mary I of England. Or Sarah Palin.

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## **08.11**

Play's clothing line was doing well, better than it ever had. "I should get sick more often," he'd said. "Not funny," I'd responded. He'd long bemoaned the dearth of formal wear possibilities for men. He hated suits and ties, thought them incredibly unimaginative. "Nooses and strait jackets," he called them. He was right. While the couture he and his designers reveled in sometimes bordered

on the ridiculous, they sometimes made incredibly smart decisions, like his “Suspension” series, the flared overalls that became his signature. Play’s “surprise” appearances at his stores around the world were all carefully planned, not to mention kept secret, fans nevertheless “social media-ing” probable itineraries. There were countless pictures of him sitting in a wheelchair now, oxygen tanks hanging from the back of the streamlined machine like a jetpack, as if he were just momentarily sitting down before taking flight.

“Know any funny movies,” Z texted. “Nothing offhand,” I wrote. “How about ‘on-hand’?” she said. “Ha! My tastes go from the Wes Anderson whimsy to Golden Age Hollywood screwball to the outrageousness of before-he-became-a-parody-of-himself Sacha Baron Cohen.” “You’re funny.” “Thanks. Smiley-face emoticon.” “Ha ha.” “Glad you’re laughing.” “You can be my movie!” Neither of us brought up Harry, the silence, the avoidance hardening into a kind of presence. Max posted: “Life sucks, but how good is its technique?” Thom posted: “I dreamt R&B still meant rhythm and blues instead of regurgitation and bullshit.” Jessie “drunk bought an Inflatable Evil Unicorn for Cats. Do I have to get a cat now?”

I was on the street. “Can’t Stop the Feeling” was sounding from somewhere. A nearby car? A convenience store? Cold and bland, the song actually stops feeling, its title nothing short of ironic. Three hundred forty-two people in America were shot by a gun today, ninety-six people dying from the shot.

## 08.12

I had an earworm. What was the other name for it? I could search-engine it but I instead allowed my mind to do whatever it does to eventually recall whatever. Retrieve it—the idea of retrieving it comforting me, as if I’d simply misplaced the word, the word sitting beneath other words, in some dark corner somewhere, in plain sight, that is, sound, or whatever, which made me think

about the time my older son, Marcus, when he was around five, had asked if you were able to think if you didn't know how to speak. It was "Feel free to feel free," a Girls with Mustaches line that reverberated in my mind. I tried to forget it by thinking of a line from a song, any other song, but it was a line from another of their songs I thought of—"You have to get up to get down." It had been some time since I thought of the Project, the task of finding a song I could live in forever. I sat in front of one of the screens. Didn't know what to look for so I just typed "I don't know what I'm looking for," feeling stupid as I wrote it since a song from a band I can't stand came to mind. Well, I *could* stand them up to a certain point, before they became the insufferable group they had become. That song isn't what immediately showed up in the search results, surprisingly enough, a song with that exact sentence as its title coming up instead. Scrolling away from what I'd guessed would be an insipid song, I found something that compelled me: "How can I find what I'm looking for when I don't know what it is?" I skimmed through the page, finding little there, except the phrase *presque vu*, which, in short, is the "tip of the tongue phenomenon," where you know you know something, but can't quite recall it, said phenomenon contrasted with *Jamais vu* or the feeling that something familiar appears strange and unfamiliar, which itself is contrasted with *déjà vu*, the feeling of familiarity occurring in unfamiliar contexts.

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### 08.13

The next episode of *Everyone Is Gay* tracked Bella and Frank traveling around the city, using public restrooms. It was probably their best show to date. "The Bible Belt's going to spank us today," Frank said, as he drove into the parking lot of a diner, its aerodynamic exterior gleaming, its neon sign duly causing retinal burn.

They sat down. Gave their orders to the waiter. Hamburger, medium well, for Frank. Caesar salad for Bella. “Where’s the ladies’ room?” Bella asked, her husky voice surprising the waiter. As she stood up, the point-of-view changed to Bella’s, the camera, subjective, looking out as if from her eyes. It was a clever disorientation, to be placed—through the camera’s movement and framing—in Bella’s point-of-view, in her mind, almost. It appeared as if it were you opening the stall door, you sitting down, you peeing, you wiping yourself, you flushing, you exiting the stall, you walking toward the sink and its wall-wide mirror. It was odd when you didn’t suddenly appear in the silvered glass but Bella. Using a paper towel, she tapped away the excess oil on her face. With a sponge, she gently buffed her cheeks, smoothing out the foundation and blush. She took out a silver tube of lipstick, puckered her lips, the old cosmetic on it clumped. Spreading red onto her lips, she puckered them again and kissed at the mirror and smiled. As she turned away from the mirror, the camera changed to her perspective once again. And now the question was whether Frank would use the men’s room.

It made sense that restrooms were once again a battleground, not only because of its place as a signifier during the Civil Rights Movement, whose primary aim was to end racial segregation and discrimination, many of the successes of which had since been overturned; not only because the restroom was a zone of potential violation of privacy that had to be protected; but also because the public restroom is America in microcosm: filthy, malodorous, inadequately supplied, and all business. And while most restrooms don’t resemble the infamous so-called Worst Toilet in Scotland, from the film *Trainspotting*, wherein a junkie deep-dives into said toilet in order to retrieve a recently “passed” opium suppository, or the equally infamous stickered and graffitied restroom at CBGB—the legendary East Village new wave and punk rock club—they were often barely distinguishable from cesspools, especially the ones on buses, which are worse than portapans because they were almost always in motion. I’m no germaphobe but there’s no way I’d touch

anything in a public restroom, not even to push down the tank's lever, the cramped confines of which requiring, in the end, a fitful contortion, more spasmodic jerk than martial arts kick. Three hundred forty-two people in America were shot by a gun today, ninety-six people dying from the shot.

#### **08.14**

The incidental and coincidental were becoming monumental. "How are you, son?" It was my mother. "Doing the best I can," I said. "And that's all you can do," my father said. "'Living just enough for the city,'" I said, quoting Stevie. "The only thing you have to do to die is live," she said. "So live," my father said. "Will do," I said. "What are you listening to?" "Lou Reed," I said. Mick Ronson's guitar was screaming all over. "Sounds intense," he said. "Vicious," she said. "Tell me how you're doing," I said. "Tell me how the dogs are." It's a great album, but "Walk on the Wild Side," played out as it is, is the standout. The rubbery bass line. The shimmering strumming. The brushwork on the snare. The background singers' doo-doo-doo-ing. The sinuous strings that arrive so beautifully if unexpectedly even though you're expecting it.

I was walking again, thinking the sight of a half-dozen fools yapping into their handheld machines as they steered their gas-guzzling behemoths with their "free" hand would be the worst thing I'd see today when I came upon a "black" woman who was erupting, cursing somebody out, ending the barrage with an emphatically expressed racial expletive. From where I was standing, I couldn't see the target of the vitriol. Turning from where she was standing, the woman walked up the street I was walking toward. Moments later, I saw a "black" man walking toward her. She turned and cursed him out. He laughed and said, "Why you have to use the N-word?" "That's right," she said,

“You have the nerve to kiss Raquel in front of me?” He laughed again. “Abortion tomorrow, baby!” she said. Nothing from him. “Ain’t even yours anyway,” she said.

The heat was getting to me. It was getting to everyone. Wearing a t-shirt and shorts, I still felt like I was wearing a long, woolen overcoat. I saw people lined up in front of an office desk, behind which sat a blue-besuited “white” man, his bottle-blond hair swept back, the person at the front of the line yelling at him. Drawing closer, I could hear the “white” woman loudly cursing, the man meanwhile looking at her, impassively. After about a minute, he thanked her, and then the next person walked up to him, handed him some money, sat down in the office chair in front of the desk. The blond-haired man tapped his machine and nodded to the “black” man before him, who subsequently launched a fusillade of profanities at the man, who, once again, sat there, devoid of expression, but who, after some moments, tapped his machine again and thanked the man. A sign on the desk read: “INSULT ME FOR \$5 A MINUTE.” After a few more people cursed at him, another “white” man in a bespoke suit came before the seated man and said, “Let’s switch places.” “Can’t do that,” he said. “Can’t or won’t?” “It doesn’t matter which,” the blonde-haired man said. “I don’t.” “I’ll pay more,” he said, taking out his wallet, placing a twenty dollar bill on the desk, the other man shaking his head, his resistance slowly breaking, though, as the pile of twenties grew. There must have been three hundred dollars on the desk, when the man finally picked up the wad and switched places with the other man. As soon as the other man was seated, the first man said, “Fuck you, you dog-fucking bone-hole! You piss-bathing, pus-licking cock-monkey! You fucking child-raping ass-pole. You feeble-minded, felching wretch! You ear-grease-picking, toe-cheese-licking, diarrhea-swallower! You desiccated tit-zit! Ass-goblin! Coke-whore! Twat-waffle! Turd-burgling abortion! You jizz-stained spittoon! Scumbag dirtbag trashcan sack of shit! You hydrocephalic douchebag fallacious phallus! You rancid, rotten pig-footed, turd-burger! You limp-dicked, feckless fuck! You spineless, leprous, pustulent, mutating aberration! Malformed,

gormless ignoramus! Splenetic, frog-fucking reprobate! Gangrenous, walking dead piss-the-bed! You nauseating, cantankerous, cankerous, ass-crumb-snacking, mud-guzzling nincompoop! You greasy, venomous, carbuncled toad! Inbred fuckwad dingleberry! Pig-faced spunk-bubble! Spazzy rotten bunghole-sniffer! You prating, tickle-brained, queasy, dissembling, folly-fallen, heavy-handed whipster! Fool-born gong! You peevish, dissembling, knotty-pated moldiwarp! You goatish, fly-bitten, mangled, minimus! Evil-eyed skainsmate! You Fritzl-imitating, donkey-fondling sphincter-extractor! You vacant, churlish, shrill-gorged, half-faced varlot! Ruttish, weak-hinged maggot-pie! Beslubbering fustilarian! Insufferable, sulphurous nonentity! Loathsome milksop! Odoriferous cur! Pusillanimous pustule! You rank, dank, asinine, spineless, smarmy, grotty, boggish, craven, cockered, maggot-brained, hemorrhoidal, slack-jawed, drooling, one-handed meat-slapping, putrescent mass of menstrual effluvia! Lawyer!” Finished, the man closed his eyes, drew in a few deep breaths, stood up, extended his hand to the other man, who grabbed it, held onto it, while curving around the desk, and then hugged the other man, the crowd surrounding them bursting into applause. Many people put money in the bin. Had this been planned? Probably, but who cares.

### **08.15**

V had been relatively quiet, which, usually meant a period of creative ferment, but considering his behavior, which had become increasingly dangerous, I was worried, so I was happy to hear about his latest performance piece: naked human pyramids, a replication of the humiliating tortures enacted by soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Well, not exactly happy but at least less worried. In any case, it was a grotesque carnival, where people were encouraged to take photos. V even had a guy there hawking photos.

Talking heads were criticizing this performance, saying that this was old news, that what had happened back in 2003 was an anomaly, deranged individuals acting on their own, that they had all been punished for their criminal behavior. Why rub it in our faces all over again? V's response was a single tweet: "Reform isn't revolution."

I called V and left a message asking him to call me when he had a chance. Text immediately from V: "The 'Big Picture' ain't nothing but another idea with a frame around it."

I set up an interview with V on *Democracy Now!*, which used to be his favorite daily news program. My hope was that they would sympathetically contextualize the work, not only address its overt political aspects, but situate it among other artist extremists, like Chris Burden, the artist who infamously crawled over a field of broken glass wearing only a speedo, who had himself crucified onto the hood of a Volkswagen bug, and who, most notoriously, had himself shot. Or Valerie Export, who, among other things had crawled naked through a maze of charged electric wires, getting zapped each time she touched one. Or Bob Flanagan, who hammered a nail through his penis and scrotum onto a wooden board. Place V's recent performances in conversation with Emma Sulkowicz's *Mattress Performance: Carry That Weight* and various works by Marina Abramovic, the body for each of these and the abovementioned artists less object or vehicle as continuum exploring pain, endurance, deprivation, etc. "Beyond empathy," as V would say.

## 08.16

The morning found me listening to Nirvana's discography. What I found most striking about *Bleach* was how much Cobain wrung from the movement from the tonic to the flattened third, and how bloodcurdling his scream remains, which is like a ball-peen hammer to the skull. "The measure of a country's greatness isn't what it does right but what it does wrong," V posted. "So for anyone who says the U.S. is/was great, I have two words: Puerto Rico." "And, yes, there are

countless other examples that disqualify any claims of the greatness of the U.S.," he commented on his post. Liars, exploiters, rogues—we're a nation of sociopaths.

Arturo, one of my cousins, called me, and I answered. I didn't know him well. Extended family were, at best, acquaintances. His father had died a few months ago. Diagnosed with schizophrenia long ago, his father had spent a lifetime in and out of hospitals. Arturo's mother had stayed with him through it all. Arturo, fumbling into his forties, had lived off and on with them. I'd spoken with him after I heard the news, extended my condolences. My aunt was suffering, daily making a two-hour trek to visit my uncle's grave. Months after his burial, the headstone still hadn't been placed. Arturo had asked for my help so I had Crawford call the headstone makers—what do you call them anyway? They responded quickly after that. America.

Arturo asked where I was. "Back in the wicked city," I said. "How about you? How are you?" "I'm still alive," he said, on edge, drunk angry, maybe. "Good," I said. "'Oh, I, I, o-oh, I'm still alive,'" he sang. "Arturo." "'Hey-ey, I, I, o-oh, I'm still alive.'" "Arturo!" "'Hey-ey, I, I, oh, I'm still alive, yeah, o-o-o-o-o-oh.'" "Arturo!" "Pearl Jam." "I know. Where are you?" "Great band." "Where are you?" "'Is that the question?'" he said, quoting the song again. "Where are you, man?" "'And if so, if so, who answers, who answers?'" "Talk to me, Arturo. Where are you?" "At the cemetery." "It's one in the morning," I said. "I know," he said, and then he burst out crying, and I couldn't make out a single word he was saying. I listened, waited until the sobbing ebbed. Then he explained, haltingly, how his mother hadn't been home when he arrived from work earlier that evening. Arturo had come back to live with his mother after his father died. He was, as he said, "trying to do the right thing," and that meant taking care of his mother, who was "falling apart." So he was doing all the cooking and cleaning while his mother moped around the house for hours before making her daily trek to the cemetery. His mother never went out to do anything else and she would always return home by dinnertime, Arturo always finding her sitting on the

couch, watching television, blank-faced. It could have been a fish tank she'd been looking at, for all she seemed to care. She hadn't returned from the cemetery that night and she wasn't answering her phone. Arturo went nuts, called the police, who said there was nothing they could do, yet, so he went to the only place he could think of. "I didn't know they stayed open that late," I said. "They don't," he said. "I broke in." And now he was there at his father's grave. He said he'd been there for a few hours. I told him it didn't make sense for him to stay there. That he should call all the nearby hospitals. Etcetera. I heard some noise in the background. Sirens. "Shit!" he said. "Gotta go." And he hung up.

### **08.17**

I woke up (Is it possible to wake up in another direction?) from a dream where I was trying to ride a unicycle and I was laughing and there was laughter all around, the laughter growing in volume with each of my failed attempts, until I finally succeeded, the laughter giving way to a waterfall rush of applause. Nice dream, whatever. Wonderland posted: "Actions speak louder than words and it took words to say that." Arturo called, saying he'd been released by the police, who'd released him after he explained why he'd broken into the cemetery. They helped find his mother, too, who was in the hospital, after having admitted herself after feeling "pain in her chest." "I'll let you know what's up once I get the whole story," he said. "Sounds good," I said, and hung up.

After once freaking myself out by imagining a bloated corpse floating up beside a fallen tree partly submerged in a river, a body of water floating in a body of water, a river I was standing near, a river running along a graveyard, I subsequently found myself locked in the graveyard and had to climb over a steel-spiked fence. Although I had considered it, I had not overturned a nearby garbage can in order to get over the fence.

I'd been living in a New England town they called a city. It was beautiful. It was lonesome. A professor had taken me under her wing. She told me I had to "stop looking for big city things to do," to enjoy my new environs—"environs" was the word she used—enjoy it for what it was. I'd told her I couldn't help hearing "irons" emphasized in my mind when she said it, "As in, they've clapped me in irons." She'd laughed. I'd laughed. And then I'd tried taking her advice, so that's how I ended up in the graveyard, locked inside it, at ease there, even as it quickly darkened, strangely enough. I always found solace in a cemetery's peculiar quiet.

I'd hated living away from home, though, hated all the hyper-privileged, hyper-sexed kids, who alternated nights of debauchery with days of yoga and cleanses. A text from V: "Be the strange you want to see in the world!"

I watched clips from V's interview with Amy Goodman and Juan González on *Democracy Now!* V was great, as usual. "Talk about your latest performance, Victorioso," Goodman said. "Thanks, Amy," V said. "I love this new piece, but I don't want to talk about that. I want to talk about Puerto Rico. Anyone who's been paying attention knows that the numbers of people dead from past twelve years of hurricanes in Puerto Rico were grossly underestimated, underreported, etc. Callous, malicious, etc., as the previous and current POTUS have been and every supreme leader will continue to be, though, their practice (disaster capitalism at its most extreme and overt) is an extension of standard U.S. policy against Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans, a violently oppressive policy going back at least a hundred years; that is, every presidential administration for the past hundred years has deliberately worked to destroy Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans. And you wonder why I despise the two-headed monster of the American oligarchy forward slash plutocracy." The interview went so well, they continued off-air, broadcasting the rest of their conversation as a "web exclusive." "Okay, one last thing before I talk about this country's torture program," V said, "which, by the way, don't be fooled, is still going on. Look at the way the media has ignored

what's happening in Puerto Rico. It cares more about some comedian's tweets calling POTUS a 'mudcunt,' than it does about thousands who've died from disaster capitalism, about the thousands and thousands and thousands of people who've been forced into what looks like permanent exile. And look at where they're being forced to live. 'Temporary Accommodations Centers,' they call them. Can you believe that? Sounds so nice, just a little vacay, a home away from home. What a joke! And the joke's on us, like it always has been."

Afterward, I called Angelica. "Checking in," I said. "That's nice," Angelica said. "What's going on?" "Should be working. Thinking about Puerto Rico, instead." "Everyone okay?" "Most of us are here," I said. "Except for my aunt, who I hardly know." "Still hard," she said. "All of us are here." "That's good," I said. We were quiet for a while. "No more news," I said. "What's new?" "What's new?" she said. "In the middle of a big project here. A beer campaign. Not very creative unfortunately." "Sorry," I said. "Pays the bills." "I hear you," quietly hating the phrase, hating myself for saying it countless times myself. "How are your kids?" "They're fine," she said. "What's your daughter researching again? "Decoys." "Interesting." "She hates when people say that." "Say what?" "Say 'interesting.' She says it means everything and nothing." "If only," I said. She laughed. "She says decoys are a key to America, a key to unlock it. One of them, anyway." "Let's have dinner tonight," I said. "Can't," she said. "Why not?" she said. She sighed. "Look, you have to give me more notice," she said. "I can't—I have kids, and one of them is young, and I can't just go out whenever I want or whenever you want." "Got it," I said. "Do you?" she said. "Yes, I'm sorry," I said. "I'll be better about this." "Good," she said. "Okay, talk to you later," I said. "Okay," she said, and we hung up. I called Geeta but she didn't pick up and I didn't leave a message. I called Zenith but she didn't pick up and I didn't leave a message. I thought about calling Sarah, again, and changed my mind, again.

**08.18**

“Fatty deposits.” “Artery walls.” “Heart muscle.” The phrases flew by as Arturo explained how his mother had felt intense chest pains and then called for an ambulance. He said it was all brought on by stress. He said his mother wasn’t taking care of herself. He said something about a “percutaneous transluminal intervention.” He said something about a “stent implementation.” He said his mother had to be on medication for a year. And, again, that she had to take care of herself. “And lose all that weight,” he said. “Physical and emotional.” “What about you?” I said. “What *about me?*” “You taking care of yourself?” “As best I can,” he said, unconvincingly. “Breaking: When the most powerful nation treats its citizens like garbage,” V posted, “no wonder it treats so much of the rest of the world like garbage.”

Arturo brought up the island. “It’s a catastrophe,” he said. “A human rights catastrophe.” “How’s the family there,” I said, feeling stupid. I knew nothing about our family there. “We haven’t heard from Titi Consuela,” he said, “but everyone else is okay, thank God.” I’d only been to the island a few times. Once when my father took my sister and me, to visit our grandparents. I don’t remember anything about the trip, except the bedroom I’d slept in, a huge room, where everything, the walls, ceiling, and floor, were the whitest white, a room which in my memory contained only one thing: a massive canopy bed, translucent muslin hanging from the square frame, swaying from a breeze coming through the windows, bright white light pouring in from all of them, in every direction. The other thing I remembered was standing in a thin space enclosed by walls, an alley of some sort, maybe, and there were hundreds of tiny lizards crawling on the walls, and I was with some other children, cousins maybe, and they were grabbing the lizards, pulling their tails, saying, “You, you!” encouraging me to do the same, and I refused, and they laughed, each one putting tailless lizards up to my face, and me finally running away from them crying, running down the alleyway toward this bright light.

“I call every day,” Arturo said. “No luck.”

“Keep me posted,” I said. “Will do, he said, and I was already scrolling on my machine for news about the island. All the corporate death machine’s networks had moved on to some other catastrophe. Border disputes in the so-called Holy Land once again. The U.S. failing as an “honest broker of peace.” Surprise, surprise. “Honest broker”—such a lovely oxymoron. There were reports of a man, a peacemaker inspired by Gandhian *satyagraha*, a term I thought meant “soul power,” for some reason, but actually meant “truth force.” Jamal Aharon Marwan Mosleh, known as JAMM by his many fans. JAMM’s story was fascinating. His mother was an Israeli-born Jew, his father an Arab, who’d grown up in Gaza. JAMM first came to prominence as rap vocalist, “a born MC,” as one prominent critic put it. His polyglot songs, which flowed from Arabic to Hebrew to English, ingeniously fusing melodies and instrumentation from Middle Eastern traditional music and American funk, had made him a beloved figure by the youth of Palestine and Israel. Curious, I downloaded many of his songs. “Thoughts on MC JAMM?” I texted Blank. “JAMM’s the jam!” he replied.

I was loving JAMM’s songs, their unabashed sonic glut reminding me of the Bomb Squad—Public Enemy’s production team—and the Dust Brothers, whose best work was the Beastie Boys’ *Paul’s Boutique*, both groups collagists par excellence, in other words. Suspension of time. Expansion of space. Propulsion of motion. I searched to see if JAMM was on tour, discovering he’d be in the city for a performance in about a month. “You’re Not A Bot, Right?” [*sic*] the venue’s site asked. “Only human fans are allowed beyond this point.” “Human fans”?! There was also something unnerving about the capitalized “A,” which should not have been capitalized. And you know the A.I. Takeover has already begun when a bot asks you to prove you’re not a bot by doing something a bot can easily do. I checked the box beside “I’m not a robot,”

feeling reduced, less human, excited, though, when I saw that there were still tickets available, great seats, too. I ordered two tickets, unsure whom I'd ask to accompany me.

## 08.19

You can't look back on a memory. Memories aren't tangible things, photos yellowing in binder pages you flip. Memories are always approximations of things that happened, which means that whatever it is you're remembering isn't actually what happened. "The best part of waking up is waking up," I posted from Play's account. "Awesome," he texted me.

Still in bed, I watched the rain fall, the bank of large windows arguably one of the best things about the apartment. Strobe-like flashes. Crabby thunderclaps. Gusts thrust a rooftop pool's blue treated water in the air. Billions of droplets, fell in sheets, like massive, swishing bead curtains, the kind of shower where you'd be drenched in seconds. The Cure was on. Perfect soundtrack for the rain.

Walking outside, I let the light rain fall on me, enjoying the wet arpeggiations on my forearms, the metallic air of petrichor, asphalt's silvery shimmer. Crossing the street at one point, I thought I saw Sarah. The Sarah-shaped woman wore a summer dress, one of the bright diaphanous hippie dresses Sarah favored. I followed the woman for a few blocks, stopped to watch her walk for a couple of blocks, and then I walked in another direction.

I found a park and sat down beneath a tree. Taking out my machine, I spun through a bunch of tabs, eventually randomly clicking on a tab. Each of the eleven duck decoys discovered by miners in Lovelock Cave, Nevada in 1924 was quite marvelous. Roughly two thousand years ago, hunters constructed them out of tule rushes and feathers to lure canvasback ducks. What could be said about America by looking at these objects, though? Subterfuge as foundational principle? Perhaps Angelica's daughter wasn't going this deep into the past, before the colonizers' ripping

away of the land from its original inhabitants. Nevada made the decoys their official state artifact, something I hadn't known existed. Only two other states have adopted the practice, though. California chose the chipped stone bear—a prehistoric sculpture made from volcanic rock—for their state artifact. Ohio chose the *Adena Pipe*—“a tubular pipe carved from Ohio pipestone into an effigy of a Native American man wearing ear spools and a loincloth with a feather bustle attached to the back”—as theirs. What should New York choose? A weapon of some kind, probably, like most of the states would, I'd imagine.

Walking back to the apartment, I saw a “white” woman—who was pushing a stroller with one hand, her other hand holding a machine through which she was video-chatting—plow into a shelf on the sidewalk, the shelf falling forward, the gardening-related items on the shelf, e.g., planters, etc., falling out, too, the woman lunging forward, attempting to cover the baby, a tiny little thing, the woman's machine crashing to the floor. The baby's okay. For now.

## 08.20

I woke from a dream where William Shatner buys *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*. Purportedly receiving visions and messages from the Judeo-Christian god, artist James Hampton spent over fourteen years building the glistening installation in a rented stable. Occupying an area of some two hundred feet, *The Throne* features altars, pulpits, chairs, and offertory tables. Calling himself “Director for Special Projects for the State of Eternity,” Hampton mainly used found materials, like vases, paper, plastic, glass jars, cardboard, coffee cans, lightbulbs, bits of mirror, covering almost everything with gold and silver metallic foils, and embedding as yet undeciphered cryptic scripts throughout. “FEAR NOT” reads the admonition above the shimmering, winged Throne. In my dream, Shatner installs *The Throne* in a massive barn on his property. Putting on his famed uniform—the gold velour shirt, black cuffed

trousers, and black boots from *Star Trek: The Original Series*—Shatner sits on the throne’s red velvet cushion and disappears. And then I woke up.

Some newsfeeds are just another kind of trough. I watched the next episode of *Everyone Is Gay*. I felt strange watching it without Z beside me. “Religion was the first surveillance program,” a screen said. Later, on my way to the Japanese restaurant, I saw a broken umbrella by a sewer cap, its star-work of ribbing and stretchers completely smashed, its sodden octagonal canopy smeared on the ground, its shaft shooting out like a sword, its handle lost. I took a photo of it and posted it on Fakebook, entitling it “Saddest Umbrella in the World.” I didn’t bother to see how people responded.

A sign on the door to the restaurant read: “RESTROOM FOR CUSTOMER ONLY” [*sic*]. I ordered a sushi deluxe. “Soup or salad?” the clerk asked. “Soup,” I said. A news program played from a screen above some nearby tables. A mass of people, marching, shouting. Signs: “THE ONLY THING EASIER TO BUY IN AMERICA IS A POLITICIAN.” “THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS WON’T PROTECT US.” “PEOPLE, NOT GUNS!” “JOCKS AGAINST GLOCKS.” I recalled what V had said, chastised myself for forgetting to remember that three hundred forty-two people in America were shot by a gun every day, ninety-six of those people dying from the shot. Sitting there, waiting for my soup, I counted up to three hundred and forty-two, several times, actually, until a woman handed me a bag with my dinner in it.

## 08.21

A city that never sleeps never dreams. There was an old “Latinx” woman on one of the screens. She had a marionette, a dolly doppelgänger whose snow white hair and rosy cheeks mirrored her own. It was so lifelike a squirrel came up to it and took a piece of bread from its hand. I thought

of Pinocchio, and then I thought of poor Geppetto, the impoverished woodcarver, who couldn't have children, but who had desperately wanted a child. At least that's how I remembered the story. And then I thought about Marla Johnson, the "Maternity Ward Killer," the lengths she went to to get pregnant, the irony of her life and death, the way she somehow reconciled in her own mind her desire to create with her desire to destroy—Kali reincarnated. Max posted: "Making a living is killing me."

POTUS came on the screen. Four years ago, despite the odds of this racist country voting for another "black" person to be its commander-in-chief, a sexist country extremely unlikely to ever vote for a woman for that role, she had easily won the bid to become the most powerful leader in the world. She'd run against Veep Mike Pence, a self-described "happy warrior" for conservative principles and policies, her own peculiar form of magical thinking, though, as extreme as his born-again Christian fantasies. The debates had been tepid affairs, resembling, if anything, her own long-running television show, where she had innumerable quackadoo's "speaking their truth," the latter a phrase she'd use to great effect during her campaign. Always affable, ebullient, and relaxed, she'd come across as confident and compassionate, the Vice President's aw-shucks persona fitting in perfectly, that is, dissolving within what always ended up being *her* show. She'd often talked about "healing the divide" in this country, but she ended up continuing her party's devastating neoliberal policies, its complete surrender to corporations, its increasing belligerence, its terrible immigration policies, etc., all of which increased the divide. Her current challenger, a Tea Party senator from Texas, who should have been "easy meat" for her, had made the current fight an ugly one, and the media was loving it, giving ample space to his virulent attacks, which were full of half-truths and the like. A familiar story.

Later, on the bus, I watched people getting on and getting off, burly, granitic Russians and Ukrainians mainly. The driver, a short, stocky man, stood up at one stop after suspending the

wheelchair ramp to ask a few passengers to surrender their seats for the oncoming passenger, to which they grumpily complied. He seemed to know the woman in the wheelchair, and spoke to her in Spanish while he assembled everything, continuing to speak with her once the bus was in motion. Some of the Russians, a group of septuagenarians from the looks of it, spoke loudly at each other, their arms waving. “English! English!” one of them finally said to the bus driver. “What did you say?” the driver said, looking at them in his mirror. “What did you say?” he said again, raising his voice, and slowing the bus, looking for a place to park. Parking the bus, he turned around, saying, “Don’t tell me not to speak my language! *One* of my languages! I fought for this country. I know my rights. Read the Bill of Rights! I don’t care what you speak. You want to *parlez-vous* or *sprechen Sie* or whatever? Music to my ears! Tell me what language I can speak?” The Russians stared at him in silence. “Tell me to stop speaking my language? I’ll stop this bus again and throw you all off. I know my rights.” And I wish he had thrown them off the bus, right then and there. Putting the bus in motion again, the driver resumed his conversation with the woman in the wheelchair, in Spanish, his other “interlocutors” sitting in silence for a long while, then finally speaking to each other in subdued tones.

## 08.22

I had an irrational fear of the isolation tank. I thought I’d somehow get locked in. And drown. I don’t know how to swim so maybe that had something to do with it. But I don’t know how to drive, either, and this hasn’t stopped me from getting into cars. The place Z suggested didn’t take online reservations so I called them.

“Have you ever done this before?” the tank owner said, sounding a bit like Bob Ross, the landscape painter slash teevee show host. “No, this would be my first time,” I said. “I see, well, basically, most people start with a one-hour float and the process itself takes about two hours of

your time. First, I give an orientation talk, where I explain how everything works, and give you some pointers for the experience. You need to shower first, thoroughly, before going into the float tank. And then you float for a full hour. After the float, you shower again to rinse the saltwater off. After that, I serve a cup of herbal tea so you have a little space to reflect on the experience, and we can chat, too, if you want. I suggest giving yourself two full hours for the experience so you're not pressed for time as people generally are these days. This is not something you want to squeeze between things. Do you have any questions for me?" I considered remarking about the way he'd said "the experience," how he'd imbued it with light somehow, but said, "Kind of embarrassed to admit I don't know how to swim." "Oh, this is completely no-skills-required. If you know how to lie in bed at night, you can do this." "I can do that," I said. I knew how to lie everywhere. He said something about theta waves, about how floating felt like "awake dreaming." Maybe this was what being "woke" meant, maybe what it ought to mean. "There's a thousand pounds of Epsom salt dissolved in the solution," he continued, "so when you lie on your back in the solution, you'll float like a cork, and it's only a foot deep, so it's not like you're in the ocean and you have to worry about sinking or anything. One of the most common things that happens is that people fall dead asleep in there." "Dead asleep?" I said. "Not sure I like the sound of that!" "Oh, sorry, poor choice of words," he said, laughing softly. "The solution is only a foot deep and there's no possibility of turning or drowning in any way, shape, or form. I've led thousands of people through this experience for going on twenty-five years so I can assure you you won't sink or drown." "That's good to know," I said. I liked it whenever he said "solution"—there was something so soothing about it.

I made an appointment for the next week. "Curious about why you don't take reservations online," I said. He laughed "Bit of a Luddite, I guess," he said, "but I just think it's better to talk beforehand." He suggested skipping coffee to avoid having a "caffeine buzz," and not coming on

a completely empty stomach or a full stomach or bladder, and not shaving since the salt “stings freshly shaven skin.” “No pressure, though,” he said. “Whatever works for you. No hard and fast rules here.” “No hard and fast rules,” I said. “I like the sound of that.” He laughed. “No worries when you come here.” “A place with no worries!” “Absolutely none.” “Perfect.

We signed off. Max posted: “Found internet quote: ‘What a information of un-ambiguity and preserverness of valuable familiarity regarding unexpected feelings.’”

### 08.23

Voices, noises, noisy voices, murmurs of the body eclectic, smart cars and startled birds, microprocessors indiscernibly humming, invisible charged particles all around. We used to project our fantasies onto oversized screens, the so-called silver screens of old, where illuminated figures, each one literally larger than life, played, a mote-filled beam of light shooting from behind us, our bodies swathed in darkness, each one of us still in Plato’s Cave, trying to make sense of the shadows. And now we both project and broadcast from tiny screens, each projection a composite, of images, sounds, and texts, of ideas, each charged event a blurring, of identity, of mind, so we no longer know where we begin and it, the fantasy, the projection, ends.

I took out my machine, posted on Play’s account: “When they drive you crazy, take back the steering wheel.” “Love it!” Play immediately texted me. I’d mistakenly misspelled “immediately” as “immediatedly,” just now, which I liked, considered as a portmanteau of “immediately” and “mediated,” the word evoking our current moment, the instantaneity of it all. Frank posted: “Mood Enhancer #291: Receiving a note from my daughter in which she called me her ‘most preshos jul of the wrld,’ making me beam, in fact, like a jewel.”

**08.24**

There is news and there is nuance but rarely both at once. I posted on Play's portals: "Being 'out of the loop' sometimes means you're just less loopy." Sadie posted: Tonight I confirmed that Mormonism is basically the best Western fantasy pre- and post-apocalyptic American dream-turned-nightmare epic ever." POTUS was on a screen. Her latest "Healing Session." There had been so many Karens before and since Amy Cooper but this was a remarkable story. The video which had garnered over one hundred million views; the embarrassment and swift punishment; the equanimity and compassion of the maltreated. And then, nothing, for years, at least publicly. "I was a mess," Amy Cooper said, tears streaming down her face after they showed the notorious video. "What I did was wrong and I'm so very, very sorry," she said, weeping now. POTUS had an arm around her. Cooper relayed how she'd spent the years since the incident in Central Park. The attempted suicide. The therapy. The rebuilding of a life. "I've done a lot of work on myself. I'm a better person now, I think. I hope." "You have to do the work," POTUS said. "We all just have to do the work. Right?" The camera panned across the seated audience, the applause like rainfall. Turning toward Amy Cooper again, placing a hand on her knee, POTUS said, "I have someone I'd like you to meet." There was silence when he walked toward the faux-living room. He'd lost some weight since the incident, and his beard was longer and grayer but there he was, Christian Cooper, the target of Amy Cooper's racist rant. "Oh my god, oh my god!" Amy Cooper shouted, standing up, running to Christian Cooper, stumbling at his feet. Christian Cooper lifted her up to her feet and hugged her and the audience exploded, the camera sweeping over the crowd again, lingering over the faces of people crying.

The float guy lived in a posh Brooklyn neighborhood, all of the brownstones pristine, as if they'd just been built, years of erosion and decay having been painstakingly scraped away by grossly

underpaid Bangladeshis. The streets were full of twee mannies pushing luxury strollers, coddled toddlers slurping babyccinos, hyper-caffeinated kidults rushing to make their food co-op shift, lactating parents association capos rushing to plot their takeover of their children's elementary school.

