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GAD'S BOOK

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE

by

Conner Dylan Bassett

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Abstract

Conner Dylan Bassett

Gad's Book

Gad's Book is a fast-paced, darkly humorous novel that blends philosophical fiction, political satire, and metafiction. The narrative follows an unnamed copywriter and aspiring novelist who—while struggling to navigate the social-technological landscape in present-day Berkeley—unwittingly joins Antifa. When we first meet the narrator, he is awkward, obsessive, and, like so many of his generation, anxious about everything. He (and his counterparts) experience social media anxiety disorder, filter bubbles, the transience of data, the attention deficit, the medicalization of depression, internet culture, the redundancy of technological life, artificial intelligence, and artificial realities. From the very first pages of the novel, the narrator seems to believe that he needs to have an opinion about anything and everything—and, more importantly, that his opinions need to be “correct.” His actions reflect his anxiety: he hides from his ten housemates, whom he has delayed meeting; pretends to smoke cigarettes even when no one is watching; practices making faces on his iPhone camera before going to parties; and spends much of his free time thinking up increasingly bizarre plots for the novel he isn't writing. And that's another thing: he's anxious about (not) writing. Amid growing political tension (it's an election year), he encounters a cast of characters—enigmatic political activists who offer him an escape from boredom, cynicism, and inertia—and he soon finds himself entangled in

dangerous conflicts, complex romantic relationships, and sexual misadventures that first enliven then threaten to destroy his carefully-constructed life.

Supplemental Essays

These essays represent the beginnings of two separate critical projects which both inform my own novel writing. The first two essays aim to historicize and theorize the autofictional novel in English and its importance as new kind of a political-realist novel. I define the “autofictional novel” as a metafictional work where the author herself acts as the protagonist, and in which the author-protagonist records the process of writing the novel at hand. This is to say that the author-protagonist presents her personal experience as a poetic and political creation. I explore how autofiction blends autobiography and fiction, aggregating a necessarily incongruous project. This incongruity—the paradox of presenting events both factual and imaginary simultaneously—perplexes readymade interpretive paradigms, not only of literature but also of the “autonomous individual.” The paradox of autofiction asks the reader to consider personal experience as fiction, and fiction (artistic or otherwise) as a social fact.

The third essay construes the first chapter of what will be a book-length collection of essays about Daniil Kharms. This chapter explores Kharms’s prose collection titled *Sluchai* as a work of sequential intrusions, disturbances, false starts, and suspensions. In *Sluchai*, I argue, Kharms reimagines the relationship between lived experience, political witness, and fiction writing and offers up an entirely new model of “life writing.”

Gad's Book

1.

That man. Something about him. Something wrong. He made a face like he wanted to have sex with everything he looked at, and he looked at everything. He cocked his head back to simulate height, so that his eyes seemed to point down on the object of his gaze.

Now he looked at me.

Now he opened his hand and extended his arm and told me to sit. Down, he said.

And I did.

That was the beginning of all my problems. The first of my last days in California.

*

I was still living in the Midwest when, on a clear winter morning, I woke up and didn't know who I was. Black eye. Cut lip. Broken tooth. Blood everywhere. I thought it was someone else's. All over the pillow and sheets and carpet. Smearred on the wall in the shape of a crescent moon.

Joe, my housemate—muscular guy with a manbun—was standing over me. He looked down. He made a face like he didn't believe I was real.

I'd had a seizure, Joe told me. I'd been sleepwalking. I'd kicked a chair over, made an obscene gesture, punched Joe in the neck, called him a snakebitch, and threatened to call the police if he didn't bring me a beer.

Christ, he said. What are you repressing?

In the following weeks, I had the sense that someone or something had been tinkering with my memory, remapping my consciousness, reprogramming my thoughts. I had the thought that I should go to sleep and never wake up. The thought that the universe was contracting. The thought that I was growing a very small penis in my armpit. The thought that aliens were colonizing my brain.

And then I had another seizure. And then another.

I went to the emergency room. I met with a neurologist. He shined a light in my eye and said—in a heavy German accent—look at my finger. Look. He poked my knee and said touch your nose. He put his hand on my neck and on my lower back and said breathe, breathe. He touched my shoulder, my elbow. He lifted my arm. Cough, he said. Blink. Blink faster. He said remember these words: orange, airplane,

bulldog. He told me that I seemed stressed. He said, stress and sleep deprivation are triggers for seizures. You should probably give up coffee and alcohol, too.

But I'm writing a novel, I said. I need coffee, at least.

Maybe you should lay off the novel for a while. Pump the breaks. Maybe that's the source of your anxiety.

I didn't know what to say.

Now. Repeat the words I told you.

Orange. Bulldog. Airplane.

Orange. *Airplane*. Bulldog.

Right.

After three EEGs and two MRIs, I was diagnosed with nocturnal epilepsy and put on a heavy dose of something I still can't remember how to pronounce.

After that, I felt like I was living twice. The world was traced in thick black lines. Everything was intense and real. It was a gift to be alive. No more cynicism, I thought. No more freezing winters.

One afternoon, I planned my escape. I called Parker, a friend from graduate school who had moved to Oakland, California a few years earlier to work as a marketer at one or another tech company.

He took my call.

Parker, I said.

Long time, he said.

I want to get out of here, I said. I want to go west.

He laughed and called me an idiot.

I want to be inspired. I want to practice the unironic religion of myself.

He called me an idiot again. *West* is a bad word, you know. No one says that word anymore unless they mean to say something bad.

I asked him questions about moving to California. What do I have to do to get there?

No, he laughed. It's too late. California used to be a cure for sadness. Now, California is the saddest state in the country. Google it. Everyone is lonely and stressed out and scared and angry.

Can you help me?

A few weeks later, Parker hooked me up with his old job at LinkedIn as a copywriter. And you can work from home, he said. Huge perk.

I had an old truck, a small thing. Most of the time, I was embarrassed to admit that it was mine—embarrassed by the way it lunged forward, by the way it sputtered and spit. There was no need to drive it, really. Not until now. Now I was on my way. I took it down I-80, slow as it went, all the way to California.

*

Six months later and already summer was over. I couldn't tell the difference. The weather was fine, but that meant nothing in that part of the world, where every day was hot or cold or lukewarm—whatever time of year—and the days did not follow logically one after the other and things changed so fast, they seemed not to change at all.

That afternoon, I did what I tended to do when I knew what I was doing. I walked to the Writer's Block bookstore, where I planned to sit and work on the novel I hadn't been writing. I went north on Telegraph Avenue, taking my good time and stopping in a few intervening shops, including the coffee nook where I bought an espresso I didn't need, and the CVS where I picked up the anti-depressants I wasn't taking and the seizure medication I wasn't taking, and Joe's Smoke Shop where I bought cigarettes that I didn't smoke but carried visibly in my shirt pocket and occasionally held between my thumb and pointer fingers so as to be seen holding them.

Telegraph Avenue is very old and very new. Even now, months after moving to Berkeley, I was possessed by the clatter of it; by the street vendors selling athleisure, "mom jeans for non-moms," Forever Pants, crop tops, floral blouses, and Blundstone rustic boots; by the rumble of bicycles, skateboarders, and car horns; by the rows of bakeries, boutique kiosks, popup giftshops selling hippie and post-hippie kitsch; by the stacks of used books and the bins of records for sale outside of stores that didn't otherwise sell books or records; by the tastefully grungy health food stores stocked with organic everything. Grass-fed, grass-finish. Local beets and onions and

knob celery and sunchoke and Brussels berry sprout and yard-long beans. Yogurt from mother's milk. Yogurt from synthetic alternative milk. Guac-Kale-Mole. Vegetable milk. Veganic Sprouted Ancient Maize Flakes. Edible Flowers. Kelp Granules. Wild Salmon Skin. Raw. Unadulterated. Straight-from-the-hive. Root juice. Bean Sauce. Sauce Box. Boxed Water. Pumpkin Spice Rice Milk. Beer Wine. Sparkling Wine Water.

A dusty light cut the late-morning haze and lit the edges of the brick buildings and the white adobe buildings and the featureless glass buildings that looked like an archaic vision of the future. The people came out, and more were coming. There were transients, huddled around the benches and alleyways, with threadbare tents and dogs. There were students and artists, the new free-spirits who resembled the old free-spirits. There were tech types with their heads in gadgets. And there were tourists—voyeurs to the spectacles and specters of radical culture, to the ghosts of the city's past, now preserved and reproduced in splashy simulacrum. The street had the bloated, overwrought qualities of a parody—a pastiche of the golden era of free-thinking and free love.

I opened my photo app and practiced making my faces into its camera—the ones I planned to wear for whoever looked at me. I wore loafers without socks, and my pants rolled up, a faded coral striped button-up under a Forever 21 boyfriend blazer, because I wanted my disheveled appearance to seem natural, careless, too casual to evoke a sense of fashion—enough to warrant attention, but not full scrutiny. I pretended to be what I was: an ordinary person, a good citizen, polite and agreeable,

nonthreatening, one of the nice ones, who said the right things. I wore an old wristwatch, fastened backward, upside-down, around my arm so that the dial sat on the inside of my wrist, and I flipped my hand over to see it, open-closed-open. It was a woman's watch—or so I had been told—with a thin strap and a small greenish face. But it did not tell time because it was broken: the hands showed twelve, always twelve, midnight or noon. I don't know where I got it. I don't remember getting it. Maybe I found it or took it by mistake. In any case, I liked to wear it, to feel it there. It mattered to me. The tangibility of it. The evidence of something else.

When I arrived at the bookstore, the glass door was heavy, and I had to pull the hospital-style handle with both hands to exert enough strength to pry it from its latch. I went down the small flight of stairs toward the reading table in the corner where the novel section was.

Most days, that area was empty. But not today. Today, a man was already there, sitting in the same place I usually sat—in the chair that leaned against the back wall where the entire bookshop could be observed.

It was him. *That* man. The one with the face.

I did not approach the table. Not yet. I tried to look at him without looking at him. I tried to stop looking. It didn't matter. He was everywhere. All torso and shoulders, built for a uniform. He had a beard and a thick braid that fell below his neckline. His frame was clad in faded black—his jeans were black, his T-shirt, his

hair. I recognized what we had in common: an ambiguous complexion, a vague makeup. He could have been Turkish—of Turkish descent, like me. Or he could have been Spanish, Italian, southern French, Northern African, a certain kind of Welsh. Maybe Russian, eighteenth-century Russian, southern Russian, not exactly Russian per se, but maybe of the Baltic region. He could have been Greek, maybe, or Algerian, Egyptian, Brazilian, Brazilian-German.

Look. Don't look. He was reading, hunched over a gigantic book that looked worn by wear or water, and when he turned the pages—gold leaf, onionskin—it sounded like the paper was being torn. And he turned them anxiously, as if reading with pleasure or hatred, as if acting out the content of his reading, and the accumulation of torn pages sounded like he was destroying the book, tearing it apart page by page.

Now it was too late—nothing else for me to do—and I approached him, slowly at first, slower now, to avoid drawing attention to myself. I took the back of the chair across from him and pulled it away from the table at an angle so as not to sit across from him directly.

He looked up like an animal from drinking. He waved his hand. Like that. Go ahead, he said. Take it.

I slid into the chair and set my bag on the table and removed my laptop and opened the screen.

Now the man was looking at my bag. Now at me. Now at my bag. Now at me. He kept his head that way—cocked, as if waiting for me to notice him, as if wanting

to say something, or waiting, maybe, for an opportunity to interject without completely interrupting whatever he thought I was doing.

He twirled his beard.

I didn't look.

He cleared his throat.

I didn't look.

He exhaled. Hey, he said. Look. He pointed at me. We share something. The same design.

I was confused. Wait, I said. So, you *are* Turkish?

What? he said.

Oh, you're Jewish? I said.

What?

What?

What?

Nothing. Never mind.

He pointed at my bag. Your bag, he said. I'm talking about your bag.

I looked down at the thing he was calling my bag—a standard canvas tote. It wasn't my bag, not really. I'd taken it from the community college lost-and-found a few weeks earlier when I happened to walk by. I saw it on a shelf, and said, Hey, that's my bag, the tote. And just like that, the kid behind the counter gave it up. Now I worried that the bag belonged to this man and that he'd accuse me of stealing it, or worse: that he'd threaten me if I didn't return it, that he'd cause a scene about it—

shame me, call me out publicly, accuse me of theft, embarrass me to the point of being unable to return to this bookstore.

The bag? Oh. You can have it, I said politely—so politely, in fact, that I worried I might have come off as condescending and sarcastic, that I might have been perceived to say precisely the opposite of what I meant.

He grinned and leaned forward. No, he said. I'm one of you. He kept on grinning like that. His grin grew ghastly and turned into a full-blown smile, and a wide gap appeared between the top and bottom rows of teeth, and, for a moment, I thought he was going to scream. I'm one of you, he repeated. The arrows. Those. He pointed. That.

I didn't know anything about any arrows. I examined the bag, turning it over and back again, and yes—there, in the bottom right corner was an almost undetectable image. A small sewn-on patch: three skinny arrows pointing downward at a slant.

Now the man lifted his shirt sleeve to reveal his bare shoulder on which was tattooed the same symbol. Three arrows. Now he made a fist and extended it toward me for a bump. I bumped it.

I looked at my wristwatch and pretended to think about something and went back to writing and not writing my novel.

We sat like this in silence, writing, not writing. I glanced at him to see whether he was glancing at me and caught him glancing to see if I might be glancing at him, and on one occasion, he looked up from his reading and made a surprised face

directly at me, as if I were reading the same book and wanted to know whether I was thinking the same thing he had been thinking.

I looked away, so he looked away, and then I looked at him and he looked back at me.

Now he hiccupped. He hiccupped again. I ignored him and typed something something on my computer. I was trying to write—something something something—but he kept on hiccupping, although hiccupping was not the right word for what he was doing. It was more like grunting, inhaling through his nose and forcing out a semi-verbal spasm that went, *Neh*. To hear the hiccup was almost to see it: to look right down into the man's throat, to watch his esophagus swell and shut. And he went on doing it, never excusing himself, so that the act seemed habitual, natural even—a compulsory expression of some internal, bodily crisis both involuntary and cultivated.

Because silence between us was so frequently marked by looking and not looking at each other, it felt like we were having a conversation, or that we should be having a conversation. Finally, he said, *so*. Just like that. *So*. *So*, he said, what are you? A student? What? A techie?

A writer, I heard myself say.

A writer?

I mean, I said, I work as a *copywriter* for LinkedIn. But I also write.

He clicked his tongue as if to summon a dog. What do you write?

I'm trying to write a novel, I let myself say because I wanted to make conversation.

He grinned again, and again I thought he was going to scream. Is your novel about a thirty-something living in Berkeley who writes a novel about a thirty-something living in Berkeley?

I didn't answer.

Do writers write about anything other than themselves nowadays? Do they have visions?

The sun hung in the back window and a concentration of heat settled on top of me. I was sweating in my jogger pants. I wiped my forehead with the collar of my t-shirt. I pulled at my crotch and changed the subject. What are you reading? I looked again at my wristwatch to show that I didn't really care but wanted to be polite.

He held up his book to show me. The Holy Bible. King James Version. I'm reading Ezekiel, he said.

Ezekiel, I said. What's Ezekiel's story?

Ezekiel is a messenger of God in the final days of Jerusalem, he said, speaking in the present tense. Before the Babylonian empire demolishes the city and desecrates the temple. Judah turns its back on God, so God turns his back on Judah. To warn the Jerusalemites of their coming destruction, Ezekiel wanders into the desert and performs a series of prophetic acts. He plucks out every single strand of hair on his head. He pulls them out one by one and scatters them around the ground. And he

burns the follicles of hair. He lies on his left side for three hundred and ninety days. And makes bread with his own excrement and vomit. And eats it.

I tugged at my crotch again. Wait, he makes bread with excrement?

His own poop, yeah. And eats it.

I don't get it.

What don't you get?

Why does he do that?

To prove something.

To prove that you can make bread out of poop?

To prove the destruction of the city, he said. To prove it true. To show the people what suffering looks like. He wants them to feel it in their bones. Confusion and fear and deprivation and abjection. Images are the highest form of communication. Words are no good. The people don't hear words. They don't think with their heads, but with their spinal cords.

He went on, droning in a deep voice like a poet reading on the radio. So, he said, Jerusalem is sacked. Vast numbers of people. Slaughter and bloodshed and pandemonium and war. Capture. Torture. Starvation. Cannibalism. And Ezekiel has a vision of the heavens. He sees the sky open. Four beings descending. Each with four faces. Man, lion, ox, eagle. Four and four. And each has four wings. And their wings beat and make the sound of water crashing against the shores of a thousand nations. And their wings are gold, and they have the feet of oxen. And the whole body is covered in eyes, the hands, arms, legs—all of it. Thousands of watchful eyes. Enough

eyes to watch the entire earth. And the wings go up and up, and the vision follows. And there is a throne of fire. An apocalyptic throne on which death himself sits, the embodiment of light.

What was I supposed to say to that? I had nothing. I couldn't think of anything. I said: God. The word came right out of me, as if spoken by another. God, I said, works in mysterious ways.

He made a blank face.

Why did I say that? Mysterious ways? Does God work in mysterious ways? I was embarrassed to say it. What did it mean?

Quickly my embarrassment turned into panic, and in that panic, I devised not one explanation for my outburst, but three, and because I could not decide which of these explanations would be more believable, I said all of them, one after the other: I need to get to work, I said. I have a doctor's appointment. It's my turn to make dinner, and I need to get to the grocery store. I forgot. Completely forgot.

He waved his hand as if performing a magic trick and gathered up his belongings and stuffed his book and notebook and pen into a leather shoe bag. I'll walk you out, he said. I told him he didn't have to do that, but he was already up, next to me. He put his hand on me and looked down at my forehead.

Before I could walk away, he proposed a smoke—a genial smoke, he called it, among friends, real quick, quick smoke. Like Ishmael and Queequeg.

Thanks, I said. But I don't smoke.

He pointed at me. You have cigarettes in your shirt pocket.

I looked down and felt naked. Oh, yeah. Here. I opened the pack and extended a cigarette to him and he took it and lit it and put it in his mouth.

I held up mine with two fingers and let him light it, and I sucked and coughed and pretended to smoke without letting the thing really touch my lips.

Now he pointed his head up and made a face and cocked back his head like a bird and pushed his tongue out and blew smoke out in strange and contorted shapes—shapes of twisted bodies, disfigured limbs, deformed animals. A jellyfish, an elephant.

Sunlight fell the color of a low-grade infection on the grass and the withered trees and the foggy windows of the adjacent yoga studios that ran lengthwise along the street.

What's your name? he said.

I said my name.

I'm Lawson, he said. Zeke Lawson.

Wait. I almost laughed. *Your* name is Ezekiel?

He showed his teeth. That's right.

When we said goodbye, I asked him, out of politeness, I guess, for his phone number. I didn't want his phone number—not really—so I was relieved when he told me that he didn't have a phone.

You don't have a phone? I didn't know there were still real people in the world without phones.

I'm not a *real* person.

And with that, he turned and went away. I thought I'd never see him again.

But one month later, I did.

*

I walked away at a jog. I went in circles. My legs swelled. I didn't need to walk anywhere, I admit. And I had a bike that I rode when I remembered I had one. But mostly I preferred walking. I like to feel it, the swelling.