The float guy was a small, thin, "white" man, loose-fitting linen clothes hanging from his lanky limbs. Barefooted himself, he asked me to take off my shoes. After I was done, he directed me into the apartment proper. Passing a loft bed, I walked into a cramped living room, floor-to-ceiling bookcases lining all the walls, looming all around. Pointed me toward a shabby couch, he sat down on an old office chair, behind him an old, clunky computer monitor flashing photos of the Dalai Lama.

"Gives new meaning to 'screensaver,'" I said. Pointing toward the tank, he said, "Once you close the outer door you'll forget you're in New York City. Dead silent in there. You'll have a perfect continuum, where the water and air is the same temperature as your outer skin temperature." His hand was a wand. He opened and shut the tank door. "Look alright?" "Looks great," I said, following him back to the living area space. "Nice place," I said, "Lot of books," waving toward the shelves teeming with books. "I have them everywhere." "Don't really see libraries in people's homes anymore." "Books are kind of, like, a thing of the past, like vinyl records, CDs, and all that kind of stuff—they're all just a thing of the past," he said. "I'm a thing of the past," I said. "I'm not a fan of electronic devices and I especially don't like to read on electronic devices. So, I just like books. I know they take up a lot of space and collect dust, and I also lost one that I don't know what happened to it. It's an old book and I've been looking high and low for it." "I think libraries swallow books, and they go into a void," I said, "especially when you're looking for them, and then when you're not looking for them, they suddenly appear." I don't have a library anymore, not really. Everything I had was in the machine. "This book,

though,” he continued, “I’ve been looking for for months. I just don’t think it’s just going to show up. And I’ve kind of become obsessed with it. I walk around as if I have a homing device, inside me, and it’s going to show me where the book is, and I keep thinking I’m going to find it on this shelf or that shelf, that it’s tucked away somewhere or something.” “What book was it?” I said. “I keep looking at the same shelves over and over again.” “Once you stop looking—have you stopped looking?” “No.” “Once you stop looking, it’ll appear.” “Cosmic,” he said. “What?” I said. “What you said,” he said. “It’s profound.” He was quiet for a while. “Once you stop looking, it’ll appear,” he said, finally. “The flipside of ‘seek, and ye shall find.’” I laughed, and he gazed at me, smiling, a mirror of the Dalai Lama’s beatific smile radiating behind him. “Years ago, I got into plants and holistic herbalism and this book—*Russian Herbal Remedies*—which I think is out of print. I still remember this book and I had this urge to consult it, because I just read some books on herbs and it rekindled my interest, and I thought I’d like to see what this book had to say, and herbalism is kind of interesting and this book was, like, folk remedies and you find really interesting stuff in books like that, and now...it’s vanished.” “Schrödinger’s shelves!” I said.

Gazing blankly at me for a few seconds, he said, “So much for that,” going on to narrate the whole process for me. He said something about rinsing before and after the “experience,” something about his “distilling and energizing” the “precious water” half the day; about the thousand pounds of Epsom salt, which made the “solution so ultra-purifying and cleansing for the body.” He told me to just let the water go into my ears, that it would come right out later. “What you want to do is lay back, like you’re lying in bed, and just completely let go.” “I want to let go of letting go,” I said. Smiling, he said, “You’re going to hear your inner sounds, the exquisite sounds of your body, like your eyes blinking, blood pulsing through your veins. You hear every sound, your breath, your heartbeat, everything you really want, need to hear.” His voice was so soothing it was making me drowsy. “Try to be as gentle as you can stepping in, sitting down, and

lying back. The less motion you cause in that little pool of water the quicker your body will be able to lie nice and still. You need to really just lay back as if you were laying yourself on your bed. Just think of it as your bed, as effortless.” He was repeating himself but I didn’t mind. “Once you’re ready to begin the experience, push the button toward your feet and turn off the light. It’ll be complete, absolute darkness, like you’re in the vastness of space. Most important thing is to feel your own body, the sensations of your body. The tensions appear in a way you’ve never experienced before. Bring awareness to the tension, to the discomfort, and breathe, and as you breathe, imagine your breath entering all that tension, and then release it, let it drain out of you into the water. The body is the key to this experience. The more physically released you are the more your mind is freed.”

“‘Free mind and your ass will follow,’ reverse-engineered?” I said. “Something like that, yes. Once you surrender to the experience, everything goes where it needs to go. How this is is completely individual. I would certainly follow any thread of your experience that arises in there. Physical relaxation is key. Just relax the body. It’s pretty wonderful. Just go with the flow.”

“Go with the float?”

“That’s right, just go with the flow, just explore, have a sense of curiosity, see what happens. It’s fine to think, it’s fine to fall asleep—people fall asleep in there all the time. What I’m going to do to signal the end of the experience is play some dulcet tones.” “Dulcet tones”—his saying the phrase was soothing itself. I wanted him to say it again. “It’ll play for a few minutes, so that will be your cue to come out. That said, it’s not an alarm clock, so please come out gently. And when you’re done, there will be a cool drink of herbal tea out here waiting for you. Sound good?”

“Yes, I’m ready.”

He directed me toward the bathroom, pointed out the shower, showed me where the towels were, the soap, shampoo, and conditioner, and then left me to myself. Following all his directions, I finally stepped into the tank, thinking of the biblical Pool of Bethesda. "Let the healing begin," I murmured. The solution didn't exactly smart my scratched-up skin but I felt a kind of mildly sharp but not at all unpleasant tingling on my arms. Once I was floating and still, I turned the lights off. Keeping my eyes open, I listened, immediately feeling a dull throbbing, hearing a pulsing timed with my heart, maybe it was my heart. I blinked my eyes to see if I could hear them. Nothing. I swallowed. Nothing unusual there, just a bit louder than what I was used to hearing above water. Strangely, I couldn't really sense most of my body, but I couldn't remember how much of my body I could sense before. Is it only when a part of me is moving that I'm aware of my body? The float guy had mentioned "body scanning," about bringing "awareness" into my feet, to try to "sense what's going on in there." So I tried to do this, but felt nothing. I kept trying to sense my body as a whole, to "feel the global sensations" of my body, but the tensions weren't making "themselves known." Beginning again, I concentrated on my toes and immediately got lost before I got to my ankles, so I started over, not exactly sure what bringing awareness to a body part actually meant. Feeling a fist of stiffness in my neck, I directed my attention toward it, breathing deeply in and out, registering the whooshing of my inhalations and exhalations. Gazing at the darkness was like looking at a sky without stars. Perhaps this is why people likened the experience of floating in water to floating in zero gravity. But surely the two experiences were very different. I was very much aware of the water, that I was in water. I'm certain being in the air feels different, more freeing. I kept getting lost. "Head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes," I sang in my head. "Head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes. Eyes and ears and mouth and nose. Head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes." I pushed my hands down into the water, touched the bottom of the tank, allowed them to spring back up. I did this several times, very much

enjoying the sensation, the lack of control of my arms when I let go. Thoughts about ripple effect lead to thoughts about butterfly effect. I felt like one of those expandable toys, those superabsorbent polymer figurines, except in reverse, that *I* was shrinking five hundred times my original size, mass, and volume. Later, my machine told me such toys do in fact shrink again in saltwater, so maybe I had something there. Where did I get such toys? A vending machine? I loved those things that spat out plastic globes, loved popping them open. Balls, stickers, keychains. Fluorescent rubber monster finger puppets. My favorite toy, though, were those mini-parachutists. Paratroopers? I didn't want to think about the drowned baby but then I thought about her, the drowned baby. You don't so much recover from a death as relearn, reaffirm what it means to live, realize that life by definition isn't termination but commencement, a setting in motion body and mind. But how to convey the silence, how loud it was, how loud what you couldn't hear here was. I couldn't hear words, the crosstalk of machines, their bleat and blurt, the ubiquitous enervating hum of humdrum living. I couldn't hear traffic's rattapallax, whimpering dogs, the acutely distressing sound of a baby being forced to "cry it out." I couldn't hear cutlery's clink, whizzing bicycle chains, aspirating joggers, the nervous jibber-jabber of commuters, each one desperate for something different. I could hear nothing, nothing but me. Was I really here, though, or was I watching myself being here? So dark. I was inside Malevich's *Black Square*. So dark. X-ray analysis had revealed a handwritten note by the artist on the painting's white border which read: "Negroes battling in a cave." Lesson? Scratch beneath the surface and more often than not you'll find something ugly there. I imbued meaning into the "solution," what it meant to be floating in solution. Isn't that what happens, though, when you solve something? The problem gets dissolved, much like how a solute disappears into a solvent. I wish I could go through a day without hearing something stupid, and sometimes I make it, that is, until I inevitably think or say something stupid, like the many more times than I care to remember times I called someone "babe" instead of "bub."

I softly counted aloud: “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three, thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty, forty-one, forty-two, forty-three, forty-four, forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two, fifty-three, fifty-four, fifty-five, fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight, fifty-nine, sixty, sixty-one, sixty-two, sixty-three, sixty-four, sixty-five, sixty-six, sixty-seven, sixty-eight, sixty-nine, seventy, seventy-one, seventy-two, seventy-three, seventy-four, seventy-five, seventy-six, seventy-seven, seventy-eight, seventy-nine, eighty, eighty-one, eighty-two, eighty-three, eighty-four, eighty-five, eighty-six, eighty-seven, eighty-eight, eighty-nine, ninety, ninety-one, ninety-two, ninety-three, ninety-four, ninety-five, ninety-six.” After what seemed like a short while, bells softly chimed beneath me, the promised “dulcet tones,” and then I closed my eyes, turned on the lights, and then slowly opened my eyes, thinking the float guru should rig the lights so they slowly turned on, install whatever was the opposite of a dimmer.

Rinsed off, completely dry, and fully dressed, I entered the living room, where a cup of hot tea and the float guy waited for me. “Thanks for the tea,” I said. “You’re welcome,” he said. “Said it would be cool,” I said. “The water?” he said “The tea,” I said. “The tea?” he said. “Forget it,” I said. “You know, I started to question my sanity about this book,” he said, already somewhere else, “like maybe I’d invented this book, even though I remembered it so clearly. Maybe this memory didn’t belong to me. I thought I had it. I thought I knew I had it, so I looked it up, and I found a picture of it, exactly as I remembered it—now there’s a new edition that came out, but I had the original edition from nineteen-seventy, and I must have gotten it in nineteen-seventy.”

“It’s older than me,” I said, wondering if he was going to bring up the float or if he was waiting for me to bring it up.

“It’s actually *Russian Folk Medicine*, not *Herbal Remedies*, but this is the edition,” he said, pointing at the large computer screen, “this is it, exactly as I remembered it. And, well, that’s my book. It *was* my book. I had it in my head, you know. I can’t imagine I’d thrown it out.”

“Out with the old, in with the new!” I said, stupidly. I wanted to tell him about the darkness, to lie, to say it felt like I’d reentered the womb, that I’d felt like one of those paper flowers that “bloom” when submerged in water. I wanted to talk about capillary action.

“Can’t imagine I would have thrown it out. Now it’s out of print and they’re selling it for two-hundred dollars.”

“Is it signed?” I had felt a kind of expanse in the tank, neither of body nor mind, but of something else, but of what?

“I mean, it’s online and people can charge whatever they want,” he said. “I think it was the first printing. I had the original book, with this cover, I mean, they printed another cover, after that one, but this is the one I had. I just had it in my mind, and I don’t even know if I want it. I just had the urge to look at it. I mean, it wasn’t like I was thinking, ‘Oh, this is the best book I ever had.’ I never got into it when I had it but now—you know, sometimes I buy a book and sometimes it takes years before I go back to it and then it really resonates. It’s like, I know I want to read it but it was just premature when I got it, but this book, it’s not the kind of book I would throw out.”

“Might mean you’re still not ready to read it.”

“Well, I might not be but it doesn’t matter because it’s out of print.”

“One day, you’ll be out on the street and you’ll pass a bookseller with a couple of tables and you’ll feel that urge again, and you’ll turn around and look through the books and then you’ll find it, and you’ll say, ‘Oh, it’s a dollar!’”

“It’s become kind of an obsession. The thing about it is that that picture is in my head. It was on my shelf for decades. “It’s a different world. I don’t remember where I got it, the book, how I got it. I don’t remember the circumstances. I just have this picture in my head. I know that it’s not here.”

“And not knowing is half the battle,” I said, deliberately misquoting a saying from an old animated television series.

“I shelve the books according to categories so I know where that book should be. I also had this book about Sufi healing and that one I did find. At first, it was very elusive but then—”

“You were ready for that book.”

“Yes, but it didn’t really resonate, and I kept thinking about this other book. It’s got to be here somewhere. So the other one I found but this one never appeared. I’m pretty certain it’s not here.”

“Strange.”

“But at least I verified it. Okay, I didn’t invent it. There it is,” pointing at the screen, which was opened to the monopoly’s page for the book. “Green cover,” he said. “It wasn’t a fantasy I had in my head. There’s the book.”

“That’s the book.”

“That’s the book. I mean, I had the name a little bit off. *Russian Folk Medicine*, not *Herbal Remedies*. It talks about herbs and treatments and—”

“Sure you weren’t smoking some herb when you were reading it?”

“Maybe drinking some vodka.” We laughed. “Those days are long gone.”

“Well, thanks so much for everything,” I said, rising.

“You’re welcome,” he said.

“I’m going to keep looking for that book.”

“You’ll find it when you stop looking.”

“When I completely forget about it.”

“When you completely forget about it,” I said. “It’s happened so many times to me.”

“It’s a mystery.”

“It’s a mystery.”

## 08.25

Machines cannot know, only remember, that is, retrieve. Me: isolato as anachronism. Overheard at the café: “How are you?” the “white” barista asked the customer who’d just stepped in from the rain. “I’m wet,” the “white” woman answered. “Whoa! What’s going on here?” the barista, also a “white” woman, said, suggestively. The other woman said nothing, visibly unamused. “Who uses an app to meditate?” Alberto posted. Stanley just downloaded Calm. Visa uses Focus, says she gets a “rush of clarity” after using it. “I swear by Insight,” Grace responded. Jessie “drunk bought a red, white, and blue headband with brown mullet-styled hair attached to it.” I was on my machine, responding to client-related emails and whatnot. “Sorry, you can’t use that,” the barista said to another “white” woman in a posh if unseasonal outfit, who’d just inserted a charger into a wall outlet. “I’ll only be a minute,” she responded. “No, you won’t,” the barista said. “God!” the woman responded. “I’m not her,” the barista said, making a number of us laugh.

Bereft, I left. Where was Harry? Where was Sarah? Where was the missing eleven-year-old girl? What was her name? Walking back to the apartment, I saw a plastic bag caught in barbed wire. I took a photo of it and posted it on Fakebook, entitling it “Saddest Plastic Bag in the World.” Max posted: “A U.S.-backed, Saudi-led coalition airstrike in Yemen a couple days ago hit a school bus on a field trip, killing over thirty children and injuring about twice that number of people. If this happened in New York City, Paris, London, Berlin, etc., it would be in the news twenty-four

seven. We would know the names of every single one of those children, etc. It happened in Yemen and so nobody, generally speaking, in the U.S., etc., knows and/or cares.” Impossible to argue with that.

## 08.26

“Tactile hallucination,” I repeated. “Maybe,” Dr. Finn said. “So I’m imagining this,” I said. “I don’t know,” she said. “What I do know is that it isn’t organic.” “Organic? What does that mean?” “There is no pathological tissue causing your discomfort,” she said. She’d ruled out almost everything: pesticide exposure, mercury poisoning, diabetic neuropathy, syphilis, Lyme disease, shingles. Fortunately, I was spared the visual hallucinations of insects. “What about skin cancer?” I said. “We need to keep an eye on it but I’m also referring you to a psychiatrist,” she said. “I’m not crazy,” I said. “No, you aren’t, but we need to explore every possibility.”

I watched a live broadcast of an air guitar competition. America: where you take something complex, difficult, and then flatten it, reduce it, through mimicry of the simplest, no, simpleminded sort. Turning off the sound, however, transformed the performances, made them utterly strange. Who are these people and what are they doing with their hands? And what the hell are they wearing? Continuing to watch, however, I thought about how these performances were a form of miming, which has a rich and venerable history, with a host of stellar performers, so I turned the sound on again, and a rush of formulaic thrash metal flooded out, bludgeoning power chords interspersed with tacky pyrotechnic speed runs. Disgusted again, I finally turned off the goggle-box.

**08.27**

Even the nowhere of sadness is a landscape. Someone behind me belched. Loud and wet. I turned, and two “white” boys pointed at each other laughing. An “Indian” woman pushed a shopping cart, which was filled to the brim with empty plastic bags. A brown blur darted past me—a finch! The sizzle of a bicycle chain. Two long tables full of books for sale, the “black” vendor standing, emptying out a cardboard box. Looking at all the books, I recalled the moment I thought I’d misread a line—“a cool of books”—in the famed book-length poem about a city in New Jersey, thinking the Puerto Rican poet had coined a group noun for books. Later, I’d found a phrase “a huddle of books,” which made me think I might not have misread the line after all. I wouldn’t say they were the best group nouns for books, though, the phrases certainly not as wonderful as a murder of crows, a pride of lions, a crash of rhinoceroses, a prettying of doves, a fling of dunlins, a convocation of eagles, and a shrewdness of apes, and more besides. Speaking of apes, we need a group noun for the most dangerous of animals. A menace of humans?

I was just about to give up looking and then there it was. The green cover. The woodcuts: leafy branch, mushroom, scissors, hammer and sickle, pennyhead-stoppered bottle. *Russian Folk Medicine*. Sometimes you bring things to being. “How’s it going?” I said to the vendor, picking up the book. “It’s going,” he said. “Three bucks for hardcovers.” “Where did you get this?” I said, handing him a five. “I have no idea,” he said, forking over the change. “Had it for a while. Books come to me in so many ways.” “Must be hard to part with.” “Books should be read. I only keep the ones I’ll reread.” “Makes sense,” I said, thanking him and walking away. Sometimes things bring you into being. The coincidence, the serendipity, or whatever made me happy, but then it filled me with dread. I’d send the book to the float guy as soon as I could. The whole thing made me think of that scene in *Repo Man*, where this seer or oracle, or whatever he is, talks about the “lattice of coincidence that lays on top everything,” while tossing stuff into a burning trash can,

going on to say you could be thinking about a plate of shrimp and you'll "suddenly" hear somebody say the phrase or the nouns in it, "out of the blue," and that there was no point in explaining the phenomenon, that it was merely "all part of a cosmic unconsciousness." I thought about the float man, his enigmatic smile, the way he said "cosmic."

The book's table of contents listed a bunch of "organic disorders and common afflictions," like gout and hemorrhoids and insomnia. Scurvy and Malaria? There were remedies for all kinds of emergencies, accidents, injuries, too. Information on "Night Blindness," "Extracting insects from the eye," and "How to extract a fish bone stuck in the throat." And itching. I immediately turned to that page. There were seven remedies, one of which was an ointment made of "two parts of pork lard, two parts of ground green soap, one part of sulphur powder, and one part of wood-tar." It advised taking "a very hot bath followed by a towel rub-down until the body is completely dry," and then rubbing the ointment over the entire body, leaving it in for twenty-four hours and then repeating the process for three days. This was for scabies, which I didn't have. Whatever I had was more insidious than insects. Sounded like quackery, though. Ointment? More like "oinkment," with all that pork! I asked my machine about the remedy, and apparently there was some actual merit to the practice.

Returning to the apartment, I ordered everything I'd need for the ointment. Everything would be delivered within two days. After dinner, I watched the season finale of *Everyone Is Gay*. It turned out to be the best episode of the program. And it was very funny. It was months before Halloween but friends of Bella and Frank's were throwing a costume party for the hell of it. Bella and Frank decided to pretend to reverse their genders. Bella played being Bill and Frank Fran. It was ingenious. They were ingenious. They demonstrated how much of their being Bill and Fran had been an act of performance and how who they were transitioning to become were their authentic selves. To pretend otherwise was not only absurd but life-threatening. Moreover, their show once

again underscored how there simply aren't enough letters in the alphabet for an initialism to cover the beautiful complexity of gender and sexuality.

## 08.28

Loneliness is always a mute expression. Images and memories always ruins. I called Z. She asked me to come over. And so after we hung up, I left the apartment.

She didn't look at me when she opened the door, but simply walked to the living room, slunk into a chair. "He's vanished," she said.

"Gone, yes," I said.

"No, vanished."

"Like smoke."

"Like something that may never have been here."

"You can't vanish without having first been there."

She fell silent. "A figment then," she said, finally, the air around us, between us, hardening into something cold. "You've vanished," she said.

"I'm here," I said.

"Where?" she said. "Just because I can see you doesn't mean you *are* here."

She was right, for wasn't my life during these months one long sleight-of-body? She thanked me for everything I'd done to help her while Harry was gone. She wanted more from me, some kind of commitment that I, too, wouldn't finally disappear. She wanted me to stop seeing other people. "Aren't you going to say something?" she said. "I'm listening," I said, and I was, and I was thinking. "Okay," she said. We sat there in silence for a while. "May I go downstairs," I said, finally. "Okay," she said.

How to explain Harry's art? First, there was the engagement with art history, with paintings that, because of their popularity, their ubiquity, had almost become "unseeable." By making them three-dimensional, you could not only see them but actually enter them. I saw them as models, though, which could subsequently be brought to scale, a daunting task to say the least. Maybe that's what Harry ultimately saw them as as well, who knows.

Upstairs again, I found Z sitting on the couch reading Hopkins. "Listen to this," she said, reading "The Caged Skylark" aloud for me. Something opened between us when she'd finished. "Please read it again," I said, and she did. "A 'dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage,'" she said. "Makes me think of Harry." "Daring the gale," I said. "Takes courage to fight the storm." She nodded and stared off. "It was me," she said, finally. "It was me who wanted this house, more than anything. This..." breaking into sobs, "this... 'bone-house'...this 'mean house.'" What could I do but hold her.

After a while, I talked to her about Harry's sculptures. Asked her to let me get a gallery to show them. "He wouldn't want that," she said. "It might bring him back," I said. "Let me think about it," she said.

This is not a ghost story. That is, every story is ghost story. Every story is haunted by its own end, numerous ends, in fact, the end of the narrative, yes, the "The End" of it always present whether appearing on the page, or intoned by the storyteller, but the end of whatever tangled mess the characters were thrown into. The end is always present at every beginning. In every relationship, especially.

Harry came to mind, again, his hollowed out eyes, chalky grey skin, the oversized clothes hanging from him. He was in a room. I couldn't determine its dimensions but I could feel it was

cuboid, a box of some kind, with no windows, but a bright light came from somewhere, emanated from itself. It was hard to explain.

I'd been ignoring my machine. There were a bunch of texts. From V, mainly: "'Television personality' is an oxymoron." "To the spoiled go the spoils." "Fine line between a diehard and a blowhard." "I've been ignoring my machine," I texted back. "This is a good thing," V wrote back. "I need a good thing." "Keep doing what you're undoing." "Will do, thanks."

## 08.29

The world was clouds. I was chasing my meds with bourbon. I went back to see Lovetron. I hadn't made an appointment. I wasn't even sure why I was returning. I'd deleted the address from my machine and I didn't want to ask Z for it and while I knew what neighborhood it was in I still had a hard time finding the building. I finally found it after I'd almost given up, which, strangely, is what often happens when you can't find something. It's something I can't quite fathom. There's no science to it. It's completely illogical. But this doesn't mean it doesn't happen and for the reason it happens. I stood waiting for the elevator in the lobby as I'd done weeks before hoping for nothing, expecting nothing.

Exiting the elevator, I found everything gone. The entire floor had been gutted. What remained of the walls were steel framing studs and torn up drywall. The ceiling was a network of frame joists, wires dangling from them like an explosion of spaghetti. Where once was light was darkness. I walked to where I'd once sat, the chair also gone, and I tried to feel what I'd felt those several weeks back but failed. I sought some kind of residual energy or something, I don't know, something like nothing, a familiar feeling, and so I left.

Arriving back at the apartment, I discovered the pork lard had arrived. Max posted: "Sometimes it's hard to distinguish between a moron and the person trying to reason with one."

**08.30**

Eye: burnt amber, no, Dust Bowl sepia. Nose: vanilla, honey, roasted hazelnuts, petrichor. Palate: vanilla and earth tones followed by cinnamon, transitioning to a sustained spicy tingling. Finish: hints of tobacco smoke. “Tell me why we’re here,” the psychiatrist said. “You want me to tell you why we’re here?” I said. He smiled, his teeth a line of white pebbles. “In the larger sense of things?” I asked. He smiled again. Actually, his sclerotic expression remained fixed, his beard obscuring further what he might be feeling, thinking. The prickly bramble had a life of its own. I thought of it as his spirit animal. “We’re here to make a difference,” I said, immediately hating having said it, the triteness of it, like some bite-sized homily. “Go on,” he said. “I’m listening,” he accused.

We talked about my life. We talked about “stressors” and “triggers,” his words. I told him I didn’t think of myself as a gun. “Maybe that’s what I need,” I said. “What?” “A gun.” “A gun?” “Yes,” I said, “a warm gun.” Silence. ““Happiness is a warm gun,”” I sang, feebly. Silence. ““Bang bang, shoot shoot,”” I laughed and he didn’t laugh when I told him why. We talked about Marla Johnson, how I could see her entering the hospital, shooting all those people, the pregnant women, the doctors, the nurses, the newborns, and herself. I talked about the three hundred forty-two people in America who would suffer from some kind of gunshot today, about the ninety-six people who would die from the shot. “Why don’t we talk about people you know?” he said, finally. “Like?” “Like your sons. Like your girlfriends.” So we talked about my sons. So we talked about Angelica, Geeta, and Zenith. We talked about Play.

“How do you feel about his illness?” he asked. “Who? Play?” He nodded. “I’m feeling what you feel when you hear about something like that.” “Go on,” he said. We sat there in silence. Talking cure—was this what was supposed to be happening? But what if talking was the virus, the disease, and what we all really needed to do was just shut the fuck up? False etymologies. “Verbal.”

“Verb all.” I wasn’t making any sense. Maybe it was the bourbon and meds cocktail. Is it an overdose if you didn’t actually exceed the daily dosage? “I’m thinking about myself,” I said, feeling nauseous. “Is that wrong?” “What are you thinking?” “The end is nigh?” I said. “Who said that? First I mean.” I’d had enough. The hour was almost up anyway. We sat there in silence for a while. Something was growing between us. Did I put it there? Were we making it together? Giving each other space, that’s it. “Everything keeping me together is falling apart,” I said. “Now we’re getting somewhere,” he said. “We’re out of time,” I said, the unintended gravity of the sentence, weighing on me, on us. “Yes,” he said, somehow making that thing growing between us smaller.

Back outside, I saw a “white” woman in the street, bent over and writing on the asphalt. There were two long skid-marks under which she wrote in huge letters: “Asshole! I hope your engine burns out next time.” Bending over, I vomited, the pink splatter as sick as the stink.

You think you’re going to die, then you realize you’re going to. Walking around, somewhat aimlessly, I thought I saw Sarah, again. I wasn’t sure it was Sarah, though, and while I wanted to talk to her, I wasn’t sure if she wanted to talk to me, so I followed her, watched as she stood at a sidewalk corner waiting for the light to change. A large purse hung from one of her shoulders and she held another bag in her hand. But Sarah never did this—she always stressed the importance of distributing weight evenly on her body and so made it a point to always wear a backpack. She hated the big purses women wore. Laughed whenever she saw a woman struggling with two or more large purses. “When wannabe couture trumps sense,” she’d say. So maybe it wasn’t Sarah. I was too far away to tell for sure. Right height, and weight, well perhaps a little heavier than the last time I saw her, but who cares, she still looked great, looked better, actually, since I always thought she’d look better a little heavier. I watched her walk into a grocery store. Watching from across the street, I waited for her to leave. Fifteen minutes or so later, she exited the store, holding another bag, this time a plastic shopping bag, in her previously free hand. I finally saw her face

and I still couldn't be sure if it was her or not. I followed her for a few more blocks, keeping my distance. I saw her walk into a large apartment complex. I stood there for a few minutes, looking at the building from across the street, my eyes slowly moving from the entrance to the bank of windows on the first floor to the bank of windows on the second floor and so on until I reached the top of the building and then I repeated the process down to the bottom. And then I walked away.

Back at the apartment, I found the Sulphur arrived.

### **08.31**

Come morning, I was looking out the window, the sky radiant, a single bird slicing across it. The ground green soap and wood-tar had arrived. I placed the products beside the pork lard and Sulphur powder. Reading about the possible carcinogenic effects of wood tar, I changed my mind, deciding to do a variation of the remedy, instead.

“Do you remember to look both ways before crossing the street?” Bree said. We were sitting in her apartment. “Funny question.” “Funny answer.” “But neither of us is laughing.” “That’s funny, though,” she said, pointing to the goggle-box. Newscasters talking about another fake suitcase bomb, about what happened after the bomb squad or whatever arrived. Just like the other so-called explosives, they ended up accidentally setting it off, but it didn’t blow anything or anyone to bits. Instead, it opened with a loud boing, like something you’d hear in a Bugs Bunny or Wile E. Coyote cartoon, a jagged-edged sign saying “Ka-Boom!” popping out from it, like the cheesy sound effects used in the Batman teevee show in the sixties. I was in tears watching the footage.

What I was waiting for, what *we* were waiting for, though, was the verdict in the so-called MetroCard Swiper case. Closed-circuit footage finally released from the Metropolitan Train

Authority weeks ago confirmed that Darnell Collins Wright hadn't sold the fare but had simply swiped someone in, performed a charitable act, in other words. He had been exiting through a turnstile as another passenger, a "white" man, was swiping at the turnstile without any luck. You couldn't hear them talking but you could see the other man's face light up as the man spoke to him, his face beaming when the man swiped him in. "I got you, man," Wright was reported to have said. The cop who had killed him had a history of using excessive force, including slamming a man into a bottle-lined wall in a liquor store, tackling him to the floor, where he put him in a headlock, yelling, "Stop resisting!" Then there was the incident where he repeatedly beat a homeless man with a baton.

It was the first time Bree had me over, first time I'd accepted an offer to come over. Books covered the walls from floor to ceiling, the dim lighting transforming the apartment into an ascetic's cloister. Seemingly ancient tomes were opened on long mahogany tables, while two computer screens flickered their screensavers, erupting lava filling one screen, an aquarium resembling the cover of Stevie Wonder's greatest hits package popped from another.

I walked around like a child with his first library card. Bree sat in one of the patent-leather couches studded with brass tacks, the rich burgundy color fading at the armrests. She'd already taken her shoes off and was curled up against the sagging cushions, her head dipped into a large book of high-resolution photos of oceans around the world. "Did you know that fish cough?" Bree said, without lifting her head. "Did you know that honey is the only food that doesn't spoil?" I responded. "Yes," she said.

I said I knew she would know that but that I also knew she didn't know that I felt my body was beginning to separate, halve itself, that there was nothing I could do to prevent it from continuing. A few weeks ago, I told her I'd found myself celebrating my asymmetry. There was my face, left eye larger, more penetrating than the right, my right eyebrow bushier than the left,

the hairs as bristly as a paintbrush. I swore one side of my face was a smoother shave than the other side. Then there was the peculiar way hair grew on my chest. And there was the matter of the very long gray hair that came out from my inner left thigh. I saw this asymmetry, an asymmetry I shared with every other human being, as a harbinger, though, that the two halves would eventually separate and I would completely fall apart.

“The body is temporal,” she said.

“That’s not helping,” I said.

I didn’t tell her about the story that had been unraveling in my head for weeks, about the gun-for-hire, how I saw myself in him. Cool. Slow. Measured. On a mission. It was always best to be slow when pursuing a marked man. Silent and resolute. A shadow that can’t be shook. Walking through darkness. The haunting. Seeing shadows running into walls and disappearing. A house of horrors. Lights turning on and off. Goggle-box snapping on, super-loud static popping off the screen. People humming, sounding like monks chanting. Things would be missing for days and then turn up. What the fuck, you know. I was stressed about it. No room for mistakes. Your senses are incredibly heightened when you’re running away from danger, after having done something wrong. Extraneous details usually ignored become supremely important. Learn the secrets of shadows. The chosen. That’s what he called the people, the petty thieves, hustlers, and other fuck-ups he was contracted to remove. There was always a sense of grace to all of his actions. He would allow them to work against themselves. Dig and fall into their own traps. Common sense was lost on these lost ones. When things aren’t as they seem, it’s because they aren’t. The man ahead of him who had recently embarked on the bus had made a series of mistakes. He should simply have disappeared. He didn’t prepare himself adequately for what would surely be a quick pursuit. It was really a mark of arrogance to know you can get away with something. This arrogance prevents the

thief from seeing properly and therefore trips them up time after time after time. Same heads, different faces. Walking through the valley.

“People love a con man,” I said. “A con man is somebody who will take something away from you and leave you breathless asking for more to be taken. He’ll have you thanking him for the trouble. Or he’ll figure out exactly what you want, you know, like the lover man meeting the unhappy wifey and giving her what she wants and then leaves. That’s a confidence man.”

“It’s a question of authenticity then?” Bree said.

I shrugged. I told her about that moment when I was about nine years old, lying in bed late at night, thinking about things, suddenly realizing I was going to die one day. I’d cried and cried, but nobody came into the room asking what was wrong. It was quiet and I was alone. I cried myself to sleep and never thought about it after that. I told her about the Death Clock.

“I’m not going to have sex with you,” she said. “I didn’t ask,” I said. “You didn’t have to,” she said. “Best thing for you is to be alone.” “I am alone.” “*Alone* alone.” “I don’t know how to be alone.” “You’re a classic Casanova.” “You’re overestimating.” “Maybe,” she said. “I think you love, and love deeply, every woman you’re with, while you’re with them. But it’s like they’re erased from your mind as soon as another’s in view.” I looked at her, and said nothing. “Oh, it’s on!” she said, pointing at the screen, reaching for the remote, and turning up the volume.

Like many, I expected the grand jury to indict the rogue cop. Slack-jawed, I watched as the district attorney announced the cop wouldn’t be indicted. Bree was crying beside me. Crazed, angry, I stormed out of her apartment.

I sat in darkness, filling the void with sound. Trying, anyway. Music is a kind of travel, travel at the speed of sound. I was five or so when Arvo Pärt wrote *Tabula Rasa*, and I’d been slouching around in my downside thirties when I’d finally heard it, somewhere in Europe, where was it,

Berlin, Paris, I can't remember, and I can't remember the circumstances, the setting, whether it was playing in a café or an art gallery, or some amalgam of the two, its overwhelming power wiping the slate clean, I suppose. The two movements, *Ludus* and *Silentium*, are a study in contrasts, in mood and tempo, play set against contemplation, movement against stasis, no, suspension. The composition as a whole plays with silence in many ways. After an ear-splitting introductory note there's a "grand pause," which swallows you whole before the music dances around, suggesting ocean buoys, bobbing on wave after wave, the piece's other pauses getting shorter and shorter until it arrives at the loud finale. The prepared piano sounds like bells and tiny, tinny explosions. The melodic range is very small, giving each note a greater density. The second section, *Silentium*, is perhaps the most mournful piece of music I've ever heard. It begins with this arpeggiation, a figure rising before plummeting—a suicide's fall?—this tintinnabulation thrust into the music, like thrown bells. In contrast to the first movement, *Silentium* ends with a dramatic caesura, disallowing simple resolution. It's hard to think of silence as simply being the absence of sound since silence is something you hear as well.

### 09.01

I watched the city burn. The ubiquity of machines and the instantaneity of posting allowed for anyone anywhere to see the conflagration happen moment by moment. Live feeds were a kind of trough. I took no pleasure in it. This was what I was telling myself. Thousands of people took to the streets, milling around after the day's day-long protests. Tensions between protesters and the police had been threatening to snap at any moment. When a pregnant "black" woman, who'd been taunting the police, was dragged to the floor, belly-first, everything had broken wide open. One screen broadcast footage hacked from cops' body cameras. Another from hacked closed-circuit cameras. Another showed a grid of footage captured from a cop-watch group. It was ugly. I

watched as a largely “white” battalion of cops standing shoulder-to-shoulder, form a wall, their plastic shields abutting or overlapping, here and there a “black,” “Latinx,” and “Asian” officer. Helmeted and body-armored, gradations of black pouring down from head to chest to legs to feet, shadowed as if from some underworld, the cops marched slowly toward a crowd of people, and what most horrified were the cop’s heads, brightly shining even in the darkness. A “black” man, wearing a bandana around the lower half of his face, emerged from the opposing side, itself a swelling humanoid blob, the man carrying a plastic garbage can, its contents aflame. As he approached the evening “shades,” the black wall they formed, a “black” woman urged the garbage can-carrying man to stop, to turn back, saying, “You’re better than this!” Please forgive them for they know not what they do, I thought. Ignoring her, he heaved the flaming can toward the police. The cops immediately deflected it, and almost immediately after doing this, the man was on the floor, a battery of batons raining on his body. I watched him curl into a ball as the cops unceasingly beat him. By the time they were through, the man was a bloodied mess. An explosion sounded from another screen. A police vehicle had been blown up. I wondered if it was one of the new vehicles, the line of bulletproof cars the latest Commissioner had commissioned. I couldn’t stop watching. I was angry, too, so words failed me. And what do we have when we don’t have words? I couldn’t help but feel aligned with these men and women, boys and girls, too. A riot is the song of the voiceless. Was that the quote? I was getting it wrong. Cooler heads may prevail but hot heads were setting things on fire. And wasn’t it time? Like an earthquake—stress, energy waves, and then, a sudden rupture. This was not to say I didn’t long for something productive to happen, a healing, yes, and a building up from the ruins of hurt and injustice. Yes, I wanted something other than what I was witnessing. I wanted something other than blind rage, but I also wanted to feel something other than the numbness, the muteness settling in when you feel wronged and helpless to do anything other than take it, take it after having taken it so many times before. Perhaps

these actions showed a lack of imagination but sometimes the nightmare keeps you from dreaming things up, dreaming better dreams. Another cop cruiser was blown up. More beatings. I watched a group of teenagers strip a convenience store. There was a young “white” woman carrying bags and bags, of potato chips, pretzels, cheese puffs. Another, six-packs of beer and soda. I watched another screen as my old neighborhood, Sunset Park, came into view. It was where I grew up, and though increasingly experiencing the effects of gentrification, the residents were still largely Puerto Rican and Mexican and Dominican. The doorbell rang.

It was Bree. “Let’s go,” she said.” “Where?” I said. “Out,” she said. “We can’t be inside.” Her face was a mess, tear-stained and worn. “Not with everything that’s happening.” The city was being torn apart, and while the riots had begun at the margins, it was now spilling out everywhere. Out in the streets now, I could hear police sirens and firetruck sirens, smell the smoke, feel the heat all around us, filling up the space in some impossible reversal, of energy and matter. Bree took my hand. She’d never done that before. Was this wise, I wondered, being out here? “We’re bearing witness,” Bree said, as if reading my thoughts, and perhaps she had been, why not? Can we be sure that thoughts reside only inside us? A text from V: A link to the entirety of *There’s a Riot Goin’ On*, Sly and the Family Stone’s masterpiece, soundtrack of the American dream turned nightmare. ““Looking at the devil, grinning with his gun...””

We walked and walked until we came to an avenue where all you saw was a mass of people walking silently, felt the heat of their bodies in waves. We joined them. I didn’t know where we were going, what we would do when we got there. Wherever we were going, it was slow moving, and we were stopping traffic as we moved forward. Block after block, we walked, and more and more people joined us, and there was a moment where I saw how large we were. Thousands of us, tens of thousands, and we were walking over a bridge into the big city, a communion of blood and unbroken body.

Bree was the one who pointed it out to me, to our right and down below: a large group of masked or kerchiefed people encircling two people: two “white” cops, each one holding batons, waving them, their guns presumably emptied. We watched as the circle tightened, became smaller and ever smaller. We watched as one of the cops spoke into his shoulder, radioing in a distress call. We watched until all we could see was an entanglement of limbs. Bree gasped. I felt cold, my stomach clenching, but we pressed forward.

## 09.02

V was right: in America, “This isn’t who we are” means “This is exactly who we are.” Sometimes life itself feels like a series of injuries added to insults added to injuries and insults. I woke to the sound of my machine, deflated, anger’s lancing angles blunted into grayness. Angelica was sobbing and I could barely understand what she was saying. “Kestrel, Kestrel,” she said. “What about her?” I said. “Kestrel, Kestrel, Kestrel,” she kept saying. “What happened?” I said. “Is she okay?” “Dead,” she said. “She’s dead.” I went cold while she cried and cried, the outpouring of it seemingly seeping out of my machine, a flood overwhelming me. I felt like I was drowning. “How?” and “Why?” was all I could say, the words tinctured with disbelief. I could hardly understand her through her sobs. I listened, and tried to console her. There was a great deal of noise in the background. People or machines I couldn’t say. “Where are you?” I said. She said something but I couldn’t understand. She was outside somewhere. “Where are you?” She was walking and there was some kind of atmospheric disturbance, wind or rain or something. “Seaport,” she said, finally. “Okay,” I said. “I’ll come get you.” “No,” she said. “Stay with me.” “Okay,” I said. “No,” she said, bursting into sobs again. “Miss, miss, are you okay?” a man was saying to her. I was with her, walking with her, hearing her haltingly say to the man, “Yes, I’m okay, thank you,” seeing her waving the man off, the machine still pressed against her ear. “Just

stay with me,” she said. “I’m with you,” I said. “Right beside you.” She passed several restaurants with outdoor seating, one with umbrellas over the tables. She passed a woman inside of a half-inflated plastic globe, the whoosh of air like a vacuum cleaner. Double-decker bus. Ugly lime-green taxi. Another ugly lime-green taxi. Group of tourists, led by a man with a light saber. Angelica stood on a street corner, marking the familiar zebra crosswalk made famous by the Beatles’s *Abbey Road*. “Not on my watch!” a woman said. Traffic light flashing a red hand, counting down from fifteen. She was across the street by the time it reached five. 7-11. Starbucks. “You still there?” she said. “Right there with you,” I said. And then she said something I couldn’t make out, and our connection broke.

My machine told me what happened. Kestrel had gone with her school on a trip to the beach. A rip tide had taken her, and by the time lifeguards found her she had drowned. I sat in my apartment for a long while, in darkness and silence, stunned, cold.

An hour or so later, still overwhelmed by the news of Kestrel’s death, I took a train to Washington Square Park to play chess, to see how I’d fare against the hustlers there. But really I went because of Kestrel, thinking about how much she’d enjoyed playing chess, how much I’d enjoyed playing with her. On the train, I’d overheard a couple talking about a recent subway platform birth, and I felt happy and then angry at myself for being happy, for momentarily forgetting about Kestrel. Such a sweet little girl. Arriving at the park, I sat at one of the tables, facing the first man who’d called me over. He was a weather-beaten man, his rosewood skin ashen over, obscuring his age. He could have been in his thirties. He could have been in his sixties. It didn’t matter. I’d be a fool to measure his chess strength based on his appearance. We shook hands and I moved my pawn up to e5 and smacked the clock. His response was instantaneous as were the next ten moves of the opening. Mulling over maneuvers, over candidate moves, I tried to stop thinking about the subway platform birth. I wouldn’t allow the translucent-slimer, meconium-

stained bundle of filth spoil my positional plans. A song played in the air, and I lost focus again, trying to suss out the song's name. "And that was 'For What It's Worth,'" the announcer said, and I laughed.

My position was crumbling, and I needed to close my mind, an impossible task. Everything around me flooded in: a snapped open newspaper, its tree litter crinkling, and I found myself longing for leaves; a bicycle's keen squeaky cheep; a frayed gray man walking past, his flaccid cock falling out from his cut-offs, his sagging skin flaps conjuring a courtship-inflamed turkey's snood. I looked away before his testicular carbuncles swelled with blood. I tried thinking about my next move, patterns popping into my head, and then repositioned my awkwardly placed knight. I looked at my opponent, whose face betrayed his assurance he was winning. I could see he was considering mating possibilities. It took every effort to ignore the gray man clearing his throat, the cilia thrusting mucus toward his epiglottis. I was lost. Allowing my time to run out, I watched the sun slotting behind rooftops. Eventually, my flag fell, and I laughed at the thought's multiple meanings.

I shook my opponent's hand and walked around the park, still wondering if I'd be heading up to the Bronx for the wake for Kestrel tomorrow. I noticed my shadow, watched it lengthen and shorten as my body shifted in relation to the light shining against me, watched it take form, seemingly take a life of its own, the variability of its substantiation suggesting how little control I had over anything connected to me. "Fuck you!" a tall, "black" man said. "Fuck me?" another man—Puerto Rican, maybe, or Dominican, "Latinx," anyway—at least a head taller than the other man, responded. "Yeah, fuck you!" the first went on. "Fuck you!" the other responded, putting his face in the other man's. "Suck my dick!" the other responded, his hands a box marking the target. "Suck *my* dick, cocksucker!" the first man said, even louder than before. "Get a room!" a stranger to both of them shouted from across the street. And then all three of the men laughed. And I

laughed, too. Checking my machine, I discovered that an academic had bypassed me and emailed Wonderland directly about including several of her pieces from her *Book of Suicides* in an anthology of experimental fiction. Wonderland forwarded their entire correspondence to me. The conversation centered on the letter of agreement that had not specified any recompense. “Labor is wealth,” Wonderland asserted. There was a passing reference to the famed musician who had inscribed “SLAVE” on his cheek in order to free himself from a terrible contract, where he didn’t own the publishing rights to his own music.

### **09.03**

The church didn’t know what it wanted to be, the exterior a Frankenstein monster of Gothic, Medieval, and postmodern parts, a whole history of feuding boards, botched restorations, and ill-conceived additions available for everyone to see. The interior, however, was a different story, the entire space gutted, revealing the building’s girders, the walls and ceiling sparsely decorated, the altar and everything on it made of glass, its transparency making it seem as if you were gazing past it toward something beyond, which was the likely point, the entire surround an invitation if not to worship then at least to sit in silent reflection. Sitting as far back as I could without seeming like I was sitting apart from everyone, I watched the theater unfold.

The service took a long while to start and people were standing and talking. I scanned the crowd, looking for Angelica. There were a lot of children, many of them, I assumed, friends of Kestrel. Electric feedback wailed as someone adjusted a microphone. A group of children assembled on a platform to the left of the altar. An organ swelled, and then the children began to sing “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” a song Aretha Franklin had turned into a profound and powerful lamentation. The children’s interpretation was nothing like that, harking back, instead, to the original’s plaintiveness. My eyes glassed up. I don’t believe in god, and I don’t believe in

redemption, but I do believe in a mediation between the ineffable—call it god, if you like—and whatever you call its opposite—the mundane?—and music is the perfect mediator. Take “Amazing Grace,” its melody perfectly linked with its message. Better yet, take Aretha Franklin’s extraordinary version of it. One of the pianists—there are three—introduces the melody, the Queen of Soul quietly vocalizing above it. “Can I get a witness here tonight?” James Cleveland asks, the congregation and choir applauds, and the choir sings, “Was blind but now I see,” its ellipses introducing the multiple fractures this song will undergo, after which Aretha takes the first syllable, stretches it out, as she does with almost every word, every word imbued with recognition, of sorrow, of joy, of redemption, of rapture, each word sacralized, the repetitions, the melisma, the words, their definitions not so much mattering but becoming matter: a transmutation. What else could it be but a soul-stirring?

After they finished, the priest walked down the aisle and everybody stood up. He talked about the mystery of God’s plan, and how the first thing he would do when he arrived in heaven was ask God why he had allowed for Kestrel to be “taken away from us so young.” He said grief was the price we paid for love. I couldn’t understand this at all. I couldn’t understand how this would bring comfort to anyone listening. Then he told the story of how Jesus had been preaching and children were playing around him and some adults listening were shushing them, trying to keep them away from him, and how he told them to bring the children to him. After the priest finished, he stepped away from the altar and down the stage’s steps, walked toward and embraced each member of Kestrel’s family. That’s where I caught Angelica. Cat-like, she swerved to face the assembly, and found me, locked eyes with me, and smiled. The children sang another song: the Beatles’s “In My Life.” There’s something about that song that gets me every time.

Angelica approached me after the service. Her hair was down, falling on her simple, loose-fitting black dress. We embraced, and I felt her tremble in my arms. “Good to see you,” she said.

I nodded, saying I was sorry for her loss, feeling stupid for saying something so meaningless, so impersonal. “I want to say there are no words but it takes words to say them,” I said, feeling stupid again. Wait, I was quoting someone. Who’d said that? Grabbing my hand, Angelica guided me toward a pew, where we sat. “Let’s just be quiet then,” she said. I closed my eyes, Angelica’s hand clasped around mine, felt her shoulders shake, felt my own tears dripping down my face.

After a while, Angelica stood up, saying she had to go be with her family. We embraced again, said goodbye. Sitting back down again, I watched as the mourners, most of them children, left in clumps. I listened to the slowly tapering of the murmuring, the soft clap of feet on the floor cease, the intermittent laughter of children cease. I listened, fighting, desperately, against waiting for something to happen, failing, though, so I listened and waited, but nothing happened, nothing. I listened as the silence took form. I listened, trying to ingest it, as if it were a wafer, which would transubstantiate within me, take over whatever made me me, erase everything. Passage of time—such an odd phrase. From where to where? An extract we could read? A section of music we could hear. Borrowed time—such an odd phrase. Who or what’s the lender?

Later that evening, Bree came over. “Verklemt,” she said. And we sat in silence for a while. She asked me what I thought about the riots. I shrugged. “I’m numb,” she said, but I could tell she didn’t really mean it, and I told her so. “No, but I might as well be, for all I’m doing about it.” “What’s there to do?” “Not avert your eyes,” she said. “And not gouge them out after seeing what you’ve seen.” She asked about my health. I told her about Kestrel, instead, how the terrible news, the worst news any parent could ever receive, had torn me wide open, laying bare my own failures as a parent even as it triggered every paternal feeling I ever had, had never thought I still had. Bree sat with me for what seemed like forever listening to Górecki’s *Symphony No. 3, Op. 36*, which begins quietly, in the lowest register, subsonically almost, the basses’ murky murmuring slowly

growing in volume, and as it does, you begin to make sense of the melodic figure, its slow sinuosity, a figure that's already inhabited you, like a snake you've swallowed whole, the dark thing swimming around your viscera, this melody incrementally moving up in pitch as well, the cellos joining in, followed by the other string sections. More popularly known as the *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*, it has three movements, the first, a lamentation, from the perspective of Mary, mother of Jesus. Tranquil, melancholic, the strings fade, and then the mother sings, asking her dead son to let her share his wounds, and then her voice fades, the orchestra subsuming everything once again, the whole orchestra appearing and then devolving, the violins vanishing, followed by the violas, then cellos, the basses left to engulf you once again. The second movement's song is drawn from words scrawled on a Gestapo prison cell wall in 1944 by Helena Wanda Blazusiakówna, who was eighteen years old at the time. What did she use to write the words? Dirt? Blood? Assuming the role of the child, the Son of God, they ask their mother not to weep for them. It's a haunting song, piercing, the orchestra sustaining a single tone for a long while before finally ending. The third movement is based on a folk song, where a mother searches for her son killed by the Germans in the Silesian uprisings. Had he been hanged? Shot by a firing squad? Was he festering in an open trench? Lying in an unmarked grave? The single note struck by the piano, an "e," stabs like a knife, clean and cold and true. The orchestra slowly arpeggiates an A-major chord, sustaining it before growing silent again. "The only way to confront this horror, to forget—but you could never forget—was through music," Górecki, talking about the symphony, had said. "The world today, it's the same—also a nightmare, crushing us."

#### **09.04**

I crushed and mixed the ingredients for the "oinkment" while listening to another report of another "black" man wrongfully shot and killed. No surprise there. Just another day in racist America.

What made the tragic story absolutely absurd was how the jury, after deliberating for ten hours, awarded the victim's family four dollars in damages, four cents of which would be paid by the "negligent" sheriff responsible but "only one percent liable" for the killing. America, where life is literally cheap. Never again, until next time.

Footage of a group of people, a kind of army, in Brooklyn appeared on a screen. They were facing a battalion of cops in riot gear and they were "armed," that is, they all had water guns. The contrast between the opposing sides was astounding. Sharp line of cops wearing visored helmets and black body armor. A squiggle of water gunners met the state's shock and awe with fluorescent cartoon, their outfits as garishly bright as their "weapons." Incredibly organized, they followed a ski-masked man's lead and "attacked" the cops, releasing streams of water from their pressurized plastic "arsenal," the cops yelling and spluttering and backing off. Moments later, another group attacked them from behind, launching water balloons at them. Water, water, everywhere! And then, an explosion. Of laughter! From the water gun army and spectators, of course, but also from many of the cops—they couldn't help themselves! It was glorious.

I took a shower to wash the "oinkment" off, the crust falling from my skin like a tree shedding bark. Water pooling around my feet, I kicked chips away from the drain cap, which was almost full. Drying myself, I remained naked, my skin tingling. I liked the feeling so I didn't put on any clothes for a long while.

I'd been telling myself I wouldn't call Sarah. So why was I calling her? It went straight to voicemail. I hung up. I called again. After it beeped, I said, "Hi, Sarah. It's Ergo. I really need to talk to you." Why did I say "to" instead of "with"? How stupid. I looked around at the screens: matrices of transistors and capacitors, grids of illumined pixels, the sound muted on every enframed luminance. The luggage carousel of sameness of the news. I watched an overturned boat. People floundering in water. People climbing onto the boat's hulking hull. I watched a flood tear

apart a house, reduce it to planks. Asphalt crumbling, falling into the mud. The waters roared in my mind. There was a woman crying on one of the screens. I unmuted the volume. “He doesn’t eat,” she managed to say through the blubbing. “Lost his will to live,” he said. It was the mother of the nineteen-year-old basketball player who’d raped an intoxicated and unconscious woman. The rapist had been sentenced to a year in prison. “Two drunk people having sex isn’t rape,” she said. Angry at the woman’s stupidity, her blindness, her disturbing lack of empathy, I silenced the screen.

Two hours later, a text from Sarah: “It’s always about what you need.” She was right. “You’re right,” I texted back. “I’m sorry.” Nothing from her for a while. I checked the weather. Why was I checking the weather? Data. There’s comfort in knowing something, even knowing something that’s based entirely on a more or less educated guess. I called again. She picked up. “Go ahead,” Sarah said. “I’m dying,” I said. No response. I waited. I could hear murmuring. Clatter of cutlery. Some classical music. “We’re all dying,” she said. “Everyone. Everything.” “Where are you?” I said. “Doesn’t matter,” she said. “I’m inside,” I said. “You’re always inside,” she said. “Except when I’m outside,” I said. “You’re the inside-outsider,” she said. I laughed. “I’m dying,” I said. “You said that,” she said, “so what else is new?” I told her about the itching, that the doctors couldn’t tell exactly what it is, that I’d tried everything, that I was trying everything, and nothing was working. “So you’re trying to make amends,” she said. She was right. She was always right. “Something like that.” “Life isn’t a movie,” she said. “It isn’t?” I said. “All the world’s a stage, etcetera.” “And you’re a player,” she said. “Maybe,” I said, “but not when I was seeing you.” “You played me, though.” “I did,” I said, “and I’m sorry.” “I’m sorry, too,” she said. “We played each other.” “All the world’s a cage,” I said. “What about the boys?” she said. “I’m trying,” I said. “Do. Or do not,” she said. “There is no try.” “Yoda!” I said, laughing, and she was laughing, too. It

brought back the time when we used to speak Yoda speak. “Go to a movie want to, hmm?” “Feeling tired, am I.” “Such an asshole, my boss is.”

I’d arrived late for our first date. Sarah had given me shit for it ever since, that is, before she stopped talking to me. We’d met a month before our date, though, in a therapy group, which I’d started attending months after my wife’s suicide. Sarah was in mourning, too, her husband having recently been killed in a car crash. And what a wreck *our* relationship had been.

There were six of us in group. Bob, the ex-banker, who nursed his mother, who suffered from dementia, “disappearing” and “reappearing” for months until she died of pneumonia. Nancy, whose newborn baby died in the hospital. Poor creature came into the world with a “hole” in his heart: a gap in the septum between the heart’s pumping chambers. Like me, Sarah hardly ever spoke in group. I had been flailing around, unsure what to do, not doing what was best, outsourcing anything and everything parenting-related. I probably should have been in a different group, specifically for people mourning people who’d killed themselves.

“Are you doing everything you can?” Sarah said. “Not sure,” I said. “I think so.” “It’s really all you can do,” she said. “What about you?” I said. “Everything okay? Happy?” “Something like that,” she said. “One day at a time, and all that—one second at a time sometimes.” “I hear you,” I said. “And I hear you,” she said.

Soon after our conversation, I was outside again, walking. A young, smartly dressed “Asian” woman walked past me, her long white cane swinging from the center of her body left to right before her feet, the pendular sway as elegant as it was precise. To my left, a “white” woman hailed a cab, her orange barbed bob a better signal than her upraised arm.

Returning home, I emptied my email inbox, and then smeared on a new layer of the oinkment.

## 09.05

The footage was uncanny: a helicopter ramming into the Columbus Circle Monument, its phallic granite rostral column crumbling like crackers, the marble statue of the infamous tyrant somersaulting in the air and falling to the ground, where it exploded into a million pieces. And the pilot succeeded in jumping out the aircraft before it hit. I watched the event several times.

Out on the streets again, I saw a car with the sign on its dashboard facing out reading “Puerto Rican Lives Matter, Too.” I was surprised to see it in my hyper-privileged neighborhood, which had long gentrified out the largely poor and working class Puerto Ricans who once lived in it. Some may scoff at the sign, see it as a form of co-optation, as somehow detracting from the message of BLM, etc. This is their prerogative, of course. For this hyper-privileged Puerto Rican, though, the message of the sign is synonymous with BLM. That is, to say Puerto Rican lives matter is to say black lives matter is to say indigenous peoples lives matter is to say LGBTQ lives matter is to say trans lives matter is to say Palestinian lives matter is to say Yemeni lives matter is to say Syrian lives matter is to say Asian lives matter is to say Muslim lives matter is to say that all lives intrinsically matter, but the existence of this oppressive state always necessitates the foregrounding of the vast disparity between the intrinsic and the actual.

So where can I see this “whole different ball game” people keep talking about? How do you hold on to a second anyway? I was at the deli. “How you doing, Mike?” the deli guy said to the customer ahead of me. “I’m good, I mean, real good, thank god.” “What are you up to?” “Oh, this and that, you know.” “Off today?” “No, they got me working nearby today, breaking up the concrete and whatnot, putting in new poles.”

Walking back to the apartment, I saw an old woman, “Asian,” pushing a shopping cart carrying huge translucent blue plastic bags full of glass and plastic bottles, sunlight shining through all that industrialized glass and plastic like consecrated windows, the pissy stink of it all, though,

hitting me like a brick. My machine vibrated. I took the call. "I'm at the airport," Wonderland said. "Which one?" I said. "Ronald Reagan International." "What are you doing in D.C.?" "I'm at the airport." "You're repeating yourself." She laughed, and explained that she decided "on a whim" to go to an airport, any airport, to wherever the first available flight was leaving. "Airports are a kind of purgatory," she said, which made me laugh. "Limbo," I said. "A great place to work, in other words," she said. "Other words?" She was having a hard time working at home and rather than "do the crazy thing of doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result," she did what she just did. She'd just wrapped up an hours-long writing session. "Made good progress on the novel," she said. She said that some, maybe even many, readers would find the narrator's "belly lint-picking focus enervating." "Worked on some suicides, too," she said. I asked her when she was heading back and she said she would be flying out soon.

Like the day before, I'd dutifully repeated the oinkment treatment in the morning, showered, walked around the apartment naked, enjoying the tingling sensation all over my body. Come evening, I did it all over again. My screens were ablaze with news of another dead celebrity who'd been famous for being famous. You can get easily lost in the manufactured sadness. I searched to see if there were any new reports about sinkholes. Nothing. Laughter from another screen. They were replaying the video of the water gun "battle," the footage segueing into an interview with the "army's" leader. Actually, "aguarmy," a clever portmanteau, and a Spanglish one at that. A face filled the screen, well, a masked one. A bright red five-pointed star burned above his eyes. "Fight fire with water!" he said, laughter in his eyes. And then he stepped back from the camera, lifted his water gun, no, rifle, no, portable cannon, quickly pumped it and geysered the camera. And I burst into tears. Off-screen: "And that was Subcomandante Mar speaking to us live from Barclay's Center in Brooklyn, New York." The leader's name was a clever and perhaps not-so-obvious nod to the brilliant Mexican insurgent.

**09.06**

The city hadn't recovered from the riots. There had been some good news, though. Weeks of calling for the resignation of the police commissioner had ended with her finally stepping down. She'd been the city's first female commish and there was much speculation that she'd taken the fall because she was a woman, that there was no way she would have been held responsible if she'd been a man. Women's advocacy groups fired from both sides of the question, though. Another prominent politician, a woman, too, said it was sexist to not hold her responsible for her actions, for her ineptitude, which were clear from the outset, and reflective of longstanding abuses of power against the citizenry.

Her career had been marred as well by the continuing antics of the fake bomber, whom the police still hadn't found. Today, there was a report of an alleged car bomb. The jalopy, a 1985 Toyota Celica, had been parked near one of the city's baseball stadiums. Seeing smoke coming out of the car, an "illegal" t-shirt seller called the police. Arriving on the scene just as fans were singing the national anthem inside the stadium, the police evacuated the area, towed a number of the surrounding vehicles, and barricaded the entire area. Bomb specialists arrived and quickly employed a remote-controlled robotic device, which, after breaking one of the car's windows, entered it, and examined its contents. It was the fake bomber's most elaborate ruse. The car had been outfitted with a smoke machine, which had a timer programmed to release smoke as thousands of fans arrived to the stadium. Minutes after the robotic device determined it was a dud, a sign burst out of the open sun roof, saying "Kapow!" confetti and glitter exploding all over the place.

And then there was the Columbus Monument destroyer. The scene replayed, red, spectral, and inexplicably liquid: the wobbly vertical tilt up the base, past the encircling cops, up the column, up to sun-seared white marble figure standing, dandyish, against a white sky, and then the metallic

hulk colliding into the column, its propellers windmilling off. Fire and smoke and dust. The pilot was in critical condition. “A ruin,” according to one of his doctors, he had broken all of his limbs and had suffered ribcage fractures; and then there were the rivers of internal bleeding. “We’ll have to puzzle him back together again,” another doctor said.

A vibration. Wonderland: “I’m at George Bush Intercontinental,” she said. “In Houston.” I laughed. “You going to all of them?” I said. “The Presidents?” she said. “Yes,” I said. Her turn to laugh. “I’m reading Malcolm Lowry’s letters,” she said, “which are, at turns, sprawling, erudite, hilarious, sad, messy, befuddling, and perverse. His letters to David Markson are particularly noteworthy, especially the one where he signs off with this advice to his younger charge: ‘Be happy in this order: Health, Happiness, Sense of Humour, Art, Pleasure.’ What a delightfully strange idea: to be happy in your happiness; and I still find myself speculating on Lowry’s suggested order of importance, how these things really can’t be compartmentalized, how he places sense of humor right in the middle, how one’s happiness should be bracketed by health and pleasure, etc.” This is how she spoke. Burnished sentences, burningly brilliant. “How’s the writing going?” I said. An uncharacteristic pause, and then: “Writing can sometimes be like walking forward and backward, simultaneously, and with pleasure, for the most part.” She laughed, then said, “Today, I woke from a dream where I was talking to Gordon Lish and Don DeLillo, and Lish was telling me something about Beckett but I don’t remember what, and DeLillo said to me, ‘Let language have its way, its sway—let it waylay you, slay you, lay you to waste, to rest.’ I wish I were still there with them, in the dream or wherever that was.” She laughed again, and we signed off.

**09.07**

Everything had been ruled out, that is, skin cancer and diabetic neuropathy, too, so why was I still scratching myself? And my second meeting with the psychiatrist resulted in nothing except feeling like I'd been emptied out, the feeling much like vomiting after already outing your insides. Antidepressants were a "possible answer," he'd said. "A serotonin reuptake inhibitor," he'd said. "What, like Prozac?" I'd said. "Which might help reduce the skin itching," he'd said "No, thanks," I'd said. "Zoloft," he'd said, already scribbling a script. So much for that, and so much for the ointment, which had, like everything else I'd tried, only resulted in temporary relief. I wouldn't be seeing any more doctors, nurses, and med techs. Goodbye, liminal waiting rooms and cold and sterile offices. Goodbye, ammoniac air and spectral hum. Goodbye, airborne anxiety. I wasn't imagining things. The itch was real and it foretold of future deterioration. I'd get the drugs some other way if necessary. I'd already "researched" generic alternatives, which is to say I'd submitted to the machine once again.

I'd read somewhere that saunas increased life expectancy, so I headed out to the gym where I'd ride a bike and then take a steam bath, the hot vapors lowering the risk of having a stroke, apparently, and had other effects, too—I couldn't remember what, though. Tests had been done in some Norway or Sweden or Finland or some other free market capitalist country with a comprehensive welfare state. A country, in any case, where saunas were so popular many people had one in their home.

Spent the next hour in the sauna. Once in there, I recalled that the book had recommended visiting a Russian or Finnish steam bath after four or five days of the ointment treatment. Had only been two and a half days but it certainly couldn't hurt. There were some old timers—one "black," the other "white"—in the sauna. "Running's great. Great workout," the "black" man said. "I've tried it a couple of times," the "white" man responded. "I do it for, like, four months, and

then my body is like, ‘Nope!’” Somehow they were using ‘like’ all the time, too, sounding like crush-struck tweens. I wanted silence, and here I was hearing people talk. Worried what the heat would do to it, I’d left my machine in my locker, unfortunately. “You hear about Tommy?” the “black” man said. “No, what?” “Had a big argument with his girlfriend. Snapped. Shot himself dead.” “Fuck.” “Fucked up, too. His girlfriend found him. That’s what he wanted.” “Jesus.” “Yeah, he’s like, ‘Okay, want to be haunted for the rest of your life?’” They were quiet for a while. “Never seen you here before,” the “black” man said to me. I looked at him and smiled. “Not much of a talker, eh?” he said. “I get it,” he said. “You get to my age and you’re either talking to yourself or talking too much whenever you get someone’s ear.” He and the other man laughed. They were quiet for a while again. “What are you doing tonight?” the “white” man said, finally. “Think I’ll watch this documentary on André the Giant,” the “black” man said. “Heard that was really good,” the “white” man said. I was too young to have seen the wrestler in his heyday but I did enjoy his performance in *The Princess Bride*. And hadn’t he and Samuel Beckett known each other, the famed author a friend of the family volunteering to chauffeur the nascent giant, whose acromegaly made it impossible to ride the schoolbus? Maybe I’d end up watching the documentary, too.

Play hadn’t returned any of my messages. I tried everything. Emails. Texts. Voicemails. He’d gotten into a fight with Marco, his handler, who also didn’t know where Play was. Normally, I wouldn’t be alarmed, but considering his condition, I kept imagining the worst. “Any news?” I texted Marco. “No,” he texted back. “Not yet.” Yes, I needed to talk business with Play, about the updates I’d received from the toy company manufacturing the memorial edition action figure of him, which would be released after he died. But I also just needed to talk to him. Hear how he was doing. I kept imagining the worst.

Someone posted a video of a pelican eating a pigeon. I watched it quickly scoop the smaller bird up, close its long, narrow bill over its baggy throat pouch, gray feathers poking out as the

pigeon struggled to get free, the pelican lifting up its head in order to more properly swallow the smaller bird whole, its throat smashing the bird to bits, bone by bone. I replayed the video, then watched a few more videos like it. Sometimes it was just a pelican against a watery backdrop, other pelicans popping in and out, a voice narrating the obvious. Sometimes you could see onlookers, people aghast. I imagined I looked just like them. I was disgusted at first, then I found the whole thing comic, then I felt disgusted at myself, for watching it. Then I watched another similar pelican video.

Wonderland had just arrived at Gerald R. Ford International in Grand Rapids, Michigan. “Where do you sleep?” I asked. “Different places,” she said. “Sometimes in my seat on the airplane. I doze off sometimes sitting in the waiting area.” I recalled she had problems sleeping. “Segmented sleep,” she’d referred to it. There was a name for everything. “I woke from a dream this morning where I was trying to source a quote from Sebald, which he never wrote: ‘He picked his pockets before safeguarding him.’” I laughed. “I’m afraid that’s as exciting as my dreams get,” she continued, “at least the parts of them I remember. I think Sebald would have appreciated it, though—the writer adrift, liminal, the false certainty about something unwritten.” “That would be a great essay.” “I’ve written about Sebald,” she said. “It’s unpublished and I want to keep it that way but I’ll send it to you anyway.” “Looking forward.” I pitched the idea of her writing a memoir about her sleep problems, as I periodically did. “An autobiographer has a liar for a subject,” she said, without a moment’s hesitation. “And I refuse to have battles over form, like the ones I battle over to justify my fiction. Freytag’s Pyramid is nothing more than a bad dick joke.”

Later, I checked my inbox and found an email from Wonderland, with “*Ecce Homo et Bestia: Tracking the Animal in W. G. Sebald’s The Rings of Saturn*” as its subject. Clicking on the file, I read the first paragraph: “Is there any mistake that when I opened the dictionary just before

beginning this paper that I opened to a page featuring an image of the Polyphemous moth? Reading Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, I find myself following hoof-, foot-, and pawprints, fluttering wings, claws skittering across caged ground; observing the latent presence of a stuffed animal; encouraged to track a peculiar kind of 'anthrozoology,' detailing not only the interactions between the human and the animal but also the 'becoming-animal,' a type of affective coming-into-being highlighted by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, and defined in their book on Kafka..."

I'd first heard Sean Rowe's "To Leave Something Behind" when it appeared during what was a kind of coda to the now-resolved action of a tense action slash drama vehicle I watched on a flight from somewhere to somewhere else—I can't remember where or when—which I forgot about almost as soon as it, the movie, was over. But the voice stuck with me, the granularity of it, a molassesed baritone, which reminded me of Richie Havens, more melancholy but no less urgent, a bit like Leonard Cohen, just a bit. The music is spare. Four chords. A bassline that bubbles here and there. A pipe organ, perhaps, inhaling and exhaling. "When the machine has taken the soul from the man," he sings.

### **09.08-10**

Traveling is the worst part of travel. My flight to Seattle to meet with the Elliots was delayed, so I walked over to a newsstand. I loved the smell of newsprint, the yeasty hint of mildew a marvelous bouquet. The cashier was surrounded by cylinders and tiny tins of mints, rectilinear packages of gum, assorted packages of chocolate, dark and milk, plain or raisined or peanuted, or their hollows filled with peanut butter or caramel, or cherry syrup, the medicinal oozing of which always disgusted me. The waiting area was somewhat sparse. There was a completely veiled woman to my left reading a newspaper, expertly folding it length- and/or width-wise as needed, as if she

were folding an origami figure, her bright eyes darting back and forth as she read. Two “white” overgrown, doughy, college-bound students sat directly in front of me. They were loud, boorish—American, in other words. They had the swagger of having recently discovered alcohol while still unsure of their limits. One of them, a bearded boy, nodded off almost as soon as he sat down and finally shut up.

Reading my just-bought page-turner, whose pages I could hardly turn, I heard a commotion, a crowd gathering around someone. It was “Everyone’s Special Someone”: Pomp Adore. Squeals of delight like pigs around a trough. I walked over toward the throng. Seeing me, Adore rushed in my direction, springing out her long and bony arms, her skin translucent orthoclase. Hers was a glacial beauty, the buffed neutrality of celebrity. A fantastico, she was, necessarily, out of place, the waiting room surround befitting the corporate sales representative. Like Play, Adore was famesque, a C-lebrity, a person famous for being famous, Instagrammed selfies or outrageous tweets her preferred vehicles of expression. The previous POTUS, too, a man whose previous claim to fame was his work as a judge of so-called beauty pageants and a silly televised competition series. You’d think his disastrous eight years as unpresident would have taught us a critical lesson, that, among other things, celebrities make terrible presidents, but then again, we didn’t learn from Reagan’s eight-year assault either. Jennifer posted about men’s rights activists “eating up” her page. “Men are a mistake,” Sula commented.

Wonderland was at Abraham Lincoln Capital Airport in Springfield, Illinois. “How’s the writing?” I asked. “Being written,” she said. “All right then, who are you writing about?” A long pause, then: “A test of one’s empathy and, perhaps, integrity—convincingly writing from the perspective of a truly reprehensible character. And by integrity I mainly mean ‘the state of being whole and undivided,’ a dubious idea to begin with.” She would be flying out to Little Rock,

Arkansas' Bill and Hillary Clinton National Airport. "Then again," she said, "Characters as such are word clouds, affective lexical functions, foggy aggregates of attributes."