I was thinking of other things. My mind conjured up images: a jellyfish, an elephant. It conjured the image of the arrows. Three arrows. What did they mean? My mother had a tattoo of a quiver of arrows on her ankle. It means fellowship, she had said. Friendship. But whose friendship? A single arrow might symbolize, I don't know. On a street sign an arrow indicates direction, angled motion: turn, go ahead. There, and there only. But these arrows pointed down. Go down? Down where? Did this have something to do with Thomas Pynchon? I took out my phone and googled "three arrows," and clicked the search icon. Three arrows, the phone told me: the anti-fascist political symbol. Antifa. Three arrows to represent the struggle against fascism, reaction, and capitalism. There it was. Was that it? So, the dude was a member of Antifa. So what?

I had lived in the same place since moving to Berkeley—a single room inside a tall Victorian-style house. I lived with eleven housemates but didn't know them. I hadn't managed more than a hello or a head nod in passing to any of them. I heard them talking outside my room. I heard them hooting and singing and stomping their feet. But I never saw them.

I happened to rent the room closest to the front door—a room that used to be a shared living space but had been turned into a “studio apartment” so the landlord could add another tenant, which may or may not have been legal. The location of the room allowed me to sneak in and out of the house undetected. Each time I entered, I held my breath and paused before the front door to make sure no one else was walking out. I kept my head down and lowered the top of my hood or hat to hide my face.

It wasn't that I didn't want to meet my housemates. It was only that, for the first few weeks after moving in, I didn't see them. And I wasn't actively trying to meet them now, several months after moving in, because I suspected that, in doing so—introducing myself, acting sociable and good-natured—I might appear self-absorbed, presumptuous, overeager. I worried, in other words, that I might appear to be the opposite of what I intended to be. And, by this point, I thought I'd missed my opportunity to meet them, and I felt too awkward to try to meet them now; and I thought that if I *did* try to meet them now, they would want to know why I hadn't met them sooner. Probably, I thought, they had already made assumptions about me—that I was quiet, anti-social, perverted, maybe—and they would be looking for clues to confirm these speculations. Maybe they would notice things about me they wouldn't have noticed otherwise. Bad things. How I rocked on my heels when I didn't know what to say. How I stuttered. How I laughed when I was supposed to scoff. How I said the word *interesting* as a hedge against more thoughtful commentary. And maybe they would mistake my passive attitude for snobbery or indifference.

Presently I crept into my room and locked the door and turned on the overhead and—remembering an article in the NYT about the feel-good effects of “warm” light—turned it off again, and turned on, in its place, the desk light.

Cozy.

My housemates gathered in the kitchen now. I heard them. They were eating and drinking and laughing and slamming their glasses and knives and forks on the table.

The phone in my pocket vibrated. *After last week's ICE raids, his family still doesn't know where he is. An explosion in Russia killed five elite nuclear scientists and the government's secrecy fuels speculation about the cause. Several dogs died last week after exposure to blue-green algae. Violent crime skyrockets in America's biggest cities: up 30% in San Francisco. A new study finds we're not seeing reality, our vision runs 100 milliseconds behind the physical world.*

I made a vegan burrito in the microwave, which sat atop the mini-refrigerator, next to the window. I sat at my desk and ate. I noted the similarity between the vegan “cheese” in the burrito and actual cheddar cheese. It was such an uncanny similarity, in fact, that I forced myself to dig into the trash and retrieve the burrito’s individual packaging. I read the ingredients, and, it turned out, the burrito was only a regular microwave burrito with real cheddar cheese. It didn’t matter. I wasn’t a vegan, anyway. I just wanted people to like me.

Now I went to the window. The glass, with no light behind it, produced a generic mirror, the kind you find in certain anonymous hotel rooms: reflecting

anonymity, the bare bedroom. I opened the latch and took out a cigarette and held it hand with my thumb and pointer fingers and waived it around as if someone were watching. I smelled it and waived it around again. I felt like a crazy person, acting like the person I thought I wanted to be.

I went to my bookshelf and look over all the books I wasn't reading, the books I read when I was young, the books I had wanted to read and felt too old to read now. My mother was a Turkish-Jewish immigrant to Europe—via Germany and France—and eventually to the United States. She told me that she wanted to learn how to be Western, how to think and believe and act like a Westerner. So, she read novels, believing novels contained some great secret code for self-identification. Only novels. All the great novels of a culture to which she desperately wanted to belong. I inherited her books. War and Peace, Les Misérables, Moby Dick, The Human Comedy, Robinson Crusoe, Middlemarch, The Brothers Karamazov, Magic Mountain, Madame Bovary, Heart of Darkness, The Count of Monte Cristo, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Pride and Prejudice, A Passage to India, The Awakening, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, The Scarlet Letter, The Sun Also Rises, The Great Gatsby, The Good Soldier, The Stranger, The Sound and the Fury, Malloy, Invisible Man, A Clockwork Orange, Naked Lunch, Fahrenheit 451, The Adventures of Augie March, White Noise, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, Dune, Steppenwolf, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Brave New World. The Remains of the Day, Goodbye to Berlin, We Have Always Lived in the Castle, The Portrait of a Lady, Jesus' Son,

Ulysses, The Piano Teacher, The Trial, On the Road, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Fathers and Sons, The Dispossessed.

At the very bottom was Don Quixote. A book for younger people, I thought, lifting it up, leafing through it, cracking its spine, running my finger long the sentences and un-dogearing a few pages.

Now I turned off the lights and got in bed and began to scour the internet. Hours passed. Hours and hours. Outside, the fog rose in concentric circles and the moonlight dispersed unevenly and produced a vague, mystifying filter.

What happened next happened quickly, within the span of a few minutes, and yet it seemed, in my mind, to fill the entire evening.

I was still in bed when I heard an uproar of voices—unintelligible and rhythmic and warlike. The chanting blended into a collective slur, shouting indistinctly into a megaphone. It moved—three blocks away, then two, then one, then two, three, four, closer and farther away—a marching band or a mob, coming from the north, now the south, southwest, west. Now the collective voice gathered up again and dispersed, collected and fallen apart, gone and swallowed by a greater silence.

And now it happened.

Now and now.

A gunshot. I had to say it out loud to believe it. *That was a gunshot.* One shot. Now another. And another. I heard it like a knock at my window. Like an intruder outside of my room pounding on the glass, trying to get inside. Three knocks.

Is this happening?

Now someone cried out. Now police sirens. Someone yelled. Someone else was running. Now quiet again, no police sirens even. Nothing. The silence was therapeutic. I could hear myself hearing it. No one was screaming. There was no one there to scream.

The room reappeared and I heard my own heavy breathing. I reached for my phone, anticipating a call or a text message to come through, but the screen was dark. I thought to call someone, Parker maybe. But I worried that a call might signal my presence, my location; and that it might draw the wrong kind of attention to me.

Was it a gunshot? No, idiot. It was a firecracker. It was a backfiring motorcycle. A nail gun, maybe. Maybe a heavy object falling. You don't even know what a gun sounds like. You've never heard gunfire in your life. On television or YouTube, okay, but not in real life.

Where were my roommates? Why wasn't anyone moving? Why couldn't I hear them?

What I wanted was to rewind the scene and listen again—to hear another gunshot. Yes, I wanted the gun to fire one more time. Or no. I didn't want that exactly, but I wanted to listen to it a fourth time, to be sure that it had been what I thought it was. I googled what does a gun sound like. I googled gunshots, loud gunshots, louder gunshots. I listened to the sound over and over. I googled rifle, shotgun, machine-gun, revolver, Glock.

I sat up and went and looked out the window to see what was happening beyond the glass. The street was empty—and it was because of this emptiness, I

suddenly felt an undeniable presence. Some dim seer, out of sight, looking in. I dropped down to the floor to hide and lifted my head to see. No one.

I rationalized that what I was feeling was only a vestigial flicker of an instantly passing experience, the residue of having been with that man. Big guy with the bible. Ezekiel. Zeke. He had made an impression so singular that I had carried it with me from the bookstore to the room, and I had projected it there, where no one was. Image, afterimage.

A knot tightened.

It's the bag. The tote. I said it out loud. Throw it out. Get rid of it. I snatched the thing and shook it clean over my desk and set it in the trashcan and stomped it down and stomped again.

For the rest of the night, I slept and didn't sleep. Heart pounding in my throat, my wrists. I took some Advil and tried to forget what had happened but my attempt to forget produced additional remembering, and for the rest of the night I stayed close to my phone, looking at the screen again and again, until I became the thing I looked at: the reflected thing—the face, the sharp and jutting cheekbones. I waited—hoping to feel something again, to be made to feel—for the blank screen to light up with news of the world, to illuminate itself with a pixelated anything—anything from the present.

*

I woke and texted Parker and asked him to meet me.

Me: i need to talk

Parker: ABOUT WHAT

Me: let's meet

PARKER: MCDONALDS AT NINE

Parker always texted in capital letters. It was, he said, a playful rebellion against the juvenile obsession with lowercase-letter texting, which had been a rebellion against normative grammatical practices and, by extension, against normativity in its more consequential forms. He argued that, by now, lowercase texting was itself a normative practice, and should be stopped immediately. In his minor rebellion against minor rebellions, Parker claimed to want nothing—neither progress nor reaction. His was a rebellion for its own sake or, as he had put it: expression without content. An anti-anti-establishment attitude.

We met at the McDonald's on Shattuck Avenue. It had recently been renovated to look newer in model but older in style, so that now, instead of a 1990s cafeteria, the restaurant resembled a 1950s ski lodge—or the idea of a ski lodge, but filtered through a computer program, printed out in 3D: pixelated imitation-pine wood panels lined the walls. The chairs were plastic but made to look like wood. The tables, too. And the bright yellows and reds of the past had been replaced with calmer greens and browns, as in a forest. The restaurant was shockingly clean. Sterile, even. Like a

hospital or a school. The light fixtures hung low from the ceiling and reflected on the tiled floor.

I stood in line. A man with a long grey beard and oversized purple sunglasses was next to me. His teeth chattered.

Noxious aromas of grease and burning cheese drifted in from behind the facade of digital kiosks where students and homeless folk punched their orders onto a screen. When it was my turn, I hit the “coffee” button, and the kiosk produced a small paper cup, and filled it with coffee. This is how I avoided interfacing with the cashiers.

I sat down in the booth next to the window.

Parker had a long face and a cleft chin. He wore round bottle-cap glasses and one of those walrus mustaches—the kind that had been popular with hipsters fifteen years earlier.

He chewed his Big Mac, mouth wide open. He rested his elbow on the table and held the Big Mac with one hand and rotated it counterclockwise with the index finger and thumb, biting at the edges, and, while chewing, fixed his eyes on the sandwich, plotting his next bite.

I didn’t know they sold those this early, I said.

What?

Big Macs, I said. I didn’t know you could get them for breakfast.

He looked at his sandwich and shrugged.

Parker forced himself to eat at McDonald's twice a week. He would order a Big Mac with extra cheese, large fries, and a soda. He believed that Americans had a moral and ethical responsibility to eat fast food because they created it. We should suffer the consequences of the world we built, he said. You know some people can only afford to eat out at McDonald's, he said, are we better than them? According to Parker, most of our peers condescend to McDonald's customers, but Parker condescended to people who didn't eat there. When others mentioned the destructive forces of fast food (greenhouse gas emissions, excessive pollution, the obesity epidemic, blue water overuse), Parker countered with quasi-religious arguments about collective guilt, intergroup emotions, universal retribution and "the great reckoning." He believed that eating at McDonald's, or any fast-food establishment, was punishment for the excesses and decadence of late capitalism. We ought to spend our lives, Parker used to say, cultivating the death drive.

Right now, however, he seemed to be enjoying his sandwich. He bobbed his head in synch with "Rhythm of The Night" playing from the overhead speakers.

I asked him how he was doing, and he said fine how about you and I said, Okay, I guess.

You wanted to talk about something.

Yeah, I said, something happened last night.

He went back to chewing.

I think someone was shot.

Someone is always getting shot, he said.

No, I mean. I think there was a shooting last night.

Parker looked up at me. His glasses magnified his eyes.

Outside, I said. Right outside my apartment. Someone was shot.

He swallowed and exhaled. You watch the news too much.

I wasn't watching the news.

Okay.

Okay, what?

Nothing, he said. I just mean, it's like, you know. Welcome to the East Bay.

People get shot all the time here. People die.

Okay, but this was right outside my room. This is different.

Is it different? Different from what? You weren't in danger, were you? You might as well have been watching the news. What's the difference?

I took out my phone and started searching the internet for news of the previous night. There had been a fight at a dog park and petty theft near campus. I found reports about public intoxicant, vandalism, indecent exposure, and prostitution. Nothing about a shooting.

Parker took another bite and started chewing and paused and said slowly, don't turn around. Don't. Turn. Around.

I turned around.

A lanky man with long hair and thin beard dressed in a mud-colored trench coat was striding toward us, kicking his feet out and snapping them back onto the ground.

I turned back. Who is that?

Name is Josh. Hangs out here a lot. Really wild guy. Don't look at him, he'll try to talk to us.

I turned and turned back and turned again and resumed my internet search.

The man must have noticed me noticing at him because now he stopped and stood over me and looked down. His face was tired and sad.

I looked at him and looked at Parker and Parker looked at me and then looked down at the table.

The man stood there longer than felt appropriate. Now he stepped back and spoke to me. You know, he said, you consume too much caffeine.

What?

Yeah, he said. I can tell. Too much caffeine. Look at that coffee, man. What is that? Thirty-two ounces? Why do you do that to yourself? They're trying to kill you with that. And you wonder why you don't sleep well. And you wonder why your brain is all fucked up.

Parker was still looking at the table, refusing to make contact.

Look at you, he said. They see everything you do before you do it. He pointed at my iPhone. He pointed at my coffee. You're just a puppet, man. Reality is a place where you yourself do not exist, he said.

Who are you? I said.

He stepped toward me and put his hand on my shoulder. His hand was warm and heavy. I am the shepherd, he said.

Parked snorted.

And with that, the man smiled politely and walked away and was gone.

What a wacko, Parker said.

Right, I said, but inwardly I felt a strange loneliness that I paradoxically experienced as intimacy—a contradictory feeling that confused me.

Suddenly I didn't feel like drinking my coffee anymore. I stood up and poured it out into the trashcan and brought my empty cup back to the table.

The light was moving, and the restaurant got brighter and brighter. Just then, I heard someone screaming.

Parker rolled his eyes and said again, don't look.

I looked.

The shepherd had walked over to the kiosk and was wailing uncontrollably. He cranked back his neck and looked up at the fluorescent light and moaned and wailed and babbled and made speech-like sounds as if in praying or casting a spell. Now he leaned forward and threw his head and swayed and twitched like body possessed. It was as if some angel or demon of speech had taken hold of him. The non-words pouring out of his mouth seemed almost to make sense, almost to communicate something of great importance.

Now he made his hand into the shape of a gun. He pointed it up and down. He pointed it at his own head. Now he squatted down.

The restaurant manager came out from behind the counter and asked the man to leave. Excuse me, he cried. Sir, excuse me! He was chewing gum, and his mouth

made the sound of a clicking pen. Sir, sir! I will be forced to call the police if you do not go, leave the premises immediately. Excuse me, sir. He thumbed his little mustard tie nervously.

Now the shepherd pulled down his pants to show the lower half of his body, hairy and leather-like. He squatted deeper and deeper, closer and closer to the floor. He looked as if he was about to defecate right there, then.

The manager turned back to look at the employees standing behind the facade of kiosks. He made his hand into a phone—thumb and pinky stretched out—and put it up to his face. Call, he said. Call it in.

An employee picked up the phone and walked back into the kitchen area, out of public sight.

Josh strained and groaned and went on babbling in his demonic language.

No, he wouldn't really do it.

Yes, he would. He was.

He did.

A soft blob pushed out of him and collected onto the floor—a dark embryo-like organism with red and green veins, lumpy, festering, and hot.

Someone screamed. Someone gagged.

Josh pushed a final time and yelled something awful and finished and promptly pulled up his pants and walked casually out the door.

The manager ran behind the counter and came back with gloves and cleaning supplies and immediately started cleaning up the mess. He turned his head away from

it even as he tried to wipe it clean. He sprayed and wiped and wiped and sprayed again and went on muttering repeatedly to himself, it's okay, it's okay, it's okay.

The place was clearing out, almost empty now.

What was I doing? I was thinking about the prophet. Ezekiel. I was thinking about bread. You could make bread out of that, I thought. You could eat it.

Parker hadn't once looked up from his food. He took another bite of his burger and smacked his lips and chewed.

How are you still eating after that? Didn't you see that?

Parker shrugged. It's human. Nothing I haven't seen before.

I don't think I can sit here anymore.

Don't be dramatic.

I already have a headache.

Another one?

I'm stressed.

You need to see a therapist. I know a good one, young guy. He's helped me a lot. Everyone needs to see a therapist. Everyone is sick.

Okay.

I'm texting you the number right now.

I drank from my empty cup.

Parker finished eating and crumpled his Big Mac wrapper into a ball and set it on his tray. How's your writing? he said. How's that going?

I wanted to tell him that I hadn't worked on my novel in over a year, that I was on the verge of giving up writing altogether, that I was and wasn't a writer. But I didn't. We had established our friendship on writing fiction, and I didn't want to jeopardize the only real friendship I had in Berkeley.

Fine, I said. Great.

Great, he said. When can I read it?

When I'm done.

He rolled his eyes.

A silence hung over us for several minutes and I looked down into my cup and saw a dark excrement stain of coffee in the shape of a fish.

Now the police arrived. Four, five, six of them paced around the restaurant looking at the customers. They wore dark glasses and helmets. They tucked their hands into their black leather duty belts. One of them stood next to our table. I couldn't see the eyes behind his sunglasses, couldn't tell where he was looking.

Listen, Parker said. I think you need to make some friends. I think that's your problem.

I didn't know I had a problem.

You've been here almost six months and you have no new friends.

I drank from the empty cup again.

Come to a party tonight.

Whose party?

It doesn't matter. You don't know her.

I don't want to go to a party if I'm not invited.

You're invited, he said. Everyone's invited. I'm going to pick you up.

What time?

Nine, he said. Pick you up at nine.

*

I stuffed an empty flask and a pack of cigarettes in my pocket and waited outside. Before long, Parker pulled up in his maroon Nissan Altima and rolled down the window and gestured towards the front seat. I got in. Four people had crammed into the back. Parker introduced them: Julio, Leea, Khushal, Anais. I said my name and waved into the back seat. Screens lit up their faces.

Parker wore a pink and purple vintage '80s style windbreaker that made him look anachronistically relevant, whereas I was now wearing a loose grey cardigan, characterless and frayed and snagged along the chest and back with a hole in the elbow, which I thought I could get away with because the beige elbow patch happened to be the same color as my skin.

I had apparently killed an ongoing conversation when I got into the car, for as soon as I shut my door, Julio spoke like he was angry. Anyway, he said, like I said, we don't have very many options. Politically, you know. They force us into camps.

I watched the backseat in the rearview mirror, occasionally turning my head to nod and let them know I was listening.

Parker laughed. That's right, he said. I'm an old school Marxist, which means I don't exist anymore.

And I'm a Nihilistic Futurist, Julio said. So, I don't exist *yet*.

Khushal, Anias, and Leea in unison held a sustained hmm sound to indicate either recognition or approval.

Julio tapped me on the shoulder. What about you?

What about me?

What are you?

Me? I work for LinkedIn. I help with the websites.

With the websites?

I write content, yeah. And emails.

He's a writer, said Parker.

A writer, Julio repeated.

He's writing a novel, said Parker.

A novel?

A novel.

About what?

I thought about Zeke. It's about a thirty something, I said, living in Berkeley writing a novel about a thirty something living in Berkeley.