Moments later, I heard what began as a kind of static but which then sounded like someone had turned on a faucet. "Are you okay?" a woman asked the bearded boy in front of me, straw-colored water puddling around him. He had peed himself. It was one of the most pathetic things I'd ever seen. "Late shift," he mumbled. "Just got off." Moments like that compel me to think that some people so desperately want to inscribe stories on other people's minds they'll impose it in some bizarre way, consciously or not. "Incontinence," a woman behind me said to no one in particular. "Kid can't hold his liquor," someone else said.

Seattle—can't think of a more melancholy city. It was raining when I arrived, the sky a gray blanket. Chucked my baggage into the backseat of the rental and drove out to the hotel. At the hotel, I drank a couple of whiskeys and conked out.

The Elliotts lived on a compound on the outskirts of the city. It was enormous. Two landscaped acres. Main house, cabana, swimming pool, and boathouse with dock. Bella was most proud of two things: the library and the weapon vault room. There must have been hundreds of them: guns resting on horizontal and vertical wall gun racks. There were glass cases, too, which contained a massive assortment of antique guns.

"I love guns," Bella said. "But I'll be the first to turn mine in if the military and the police turn in theirs. And you know that ain't going to happen." Gun nuts know how to shoot the shit. "Three hundred forty-two people in America are shot in murders, assaults, suicides, and suicide attempts, unintentional shootings, and police intervention," I said, "and every day, ninety-six people die from gun violence." "Good thing we have guns," she said. "Because there'd be a whole

lot more violence.” I nodded, saying nothing. “Ever wonder what people mean when they say, ‘We got this’?” Bella said. “What’s the ‘this’ they’re talking about?” I was already ready to go home.

It was a dismal afternoon, the sky gray, smeary with clouds, a contrast to the airport’s glary glass and shiny steel. There’s a sterility to airports, like hospital waiting rooms, everyone waiting for death, expecting it. How fitting they’re filled with terminals. I bought a roast beef sandwich and water and found a place to sit. A “white” woman beside me was audibly texting, each keyboard click a ball-peen hammer blow to the head. Give a monkey opposable thumbs and they use them to text. I kept quiet, though. Why should it be her problem that my threshold for noise was so low, the lowest it’s ever been? Hard to think of it as *white* noise. Hard to think of it as any color. Noise is blank. Made me think of Blank, funny enough. He’d like the thought, especially if the terms were reversed. Had to check in with him. People’s voices booming on their machines. Everyone a mobile broadcasting station. The nearby bar was as noisy as it was antiseptically bright, the room filled with screens with different games playing on them. A group of people were assembled in front of one of them, where two teams were about to ram into each other. Gladiatorial, territorial, teleological, concussive, sensational, football is the quintessential American sport. Any game where you had to wear armor had to be more bloodsport than anything else. Mass, velocity, force, collision—it was like watching a multiple car pileup, but a wreck whose fragments disperse and smash into each other again and again. Every man a battering ram avowing body over mind. Eggshell is to helmet as yolk is to brain. Considering the high percentage of brain-related injuries in American football, I think it makes sense that the game, where feet rarely make contact with the ball, is called football. Any time I caught a glimpse of a game I was reminded of the time I saw a few teens tossing a football around as they walked on the sidewalk, one of the teens saying, as he threw the football to one of the others, “If you don’t catch this, you’re gay.” Made me angry, at

the ignorance, the fear, the hatred. Wish I'd known the names of great ballplayers who also happened to be gay, so I could've said a bunch of names then and there. I ought to have said something anyway. Shoulda, coulda, woulda.

I watched the watcher's watching, several pitchers of beer on the counter before them, each of them wearing jerseys. One of the spectators, a beefy woman, her face a shiny red apple, walked over to me. "What are you looking at?" she said. "The game," I said, ellipsing "of life" from my response. The airport was bright and cold and airless, everything and everyone bathed in a corporate-sponsored glow. My flight was delayed. We call this "downtime." The woman came over to me again at half-time. "What's the meanest thing you ever said?" "That's easy," I said, "I've already dug the hole." "Good one," she said, returning to her stool.

The sky was full of clouds shaped like landforms, like bluffs and buttes, reefs and cliffs, like canyons and alluvial fans, like arêtes, gorges, and barchans, like mountains, peninsulas, and archipelagos. Pinks and reds and oranges mixed with the periwinkle blue. The setting sun bubbled behind the gauzy canvas, like lava erupting. And then, everything was black.

Entering the city's airspace, we see the glittering circuit board, feel the abrupt lurch, the stomach's sudden convulsion.

## **09.11**

There is no absolute being, only resolute becoming. Sitting on a bench in the park, eating a pecan sticky bun, I watched a beady-eyed squirrel approach me twitching its whiskers. Citified as I am, and citified as the squirrels I know are, I'm used to squirrels keeping their distance, and so I was perplexed until I realized it was interested in the crumbs and pecans that had fallen from my bun. I kicked over some crumbs to the animal, who, quickly nibbling the stuff, came closer, almost to

my feet, so close I could have kicked it. I didn't but instead stood up to allow it to feast on whatever I'd missed.

I'd need to find someone who could sell me the drugs I needed. I sent a coded message to a high school friend I used to get high with and he responded right away with the number of a guy who ended up using one of the corporate delivery services to bring me the bottle of capsules that would keep the itching from flaring up as often as it would if I weren't taking them. Putting away my machine, I picked up my book, taking minutes to adjust to the pages, reading a paragraph over and over until I stopped getting lost.

Later, lifting my head for a moment from my book, I saw a couple, a thin "black" man and a voluptuous "white" woman, standing in a nearby field of grass. The man did a one-handed cartwheel and the woman applauded. He said something, and she said something and laughed, and then he laughed, after which she did a cartwheel, and then they both laughed. One of the reasons why they laughed is that she'd been wearing a shimmering, almost metallic turquoise dress that fell down during her performance, revealing, well, all there was to reveal, whatever her thong didn't cover. There was some applause and hoots by other onlookers, both male and female, to which the woman responded by clasping both hands, lifting them in the air, and shaking them like the free-spirited champion she was.

Geeta called. She quickly dispensed with the small talk. She said she wanted to know why we couldn't be together in the way she wanted to be together. She said I was broken, that my wife's death had torn me apart, and that I had to let go of guilt in order to move on, move past fragmentation, past isolation. "Do you really want to be alone when you're in your sixties," she said, "in your seventies, when you need all the love you can get?" I listened to her and said nothing. "I'm done," she said.

I had no hopes, though, that by telling her what I'd seen, that she'd see what I would have said. Yes, I remember every crenulated facet of my wife's mollusk-spiraled ears, the lobes like sucked lozenges, silver calligraphy hanging from them, her pinky scooping out wax like dried bits of yolk. I remember showering water falling down from her head, spilling through her arched shoulder blades, down her spine, its dendritic fall a contrast to the tooth-like tiles' crevices, and the hair nests in the bathtub strainer, soap bits stuck to it like tiny eggs. I remember the bedsheets, thick red—call it carnelian or sard as long as you, too, see its thickness—frayed seams, body-stained: a cartography of movement, of desire, of time. I remember the poetics of her yawn, an alto in mourning, something so warm and so sad. I considered telling Geeta what I remembered of what I'd seen, so she'd see what I remembered, so there'd be one less person who'd forget. I remember my wife picking at a scab as if shelling a boiled egg. I remember falling into the hammock of her arms. And breath, the way breath often decided—I know I sound like I'm curating my memory, my mania, but so many things were decided by a breath. And the eye is a lusting, greedy thing. I remember standing with her in front of the Taj Mahal and feeling that, though yellowed like nicotine-stained teeth, the mausoleum still shimmered, its regal stillness undimmed. I remember her unclipped toenails tearing holes in my socks. I remember resting my ears on her belly, saying how happy I was we were pregnant, and her grabbing hold of my “sympathy fat” hips saying, “I can handle that.” I remember how we'd watch people working on a word search, waiting until their eyes lit up. I remember how we kept our eyes open believing the world would be that much brighter. I remember all the pulses, all the soundtracks, all the jokes, all the alls, and every *thing* and everything. O memory, you are a muddled puzzle!

I'd wanted to tell Geeta I was being strong-armed by phantom limbs. Instead, I said nothing, a void avoiding everything. Overheard: “How many more layers do they have to put in the shit sandwich before you stop eating it?” Made me laugh aloud.

Ping! Wonderland, texting me from Dwight D. Eisenhower National Airport in Wichita, Kansas: “I like when a fiction I’m working on feels like some kind of monster with whom I’m fighting tooth and claw, wrestling into submission just long enough to sharpen its gnashers and nails in order to completely rip me apart upon its release.” It was twenty years to the day that a number of deranged people used passenger planes as missiles, killing thousands of people. I hated those so-called think pieces where people reflect on a tragedy by talking about where they were and what they were doing at that moment. The “Where were you when JFK was shot?”-type essays. I sometimes feel that people respond to actual tragedies in the same way as they respond to fictional ones. Just look at the hubbub over a massacre in a medievalesque fantasy. People mourn about it, console each other about it, and then forget about it, ultimately relieved, happy they experienced something so deeply. The stages of grief about actual events seemed patterned after the grief experienced over the fictionalized events and vice versa to the point where they’re indistinguishable from each other. Any action taken is always minimal, but still felt by many as meaningful. I could tell you where I was when the towers fell but what would that tell you? Does it help to bring greater awareness and clarity to the tragedy that occurred? This country has never adequately faced the uncertainty, the insecurity that increased that day, the repetition of the image making the event less real, less tangible, as something that was recorded, its very repeatability, reproduction, a kind of erasure. It’s the kind of amnesia that allowed a recent POTUS to talk about the need for nuclear disarmament while at the same time establishing a thirty-year plan to refurbish this country’s nuclear stockpile to the tune of one trillion dollars. No, I won’t say where I was.

America: where amnesiacs say “Never forget!” Yearly, on this day, I think of what people in this cussed country refer to—if they refer to it at all—as the “Other 9/11,” the 1973 Chilean coup d’état perpetrated by the armed forces and national police against Salvador Allende, which

lead to his suicide, and then followed by Augusto Pinochet's assuming power. Fearing "an irreversible Marxist regime in Chile," the Nixon administration covertly and overtly supported the coup against the democratically elected Allende, and helped install the Pinochet regime, which subsequently tortured, killed, imprisoned, and "disappeared" tens of thousands of Chilean leftists. Pinochet's subsequent seventeen-year rule was a vast catalog of human rights abuses, not to mention full of political and economic corruption. Amnesiacs ever forget.

## 09.12

I'd been expecting the call, but I was still shocked when I finally received it. Silvio Play was dead. He'd died in his sleep the night before. I'd readied myself but I wasn't ready. I felt numb. I felt cold. I felt warm. I felt nothing. I felt everything. I wept. I felt like calling someone, to share my grief, but how do you do that, grief something you can't actually share but merely bear?

I spent the rest of the day answering questions from the media, about Play's final moments, about funeral arrangements, about his legacy. I told them he was a dreamer, a man who envisioned possibilities and did everything he could to realize them. An artist who used his body as *prima materia*, to be manipulated and transformed into whatever he deemed fit. I hardly believed a word I said to the media but they ate it up. What's worse, I was a simulacrum of grief.

Clichés everywhere. Related to Play's death: "No words." Except for those? "Everything happens for a reason." "He's in a better place." And where might that be? "It is what it is." And unrelated: "Hive mind." "Outside the box." "A' game." "Punch above your weight." "Game changer." "It's in my wheelhouse." "Going forward." "Flesh it out." "Pivot." "Threw them under the bus." "Blond moment." "It's all good." I felt like my head was going to explode. "You do what you can do," I said to myself, over and over again, emphasizing a different word with each repetition: "You do what you *can* do." "You *do* what you can do." "*You* do what you can do."

“You do what you can *do*.” Travel arrangements—I can do that. New York City to Miami. Couldn’t get anything better than an early morning flight the next day. Booked a hotel as close as I could get to where the funeral would be held.

I made up Play’s last words, sent them to the media: “I’m fucked. You were great!” I could do better, but I think he would have liked them.

The dealer arrived a few minutes earlier than I expected. He had a month’s supply of my medication. He was young, college-aged, might even have been doing this to pay for tuition, who knows. Girls strip. Boys deal. Hearty, white bread “white,” he was skinny and slouched, his scraggly scouring pad of a beard obscuring half his face. You got the sense he was trying to hide something. Nothing chin? Harelip? “How did you get them?” I said. “Trade secret,” he said. Later, noticing I’d been walking the length of the apartment back and forth, I threw on some clothes and walked out.

“Hours to kill”—what a terrible phrase. Shouldn’t we do everything we can to delay the furious rush of time? Everything around me looked strange, but felt more palpable somehow, every object assuming a personality, a personhood, a body, and they were all pressing into me, crowding me out. Harder to take, to withstand, were the innumerable iZombies, each so-called person a roving camera, a surveillance drone, an organic interface running apps, each meat robot a broadcast station made of skin and bone and blood and guts pumping out music and video and news twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. I thought of Shaye Saint John, her bizarre and thoroughly tragicomic videos, especially “24/7,” which features her, that is, Eric Fournier, an originally Los Angeles-based and now long-dead artist, wearing a frightful white mask, flowing brown wig, and garish gold frock, a long polka dot scarf around her head, a thin mannequin arm rapid-fire tapping on a computer keypad and mouse. “Twenty-four seven on the internet,” she says over and over and over again. “Yeah, on the internet. Yeah, the exposure!” At one point, she says something

about getting an autograph machine. “God, I just love signing autographs on the internet. I was totally signing autographs on the internet! God, I was totally signing autographs on the internet! Twenty-four seven! Twenty-four seven!” “They love me on the dot com!” She was Max Headroom’s helium-filled dizygotic twin. I keyed up Shaye Saint John’s *Kristen Slowly Dies in Front of Children*—her thoroughly strange album, which includes “the sounds of confusion, laughter, crying, and hysterical screaming,” a soundtrack befitting my mood, in other words—and walked on.

The last time I’d visited the Coney Island Museum was to see the 1:13 scale 3D-printed replica of Coney Island’s legendary Luna Park, as it looked a century ago. I’d missed it the first time it was installed and now it was part of the permanent collection. Ever ambitious, the artist Fred Kahl, along with his team, also built replicas of the two nearby competing theme parks: Dreamland and Steeplechase Park. What I really wanted to see, though, was Dreamland’s Lilliputian Village, a built-to-scale town where three hundred short-in-stature people had lived.

Hours later, at the beach, I walked from one end to the other, trying to empty my mind out, the sun, meanwhile, frying my “skin-suit.” Stopping at one end, near the jagged jetty, the murky ocean slapping against the long line of rocks, I fell to my knees, and started digging, digging and digging, scooping the sand out, piling it up on one side, digging and digging until I made a hole I could fit within. Finished, I slid into the hole, and dragged the sand into it, on top of me, buried my body, up to my neck. Gazing at the ocean—my eyes tracking the waves, the sea gulls intermittently swooping in and out, the occasional water scooter cutting across, displaced water bursting out behind it. I struggled to keep my eyes open, finally sleeping for what felt like forever.

**09.13**

We tell ourselves stories in order to lie. I was at the airport, awaiting my plane headed for Miami for Play's funeral. I keyed up Philip Glass's *Metamorphosis*. Inspired by Franz Kafka's famed story—a story as ominous, as creepy as it was still about an awakening, a fucked up one, but an awakening nevertheless—the five-part suite, all compositions for solo piano, which Glass performs, has a brittle quality, as clear as glass, the melodies often built around two-note ostinatos.

Wonderland called, and I picked up. “Sorry for your loss,” she said. “Thanks. “Where are you?” I responded. “The nowhere that is an airport,” she said. “Me, too,” I said. “JFK.” “Wow, me, too. John F. Kennedy Memorial Airport in Ashland, Wisconsin.” “His brother was the better man,” I said. “He was, that,” she said. I heard some yelling in the background. “What’s that?” I said. “What?” “All that noise.” “Oh, people watching a game.” “Got it.” “Wiffle ball,” she said, laughing. “World Series of.” “Weird,” I said. “Quintessentially American,” she said. “The plastic whizbang slap of it.” I laughed. “A marvel of technology,” she went on, “of home-based inventiveness, no different from Steve Jobs’s garage engineering. David N. Mullany’s home in Fairfield, Connecticut should be designated a historic landmark, just like the Jobs’s garage was and the Palo Alto garage where Hewlett-Packard was started. I’ve always found sports boring, though, most of them, at any rate.” Digressive, knowledgeable, freely associative, drawing connections across disparate fields, etc., Wonderland was a wonder. I once asked her how she retained it all, which launched her into an essay about memory and time, but the only thing I could remember was her talking about how from a very early age she would always alternately read among several books, rarely ever reading a book from cover to cover. “So much talk about ‘unputdownable’ books,” she’d also said at the time. “Much as I enjoy books like that, though, I also enjoy great books that I must put down, great books that make me run to the dictionary, that inspire me to write, that refer to other books, remind me of other books, books I must take breaks

from, if only to briefly recover from how devastating they are. I love reading writing that makes me want to tear up my own writing, that is, tear it apart, revise and revise and revise it until it resembles and perhaps even measures up to what I'd read, in terms of vision, imagination, precision, concision, energy, attentiveness."

"I love all those writers but only one person of color making the cut?" Jared posted "Makes me feel, yet again, there should be a moratorium on prizes for white people." "How about a 'prize' that disregards color, gender, sexual orientation and is based on merit?" Russell commented. "These prizes *have* historically disregarded race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.," Jared responded, "that is, have privileged white heterosexual men over everyone else. The solution is not to supposedly adhere or return to some imagined objective merit-based system but to redress the centuries-long and continuing prejudice and discrimination against marginalized people." "One could fill a bunch of blimps with that volume of hot air," Russell responded. "Ridicule isn't refutation," Jared responded.

The flight was a jumbled mass of images, a cacophony I barely registered, innumerable sounds blending into each other. There was a computerized message about safety blaring from speakers, the fake-friendly voice saying something about seats, something about aisles, exits, and bulkhead areas. A baby was screeching somewhere on the plane. Something about "unexpected rough air." Dramamine was already dissolving in my body but I still wanted a drink. Something about life vests. First class was all booked up, so I was in coach, trying to make the best of it. Sitting by a window near one of the wings, I imagined it breaking off, and I thought of the *Twilight Zone* episode where a man, played by William Shatner, sees a terrifying creature ripping out the wiring of one of the engines. Something about the stewards preparing themselves for departure or something. I heard the engine's whoosh as we took off and ascended, higher and higher, the thrust of rushing forward at over five hundred miles per hour pummeling me into my seat, the rapid

change in air pressure making everything sound muffled, feel muffled, so I swallowed and yawned—a little click sounding in my ears—and I heard a dog wailing and wailing, its owner gently shushing it, whispering to it, and I yawned again and again, a voice—human or machine, I couldn't tell—saying something in a higher-pitched version of the voice of offstage adults in those *Peanuts* cartoons, and my eyelids felt heavy, felt heavier and heavier, my body melting into my seat, merging with the plane, with the physics of lift, weight, drag, and thrust, my ears filling up again, and I yawned again and again, until I finally fell into oceanic sleep.

Exiting the airport terminal in Miami, through whooshing open glass doors, I felt emptied out, hellish heat smacking my face, draping over me like a second skin. Hailing a taxi, I was off to my hotel. I'd wanted to stay somewhere understated but I ended up having to stay at this pastel-colored palace, which went overboard on the amenities. It had its own aquarium, humpback whales and great white sharks greeting you upon entry. Play would have approved. The entire alphabet was mourning his death: the LGBTQ community and beyond. Makeshift memorials appeared throughout the city, in front of bars, clubs, and gyms.

#### **09.14**

You come to an empty room, which slowly darkens until you can no longer see anything. You hear a percussive sound. It booms, like a giant koto drum, the mallet intermittently striking. The speed of the strikes quickens and you recognize it as an intrauterine baby's energetic heartbeat. I imagine it was a joyful noise, the music playing in a darkened room, echoing off the womb-like exterior's walls, a gentle mimicry of what you hear in the fleshy place you've been floating in for nine months—a gentle thrumming, ba-bum, ba-bum, ba-bum, another heart beating “Welcome to the spinning world!” A perfect entrance, in other words, rivaling the beginning of “Acknowledgment,” part one of John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, where a smashed gong ushers

in a prayer, a meditation on what supposedly makes the world go round. You see a dim light ahead of you and you walk toward it. You thrust your hand toward it, surprised your waving hand and arm meet no resistance. Walking through the darkness, you feel something moving beneath your feet, *moving* your whole body, and you realize you're on a moving platform, a travelator. You hear muffled sounds, as if you were underwater. You discern some words here and there. The heartbeat accelerates and it mixes in with the sound of several people clapping, the sound of which slowly increases in volume and size until the applause reaches arena-sized proportions, the light getting brighter and brighter until it sears white and hot and your eyes burn and you hear a baby crying and crying and people laughing and cooing, the soundtrack slowly subsiding, tapering into silence, and then replaced by a waltz, a nursery song you recognize but don't quite remember. Life-sized photos of a baby, a boy, a golden child, appear to your right and left. He's bald and shrimp-pink. His eyes are enormous—you could swim in them, their bright hue something oceanic. And then he grows, toddles his way toward a ball, eats an ice-cream, throws sand in a sandbox. First day of kindergarten and he sparkles, ready for anything, for everything. The years pass, and his face elongates, his teeth misalign, and his smile becomes a metal cage, his braces the earliest of his many alterations. His eyes, though, are the same: ocean-dark. And then, a voice, his voice, tired, ragged weak, reciting a poem, something by Dickinson: "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," he says, "And Mourners to and fro"; and you can't help thinking, even now while grieving, how Dickinson is always a pleasure, her lyrics incredibly precise while also fractured, ruptured, full of doubt, a profound awareness of mortality in every line, imbued in every word, how this poem's openendedness is a possibility space, which widens and widens, its repetitions, i.e., "treading, treading" and "beating, beating" concretizing their respective actions; its overall conceit, of desperation and madness and sadness, the harrowing feeling of it, likened to a funeral, suggesting, ironically, a kind of order, a method to the sadness; its enjambments, especially the third stanza's

final line and the fourth's first; its succession of metaphors: heaven as bell, Being as ear, etc.; the personification of and the speaker's merging with silence, a silence "heard" throughout the poem; all things of wonder. And that final line, itself a broken plank—O, what other world have we hit in this perpetual freefall, and which ones to come as we plunge deeper? Sometimes, it's better to be within a shadow of doubt.

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised, but seeing hundreds of fans line up to take selfies with Play's refrigerated and embalmed corpse was one of the oddest things I'd ever seen—theater of the disturbed, a performative amalgam of desire and fear, seduction and repulsion, sadness and joy. Play looked perfect, even more perfect than in so-called real life, more real than real, his death the apotheosis of the makeover, of the real itself, myth and man coming together, coming to life in death, the irony striking me cold, cold as his perfected skin.

### **09.15**

We were stranded on the tarmac. Trained to expect a certain kind of immediacy, we hate to wait. Look at us watching someone fish out coins from their pocket or purse or whatever to give to the cashier. Look at us on the highway, where anyone keeping the speed limit is an asshole. Look at us at the post office when there's only one station open and there's a long line of people waiting and someone at the window dares to ask the clerk a question we all already know the answer to.

I didn't bother to take out my machine. Too tired, or numb, I couldn't tell. Every moment felt like a memory of it. I felt unmoored, and worse, weightless. Desperate for a drink, something to numb me, I closed my eyes. Every sound seemed magnified, every click a jackhammer, every word an explosion. I started humming and the person beside me—a twee "white" man wearing a

vest and tweed jacket—asked me if I was okay. “A-okay,” I said, stupidly, rocking back and forth in my chair. I’d swallowed two Dramamine capsules but they had yet to take effect.

We were in the air after what was only moments but had actually felt like hours. I don’t remember the rest of the trip. I woke to the sound and feel of us landing in New York City, feeling neither here nor there, both here and there, the very definition of either/or. My head was a brick, a pillow, a brick pillow. Sometime later, finally walking around the airport terminal, looking for a taxi depot, I saw William Shatner, that is, I thought I saw him, that is, I saw someone I thought was William Shatner, and I surprised myself by following him through the terminal. He’d have to be in his late nineties at this point, but it was definitely him, walking at a solid pace belying his age. But maybe it wasn’t him, the big city the waystation for everyone’s doppelgänger at some point or another. Shatner, or his body double, was dragging a small wheeled suitcase behind him and at one point his machine sounded and he stopped, answered, and resumed walking, but I couldn’t hear him. He stopped at another point, though, let go of the suitcase handle, and waved his now free hand in his, that is, in Shatner’s characteristic way, sharply jabbing into the air, with undeniable bravado, as if he were a starship captain giving orders, used to having them immediately obeyed. I let him go after a while, watched him walk away, diminish to a tiny dot in time and space.

Back at the apartment, I felt itchy again, this time on the back of my neck. I hadn’t felt itchy for what seemed like a long while now. I hadn’t felt much of anything at all, true, but the ointment treatment must have worked, even though I’d done it only for three days. But here it was, whatever it was that was inside me, rearing its wretched head again. “Here we go again,” I said popping two of the pills I’d bought from the dealer. Would I repeat the treatment? I watched the official video for “Here I Go Again,” one of Whitesnake’s hits from the eighties. Talk about cock rock! Singing along, I laughed and laughed. What is it with the woman in the diaphanous

gown sprawling on the expensive cars? “Maniacal laugh, maniacal laugh, maniacal laugh,” I said, quoting one of the Muppet movies. The singer’s voice reminded me of Chris Cornell. Such a great singer. Some people at the time had thought it had been accidental, that it was a botched autoerotic asphyxiation session. The wrong people always die.

Autoerotic asphyxia goes by many names, among them “breath control play,” asphyxiophilia, hypoxiphilia. Some practitioners call themselves “gaspsers.” Such deaths are probably severely underreported. You hear of the celebrities, like David Carradine. Albert Dekker. Michael Hutchence, maybe. The Conservative British politician, whose corpse was found naked save for the nylon stockings held up by a garter belt, a plastic bag over his head, an extension cord around his neck, and, more bizarrely, an orange wedge in his mouth.

I gazed at myself in the bathroom mirror. Who was this man? Eyes and ears and mouth and nose—all unknown. I watched the man breathe. After a while, I grabbed the straight razor, admired its rosewood handle, the inlaid bits of mother-of-pearl. Opening it halfway, I registered the tang and pivot pin, the fluting on the top and underside of the shank. Gently running my finger along the razor’s edge from heel to toe, I wondered why the blade would be likened to a foot. I saw the blade lightly running across my neck, making “hesitation marks” along the way, admiring how much they looked like the scratches on my arms. I saw the blade puncture the jugular vein and external carotid artery on the left side, blood spurting out like an errant hose. Closing the blade and setting it down, I sprayed shaving cream into my hand and then lathered it on my face. After twenty or more strokes, I was done. Then, I lathered up my eyebrows, and shaved them off, too. I plugged in my electric clippers and mowed down my hair. And then I sprayed dollops of shaving cream directly on my head, spread it out evenly, and razored off what little hair I had left on my head. Washing and drying my face, I looked at the mirror. You might say I looked like an extraterrestrial, humanoid, surely, but definitely someone or *something* other.

The news blared from one of the screens. They weren't calling them detention facilities, although that's ostensibly what they were. The layers of irony were mindboggling. Puerto Ricans are American citizens, after all, each "refugee" forced to seek asylum on what really ought to have been home. Receiving harsher treatment than their fellow Caribbean counterparts who'd defected from their supposedly oppressive homeland, a homeland which had for many years been this country's whorehouse. Many of those exiles now maltreating the new exiles.

Ping! "Jimmy Carter Regional Airport in Americus, Georgia, now," Wonderland texted. Roland posted: "America: where intimacy has been reduced to a videogame." A death takes you out of yourself. Play was dead but I was the one who felt like a ghost—unmemoried, strangered, out of calendared time. I thought of Kestrel. I thought of the eleven-year-old who had gone missing. I thought of Harry who had gone missing. I thought of Darnell Collins Wright. Who's next? Moments before, I came up with something and I almost posted it from Play's feed: "I remember the future." He would have loved it. The machine I carried with me everywhere signaled my arrival. The elevator knew which floor to bring me to. There was no need for keys, no need for card—the door opened to my touch, the machines almost making me feel like I wasn't outside of it all, an invisible presence, a kind of haunting. A flood on one screen. A hijab-wearing woman in a courtroom on another. A weather map, arrows, news ticker. And there he was, Play, smiling from one screen. Ah, those marvelous teeth. Those bright eyes. He was dancing on another screen. He was in a wheelchair on another, emaciated, tubes in his nose. A catwalk, models wearing his clothes, looking fierce. The MetroCard Swiper bodyslammed, the exonerated officer outside the courthouse. Then something came over me. Isn't that what they say? Something "coming over" as if you were a house, within which a guest, uninvited, dwells, takes up space. But that wasn't right. It was more like something was pushed aside, *I* was pushed aside, and something else took over. Call it what you will—anger or sadness or despair, or all of the above—but something took over

me, and I was quickly rushing toward one of the walls, and ripping a screen away from it, lifting the screen above my head—wires snapping all around me, hitting my face and neck and chest—and throwing the screen down on the floor, immediately picking it up again and throwing it against another screen, which didn't shatter as I had expected it to, hoped it would, but merely dented it, so I took that screen in both hands—it was huge—and threw it against the floor, then lifted it up again, threw it toward a bank of screens, each one refusing to go black. I ripped each of the other screens all of the speakers off the walls, threw each of them against the floor, screws and wall-mounts and whatever flying out, dust, paint chips, and sheetrock chunks falling to the floor, the smash and scatteration ultimately leaving me feeling emptier than before.

My machine sounded. I almost hadn't heard it because La Monte Young's *Well-Tuned Piano* was inexplicably wafting out of the rubble all around me. It took me even farther out of myself, which was very much where I wanted to be. Reverberations is what I think when I think about this composition. Vestiges. But when I'm listening, actually listening, I'm a kind of tuning fork. A receptor of some kind. Alternately ominous and elegiac, the second section, rattling, rambling.

It was my parents. I didn't pick up. They had probably seen the news of Play's death, and wanted to console me. I didn't want to talk to anybody I really knew, that really knew me. I wanted to talk to Play. Impossible, so I ran out of the apartment. It was hot outside. Overheard: "Yeah, he fine, but I don't play in the snow." My mind was crowded. I needed to get outside it. No, I wanted to get out of myself. But hadn't that already happened? I wasn't making any sense. I walked. "Roosevelt Memorial Airport, now," Wonderland texted. "Which Roosevelt?" I said. "The better of the two," she texted. "The best of them all," I said. "Heading home after this," she said. "Landing in J.F.K." "A perfect circle," I said. "Vico would be proud," she said. "Joyce, too," I said.

**09.16**

The accusatory sun wasn't out, yet, but I was up. The living room was a mess, the rage and ruin of machine guts and sheetrock rubble producing a pleasurable rush quickly drowned by disgust. Grabbing a box of heavy-duty plastic bags from a closet and a broom and dust pan from another, I started to clean up, stuffing screens and wires into bags and sweeping up the paint chips and plaster chunks, depositing it all into the bags, too.

The itching would come and go. Today it went, so after cleaning up the living room and bringing the plastic bags down to the basement, where they'd eventually be properly disposed of by the management, I went outside for a walk and a smoke. It was early morning. Commuters were commuting. Men and women walking in lockstep. Overheard: "I don't do love." Coffee thermoses in hand. There was a bald "white" man walking his dog. I saw him place a bag behind his dog, perfectly timed so that the pooch's poop plopped into it. Then he took out a napkin and wiped the dog's butt. He looked at the napkin once then swiped the dog's butt one more time. It was the strangest thing. I'd never seen such a thing. I wasn't repulsed just perplexed. I found myself wondering what dogs would normally do: without human interference. And then I recalled seeing dogs rubbing their butts on the ground if something irritated their bunghole.

My machine throbbed. I picked up. "How's life?" my father asked. "It's dying," I said. "Definitely a trip." "A trip, yes," I said. "With too many people blocking the view." "Hey, we're not all bad." "Not all that great either." I don't know much about non-human life but I know that those few other animals that might be accused of cruelty can't be accused of the massive destruction, like humans can, of eighty-three percent of this planet's wild mammals, and of fifty percent of its plant life, not to mention of killing their own kind in massive numbers, through wars, genocides, ethnic cleansings, forced labor and slavery, internment and extermination camps, etc. And then there's human sacrifice and ritual suicide, etc. "I'm sorry about Play," my father said.

“Thanks,” I said. “You were close?” he said. “We made a lot of things happen,” I said. “Made a lot of money.” “Money isn’t everything.” “It’s something,” I said, sounding harrowed, hollowed. I was a void, a walking sinkhole. “You taking care of yourself?” he said. “Doing my best.” “Good.” “Doing what needs to be done. Etcetera.” “You do what you can do—” he said. “Because it’s all you can do,” I said. He laughed. “Yes,” he said, “exactly.” “We have this action figure coming out,” I said, telling him I’d have one sent to them when they were finally released.

Speaking of non-human animals, it would be a day of such animal sightings: A skunk crossing a heavily-trafficked street (it made it to the other side), that same skunk, presumably, appearing in a nearby park some hours later. A hawk heroically flying overhead, birds lower on the food chain twittering all kinds of messages about it to each other. An orange and black butterfly—not a Monarch!—landing on my wrist. Walking away from that selfsame park, I heard a rustling in some bushes surrounding a house on my right. Turning, I saw a ragged tail belonging to a rugged raccoon, who after gazing at me—in silent judgment, perhaps—burrowed under the porch’s dirty latticework.

Exiting the park, I came upon a farmer’s market, and saw a “living statue.” Painted white, the “white” woman wore white tights, white pointe shoes, and a white, bell-shaped tutu, the phrase “painted white” playing over and over in my head. What were “racial” categories anyway but paintings with a broad brush? We need to get beyond surface appearances, the optical delusions of them. Beneath the skin, beneath everything, we’re all quanta. I stood watching the woman for a long while, children marveling whenever she “came alive.” She brought to mind the whimsical scene in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, where two of the heroes trick the evil king into believing they’re life-size dolls. I wondered about Greg, too, what had happened with him and his doll. I watched as the white-on-“white” woman elegantly brushed her right leg into the air while simultaneously pushing off with the left leg, and touching the feet together in the air, and finally landing with her

feet crossed and knees slightly bent, her arms upraised, making a kind of oval shape. There was a lull in interest for a while but she remained fixed in position, and I watched, secretly hoping a pigeon would land on her shoulder.

Later, I saw a kite, dangling from a tree. Took a picture of it and posted it on Fakebook, entitling it “Saddest Kite in the World.” Angelica called me. “I don’t like this one,” she said. “The photo you posted.” I laughed. “It’s not funny,” she said. “It’s scary. Are you okay?” “I’m okay, yes, I’m fine,” I said. “Dandy.” “Dandy?” “How are you?” “I don’t know,” she said, sighing. “I really don’t know.” We were quiet for a while. “When can I see you?” I said. “I don’t know,” she said, sighing. “I really don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore.” There’s never anywhere to sit when you’re walking and you want to sit so I kept walking. “Gotta run,” she said. “Sorry, I have to let you go,” she said. “Okay,” I said. “Have a good run!” She had to “let me go,” she said, not intending the phrase to be a final cutting off of things but it felt that way to me, nevertheless, for a few moments at least. Finally finding a bench, I sat down, took out my machine, checked to see how my post was doing. I just stared at the post, watching the reactions come in one by one. I pictured someone taking a photo of me, and just before posting it on Fakebook, entitling it “Saddest Man in the World.” I laughed. The best comedy is always muted by some kind of sadness, which makes it even funnier, which makes it even sadder. I guess this is what sitting beside yourself means: reflectiveness sans mirror.

A text from Geeta: “Let’s dance!” “Love Bowie,” I wrote. “Sad he’s gone.” “Don’t change the subject,” she texted back. “Tell me where and I’ll be there.” She gave me the logistics. “Cool?” she texted. “Always.” Smiley-face emoticon from her. “Remember me on this machine,” Siobhan posted. It received over a thousand reactions. Laura is doing that awful thing where the mother waits until “the kid” is at the father’s to throw out toys they’ve had for years. “Early-stage hoarders!!!” she called them. “Have them give them away,” Sheila commented. “They won’t even

give away the crappy plastic, million-piece, broken robot they got at the dollar store three years ago!!!" Laura responded. "Leaving this space," Kumar posted. "Define 'this' and 'space,'" Kirk commented.

Geeta and I met at the Mardi Gras, a "multi-club," as they called it, a post-post-modern venue, where it's the titular holiday every night. It featured a long-lapsed Las Vegas-styled gimcracked décor; neon-lit palm trees; tall, clear columns filled with bubbling water; portable "stripper poles"; and four different rooms playing genre- and/or era-specific music, the most bizarre of which was the "Diamond Rodeo" room, where nth-times-removed cowboys and cowgirls unsmilingly danced in lines as if rehearsing for a funereal music video, and where my yee-haws went largely unappreciated.