Gross, said Julio.

Just kidding. It's about—I made something up—a clown.

Khushal googled “clown novels” and told me how many other novels about clowns already existed: It by Steven King, The Clown by Heinrich Böll, Shalimar the Clown by Salman Rushdie, Clown Girl by Monica Drake, Sacred Clowns by Tony Hillerman, City of Clowns by Daniel Alarcón.

It's about a clown, Leea said, still on her phone, but what is it really *really* about.

Anais was looking at her phone, too. Tell us about it.

Give us the whole thing, Julio said.

Okay. I gave them a summary, something long. I spoke nervously, frantically even, but I liked telling stories more than I liked talking about myself, so I went all in. I said as much as I could. Whenever I paused or tried to stop the story, someone—usually Parker or Julio—pushed me to keep going, to finish. It went something like this:

He'd rather not be a clown, but he makes people laugh. He makes them afraid, too. He wonders why. Why are they laughing? Why are they afraid? His life goes on. He believes in God, gets lonely, smokes cigarettes, drinks in the morning. Masturbates a lot—that type of thing. Certain people love him because he's so sad. He's so sad that he's funny. They find him whimsical and amusing, but really, he's on the verge of losing his mind. He wears orange pants and bright t-shirts. He wears loafers without socks. He spends a lot of time writing in his journal. He performs at birthday parties and in local events. But the art of clowning is dead, he thinks. Clowns are more irrelevant than ever. Not only irrelevant but disagreeable. They have taken a new, unlikable form. He thinks I should have been a lawyer, a banker, a politician. Soon he discovers like-minded folks on the internet with whom he shares his experiences, his feelings—entire digital spaces full of male clowns. There, he finds purpose and meaning. At first, he spends, I don't know, maybe an hour or two online every day, but as the days pass, as he finds his virtual interactions increasingly stimulating. He spends more and more time online. His digital life is more fulfilling and rewarding than his physical being, his "real life." He begins to think there is no difference between them, that there should be no difference. There is no such thing as

“one true reality.” Eventually, he spends most of his days on the internet—his eyes fixate and reflect the rapidly changing lights on the screen, his mouth droops open, exhaling shortened breath. His hands tremble as they type to keep up with the speed of internet thought. He joins a group called “Clowns Against Non-clowns,” where he engages in anti-anti-clown rhetoric. He participates in all manner of online shenanigans: trolling, meme-making, etc. He quits his job as a clown to become an artist, a pioneer of the new digital “clown aesthetic.” He buys a webcam and starts to make internet performance art. Overnight he achieves fame for a YouTube video in which he stages his suicide. This is where he finally fulfills his clown potential. That’s what he tells himself. He makes several films, several suicides. After each performance, of course, he kills himself. In the first video, he shoots himself in the head. In the second video, he hangs himself. As you’d guess, the scene is highly offensive and controversial. It looks authentic. The first time he does this, the video goes viral within a few hours. Of course, thousands of people report the video, and YouTube removes it. The clown—supported by his online community of clowns and emboldened by his newfound internet attention—issues a statement of artistic intent, which he publishes on Twitter. The reactions to his performance art are mixed. Internet art critics praise the work. Some call it “a brave realization of the logical conclusion of toxic masculinity.” One critic writes, “his work implicates the community in the act of individual suicide, the viewer is forced to witness the death of the other and recognize his culpability therein.” Casual observers of his videos find them distasteful and offensive. One blogger calls him “an angsty and melodramatic

adolescent man, another crisis of masculinity;” though, masculinity is and always has been characterized by crisis, since the beginning of time—thinks the clown—so it seems tautological to use place the words “crisis” and “masculinity” side by side. Still, another critic says that his art lacks any real political power, “it can only shock and unsettle but cannot change anyone’s mind.” One person writes in the comments: “The intent of the artist is too vague for this to be anything other than trolling.” Another person agrees: “Because there is no systemic critique here, we have no choice but to read this as an act of aggression.” Because his videos incite controversy and anger, I said, YouTube continues to take them off their website. Later, YouTube deletes the clown’s account and bans him from using the site altogether. He protests this decision. He writes several letters and emails to YouTube arguing his case. He never receives a reply. No one contacts him. He cannot infiltrate the bureaucratic fortresses of internet capitalism. He launches a website where he can post videos freely. He doesn’t have as much traffic at first, but he garners enough attention that he can sell enough advertisements to make a living. He becomes known as “the clown who kills himself.” He performs all types of suicides: gas, poison, prescription drugs, heroin, freezing, jumping in front of a train, asphyxiation, drowning, starvation, self-immolation, even hari-kari. Each time looks as real as the time before. Once, he almost accidentally kills himself. He feels exhilarated. Transcendent. He can’t ever fully replicate the experience, though he tries. More and more he wants to approximate death as carefully as he can. This becomes a kind of addiction. Some commentators say, He’s challenging the very nature of reality.

Others say, "He's inviting us to think about death as an art form and therefore as a kind of fiction." When he runs out of ideas, he decides, against his better judgement, to reenact the suicides of famous men: Kurt Cobain, Mark Rothko, Paul Celan, Robert Oppenheimer, Ernest Hemingway, Hunter S. Thompson, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vincent van Gogh, David Foster Wallace, Robin Williams, Walter Benjamin, and so on. This is a step too far. The clown's critics begin to attack him for "theft." They accuse him of representing experiences that don't belong to him. His more sophisticated opponents call him an appropriationist. His more pedestrian commentators refer to him as "a sellout," "out of touch." Meanwhile, elsewhere, some social documentary students, eager for a story, decide to make a full-feature documentary about the clown. And the clown, now concerned for the future of his reputation and, by extension, his career and livelihood, agrees to participate. The cameras arrive at his home three weeks later. The following interview takes place:

Interviewer: Did you expect this level of backlash?

Clown: Backlash?

Interviewer: Regarding your suicide reenactments.

Clown: I was doing what I'd always been doing: killing myself over and over in a variety of ways and with a variety of tools. I think some people are upset because they don't understand my method. But that's what art is. It's a trick. It's a magic show. If you don't buy into it, it isn't going to work. If you don't believe it, then it won't work.

A year or later, when the documentary finally comes out, the clown is devastated by what he sees. The documentarians paint him as a lonely, desolate, self-hating figure whose suicide performances are merely testing ground for fantasies of self-annihilation. In response, the clown announces that he will retire after one final performance, in which he will complete an actual suicide. The event is to take place in real time, on a live webcam. He's going to kill himself, this time for real. But before he does, he receives hundreds of letters encouraging him to complete the killing. Kill yourself for real this time you piece of shit. I hope you slit your wrists so I can watch you bleed to death. But he also receives kind emails from current and former fans imploring him to stay alive. You have brought awareness to a world blind to the endemic of suicide. You are a hero. These letters cause him to weep, though he does not know whether he weeps for them or himself. On the day of the event, the clown sets up his computer and delivers his final speech. When it's time for him to kill himself, he stands up, drinks a glass of water, and walks out of the room. He does not return. The webcam continues to run. The world—or the small portion of it that happened to be interested in experimental internet performance art—watch for hours. Nothing happens. The camera continues to run. It shows only the clown's dull living room: a leather couch, torn on the armrest where he used to put his feet, above which hung a print. The webcam runs for days. People continue to watch—watching nothing, waiting for something to happen. And this is how the story ends. The clown never comes back into the room. Some of his viewers call the police, but no one

knows his address. When the police eventually locate him, he isn't there. He isn't there, but he isn't anywhere else either.

Parker was nodding, maybe ironically.

Julio went, Ah. Ah, I see. It's one of those sly literary books, all Starbucks-like, that leaves you feeling cold and headless. Something to meditate.

Khushal said, I thought the existential novel died in the 70s.

Leea: So, does he kill himself?

Khushal: A metaphor for the failure of metaphor.

Leea: I read it as an allegory of oppression.

Khushal: So, the oppressed are represented in the form of a clown?

Parker: The problem is that the very concept of a clown is relative to the hierarchies of the dominant culture. What is a clown even, and to whom is he clowning?

Julio: If I'm honest, it sounds like it's about white supremacy.

I leaned my head against the window, trying to distance myself physically from the conversation.

Leea: Can't he just be a clown?

Khushal: Wait, okay. Is he oppressed or is he a Nazi?

He's a Fascist, said Julio.

I pressed my head harder into the glass. A sitcom-feeling of imbecility overcame me.

Parker: Is it even possible for someone to know the difference between good and evil?

No, said Julio, the clown is a representative of fascists. That's how I read him. He's a white supremacist at least. Sad little man. I think you should change the ending of the novel. Make the clown kill himself.

Leea: Every clown is a fascist?

Julio: Have you heard of Clown World? It's one of those memes on 4chan and Reddit. They say that Leftist politics are clown politics, leftist media are clown media. So, the fascists appropriated a new symbol for themselves. The Clown. Like Pepe. Like the OK sign and the Boogaloo. Maybe he is a Boogaloo?

Khushal: Myth of the down-and-out white.

Leea: It's racists to assume he's white.

Julio: He is.

Leea: Is he, though?

Julio: Isn't he?

Khushal: Why wouldn't he be?

Julio (to me): Wait, aren't you white?

Me: Me?

Julio: I can't tell.

Khushal (laughing): How white are you?

Me: I'm Sephardic. Kind of.

Julio: Kind of Jewish?

Me: Half Jewish. Turkish.

Julio: So, you're white.

Khushal: Hella white.

Julio: The white clown.

I felt a shame so crippling that shame was not the word for it. The world went blurry—a metaphor of fog becoming a literal inability to see. I tased my own tongue: acidic, bitter, metallic. I looked at my broken wristwatch.

Wait, Parker interrupted, but, if the real world is a clown world, then is the clown a symbol of fascism, or its enemies? Wouldn't the mainstream politician be a type of clown in the world of clown politics? Or is fascism dressing itself up in clown paint and masks to mock the 'clown world' they disavow? Who exactly is the clown in this symbolic order?

I don't think there's any order in what the fascists do, Julio said. It's chaos they want, so it makes sense that they would cultivate a slippage of cultural symbols and iconography. There are also rumors that they're trying to co-opt the rainbow and the thumbs up, too. And for no other reason than to cause chaos, to create a disconnect between signified and signifier so that no one knows what's real and what's fake.

We arrived. Parker double parked the car in the driveway, and we walked around the back of the house and entered through a rusted metal gate that led into the backyard.

The house was nothing to speak of—a small one-story red brick home, with small round windows, and the backyard was all weeds and dirt, enclosed by a short concrete wall.

Want to smoke before we go in? Parker reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out three pre-rolled joints.

The patio had a picnic table and a few lawn chairs and a makeshift fire pit—a semicircle of stones where a pile of coals crackled.

I sat in a beach chair next to Parker. Khushal gathered twigs beneath the trees, and threw them one by one onto the coals, where they instantly ignited.

The house shook from the crowd noise, the music. People circulated in and out through the screen door, which swung open and closed and each time smacked against the doorframe. I wondered whether Ezekiel was inside. I looked at the house. I scanned the backyard, trying to find for him—wanting and not wanting to see him.

Parker lit the joint and took a long hit and blew and passed it to me. I sucked and sucked again and held the smoke in my mouth, careful not to inhale, and pretended to gulp, to swallow, and turned my head to the side and blew it out. I handed the joint to Leea, and she pressed her lips down and inhaled once, twice. She crossed and uncrossed her legs.

Julio took a hit. Do we really need another novel with a disaffected male narrator?

He's not disaffected, said Leea, looking at me. He's just awkward.

Khushal took one hit and turned to face me and blew out. Why don't we just ask our author what he means? What does the clown mean? Who is he really?

He's just an artist, I said.

They laughed, almost in unison. Their eyes became increasingly small and red as they passed the joint around.

Please no more novels about artists, Julio said. No more art. No more religion. No more quote-unquote weird sex. No more violence.

Our conversation ended when another group of people entered through the same gate and approached us and greeted us. Everyone knew everyone else except for me. They hugged and kissed or, didn't hug or kiss but shook hands or nodded hello. The new group was Omar, Henry, Jackie, and Janice. Parker introduced me as "the clown writer," and I nodded to downplay my embarrassment. I took the empty flask out of my pocket and pretended to drink to discourage anyone from asking me about my "clown" writing, which they didn't.

For a long time, there was lively discussion and arguments about this and that—guns, gender, the future of art, freedom, and social media, about culture and post-woke-ism, and whether white guilt was another version of white privilege, and whether white allyship was part of the white savior complex. The whole time, I did what anyone would do. I shut my mouth is what I did. I shrunk down, minimized, withheld, limited my voice to the most necessary level of content-sharing, and suppressed everything surplus to basic communication.

Soon the weed was smoked and blown out, and the air looked thick and painted with palpable, impasto brushstrokes—the kind that causes a painting’s subject matter to protrude from its medium, becoming the object it represents.

As the smoke began to dissipate, Parker stood up and the two groups headed off toward the house. I stayed in my seat and held up my flask and said to no one in particular, I’m going to stay out here for a while. I want to finish this off.

No one seemed to care.

My plan, in truth, was to sit there for a few minutes, maybe longer, and eventually order an Uber back to Berkeley.

Soon everyone was gone except for Janice. She looked at me and made a face that I would come to recognize and distinctly her own, chin tilted up, head pushed back, as if looking down on the object of her gaze.

I’ll join you, she said. If that’s cool.

She sat down and turned, and the light ran down her face. For the first time, I could see her clearly. She had a young, athletic body, thin but muscular, but she wore an old woman’s face—her mouth sagged at the edges, always almost frowning.

As the coals and twigs popped and cracked, I thought about the gunshots from the previous night. I heard them when if I tried to hear. I thought to ask Janice about it, but then thought better.

Janice pointed to my flask. You going to share that?

I held the flask up with two fingers and shook it out. Sorry, I said. That was the last of it.

Janice scowled and stood and headed for the house. Wait here, she said.

While she was gone, I found a stack of logs on the side of the house and took one and set it on top of the coals to keep the fire going.

Janice returned, breathing hard. She held up to show me an open bottle of wine. I stole it, she said. We can share. I don't want to kill it all by myself.

Red wine gives me headaches.

Janice put her lips around the mouth of the bottle and threw back her head and gulped. She extended the bottle toward me, and, despite my initial rejection, I accepted, and drank.

We were silent for a long time, watching the flame twist and turn and cast circles around us. I felt myself wanting to say something. To break the silence. To make conversation, maybe. So, I blurted out a boring question and followed it up with stupid question and another boring question. How do you know Parker? I said. Do you work together? What do you do for work?

She shook her head. No.

No?

No.

No, you don't work?

Work, she said. Of course, I work. Work is boring. I don't want to talk about work. I don't want to make small talk at all. No small talk. It's boring, you know. It's so lame *small* talking with someone you might never see again. What if we never see each other after tonight? We will have wasted a whole night talking about—what?

Work? Where you were born, and what your hobbies are, and what you do for a living. Why should I care about all that if I don't even know you?

I hummed.

We've got this whole getting-to-know-people thing backward, she said. We meet people in all the wrong ways. The wrong order. The first thing you should know about someone is their political and religious beliefs. Maybe their greatest fear, biggest regret, most embarrassing story. That kind of thing.

Okay, I said. Tell me one. An embarrassing story.

Nothing embarrasses me, she said. Shame is boring.

I put my mouth on the bottle and drank. Fine, I said, not embarrassing then. Tell me anything.

She leaned back and seemed to think. Okay, she said. I have one. A few years ago, I started dating this guy. Total airhead. Good body though. A gym rat, whatever you'd call it. We went on three dates, and I was into him, but not that into him. After dinner, we agreed that we'd fulfilled our dating requirements and that it was time to move to the next phase of our relationship. We agreed to have sex the next night. So, the next day, he comes over to my apartment, comes in the door, and he's waddling all duck-like. He asks to use the bathroom and tells me that he needs a plastic bag. I give him a trash bag and point him in the direction of the bathroom. He's in there for like, I don't know, twenty minutes maybe. He takes a shower. It's quiet for a long time. When he comes out, trash bag in hand, he tells me that he sharted his pants, and had to walk four blocks with poop running down his leg. What? I say Sharted, he

says. What? He explained that he needed a trash bag for his underwear, and he kept saying sorry, I'm sorry, he says I'm sorry, I thought it was just a fart, and I'm like, dude, I get it. I'm super grossed out at this point, but I'm trying to be open-minded. And he had just taken a shower and so—

And so, you fucked him anyway?

And so, I fucked him anyway.

No way.

Just then, Janice's phone started ringing: a circus theme. She removed it from her pocket. Sorry, sorry. I need to take it. Hold on. She stood and walked and opened the backyard gate and went away.

I looked at my phone, though there was nothing there to see. My background image was a stock photograph of sand dunes at night—a barren desert landscape under a full moon.

I kept looking and eventually it vibrated. *Three friends massacred on fishing trip; manhunt underway. Pair of 'dangerous' fugitives who escaped Virginia jail may be in Pennsylvania, officials say. Woman fatally shot in NYC after asking man to stop setting off fireworks. Portland police declare 'riot' after fires set, fences moved.*

Janice returned and sat down.

That was a crazy story, I said. Incredible.

She put her hand on my knee and leaned in. It's not over yet, she said. So, we're doing it and, you know, I'm on top and looking down at the dude, and suddenly he starts screaming no. I'm like, should I stop? And he says no. So I keep going, but

he keeps yelling no. Like, no. No! Loud, too. Like, scary loud. And I'm freaking out because I'm riding him and he's yelling no, but he doesn't want me to stop. And then his face gets all distorted, and his mouth slips, all saggy and drooping like it's about to slip off his face. It's like I'm fucking a Picasso painting or something. And then he starts coming, and he's screaming, and then, not kidding, he starts shitting. He's shitting and coming at the same time, and it's warm and thick and wet. And it's everywhere. It keeps coming and coming. But this is the weirdest part, she said. As soon as he starts, shitting, I start coming, too. I can't explain it. I don't know. I didn't feel myself approaching climax until that point, but somehow, we had achieved that ideal situation where you and your partner both come at the same time, but as I'm having this totally awesome orgasm, I'm also covered in shit. And I can smell the shit. I can feel it all over me. But there's nothing I can do. I'm coming. It's like a horror movie and a religious experience at the same time.

I can't believe it, I said. I don't believe it.

It's true, she said. I had to get an entirely new mattress, bed sheets, everything. That guy was so embarrassed he didn't even stay to help me clean up. He Venmoed me more than enough money for a new mattress, bed frame, sheets. So, I did get an upgrade out of the whole thing, at least. But it felt weird like he had paid me money to take a shit in my bed. I felt like a sex worker. A sex worker of twisted shit fantasies. I never heard from him again.

I can't believe it, I said again, but in a slightly louder voice this time, to let her know that I sincerely couldn't believe it and wasn't merely adhering to the niceties of conversational listening and role playing.

The light was directly above her head, and it set a silver-purple glow across her hair, and, for a moment, she looked like a completely different person, someone familiar, someone I had known.

Which was more unbelievable: the story, or the fact that she told it? Why had she told it? Was she trying to communicate something indirectly, some sexual preference? Some erotic deviancy? Did she hope that I would infer some coded meaning? It didn't matter. The story caused me to feel instantly and inexplicably close to her. She seemed to become a longtime friend, a potential lover; and, like an idiot, I wondered whether I was falling in love with her, and that feeling felt wrong, and therefore it felt good. We had an instant bond—something deeper and more vulnerable than mutual life circumstances, something more profound even than the level of the body, something grotesque. A story. A confession. I recognized something in her I lacked: a gravid buoyancy, an openness. I wanted that.

*

We shared an Uber. When the driver dropped me off at my house, Janice stepped out of the car and walked in with me and told the driver that she was getting out here. Neither of us said anything about it, and it felt more exciting that way, each of us intuitively wanting the same thing without having to articulate it.

Inside the house was hot, and I could hear my housemates laughing in the kitchen, rowdy, the whole group of them. I grabbed Janice's elbow and led her to my room and closed the door.

When I flipped the light on, Janice covered her eyes with her hair to shield them and made a joke about being a vampire. For a few seconds, she paced the room as if unsure where to place herself. She stumbled and slurred her words. She looked at her phone and laughed at nothing, something on her private screen. She looked at my bookshelf and fingered the books, tracing the spines of each volume.

Do you really read them?

I used to.

Expensive wallpaper, she said and mumbled something I couldn't understand and laughed to herself. It was then that I realized I had a problem. Janice was drunk. Way too drunk. And I suddenly didn't feel comfortable being around her.

Now she reached into her pocket and took out a piece of gum and put it in her mouth and violently chewed, forcefully breathing through her nose so that she seemed to be laughing. She threw the wrapper into the trashcan.

Dude, she said, pointing down. Why are you throwing this away?

Throwing what away?

Why are you throwing *this* away? She reached into the trashcan and removed the tote I had thrown away previous night. (I had forgotten it was there.) This, she said, lifting the bag and looking it over. She held it up to me and smiled. Are you into this?

Am I what?

Are you into *this*?

Into what?

She pointed at the arrows. *This, this. this.*

Before I had time to think I said yes. Yes, I said. I am.

After looking me over for a while and sustaining a meditative look—head back and chin up—she said, me, too.

You, too?

She seemed pleased. She grinned. Yeah, she said. Yes. I am.

I thought to ask her if she knew Ezekiel but didn't.

Now she sat down at the head of the bed and looked me up and down. After a long pause, she lifted her skirt in a joking way and dragged out her vowels as she spoke. If you want to have sex, I think she said, that's okay with me. But it's going to be lazy.

I sat on the bed at a distance, afraid to touch her. I could feel the heat of her body, her skin. Lazy sex. I knew what she meant, and, I admit, I did consider it. But no. She's too drunk.

No, I said aloud, afraid that I might say yes.

Come on, she said. It's okay.

I looked away and down at my phone.

Whatever. Fine. Let's go to sleep. She stood up and spit out her gum and threw her entire body upside-down onto the bed—so that her feet lay on the headrest—and made snow angels in the sheet and undid her ponytail and let her long black hair fall across her shoulders. Her arm hung off the side so that her hand swung loosely down.

I pulled her feet up toward the top of the bed, straightened out her body, and lifted her head to place a pillow beneath it. With an old quilt I kept in the closet, I wrapped her up, and instantly—almost instantly—she closed her eyes and was asleep, still fully clothed.

I clicked off the light and watched her for a moment to make sure she was in fact sleeping. She drew breath forcefully, almost sucking it in.

For hours I lay awake, looking up at the ceiling and out the window. I worried about my lie. Why had I done it? What was Janice going to expect of me now that she thought I was part of Antifa?

The lie, I thought, doesn't have to be a lie.

For several minutes, I was consumed by a particular kind of loneliness—the kind you feel when lying, intimately, next to a stranger.

*

The house was quiet, and it seemed late enough that I could safely leave my room without risk of being seen. I stumbled down the hallway into the shared bathroom and turned on the shower and locked the door. The moonlight streamed through the small bathroom window, like a spotlight, the kind that illuminates a stage.

I was sitting on the toilet, waiting for the water to heat up, when the phone vibrated. *Toxic algae close beaches. Earthquakes rattle southern California. Iran sends warning to the west. Disney star dies. There's a growing call in the US to defund police as a solution to police brutality. Here's what that means.*

I clicked the icon, which took me to another icon, and another and so on—and soon I was on the internet. I caught a clickbait article at the bottom of the article I was halfway reading, titled, *You Won't Believe These Celebrity Bodies.*

The third body photograph was a normatively beautiful celebrity (who shall remain nameless) whose mediocre acting career had recently imploded following a sequence of ugly scandals (sex tapes, ambiguous and therefore offensive tweets). In the photograph, she walked out of the ocean—a classic Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition cover shot. Everything was wet. Everything expressed wetness. Her hair lay thin and plastered to one side of her face and her body was swollen. The nipples, indistinguishable from the rest of the torso, slipped out of her bikini, and the legs sagged and pulsed with thick veins and her neck and shoulders were damaged with sunspots. There was something horrible in the image: she was laughing, but in a conspiratorial kind of way that made her look evil or something.

It was not the woman herself that caused blood to rush to my crotch, but the idea of the woman. She seemed real, or almost real. Present and authentic. Her body was ordinary, human. She could be like someone I knew, had known, would know. Someone tangible. Someone I might meet at a bar—desiring and desperate as I was for casual lovemaking.

I closed my eyes the better to see, and let a short fantasy played itself out in my mind, as if on a screen. The whole scene, every scatological detail, was a rerun of something I'd watched in a homemade porn video with amateur actors on the internet. Two adults having sex on their dining room table. Neither the fantasy nor the desire belonged to me. The man was another man. The erect cock was his cock, and I was made to watch him. *Ezekiel. Ezekiel.* The name came into my head. They had generic sex, Ezekiel and the woman, in a sequence of conventional positions. Nothing deviant, nothing creative, really. Bent over, missionary, reverse cowgirl, cowgirl, reach around. He mounted, he leaned. He cried out in pleasure and pain. She grabbed him by the throat and his face went colorless. Look. He's losing his composure now, stretching out his toes and thrusting upward to make his pelvis pop.

When it was finished, I turned off the bathroom light so that I could not see myself. But the moonlight was still there, all over me. Like sticky milk. I looked at my broken wristwatch.

I wadded together a handful of toilet paper and held it beneath the running faucet and rubbed myself with it, still swollen with residual blood flow, plump, sticky

with discharge. And I was careful when I rubbed them clean, reverent and confused,
the way, I imagined, the Apostles washed the feet of Christ.

*

A bad energy woke me, and I found Janice already awake, still in bed, but turned away from me. She squirmed and sat up and hunched. She was looking at her phone. A video played. The volume was low, droning some monotonous, some tedious loop.

How long have you been awake?

She didn't answer.

I cleared my throat.

The protests, she said. It's all over the news. Three people died last night.

Something to do with the election.

My head was killing me—the red wine.

Lots of people are worried, she said.

Where?

Everywhere.

No, I said. Where was the riot?

Not a riot, she said. Not a *riot*. A *protest*.

I got out of bed and opened the curtains. The sun was not in its place. It was late, later than I thought it should be. Children were laughing or screaming nearby.

Janice got out of bed and tried to open the window. She struggled and, when the window wouldn't budge, gave up trying and sat back down on the edge of the bed and pulled out her phone and went back to the videos. This is bad, she said.

Yeah, I said.

Silence.

Want some coffee?

People are dying out there, she said.

I didn't know if that was supposed to be an answer or whether she hadn't heard me, so I asked the question again, and again she did not answer. She held her phone up for me to see. See? she said. Watch.

I tried, but the images were unwatchable. The screen displayed a mash of limbs and faces, a clash of bodies, bodies indistinguishable from one another, moving, being moved, right and left, forward and back, undifferentiated from movement itself. It was impossible to see who was who, who was doing what, and to whom it was being done. The screen was a blur of violence and struggle, happening too fast to be properly filmed.

I said that's terrible.

I know, she said. I know.

I went to make coffee, slow as I could—took the Brita Pitcher from the mini-fridge, poured the water into a glass, poured the glass into the coffee maker reservoir, and repeated the process until the water level hit the maximum line. I lifted the lid and rinsed the filter basket with the already-filtered Brita water over a large bowl on top of the fridge and removed an eco-friendly paper filter from its cardboard box, and placed it into the filter basket, then opened the drawer where I kept my coffee tin, peeled back the lid: no coffee.

I'm out of coffee, I said. Let's go get an americano, or what do you like?

I need to get home. I need to be alone.

Okay.

She ordered an Uber and sat there for a while on the edge of my bed. She had turned up the volume, and I could hear the riots booming from the tiny machine. She watched it over and over, the same video: explosions, flare guns, teargas grenades, yelling.

I joined her, took out my phone and looked for something to look for on the internet.

When the car arrived, Janice beelined out, and I went with her. Should I hug her? Should I make plans to see her again?

Her head was down.

I said goodbye, but the violence continued in the background. People were still screaming on the machine. You shot him, someone yelled. You killed him.

*

A clock was ticking. Something moved. Something passed by. Almost noon. Afternoon. Evening. Janice was gone and I was sitting—still sitting—at my desk, trying to write. Something something. Nothing coming. I thought about Janice—couldn't stop thinking. My thoughts thought themselves. The window and the light in the window moved. It felt like I was being moved. And it was then I heard—if hearing is the word for it—a sound, almost a voice, familiar in its unfamiliarity, an imperative, commanding me something: out, out, out. I got up and went, having nowhere to go and nowhere to be, to exhaust myself.

I went north on Shattuck toward Hearst, cutting east along the north edge of the university, then dropping down, southward along Sather toward the southern entrance that connected to Telegraph, where I turned right, down Bancroft, back the way I came—west, then farther south again, then east, then west again.

The power lines hummed.

It was not yet noon and the temperature had already hit one hundred degrees plus. The sun exerted a sameness that blurred the lines between things, this and that—weeds and grass, grass and dirt, dirt and concrete, concrete and glass.

The phone went: *Drug-resistant malaria, Venezuela blackout. A glacier memorial. How Equifax exposed the personal data of millions of Americans. How Google sold face recognition software to the Chinese Government. So many intense emotions surround a body that is trying to die. Here's what one doctor wants patients to know about the end.*

The University was out of my way, but I liked to walk there—to be seen walking. I walked among them—students and professors, almost one of them, all of them dressed in natural fibers, recycled materials, earth tones: V-neck jumpers and overalls, flannel cutoffs and denim jackets, wool hats and army boots, infinity scarves and faded ripped jeans, beige shoulder bags and Swedish backpacks.

By the time I noticed the protest on campus, it was too late to avoid the crowd and I couldn't simply turn around and walk the other direction. Not now.

Almost all protests in Berkeley started or ended at Sather Gate. That's the way it was and had been. The gate—forged and fortified with bronze and steel metalwork, long ago named a Historic Landmark, listed on the National Register of Historic Places—had been an established symbol of anti-establishment attitudes. Something was always being protested at Sather—the living wage, tuition increases, international relations, police brutality, workers' rights—and each new protest replicated historic gestures of rebellion. I recognized the scene immediately, having read about it online. The SA, SU, US, UTA, ASUC, BAMN, LBM, BSA, AAS, AAC, ESLP, and SEC were there with clipboards and leaflets, chapbooks and pamphlets. Pop, Rap, and Pop Rap played too loudly on some unseen speakers, giving the gathering a celebratory quality, an expression of joy in dissonance. Students, tech-types, artists, and lifelong activists clustered in rhizomatic formation around the gate, picketing and chanting and singing and clapping their hands and marching in circles. They took photos and videos to post on the internet. Antifa was there, too, with its satellite groups, clad in Ninja uniforms: black bandannas, tight black pants, hoods, scarves, ski masks.

Was Zeke among them, the anonymous? Was Janice? I could feel her looking. Should I have been over there with them?

I took my phone and put in my headphones and pretended to receive a call. I was like, Hello? and stopped walking. Yes, I said, I'll be there, and continued walking. Of course. That's what they're saying, I said. Unbelievable. Watermelon, watermelon. Yes. Okay. Good, good. No problem. See you soon.

One protester noticed me and determined to enforce my participation, shoved a flier in front of my face while walking stride for stride beside me. He shouted something I couldn't hear. I took the flyer and nodded without making eye contact. The protestor shouted something, something else. I forced a smile, making sure to show my teeth. But immediately I worried that my smile might reflect the physical discomfort I was feeling—that it looked more like a scowl than a smile, and I worried the protestor might think I was grimacing at him and his cause, and so, to counteract my grimace, I made a new face: eyebrow furrowed, mouth turned down.

Now the protester waved his hand, pointing and drawing shapes or letters in the air. He slapped the palm of one hand with the backhand of another. He pointed up at the sky and down at the ground. And I became aware of the possibility that even my contemplative face looked like something else, that what I hoped would communicate thoughtfulness, expressed its opposite—impatience, anger. Now I made an array of faces, moving all my features, never settling on a single expression.

He yelled something and moved toward another passerby.

The phone vibrated again. *California State health officials are investigating a virus outbreak at a nursing facility near San Francisco. U.S. stocks are heading toward their worst week in 12 years and investors want to know where it will all end. Iran's nuclear program. Three dead in Texas explosion. Protesters have been grabbed off the street by federal police in camouflage and body armor and forced into unmarked vans.*

I went on, head down. My shirt clung to my skin. I opened all my social media apps, and indiscriminately “liked” every single photograph, every post, every political rant, every joke, every shared link that I could find.

When I was alone and far enough away, I sat down on a bench and looked at my broken wristwatch. When I was alone, away from the protest, I went into my texts and found the number for the therapist. I called it and made an appointment. We can wedge you in tomorrow, said the voice my ear. Sure, I said. Tomorrow.

As soon as I hung up, the phone went: *Multiple dead in a bombing of a shopping center in Florida. A state of emergency has been declared in California as the southern region continues to experience aftereffects of multiple earthquakes. Cockroaches are developing cross-resistance to insecticides that can be passed on to their offspring.*

I clicked on the icon and indulged in the luxury of boredom, not a luxury really, more like an obligation, an affliction, a routine—too frequent to be relaxing—of meandering through each algorithmic pathway, formed according to my digital habits, that forged a virtual personhood, and eventually, a new self. And I watched,

half-watching, videos online: a political speech by the Presidential Candidate K, and a satirical impersonation of Candidate K on a late-night TV show. I watched a lecture on the death of religion, a talk on the rebirth of religion, a controversial performance from a famous stand-up comic about masturbating, a lecture on the various iterations of Stalinism in Hollywood films, a lecture on the use of archetypes in political narratives. I saw a kid chugging a gallon of milk, high school cheerleaders eating ghost peppers, cats playing ping pong, high school baseball players putting pepperoni on their nipples and streaking around their neighborhood naked, Mormon missionaries snorting cocaine off a coffee table. I saw a Philadelphia Eagles fan covering himself—in drunken reverie and Dionysian ecstasy—in horse shit; a French soccer player simulating oral sex on a raw chicken, a tech mogul trying to have sex with a whale. a website called *the nicest place on the internet*, where, for a small fee, I could see random people waving and smiling and complimenting my clothes, my hair.

And suddenly, in real life, I saw in the corner of my vision. Blood. My hand was covered in it—a wet crimson streak that ran from the top of my middle finger to the base of my palm. I tried to wipe it off with my other hand, but only smeared it around, spreading it widthwise across my wrists and forearms. Now it was on both hands. Now I was panicking, and my panic occurred to me as an allusion to something else, and therefore of a cliché. My thought was not of the blood, but of what the blood might represent. The metaphor of blood. Bloody hands. I looked around to find anyone to ask: Do you see this?

Now I bent and licked my hands frantically to clean them and my tongue stiffened at the taste of sulfur and salt. I looked around again and examined my whole body.

Then I found it.

Without noticing, and for an unknown length of time, I had been scratching at the back of my calf. A mosquito bite. I'd been scratching the bite so hard that I'd cut myself, tore away a piece of my own flesh the size of a dime. But because I had scratched so thoughtlessly, so intensely but without intent, it would be inaccurate to say that I, this me, had done it at all. It had been done to me. Was done. Blood ran from the cut down my leg and onto my foot.

The wind must have been blowing, though it was not the wind I noticed, but my body noticing the wind. I was shivering, and the hairs on my arms and neck went upright. The day was clear, but the wind—if wind it was—suggested a shift in weather pattern, a change. Oncoming rain, or worse.

*

Next day, late afternoon. I walked to my appointment: the first of seven prepaid meetings with the therapist.

His office was located on the top floor of a concrete building; and it had a window that overlooked other concrete buildings, with windows identical to themselves, and against which the late-morning sun hit directly, so that each long sheet of glass functioned more like a mirror than a window.

The office itself was narrow and bare, like a tunnel. It had one desk, one yellow rug, one glass table, and one bookshelf. It had two large chairs, which faced one sofa—the same chair, but twice, i.e., two of one chair—crimson, leather armchair with chrome dragon feet.

The therapist was pacing from desk to window to bookshelf and back to desk, as if looking for something to look for. He had one hand in his pocket and the other on the back of his neck.

He pointed at the sofa and told me to have a seat.

The sofa smelled new but looked old: a false antique—flame mahogany, with carved cornucopia knobs at the knees, upholstered with a red and pink floral pattern, tufted with enormous buttons.

I sat down. I looked at my broken wristwatch.

The air conditioner blew a colder-than-necessary breeze directly above me, causing my hair to flap against my forehead.

The therapist opened the drawer and produced a brown file folder, packed with multicolored sheets of paper. He sat upright, always upright, and lifted one leg over the other, placing his ankle on his knee to form a figure four.

I wondered: Does the therapist have a therapist? Does that therapist have one, too?

He dressed in a light gray suit with a black V-neck, deeper than seemed appropriate, allowing his chest hairs to protrude. And he had shiny, black hair, parted on the right side, above a high-boned face with a slightly crooked nose, and so slight was his crook that, when he smiled, it caused the skin across the bridge of his nose to tighten: a tiny blemish that produced the illusion of perfection. You might look at him and think, if not for that crook, his face would be perfect, and you would be wrong, because it was precisely that crook, that tiny spot where his face was too big for its skin, which conjured the concept of perfection in the first place.

Now he leaned forward in his chair. I see, he said. We've been recommended, he said.

We?

He hummed.

It would eventually occur to me that, when speaking about my problems, the therapist would use the pronoun "we," so that he was and was not also referring to himself, maybe to humanity generally. But, in the moment, his usage of the pronoun confused me, and I wondered whether he was deliberately coercing me into playing the role of his subconscious. Or else, maybe, he was referring to me, this me, this

version of me, me in the plural, acknowledging the multiplicity of being—any me, you, him, her, them. Or he was earnestly attempting to establish some sense of solidarity between us.

He flipped through my file, moving each loose sheet of paper from one side of the file to the other. He held his tongue in place outside of his mouth and, lifting his hand, struck his index finger against his tongue to wet it, as one strikes a match against a stone.

Okay, he said. Okay. He cleared his throat and took a sip of what I assumed was coffee from a tall thermos that rested on the coffee table between us. I will ask a few simple questions, he said. Otherwise, it's best if we just, you know, talk.

He set the thermos back on the table, then picked up the thermos again and sipped.

I could hear people shouting outside the building—muffled voices, barely audible, barely language at all. It sounded like someone yelling unintelligibly into a pillow.

Tell me about a dream we've had recently, he said.

I hadn't dreamed in years, but I didn't want to say that. I worried about what the therapist might infer from the absence of dreams. Too much drinking. Too many sleeping pills. Failing "to process my environment." A lack of imagination.

If not dreams, he said, how about hobbies? Tell me about us. What do we do outside of work?

It was getting harder and hard to call myself a writer but, after performing my usual hesitation, I said it: I'm working on a novel.