I was in the Eighties room. Bryan Adams's "Summer of '69" started playing as soon as Geeta walked in. "You look different," Geeta said, holding me by the arms. "Strange, actually." I laughed. "What did you do?" "I shaved," he said. "No," she said. "That isn't it." I went to the bar to get drinks for us. I thought seeing the man wipe his dog's butt would be the strangest thing I'd see today but while I was waiting I turned to look at the dancefloor and saw a guy gyrating arrhythmically but intermittently letting loose amazing roundhouse kicks. Strange, too, but undeniably beautiful, was the visually-impaired man, who ripped up the dancefloor, expertly using his walking stick within his moves.

"You did something to your face," Geeta said, sipping her drink. "I shaved," I said. "You're always clean-shaven." I laughed. Screwing her eyes, she scrutinized me, and said, "Oh my god, your eyebrows!" I laughed. "'Let's Dance,'" I said. "Lead the way!" "No," I said. "Bowie," pointing. "Great song." "Come on!" she said, grabbing my hand, leading me to the dancefloor. She was a terrible dancer. "You've got *moves*!" she said, nodding her head, exaggeratedly. "U Can't Touch This," was playing. "Just having fun," I said. Fake it till you make it, they say. A song changes

everything. “Sweet Dreams” came on. Actually, it was “Sweet Dreams,” dismantled, deconstructed, everything removed but the four-on-the-floor kick drum and the initial two-bar keyboard riff over and over again. I turned to look at the deejay. Blank. Of course! I danced and forgot about everything. The song ended, and I turned again to see that Blank was gone. Another deejay had already replaced him, the sound of synthesized shakuhachi filling the air, the familiar introduction to “Sledgehammer,” which drew everyone back to the dancefloor, that is, until a “white” man appeared on a makeshift stage near the deejay, a screen behind him projecting the famed video of the song, the man matched Peter Gabriel’s jerky movements move for move, him lip synching all the while. The crowd burst into applause as the song ended. Talking Heads’ “Once in a Lifetime” came on and the man nimbly mirrored David Byrne’s spasmodic moves. And then “Billie Jean” came on, and he once again matched the projected dancer’s moves. He was a perfect mirror, except that he wasn’t. There’s always something almost unworldly about Michael’s moves, as if the laws of gravity didn’t apply to him.

Our Luft was waiting for us by the time we were on the street. The car was moving and we were all over each other. Smearly. The highway was alive. “Let’s give him a show,” Geeta said, grabbing my hand, putting it between her legs. “I’m so wet,” she said. I wasn’t into it but I went with it. “I’m using you,” she said. “You know that, right?” I laughed. “I’m already used up,” I said, making her laugh. I needed to get out of the car. It took everything to keep myself from screaming.

We were outside again, on the street, the cab driving through the night’s dense immensity, offering safe passage, for the enchanted, the disaffected, the worn-weary, the boneheaded drunk, the bored, the lonely, the depressed and overmedicated, the hyper-privileged, each solitary desperate for something, something they’ve long lost but long forgetting exactly what it was they lost.

“Hello, Philippe,” Geeta said to the uniformed man opening the door for us. “Good night, Ms. Geeta,” he said. “Hello,” I said, nodding. “Good night, sir,” he said, his eyes narrowing.

“The place looks good,” I said, entering her apartment. “Still a lot of work to be done,” she said, beaming. “Can I get you something to drink,” she said. “I’m good,” I said, walking around her place, which was pretty small, considering what she’d likely paid for it. “Good?” she said. “Want you to be bad.” “I can do that,” I said. “Just this once,” she said, her gaze somewhere between glare and scare, “and we’re done.” “Fine,” I said, kissing her neck.

Laying her down on the bed, I stripped off her underwear, a thin spandexy thing, the motion releasing a powerful odor, which I took to be discharge or something. “Whoa,” I said, but I wasn’t revolted. I continued kissing her. “What?” she said. “There’s a smell.” “Huh?” she said. I was licking her clit now. “A smell,” I said, pointing. “Oh...oh!” she said, snapping her legs closed, pushing me up and away. “I don’t mind,” I said. “I do,” she said, standing up and bolting to the bathroom. I imagined her standing before her cleansers and perfumes, her swabs and brushes, methodically deliberating but acting quickly, nevertheless.

She explained that she’d been using birth control, a device inserted in her upper arm. It altered her chemistry, regulated estrogen levels. “Power,” she said. “I want to have control.” Taking my hand, she rubbed it against the implant. It felt like a matchstick, and I couldn’t understand how it worked from there. It seemed so far away.

“Eventually, my body will get confused,” she said. “And it’ll stop producing estrogen.” I grunted. “Means I’ll get wrinkles,” she said. “Can’t have that.”

*Ping! V:* “Sometimes life is simply bracing yourself for death.” I turned the machine off, Maria Callas’s voice etherizing.

**09.17**

Life is a work-in-translation, thus fraught, contingent, malleable, performative. I was in my apartment, sitting, staring, feeling, well, feeling what I was feeling. I didn't want to move. I gazed at the walls of my living room, scarred with holes, and I thought of keeping them that way, and then I thought about *uinenwerttheorie*, the fascist theory of ruins, and reconsidered it. Grabbing my ancillary consciousness, I read about Nexplanon, the birth control implant Geeta was using, how it releases the hormone progesterin to stop you from getting pregnant, the name of the device oddly suggestive of birth, all of which made me think about a woman I used to date, who as a child had her aortic valve replaced with an On-X, a mechanical valve. I remember the eeriness of lying in bed with her and hearing her tick. "Can you hear it, too?" she'd said. "Used to bother me, keep me up, now I don't think about it." She always slept better than I did. She'd told me how dolphins had swum close to her on two different occasions, likely because they were curious about the ticking. She had to stop going to meditation, though, because it kept disturbing the other meditators. She's dead now. Still hurts to even say her name.

Our bodies have long incorporated technology: eyeglasses, contact lenses, hearing aids, artificial limbs and joints, and mechanical heart valves. A host of contraceptive devices, among them diaphragms, cervical caps, IUDs, and male and female condoms. And then there are the ubiquitous so-called phones, so we're all part machine now, in other words. And considering how you can have your heart wrenched, get your buttons pushed, how you can get hammered, screwed, and nailed, and/or get kicked in the nuts, I think Donna Haraway was right: we *are* "all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs."

So we were already well on our way into the next step in evolution, the next being machines completely replacing us, that is, unless the human-caused threats to our existence: nuclear war and global warming and climate change, didn't wipe us out first. I recalled reading about a

neuroscientist, a pioneer in “thought digitization,” who’d implanted wire electrodes in the brain of a paralyzed man and then teaching the networked patient to mentally control a computer cursor. Voila! The world’s “first cyborg,” the scientist subsequently using himself as a guinea pig for one of his experiments and I don’t think it went well. “The joy of a job makes a boy say wow,” the scientist had repeated over and over aloud while recording his brain activity subsequent to one of his operations. The sentence had haunted me, for a long while, and I’d found myself repeating it to myself over and over again.

Wonderland was in Dickinson, North Dakota’s Theodore Roosevelt Regional Airport. “I’m thinking about, and finding myself arguing against, Guy Davenport’s idea that ‘every force evolves a form,’” she said, “or, more precisely, that a ‘work of art is a form that articulates forces, making them intelligible,’ since a work of art is also a form that articulates forms, as well as a force that articulates forms and forces, making them, yes, intelligible, but also sometimes unintelligible, since form can be understood as both an object and in its transitive sense.” I couldn’t follow her and I told her as much.

My face itched. Where my eyebrows once were, more precisely. The top of my head, too, all around it, actually. I ran a hand over the stubble. Felt like sandpaper. What grade? Closer to fine than coarse.

I called Titus, my younger son, first. It rang a few times, and I expected it to go to voicemail. Just as I was about to hang up, he said, “Been a while,” his voice distant, the miles between us hardening into something you could feel.

“A long time, yes,” I said. I could see him, the scar on his chin he’d received while playing leapfrog as a child with his brother.

“Must be important,” he said.

“Bad blood.”

“Between us?”

“Inside me.” I told him about the illness, how I wasn’t getting better, that “prospects look bleak.”

“Prospects? That’s funny,” he said, laughing.

“What?” There’s another one, a scar, on his knee, from when he’d slid across ice and landed on some glass.

“So detached,” he said. “Are you dying?”

“We’re all dying.” I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything.

“That’s it?”

“I want to make things right.” Stupid, stupid, stupid.

“I can’t do this,” he said.

“I just thought you should know.” There’s the shriveled blotch above his right ankle, scar tissue from a motorcycle’s hot muffler.

“I can’t do this,” he said. “You can’t make me the caretaker of your emotions. I won’t take on that burden.”

“I’m sorry.” Oil stains dot his left hand.

“See? That’s what I’m talking about. I’m not taking on your guilt, or offering you a way out.”

“Okay,” I said, to say something.

“I’m hanging up now.” And he did.

Sometimes the day is too much to bear, not feels like, not seems like, but simply and not so simply *is*, that “too much” the very definition of what you, paradoxically, can carry, and carry it you must, even as it crushes you.

Marcus, my other son, had made a mint manufacturing manikins. He'd come up with an astounding idea: a series of manikins covering the entire range of the body mass index: gaunt, average, overweight, obese, morbidly obese. There were dwarves and giants, stringbeans and beefcakes, amazons and butterballs. Considering how the call to Titus went, I chickened out of calling Marcus.

“The joy of a job makes a boy say wow.” Yes, that sentence had haunted me for years. My obsession with it had something to do with my working in a job I long hated, a job I had never loved, and with my wife's death. I quit soon after she'd killed herself; and thus began “The Lost Years,” the decade-long drift from place to place, job to job. After enrolling—abandoning?—my sons in boarding school, I disappeared, intermittently appearing at special events, like Family Day, and for their graduations from middle school and high school, where I'd made various promises to them, most of which I had subsequently broken by disappearing over and over again. Ten years later, I'd made a life for myself, such as it is.

The sentence. A death sentence. All sentences are death sentences. I couldn't have made that up. It was something I'd probably learned from Wonderland. Whether statement, question, exclamation, or command, there's always termination. “The joy of a job makes a boy say wow. The joy of a job makes a boy say wow.” Not sure where I'd first heard or read that sentence but it was definitely before I'd read about the scientist. Made me think of the sentence Jack's sentence in *The Shining*: “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” I love the moment where Shelley Duvall's character discovers Jack Nicholson's Jack's been obsessively typing the sentence, over and over again. I love the different forms the sentences eventually take on page. It's like word art. I wonder who actually typed out all those pages. Ingenious!

Speaking of Wonderland, she texted me from JFK, saying, “Done with being in limbo.” “What's next?” I responded. “Back to akimbo,” she texted. Ping! “The word making up the last

three letters of the word ‘bureaucrat’ is critical to understanding its meaning.” Not one of V’s best but the day wasn’t complete without one of his “interruptions.” Harold posted: “I watched an hour of celebrity meltdown videos and now I feel so much better about myself.” “Schadenfreude therapy,” Stevie responded. America: where people confuse stasis and regress with progress. “Stay gray!” Millie commented on Georgia’s post saying she couldn’t wait until her hair grew out so she could die it pink again. “How about I do what I want with my hair?” Georgia responded.

I called Angelica. “I had a good day today,” she said. “That’s good,” I said. “Actually, no it isn’t,” she said. “I don’t understand,” I said. “Don’t you see?” she said. “I was having a good day, because it’s Shark Week, and I watched the first episode, and then, while I was watching an episode of *Not for Everyone*, I went to the kitchen for something cold and sweet, and then I saw a photo of her, of Kestrel, on my fridge, and her gap-toothed—” She was bawling now. “Her...her...gap-toothed...smile...and I was...reaching for...for the fucking...freezer door...I wanted ice cream...fucking ice cream!” “I’m so sorry,” I said. “Sorry?” she said. “What are you sorry for? I’m the one who’s sorry!” I listened, held the space for her, what else could I do? “I felt so guilty for feeling happy, and it made me sick to even look at the ice cream, so then I threw all the ice cream away.” She told me that the driver of Kestrel’s school bus had been putting a bouquet of flowers on her seat every day to keep any of the other kids from sitting on her seat. They probably didn’t want to sit there anyway. Everyone was devastated. Guted. I was devastated, and I hardly knew her. Life’s a killer.

Andrew Hill had cried during the recording of “Dedication,” or so the story goes. The angular composition was originally titled “Cadaver.” There’s a certain melancholy to the piece, offset by Eric Dolphy’s astonishing solo on the bass clarinet, which features his characteristic swoops toward much higher registers.

**09.18**

America: a country where a late parent will drive their car in front of their child's already-departing school bus, forcing said school bus to stop, so that their child may board the now stopped school bus. "We found this memory and hope you enjoy looking back," my machine said, accompanying a photo of V and me, from twenty years ago. I looked terrible, the scruff around my neck more dead animal than beard, V wide-eyed, a bright smile blazing beneath his impressive Zapata mustache. Max posted: "The problem isn't that people use 'four-letter' words; the problem is that there aren't enough of them."

Having scheduled workers to repair my living room walls, I left the apartment, deliberately leaving my machine behind. It was one of the last days of summer, likely one of the year's last hot days. I saw an American flag protruding out from the side of a store, red faded to pink, white and blue to varying shades of gray. I took a photo of it and posted it on Fakebook as "Saddest Flag in the World." With the beach as my destination, I took a train, where I saw two "white" women scowl at each other after they simultaneously realized they were wearing the "same" dress. And one of them debarked and went to the next car at the next stop.

Walking where the ocean frothed on the sand, I saw a big "white" man yelling toward the ocean, which I turned toward and saw what I thought was a dog paddling toward him. Hearing the big man wolf-whistle confirmed the notion. Taking off his shirt, he jumped into the ocean, and I quickly realized it wasn't a dog in the water but a human bobbing in the water face down. I'd left my machine at home so I called out to people nearby to call 911. Realizing they didn't speak English, I shaped my hand into the international—I think—signal for telephone. A pregnant "white" woman bounced up from her blanket and handed her machine to me and I quickly dialed the emergency number. I quickly described what was happening to the operator and then the dispatcher, and I told them where we were. The dispatcher, dissatisfied with my description, kept

asking for an exact address, and I kept repeating to him that we were at Coney Island Beach, at the water's edge, and that I could see the Nathan's Famous restaurant on the boardwalk, and to send EMT to that place on the boardwalk, knowing they'd easily see us on the practically empty beach.

Meanwhile, the big man who'd jumped into the ocean was struggling to bring the person in, so another "white" man, the partner—I think—of the pregnant woman, jumped into the ocean to help. They successfully brought the person in, while a couple of us waved over a Parks Department pickup truck that was cutting across the beach. Parking the truck near us, the driver jumped out of the vehicle and proceeded to perform CPR on the man, yes, a man, a bedraggled "Latinx" man, likely tempest-tossed long before the ocean did its damage. The man's lips were blue, and he wasn't breathing, as far as I could tell. A short while later, brackish liquid foamed out of the man's mouth and nostrils, and then he softly moaned. He was still unresponsive, though.

After what seemed like forever, EMT finally arrived, exactly where I'd told the dispatcher to send them. I waved them toward us even though they had seen us and were already rushing over. Taking over, two of the medics put an oxygen mask on the man's face, while the other two questioned the four of us standing there. Other EMT workers arrived, and they attached plastic nodes on the man's chest and stomach, the nodes' wires affixed to this boxy contraption. I braced myself thinking they were going to electroshock him back into consciousness, but they didn't, instead registering and recording his vital signs.

EMT had everything under control when the cops arrived, all of them "white," each of them bossing everyone around, the non-EMT four of us standing on the beach, all of whom had somehow helped. One of the cops went through the man's things, which were on the sand. I warned the cop that the man's dentures—which the EMT workers had taken out—and the man's machine were wrapped inside the towel. "Yeah, yeah," he said, carelessly unwrapping the towel, whereupon the dentures fell on the sand, which startled him. "It don't bite!" one of the other cops said, the others

laughing at the first cop. Leaving the dentures on the sand, the first cop toyed with the man's machine, an old flip-phone with a large keypad, etc., this cop saying, "What is this, an iPhone Zero?" the other cops laughing. Their exchange was loud and obnoxious, expressed without a care for whomever might be listening, including those around who might be family and friends.

While all this was happening, the EMT workers strapped the bedraggled and moaning man into a stretcher and hoisted him into the pickup truck. And then they were gone.

Later, I scoured the internet to see if there was news about the almost-drowned man, but couldn't find anything about it. I saw an ad for *Shark Week*, a lot of them, actually, which made me think I was being surveilled far more closely than I thought. Predatory is what it is, the show. Americans, millions of them, watching, studying a fellow paradigmatic apex predator, you know, for tips.

## 09.19

I woke with a pain in my neck. I did some neck exercises, took some aspirin, massaged my neck as best I could. Made an appointment to see a masseuse. All the screens were ablaze with a certain face. Another dead celebrity. Or dead politician. I couldn't tell the difference anymore. People were talking about how they couldn't wait for the year to end, that it was taking away too many good people, leaving behind the dead. "What was wrong?" people kept asking. Wherefore the concern? I didn't get it. I'd be worried if people stopped dying. I thought of Play. I hadn't thought about him in days. And I felt terrible about it. There was something about the other dead person's face, though. I couldn't place it.

I was supposed to meet Geeta for lunch. "I've got a pain in my neck," I'd say to her. "*You* are a pain in the neck," she'd respond. "Better than a pain in the ass," I'd return. "Oh, you're that, too," she'd say. She picked up after the third ring. "Canceling?" she said. "Postponing," I said.

“Okay,” she said. “I’m so tired,” I said. “You’re grieving,” she said. “It takes time.” “It takes time?” “Yes.” “Time heals all wounds.” “Exactly.” “Time is nothing.” “It’s a cliché,” she said. “I’m sorry.” “I’m just so, I don’t know, tired.” “Take your time,” she said. I laughed. “What?” “It takes time,” I said. “Oh, right,” she said. “Let’s catch up soon.” “Sounds good,” I said, and we signed off. “We care about you,” my machine said, “and the memories you share here.”

Front desk called to say I had a delivery. It was a big box. And I’d no idea what was inside. Opening it, I grabbed one of the bubble-wrapped items inside it, ripped it open, and then dropped it once I realized what it was: the memorial edition action figure of Silvio Play. I felt cold, as if all the breath had been squeezed out of me. I stood there for a while, frozen in place, something like a doll myself, a manikin. Standing there, I saw Play, his movie star smile, his perfectly coiffed hair, his unreal build. Picking up the packaged figure again, I threw it back into the box, and then kicked it a few times toward one of the alcove’s walls. Blank texted: “RIP, JAMM.” The face on all the screens. Damn it all to hell. I keyed into my machine, which told me he’d been taking part in the peaceful protests in the occupied West Bank and along the Gaza Strip border and had been “accidentally” shot by an Israeli soldier.

A walk would make things lighter, and so I was outside, walking toward the café. Waiting in line, I saw a “white” woman walk to the front of the line for stirrers and straws and whatnot, ahead of two people waiting before her, both of whom were “people of color.” “You cut the line,” I said. “Really?” she said. “I didn’t realize,” she said, grabbing napkins, a plastic cup lid, and a cardboard cup sleeve, offering no apology, etc. She was wearing one of those old buttons with a capital “h” with a left-ward pointing arrow on it, and I couldn’t help thinking that, sure, she was, or at least had been, “with her,” but nevertheless “without them,” that is, “without us.” She didn’t “realize” because she didn’t see, she didn’t see because they/we were invisible to her, invisible to her because they/we were beneath her, etc. And yes, it may have been an “honest mistake,” a

“momentary lapse,” etc.—and, for all I know, she may be dying of cancer or mourning the death of a loved one, etc.—but I think it’s the day-to-day stuff, how you treat strangers, how you treat people you’ll likely never see again, how you treat people in the service industry, etc., that reveals who you are, i.e., that the micro always reveals the macro.

## 09.20

Come morning, I was listening to JAMM’s music, mourning. Mourning again. Ping! Zenith: “*Olam, Shana, Nefesh...*” Having no clue what these words meant, I looked them up. It was the Hebrew triad of world, time, soul. Such trios, like mind, body, and soul, usually bothered me as much as binaries but somehow these three words lined up together didn’t bother me. Francie despaired about online dating: “My problem is believing in potential human intimacy, while almost paralyzed by the tyranny of choice.” Some have suggested that the opposite of home is exile. I reject that notion, not just because it’s a facile binary, but because it ignores other zones, other places, like travel, flux, drift.

Kyrie, the masseuse, had hands of steel. She always greeted me with a handshake that felt like I was being gripped by a brick. “How’s life,” she said, her voice a round alto, Germanic. “Out of sight,” I said, stupidly, feebly. “And out of mind, I hope,” she said.

Back at the apartment, I dragged the box of action figures into the apartment. Took out the package I’d left half open. Breaking the plastic box open, I lifted the figure out, uncoiled the black wires fixing it to the cardboard that had an airbrushed photograph of a city street, skyscrapers looming in the background. There was a kind of circular beauty to the toy. Play had done everything he could to alter his body to look like an action figure, and here now was an action figure that was a miniature replica of Play. I laughed and laughed until I cried.

The door sounded, reminding me that the workers were starting the job today. I opened the door to two men, as dichotomous as Laurel and Hardy. “How this happen?” the burly one said, sweeping his granitic hands over the walls. “No comment,” I said, making him and the other man laugh. “Okay,” he said, “we start now,” turning to his colleague and launching into commands in a language—Slavic? Cyrillic?—I couldn’t understand. “Where are you from?” I said. “Brighton Beach,” he said, laughing. “I mean, originally, sorry,” I said. “Originally?” he said. “We are from Georgia.” “The whole day through,” I said. “I don’t understand,” he said. “The song?” I said. “Oh, yes, Ray Charles, I know it,” he said. “Different Georgia.” “Yeah.” “Very different,” he said, his eyes welling up. “Okay,” he said. “We start now,” explaining that they would leave and return shortly with tools and materials.

## 09.21

I was looking at the walls of my living room again. The Georgians had done a great job. After fixing the walls, they painted them, and so you couldn’t even tell anything had happened. Ping! Arturo: “Hey, bro. Where are you?” I hated being called “bro.” Made me think of jam band-groupie boys with neckbeards. Arturo had been periodically texting me after I returned from Miami. He kept saying he wanted to come back to the “Big City.” I texted back that I was home. Asked how he was doing. I hadn’t given him or my uncle much thought. I was surprised to hear from him. Usually people slip away once they discover they’re the ones who are always doing all the reaching out. Maybe he didn’t see it or maybe he didn’t care. “I’m coming over,” he texted back. His flight had arrived that morning. “I’m on a mission,” he said. Jonas, regarding the latest political debate, posted: “Yeah, it was a nothing burger.” Trevor Gunn, the curator of one of the galleries that show V’s work called, leaving a message saying he had a “proposition.” Thought it might have something to do with Harry’s sculptures. At least that’s what I was hoping. Max posted: “While

we're talking about this and that, the Marianas have been devastated by one of the strongest storms in history." The islands had been hit hard over and over again. The causes were clear and preventable. At what point will we confront the world's greatest existential threat to its existence? Never, the world an arguably inevitable suicide.

A couple of hours later, Arturo showed up at the apartment, "worse for wear"—I wasn't sure what that phrase meant but thought it had something to do with threadbare clothes. His hair was a matted mess, rug-like, and he was thin all around, gaunt really. I offered him a place to sit, but he waved me off. "Bro, like I said, I'm on a mission, and these feet were made for walking." He was pacing around, then kind of lightly springing back and forth, feline-like. Unzipping the knapsack he'd swung off his shoulders, he fished his hands in it, thrusting out a book and tossing it over to me. It was one of those blue autograph books you get at the end of elementary school, the pages folded into triangles so it looked like sharp teeth when you opened the book up. "Open it," he said. As soon as I opened it, he pounced toward me, snatched the book out of my hand and unfolded one of the sheets of paper. "'Dear Artie—'" he read aloud. "'Artie!' Can you believe that? Nobody calls me that anymore. Anyway—'Dear Artie, Have a great time in the Sunshine State! Look me up in the Empire State anytime!'" Arturo looked up at me, ecstatic. "Isn't that amazing?" he said, snapping the book shut. "And you know what, I believe him, so that's why I'm here. I'm going to find Alex Alexopoulos," he said, stuffing the book back into his backpack. Shaking my hand, then hugging me, he said, "I'm off!" And he left the apartment.

Arturo called me later, and left a voicemail, saying he'd found Alex Alexopoulos, that they'd met for coffee, that he'd ended up in A.A.—"Just like his initials!"—and had been fifteen years sober. Arturo wanted to meet me later for dinner. "Can't do dinner tonight," I texted him. "How about lunch tomorrow?" he texted back. I didn't want to see him. He was too much for me. He was a

black hole sucking me toward him, and there were too many other black holes around me, like the sinkholes, which I'd lost track of. Anyway, I had to put a stopper to it. He was likely to end up on my doorstep so I agreed to meet with him.

It wasn't that time was flying but that I was flying past time. "Move fast and destroy things," they said. I spent the next hour disabling all my social media accounts.

## 09.22

Morning, the machines woke me up. Lying in bed, my head pillow-propped, I scanned the surround, my smart apartment, and I felt dumb. I spent the next hour enabling all my social media accounts. Bangladesh was underwater again. "We're glad you're getting support from your friends," my machine said, "and hope this has made the world feel a little closer." Max posted: "It's always a case of mistaken identity." Arturo had insisted on eating at Mi Isla. "Comidas Criollas, bro," he texted. He was already at the restaurant when I arrived. He was drinking a milkshake. "What's up, bro?" His was a vice-grip embrace. I was taller and heftier but he was definitely stronger. "Ready for some soul food?" he said. "Something like that," I said, taking my seat.

"Man, I had a crazy day," Arturo said, launching into a story as I scanned the menu, even though I knew what I wanted. "I was telling you about Alex Alexopolous, right?" I nodded, beckoning the waiter over. "He's a mechanic, and bro, I thought *I* was fucked up, but him, damn, you should see his face, all cracks and crevices, like one of his wrecks." "Arroz con gandules y chuletas fritas," I said to the waiter. Few delicacies in the world as satisfying as a perfectly prepared plate of arroz con gandules, which means "delicious" in Spanish. My father used to make it for us all the time, the key to this rice and green pigeon peas dish is its sofrito, a powerful base of bell peppers, plum tomatoes, onions, black pepper, salt, garlic, and cilantro. "And a Corona," I added.

It was the best they had. “He took me over to his shop,” Arturo said, “where we talked shop.” He laughed, and I laughed, too, feeling like I was being hit by ocean waves. Better to just ride the waves. “Married. Two kids. Divorced. Like you, bro, except his ex is still alive.” He paused, trying to gauge my reaction. “Sorry,” he said. “For what?” I said. “You know.” “Thanks,” I said. “I’m okay.” “No one’s ever okay after something like that.” “No,” I said. “But no one’s okay after life.” He laughed and I laughed.

He went to the restroom, and I took out my machine. I had hundreds of tabs open on my browser. I picked one at random. It was about a poet who wished to retreat from the “pale flickering” of the day to day toward exploring the “dark deep and absolutely clear” phenomenon of the outside world. In contrast, it was the pale flickering of the screen that captured my attention. “You’re always on that thing,” Arturo said, returning. “I need to be on this thing,” I said. “A need isn’t something you make up,” he said. He was right. ““All the untidy activity continues,”” I said, quoting the poet, ““awful but cheerful,”” placing my machine on the table. I ate my dinner with what you might call decadent reverence.

Later, back at the apartment, I returned Gunn’s call. “This isn’t about V,” he said, right away. “About Harry’s sculptures?” “What?” he said. Oh, no, it’s about you.” “What?” “I’ve been following your series.” “Series?” “Of saddest things,” he said, and I burst out laughing. “What? They’re great.” “There’s no there there,” I said. He said something about the “thinginess” of things, about each of the object’s “thisness,” their “whatness.” “Speaking of ‘what,’” I said, “what the fuck?” “I want to show them,” he said. “We need more of them, though.” “More?” “More of the objects.” “I don’t know,” I said. “Saddest plant. Saddest tree.” “Um...” “Think about it,” he said. “I don’t know.” “Just think about it,” he said, and we signed off. Moments later, I received a call from my parents and I answered. “Are you okay?” my mother asked. “Okay?” “Something like

that,” I said. “We’re here for you,” she said. “I know,” I said. “You hear about that writer?” my father said. “Famous writer. Major prizes. Now disgraced.” “Hadn’t heard, no.” “All kinds of accusations. Sexual misconduct. Abuse.” “*Alleged*,” my mother said. “Nothing’s been proven.” “Doesn’t matter,” my father said. “Fifty accusers. She’s done.” “She?” “She, yes,” he said. “This is still America,” my mother said, her words overlapping with his. “Exactly. Where you’re guilty if enough people accuse you of something.” “Guilty till proven innocent,” I said. “Right.” Took out my machine to check. Can we talk about something else?” I said. “Anything you want,” they both said, making us all laugh. “Just tell me how you’re doing, what you’ve been doing, the latest about the cats and the dogs and the neighbors or whatever.”

### 09.23

POTUS bombed the airfields of another of the totalitarians the U.S. government had groomed in the first place. Press secretary said it was to “send a message.” The message to me was clear: A war is the perfect way to stay in office. *Wag the Dog*, etc. She may have broken a glass ceiling but she’d also broken many promises, and her approval ratings were continually dropping. “Her *disapproval* rating is the proper measure,” Erica posted. “Pizza Rat is my spirit animal,” Max posted, and no one reacted. Too many strange videos ago, I guess. “Mine is the Don’s comb-over,” Ravi commented. I shuddered thinking about how the orange menace had managed to stretch his fifteen minutes into not only two terms as president but as host of *Real News*, a popular late night theater of the absurd where he continued to spew his venomous ignorance, hate, and stupidity. Jessie “drunk bought a pocket-size ‘Simple Suture Kit w/ Wounds.’”

Waiting in line to order an egg and cheese at a local Palestinian-owned deli, I heard another customer ask why her sandwich was taking so long to be made. The cook burst out saying, “You said three times before. You see I’m alone. I’m not machine. I’m the human. I’m the human.”

Flustered, the tallow-haired “white” woman walked out, her bag emblazoned with two vertical light-blue rectangles, a red arrow crossing the middle of them. Not with *her*, I thought. I told the cook I was with him, that the woman had no right to harass him, that he deserved respect. We chatted about related things for a bit while he made my sandwich. He had come from Palestine ten years ago, Gaza specifically. He grew up in an orphanage, and one day, when he was a little boy of six, he found a magazine in a garbage can. Flipping through it, he found a picture of the New York City skyline, and he thought he was looking at a dream of the future. Remembering, he was the picture of ecstasy, which made sense. Always “coming,” the future is libidinal. After discovering it was a real place, he immediately wanted to come to America, to live in New York City. “My dream,” he said, pointing to the ground. “Where are you from?” he asked. “Here,” I said. “New York City, born and raised.” “Not from Middle East?” “No,” I said, “I always look like I’m from somewhere else.” “Another life then,” he said, and laughed, and I laughed, too. “No charge,” he said, handing me my sandwich. Thanking him, I left.

I was thinking about Gunn’s call, trying to forget about it, because I knew that if I thought about it, then whatever it was the photographs had would be lost. They had no purpose, and once they had a purpose, they would vanish, that is, they would still be there but I wouldn’t be able to see them anymore. Who was it that said you couldn’t see things unless there was a frame around it? Whoever it was was wrong. The frame keeps you from seeing the thing as it is, whatever that is, that is.

## 09.24

Overheard: “Stop arguing with me!” she said. “I’m on your side.” “Side?” she said. “What, am I a box now?” “Ha ha. And I bet if I said I have your back you’ll say, ‘What about the rest of me?’” And they both laughed.

Had a conference call with the executors of Play's estate. Set up logistics for a meeting with them, for the end of October. Jorge posted: "Last night at a bar, a woman offered me unsolicited advice about proper skin care when out in the sun. She mentioned zinc oxide about fifteen times in as many minutes. She only referred to her 'aesthetician' three times, though." Max responded: "Last night at a bar, a young drunk from South Korea, who was wearing zebra-striped shorts, told me I was 'awesome,' and then asked what I do, and when I told him I'm a musician, he asked, 'Are you famous?' I gave him the obvious answer, and he said, 'Do you believe you will be?' And I gave him the obvious answer, and he said, 'You're going to be famous, you just have to believe it.' He came back a few minutes later, saying, 'Because you're awesome.'"

Arturo called but I didn't answer. He left a voicemail, saying he was walking back to his hotel, on a picturesque line of streets in Queens, and came upon a block canopied by low hanging trees, where he saw "mother-of-pearl moonlight" shining through the shadowy overhanging, and that, "for a moment, an ever so momentary moment," he felt happy, that fleeting feeling of what it might actually mean to be "present," an otherwise ultimately unapprehensible, and thus impossible, state. "Thanks for being there for me, bro," he said, seriously, saying he was heading back home in the morning. Funny how my cousin characterized my not being there as being there. It was a philosophical conundrum I couldn't quite figure out. To not be is to be, or something.

Sometimes life is the bearable darkness of becoming.

## 09.25

Shortly after I'd arrived in the park, I sat next to an obese, purple velvet cape-wearing "white" woman, who said, "Please tell me you're not wearing cologne or essential oils." I said, "I'm not wearing cologne or essential oils." "Are you trying to be funny?" she said. "No," I said. "Would you like for me to be?" "I'll have to get up if you've used some smelly shampoo or something." I

laughed. She looked at me, saw my shining bald head and laughed, too. After a few minutes, she said, “I hope they turn up the a/c,” which made me laugh, the sun’s heat weighing heavily on us. “I hope they turn up the AC/DC,” I said, which received no response. Then a “biracial” couple stood beside us, and fired up their cigarettes. The woman immediately asked them to move away, calling them “fuckshits,” under her breath, the contortions necessary to actually live up to the insult were a wonder to think about. Following these “events,” a number of people—who were garbed in hooded cloaks, capes, or cowls, or some faux-Victorian something or other, some of their faces veiled by lace—pranced by, singing “Yes! We Have No Bananas.” The day could only go downhill from there.

## 09.26

I walked back from the park. The sky was a yellow rind. Chirping. Machine or bird? Keeping your story straight doesn’t mean you’ve told the truth. “Excuse me, sir,” a “white” man said to me, pointing to a front yard, where I saw two lawn chairs, and then something moving behind them, a bird, a very large bird, a red-tailed hawk, pecking away at a pile of feathers, a pigeon, the remains of it anyway. “I’m a teacher,” the man said. “I hope it wasn’t one of my students.” He laughed. The hawk was marvelous. “Feast your eyes on that!” the man said. I wished he would shut up. “Nice to see some wildlife around here,” a “white” woman said. “Wildlife?” the man said. “Go to Bed Stuy, you’ll see some wildlife!” He laughed. “That’s not funny?” “Not funny? It’s hilarious.” “No,” she said. “It’s racist.” “Racist?” he said. “It’s not racist, it’s funny?” “You shouldn’t joke like that!” “Like what? I’m not racist. I’m black.” “You’re not black.” “Not black?” he said. “Who are you to tell me? I’m black.” “You shouldn’t joke like that!” “Like what? I’m black and you’re telling me I’m not black. Now who’s the racist, lady?” He laughed, waving over a “white” man slowly biking past. “Red-tailed hawk,” he said. “I hope it wasn’t one of my students.”

Angelica called. “It resonates for me,” she said. She had been talking about past life regression therapy, how it was helping her with her grief. “Our lives just don’t end,” she said. “We keep going, in another form.” She explained how she had been guided through her various “priors,” how she was carrying them with her, day by day, hour by hour. “They all died, though,” I said. “Yes,” she said. “So you’re carrying their deaths, too?” “Yes,” she said. “Which isn’t as sad as it sounds.” “Sounds very sad to me.” Silence, save an industrial hum. “Can’t you be happy for me?” she said, finally. “I’m happy for you.” “Kestrel’s out there,” she said. “She’s still out there?” I said. “Yes,” she said. “Alive in some other form.” “When does it end?” “I’m not sure it does.” We were quiet for a while. “Look,” she said, “it may not be true but it feels true, like a story, like a really good story, you know?”