He nodded and wrote something down and leaned forward and slurped the residual liquid from the lid of his thermos. Now he asked me what felt like a routine list of questions: What do we eat for breakfast? How are we sleeping? How much time are we spending on the internet? What do we think about before we fall asleep? How much water do we drink? The therapist was younger than me, so I struggled to tell him the truth.

It feels good, he said, to know that we are both normal and uniquely strange.

The light was the shape of the window on the wall.

Have we been taking our medication? he said.

I couldn't tell him no. I couldn't tell him that I was afraid of the side effects listed online: a loss of all motor functions, vague body aches, the inability to speak, brain fog, decreased libido, heartburn, suicidal thoughts, homicidal thoughts, death. I couldn't tell him that the pills made my penis numb—like I had no penis. And the lack of a penis mocked me so that I felt the absence of my penis as a kind of presence, a phantom penis where my real penis was. I couldn't say any of that. So, I said sometimes.

Sometimes?

Sometimes I take them. Sometimes I forget.

We can set a reminder in our phone. We don't have to bear that responsibility alone. The responsibility of remembering, I mean. We have technological assistance for remembering.

Yeah.

The therapist wrote in his notebook. Okay, we are a writer, he said. How's the novel going?

I have an idea, I said. A story in mind. I just haven't been able to get going.

I used to be an artist, he said. I wanted to be one. An actor.

An actor.

And then—he looked down and gestured toward himself—I became a therapist.

He closed his mouth and opened it and closed it again, and after a long pause, realized he wasn't going to get anything else from me, he said, How would we describe our novel? What's it about?

I thought about that for a while and then I made up another story, something like this:

The novel takes place in the present day. It's about a man, Simon, who works for a telephone apparatus manufacturing company in Kansas. The guy is a standard midwestern bachelor type of guy—quiet, burly, motivated by simplicity. He reads the Bible. He drinks American beers, mostly local—not by choice, but because it's what one does where he lives. For the most part, he doesn't do things because he wants to do them. He lives a difficult life, full of underpaid and tedious labor, marked by

occasional bouts of depression—or is it ordinary loneliness? He can't tell the difference. He never marries. He's given up on love. He has a few friends with whom he drinks beer after work. Simon continually worries about the state of his employment. He has no transferable work skills and worries he doesn't drink enough water. He worries that hot drinks will give him stomach cancer, so each morning, when his coffee is made, he places one ice cube in his cup and waits until it fully melts before he begins to drink. He worries that he's not shitting enough. He wonders how his life might be different if he'd moved away when he had the chance. But Simon has a secret project and a productive inner life. Roughly one hundred pages into my novel, the reader discovers that Simon is also writing a novel. He's been writing it for years in his head. Honestly, it's one of the weirdest books you've ever read. You must trust me on this, I know. There's no other way to say it. He's a visionary. The novel, he's sure, is going to make him famous. For one thing, it's brilliant, intricate, and culturally relevant. The plot is massive, a maze without a center—a fantastical project, worlds within worlds. His problem, the reason why he cannot write down his ideas, however, is utterly banal. He cannot get past the first sentence. He writes it again and again. Can't get it right. It goes like this:

After three weeks of darkness, he—Vernon Rodgers, whose email address was and had been the one his father gave him, vernon.vernonrogers.rodgers@techworld.com—began to write the story of his life and death, which is to say he began to write, unbeknownst to himself, his own suicide note.

The sentence is ridiculous, right? First of all, why “three weeks”? Well, three is a holy number and must be kept. Also, the number three will have significance later in the novel when the numbers seven and thirteen, holy numbers, all come into play. He must keep three. But weeks? No not weeks, it might be three days or three hours even. Or if it’s drama he wants, then why not three years? Why not give the reader a more hyperbolic encounter and say three decades? Or lifetimes? No not lifetimes that’s too much. It’s melodramatic to say lifetimes. Three weeks is excellent, he thinks, although years does have the effect of being both symbolic and believable. Both a dream and a verisimilitude. That’s what the modern-day reader wants: Believable magic. Something crazy but not too crazy. Something real but not too real. Then he asks: why “darkness”? It’s a little cumbersome don’t you think? Does it mean depression? Does it mean a literal nighttime? Is the dark metaphysical or scientific? The question is whether the ambiguous nature of the darkness is productive or not. Whether it contributes to the arc of the narration. Whether it is deliberate. He doesn’t know what it means, but it might come to mean something later, and so he decides to keep it. Now we come to the matter of his name. It’s a fine name. It’s the name of a standup gentleman. A firefighter maybe. In any case, it’s not the name that matters so much as the email. What is that email? Well, first, his father—also a firefighter—gave it to him when he was a child. The email introduces into the novel four things: 1) humor, 2) a pattern of repetition, 3) complacency on the part of the protagonist, and 4) the likelihood of some lingering technological incompetence. All are important to the novel, and thus the email address, no matter

how stupid it sounds, must remain. Next up: “began to write.” Why did he begin? Why now? And then: “the story of his life.” No. Why not: the story of his death? “The story of his death” is a phrase which introduces an essential paradox into the story. How is it that he can write the story of his death? He cannot, and yet, he wants to try. He cuts the life part out. Next: “unbeknownst.” It’s an archaic word. Almost biblical, no? Why not simply: without knowing it. No. Clunky. It must remain unbeknownst. And anyway, this word, he hopes, will establish a playful, literary tone that the reader will come to recognize as distinctly his own, the author’s. Next: “suicide note” seems redundant, right? Cut it. No, don’t cut it. It’s funny. Is it funny, or offensive? Keep it, for if nothing else it serves as a trigger warning, which, he thinks, is the clumsy modern-day version of foreshadowing. In addition to all this tedious editorial work, there is the problem of spellcheck and grammar check. Whenever Simon enters the sentence into Grammarly, for example, the program tells him that it contains “two critical issues” and “two advanced issues.” The computer recommends cutting multiple words, words which he himself has come to love. “Own,” for example, and “story.” The program also recommends cutting the sentence into two or three sentences, but he fears that doing this will eliminate the “flow,” as they call it, and maybe the “voice,” too. Or is it the tone? He finds himself at odds with the machine that assists him in his writing. Where does his voice end and the voice of the computer begin? He critiques, again and again, every single part of the sentence, determined not to conflate his love of writing with the quality of his writing itself, and not to give in to the simplicity of his enjoyment of the written word. He shares his

novel idea with one friend—Franz. Franz laughs at his struggles. It's one goddamn sentence; no one is going to care whether it's any good. Franz tries to tell him to forget the sentence and move on, but each time he tries to do this, that initial sentence, with its paradoxes and tonal slippages, haunts him. He sets out to diagram, map, and outline his novel. To trace out a grand design and to return to writing later. His house fills with sketches, drawings, charts, timelines. Graphs and notebooks. He wants to get everything in. He inscribes notes to himself all around his house and becomes consumed with the project, which deals with all kinds of touchy contemporary topics: the politicization of trauma, the rise of therapeutic nihilism, and much more. It's going to be a tomb, he thinks. At the level of Gravity's Rainbow and Infinite Jest and The Secret History. A book with no beginning and no end. A labyrinthine masterpiece that even the most careful cannot navigate, a philosophical puzzle with trap doors and dead ends. He draws a map across the walls of his house. Maps within maps. Plots within plots. Characters become other characters. They shed their skin, they become each other. Vernon Rodgers is his own father. Vernon Rodgers kills himself in the past and lives to write about it in the future, and vice versa. One day, he's walking along the empty streets of his small town—his head lost in the imaginary world of his novel—when he crosses the road and is hit and killed by an oncoming truck. Or maybe he steps in front of the truck on purpose. It's not clear in the writing whether his death is accidental or deliberate. I don't even know. Maybe he doesn't know either. And that's it—the end. The novel concludes I think, with a final description of his home. It's full of loose sheets of paper. Incomprehensible

designs. Unreadable charts. Poems. Secret languages. When the police enter his house, they find nothing of interest, only the notes of a madman. It turns out, in the end, there is no mystery. No novel, even. Nothing but that single stupid sentence.

The therapist smiled and wrote something down. *Interesting*, he said. His smile was enormous. It hurt my face to see it. It reminded me of Zeke.

*

Two days later, I heard the gunfire again. I thought I did. I'm sure. It was the middle of the night. I heard something. Three shots. Same as before. Someone knocking at my window. Each increasingly louder than the one before. Each clearer.

I woke to the sun and the image of the sun on the floor appeared and disappeared as clouds cut across the sky. Invisible birds squawked in an invisible tree. I sat up and googled *what happened, what's happening, what happened in Berkeley, shooting in Berkeley, shooting, gunshots, Berkeley, what's happening to me right now.*

I stood by the window and watched the light accelerate and decelerate, and searched for someone to see, a person, a physical passerby—anyone who was not me to ground me there, to prove myself there. I wanted to be with someone and get out of my own head. I wanted to tell someone about what happened. To ask them about it. I thought about Janice. She would listen, wouldn't she? I counted the number of days that had passed since I didn't sleep with her: one, two. Two was enough. I texted her and she texted back immediately:

Me: want to get dinner or something?

Janice: okay, yeah

Janice: i would totally do something but not tonight i have a date

Me: np

Janice: with myself

Me: is that a thing?

Janice: is what a thing?

Janice: self-dating? yes

Janice: obviously it's a thing

Me: cool!

Janice: i'm going to take myself out i'm dating myself, too i should have mentioned that before i'm trying to be good to myself i write little notes and remind myself how much I love myself and ask intimate questions like what are your greatest fears and what was it like growing up in middle America, what it's like being Iranian-American in today's social climate i light candles and make myself my favorite salad with goat cheese and cherry tomatoes sometimes i take myself out for a movie or to a museum, it's a healing technique i'm getting to know myself better and I think I'm learning how to love myself

Next day Janice invited me to meet her at SFMOMA and check out a new exhibit on abject art. I was disappointed. Janice wanted to meet at a gallery, I figured, because conversation is not necessary there. Looking at art is easier than looking at people.

My disappointment turned into confusion when Janice arrived with Julio.

I saw her. I waved.

She looked at her shoes, now at me, now at her shoes. You remember Julio, she said.

Julio, yeah. Hey.

Julio grinned and offered me his hand like a dead fish, and I shook it and wiped my palm on the back pocket of my pants.

We bought tickets. We walked. Periodically I looked down at my broken wristwatch to make sure it was still there.

As the dynamics of our situation became clearer, my actual vision blurred. The world appeared to me as a poorly taken photograph. Had I misunderstood our arrangement? Had Janice mentioned Julio and I'd forgotten?

I excused myself and staggered toward the bathroom and stood before the mirror and tried to take the anxiety medication I hadn't been taking—set two pills between my teeth and ran the faucet and put my head under the running water and sucked from the stream. I gulped. But my throat tightened and closed, and the pills did not go down. I gagged and drank again and gulped, and again the pills did not go. I tasted my tongue, bitter and chalky, and I spit the pills into the trashcan and rinsed my mouth out.

Three deep breaths through my nose for a little motivation, and I walked out.

I tried not to speculate about the nature of Janice's relationship to Julio but wasn't in control of my thoughts. Julio must be her lover, potential lover, ex-lover. All possible scenarios ran through my head: boyfriend, cousin, best friend, gay friend, coworker, business partner, brother, half-brother, housemate.

Why didn't she identify their relationship right away?

Julio was much better looking than me—a thin, lyrical type of guy, with a long neck and a misshapen Adam's apple that made him look like he had swallowed a

dented ping pong ball. He had a bleach-blonde, swept-back hairstyle—an undercut with lots of length on top. His mouth was cartoonishly oversized like the Big-Mouth Snapchat filter, and he wore small shorts and a purple tank top. Often, he said the word *coalition*.

The three of us meandered silently, almost reverently, through the exhibit of abject art. There was a row of installations: smashed up teeth, flesh, orifices, trash, fast food leftovers, bloody animal fur, queasy party favors, chintzy bric-a-brac, perverse souvenirs, human hair, and abstracted testicles. A film: a woman obsessively brushes her hair until her scalp bleeds. And another: a child squirts ketchup all over her cheeks, lips, and hands. And another: a hairy man crawls into and out of a gigantic rubber hole. There are latex body parts impaled on pitchforks hanging from the ceiling. There were Barbie dolls nested in dark, kinky hair.

Against the glowing white walls, polished wood floors, high ceilings, and bright lights of the institution, the abject exhibit produced an aesthetic simultaneously sacred and profane, refined and ribald. It was like a slaughterhouse that had been recently sterilized. It reminded me of Berkeley.

Janice moved carefully, engrossed in the exhibit, mesmerized even.

I walked quickly toward permanent collection. Julio followed me, and we moved up, circling the museum through a series of staircases and side doors and diversions.

Soon Julio and I stood side by side, looking straight ahead at Robert Rauschenberg's "Erased de Kooning."

I didn't tell you, said Julio. I'm a writer, too.

No one likes writers, I joked.

I belong to a coalition of writers in Oakland. I have a novel in the works.

Yeah, I said. Everyone's writing a novel. What is it, science fiction?

No, he said. Realism.

I hummed.

Julio stuck out his neck and pointed with his head at the erased drawing. I used to admire this piece, he said. This painting. I wanted to believe that Rauschenberg was a revolutionary, that he had erased this drawing as an act of rebellion, as a rejection of the master, a protest against Abstract Expressionism and its dogmatism. But no. None of that is true. I was reading on Wikipedia that Rauschenberg had, basically, very politely, asked de Kooning for a drawing so that he could erase it. Rauschenberg even gifted de Kooning a cheap bottle of booze. He basically bought the painting, and de Kooning sold it to him, and gave him permission to do whatever he wanted. To erase the thing, and Rauschenberg did erase it, and he considered the erasure to be a poetic tribute.

I hummed again.

Rauschenberg knew he wasn't as talented as de Kooning, so he reenacted the initial shock value of de Kooning's paintings, but without the object of shock. There's no actual art here, only the ghost of art.

I thought about that. I thought about the gunshots. But that's the whole point, I said. The absence of art is the new art.

Julio looked at me.

The most real thing is the thing that's missing, I said, having no idea what I was saying.

Julio moved and I followed, and we stood now in front of "The Automobile Tire Print"—one hundred feet of printer paper glued together, over which John Cage had driven his Model A after soaking its front tire in black paint.

Julio folded his arms. He said, I like this one much more. It looks like an ancient scroll.

I took out my phone and googled *interpretation of the automobile tire print*. While pretending to text someone, multitasking, speaking causally to Julio, I read aloud the results of my google search. I went, *People generally interpret the drawing as a process piece, a performance enshrined in a single, unified gesture not unlike the monoprints of more primitive art forms. Its indexical marks are representative of the structures of music and silence.*

He laughed. Did you just read that on the internet?

I laughed, too, but in a knowing way, as if I'd known that he'd known that I'd been reading from the internet. It's stupid, huh? I said, and then, eager to change the subject, I asked him about his novel.

He answered quickly as if he'd been anticipating the question. Long story short, he said. A group of scientists invents a way to 3D print DNA to correct damaged strands of DNA which have caused genetic mutations and diseases. The technology gets developed, normalized, and made readily available on the market.

Sounds like sci-fi, I said.

Eventually, he said, terrorists acquire the technology and learn how to print viruses, which they release into the populations of their enemies. Soon anyone can print viruses, especially ones for which there is no cure. All you to do is copy the code on the internet, and the printer does the rest. This becomes a popular method of warfare, and eventually, ordinary murder. It's nearly impossible for the government to police it. It's a perfect crime. That's the backdrop of the story.

Cool, I said. Lots of science-fantasy type stuff in there.

But it's really happening, he said.

What is?

Printing viruses, in real life.

Terrorists are printing viruses.

Yeah. You don't know about that?

Well, just because something happens in a novel that also happens in real life doesn't make it realism, not really.

What makes something realism?

The absence of the capital R real, I said. (I had no clue what that meant. I was trying to conjure Josh, the shepherd.) The Real, I said, is necessarily inaccessible. It's barbaric—too real to be known. We don't represent reality in art, we cover it up. We hide it. Art is a masking technique that obscures our most painful realities. Art contributes to the simplification of an all-too complex reality.

Julio was quiet.

I looked around for Janice and found her lagging, lingering to look at every piece, leaning in to see. Tightly she kept her arms folded.

Reality, I said, turning back to Julio, is the thing we cover up with art, entertainment, and news media. Real life, daily life, ordinary existence—that is the absence of reality.

You really believe that?

You don't?

He shrugged. So, what should I call my novel then?

I told you. Science fiction.

The phone vibrated. *Strawberries and Spinach lead the list of contaminated fruits and vegetables—click to see which other veggies may be harmful to your immediate health. A servant to the poor, or a wolf in sheep's clothing? Click to see who.*

I watched Janice approaching, painting by painting. She wore black shorts and a green, oversized military jacket, which fell below the lowest level of her shorts so that, from certain angles, she appeared not to be wearing any pants. Her hair fell just above her waistline. She examined the Erased de Kooning for several minutes, and—leaning backward and forward, looking for what was missing in the artwork—she appeared, beneath her coat, naked and not naked intermittently. Her body swayed, hypnotized. When she finally turned away, I saw that she was crying.

For the rest of the afternoon, we moved like this through the gallery: a shifting triangle, occasionally colliding together to say a few words, and then moving on to the next painting, studying—or assuming the position of studying—individual details. A boat. A cluster of dark trees. A skull.

The artwork radiated a frequency I could not tune myself to hear. One painting blended into the next, each referring to another painting I'd seen elsewhere before. The same motifs, narratives, objects, faces. They were remarkable because they seemed to blur into a single incompleteness.

Janice took pictures of the paintings and Julio took pictures of Janice taking pictures.

I felt distracted and jittery. I had no legs.

Janice leaned close to look at a painting and made a moaning sound. She seemed increasingly engrossed in each work, and this caused me to feel either ashamed of my disengagement or annoyed at Janice for her total attention to the art despite the awkwardness of our situation.

Soon Julio received a phone call and he stepped away and he lowered his head and covered his mouth to take it. Something something something. Now he hung up the phone and turned and told us he needed to leave. I need to prepare dinner for the members of his co-op, he said. It's my turn to cook this week. We're having tofu bean burgers.

Janice and Julio hugged goodbye, and he whispered something in her ear and she smiled.

I lifted a hand to say goodbye to him, though he didn't reciprocate.

Now that Julio was gone, I stayed close to Janice. I put on a look: casual, casually contemplating the paintings in front of me, nothing too serious. I squinted and nodded as if in approval of something no one said. And I could see in my peripheral vision: Janice squinted to look at a different painting, the one next to the one I squinted at.

After a long pause, I said: How do you know him?

Julio? He's a partner, she said, and walked away.

I noted the ambiguous "a" article, connoting neither possession nor status. I pointed to an empty canvas—totally blank, no paint at all.

What do you think of this one? I said.

The affect is hard to describe, she said. It's almost sexual but precedes sexuality. It's lighter. Almost innocent. Youthful, you might say, she said, but with a tinge of despair, or dread. It's the moment before experience ossifies into the imagery of experience.

Was she making fun of me?

After an hour or so, we left the gallery and walked in the city. The weather was fine. Lukewarm. The streets crowded and noisy. I saw a man pissing in a park and another man watching him.

Enough time had passed since I brought up Julio that I felt I could bring him up again. There was a lull in our conversation, and I asked, neglecting to insert a subject into the sentence: So, like a business partner?

Janice looked at me.

Your partner.

She laughed.

Julio, I mean.

I'm polyamorous, remember?

Polygamist?

Polyamorous. I'm in several relationships, she said. Some sexual, some not. I mentioned it at the party. Remember?

I didn't remember.

I mentioned it, she said. Didn't I mention it?

No, she hadn't.

Remember?

Right, I said. Of course. I remember. You're polyamorous. That's awesome.

She looked at me.

What?

Why are you making that face?

I'm not, I said. There's no face. No face. See? (I made a face.)

Don't be weird about it, she said. It's super common around here.

My brain produced a fog that caused me to remain silent for what felt like several minutes, unable to access my thoughts.

There are lots of different reasons why people do it, she said. For me, I don't know—. I don't believe in love. Not really, not like that. I believe in love in general, sure, if love means altruism, goodness, and compassion, but not the kind of romantic love that produces nationalism and Hollywood and TV shows. It's romantic love I don't believe in. I think it was invented by poets and marketers and religions. To domesticate or tame sexual desire. That's what it is.

I nodded and kicked a small rock into the street.

I could tell Janice wanted to talk about this. I let her talk.

She went on about the ethics of polyamorous love, speaking more quickly than I had heard her speak before. It was a quickness which gave her language a rehearsed quality, as if she had delivered this same sermon before. Her voice got louder and clearer and suddenly firm.

And for the record, she was saying now, I practice egalitarian, ethical, solo polyamory. I'm almost more of a polysexual, you know, I'll fuck anything human, but that's not quite right either. There's no category for it.

No categories, I affirmed.

Janice went on. She took out her phone and looked at it, and scrolled up and down the screen, and continued to talk.

I zoned out and took out my phone, too, and searched for Janice's dating profile online. When I found it, it revealed what I should have already known: *Tech*

writer. Tech mystic. Sex adventurer. Marketing manager and creative content creator. My selves are Poly, SSC, GGG, NSA, ISO-whatever, and WAA. I have many, ever-changing wants, needs and feelings. I'm open to all kinds of relationships—friends, friends with benefits, fuckbuddies, part-time boyfriends/girlfriends/partners, long-time on-and-off lovers. I believe sex is a basic human need, like food and sleep, and nothing more.

This is the last time I will see her, I thought. And I promised myself, in that moment, that I wouldn't call her again—not because I objected to polyamory, but because I felt exhausted just thinking about it. It seemed complicated and emotionally demanding. Or maybe not. Maybe I did have a problem with polyamory because it seemed too easy, one of many acceptable, countercultural, California ontologies. Or maybe I subconsciously envied polyamory, and I imagined it to offer a hidden pleasure from which I was excluded. Maybe I even harbored a deep-seated hatred for polyamory. Whatever my reasoning, I decided, then, that Janice wasn't worth pursuing if I had to navigate the dynamics of a multi-partner relationship. I had no experience with non-monogamy and felt too old to try. But even this decision, in the moment I made it, felt routine, predetermined, as if made by a former version of myself. Who am I in the future, and will I be the kind of person who would venture into polyamorous love? Thus, my decision was no decision at all. It was a manifestation of doubt. For even as I made the decision, I wondered how I could possibly decide such a thing. Why wouldn't I want to see her again, if only for conversation and casual sex? I had no one else to see. No other prospects. I

wondered—even now, as Janice enthusiastically enumerated the virtues of a multi-person love—whether I unwittingly lay the groundwork for some inevitable irony, as in: he says he won't, but we know he will. As in: he wants what he wants whether he likes it or not.

I tuned back into the conversation. Janice was explaining something. I have more than one partner at a time, she said, but don't consider myself to be part of any couples. I don't have primary partners. It's an independent life.

Makes sense, I said.

Anyway, she said, what I meant to say is that I didn't want Julio to come to the gallery today. He invited himself.

I nodded.

He wanted to hang out with you because he's trying to get over this jealousy thing he has. Getting to know your partner's partners is supposed to help with that. Not that you and I are partners, I mean. I'm just saying—.

We went home separately, or I went home, and Janice stayed in the city. She had other plans, she had said, to see someone else. I didn't ask who. None of it mattered. I'll never see her again, I thought. She isn't even real. I'm not even real.

And yet, that night, thoughts of Janice kept me awake—something about her. Something. Fantasies of her filled my head. Not sexual fantasies, but domestic ones. Visions of the prosaic and the mundane—of making dinner and watching HBO and

brushing our teeth together before bed. Dreams of living together somewhere else in time and space, a suburban life, a garden, a lawnmower, a garage.

You're sick.

Sometime between two and three in the morning, I heard someone in the hallway. Someone moving, heavy and loud, just outside my door. Coming closer. I startled and felt afraid. I sat up. Think of something else. Think.

The hallway light lit up the space beneath my door, enough light to give the objects in my room an outline, a vague shape.

I waited until the movement stopped and all was quiet again. I didn't want to get out of bed, but now I needed to pee and knew I wouldn't be able to fall asleep until I did. My body dragged itself and my heels stiffened, and it took me a few seconds to balance myself before moving. I put my hand on the foot of the bed and stumbled out.

When I got to the bathroom, the door was shut. I knocked. No answer. I knocked again. I walked inside. The light was on, and now I could see. There. The floor was covered in blood—blood on the toilet seat, smeared on the bath rug and around the shower, not yet dried, permeating toward my bare feet, as if its source was beneath the floor, or was the floor itself. It was much more blood than would come from a nosebleed or a small cut or an extracted tooth. The blood was dark, the color of dirt.

I thought to cry out for help but feared I would be blamed for the bleeding.

Bleeding? No. It's not blood, but shit. Wet and fleshy excrement. Or no. Not shit. Vomit. It must be vomit. Someone—a housemate, a friend of a housemate—must have come into the bathroom and tried to throw up but missed the toilet entirely and heaved onto the floor, probably more than once, someone too drunk to realize they had missed the toilet, too drunk to clean up, someone with an enormous stomach, vomited across the entire floor.

I pretended I hadn't seen anything and walked back to my room and removed a plastic water bottle from my recycling bin and peed into it. I drank whiskey from the bottle and got back into bed.

The phone vibrated. *A neurologist explains why we see a story about the world—a story—and not the real deal. How a single mother was tortured to death in her own backyard. How one family built an underground sex trafficking operation out of their basement in Salt Lake City, Utah.*

2.

Of course, I saw Janice again. Why wouldn't I. She was exciting and interesting and unpredictable. Two days after meeting her in San Francisco, we met at an overpriced Mexican restaurant near my place.

I watched her watching her reflection in the windows as we walked inside.

We sat in a diner-style booth in the back and looked down at our menus.

Janice ordered two beers and a plate of vegan nachos.

The waiter said, thanks treasure, and took the menus.

I told Janice that I was a vegan too and she seemed happy about that, but not as happy as I had hoped she'd be.

The restaurant was dark and crowded with graduate students and professors, and people who looked like graduate students and professors but probably weren't. The music was up, and we had to speak at a volume slightly louder than comfortable. We discussed the spectrum of topics: TV shows, podcasts, dieting, dating, new beers we had been wanting to try, how our friends were getting divorced and rescuing dogs and having kids or not having kids. Janice spoke easily and without pause as if she had rehearsed everything she had to say. She stirred her drink with her fingers and leaned in. She asked me for the facts.

The facts?

Yes, she wanted the facts. Now that we had made it past the initial stages of getting to know each other, it was time for the facts. All the facts. The word sounded like *fucks* when she said it. *Give me the fucks.*

The facts: I grew up in the middle of nowhere in the Midwest, in the plains, in the snow. That's why my face looks like this, I said. I'm not as old as my face is. But back then I was always squinting. I had to squint to see.

Janice reached across the table and traced the lines on my forehead and around my mouth. I like it, she said. Your face. You look extreme. Severe. Like Sean Penn.

I had the impulse to tell her that I thought the same thing about her face, that it was old, older than her body suggested it should be. But I didn't.

More facts: Jewish mother. Catholic father. First, I was the Catholic kid at a Jewish school. Later, I was the Jewish kid at the Catholic school. I was doomed to believe and not to believe in God. My father died a long time ago and my mother remarried and moved to Maine.

More facts: I went to graduate school to become a writer.

To write what?

Novels.

Are you writing now?

I'm trying. (I didn't tell her that I hadn't been writing in years. I didn't tell her that I tended to get disoriented and confused by my own writing. I would sit down to write and become fidgety. I would question myself, my feelings and the feelings behind my feelings, and the construction of my sentences, and the meaning of individual words. Words like "meaning" and "individual" and "word." Sometimes, I would lose the narrative and forget where I was and what I had been doing, and in the

absence of any kind of creative output I would think about other things: the cynicism of culture, the fragility of the human body, the tedium of social life and work, or the accumulation of wealth and the attendant clout I imagined it would bring me.) But I moved to Berkeley six months ago because I needed to get out and Parker got me a gig at LinkedIn. I work from home, never go into the office.

Tell me something that's wrong with you.

Wrong with me?

Something is wrong with everyone. What's wrong with *you*?

I don't know.

Don't be shy.

Okay. Um. I'm epileptic.

You have seizures?

I'm a nocturnal epileptic, so only at night. So far.

Janice ordered a second round of beer.

I asked her the same questions she asked me, and she gave me the answers.

She talked about her family, her childhood. She was born in Chicago, went to University of Chicago, studied marketing, and got a gig in advertising out of college. She told me about how her father was in the Army, and her mother an Iranian immigrant. I have a fractured identity, she said. Two opposing energies compete for my heart. She told me that her mother had abandoned them at a young age, when she first arrived in the United States. So that was us, she said: mom, dad and me. Three, and later two, and then one. The family fracturing was a source of guilt and

confusion, because—as she put it—she was an Iranian woman raised by a single white man. And not just any white man, she said. He was all military. Very military.

Very?

Hard core, she said. Intense. Self-sacrificing, but in a condescending, martyr-type of way. Macho. I never saw him cry. And he ate the same thing for breakfast every morning. Grape nuts. Grape nuts and coffee. Black coffee. And he drank black beer and he never talked about what he liked and didn't like. Everything was neutral to him. Everything was given, and his reaction to everything was blank.

He sounds like a jerk, I said unthinkingly, pandering to what I assumed were Janice's daddy issues.

Wrong, she snapped. You're wrong. He was quiet, that's all. But he was gentle and soft spoken. Don't get me wrong. He was sad. Everyone's sad, I know, but he was broken. He didn't say much because he didn't want to say the wrong thing. He didn't want to talk about what he didn't understand, and he didn't understand much. That's what he told me. Better to shut your mouth, that's what he said. He used to say: what's gone is gone forever, and that's the hardest thing to learn. He didn't trust his feelings, or any feelings for that matter. I don't think he really knew who he was or what he believed in.

I hummed and glanced at my broken wristwatch.

And once I finished college and settled with a job and an apartment, he shot himself in the head. Right in the mouth.

Jesus, I said. Jesus Christ.

But I consider it to be a generosity toward me because, I think, he waited to do it until I was gone—he waited to do what he had wanted to do for his entire adult life.

I'm sorry, I said, reached out to touch her hand, set flat on the table in front of her, but she pulled it away and placed it in her lap, and I, in turn, pretended to swat away a fly.

The lunch hour ended, and the restaurant started to clear out and the chatter quieted, and the clank of plates and silverware grew louder.

Janice crossed one leg over the other, and then reversed her legs, and placed the other leg over the one, and undid them and put both feet flat on the floor, and leaned backward, and then leaned forward and put her elbows on the table. She drank.

She licked her lips and put her pointer finger on the napkin in front of her and spun it in tight circles on the table. She kept talking. I let her talk. She told me about how she moved to California after her dad died to get access to the sun and the open space. She got an apartment in Oakland and a marketing job in the city, then bounced around Silicon Valley. I earnestly believed, she said, that moving to the west coast would heal me. The sea and the sun. But when my dad was gone, I couldn't sit still or settle down. I rejected sleep, too. I was afraid, she said, that I wouldn't be able to wake up again. That I'd not be able to come back. I feared not being there in the morning. Even now, she added, I don't like sleeping. I have to force myself into it. I take sleeping pills and drink or turn on the television or the white noise machine or the fan, just for the proof of something there. Anything. The meaningless drone of anything outside my head. I read cheap paperbacks, crap detective novels or erotica

until I fall asleep, mid-sentence, with all the lights on. And even now I usually wake up with a sense of relief, thankful to have made it out alive.

*

Weeks went by. I spent more and more time with Janice. We still hadn't had sex or even kissed. We talked and didn't talk and looked at each other. We went to dinner. We danced in bars. We made popcorn and watched movies. Movies goddamnit, not films. Janice hated films. Films are what white people watch, she said. Fuck films. She referred to everything, therefore—even YouTube clips or Instagram stories—as movies.

Occasionally, I walked her to work, and we had coffee together. Janice was generous and nonjudgmental, so much so that I often took her all-accepting attitude for indifference and flippancy. This caused me to act alternately tense and relaxed in her presence; but because Janice was seeing other people, I felt no pressure to be everything usually required of a romantic partner—sexy, smart, charming, witty, all that at once.

We shared secrets. It was easy for her. There seemed to be, for her, no difference between thinking and speaking. She held nothing back and didn't consider anything to be private or sacred. She was unashamed. She made fun of herself. She opened her mouth and laughed and threw her head back and showed her long neck. I peed my pants on an airplane while taking a nap, she said. I search for myself every morning on the internet. I cry during Google commercials. At night, I jump onto my bed because I'm still afraid of what's underneath it. I cry for no reason. I act like I'm stretching so I can smell my armpits. I pretend to text on my phone while secretly taking a zillion selfies.

She told me crude stories about gym showers, library hallways, and public bathrooms. She told me that she used to be a kleptomaniac, that she stole things from people, random things, things useless to her, meaningless to her—a child’s tricycle, a plumber’s screwdriver, a soccer coach’s cleats. What mattered to me, she said, is that I could take something, anything. And by taking something I felt like I had some control over my life.

Once a week we left the East Bay and drove away into the city or farther west or south. Sometimes we took the day and drove to the coast and stood at the water where the earth seemed to extend forever. We went east, too. Into the hills. It felt good to go, to be gone—to escape what felt like a meaningless routine.

It’s better, Janice said, to run away from your problems rather than solving them. Problem solving is an institutional imperative. Better to escape. Better to escape in the middle of the night and get out before anyone notices.

There was a restaurant we liked east of Berkeley, up on a ridge somewhere. It was quiet there, and it had a view. We recognized no one, and no one recognized us.

What do you do for work? I asked. You can tell me now.

She grinned and covered her mouth. I’m a writer, too.

Everyone’s a writer, I said.

I’m in tech. I write dialogue.

Dialogue?

For robots.

Robots?

Sex robots. For the pornographic revolution.

I asked her to explain.

So, yeah, the robots have sex with each other, she said. She made air quotes around the word sex.

What does the human do?

Nothing, she said. No humans.

Still, I didn't understand.

The human is nothing, she said. The human is irrelevant. Soon, every consumer will have a customized sex robot. One robot per person. Like a smartphone. Everyone will have a smartphone and a sex robot. It's not a full body sex robot. It's just the lower half, the groin, the crotch area, complete with life-size sex parts.

How do they speak to each other?

Speak?

You said you write dialogue, but how do they talk to each other if they don't have mouths?

She laughed. You don't need a mouth to say something, she said. This is how it works. You take two robots, yours and someone else's, put them together, turn them on and that's it.

That's it?

That's it, she said. Because sex, or, in most cases, the possibility of sex, the psychological need for sex, has the potential to ruin the relationship that allows sex to be possible in the first place.

I made a face.

The robots have sex with each other so that we don't have to, she said. They attend to the psychological realities of sex and relieve us from the burdens of needing sex. They act as a surrogate for you and your sex life. They have sex for you when you can't have it. No one ever never needs to have sex again.

Wait—.

Let's think of a few scenarios, Janice said. For the robots.

Okay.

Okay. Scenario One. Take our current situation. You and me. We met each other under the pretense of a possible hookup. It's likely that when we planned our get-together, we considered, maybe even fantasized about hooking up. Let's admit that. Soon this gets confusing. For example, when I told you I wanted to meet for lunch, maybe you thought lunchtime meetings mean no sex. But admit it, part of you hoped that maybe we'd have a quickie at my apartment, or that I'd give you a hand job in the park. The sexual tension causes you to focus on yourself, even now, as we speak. Maybe you're asking yourself: How does my hair look? Am I saying the right thing? Should I have made that joke? Why won't she make eye contact with me? Does it mean anything that she ordered nachos for lunch? Not an ideal pre-sex food, right? And so on. In short, the possibility of sex inhibits sex itself. We're on edge. We

need to loosen up a bit, you know. Okay. Now imagine that we have our sex robots. Let's say that the first thing we do when we meet each other—the very first thing—is put our sex robots together. We watch them grind it out, at first slowly, and then fast and explosive. Eventually, both climax. And that's it. From that point on, both of us are free. Because there is no difference in the brain between what it sees and what it experiences physically, we have vicariously orgasmed without the anxieties and emotional attachment associated with new sex partners. The pressure of sex is gone. We can discuss politics and religion without worrying about whether we're going to get lucky at the end of the date. We can talk openly. We can be honest.

I had the urge to spit but swallowed instead.

Scenario Two. Let's say we had been dating for a few weeks and you suddenly get very nervous. Let's say you found out something about my past that intimidates you—maybe that I used to identify as a lesbian or a man. Maybe you found out that I used to be a sex worker and that I'd fucked hundreds of men. And let's say that this knowledge caused performance anxiety for you, because, I don't know, maybe you're repressed, and suddenly, despite weeks of good sex, you are incapable of getting an erection. Even the slightest reminder of my past is enough to distract you. Occasionally your cock gets hard enough, but you almost always lose it—emasculatation, shame, all that. Enter the sex robots. Instead of having sex, now we watch our robots have sex. Your robot is the ubermensch. It never loses it's hard, never fails to satisfy its counterpart robot. You slowly gain your confidence, and our

sex life resumes. It turns out, sex is nothing intimidating or mysterious, nothing more than a mechanism. You get it?

Yeah, I said. I think so.

Scenario Three. Let's pretend that you and I got married.

Okay.

For a few years, our marriage is good, the sex is mostly good, sometimes it's average, but that's expected. Both of us eventually get busy with our careers. You're getting a new job. I'm nearing a promotion. We don't have the time or concentration required to have good sex. We might try here and there, but each time we do, you're thinking about the progress of your work, and I'm worried about turning in my quarterly reports on time. You see where this is going. Both of us begin to feel guilty for not having sex as much as we used to. We agree we should be having more sex. We hear our coworkers talking about the sex their having, even in older age. We begin to conflate our sex life for our most basic feelings toward each other, wondering whether we care about each other as much as we used to. What will we do?

Sex robots.

Sex robots! Each morning, we let our robots sex it out, and our sex lives are restored. The psychological burden of sex is gone, and we can entirely focus on our careers without wondering about the state of our marriage. We don't have to have sex if we don't want to. There's nothing antisocial about it. We have the robots, you see? A person has a limited source of libido at any given time, she said. And libido is a

powerful source of motivation, right? Sometimes, we need to focus that libido on things other than our sexual partner. The sex robots allow us to participate in the act of sex—thus fulfilling familial, social, and consumer demands of it—while also reserving our libido as a vibrant life-source that fuels our careers and creative projects. It's revolutionary. It will free up our minds to think of things other than sex. The robots satisfy the more deep-seated psychological aspects of sex, things like power, revenge, self-actualization, self-harm, social status, and the kind of violence and aggression that comes from failing to actualize what one believed should be a normative and satisfying sex life. Just think about it. If everyone had a good sex life—the kind of sexual habits that we consider not only healthy, but essential—we would have a much better political reality, too. Why do you think all of these white supremacists are marching in the streets? Because they're a bunch of nerds that never have sex, right? Why do you think so many leaders of rightwing movements discourage young men from masturbating? Because they want to channel the sexual frustrations of young men for political purposes. When we introduce these robots into the market, you'll see a significant decrease in political polarization, domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, and STD's. Fewer angry men. They might be bored or docile or impotent. But at least they won't be angry.