## **09.27**

Last night, late evening, City Hall Park disappeared. They said it was a terrorist attack. Color-coded alerts were in effect. They said to breathe and stay calm. First responders and law enforcement were addressing the situation to ensure people were safe. After the dust cleared, literally, though, reports came in about how the downtown spot’s grassy lawns had been swallowed by a giant sinkhole, a massive maw rivaling the sinkholes of Daisetta, Texas; Bowling Green, Kentucky; Guatemala City; South Florida; and Venezuela’s Sarisarinama holes. Not a single person was hurt, they said. I doubted that, since there would likely have been some homeless people sleeping in the park. The Invisibles. Maybe they closed the park every night, though. The footage was uncanny, though, and beautiful, actually. Would make a great tourist attraction. “Developers” were already working on it, I’m sure.

I sat in the kitchen, gazing out the window, the sky a slate slab threatening rain. “Tell the news, not the weather,” a writing teacher once said to me. But what if the weather is the news? And what is life but a series of atmospheric disturbances?

I had to get out of the apartment, so I gathered my things, including my laptop, and headed out to a nearby café in order to work, or at the very least to not hear myself think. They were playing Aretha Franklin at the café when I arrived. Soon after, though, they played Sade, and it unnerved me. Longtime fan of her music, I’ve nevertheless never seen her perform, alas, but I once took a music anthropology class, where a fellow student—a statuesque “black” woman, who never spoke in class but who kind of spectacularly glowed—chose a selection of Sade’s songs as the soundtrack for her performance essay, where she narrated how as a little girl she’d witnessed her mother being shot to death by her boyfriend. I remember being utterly stunned, by the horror, by her intense beauty, by the contrast between the two, by the darkness that engulfed the room, in feeling, yes, but seemingly in sight, too, and her equanimity that may or may not have been a kind of architecture of denial I couldn’t even begin to understand then and can still barely fathom now. I can’t listen to Sade without remembering that woman and her story. My stomach clenched. I couldn’t listen anymore. “Upbringing?” a “white” man said, the “black”-“white” “biracial” woman across from him frowning, her arms crossed. “More like downbrining,” he continued, making her laugh. Thinking I’d laugh about it later, I gathered my things and left the café.

Back at the apartment, I searched for information about past life regression therapy, trying to be open-minded without letting my brain leak out.

## **09.28**

“A perfect circle.” They kept saying it. “It’s a perfect circle,” describing the City Hall Park sinkhole. It added to the mystery, and increased my dread. They had a civic engineer on the news,

talking about why sinkholes tend to be circular, as opposed to squarish or some random shape or whatever. She talked about nature- versus human-caused collapses. “What about supernatural causes?” the “white” talking head asked. They laughed. Words flew by. Erosion. Abrasion. Scour. Void. Karst. Solubility. Groundwater. Subsurface. Complex failure modes. And then, a public service announcement about the perils of drunk driving, where a drab, long-faced “white” doctor said, “The only thing worse than waking up to my face in the morning is not waking up at all.” And I turned the screen off.

“Surfing the internet”—do people say that anymore? I never warmed to the phrase anyway, keying into a machine nothing like riding waves. In any case, I was online, but when wasn’t I? Erik Johansson’s *Mind Your Step* is an amazing piece of public art. It’s a transformation of Sergels torg, the most central public square in Stockholm, Sweden. In it, he creates the illusion of a sinkhole.

Leaving the apartment, I walked toward the restaurant, where I’d meet Angelica for dinner. I saw a “white” man throw an empty soda can toward mouth of trash can and miss his target. Walking toward him, I looked at the soda can and I looked at him and I said nothing. “What?” he said. Walking toward him, I said nothing, watching to see if he’d resume his game of throwing a soda can into a trash can and leaving said soda can on the sidewalk after missing his presumed target. “What?” the man said, and I said nothing, still walking away. “What?” he said, and I said nothing, finally turning the corner. “Thought so,” the man said, making me laugh. Urban guerilla warfare, at its finest.

Twenty-minutes or so later, Angelica and I were sitting at Julia’s, a lovely pan-“Latinx” hole-in-the-wall. I was plowing through a large plate of empanadas, my favorite kind, a piping hot concoction of pesto, tomatoes, and mozzarella. “I think you should try it,” Angelica said, forking into her mofongo. We had been talking about past life regression therapy again. “It’s not for me,”

I said. "I'm not a believer." "You do it at the movies," she said. "What?" "Suspend your disbelief." "That's different." "It's just an experience," she said. That word again: "experience." The float guy floated to mind. "Something different," Angelica said. "Something different." "Out of your comfort zone." "I don't have one," I said. "I'm *all* discomfort. One big discomfort zone." She laughed, and I took another bite.

Later, back in my apartment, I asked Angelica if she wanted something to drink. "What do you have?" "Red, white, brown, or clear?" "Red." I opened up a Cab, and poured two glasses till they were half-full. I brought over the glasses. Clinking her glass, I said, "To all those who wish they were us!" She laughed, sipped from her glass, placed it down on the table, grabbed my glass, and placed it on the table, grabbed my hands and hugged me and gripped me tightly, and I could feel her shaking, and then she pushed me, roughly, toward a wall, where she grinded her pelvis against mine, and I could feel her bones, her body still shaking, and then she was on her knees, unclasping her shoes and kicking them off and away, whereupon she unbuckled my belt, tore my pants and boxers down, grabbed my warhead-hard penis, pumped and squeezed it, throttled it, really, then put it in her mouth, practically gagging herself, her saliva dripping all over it, dribbling down her chin, and then she was up on her feet again, lifting her dress over her head, sliding the straps of her bra down her shoulders, thrusting her arms back to unclasp it, her slightly saggy breasts falling out, and then she grabbed me again, pushed me into the bedroom, and pushed me backward onto the bed, where she went at my penis again, with one hand and then both hands and then her mouth, and then she climbed on top of me, grabbed my penis again, slid it into her vagina, which was so wet and soft I could barely feel my penis thrusting inside it, but I could feel her pelvic bones, their sharp ridges cutting into my pelvis with each of her thrusts, and she was pounding, pounding away at me, her ass slapping wetly against my legs. She fucked me as if there were something trying to break outside of her skin and the only way for it to come out was if she

smashed her body against mine, scratched and bit and pushed and pulled and slapped and kicked. She was crying and I bent forward while she pummeled me, slowing her just a bit, and I grabbed her by the nape, brought her forehead against mine, her sweat mingling with mine, her hair getting in my mouth, spilling onto my face and neck and shoulders, and I was kissing her face, her tears so much salt on my lips, in my mouth, and then she was screaming and I was screaming, and I could feel her shaking again, shuddering, whereupon she pulled her body off mine, threw her body onto the bed, wet and spent. Sweat-drenched, exhausted, we laid there, in the semi-darkness, silent and quivering, the fingertips of my left hand barely touching the fingertips of her right, silent save for our deep breathings in and out, in and out, in and out, in and out.

“Do you believe in god?” Angelica said, finally. “Yes,” I said. “You do?” “Of course they exist,” I said, “each one performing ‘wonders’—making something out of nothing, mountains out of molehills, resurrecting the dead, etc.” “Come on!” she said. “Be serious!” “Okay,” I said, “then, no.” “Did you ever?” “Yes,” I said, after thinking for some moments. “When I was a kid.” “What happened?” “Life happened.” “How did you lose your faith?” “I got smarter.” “Something must have happened.” “Anyway, I didn’t lose my faith. I just stopped believing in God.” “I don’t understand.” “Faith is the will to live in spite of everything fighting against it.” “Suspension of disbelief?” I laughed, and she laughed. I told her about Russell’s teapot and the Invisible Pink Unicorn. “Here’s one I came up with,” I said. “One day, POTUS says Canada has developed an intercontinental ballistic missile that’s invisible and that our radar can’t detect it, and that they intend to launch them at us and we need to preemptively strike their launch facilities before they attack.” “It’s not the same thing,” Angelica said. “No, but it’s analogous.” I went on: “Congress members from the opposing party challenge her, saying, ‘There’s no scientific evidence for it. We can’t go to war based on your belief that it’s there.’ Etcetera.”

**09.29**

I'd heard about the event online. My son's show. Bree had been pestering me about it for weeks, but it was only at the last minute I decided to go. It was a major coup for him. Saks Fifth Avenue, one of the most coveted window displays in the city. I wasn't sure how it would all play out anyway. I was nervous, my stomach the most elaborate of knots. Alpine butterfly bend. Anchor hitch. Bowline on a bight. Heaving line knot. Trucker's hitch. Round turn and two half hitches. Zeppelin bend. All of the above. Would I talk to him? When was the last time we spoke? I couldn't remember.

There was a large crowd when I arrived. Many people were "decked out," as they used to say. Looked like a fashion runway. Women in glimmering gowns and spiky heels, their hair perfectly coiffed. Men in suits, mainly, here and there someone wearing a more adventurous outfit. Overheard: another person saying, "Just saying," and well, it finally happened: my brain reached its capacity of hearing people say it and had, as a result, burst, gray matter pouring out of my ears and down my neck, like wet concrete down a mixer trough. I looked for my sons.

All fourteen windows were a wonder, each one a diorama of post-apocalyptic scenes. One featured three people sitting in a half-circle, gazing blankly at a skinned dog turning on a spit. Another featured a girl and boy playing with headless dolls underneath an overpass or something. I kept an eye out for my sons.

Music played from huge speakers. Orchestral. Epic. Ernest Bloch's *Concerto Grosso, No. 1*, my machine told me. "Hi, Dad." It was Titus. "Good you made it," he said. "Glad I'm here," I said, my eyes glassing up, surprising him, and me. "Seen Marcus?" I said. "Not yet," he said. "Should be here soon." Marcus had collaborated with a rising designer on the manikins' outfits, retro-future affairs, sufficiently roughened, though. "He doesn't want to see you, you know," Titus said. "I know," I said. "I don't want to see me either." He laughed. It was good to hear him laugh.

We walked past each of the windows together, neither of us saying much. “He’s so talented,” I said. “To say the least,” he said. “I’m good for that,” I said. He laughed. Always leave them laughing, right?

A stretch limo arrived, parking in front of the main entrance. “Stay here,” Titus said. “I’ll go talk to him,” I watched as he waded through the crowd. Saw him greet Marcus, who embraced him. They talked for a minute and then Titus pointed toward me. Marcus looked at me, scrutinized me, really, and then turned away, saying something to Titus. They talked for a bit, and then embraced again shortly afterward. The buzz of a helicopter overhead. The news? The police? It was heading downtown, toward where City Hall Park used to be. “He doesn’t want to see you,” Titus said again. “I know,” I said again. “It’s good you’re here, though,” he said. “He’ll think so, too, even if he won’t admit it.” I nodded my head, saying nothing. “Good to see you, Dad,” he said, after a while. “Good to see you, son,” I said, shooting out my hand, which he grabbed, and then he embraced me, surprising me, and himself, I think.

I emailed Marcus later to tell him how much I enjoyed the show. You do what you can do because what else can you do?

### **09.30**

Crawford called to tell me V was in custody again. It was only a matter of time, I thought. Surprisingly predictable, I thought. But I was mistaken. V hadn’t been arrested for one of his performance pieces, well, at least not for the ones he’d become infamous for. “They say he’s the Fake Terrorist,” Crawford said. “What?” I said. “All those duds?” “Made and installed them, yes,” she said. “Allegedly, I should say.” “Allegedly, right,” I said, and burst out laughing, I couldn’t help myself. “This isn’t funny,” she said. “Homeland Security took him into custody and they’re not allowing me to speak to him.” “Yet,” I said. “Yet,” she said, her “yet” sounding more like

“notwithstanding that,” which worried me. She explained that they hadn’t charged him and that it was possible they might designate him an “enemy combatant,” after which they could hold him indefinitely. “We need to alert the media,” I said. “That’s why I’m calling you,” she said. While details were still scant, she did know that the police had camera footage of the Fake Terrorist leaving one of the fake bombs at a train station.

I called and emailed everyone I knew. This would be at the top of the twenty-four hour news, trending everywhere by the time I was done. Finished, I took the train to the city, to Metropolitan Correctional Center, where V was “being held,” the phrase falsely implying care and generosity. They wouldn’t let me see V, so I walked over to City Hall Park, what used to be the park. It was blocked off, but you could see flatbed trucks and floodlight towers. Cranes and excavators and grappers. Goggled and gloved workers. Ogling tourists and residents. Dumpsters full of debris: brick and schist and gnarled metal and glacial riprap. The air full of invisible particulate matter you breathed in, tasted in your mouth.

There had been some talk of keeping the sinkhole intact, not filling it in, the beautiful aerial shots they kept showing encouraging such a notion. The government would never allow it, pride trumping greed in this case.

## **10.01**

City Hall Park Sinkhole notwithstanding, the news was afire with V’s arrest. I spent the afternoon fielding questions. Saying basically the same thing to each outlet, namely, that V neither denied nor confirmed allegations that he was the fake bomber. I’d met with Crawford earlier, to talk about the latest involving V. “Best to stay off phones for this,” she’d said. She’d finally been allowed to see V, who was in “good spirits,” V relaying to her how he’d been in his workspace reading, when law enforcement knocked down his door, batoned him down to the floor, handcuffed him, read

him his rights, etc., and brought him to the Correction Center, how he kept responding to every question with the same answer: “Lawyer.” The feds had managed to break into V’s machine even though he’d “bricked” it, his machine automatically deleting all his texts and apps once they gained access, though, so they ended up having to subpoena his cellular carrier and his preferred social media companies in order to retrieve his texts and posts, not to mention emails, photos, map data, contact lists, bank transactions, and online shopping purchase histories. “If you have nothing to hide, then why won’t you simply cooperate?” they’d said to V. ““Everybody’s got something to hide except me and my monkey,” he’d said. “Beatles,” he’d said, responding to their befuddled silence. ““Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety,” he’d said. “Ben Franklin.” And they laughed. “Yeah, I get it,” he’d said, laughing, too. ““So get up, get, get down! 911 is a joke in your town.”” Glaring back at them, he’d said, “Public Enemy.”

Crawford explained that once they’d gained access to V’s data they’d cross-reference his online social network with his texts, and his call and chat logs in order to determine who may have helped him, or have had knowledge of his actions. “So they might bring you in, too,” she said. “Impound your machine, etc.” “Let them,” I said. “Back up everything,” she said. “Already have,” I said, all my data always automatically backed up into “clouds.”

Public outcry over V’s arrest without charge forced the government to finally release footage of the Fake Terrorist. News outlets kept airing it over and over again—the familiar grainy capture of the closed circuit, of a hooded figure, a man, presumably, descending into the bowels of a train station, one of the so-called attack sites, with a suitcase, and then emerging about fifteen minutes later, sans suitcase, from the same station.

The talking heads invariably referred to *America #13*, the installation where a hooded V was filmed at different settings: ballgame, church, synagogue, mosque, beach. And just like the

footage purportedly of the Fake Terrorist, you never saw his face in any of the videos. They didn't talk about David Hammons's terrifying *In the Hood*, which hung from a wall like a hunting trophy, or Nehemiah Dixon III's haunting *Hoodie 1, 2 and 3*, these hovering absences pointing toward longstanding and pervasive state-sponsored violence against "black" and "brown" bodies. They also talked about V's recent series of performances, each newscaster a blowhard spewing nonsense about responsibility, that free speech didn't mean you had a right to yell fire in a crowded movie theater when there wasn't a fire, blah, blah, blah. Not a single intelligent thing said about terrorism, either, about how the Fake Terrorist's efforts interrogated how the word "terrorism" was used, or, rather, misused. It was, if anything, a war of words, a sustained attack against the rhetoric of the so-called War on Terrorism, initiated by a monkey of a President, then grossly intensified by a smooth operator of President, then simply sustained by a con artist of a President, all of whom had succeeded in largely dispensing with "meddlesome" checks and balances. Call it a war and anything is possible. Just ask Nixon.

I was concerned for V's safety. Crawford assured me that V was fine, sharing that he wanted to see me but wasn't permitted to see anyone outside of legal counsel at this point. The ACLU and the Center for Constitutional Rights were now involved in the case. I missed V's texts. I started collecting a number of the pithier ones in a file, unsure, exactly, what to do with them: "Goliaths necessitate Davids." "Your point is mood." "You might need to enlarge your palette in order to see someone's true colors." "Social media: where people confuse the right to an opinion with the necessity of sharing it." "Just because it's now doesn't make it new. Just because it's new doesn't make it necessary." "Sometimes you have to come to terms with terms." "What's the color of a person erased?" "Funny how losing faith can result in losing face." "Funny how you have to get up to get down." "Tend to the root, not the fruit." "Not wanting might get you what you need." "If ideas are property, then they are meant to be trespassed." "When it's their way or the highway,

better to hit the road toward higher ground.” “Funny how many people think that eloquence means social reform.” “Funny how many people shoot their mouths off when they talk about guns.” “Funny how most times someone has supposedly nailed something they’ve actually barely even pinned it.” “Some things are always the future.” “Nothing is ever said and done.”

I went to the market to pick up a few things. Walking down the juice aisle, I ran into Morgan, the lawyer. Her daughter stood beside her, staring marble-eyed at her machine.

## 10.02

Every day, I linked to the news, the local and global, rubbed my face in it, feeling defeated every day—Call it “Amerincholia”!—even as I signed petitions, wrote the occasional letter to some representative, gave money to some charity. I was a glutton for it, even as I thought I should turn it off, or least administer my drug in smaller doses, there I was, engorging myself on it all. “Never take know for an answer,” V had texted the day before yesterday, before he was arrested, of course. I was still thinking about what it meant. Lamont posted news about having a ‘dead bone’ in his wrist. What did that mean? I didn’t want to know what it meant. I knew, though, that the more I looked away the more I’d want to see it. I back-channeled him, saying I was sorry to hear. He said, “If it isn’t one thing, it’s another,” a sentence that always rang false to me, because what did it say anyway but the obvious? Perhaps that was the point. Max posted: “Looks like the day is going to be one weird thing after another for me, and I welcome it. A pregnant woman who was just staring at me here at the café where I’m sitting said, ‘I’m staring, right?’ ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I don’t know what it is,’ she said. ‘Your aura or something.’ ‘I get that a lot,’ I said. ‘Lame, but it was the best I could come up with at that moment. She laughed, though.”

How was Angelica? How was Geeta? How about Z? What about my sons? How were they filling their days? One of the screens showed footage of a dumpster that had been set on fire. Whoever had done it had first painted stars and stripes on it. Was this another part of V's *America* series? The newscaster on a screen was asking the same thing. All of V's known assistants were already being questioned. I called Morgan, who didn't know anything, and she advised me to say the same to the press. Was Homeland Security going to call me in, interrogate me about V?

I left the apartment and walked to the park, where I found a door, which had been laid flat on the ground in a copse of paper birch trees. White paint had been painted over a layer of red paint, some gouges in the door revealing blond wood. There was a frame around it. The silverish knob was ornately filigreed. I imagined it was a gateway to another, and probably better, world. I tried opening it. It was locked. Perfect.

Later, I met with Crawford again, at a café. "They're still not letting me into his studio," she said. "Or his apartment." "Not surprising," I said. She smiled, "V is always surprising." I laughed. "I got in anyway," she said. "What?" "In a way," she said, explaining how V had given her a link to a website, with requisite login and password. "Take a look," he'd said. Logging in, Crawford had discovered a grid showing live video captures of his studio and apartment. "They'll probably find the cameras so it all will likely go dark, soon," she said. "Before it does, V wants you to send the footage to all the news outlets." "Brilliant," I said. "Can I get in trouble for this?" "No," she said. "Not if you're careful," handing me a manila folder, which had—along with the website link, login, and password—written instructions on how to deliver the footage anonymously. "Fun," I said. "So you'll do it?" "Of course," I said. "Anything I can do to help." Standing up, she shook my hand, wished me luck, and left the bar.

### 10.03

If it's neither the time nor the place, when or where is it? "Something went wrong," my machine said. "We're working on getting this fixed as soon as we can. You may be able to try again."

Noticing a little "white" boy lifting himself by his arms in a grocery store cart, a short while ago, his back against the front of the cart, I ran over to the "white" guardian, saying, "Look!" and pointing at the boy. "I see him," she said. "He might fall," I said. "No, he won't," she said. She turned away and I walked back to the other checkout line. Moments later, I saw the boy fall backward over the back of the cart, his guardian catching him by one of his legs, crushing her body against his, quickly wrapping her arms around him as the two tumbled to the floor. The boy was shrieking as a "black" man and "Asian" woman helped him and the woman up to their feet. Shortly after, I saw the guardian place the boy back in the cart, in the seat this time. Clicking the seat belt shut, she looked at me and scowled. Disaster averted. There's that, at least. Wasn't this America, though, ignoring warnings, and then, after something bad happened, blaming someone else for it? I wanted to see the surveillance camera footage of it.

### 10.04

Trending: "Monks Arrive in NYC to Make Sand Mandala." Living at the Drikung Thil Monastery, a marvelous, centuries-old complex, the seven-monk delegation had flown from Lhasa, Tibet to New York City. The construction of the mandala would take four days. While they didn't explicitly say it, it was clear, at least to me, that the monks had come to address the proliferation of sinkholes in this infernal city, the holes likely symptoms of a heretofore undisclosed disease.

**10.05**

This morning, I woke from a dream, of which I remember nothing save the following line: “splinter off into my separate selves.” I thought of posting about it and then changed my mind. “Standing on a train platform in Manhattan this morning,” Michael posted. “I was approached by an earbud-wearing “white” woman—machine in hand—who said, ‘You know, it really is nice to see someone reading a book book. We’re all out here with our pad this and our pod that. But you know, when I want to read something, really read it, I grab me a book book.’ Laughing, she raised her empty hand to give me a high five. After I performed my part of the rite, she interlaced her fingers in mine, saying, ‘People like us got to stick together.’ Unlacing her fingers, she said, ‘You have a good day!’ And, you know what, from that moment on I did.” “Working on a poem called ‘I Wandered Lonely as a Crowd,’” Bella posted. Two hundred people responded. The Nobel Prize in Literature had been awarded to the first transgender woman, and social media portals were afire responding to a famous feminist, who’d posted: “And they still give it to a man!” Friends are sometimes the best enemies.

After breakfast, I listened to a podcast interview with Wonderland. “What gives you hope?” the interviewer asked. “Nothing,” she said. “Nothing?” “It’s a poorly formed question, isn’t it? Personifying what’s ultimately intangible. It’s a vector of passivity, not audacity, as famously alleged.” Made me think back to when I went to Sunday school, and heard the scripture about faith. It was one of the few verses that stuck with me, maybe because I actually believed it, that faith was the “substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” “What compels you to write?” the interviewer asked. ““The task of a writer is not to solve the problem but to state the problem directly,”” Wonderland responded. “So says Anton Chekhov. I would go further: the task of a writer is not to solve the problem or to merely state the problem directly, or even indirectly, but to make the problem, make problems, unsolvable ones at that.” She spoke about her novel-in-

progress, surprisingly enough: “One of the challenges I’ve had in writing this novel that I’ve been working on for about three years—and have almost finished a second draft of, I think—is apprehending it as a totality, something more ‘easily’ done with short fictions, which, because of their length, are almost like paintings or sculptures, in a way, that is, in the sense of being objects that you can, in a way, take a few steps away from and ‘see’ the entirety of, and thereby determine more or less what it needs, demands, etc. The manuscript’s over five hundred thousand words at this point, which makes it a bit unwieldy at times, but I think I’ve found something, a process, maybe, that helps me to more or less see the whole thing ‘at once,’ without having to hang up all the pages on the walls of my apartment, something I’m still very much considering doing. The process? Well, it came after recently timing how long it takes for me to read through the manuscript. Knowing it takes only about forty-five hours or so to read it, that I can read it every three days or so, each time registering what’s ‘missing,’ made me realize I can more or less have a better sense of it as a whole in a relatively short period, an act resembling taking a few steps away from a painting, sculpture, etc., in order to see it as a whole. Seems kind of obvious in retrospect, but realizing I could read it in about three sittings makes the task of seeing it as a whole much more actualizable.”

Five hundred thousand words? That wasn’t a novel but an encyclopedia! But who would publish it?

I watched the livestreaming of the monks, an aerial view that at this point showed two of them drawing the outline for the mandala. After finding the true center of the large gray square, they ran chalk along a long clear ruler to make a long horizontal line through the center, and then a long vertical line through the center again, and then a number of long lines cutting across diagonally, like spokes in a wheel, radials in a large star. Following this, the monks made seemingly innumerable bisecting lines, and then used a large wooden compass to make a series of

concentric circles rippling out from the center, linking perfectly with the many lines already made. Every so often, the monks would step away from the drawing, and you could see their shadows moving across it, see soft silhouettes of their arms sweeping across the surface, hear the monks whispering to each other, see them kneel on the drawing again, and resume their drafting of the outline, the chalk occasionally squeaking as it skated across the slate surface, which actually did in the end look like blade-scraped ice, the reverberating circle a looping rink, too. This was watching as meditation. Mesmerized, I was Chauncey Gardener in *Being There*—I, too, liked to watch.

## 10.06

It's something how much nothing can be and become.

“When white men start complaining how awards they ‘deserve’ are not going to other white men, you know they’re scared witless,” Joanna posted. “As they should,” Mags commented. Marcus texted me: “What do you want from me?” “I don’t want anything from you,” I responded. “Just want the best for you.” “I know what’s best for me,” he texted. “I know,” I texted. “Your show shows it. I loved it.” No response for a while, and then, “Thanks. Take care.” “Thanks, Marcus! Kudos!” I responded, and then, after pausing to consider and reconsider, texted, “Proud of you!” My exclamations marks repulsed me, the motivation for my using them somewhere between presumptuous and desperate. Marcus didn’t respond.

I watched the livestreaming of the monks. All seven of them were working on it now, two of them kneeling in the center, the others, also kneeling, arranged close to or outside the borders. Metal bowls filled with colored sand bubbled all around the mandala, white and red and black and yellow and blue and orange and green, all made from gypsum, charcoal, red sandstone, and clay

earth pigments. The monks filled these foot-long funnels—*chak-pur*, my machine said—with sand and used wooden or metal rods to scrape or tap along the ridges toward the point of it, precisely releasing the vivid granules onto the surface, each of the monks resembling pastry chefs decorating a large cake. I watched for hours, listening to the scritch, scritch, scritch of the rods, the monks' occasional whisperings, and registering their slow progress, marveling at their patience.

### 10.07

Turning off *Not for Everyone*—where one of the contestants was a woman whose home was filled with cryogenic capsules, where a menagerie of dead pets resided, among them a Labradoodle, Maine Coon, capybara, and bearded dragon—I watched the livestreaming of the monks. It was nearing the end of another seven-hour session, and more than half of the mandala was completed. A few of the monks were wearing surgical masks to keep them from blowing away the more elaborate of the details they were working on, their resemblance to surgeons oddly appropriate, for wasn't this whole process meant to be a form of healing, a kind of amulet to protect the city from further catastrophe? I watched the monks' slow and steady and almost indiscernible progress, listened to their mysterious sublunary sounds, until, their workday over, one after another, they stepped away from the mandala and the screen went abruptly black. Light and dark matter, in other words.

### 10.08

By some estimates over a hundred billion people have lived on this planet. Most of them are dead. Come to think of it, the world is a graveyard. Decay sounds horrible but if everybody that died didn't decompose and become absorbed into the earth, the planet would quickly be covered with the dead. What to call the phenomenon of thinking about something and then all of a sudden

coincidentally seeing it everywhere? I'd first experienced it, or at least consciously observed myself experiencing it, after finding out that my now deceased wife was pregnant. All of a sudden, I saw pregnant women everywhere. Whatever you call it, I experienced it again. Directly after thinking about the world as a graveyard, I chanced upon an article about one of the city's five boroughs having more people underground than aboveground. More than twice as many, actually. Reportedly visible from space, it's often referred to as the "Cemetery Belt." Over five million dead to the borough's two point three million alive. "Frequency illusion," my machine told me. A cognitive bias, apparently. I wondered how many others I suffered from. We'd lost the baby. She'd lost her mind. And I'd all the "alone time" I'd wanted.

I'd spent part of the morning posting from Play's various social media accounts, linking to fan tributes, to old interviews, etc. I found myself checking other profiles, of friends and family members who had passed, each one a memorial outpost, if you will. Over two billion people were on the main corporate media portal at this point and this didn't include the over seventy-five million people who were dead. They were calling it the "digital graveyard," the difference here being that everyone was preserved, that their data was preserved, but what's the difference. Most of the people I "knew" I didn't really know, what I knew about them limited to carefully curated presentations of themselves.

I found myself going to my uncle's page, Arturo's father always an enigma to me. He'd been in and out of psychiatry wards for as long as I could remember. His page was strange in that you couldn't really tell anything was ever wrong. He looked happy. Arturo and my aunt looked happy. And in this realm without air, sun, gravity, depth, or horizon, looking happy was being happy.

I watched the last few hours of the monks making the mandala. Millions of grains of sand had been used toward making the sacred cosmogram, which I read as a kind of colorful blueprint

of the world, in kismet with other works of art and architecture, like the medicine wheels of the North American Plains Nations, Plato's Magnesia, and Mandinat as-Salaam, al-Mansur's "city of peace." I couldn't actually read it, though, and almost wished there were some kind of voiceover narrating, James Earl Jones or Patrick Stewart or someone else, explaining the symbols, the purpose of the laborious process, revealing its deeper mysteries, but I was glad there wasn't since the ambient sounds, the scratching of the rods, the various shiftings of the monks bodies and their whisperings would have been drowned out.

## 10.09

It isn't so much the inanities of most cellphone conversations I hear in public that bother me as it is the volume at which they're expressed. Feeling like I'm going to have to start wearing noise-canceling headphones. Walking in the park, I discovered a small stone cube submerged in the dirt. There was a bronze arrow bas-reliefed on it. I didn't know what it was, but I was certain it was another clue that lead to nothing, nowhere, no thing, no where. I followed it, though, my suspicions in the end confirmed, the likely empty signifier an apt, what, echo, vestige, trace, of these uncertain days, where many pointed words are used to say and enact nothing much.

Cold and dark, it was the first real fall day. Most people were wearing jackets or sweaters, some wishful thinkers in t-shirts and shorts. Joggers killing themselves for that adrenaline—or was it endorphin, or was it both?—rush. This body, where we are all day every day, and what do we know about it? Decay—now this I knew something about, not only the skin crawling I'd been experiencing, which had ebbed over the past couple of days, but little aches and pains that never appeared before, and took longer to recover from. Two hundred people posted an article about how screen addicts, all of us, tap or swipe our screens about three thousand times a day. O the irony of posting it and commenting about it online. I didn't bother tapping on the link. I thought instead

about how we touch our faces two to three thousand times a day, well, at least I thought we still did, these black mirrors less an extension of ourselves but our selves, what was left of them anyway.

I watched the livestreaming of the mandala. The camera's distance had changed so it now showed a much larger view of the room, where you could now see spectators walking around the mandala from several feet away. It was still an aerial view, though, and you could see the mandala now, unobscured by the monks, complete, in full splendor, actually, vivid square within vivid square within vivid square, circle within circle within circle, an architectonics of mystery, of wonder—it was a clock, a compass, a portal, a wheel of fire, a machine of healing.

Moments later, you could hear bells tinkling, and then see the monks entering the space, each one having abandoned their modest robes for more elaborate garb, which included yellow hats, whose feathery crests resembled the Mohawk-like plumes of a centurion's helmet. Surrounding the mandala, they chanted for a long while, the crowd around them growing considerably larger. Once they stopped, one of the monks knelt on the ground close to the mandala and scraped a small metal rod from the perimeter to the center, producing a line that revealed the slate underneath. The other monks chanting again, this monk stood up, walked to the opposite side and repeated the process, repeating the process several times more until he produced an X on top of a cross. Following this, he dragged a three-inch paintbrush along the lines he just produced, blending the sand granules together, blurring the lines, I thought—between what, though, I wasn't sure. Past and present? Movement and stasis? Time and—what's the opposite of time? It looked like a wheel again now. Time heals all wounds, unless your time is up. Then the monk made a series of curved strokes with the brush, from the perimeter to the center, over and over again, all around the mandala. Now it looked like the wheel was spinning, a swirling ball of energy, of fire. The monk continued this process, brushing the sand from the perimeter to the center, revealing a

palimpsest of the ritual as a whole, sand piling up in the center, gray as ash. Done with the brush, the monk used a kind of shovel to scoop the sand into a jar. After he finished, the audience burst into applause, and so did I, tears streaming down my face. Blank wonder, raw fear and trembling. Had I found the ever elusive numinosum?

## 10.10

My life was like a bad teevee series, abysmally episodic, superficially tragicomic, like comedy shows these days. I was performing and nobody was watching, or, rather, I was watching myself perform, hour after sour hour, day after dismal day. Digitally “daydreaming,” I came across the Baltic Way, the peaceful demonstration at the end of the eighties where over two million people joined their hands to form a chain across the three Baltic states: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, constituent republics of the U.S.S.R. “You don’t know how lucky you are, boy.” The chain spanned over four hundred miles. It was an inspiring image, a unified effort I thought impossible in these disunited States.

Coincidentally, I saw a friend’s post about a peripatetic millennial, who, heretofore stumbling through his stunted thirties, had made a mint as a travel agent inspiring people to see America by rail. It was the image of the map that struck me. This-land-is-not-your-land with a relatively straight red line across its expanse connecting coasts. You could find the “soul” of this country in less than a week.

Bypassing the entrepreneur, I bought a multi-day rail pass, which would allow me to hop on and off the train as I pleased. Unsure of what I would do on the Left Coast after crossing this land is my land is your land of bilk and money, I only booked it one way. I’d leave tomorrow morning. Max posted: “I burned several hundred calories just assembling this exercise bike!” “I

fell in love with an algorithm,” Ellen posted, “and not (just) because it had a nice bot.” Jessie “drunk bought a ‘Han Solo in Carbonite Shower Curtain.’”

I thought about telling Bree about my trip, ostensibly to ask her to take care of my plants, but really, if I were being honest, to have someone know what I was doing, where I was going—to have someone miss me, in other words, and just as suddenly as the idea occurred to me I dismissed it, disgusted by the idea of it. *Star Wars* came to mind, too, and I was further disgusted, the insipid corporate space opera franchise having never appealed to me, to say the least.

I couldn't really read, not anything of depth, not anything in a book book, and I didn't want to talk to anybody, see anybody, so I stayed inside, engaged with the screens, the shiny flat surfaces, I called portals, but were really voids. Checking for news of the monks, I discovered they had taken the jar of mandala sand to Coney Island Beach, where they walked into the ocean and poured the sand into it, their robes swirling around them. They would be on a flight back to Lhasa, Tibet tomorrow. A short stay but who could blame them, I wanted out, too.

## 10.11

Funny how often getting ahead is just another way of falling behind. Beware lest the ground you think you've won is lost in the ground vanishing beneath your feet. I scoured the internet for news of sinkholes and found nothing. Maybe it worked, the monks' mandala. Max posted: “I misread the line ‘a bud bursts open’ in Yi Lu’s ‘March Pasture’ as ‘a bird busts open,’ the dark residue of the line staining my reading of the poem even though I’d immediately realized my mistake.”

“Somewhere public,” Marcus had texted. I asked him to suggest a place. So we met for lunch at Semiotix, an eighties-themed bar, in the Zone, one of the few neighborhood's untouched by the riots. Gray and rainy and cold, the day could only get brighter. One could hope, right?

“You look good,” I said, upon his arrival at the restaurant. He shrugged, his generation’s punctuation mark for everything. Wearing a bright red track suit and shell-toe sneakers, he fit right in with the décor: graffiti-painted walls and ceilings, neon lightning bolt light fixtures, *Pac-Man* and *Q\*bert* cabinets in a dark corner.

“I loved your show,” I said, the years peeling away, and suddenly he was a boy, magic marker marks all over him, paper after paper filled with superheroes and monsters.

“You said that, already,” he said. Where had the bright-eyed boy gone, the twelve-year-old I’d taken to Madison Square Garden to see his favorite band?

“Worth saying again,” I said. “Worth seeing again.”

He shrugged, again. Maroon 5: aural cotton candy, sweetness that dissolves soon after it appears.

“Proud of you,” I said, wondering if he still had the concert jersey.

“What do you want?”

“That’s a good question,” I said.

He shrugged.

Girls with Mustaches was on, surprisingly enough. “You like them?” I said. “They’re alright,” he said. “I have a friend who’s obsessed with them,” I said, which wasn’t exactly true, since it was really me who kept scrutinizing their lyrics, who was felled by them, really, that it was me who kept replaying their songs over and over in my head.

“So you’re sick,” Marcus said, after a while, the music especially abrasive. Made sense they were playing their music, actually, since it harked back to composers like Glenn Branca and Rhys Chatham, noise rock bands like Sonic Youth and Band of Susans.

I shrugged, unconsciously mirroring him, I guess. “I want to make things right,” I said.