*

Days or more. Janice leaned down and stretched and stuck out her neck to drink her cocktail without using her hands. Her hair was up in a beehive shape thing, a pineapple look. She sucked a piece of ice out of a glass of water and chewed it and rested her elbow on the bar and set her head in the palm of her open hand. With her free hand, she reached over and grabbed me by the wrist and pushed it down in what would have seemed, in other circumstances, to be an act of aggression. The skin of her arm was thin, and her veins protruded, blue and darker blue. She breathed deeply and held her breath and exhaled. Abruptly she said, *what are we?*

The more I got to know Janice, the more I became grateful for this tendency in her—the tendency to disambiguate things, to name them. To make verbal boundaries and contracts. As if the reality of a thing depended on the words that define it.

Are we friends? she said. Or more than friends?

More is good, I said.

Should we sleep together?

Blood rushed to my head, and I felt dizzy—aroused, drunken. Tonight?

Not tonight, she said. I have work early in the morning and I don't want to lose sleep. Plus, my roommate's parents are visiting from Pennsylvania. So, we'd have to sleep at your house, and I'd rather not.

What's wrong with my house?

Nothing, she said. But not on a weekday. I like to sleep in my own bed. I worry that I'll forget something. Toothbrush. Medication. Pajamas.

Makes sense.

Saturday, she said.

I felt a sense of deflated excitement. I started picking at the scab on my calf—the wound I did and didn't inflict on myself earlier. Okay, I said. Saturday.

*

On Saturday it was raining. The first rain since the end of summer. A violent, primitive deluge that fell slantwise with the gyrations of the wind, pounding against the roof in rhythmic bursts. The house shook with it. It heaved and cracked and seemed to break. The windows convulsed and the walls shuttered, and the curtain rings rattled the steel rod where they hung.

Somehow, I felt comforted by the storm—by the physical evidence of wreckage. The visibility of deterioration and destruction. It felt correct to witness the world as it had been shown to me on the news: dangerous and unpredictable and nearing its inevitable end.

All morning I watched YouTube videos. *Ten misconceptions about polyamory. The underbelly of refugee camps. How eleven people control the world.* The videos they kept playing, one after the other. I didn't have to click anything. I watched a video about the Denver International Airport, New Coke, Deepwater Horizon, Alternative Therapy suppression, collapsing media conglomerates, the porn industry, and the rise of Satanism in western government. I watched a video about Antifa, yes—how it was secretly funded by conservative strategists to make the Left look like a bunch of crazies. Was it true? Probably not. I knew the game. The internet is operated, I thought, by algorithms and bots, fake people with fake identities moving their fake cursors, clicking fake websites and liking fabricated places and faces. The only real things were the ads and the products they advertised. The problem with the internet, Parker told me once, that so many folks are experimenting with their alter-

egos. Adults become children again and, what's even scarier, is that children pretend to be adults.

When the storm passed, I walked to Janice's. The streets were cleared out—empty, and the gutters ran full of rainwater. As I went, the words of the therapist spoke themselves in my mind, clear and direct, as if spoken aloud: Before we do anything, visualize that thing in our mind. We must achieve our goals mentally before we can achieve them physically. It was for this reason that I began to play and replay potential sex scenarios with Janice. Most of these scenarios were conventional. Mimetic. Others were mildly adventurous. But soon, my mind, of its own accord, began to play out a different scene—one where I started doing things wrong. Bad things. Faux pas and miscalculations and assumptions. I tried to stop thinking, to stop the scenes from playing out, but they kept rolling anyway.

In one scene: Janice and I were making out, in the dark—playfully, but with intention. And I, in the fantasy (anti-fantasy) interpreted this situation as an invitation to keep going—to go further. And my imagination went further, too. Janice touched my leg, my inner thigh. And I saw in this a sign of readiness and progression—a shy signal. And we began, and she seemed into it, moaning and such, and occasionally saying some raunchy thing—a line from her sex robots, maybe. And then I did something wrong. I stuck my finger in her mouth and made a fishhook, put my hands around her neck, pulled her hair, put my finger in her youknowwhat. In my vision, the

whole scene played itself out. Janice promptly ended the encounter and told me to leave—get out, she said. And later, after I'd left, she called me out on twitter, posted messages on social media, warning other women of me. She wrote that I was insensitive and forceful. And now, presently, my imagined scenario caused me to feel real shame—my imagination had become real. I felt it. I felt awkward even then, in total isolation, cut off from the social sphere. I imagined myself having to leave California, to change my name.

A trial ensued.

The presiding judge: What the hell did you think you were doing? Do you think that you had permission to choke her like that, to touch her asshole?

These are just things people do, I said. Don't they?

Do they?

I didn't choke her hard, I said. I barely choked her at all, I only wrapped my fingers around her neck lightly. I placed them there, for effect and aesthetic purposes, to show her that if she wanted me to choke, I could. And I was willing. It's totally normal. It's a sex thing, isn't it?

I came out of the nightmare paralyzed and had to sit down to gather my thoughts. What thoughts? Who put those thoughts there?

You're sick.

*

Janice's apartment building was a glass structure in central Berkeley. It had been designed in the 90's, as far as I could tell, to anticipate what people must have imagined buildings to look in a then-distant future, which, in the present tense, looked like the now-distant past.

She lived on the first floor, third door on the right. I knocked five times and held my breath and dried off my hands on the back of my jeans and took out my phone and pretended to do something on it.

Janice answered in her exercise clothes. I had never seen her so stripped down. Everything about her was small. She wore tiny spandex shorts and a crop top the same color as her skin—beige, oatmeal, faun, biscuit—which made her look androgynous and humanoid and without nipples.

You're early, she said.

I apologized.

She kissed me on the mouth and invited me in. I have a few more sets, you don't mind.

I sat on the couch.

Janice positioned herself on the floor, laying herself flat and cracking back her head to look at me.

I looked at my wristwatch. I looked at my phone.

Janice started her burpees.

Her apartment had two bedrooms and two baths and gave off the feeling of an upscale hotel lobby. The mode was mid-century modern, arranged with sleek

shapes—orange accent chairs, a glass Platner dining table, an artichoke chandelier. A balcony looked down on the street below.

Janice was panting now, drawing short and rapid breaths. She made her little mouth into an O.

I went into the bathroom and ran the faucet and splashed cold water on my face and looked at myself in the mirror. The eyes sagged. The face felt lopsided and tired. I threw more water onto my face again and put my head beneath the faucet and drank and I rubbed some of Janice's face lotion on my cheeks and went out again.

Can I have some coffee?

Mm-hm, Janice hummed—down and up. The Nespresso pods are in the left cupboard there, above the machine.

I put the Nespresso pod in the machine, removed a small mug from the cupboard and set it in the appropriate place beneath the nozzle. I pressed the appropriate button on the espresso maker, and it released an excremental discharge, thick brown liquid dripped into the porcelain mug. I moved my eyes back and forth from the mug to the nozzle, so as not to let them wander toward Janice, who was still bouncing. I guzzled the americano while standing at the counter. It burned my tongue. Then I remembered a detail from the story I had told the therapist—about a correlation between too-hot coffee and stomach cancer—and I ran over to the sink and rinsed out my mug, and filled it with water and guzzled that, too. Then I repeated it: filled the mug and guzzled the water. And again. Three times in total. I hoped that the cold water would counteract the hot coffee in my throat and stomach.

I took out my phone to look through the news, but I couldn't focus while Janice was still breathing like that, almost panting.

Watch TV if you want, she said.

Okay.

The TV wasn't a TV at all, but a large computer monitor that sat atop the coffee table and faced the couch.

How do I turn this on?

Janice got up and stood over me. I could smell her sweat—a subtle odor, a weedy little onion. She grabbed a remote and pressed something and the screen flared up. She typed something into the search engine and entered a password. There you go.

On television: nothing. I flip through the channels nervously and eventually settled on a college football game I didn't care about: the University of Iowa versus Whoever.

All done, Janice said, finishing her last pushup. Going to take a shower.

I hoped she would invite me to join her, but she didn't.

I turned off the TV and was alone. Somewhere outside a dog barked, and another dog barked, and then another. Through the window: traffic—a procession of headlights passing through the fog in a rumble of wet tires. Thunder shook the apartment, one clap and another. Briefly I forgot where I was; I lost all sense of place, and I struggled to recompose myself, to replay the circumstances that brought me there—the shape of the room and the curvature of the couch and the angle of the

refracted light coming into the glass door at a deluge, a blowout. I heard strange creaking noises, psychic projections of noises previously heard—the sound of my own body, and the pause between breaths. I thought I was going to have a seizure, so I went to my bag and took my medication and drank another glass of water.

Dizziness. Voices. Noises in the other room. Janice? I said, but Janice was not there.

The phone vibrated. *Male suicide rates at an all-time high. 49 murdered by terrorist groups. Fascists in Ukraine to ignite a race war. Russia preparing to invade. Here's your guide to the newest Netflix releases: which ones you should be watching. One dead and three injured at Synagogue shooting in California. Are you addicted to the news cycle? Here's our weekly recommended coping exercises.*

Now Janice emerged from the bathroom in a fluffy pink robe. I was about to make soup, she said. Want some?

Soup?

Curry, she said. Power curry.

Janice vanished into the walk-in pantry and came out a few seconds later clutching a bag of sweet potatoes and curry powder. She opened the refrigerator and opened one of its drawers and removed a head of broccoli and a bundle of asparagus and went back into the pantry and came out carrying a bag of garlic cloves, a bag of tomatoes, one giant red onion, and a bottle of olive oil. She removed the vegetables from the bags and set them out one by one onto the counter and took a cutting board from a cupboard above the refrigerator and two knives, one small blade and one large,

from their block. She minced the garlic with the smaller blade and sliced the sweet potatoes with the larger one. She cut kale and carrots, and placed tomatoes into a large pot to boil, and went back to the refrigerator to get some parsley. She chopped it. I watched her cook, moving with ease and deliberation. She chopped and sliced and cut faster now. The knife was louder on the cutting board, like a hammer falling. She tore bits of broccoli apart, ripped the stems off the asparagus and she threw things into the pot.

The water boiled and spilled over, and Janice stirred it again.

We pushed our way through ten minutes of conversation: weirdest taco trucks in Oakland, best Alejandro Jodorowsky films.

Soon the meal was ready to eat, and Janice spooned the soup into two bowls, threw some salt and pepper on and drizzled some olive oil across. She turned off the kitchen lights, and the overhead, so that the computer screen was the only light in the room.

We ate on the couch. The curry soup tasted good—salty and filling. It had been a long time since I'd eaten anything other than little microwave meals.

Janice finished her soup quickly, and asked whether I wanted anymore, and when I said maybe later, she set her bowl on the coffee table and leaned over and nuzzled her head between my chest and armpit.

Want to lie down and watch a movie?

We went into her room and I and threw myself, knees and ribcage, down on the bed.

The bedroom, like the living room, was spare, surface-level, meant for living in, and nothing more. A single set of drawers, bedside table, unpainted Ikea desk, and a womb chair in the corner. Even the bed was uninviting, too firm, too high: I sat; my feet hung above the floor.

Horror? Janice said.

Horror what?

Are you down to watch a horror movie?

Horror, I said. Sure.

Janice took her MacBook from the desk drawer, plugged it into a nearby cord, opened the screen and logged into her Netflix account. Dracula?

Dracula.

The movie was nothing special, and the acting was mostly average. I watched though, as well as I could, waiting for the movie to show me something about the world, the way it was or was becoming.

Dracula sucked the blood of beautiful men and women and he got younger and more beautiful himself, though he wasn't *that* beautiful, not as beautiful as Julio.

During a particularly violent scene—Dracula ravishing an entire convent somewhere in Eastern Europe—Janice leaned across and put her face on my face. We kissed, though it felt wrong to kiss then, while Dracula was eating.

My wayward fantasy—the nightmare, really, as it became—still lingered in the background of my thoughts, inhibiting my movements. I slowed and tensed up, but managed to progress, albeit awkwardly, from one sexual stage to the next: kissing

to touching, touching to holding to holding down. Maybe I appeared overeager when I took my shirt off—which I did, I admit, unprompted and instinctually, not because I necessarily wanted to take it off, but it’s what one does—because Janice startled, jolted back, and that caused me to startle, too. I halted and leaned back.

Dracula was sucking.

Janice placed both her hands on my chest and squeezed—the way that a man might grip a woman’s breasts and twisted my nipples until they hardened, and she stuck her tongue into my ear. Tell me, she whispered now, what you want me to do to you. And I did tell her. I was not yet past the initial awkwardness of having taken off my shirt, so I could only bring myself to say utterly generic, boring things. Touch that, I said. Oh, yeah. I hesitated to say anything too specific—anything Janice might use as fodder for her sex robot dialogues.

We performed our duties quietly, gently, with caution and uncertainty—as if participating in an exchange of goods, a transaction of pleasure, like for like. When Janice had done her work, I took my turn. I turned her over, as non-threateningly as possible, and fooled around, and put my tongue here, and put my fingers there, and made the shape of a hook, and pulled toward myself, twelve o’clock, two and a half inches up and directly below that urethra, motioning someone forward, the way the internet taught me. And I moved onto other things, too—this and that—and at each stage, I asked Janice, as the internet instructed to do: Is this okay? Is that? Is this? And with each question, Janice answered businesslike: yes, yes, yes. There were so

many yeses that I lost track of which ones were referred to questions and which indicated pleasure.

And Dracula was there, too—shedding his skin to become a wolf, and then to become a bat, and then a man again. His eyes went red.

How long had we been going now?

I tried to distract myself from myself. I looked at a clock mounted on the wall. It was a replica of a Piet Mondrian painting—a grid of solid colors, whites and yellows, and a large red square panel in the center. But that clock was the opposite of a Mondrian; for it ascribed to the painting the very use-value which the artist originally aimed to strip away. The clock instrumentalized what Mondrian had wanted to render nonfunctional, spiritual, transcendent.

I was brought back to the present when Janice started to talk loudly. She was talking dirty: *fuck. wet*, etc. But she spoke in the third person, so that her sex talk sounded like narration, rather than description or instruction. *He likes it*, she said. *He wants it rough*, she said. *He needs it. He pulls her hair*. I understood the narration—because it named both characters in the third person, and therefore, it seemed, lacked interiority—to be an omniscient third person. And if this narration was all-knowing, what else might she say? What did she know that I didn't?

He isn't as hard as it used to be, the narrator might say. *He's not as strong. Not as young and smooth and tenacious. He's losing it now. Look at him*.

And I began to experience the present moment in the third person, too. As “he”—himself. My perspective shifted to a position off the bed, away from the act of

intercourse, and when I looked back, he was not me having sex with Janice, but someone else entirely and I watched the sex that I was supposed to be having.

Go faster, he thought, eager to get to the end.

He goes faster.

Now then I saw, as if in a vision, the sex robots: a mechanical penis and a mechanical vagina, moving forward and backward toward a coded, preprogrammed outcome. Then I saw endless mechanical penises. A whole valley of robotic cocks and balls, all of them swinging up and down in unison, into and out of their mechanized counterparts.

Don't lose it, I thought, and lost it. I slipped out. A dark and sluggish tool. Slumped against her inner thigh. A fishy smell with garlic and ammonia. Better to come early than not at all. Better to fake it than to fail. So, I did. I pretended to orgasm, and I cried out, as if for help, in a voice I could not recognize as my own. It was a shrill sound, a broken car horn.

I stood and wiped myself off with my undershirt, though there was nothing to wipe. Then I collapsed onto the bed next to Janice and exhaled. I wanted to be far away.

Was this my future, oriented toward incompleteness?

Janice reached over and touched me. Lay with me, she said. She kissed me in a way that was probably loving, but which seemed belittling. For a while, we lay prone and supine, talked and didn't talk, converged and faded into thinness and

silence. Our feet hung off the bed. The screen went deep blue. It felt like I was underwater, drifting.

*

I woke up to pee in the middle of the night and the room was darker than when I had fallen asleep. I rolled out of bed and went toward where I thought the bathroom was but wasn't—that was the closet. I turned around and lifted my arms and stretched them out, Frankenstein-like, and shuffled one foot in front of the other without taking either off the ground. When I found the bathroom, I made sure the door was shut behind me before I turned on the light. I recoiled from it and allowed my eyes to reopen in their own time. I sat on the toilet and pissed like a girl—my cock was still half-erect and needed to be pressed down to let urine flow through it. I looked at my broken wristwatch and looked again.

I stood and examined the bathroom, hunting for clues. Clues for what? I opened the mirror cabinet behind the sink and found: French toothpaste, French perfume, a ring-holder dish in the shape of the Eiffel Tower, contraceptive pills, generic painkillers, and a bottle of antidepressants (different than my own antidepressants) and another medication I didn't recognize.

Taped to the back of the mirror was a drawing, sketched out, I think, by Janice herself. It was two faces. The first was the universal smiley face: a circle, two dot-sized eyes and a U-shape mouth (no nose) beneath which was written in bold: medication. The second face was drawn in much greater detail and quite obviously intended to represent Janice's actual face. It was the shape of a human face—larger at the forehead, narrowing at the chin—complete with eye-shaped eyes, lips, cheekbones, forehead wrinkles, and long wavy, black hair. What was most frightening about the face was the mouth, which was wide open, crying out in pain—

doing evil or having evil done to it. And the teeth were showing, and they were crooked and misshapen and sharp. All of them: sharp. And atop the head were two horns, like those belonging to the devil— Dracula in his most monstrous form. And beneath this second face—which was both Janice’s face and the devil’s at once—was written: no medication.

When I got back to bed, I turned my head away from Janice so as not to be seen. And I wept. I turned my face down, into the mattress. I sobbed and turned my head toward the window. The wind was blowing. The trees swayed and bent and receded from the pallid moonlight to become their own shadows.

*

Everywhere looked like autumn but felt like summer. The leaves were brown and orange and falling, but the temperature was the same as it had been—hotter even. School had started, and I saw more and more students passing by my window, whichever way, keeping their heads down as they went.

The phone went. *The renewed fight against ISIS in Syria, a U.N. warning about climate change, a destructive earthquake in Albania, a woman in Texas found dead on her way to work was killed by multiple feral hogs, more germs than you realize in your kitchen.*

On the internet: another presidential debate. One candidate explained his proposal for universal basic income. The total automation of labor, he was saying, is inevitable. In ten years, eighty percent of the American workforce will be phased out of existence. There won't be jobs left in the service industry or the manufacturing industry, will soon be accomplished by machines. Candidate K, in response, claimed that, in fact, the industries of contraction and labor were alive and well. He argued that in a few years, construction companies will be undermanned and, therefore, in desperate need of a new, young workforce. This need will produce in-demand, high-paying jobs. American's future will be built on hard working folks.

With Janice there was more sex, and the more sex there was the more it felt like sex. We saw each other three days a week—Sunday, Monday, Wednesday. Those were called “my days.” I didn't ask about the other days, or whose days they were. I was

happy to have my own. Three was enough for me, and three was enough for Janice, too, because, as she put it, she didn't want our relationship to interfere with her life. I don't want our sex to distract me from my own time, she had said. Plus, she added. I have other obligations, social and romantic. Other people, too. It's not just you and me, she said. There's always a third party. There's a whole world to experience.