“You can’t do that,” he said, making himself bigger. “You can’t just appear and do that.”

“I know,” I said. “But I want to try.” The conversation was going nowhere and I felt nauseated. I told him about the television shows I’d seen recently and he perked up. *Machina franca*? “Finally saw *The OA*,” I said. “Old show,” he said. “Yeah, guess I missed the whole renaissance in television thing, but I must admit that show is compellingly strange.” He surprised me by bringing up V. Made sense, though. V was an artist, a great one, so of course Marcus would be interested in what he was doing. “Razor’s edge,” he said. ““You can’t undo a beheading,”” I said. “Huh?” he said. I laugh-barked. “Sorry,” I said. “I was quoting V.” “He has lines for days,” he said. “That he does.” “He write them all?” he said. “All his, yeah.” “Hmm,” looking at me, looking in me, through me. I was water, I was glass, I was thin air. His machine sounded, simulated glass breaking. “Sorry,” he said, still looking at his screen. “Got to run,” pulling his wallet out. “I’m out,” we used to say. “I’m ghost,” we used to say. “I got this,” I said. “Alright,” he said, standing up. I stood up, too, thrusting out my hand, which he took and shook. Baby steps, etc.

Sitting in a café, I called Z, and she picked up, surprising me. “You’re there,” I said. “More or less,” she said. “How goes it?” I said. Silence. “Tell me what you’re doing,” she said. “I’m working at a café, where a woman near me periodically ‘musically’ licks her fingers. She doesn’t like that I glance at her every time she does this. I don’t say anything when she asks why I glance at her every time she periodically ‘musically’ licks her fingers.” Zenith laughed, faintly, weighed down. “I can’t do this,” she said, abruptly. “What’s ‘this’?” I said, standing up, walking away from where everyone was sitting. “Us,” she said. “Okay, take your time,” I said, standing by the exit. Silence and then a long sigh. “Goodbye, Ergo,” she said. “Wow,” I said. “That’s it?” Silence, and then another long sigh. “Just like that, huh?” I said, stupidly. “I’m letting you go,” she said. Eggshell

silence. “Okay,” I said. What else could I say? “Wish you all the best,” my signoff sounding as stupid as I felt.

Stunned, I walked back to my table, gathered my things, and left the café. Outside, the surround was less continuum than maelstrom of discrete, jagged parts. Searing sun. Roaring car. Man yapping into machine. Another roaring car. Blistering heat. Jabbering couple. Another man yapping into machine. Woman yapping into machine. Flip-flop slap on pavement. Kid on kick scooter. Food truck—I could barely look at it. “Today’s Specials! Veggie Tacos! Chicken Quesadillas! Baja Fish Tacos!” Everything in fragments. Light and color and shape and texture and size and weight. The heart shatters so you see it better, see what it’s made up of, see it’s all made up.

Back at the apartment, I turned everything off, all the screaming machines and screens. I took an egg out from the refrigerator, held it in my hand as I sat down, silence getting louder and louder, the living room slowly darkening, the egg “sweating” from the change in temperature. I knew the condensation didn’t actually come from the egg—relative humidity and all that. Silence congealed around me, the space a study in grayscale, the tone of the room going from platinum to ash to battleship to charcoal to black. An egg has a weight that’s difficult to describe. It shouldn’t weigh as much as it does. Is it the awareness of the shell’s fragility? I thumbed the egg’s sundry bumps, my hand likely affecting its “bloom,” the thin outermost coating shielding it against bacteria and dust. The naked eye can’t see it but the shell’s crystal-formed surface has thousands of pores. Sitting in darkness, I wept.

## **10.12**

Americans live in a perpetual present. I’d long needed to get out of that particular trap. Maybe this trip would help me. All the machines were off. My smart apartment was now dumb. Time to put

a mute button on the world. What the hell did I even mean by that? I stepped out for some coffee, which I quickly gulped down. Smoked a cigarette. I'd hardly slept the night before but I felt energized. Not just from the caffeine and nicotine but from the anticipation, the pre-travel jitters and whatnot. It was good to be feeling something.

Returning back to my apartment, I continued getting ready for my trip, packed my bag, a sleek piece of luggage, with seemingly innumerable compartments, enclosures, straps, zippers. It was early enough for it to make sense to take a taxi into the city, where I'd catch my train. I reserved a taxi with Luft. I thought of something V had posted: "Revolution? We can't even get people to stop using union busters like Luft." He was right, as usual. And words like "revolution," "progressive," "populist," "establishment," and "grassroots" were just some of the words that have been so stretched and diluted as to be rendered virtually meaningless during this farce of a presidential election season. Seemed to be one of the peculiar characteristics of election seasons. My car arrived in minutes.

Post-dawn, the city was a gauzy dream, every hard edge softened, glass and steel surfaces only just beginning to scintillate here and there. Hardly any traffic, taxis, trucks, and buses just beginning to hum along, no waiting for the grid to unlock, or feeling diminished by immobility, technology gone wrong. Beside me: a duffle bag packed with a couple changes of clothing, toiletries, wallet, medication, "medication," a couple of magazines. And one of my machines. I'd thought of leaving it at the apartment as well since I didn't want anything to distract me but I ended up caving, thinking I'd need it in case of emergency. So much for disconnecting in order to actually reconnect. I wasn't sure what I didn't want to be distracted from exactly. Perhaps I'd find out what it was. I had been let go, so I was going, but that wasn't all of it.

A half hour later, I arrived at the station, which was already abuzz with activity, worker bees flitting to and fro, various eateries, more like kiosks, open for business, a donut shop next to

a pizzeria next to a Szechuan spot next to a deli, an international smorgasbord marred only by the various fast food establishments shoveling out what could only be called laboratory eats. I passed a group of tie-dye wearing travelers, likely “on tour,” that is, following some bland jam-band across the country. Sure, not everyone who wanders is lost, but I still wouldn’t ask these wanderers for directions. I bought a bagel and a cup of coffee and headed to my train, which would depart in minutes.

Finding a central car, I looked for an empty seat by a window. They were all taken so I found an empty aisle seat, shoved my bag in the thin overhead compartment. The “white” man beside me, one of those bearded boys you see everywhere these days, was scrolling through photos of his bare-chested self, admiring each sharp cut of his six-pack or something. America. “Good morning,” I said. “Something like that,” he said, thumbing away at a text. Good thing he wasn’t driving. The year had seen an increase of traffic fatalities due to people being on their handheld whatevers. One lost day, I’d spent hours looking at photos of wrecks. Fireballs. Metal and rubber and plastic and glass twisted into ghastly shapes.

A couple of months ago, a train derailed at a station I frequented. Over three hundred people had been injured. I wasn’t there. I hadn’t even heard about it until an acquaintance on social media asked if I was okay. It took a while for me to mark myself safe. There was something about this act that made me ill. I turned on my machine, which immediately alerted me to friends marking themselves safe after an airport shooting. It was like my machine was reading my mind. Teresa posted: “Another day, another mass shooting...” Had she gotten that from me? Maybe I got that from someone else. It didn’t matter. “I know *Clueless* by heart,” someone said. “I’m clueless about what you’re talking about,” someone responded. “People should be themselves,” I wrote for Play’s feed, “except for everyone you wish weren’t,” stopping myself just before posting it, my eyes glassing up as I rebuked myself for forgetting to remember.

The train smelled faintly of cleansing agent. A strange phrase, “cleansing agent,” suggesting a spiritual operation, a mystical experience of some kind. I was happy to be far from the restroom compartment, which was likely to reek and force me to mouth-breathe for hours. Human filth is the most disgusting because it reminds us of our own capacity for waste, the relentless outpouring of it, our internal decay, our inevitable decline. Where’s the cleansing agent for that? “Are you okay?” Angelica. “I am,” I texted back. “Why do you ask?” “You never use emojis, and you just sent me a shitload. “Shitload, indeed!” I responded. “Must have pocket-texted.” “Got it!” she said. “Sorry,” I said, scrolling up past the emojis and gifs I’d sent: hearts, ghosts, persons shrugging, faces with tears of joy, smiling face with heart-eyes, soccer ball, tennis rackets, piles of poop. She sent an Okay Hand Sign emoji. May have come from a mudra, my machine told me, the pressing together of the thumb and forefinger representing the union of consciousness. Pocketing my machine, I pressed my right hand’s thumb and forefinger together, and lifted my hand, looked through the produced hole, and felt nothing.

As the train pulled out of the station, the vibratiuncles I felt beneath me matching the air’s light buzz of anticipation, I ate my bagel, a toasted and lightly buttered on both sides poppy seed with fresh lox, lettuce, and tomatoes, which, upon eating, overwhelmed me: a convergence of food, eros, being. Perfection, in other words. Whoever invented bagels was a genius, the baker likely dreaming up donut-shaped bread, the masterstroke being the toppings, or whatever you call them: sesame seeds but especially poppy seeds. I washed it down with some water, crunching the ribbed bottle with no small degree of satisfaction.

The compartment was a refrigerator, almost a freezer, actually, and I found myself wishing the windows were openable. I wanted to feel the outside air hot on my face. The sun was ablaze when we emerged from the tunnels. I flipped through my magazine and after a short while we came upon the Hudson River, and it was a grand site, its corrugated surface coursing like liquid

metal, sunlight glittering across it. “Beautiful,” I said. “You said it,” the bearded boy beside me mumbled.

I stood up to ask a “white” woman to turn off the notifications on her machine. She refused, aghast, looking as if I’d asked to fondle her breasts. America. A “white” woman in a seat across the aisle shook her head in solidarity with me. I told the first woman the sound was like a sledgehammer to my head. She ignored me.

Sitting back down, I queued up David Bowie’s *Station to Station*, which begins with the sound of a locomotive speeding on its rails, its sharp susurrus put through a series of sound filters, flangers and whatnot, which brought to mind the “strange, beautiful music” of Jimi Hendrix, the reference reinforced when a feedback guitar cuts through the soundscape, continuing as the “wall” of guitars builds to include a chicka-chicka, a bendy figure, a recurring arpeggiated turnaround, the drums plodding ever forward, finally giving way to a Bowie’s ever-weird vocals. The return of the Thin White Duke. If only.

I took out one of my magazines, one of the self-consciously hyper-literary magazines that pumped irony. I hadn’t brought any books since reading fiction actually makes me feel more alone, not while I’m reading, especially when the “consciousness” of the book subsumes my own, but after I read such books, me returned to the so-called real world, where language is utterly debased everywhere I go. Another way of saying this is the more I read the less people I feel I can talk to, actually commune with, in the deeply immersive way reading creates. I’d also considered bringing the memoir everyone was talking about but I couldn’t bring myself to do it, such books the textual versions of run-of-the-mill reality teevee shows, the oversharing less confessional than sloppy solipsism.

Hours later, passing through Pennsylvania, I got up to stretch and walked the entire length of the train. “Trigger warning: another mass shooting,” Amelia posted. Years vanishing, I saw

myself standing in front of a huge screen, in a waiting room somewhere, the goggle-box's volume off, but I could read the scrolling ticker tape, could see the armored cars and ambulances, the cops in military gear. Three hundred forty-two people in America will be shot by a gun today, ninety-six people dying from the shot. I struck up a conversation with a "black" man getting a coffee at the concessions whatever. He was a writer on a residency. I thought he meant going to a residency but then he explained that he was the recipient of an award from the train company, which paid for a round-trip journey on the train, and provided full accommodations, including a sleeper car equipped with a bed and a desk, not to mention wireless internet. He was working on a novel. "A mashup of horror and romance," he said. "I'm all about the language, though." He asked me what I did and I told him what I did, quickly listing some of the people I represent. He was most impressed by Wonderland. Said he loved her suicides, that he hoped to see them collected someday.

A couple near me were talking with each other, *at* each other, actually. "What are you looking at?" "I'm not looking at anything?" "Calling me a thing?" "*You* said 'what.'" "You know what I mean." "Yes, nothing." "Fuck you." "Fuck me?" "Yeah." "Okay." It was going to be a long trip for them, I thought, but then they laughed.

Returning to my seat, I knocked back two nip bottles of rum. Pinpricks of light broke up the outside dark. I plugged my machine into the outlet and reclined my seat. Closing my eyes, I slowly drifted to sleep.

### 10.13

"You're so vain you probably think this post is about you," Everly posted. "Somebody called me a fucknut and blocked me after I called them a twat-waffle," Delia posted. "Where is this 'whole other level' people keep talking about, anyway?" Kirk posted. "Sly knows," Webster commented.

“He wants to take you higher.” “Stevie, too,” Agnes commented, linking to a clip of “Higher Ground.” “A person who thinks they’re all that, isn’t all there,” Max posted. “Never underestimate the stupidity and servility of Americans,” Max posted, minutes later. “?” Kirk responded. “Too many examples to cite,” Max responded. “It’s time for POTUS to stop being a punk and react to this horrific event not only as a parent whose child died in infancy (as she said in her recent comments about the killings) but as a President, someone who will take progressive leadership on this issue. And every politician must follow that lead.” “‘Punk’ is a homophobic slur, but yeah,” Lemuel commented. “Enough has been enough for way too long,” Selah commented. Jessie “drunk bought knee-high shark socks” that made your legs look like they were being devoured by great whites.

It was late afternoon when the train pulled into the Windy City. I was still lying back, in the shape of a scalene triangle, I guessed, still bleary-eyed from having woken up several times in the middle of the previous night. The seats hadn’t been built for comfort. I should have reserved a sleeper car. What had I been thinking? I hadn’t, obviously. Sitting up, I looked out the window as the train slowly stopped. There were people bustling about. I saw a “white” man and something about him seemed familiar. He was a bit bedraggled, and I watched him lumber forward and eventually stop in front of a trash canister. What was it about his walk? I couldn’t place him. And I was about to chalk it up to my theory about cities, that they’re full of doppelgängers. But it nagged at me, and then it hit me with a force not unlike heaving ocean waves: Harry!

Frantic, I jumped to my feet, quickly gathered my things, stuffing them into my bag, and hustled past fellow passengers. Leaping through the doors just as they were closing, I landed on the platform. But he was already gone. I walked around the station, aimlessly, for a while.

Entering the Great Hall, I saw Harry or the person who looked exactly like Harry and then history hit me, film history hit me as I hounded Harry. “Hounded,” yes, the word, my use of it making me think of other words, other animals, chosen among the world’s menagerie, which were

just waiting to be verbed. You never say something like “The man elephanted down the road,” alas, but you can fish through your bag for a sandwich and it doesn’t have to be a tuna sandwich, but if it is, you damn well better get it out of your bag, mayonnaise rotting in your bag being a big problem. Finding it, you wolf it down. Etcetera. Yes, history hit me, film history, as I hounded Harry through Union Station’s expansive waiting room, which I was hurrying through, glancing for a second at the majestic ceiling, its grand chandeliers bearing down on me. I saw Harry climb up the stairs. Yes, those stairs, the stairs we’ve seen so many times, except everyone in the film goes downstairs, and by everyone I mean everything, and by everything I mean a certain baby carriage. But I was going up the stairs and it felt somehow wrong to go up the famous Beaux-Arts cascade. Before I knew it, though, I was on the street. And the man I thought was Harry was gone again.

I wasn’t sure what to do. I thought of calling Z, but it would only upset her, or worse, give her hope. And hadn’t she already let me go? Taking my machine out, I searched for a hotel near the station. Booking a room, I got into a taxi, its infrared camera turning on as soon as I opened the door and climbed in. Max posted: “‘User agreement’ sounds like an addiction contract, which is what it might actually often be.”

Arriving at the hotel, I was greeted by an “Asian” clerk who looked up from his machine, clearly annoyed at my interrupting him, even though it was his job, the job beneath him, and who was I to argue? He was young, tall but hunched over, like palm tree in a tropical storm, alright I’m exaggerating, but he was nevertheless beleaguered by student loan debt, unable to find work, let alone work he would find fulfilling, forced to take whatever he could find. His t-shirt read, “I would prefer not to—you want fries with that?” And that about summed it up. A not-quite Bartleby the Scrivener—America’s future. There were millions like him and more to come. “‘Let them lead the way’”!

My hotel room was a hotel room: predictably anonymous and antiseptic but at least it was clean. It didn't matter anyway. I'd give it a day or so, my search for Harry. I'd call shelters in the area in the morning, see if they knew anything. And then I'd search the streets. I'd go back to the station in the evening. Maybe he followed a routine and would be there. Why not, it was worth a try. Nouns into verbs. How about a proper noun into a verb? Harry. "To torment by or as if by constant attack," my machine told me.

About an hour later, after calling around and getting nowhere, I left the hotel, without any real plan. I would just let things happen and see what happened.

Only early fall but it was cold outside, and I could only imagine how cold this city would get. East Coast winters are balmy by comparison, East Coasters dubbing "snowpocalypse" or "snowmageddon" what the Windy City would regard as just another cold day. Then again, I could simply be exaggerating the heartland's resilience.

#### **10.14**

Mourning is sometimes an exorcism. I missed Play. I missed V. The night before, I kept hearing V's voice in my head saying things I wasn't sure he'd said or not: "Going through the motions does not a movement make." "It's usually the ones who think they've 'seen it all' who have missed so much." "It's dehumanizing to think of oneself as having buttons to push." "'Nailed it,' they say when they've barely pinned it." Most of the country was celebrating Columbus Day today. New York City's Columbus Citizens Foundation had condemned the destruction of the Columbus Monument, of course, and were still actively campaigning to have it restored. For them, the ruin was a scar, all their ahistorical talk, all the whitewashing, etc., though, reminding me that the statue had merely been a gross, grandiose participation trophy. "With all the broken promises to Native

Americans, to say the least,” Max posted, “is it finally okay to call the flag ‘Old Unfaithful?’” I spent the afternoon visiting shelters. I couldn’t find him. Harry lost at city.

I was in a taxi, heading back to the train station, the “black” driver talking into the air, a scarab-like device hanging from his ear. “Please turn off your phone,” I said. He didn’t hear me or he pretended he didn’t. I asked him again. “Oh, sorry!” he said, and stopped talking. I’d already booked a seat on a train heading west. It was bright outside, the sun a brazen bronze. The streets weren’t so much mean as indifferent.

People you see at Union Station: a fifty-year-old “black” man wearing a hat that reads: “WW II Veteran”; a “white” man plunging his hand into a small paper bag, and then using it to wipe his powdered sugared lips; Max’s doppelgänger, withered and melancholic, though; a “white” woman whose various obnoxious ringtones—which she was playing one by one, each tone made more obnoxious by their loudness—reminding you that everyone is R2D2.

Antsy, I left the waiting area and headed for the platform, where an LED sign announced the status of my train as “BOARDING.” The train wasn’t there. I thought about this invisible locomotive, its ghostly passengers, where it had come from, where it was going.

The train finally arrived, and, boarding it, I walked over to the first empty seat I saw. A “white” man there was talking on his machine. I looked around for another seat because the last thing I wanted was to be listening to someone on their machine the entire ride. The train was full, though, so I put my things in the overhead compartment and reluctantly sat down beside him. “Passengers in the Quiet Cars,” a canned voice said, “please turn off all sound-emitting devices, and please limit conversation and speak in subdued tones,” making me laugh, the sound more bite than bark.

The train moving, I tried reading from a magazine but felt nauseous. The man beside me was still on his machine. "It's nice," he said. "Looking out the window. Sun on my face." Was he going to narrate the entire ride? "Sorry, gotta go," the man said into his machine, likely feeling my dirty look. "Talk to you later." Soon after, I closed my eyes and dozed off. Fell into blankness. I woke up to a woman's voice, all emotion sucked out of it, me feeling less rested than I did before. "The café is open and located in the middle of the train," a woman over the loudspeaker said. I was impressed by her thoroughness, the list of items a kind of poem: "We have bagels with cream cheese; Dannon Light and Fit Greek Crunch Strawberry Cheesecake Nonfat Yogurt; Danish pastries; blueberry muffin, vanilla low-fat yogurt with fresh berries and granola parfait; Jimmy Dean Sausage, Egg, and Cheese sandwiches; fresh and seasonal fruit trays; fresh vegetables with hummus; entrée salads; Hebrew National All Beef Hot Dogs; pepperoni and cheese pretzels; DiGiorno Rising Crust Four Cheese Pizzas; Angus cheeseburgers; Lay's Chips, Doritos, Smartfood White Cheddar Cheese Popcorn; Planters Peanuts, Smoked Almonds, or Mixed Nuts; Cup of Noodles; M&Ms, Twix, Skittles, and Snickers. We have Pepsi and water; and for those over twenty-one with ID, we have gin, scotch, red and white wine, and Stella Artois beers. At this present time, we have no line or wait." A tinny buzz from someone's ear buds. I didn't say anything. I looked out the window, and didn't know where I was; what I did know was I was moving from here to there, and I felt good about that. I saw trees and trees, orange and red and yellow flashing past. Another train passed, a momentary streak of shrieking metal. Turrets, wires, long metal worms of tubing for some mysterious purpose. Grid of windows on a factory or something, its array of blue squares like a sheet of Pantone swatches. Piles of rocks, like cairns on a highland. Tar-encrusted buckets. Fences and walls and gates. Parked boat on a wheeled contraption. A burly, bearded "white" man on a billboard advertising "A Real Man's Beer." Another for an "Expanding Opportunities" conference at a nearby expo center. Heavily-graffitied

walls, palimpsests of names and blobby images, spray-painted on one of them, in large block letters: “WE’RE FUCKED.” A large green field, a “white” man walking across it, pocketing his hands, a black and white dog behind him, running toward him. Moving pictures. This was the best kind of movie.

The man beside me was scrolling through photos of himself. I thought of what Baudelaire said about photography: “From that moment onward, our loathsome society rushed, like Narcissus, to contemplate its trivial image on the metallic plate.” And then the man farted. I immediately stood up to get away from the noxious fog. I glared at him, his face fixed into looking as if nothing had happened. I walked over to the café car. The man wasn’t there when I returned to my seat, outside, darkness, stars scattered bright, inside darkened, ceiling lights dimmed for drowsing, passengers breathing, someone intermittently mumbling, and I dozed off.

## 10.15

It may be only an idea of a person you’re missing, but all you have are ideas. The train lurched and lurched until it finally stopped in the middle of what looked like one of those poorly constructed sets for teevee shows from the sixties. All life sucked out of them. A spectral elsewhere, ghostly nowhere. There was the post office and the church and the one-roomed schoolhouse. Everything clapboard. Had they looked convincing to their original viewers? In the way Claymation and early CGI once looked convincing. *Clash of the Titans* came to mind. Pegasus landing in a forest. Medusa letting arrows fly. The Kraken rising from the sea. Mystery, magic, splendor, spectacle.

The conductor, a fat, “black” man, who whistled gospel songs up and down the aisles, apologized for the delay. “But we’re sure to move shortly,” he said, jingling his ring of keys. A “white” woman asked for a reason, and he told her freight trains were always given priority.

“Things are more important than people, huh?” she said. Shrugging his shoulders, he walked away, humming “Amazing Grace” as the car door slid open and locked behind him with a metallic snap. We didn’t move for about an hour. I went to the bathroom. Finished peeing, I stomped on the flush button, startled by its nasty raspy gasp, the suction a kind of wonder. Ross posted: “I think the next time I hear someone say something is ‘interesting,’ that word, ‘interesting,’ will solidify and penetrate my skull, dissolving there, and then, through some combustive chemical reaction, make my head explode.” I knew the feeling. Max posted: “It may take two to tango, but how many to mango?”

You could call it a roam of one’s own. You could call it losing one’s mind. You needn’t mind losing your mind. I once was found, but now I’m lost. Overheard: “So what are we going to do now?” “I don’t know. Why do you keep asking me?” “This is the first time I asked you!” “Damn.” “You know, when you look up to God like that, like, I wonder about life.” “Damn.” “Passengers,” the conductor said, “look outside to your left and you’ll see a docked submarine. I couldn’t see it. “Near the yellow cranes,” he said, seemingly reading my mind, and there it was, a silver-armored whale glistening in the morning light. And I made up a word: “glampse”: a portmanteau of “glance” and “glimpse” meaning a slight intensification of “glimpse.”

The sky was slate, with pink tints and blue hints, white streaks here and there like scuffed correction fluid. “We thank you for your patience,” the conductor said, as a kind of pre-emptive strike. People talk about losing their patience, as if it were a substance, something you stockpiled and that you could quickly lose. You were either patient or impatient. And at that moment, I was the latter. The train lumbered into the station, and I stood up, opened the overhead compartment, removed my things. An LED sign on train: “WHEN MOVING ABOUT—BE SAFE.” A passenger, a feeble old “black” man, who’d sat directly behind me, stood up, too, his actions mirroring mine. We were both facing the same direction, looking at the door, me behind him now. I’d rather a train not move

at all than crawl as it was doing now, and the old man must have been thinking the same thing since he turned around toward me and said, “Are we having fun yet?” I laughed, wondering who had first asked that question. Seemed like it ought to have been from a sitcom, one of the first ones, like the *I Love Lucy Show* or *The Honeymooners*, which were the earliest ones I could think of, but there were surely earlier ones. “Let’s not lose track of each other when we get off,” someone behind me said.

“Have a great day,” the conductor said, as the train finally stopped at the station, “and a better tomorrow!” The doors whooshed open, and we spilled out, all hustle and jostle. Overheard: “She not ugly. She just need her eyebrows done.” “You mean, *eyebrow*.” The teenage girls laughed. Taking out my machine, I discovered I couldn’t get online. All I got was the spinning Wheel of Death. Twelve spokes, the attempt at loading evinced by the spokes darkening one by one clockwise in quick succession. I thought of the monks’ mandala. Maybe it hadn’t worked after all. Maybe it was working differently outside of New York City. I felt lost, unmoored, adrift, but hadn’t I already been drifting for a long while now?

I was on the street, but I wanted sea caves and tide pools, I wanted hot sand and damp seaweed and barnacled shells. Tom Petty blasted from somewhere. Who had designed this graphic, for the so-called wait cursor? The architects of social media were all androids, each of them promising something even worse than Disney’s false promise of interconnectedness in their song “It’s a Small World After all.” Was I the only one disconnected? “Can’t help you,” someone said. “I’m offline, sorry,” another person said. It was a loathsome sound, Petty’s languidly nasal delivery evoking less denim, boots, and workday grit than debauched simulacra of same. The so-called Boss made me feel the same way. Neil Young and Bob Dylan didn’t, although they probably should have. Maybe because the latter had foregrounded the artifice, the constructedness of his

performance from the start. I finally found someone, a local, who knew where she was and how to get to the beach.

Finally arriving, I strode, barefoot, across the sand, oddly comforted by the sensurround, the ocean's low-frequency roar, the waves' soft static. The Pacific—how appropriate. I'd somehow crossed the country but I hadn't found what I was looking for. Somebody should write a song about that. Perfect, really: Self-consciously literary hero embarks on a road trip—rail trip, yes, but still—travels past plains, plateaus, and prairies; past fields and forests; past flatlands, grasslands, wetlands, and wastelands; past swamps and bogs and knobby knolls and rolling hills; past valleys and mountain ranges; past arid rain-shadow deserts; past coniferous and broadleaf woodlands; past salt pans and alluvial fans; past dissected lava plains, endorheic basins, saline lakes, river narrows, natural bridges, and deep, sheer-walled canyons. Past tony towns and sooty cities, glum slums and vacant lots, graveyards and ghost towns, suburban strip malls and supersized family farms; past barns, silos, mills, factories, and warehouses; past gymnasiums and solariums, football stadiums and swimming pools, tennis courts and soccer fields; past multiplexes, megachurches, and multi-level transportation complexes. And city walls and highest mountains, desert plains and streets with no name: quotes from U2 songs, so you see, I really haven't learned anything. This land was made up for you and me. Wherever you go, there you aren't. We are matter in a material world. Worse, I didn't know what I had been looking for to begin with. "And now for something completely different!" Was that what I wanted? Absurdity after jarring absurdity instead of episodic regularity? Life as *The Monty Python Show*? The sand felt wonderful beneath my feet, between my toes. I sat for hours looking at the water. The "wine-dark sea," as Homer described it, giving further credence to the idea that people in the West couldn't see the color blue in ancient times. And the color doesn't appear in the Koran or ancient Chinese stories either. Egyptians, who were first in so many things, might have been the first to see, to truly see the color. I could see

blue, though, the sky celeste with a hint of periwinkle, the Pacific a shimmering silvery-blue. “My blues so deep you might think they’re black,” as the song said.

I rented a room in a bungalow on the beach for the night. I had a window that looked directly out onto the beach. Three horizontal bands—tan, pewter, and blue: sand, ocean, and sky. I was reminded of Agnès Varda’s *Documenteur*, a short but nevertheless lovely film. Lyrical, discursive, melancholy, the film depicted a writer writing on a typewriter, who had a marvelous, expansive view of a beach. Who was it that said we can’t see what’s in front of us, unless it’s framed? I moved a chair toward the window and sat and took out my machine. No connection. I tossed the machine onto the bed. The room stank of soap and cigarettes and sex. I stood up again and moved the goggle-box toward the window. The plug was long enough, surprisingly, for me to set the goggle-box directly beside the window. I turned on the goggle-box, set it to a news channel, but it changed to another channel on its own, and then changed again and again. I turned the sound off and sat down again. I looked out the window, looked out as far as I could, attempting to register the gradual changes of the colors of the sand and water and sky as the sun set, images from the goggle-box brightly flickering in the periphery. And then, a cliché of the cheap motel: thump, thump, thump against the wall, and moans, like pigeons cooing, the occasional piggish shriek. I turned up the volume of the goggle-box, the channels still randomly changing.

## 10.16

Wherever you go, there you aren’t. “Splinter off into my separate selves”? Zenith would have said it had something to do with the union achieved during deep sleep and how you returned to the illusion of fragmentation upon waking. I thought of it in reverse, actually. I wanted to talk to Z, hold her in my arms. I was at the airport. I was going home. I heard myself say it so it must have been true. Protests against the renaming of the airport had failed. Trump’s name was everywhere.

On all the highway and terminal signage, etc. Walking wildfire that he'd been, notwithstanding, he was still nothing more than a logo, a brand, a soapbox. Territorial pissings. Immortality on the cheap.

The airline clerk had asked where I was going. "Final destination, sir," she'd said. "I don't know," I'd said. "Excuse me," she'd said. "Home," I'd said, but what did that mean? Home isn't a building, unless you're using the word as a verb, "building" meaning a series of actions, of movements, always in flux, mobile, multiple, defying all attempts to locate it. I was trading objects for acts. Then again, I'd have an extra-wide seat and ample room to stretch out. I'd have the "ultimate in mood illumination." I'd have advanced humidification, which would reduce fatigue and dryness. I'd have disposable ergonomic earbuds. I'd have a flight attendant's personalized service. I'd be drunk before nightfall. "Global Warming Is Killing the Great Barrier Reef," my machine said. "I'm going as Son of Sam(uel Beckett) for Halloween this year," Manuel posted. Someone's machine went off, its ringtone a glistening marimba, the theme song for a videogame my sons used to play. Max posted: "Took an improv comedy class on a whim tonight. Consensus was that I'm great at making everyone feel sad. Now if that isn't funny..." "We're off to the races!" a "white" man beside me on his machine said, immediately following it up with saying, "We're really cooking with oil here!" the metaphor overload succeeding in conjuring up an image of a breaded thoroughbred on a fork and knife-flanked plate. And no, I didn't tell him to stop horsing around. Behold: deadbeat dad making dad jokes.

We were in the air, and I felt tired, oh so very tired. Looking out the window, trying not to make anything out of the clouds, I fell asleep.

**10.17**

Morning, back in the city, the big city, braggart of a sun pushing everyone around. Metallic pachyderms moving in herds, my own taxi barely moving. There was music in the car: “New York City, just like I pictured it, skyscrapers and everything.” Great song, but “skyscraper,” the word, seemed so antiquated, superannuated, a relic from a vignettted era, glistening Art Deco decadence. “I like it but it’s hard to make it,” the Yemeni cabbie said, his answer to my asking if he liked New York City mirroring my feelings about it. It’s the city that’s never finished. Banks and grocery stores and gas stations and supermarkets and apartment complexes. Verticals and horizontals. Lines and lines and lines. Ambition confused for direction. Titillation confused for joy. Signs from the universe? You mean, “Rough Road,” “Road Closed,” “Falling Rocks,” “Danger,” “Dead End,” “Dip,” and “Stop”? “To workers I’m just another drone.” Bob Seger? Classic rock stations are mortuaries. City of bankruptcies and bombings and burnings, city built for plagues, each tragedy borne of the nature of the city of itself. And there I was singing along. “I’m not a number! Damn it, I’m a man! I said, I’m a man!” “The page you were looking for doesn’t exist,” my machine said. What had I been looking for?

“I definitely think articles about awards, how they’re disproportionately given to white people, particularly white men, etc., are necessary,” Jared posted, “as are articles about the sordid history of where the money for the awards often comes from, even while being aware that if you dig deep enough on just about anything, the money will be dirty. That said, I wish there were many more features on un- and under-sung writers, musicians, painters, and other artists, etc., and that those features were given more attention than the abovementioned exposés, etc., the attention (shares, etc.) given to exposés, etc., resulting in more attention to those already well- and over-recognized awardees.” “They should’ve given it to Alison Wonderland,” Donna commented. “Yes, if only

they'd nominated her to begin with, but we've already talked about that," Jared responded. "Can't wait for *Book of Suicides*," Donna responded. "I can't, either," Jared responded. "And for her 'work-in-digress,'" as she calls it," Donna responded. Wonderland had many different working titles for the book, among them *Apart from Others*, *Call of the Void*, *You Bury Me*, and *A Place to Go Into From*.

It was warm where the sun shone bright on one side of the street, cold on the other side, the latter feeling like early fall. Overheard: "Take that off! I can't take it!" a "black" woman said to another "black" woman, who was wearing a thick long coat. "I never know how to dress!" "Weather—what can you do?" Things were different but I couldn't say exactly what. I saw a bumper sticker that read: "What would Bruce Lee do?" Good question. I passed a "ghost bike," one of those roadside memorials you used to see more of in the city, before they made more bike lanes. Fewer people getting doored, I supposed. What was the origin of them anyway? Would make a great anthropological study. I took out my machine. "Cyclist struck here," the sign hanging from the first recorded ghost bike read. There should be ghost cars, too. They'd get towed away, of course, but maybe not for a while. "My fellow Latinx friends might appreciate that I'm going as Chewbaccabra for Halloween this year," Manuel posted. "Either that or GremLin-Manuel Miranda." Earlier, my machine had powered off and somehow logged off one of my social media portals. Finished entering my username and password, I'd felt strange about being given the option for the site to "Remember me," so I left the box unchecked. What doesn't kill you merely weakens you for something that will.

## 10.18

Today was tomorrow. Taking out my machine, I opened Play's portal and typed, "Today was," and then stopped myself, quickly shaking my head. Discarding the draft, I stood up, stretched my

arms up, letting them fall, slowly, to my sides, whereupon I walked to window, watched a plane score a line across the sky. The so-called 'Big Picture' isn't anything but another idea with a frame around it. "Was thinking of going as Third Party Candidate for the Halloween costume party this year," Manuel posted, "but I'm worried people will say I'm stealing votes that belong to them."

The itch was gone, but the feeling I'd been having, of loss and dread, was so strong I almost wished it to return. The worming thing. I ran my hands over my arms, feeling nothing but my hands running over my arms. Had something happened on the trip where nothing happened? Failure and disappointment as remedy? Maybe it had sloughed off into the Pacific Ocean. I had to do something so after snapping open a plastic trash bag in the air, I walked to the bathroom, where I grabbed all the itch-related lotions and sprays and whatnot one-by-one and threw them into the bag. Finished, I walked to the kitchen, where I found more medical products gathered together on a counter. Holding the bag against the counter's edge, I shoved all the bottles and boxes and canisters into the bag with a forearm. I found the remainder of the "oinkment" in the bedroom and threw that into the bag, too.

Maybe it had simply burrowed deeper, hid itself in bone, in blood, in the fibers of my being, so maybe it would return. Keying into my machine, I clicked the Death Clock tab. "This site is currently under construction," the homepage read. "Check back soon." I read another article about past life regression therapy. Watched a video featuring POTUS in another life herself, so to speak, ha ha, speaking with a therapist slash medium. The therapist had written about a woman regressed back to a time before she was born, all the way back to Before the Common Era. "Sounds crazy, I know," the now-POTUS had said. She kept referring to "paralyzing phobias." The therapist's proof was dubious at best. If celebrity has taught us anything—and it hasn't because we haven't learned anything, we never learn anything—it's that truth doesn't matter, only believability does. This is why the so-called border between celebrity and politics is so porous as to be virtually nonexistent.

**10.19**

I saw an old “Asian” man close one of his nostrils with a finger and forcefully breathe out the other one, a rope of mucus shooting out, the man pulling the rope from his nostril and thrusting it onto the sidewalk, then scraping his dirty finger on the bark of a tree. “Disgusting!” a man bicycling past who’d seen it, too, said. “Okay, for Halloween I’m going as Virginia WereWoolf,” Manuel posted. “I’m going as Stevie Wonder Woman,” Max responded.

**10.20**

*Book of Suicides* was done. Wonderland insisted I “give” it to a small press. She had wanted out of the big publishers and had been contracted for one last work and was therefore free to do whatever she wanted with the other projects she had in play. It was a new world for me. Most writers were, in a sense, small press writers, each one most likely to have had their first short stories, poems, essays, or whatever published in a literary journal, which invariably operated on a shoestring; and many of those writers had gone on to publish collections or first novels on small presses, these presses more likely willing to take a chance on these strange voices. I sent the manuscript to a few different editors all of whom were excited about the possibility. Wonderland ended up choosing a press called Publishing Arm, which you had to admit was the best name for a press that had set itself very much in opposition to what it called “Neoliberal writing.” “Live like you’re already dead,” Jessie posted. “Like a zombie?” Esmeralda commented. “Funny how often the so-called New Sincerity looks like the old insincerity,” Teodora posted. The thread reminded me of something Wonderland had said in an interview: “‘Write as if you were dying,’ Annie Dillard sagely writes. I’d add: Write as if you were living, too, living now, instead of in some imagined past. Or knowingly write as if you were living in the past, using the diction and conventions of some bygone era, etc., but instead of taking them for granted, as some kind of

ridiculous standard to which all writing should conform, use them to unravel language and narrative, etc. Or write as if you were immortal. Or write as if you were dead or undead or a ghost or risen from the dead, all of which might also lead to something totally unexpected, who knows.”

## 10.21

Everything is ebb and flood. Met with Titus again, this time over coffee, and it was his idea. Monk’s “Nutty” was playing in the café. The “white,” boutique-tattooed barista was staring into nothing.

“What were your parents like?” Titus said, his slouch reminding me of someone, but I couldn’t remember who.

“Don’t really know,” I said. “About my mother, that is. She was in the military and kept moving around. My father was the one who raised me. We’d sometimes follow her, though. To wherever she was stationed.”

“Might be why you dropped out,” he said.

I laughed. “What?” he said. “Oh, you make it sound like I was in school,” I said, “and when you put it that way, whether you meant that or not, it makes sense. It really was like school.”

“And you failed.”

“Yes,” I said.

“You had reason.”

“Reason, yes,” I said. “But no excuse.”

We were quiet for a while. There was less tension, though. I was really enjoying his company.

“She tried to make amends before she died,” I said.

“Make up for lost time,” he said.

“Lost time, yes,” I said, thinking about how much I had lost, how I was trying to do the same thing. But how do you retrieve something as intangible as time?

“Is that what *you’re* trying to do?” he said, his shoulders slightly concaving. Ah, his mother! “What?” he said. “What?” I said. “You were staring off into space.” “Sorry!” “So that’s what you’re doing?” he said. “Making up for lost time?”

“No, I don’t think so,” I said. “Not sure if time’s something you can lose and then find again.”

“What’s gone is gone?”

“Can’t be helped, can it? I just, I don’t know, want things to be better between us.”

Titus drew in a breath and let it out again slowly through his nose. He stretched his arms back, his posture immediately improving. His mother’s therapist had said it was likely a defense mechanism. Curling in to protect herself. Dance therapy had helped.

We talked about shows he’d been watching. “How about Grandpa?” he said. “Remarried. He asks for you sometimes,” I said. “You and your brother.” “Can’t say I remember him.” “My fault, too.” “Yeah,” he said. “Tell him I said hello.” “Will do.” He rose from his seat to go use the restroom. Two men nearby were talking shop. “Fuck logic,” one of them, a “black” man, said. “What you want is emotional arc.” “Something relatable,” the other man, a “white” man, said. “No, the greatest story never told,” the “black” man said, stroking his grizzled goatee. They laughed. “You got one song to sing,” the “black” man continued. “So sing it!”

“Misterioso” was playing, Monk’s angular blues an architectonics, time and space stretched beyond comprehension, each tonal punctuation nevertheless anchoring you here and now. I checked my machine. “Okay, I’ve finally decided who I’m going to be for Halloween this year,” Manuel posted. “Jackson PolLoch Ness Monster.”

Titus asked for the check when he returned, and we hugged before we parted ways. It was a start.

On the train platform, I saw a young “white” man offer to help an old “black” woman—a stranger to him—who was sitting on a bench, struggling to tie one of her shoelaces, the woman accepting the offer and then profusely thanking the man as he bent down and tied the lace. Humans in the wild surprise you sometimes.

## 10.22

“Cure employee boredom with the entertainment they love,” a screen said. George was complaining about having been “breadcrumbed,” the long-standing practice of emotionally unavailable men and women of making just enough contact to keep you interested, texting you to meet but never following through. “I just want a meal,” Cassandra commented. “Is that too much to ask?” “Yeah, and all I keep getting is junk food,” Delphine commented. “I’m about to change my dating profile username to ‘StillHereToo?’” Alberta commented.

I closed a tab on my machine’s browser, which had shown search results for “when will the sun explode?” I couldn’t remember asking the question. In any case, the answer isn’t a good one. Five billion years from now, the Sun will expand and become a red giant, a swollen star whose surface two point five billion years beyond that will be past Earth’s orbit, engulfing and ultimately destroying “our” planet. I looked outside. The sky was pilot light blue, cloud-clogged. I couldn’t see the sun.

Angelica wasn’t returning my calls or texts. Geeta had cut me off. Zenith had let me go—where I’d gone, though, wasn’t clear. What was clear was that I’d made a mess of things and had gotten what I deserved. I closed out another screen.

**10.23**

Wonderland was on the Madder show. “What do you say to people who say your books are gimmicky?” he said. She stared at him for a long while, the camera making it look as if she were looking straight into it, through it, confronting her accusers. And it was clear to anyone who knew her that she wasn’t drafting a response before saying what she ultimately said: “Yesterday’s gimmick is today’s convention.” “People say your prose errs on the side of purple,” Madder said. “‘Errs on the side of purple,’ I like that. Prince ‘erred’ on the side of purple, too.” Wonderland said. “Speaking of airing, let me air out from your consciousness this really tiresome idea. If your diet consists of the blandest of foods, whether genetically-modified and/or pesticide-ridden or not, anything you eat that isn’t bland will likely seem too spicy, too rich, etc. Similarly, if all you read is the ‘sparse,’ the ‘transparent,’ the ‘relatable,’ etc., then everything that isn’t any or all of those things is going to seem overwrought, like so much so-called showing off. In other words, read sensually and sensuously and lustfully and lustily, and then write, for tomorrow we die.” And then: “Would you trust a physician whose practice was solely based on practices codified over two thousand years ago or who at best ignores the last hundred years or so of practices, innovations, experiments, theories, etc.? How about a scientist, architect, or engineer? If not, then why trust writers and other artists whose practice is solely based on practices codified over two thousand years ago or who at best have ignored the last hundred years ago of artistic practices, innovations, experiments, theories, etc., and especially those artists who legislate these practices, weaponize them against other practices?” Madder looked stunned. “But what if you fail to connect with your audience?” he said. Wonderland’s eyes shrunk to slits then widened again. “Failure, yes,”

Wonderland said. “Makes me think of Beckett, who said, ‘Fail better,’ which strikes me as the best writing advice. He didn’t intend it to be used as such, of course. I like it because of the many things it does: its clever oppositional play off the phrase ‘feel better,’ which also challenges the contemptible notion that art serves as a kind of therapy for the artist; its assumption that you know what failure is, that is, that you have deeply familiarized yourself with the elements of your craft and art, that you are capable of distinguishing the difference between good and bad art, and that you have deeply engaged the best artistic expressions, moreover that you are constantly engaging the art-historical continuum in all of its profound diversity; its assumption, too, that you are endeavoring not to simply write what you know but to discover what you don’t know, probe what you think you think and feel and know, engage what others think they think and feel and know, and much more besides, and that you are deeply aware that all attempts at such discovery and analysis, such openness to possibility, such vulnerability and honesty and integrity, might doom your writing from the start but are nevertheless absolutely necessary to make any kind of sense of being, memory, reality, history, etc.”

I texted Angelica, asking for the contact information for her therapist or medium or both. “Are you serious?” she said. “Yes,” I responded, but I wasn’t sure I was. She sent me Dr. Powell’s website. “Tell her I sent you.” she said. “Won’t she already know?” I said. “She’s a medium, dummy,” she said, “not a psychic,” punctuating her message with a string of Face with Tears of Joy emojis.

## 10.24

Pale, skinny “Latinx” teen on a skateboard zipping fast against traffic. Tall buppie in a jet-setting jet-black pin-stripe suit wondering what it was all for. Beleaguered “white” preacher going over his lines. Diverse group of careerists careering themselves into isolated wrecks. “White,” grease-

stained mechanic, opioids he no longer needed but was addicted to rivering through his veins. “Biracial”—perhaps “Asian” and “white”—woman, rushing to make her hypnotherapy appointment. “White” schoolteacher rushing to the security job he had to take to “make a dent” in his student loans. Bearded “white” man wearing a faded “Feeling the Bern” t-shirt, magical thinking still fogging his brain. “Black” dad-bodied dad, his newborn daughter facing out from the ergonomic, water-repellent, moisture-wicking carrier strapping her against his chest. Young little “Latinx” girl in a white dress walking a black dog, the leash longer than she was tall, her Bolivian grandmother walking beside her, bowler hat atop her head, her long black braid snapping against her alpaca wool shawl, her bright blue pleated skirt swishing in the wind.

After a whole day walking around like a zombie, I boarded a train home. Overheard: “Go to hell!” a woman said. “Better hell than heaven,” a man responded. “I’m afraid of heights.” The car was about half-full, or half-empty, depending on your state of mind,” and what a phrase, “state of mind,” which suggests a certain kind of ordering, other states of mind floating all around you and me, everyone more or less in kismet or civil war with you, or absolutely indifferent. In any case, there was a “white” man there, a man of about sixty, his missing teeth making him look older, so I couldn’t be sure, the gaps in his mouth making him less coherent, because, yes, he was talking, yelling, in fact. Vituperations. Slavic-sounding. Cyrillic? Every so often, a word in English would pop out from his sludge: “America,” he’d say, punctuating some remark. At one point, a “black” man entered the train and the old “white” man pointed and yelled at the man, who promptly ignored him until he apparently couldn’t take the tirade anymore. The “black” man told the “white” man to stop and he did but not without first giving the “black” man the middle finger. It took everything in me to keep me from rising up and lunging at the man and ripping his head off. I had to get off the train. “Call her yet?” Angelica texted. “Not yet,” I answered. No response from Angelica. I

looked at Dr. Powell's website again. Watched a video, where she came across as both smart and absolutely bonkers. I scheduled an appointment.

## 10.25

The sky was purple, various shades of purple, actually, and I walked toward the setting sun, marveling at the colors, their vividness, bright as freshly painted watercolors. Buildings got in the way of the brightest part of the sky, so I swerved to my left for a block or two until I could see more of the sky and then to my right again, the colors deepening, until finally it was dark and I didn't know where I was. I thought of a line from a film, something like, "Which came first, words or things?" It had to be one of those existential French vehicles where nothing happens, which is where everything happens. One day at a time, they say, but I was thinking one minute at a time, one second at a time, one breath at time, blink, blink, blink—a hot wind, trees soughing, crisp leaves scattering on the sidewalk like insects. Maybe it wasn't words and things but words and ideas. Are there things without words? Overheard: "If only I was twenty years younger," a man said. "I'd light. It. Up!" "Light what up?" another man said. "The world, man, the world!" he said. V posted: "Victorioso Francisco Isidoro Luis García Ramírez de Arroyo y Velázquez marked himself unsafe during The American Dumpster Fire." V was still in custody so how had he done this? Had he managed to get a machine? Had he programmed some kind of automated system to post things he'd previously stored up? Or was someone else doing his bidding, texting as needed? It was all too much, and I wept, right there on the street.

Catching my breath again, I started walking again. Angelica called. "So?" "I set up an appointment. Will see Powell in a few days." She laughed. "Let's go somewhere," she said. "Okay, where?" I said. "Where?" "Okay, anywhere," I said. "How about a party?" she said. "I'm not a party to that," I said. "Are you okay?" she said. "More or less," I said. "More or less than what?"

she said. “Of what,” I said. “It’s a costume party,” she said. “Even worse,” I said. “What will you be?” Angelica said. “No idea.” “That would be a great costume. No one would know what you were supposed to be.” “Ha.” “Come on,” she said. I shrugged, which she couldn’t see, and I was quiet for a while. “The change I want to see in the world,” I said, finally. “Now we’re talking,” she said. “We are,” I said. “Let’s keep doing that.” I asked her for the logistics, which she immediately texted to me. “So, it’s a plan,” she said, laughing. “A certainty,” I said. I certainly needed more of them.

## 10.26

A cold day, everything smeared in gray, the drizzling an annoying spray bottle blast to the face. Max posted: “Out of darkness into delight!” Crawford called to tell me V had been declared a “provocateur,” POTUS’s replacement term for “enemy combatants,” with its concomitant suspension of *habeus corpus*, which literally meant “You should have the body,” which I’m sure V would have loved. Crawford said there was the possibility V would be shipped out to Guantánamo, the detention camp there. Or worse: to a so-called black site. All of this seemed preposterous to me. V was an artist. This was an infringement of due process, a curtailing of his freedoms. I keyed up a video of an interview with V from years ago that had gone viral recently. He looked so much younger. “Sometimes I think it’s enough just to persevere, to survive. But then I think of other possibilities. You can swim against the current. I am an artist. Whatever I touch becomes art. I legitimate it. I elevate it. I bring it into focus. I bring it into prominence. I declare its importance. I make its permanence. I am an artist—whatever I turn touches to art. I want to touch you.”

**10.27**

I arrived at the party before Angelica did, and the scariest thing I'd seen was adults in onesies. It would likely be the scariest thing I'd see this Halloween, perhaps ever see. There's a vital urgency to "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'" that's missing from what passes for dance music these days. That said, what the heck is MJ saying about vegetables toward the end of the song? Sitting, drinking a terrible whiskey sour, I spotted five Wonder Women and five Batmen. Two Marios. No Luigis. And Waldo was surprisingly easy to find. "I was all set on going as a hot air balloon for Halloween until I realized people would think I was Fox News," Luis posted.

What does Bobby Byrd mean when he sings that he knows you got soul? Is the article ellipsed? Soul as a property, as an element, as something acquirable. You have it otherwise you wouldn't be in here. But where is that "here"? Overheard: "I don't drink because when I drink I *drink*," a "white" man with a blep-riddled face said. "And I don't think because when I think I *think*," his friend, a taller version of him, said. "And I don't stink because when I stink I *stink*," the first man said. "And when I drink I stink and can't think," the other said. "Which brings you to your shrink," the shorter man said. "Which brings us full circle," the taller one said. "Exactly," the shorter man responded. "And exactitude is what we want," the taller man said.

Seeing Angelica enter the hall, I waved her over but she didn't see me. She took out her machine. A text from her: "Where are you?" "Here, waving at you!" I texted back. She looked up, looked around, saw me, smiled, and walked over. Where would we be without our machines? No one would ever be able to find us. "Flapper girl!" I said. "Good to see you," Angelica said, turning slowly around, shimmy-shaking. "Good to be seen," I said. "You look amazing." She was wearing a silver, scoop-neck dress, rows of sequined fringe shaking around her hips. "Thanks," she said, flinging one end of her black feather boa around her neck. "Who are you supposed to be?" "Nowhere Man," I said. "You're sitting by yourself." "No," I said. "I'm sitting in my nowhere

land.” “I don’t get it.” “Making all my nowhere plans for nobody,” I sang, terribly. “Beatles.” “Got it,” she said. “I prefer the Stones.” “Ha!” “What?” “Not getting dragged into that old argument!” “So that’s why you were sitting in a corner—” “I was waiting for you.” “—by yourself—” “Ha!” “—brooding.”

I told her about the man who lived at the top of the Katskhi Pillar. “Anyway, I was waiting for you.” “Sounds familiar.” “What?” “I feel like I’m the one who’s always waiting. Waiting for you.” “I’m sorry.” “But you’re not.” “Okay.” “Okay?” “I thought we were here to dance.” “You’re right,” she said, shimmying again. The Beastie Boys’ “Shake Your Rump” was playing. The song was an extraordinary fusion. So many different samples. “You know,” I said in her ear, “I’d planned to come as Voting Rights until I realized the U.S. Government would likely suppress me.” She laughed, saying, “Get out of your head!” “I’m trying!” I said, waving my hands in the air. “Shake your rump-ah!” The song segued into “Unity, Part 1 (The Third Coming).” “Peace, unity, love, and having fun!” I sang along. “When are you going to take me home?” Angelica said. “The Message” was playing. “Don’t push me cause I’m close to the edge!” the partiers screamed along. “I’m trying not to lose my head.” “Whenever you want,” I said. “What?” craning toward me. “Whenever you want,” I said, louder. “But what do *you* want?” she said, pushing me away from the dancefloor. “I don’t know.” “What do you *want*?” We were standing at the elevator bank. A zombie clown was dry humping a furry Muppet. Grover? “Yes, you do,” Angelica said. “I wanted you to want me but what I want is...I don’t know.” “And not knowing is half the battle,” I said, making her laugh. “Smartass,” she said.

Two zombies were all over each other, their faces less kissing than smearing against each other, fake blood and whatever else turning their faces into pizza, their limbs clumsily intertwining, arms slapping against chests, legs mashing against thighs.

“Better than dumbass,” I said, pointing to the triangle-shaped elevator that just popped on. “I think—” “Think?” she said, following me into the elevator. “What do you feel? In your body?” “Where else would I feel?” “You’re always in your head.” “Where else can I be?” It was hard to talk while there was a gorilla doing who knows what behind me. We were quiet for a while. Our elevator landed, opened up at the lobby. “I don’t want to be your emotional teething ring,” she said, finally. I laughed. “What’s so funny?” “Nothing,” I said. “Then why are you laughing?” “I don’t know. The way you put it. ‘Emotional teething ring.’ Well put.” “I can’t do this,” she said, the space between us like breathable foam. “This?” “Us.” “No?” “I’m sad all the time.” “I’m sorry.” “And so are you.” “Okay.” “Okay? That’s all you have to say.” “What else is there to say? We came. We saw. We squandered.” “Ha,” she said. “That was stupid,” I said. “I’m sorry.” “I can’t be with anybody.” “Okay.” “Stop saying that,” she said, taking my hand. “I’m sorry.” “Stop saying that, too,” she said, casting my hand from her and walking away. She had let me go. I was gone.

I was on the street. And a brass and drum street band came toward me. It was a joyful noise, utter zaniness. At one point, one crazed drummer, a woman with leopard rosettes tattooed on her face, climbed onto a bass drum held aloft by other people, stood on it, mallet-banged it, lit a sparkling smoke bomb, and then leaped into the crowd.

If desire consumes, then what’s left? Nothing? And who would want that? But if I am consumed and the Other is consumed, is something else made in the interim? What you lose always stays with you. I had danced the night away, but it will return, tomorrow at the latest, I promise.

## 10.28

Cold again. New York City has two seasons: six months of hell frozen over and then everything else. Had flu season started, yet? Needed to get a flu shot. If every city can be likened to a body,

with heart and brain and arteries or whatever, then they, too, had illnesses, clots and fevers, and cancers metastasizing in darkness. Christmas begins right after Halloween. And everywhere “sheepers,” sheep shopping for things they’ve been driven to buy because of advertising, which does nothing but prey on your vulnerabilities. It opens the wound and offers the cheap plastic bandage it’ll surely rip off to start the sick process all over again.

There is no “grand scheme of things.” It was raining and I was walking, intermittently marveling at the sky-scarring lightning, thunder’s sonic boom. The city, filthy as ours, needed a good rainfall, the cleansing it brought, the asphalt a kind of dirty frying pan, steam rising from it, the putrescent funk of garbage bags left for far too long on the street wafting in the air. And then rain falls and that metallic smell of petrichor comes and purifies everything. Molly posted about Wonderland’s *American Book of the Dead*, which she described as “a marvelous debut novel, where a somewhat routine but still heavily-charged day is interrupted by memories of an intensely erotic and violent and visceral past, every lyrical sentence seemingly sculpted onto the page, displaying a keen ear for dialogue, not to mention her vast command of sentential acoustics, the overall result of which is unsettling and evocative.” Max posted. “What doesn’t fill you makes you hunger.” “What doesn’t thrill you makes you wander,” Max commented. I maneuvered my way past a “white” man tarped beneath a golf umbrella, the SUV of the sidewalk, or is it the Hummer? Humbrella?

## 10.29

A flash lit up the room followed by an explosion. So much for soundproof windows. At least I couldn’t hear the car alarms set off by the thunder. Vibration sensors are a wonder, in any case. The window shades slid open, responding to the command I shouted at my machine. It was raining, pouring, really, as if the sky had opened up and let an ocean fall, and I couldn’t get out of bed. One of the windows slid open. I listened to the rain fall, the wind howling.

Lumbering up, I sat on the edge of the bed, lightly smacked my cheeks. “Wake up,” I said. “I am awake,” I said. “But are you ‘woke’?” I said. And I laughed. “You’re not fooling anyone,” I said, stretching my arms out, reaching for something above me but I couldn’t say what. A puddle had formed on the floor beneath the open window.

I wanted to stay in the apartment. There was no way I could stay in the apartment. The word screaming its literal meaning: “a separated place.” I didn’t want to see anyone. I didn’t want to be alone. I hoped someone would call. Someone real. No one called. So I browsed until I drowsed.

### 10.30

Dr. Powell’s office was in her home, a cozy brownstone in Park Slope, which smelled like old money. She had the affected elocution of Golden Age Hollywood leading ladies, like Claudette Colbert and Katharine Hepburn. Would she pronounce the big-box store Target “Tar-zhay”? Clasp my hands at the door, her “white,” wrinkled hands, warm and papery, she directed me through a large dark living room and into a red velvet-walled sitting room, where she pointed me toward one of its oxblood red leather chairs, several candles trembling around us. “Ah, a womb,” I said. “I get it.” Or the Red Room, an “anomalous extradimensional space” in *Twin Peaks*, which I didn’t mention. I half-expected the Man from Another Place, though, to emerge from behind one of the room’s sumptuous red velvet curtains. “Lovely space,” I said. “I’m so delighted you like it,” she said, smiling. “Let’s begin, shall we?” “How can I refuse?” I said.

She talked about the space we would be creating together. “Take a deep breath,” Powell said, “and just allow your eyes to close.” “Just allow,” she said. “Acknowledge,” she said. “Release,” she said. I released tension and pain, in each and every muscle and tendon and nerve. “Just allow yourself to be,” she said. I allowed warm waves to flow over my head and face and

eyebrows and eyes and nose and cheeks, my muscles melting, waves of relaxation flowing over my mouth and lips and tongue and throat and ears and neck, my muscles melting and blending. I allowed outside noises and thoughts to come and go, without judgment, warm waves flowing over my shoulders and arms and wrists and hands, all tension dripping from my fingertips. I allowed the waves to flow over my chest and stomach and waist and hips and thighs and groin, feeling a pleasant tingling down my spine and down around my knees and calves and ankles, waves flowing down my feet and toes, all tension and pain flowing out of my toes. I was sinking deeper and deeper. Powell said I was in a place of oneness, a place of love. She said I was with the "One." She said I was safe and that I could see and witness anything. She said I could see someone who would help me understand the life I was living now. "Let yourself go," she said. "Let yourself go. Detach." "Let myself go," I said. "Yes," she said. "Let myself go?" "Yes," she said. Where do you go when you let yourself go? Is it where you go when you've been let go? Let gone? "Tell me who you see," she said. "No one," I said. "I don't see anyone." "Allow," she said. "Acknowledge," she said. "Release," she said. "I can't do this," I said, standing up, my heart hammering. "Please," she said. "Please sit." "I can't," I said. "I have to go," I said. "Please stay," she said. "We can try again. Or another time." "Sorry," I said, my breath short, as if I'd been running and maybe I had been, toward something or away from something I wasn't sure. "Sorry, I have to go." I said, already walking out of the room, speeding up, rushing toward the door, opening it, and walking down the brownstone's steps, walking down the sidewalk, past the "white" man with the tiny white dog, past the "white" couple arguing about something, a glazy-eyed child with them on a machine, past a street-sweeping truck, the rush of its cylindrical brushes somehow soothing me, so I walked alongside it, watched it spray water, watched it suck up debris: leaves and twigs and bottle caps and straws and cigarette butts and plastic grocery bags and potato chip bags and bits of paper and plastic forks and spoons and knives.

Later, sitting in the apartment in semi-darkness, I heard the buzzer ring. Delivery guy. Take-out, whatever the cuisine, has to be one of the most depressing things. The anonymous packaging of it. Delivered to us in our separated places, the packaged meals' powerful aroma arrives almost as a surprise, albeit an undeserved one, the scent we haven't labored to produce. Practically salivating after opening the white cuboidal cardboard containers, though, I emptied their contents onto plates, stuffed the oleaginous, brackish foodstuffs into my mouth. Food coma-ed, I drowsed off, and then rummaged the bags for dessert. These days, fortune cookies function as mini-self-improvement message conveyers. One of mine read, "If you're a pessimist, consider just how futile that attitude can be." Thing is, encouraging a pessimist to consider the futility of something is probably not such a great idea, it being an encouragement, I would think, to continue wallowing in their misery. "An event can't be created in the past," my machine said. Jessie "drunk bought a professional, portable, personal breathalyzer."

Crawford called. "Good news!" she said, uncharacteristically cheery. "Turn on the news!" "Television on!" I said. "Hanging up now," she said, and did. "News!" I said. And there it was: all charges against V had been dropped. They showed video footage of the feds planting a three-liter pressure cooker full of nails and ball bearings and ammonium nitrate-based explosive material in V's studio. I couldn't believe my eyes and ears. Minutes later, they showed V being released from Manhattan Correctional Center, Crawford beside him. "How does it feel to be free?" a "black" reporter asked V. "I'm not free," V said. "Just lucky. Sure, I was smart enough to have had the foresight to install the cameras. But what if I hadn't done that? So no, I'm not a free man at all." He laugh-barked. "I'm a fluke." Locking elbows with V, Crawford directed him toward the car waiting for them.

Happy, ecstatic, really, I walked up and down the length of the apartment. Coming to the kitchen on one of my rounds, I stopped and stared at the sink, which was piled with dishes, pots and pans, and cutlery. I turned the faucets on, tested the temperature of the water with an index finger. Picking up a plate and beginning to scrub it with a sponge, I recalled how much I loved doing dishes, that it had never felt like drudgery to me, the act instead feeling something like meditation, like surrender, a disappearing act, where I, too, “submerge,” emerging from wherever I was more clear-headed, maybe even cleansed. The water was warm. Pinpricks of light gleamed from the frothing soap. I saw a man walking, walking down a path. There was light and then there was darkness and then there was light again. The man knelt down and closed his eyes. He prayed silently, his whole body shaped into the words. I wasn’t sure exactly how this was possible but this was what he was doing, what the words had done to him. What were they doing to me? I picked up another dish, scrubbed the soapy sponge against it in circles, the warm water falling from the faucet, and the man picked up a canister, lifted it over his head, and poured its contents over his head, the liquid dripping down his neck, down past his shoulders and chest and thighs and legs. Drenched, he reached toward something on the ground, a box, a box full of matches. He opened the box, took a match out of it, and struck the match against the coarse striking surface. And then he placed the flickering match against his arm, which immediately burst into flame, and then my arm was under the faucet’s running water. Whose arm was burning? Whose arm was being doused with water?

### **10.31**

I took the train to Midtown Manhattan, to meet with the executors of the Play estate. Tying up loose ends, or cutting the fallopian tubes, I supposed. A flash of his smile. An echo of his laughter. The clearest memory is perfect devastation. Sitting beside me were two young “white” men. Both

were mumbling but somehow understood each other. I caught a word every so often, sometimes even a phrase, and only once a complete thought, one of them saying to the other, “Reached my friend quota, last night.” Friend quota!

On the train, an old “black”-“white” “biracial” man sitting across from me was happy, and it was the saddest thing. He was singing McFaddon & Whitehead’s “Ain’t No Stoppin’ Us Now.” Veering in and out of tune but remembering all the words, he reached out to shake my hand, fooled, perhaps, into thinking my smile meant I was happy, too, and maybe I was, during that brief moment before he let my hand go. Later, walking aboveground, I could sense all the cameras, the scrutinous eye of the surveillance state, the no-longer-secret history of spying humming, softly, all around me. Was this what it felt like to be a celebrity, soured by the limelight? I passed the “naked” cowboys and cowgirls; the balloon-boobed body-paintees; the Spider-Men, Wonder Women, and Iron Men; the Marios and Luigis; the SpongeBob Squarepantses; glimpsed Godzilla battling the Statue of Liberty; and King Kong humping the Empire State Building; and waded through the bug-eyed tourists who loved them. Saw a friend from high school selling cheap souvenirs, who pretended she didn’t see me. There but for the grace of but I don’t believe in gods. A “Buddhist monk” offered me a heavily-ornamented, gold-colored card, the embossed word “Peace” rising from it. Thanking him, I accepted it and walked away. He gently grabbed my forearm, asking me to write my name in his book, after which he gave me a beaded bracelet. Thanking him again, I walked away. He grabbed me again and asked me for money, saying the more money I gave the more peace I’d have. Saying nothing, I gave him back the card and bracelet.

The building was a concretion of postmodern excess. Empty swerve.

Play’s lawyer was a lawyer: all business, no humor, bloodless. Short, stout, skin like plaster. “So why am I here?” I asked, unwaveringly meeting his stare.

“We have a gift,” he said, lacing his pale, sinewy fingers on the desk.

“Well, what is it?” I was tiring of the weighty pauses.

“Not a ‘what’ but a ‘who,’” he said.

“I don’t understand.”

The door opened behind me, and I turned to see a “white” man walking in, and even with the meticulously coiffed beard, the shoulder-length hair dyed dark piano-key black, I recognized him, my body shuddering at the sight. “Miss me?” His perfect smile. Something wrong with his eyes, though.

“Motherfucker,” I said, standing up, but falling to the floor, my knees giving out on me.

“I’m sorry,” Play said.

“Why?” I was drowning, my head a torrent of words, feelings, ideas. Numb, I slid toward a chair, grabbed an armrest, slowly lifted myself up.

“Never underestimate the stupidity of Americans,” he said. “You taught me that.” He chuckled. A death rasp.

“The fuck?” I said.

“Facts don’t matter,” he said. “They are matter,” his abrupt laugh a kind of bark. “I learned that from you, too.” No, nothing wrong with his eyes. He’d had the lazy eye corrected.

“Motherfucker.” I rushed toward him, shaky legs, notwithstanding, and swung at him, cracked my fist against his face. Play fell, cowered into a ball, and I kicked him, repeatedly, yelling and cursing at him. I broke my body against his, the dam inside breaking, too, and I let it all flood out. I wanted to smash the smugness out of him. Even now, back from the dead, he wasn’t alive, not really. He was death incarnate, a monster, a giant leech preying on the living, preying on the dying, too, preying on me, a man somewhere in between. And then there were arms on me, prying me away, pushing me into a chair.

Play was sitting in a chair, too, head down, sweat wet, bruised, deeply breathing. “I have a plan,” he said, finally, agitatedly. I glared at him. And we stared at each other for a long while. Was this some kind of standoff? Was I in some insipid reality teevee show? “Resurrection,” quaverless, his familiar “cool” taking over once again. The rest was a blur. Play talked about the “sightings,” photos of him in public, carefully placed in the tabloids, all the blogorrhea. “Like Elvis,” he said.

“Or Bigfoot,” I offered.

“Generating a buzz,” we said.

My head buzzed, and my stomach clenched, and I threw up.

I left the meeting distraught, anger and sadness churning inside. I wanted to call someone, but who? I couldn’t say I’d never felt this alone, because I had, many times before, and I found no comfort in its familiarity, in recognizing that, like everything, even the worst that could happen, it would end. There’s a movie, a maudlin Hollywood vehicle, a rags-to-riches tale, where the “black” hero trudges through the mud of life, and at the end he wins, discovers he gets the job, the dream gig. He thanks his employers, but rushes out, betraying little of what he’s feeling, the sheer exhilaration, and he goes outside, where he finally lets go. He’s got no one to call, no one to share that moment with. I’d say that that was what I was feeling: blandly mediated—but how can you feel a reference, an audio-visual correspondence? Someone said: “Don’t divorce him. Do what he do.” “Cheat?” her friend said. “It ain’t cheating if he cheating,” she said. “It ain’t?” “That’s what I’m saying,” the first woman said.

Riding the train back home, I was terrorized by my own imaginings, one terrible narrative overtaking another. I imagined a deranged man—it’s always a man—a deranged and angry “white” man—it’s always a deranged and angry “white” man—rising from his seat and taking out two semi-automatic guns. He would turn, robotically, to the couple on his right and unload a round

into the man's chest and another into the woman's screaming mouth. I'd watch as bullets flew into the three teenagers who were running away from him. The rest of the riders at this point would be knotted together at the end of the car, where I sat, and the man would shoot them all, moving his guns left to right as if he were spraying a lawn, ridding it of an insect infestation. I'd be last—a bullet in the head. It was a terrible vision, and I kept shaking my head, trying to rub it out, somehow. Dreaming up another dreadful scenario was the only way I could stop thinking of that imaginary horror-show. I closed my eyes, imagining myself alone on the train, completely alone, the train remote-controlled, and somehow inexplicably hurtling off the tracks, falling into the river, where I'd subsequently drown.

It was dark when I finally came up from underground, slaloming past all the isolatos, every single one of them looking for something or someone better, a better job, better apartment, better boyfriend, better girlfriend, better husband, better wife. It was unseasonably hot and noxious, the air an admixture of sweating asphalt and fuel emissions. I was dazed, still shaken from Play's "resurrection," weakly slogging through the clogged streets, almost blindly navigating past collisions and collapsings, of visions, myths, and fantasies: a squadron of soldiers, dressed entirely in green, their faces and hands painted the same color, like the familiar plastic toys; naked geishas, powdered white, digitized pixelations covering their nipples and genitals; a trio of kidults wearing footed furry onesies, each one carrying bags full of trick-or-treat loot; a woman pushing an empty stroller, her head encased in an overgrown milk carton, her face poking out from it, the word "FOUND" written on the surface above her forehead. Overheard: "I'd like to see what the partial shebang looks like." "Answer a question to help people get to know you," my machine said.

I couldn't help thinking, among the many zombies and ghosts and skeletons, that I was the one who was dead, that I'd been dead long before, that what I called life was a charade, of my own making. Three tunic, robe, and cloak-garbed figures rushed past me, likely late for the premier of

the teevee version of the insipid corporate space opera franchise airing tonight. “May the Farce be with you!” I cried out. “The farce is strong with this one,” I said, quietly, slapping my chest. I saw everything around me with cold clarity, but I wasn’t really paying attention. Lost in details, losing sight of the bigger picture, I kept bumping into people, various costumed folk. “God loves a drunk,” an angel said, gently pushing me away. Who was this benumbed person, this penumbra of a man, she’d touched? Overheard: “I didn’t have a chance to pull it out today.” I saw an uncostumed “white” man throw a Super Slurp, Hulky Gulp, or whatever toward a garbage can and miss, the plastic cup smashing against the side of the can, toxic food dyes, artificial flavors and sweeteners, and carcinogenic preservatives spraying out, the bright red liquid splashing against and around the can like a bad action painting, said man not picking up said cup and putting it in said can. America.

Crossing the street, I looked up, watched cars crawl across a dank overpass. Looking down at my machine, I saw a text from V: “Life is what you remake of it.” And in that interval, that pinprick of time, between before and after, a flood of sensations, of feelings, of vibrations and waves, was released, like a compressed file unzipped. Call it recognition yielding to remorse yielding to acceptance as a car screeched toward me, its brassy cacophony barely cutting through my sleepwalking cocoon. Living within that interval, I felt another body against mine, colliding into me, surprisingly, from behind, forcing me forward, away from the still oncoming steel juggernaut and onto the other side of the street, where I landed unscathed; the sound of wet meat and fresh bone crushed by rubber and metal, dragged against asphalt, rending the air with reek and wreck. Jumping to my feet, I saw the crushed but discernible shape, the constellation of stars: my hero, my superhero, blood draped behind his mangled body like a cape.

And there was night.