Wherever we went our shadows went with us, now before us, now behind. We met at the bookstore, we emailed each other. I looked forward both to fear and to excitement, opportunity and suspicion. We went to the cafe and the bar and the theater. We drank. We walked. We took the side streets. The weather was fine. Time passed, but I couldn't feel it. A line turned into a loop, a loop into a circle. We ended up in the same place we started. Nowhere in particular. We went to the grocery store and the bike shop and the bagel joint and the bakery.

Janice talked and I listened. *Furthermore, moreover, additionally, what's more, therefore, thus, thusly, behold, and so on.* Art, sex, and the proletariat. Aesthetics and perversion. Sex and Art. Ethics and the proletariat and the pedophilic elite. I was Janice's convert, her would-be disciple. She was un-repressing me, she said. She was opening me up to a whole world of possible selves. She said: change your life. His voice was always that way, heavy and drawn out; and when he spoke my own throat felt sore, as if I had been the one speaking. Be yourself, she said. Be your real fucking self.

The air was heavy, and each day was a din of voices and vibrations, cars and trucks rumbling through the streets. The sky turned and turned, drained of color. It

appeared and disappeared. The buildings sprawled out, lowly and thin. The yoga studio and the bag store and the public library. The light obliterated them. The power lines buzzed louder, and swarms of flies buzzed beneath them.

One day, we met at a narrow hotel in San Francisco—a sleazy place, cheap, the kind of hotel that offers an hourly rate—so we could have sex in front of the room’s street-facing window.

We stood up when we did it. I was behind her, and she faced the glass, so that she could attract passersby, make eye contact with them. She said it was hot, and she liked the danger of it—the possibility of being caught. She wanted to be caught, too. She pressed her hands and face hard into the glass. She screamed, exaggeratedly, as if for help.

I contorted—pulled back the upper half of my body, cranking my neck away, and extended my lower half forward, cock and all, so as not to see or be seen. After a while, Janice turned around, wedged her back against the windowsill, pressed her body against the glass and spread out.

She wrapped her legs around me and looked down to watch me sliding in and out. I watched her watching it. She did not lift her head, not once. She fixed on it, mesmerized by the repetition and mechanisms of it—and in this way, the way she watched, she both included and excluded me from the process. And so, I felt that the

drama of sex was reduced to its fundamental codes—its subjects brutally dislocated from the particularities of desire. It was exactly what I did and did not want.

Now he goes slower, she said, and I went slower. Now he goes faster, she said, and I did.

When it was over, Janice thanked me for doing it. She said, don't you want to know if anyone saw us?

Sure.

They did, she said. Lots of them.

She reached over and plucked a loose hair off my bare arm and held up in place between her thumb and pointer, as if making a benediction, to show me.

Later, Janice and I were walking nowhere, wandering off the main roads, near the highway. The sun fell behind rows of incongruous apartment buildings. The sky lit up red and empty, like a battle scene without soldiers to fight.

Do you think I'd like your novel? She said, apropos of nothing.

No.

Why not?

I don't know.

Is it one of those *lit bro* novels?

What's a lit bro novel?

Is it sexist? Is it about a sad man who feels sorry for himself? Is it one of the huge books that wants to impose a phallic consciousness onto the world? Are you one of those *dude* writers who only describes women's tits?

I hope not.

Janice put her hands in her pockets and jingled some keys or coins. She faced forward, looking out there, ahead of us, with exerted effort. She squinted, and opened her eyes and squinted again, as if trying to see something far away.

I looked out there too but saw nothing. A thin complex that cut diagonally from the north, run-down houses, patchy lawns, rotting wood, some windows barred and boarded-up.

Why wouldn't I like it?

I don't know.

It's too academic, or what?

Too symbolic, maybe.

Why are you writing it?

I can't help what I write or don't write.

What's it about?

Nothing.

Tell me, she said. Tell me the whole thing.

It's long, I said, trying to avoid summarizing another novel I wasn't writing. I glanced down at my wristwatch as if to suggest we didn't have time for me to tell it.

Tell me, she said. Go.

Okay. I decided to take this as an opportunity to impress Janice, maybe, so I made something up. A story. A long one. The longest yet. It took half an hour to tell. It went something like this:

There's this guy, Gad is his name, who, when the novel begins, is married to the love of his life. A woman, Bobbi. He calls her Bob, and sometimes Robert, Bobert, Bobber, or Bo. Both are somewhere in their late thirties. They've been married for—I don't know—seven years. Maybe more. They live in Brooklynn and work as adjunct professors at a community college.

Gad is a large man and has cultivated what he considers to be a historically masculine look--worn-out jeans and flannel shirts and boots. He wears a large beard. Bobbi also dresses like a man—she wears more or less the same outfits as Gad. Sometimes, they even share clothes.

She has red hair and, each morning, meticulously places it into a messy bun, giving off a blasé look.

Gad and Bobbi are both novelists. Gad has not been able to write because, as he puts it, he wants to write something completely original, to imagine or invent something out of thin air. He wants to tell an old story in a new way, or a new story in an old way. Old—as old as the Greeks and Children of Israel and older, as old as war and its folly, as grand as mythology and religion. He wants to tell a story, something beautiful, something true.

But every story he tells is wrong—every story gets something wrong. Each story, in its own way, tells a lie. It's a trap, he thinks.

Eventually, Gad decides that he must simply tell his own story and no one else's—the only story he's allowed to tell. Not an invention, but a confession.

But the problem is this: He has no story of his own—nothing to confess. His life, so far, is boring, mostly, and/or at least uneventful. So far.

Bobbi, by contrast, writes with ease. Plus, she's brilliant and charismatic. Heretofore Bobbi has been very secretive about her writing. She has not, on principle, allowed Gad to read any of it.

You can read it when it's published, she says.

So, Gad—who does not push back or pressure her—waits. Her first novel is published to great acclaim. Her novel explores sex, sexuality and all that. Some reviewers even call the novel “high erotica,” “pornographic art,” “downright dirty fun.” One critic writes that Bobbi's novel “pushes the boundaries of what is considered acceptable for the average reader of literary fiction.”

He buys a copy for himself with his own money and reads it.

It goes without saying: Gad is happy for Bobbi. He's excited for his wife, but—like most readers of his generation, and, maybe, most readers in general—he assumes that Bobbi's novel is autobiographical. He assumes, too, that the primary love interest in the novel, whose name is Red, is modeled after himself, Gad. And indeed, Gad recognizes himself in Red: his muscular build, weightlifting schedule, gambling habits, drinking preferences, even his idiosyncratic colloquialisms. He says

things, for example—“el” instead of “the,” and “four shores” instead of “for sure.” Red resembles Gad in other ways, too. He wears a “dad hat”—a plain, shallow, beige cap that sits loosely atop his head, always about to fall off.

Towards the middle of Bobbi’s novel, however, during the first full-length sex scene, Gad fails for the first time to recognize himself in Red. Here Gad encounters a long description of Red’s penis, that is—surely, definitely, he thinks—not his own penis. The description goes like this: *The piece was paunchy and plump. A short, stalky motherfucker, astonishingly compressed, flattened even—a condensed baguette, a smashed-down soda can. And when it hardened, it extended not upward, but out, so that it grew in width. So broad it was that, when I tried—and I tried hard, very hard, in truth—I could not put my mouth around it, and it was of no use to me.*

Gad feels confused not only because he does not recognize the penis, but also because he wonders whether a) he has deluded himself about the nature of his own penis, and b) the described penis is another man’s penis, and, if so, whose?

He removes his pants, then and there, to examine, naked from the waist down, his own penis, and sure enough: no. His penis is perfectly normal. Too normal. If anything, his penis is the opposite of the one described. It is long and thin, and it hardens in unremarkable, average ways.

It’s just fiction. It’s all made-up. He laughs at himself. He forces himself to laugh, and he laughs so loudly that, when he hears himself laughing, he does not recognize his laughter, and the sheer volume of it exposes the laugh as false. The

laugh, he thinks, resembles a moan—a howl, a sob. And when Gad becomes aware that his laugh sounds like a sob, he begins, in fact, to cry—to weep hysterically.

Days pass and months. Gad can't move past it, can't get over that description, that pancake penis, the widening of it, can't forget his own fears and insecurities and fragilities. He believes—or he wants to believe—that he's being irrational and moody. That the narrator isn't Bobbi, anyway. Come on, fool.

But he can't let go of it, and slowly it eats away at his brain. He can't get the image out of his head—the fat cock, the cartoonish girth of it. He sees visions of his wife trying to fit her tiny mouth around it. He sees that image when he goes to bed, when he wakes up, and—worst of all—when he himself tries to have sex with Bobbi with his average penis. Pencil dick.

Gad begins to suspect that Bobbi is or was—whether now or at the time of writing her novel—cheating on him with another man. Suspicion turns into sorrow, and sorrow into anger, anger into loathing, loathing into confusion, confusion into impotence. His sex performance worsens, and Bobbi notices that he isn't himself—that he hasn't been himself for a long time. She suspects that he is jealous—not of some imaginary lover, but of her literary success. After all, it's obvious: Gad, in his anger and confusion and impotence, has not been writing.

How could he write?

Now Gad's paranoia turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Bobbi does begin an affair. One and then another. Threesomes and foursomes. Soon Bobbi can't stand to be around Gad—not only because he mopes and broods around the house, but

because she correlates his moodiness with her writerly success. And so, in a fit of misunderstanding and irony, propelled by her feminist convictions, Bobbi files for divorce.

Gad tries to defend himself, tries to explain his actions and salvage what might be left of the marriage, but Bobbi—who interprets Gad’s insecurities as insults, and his confessions as attempts at manipulation—rejects all of it.

Nothing can be done. It’s no one’s fault—or, probably, it’s Gad’s fault, and he knows it, and that’s what hurts.

*Now he is alone. He borrows some money from his mom and moves into a small studio apartment with a shared kitchen. I finally have something to write about, he thinks, I finally have a story to tell. A quiet story about divorce. It will make a good excerpt, he thinks, for *The New Yorker*.*

Here he goes. Gad sets out to write an autofictional revenge novel that will indeed do everything Bobbi had accused him of doing in the first place—it will shame and humiliate and vilify her, his wife.

Look at him writing. He writes and, for a while, his writing is good. He works day and night. The writing consumes his life, and his life becomes his writing. He sets goals and deadlines, and he meets them.

In his novel (which is inside my novel), he describes Bobbi the way she had described him: stubborn, belligerent, dictatorial, brash.

Soon Gad reaches the end of his novel, and it’s here that he burns out. He stalls. He feels himself either overworked by his writing or bored with it. He doesn’t

know how to end it. Does it end with the divorce? Does it end with the beginning of writing the novel itself? No. No, there is no resolution there, no intrigue. There is neither coldness nor heat. Does it end with Gad alone, as he is now? With Gad as himself, dejected and sad, drinking toward sleep? Toward death? No, there is no catharsis in the pathetic. No epiphany in self-loathing. No. The story must be true. True as possible.

Days pass, every one identical to the one before it. His shower is the same every time he takes it. Lukewarm.

One night at a bar, Gad, who sits alone on a barstool, his shoulders slumped, is approached by a man named Blue. Blue is the man's surname, of course, though he does not reveal his first name. Blue's a casual guy, neither big nor small, neither handsome nor ugly. He speaks slowly and in a low register. His voice is low and raspy and gritty. Says words like "nary" and "your'n" and "nuh-huh." Gad likes this about him, and he feels instantly bonded to the man. He trusts him. The two men connect and converse about sports and construction projects on the east bridge and the New Jersey turnpike, and the weather, and how crowded the city gets this time of year with tourists. They express a mutual disdain for politics and politicians. Fucking crooks, Blue says. Shitbag criminals.

Now Gad is enlivened enough to admit that he's a writer, that he's writing a novel about his life and his divorce, about his ex-wife Bobbi who wrote a novel about him and got it all wrong and might have ruined his reputation forever.

A revenge novel. Huh. Never heard of that before.

But I have a problem, says Gad. I can't finish it and I don't know why. It's not coming to me. How to end a story which is your own life, a life which, you hope, will continue after the story of it is told?

Blue thinks about that.

Do I end on a minor or major key? An image? An epiphany? A symbolic rebirth? A symbolic death? A literal one?

Blue is thinking.

I haven't had an epiphany, Gad says, so, I can't write one. Do I wait until my life presents an ending? Do I simply end abruptly, here and now? I don't know. Maybe it's this city. It gets in my head, and it's hard to see beyond it.

Just then, Blue sits up straight and turns to look Gad in the face. Listen, he says. Listen, brother. I own a house, a getaway pad. A bit of a vacation home, you could call it. It's very far away from here, in another world practically. You could go there and finish your novel, clear your head a bit and think. Shit, you could go there for the entire season, if you need it.

Gad is dumbfounded, speechless with gratitude.

Blue claps his hands. It's in the southwest, he says. In the desert. Southern New Mexico, near the border. Las Cruces, a barren place. You could go this winter and stay as long as it takes you to finish it.

For hours, the two men hash out the details. Gad will finish teaching his courses, and as soon as the semester is over, he'll drive across the country, and stay at Blue's house until he finishes the novel, or until the novel—he jokes—finishes him.

For several weeks, Gad and Blue exchange a few emails, mostly to swap logistical information—Blue describes the house to Gad. It’s stucco, he says, the color of sand. It has a red door. A tin roof. Garage. Concrete wall. Path with stones. And it has a giant window that overlooks nothing. He tells him that there is a key taped to the bottom of an empty pot on the left side of the house, in the backyard, behind the gate.

Weeks later, Gad is on the road. He drives for three days—I-70 to I-44 to I-20 to Whitehorse Land, to Crimson Avenue.

He stops to sleep and eat breakfast in Indianapolis and Tulsa, stays in motels as cheap as he can find, the kind of places people go to cheat on their spouses. He wakes and eats the continental breakfast—packaged pies and muffins, mass manufactured and packed with preservatives.

And he keeps driving and never stays too long at any one pitstop, rarely stops to use the bathroom (he pees in a Gatorade bottle).

He’s going west, now southwest, now south. Suddenly he’s in the desert, though he had not seen it coming—though it came without warning.

The sun follows him until it falls into the foreground and sits on the horizon. It turns the black road pale, impossible to see; and the road extends downward and drops into a hellish panorama that seems to encircle even the most intangible part of himself.

He drives through one small town and then another, past thin houses, dilapidated strip malls, sun-burnt boneyards with rusted trucks and broken-down

machinery, concrete schools with empty playgrounds and deteriorated swing sets and shallow dirt pits.

When he arrives, the stars flood the desert floor. But there is this problem: now, here, at this address, the point to which google maps has guided him, does not exist. There is no house. No number 185 Crimson. Only an empty plot. A patch of gravel the size of a small parking lot—wild, uncleared sagebrush and rock.

He conjures up the personality traits most stereotypical to his self-image: toughness, composure. But beneath the skin, maybe on its surface, he feels terror coursing through himself, pulsing through his veins. He's lost, nowhere near his intended destination, he's been lied to, tricked, left for dead.

He checks his phone: no service.

He jumps back into his car and slams the door and starts the engine and hits the gas and drives back, away, to find whether he had made a wrong turn. He turns back along the route he came, seeking out a side road, a secondary path, a fire road maybe, a private driveway. He re-enters the house address but, without service, the machine is unable to trace another way. He goes through the night. The stars cast a dense and filmy light—celestial, like gossamer and lace. He drives back into town—barely a town, barely a village even, even smaller, and totally dark. Still, he cannot pick up a signal. No service, no sign.

For hours longer he drives, and in the desert outside of town, he does find a few houses, but none is right. None matches Blue's description.

Gad's fear turns into fatigue and fatigue turns into listlessness and indifference, and eventually, as the sun begins to rise, he pulls his truck over there, on the side of a road—which is no real road, a wide line cut in the dirt—he stretches himself lengthwise across the bench seat, and tucks his backpack beneath his head, and sleeps.

He does not dream.

In the afternoon, the desert flares up and he sees everything: the expanse of nothing—and in that pantransparency, the whole world seems, for a moment, to lose its meaning, its purpose, if it ever had one.

He turns on the car, and rolls down the windows, and rummages through his backpack until he finds a granola bar and half a bag of trail mix. Then he resumes his search.

Hours of driving, circles within circles. He sees the same hills, same dry ravines—cacti and sage and rocks. He's losing his sense of direction now, looking more and more at his phone, helpless and frustrated. His frustration causes him to resent Bobbi again, to hate her again, to hate her in a way that he had not hated her before.

The sun is pale and white. Gad wonders whether this—here, right now—is how his novel will end.

His phone reads five o'clock now and he's running out of gas. He makes his way back into town—not really a town—and fills up at a Texaco and heads to a diner for some real food and maybe some coffee.

The diner is empty, save one gray couple sitting in the back booth. The decor is modeled white and pink—a fleshy pink, like the skin of a naked rat. The floor is tile, a pink and white checkered pattern. The chairs have overstuffed seats and backrests. Flesh everywhere. Gad sits in a booth, but the seat is unusually wide, longer than the length of his thigh, so that, when sits against the back of the booth, his legs strain to reach the ground, and the tables are unnaturally high so that he must lift his elbows above his nipples to rest set them down. He feels like a child.

He stands and moves to the bar.

The waiter emerges from the kitchen.

He orders a cobb salad and fries and coffee. She nods and walks away and returns with a plastic cup of water. He downs the cup in a single effort.

The waiter observes him, looks him up and down. She's gaunt, tall and thin and worn-out. Passing though?

Sorry?

Passing through, she says again.

I'm looking for a house, he says. I'm going to be living here for a while, going to stay for the season. But I can't find it. I'm lost.

She shows her teeth. What's the address?

He hesitates, skeptical of her motivations, but then decides he has, now, nothing to lose. He holds up his phone on which is written: 185 Crimson.

She shrugs. Tony, yells the waitress. Tony!

A large man emerges from the kitchen—a man who resembles Gad in size and appearance, though his beard is bigger and uncombed and yellowing around the mouth. Maybe he's the cook? The manager?

Tony, says the waitress. You know a Crimson around here? Crimson road?

Gad holds out his phone so that Tony can see it. Tony squints at the machine and flicks his tongue. There's no Crimson here, he says. Not in this town.

Am I in the wrong town?

Dunno, he says. No Crimson, though. I know that. There is a Simpson Ave and a Christen Ave. But I doubt that's what you're after.

Gad frowns, why's that?

Tony frowns, too. Dunno. But those roads are far off. Out of town. It's wack out there. Drug houses and such.

Gad nods and thanks them. He eats his meal as fast as he can. Drinks his coffee, and leaves.

He enters the new roads into his phone. The machine's map locates a 185 Christen, and Gad is gone, back on the road.

He's driving with a new purpose now, faster and with a sense of urgency. The tires screech and howl against the uneven asphalt. The asphalt turns to gravel, and gravel to dust. The dust jumps up and makes a cloud around the truck.

Now he sees in the distance, by the last light of sunset, on the crown of a small bluff, a house. The house is indeed Blue's house. It looks exactly as it had been described. Single story, the color of sand, stucco, tin roof, with a single car garage. A

short concrete wall surrounds the property, and a thin path outlined with thin stones leads up from the driveway to the front door. The front door is as Blue had said it would be. Red.

And the house has that giant window, too, overlooking nothing.

But even as Gad begins to experience that long-awaited sense of relief, he feels also dread; for in that large window there is a light on, and in that driveway, there is a car—a station wagon—and that red door, look, it is slightly ajar.

Gad pulls up to the house anyway and, after sitting in the car for several minutes and—confused, lacking the energy to make any other decision—convinces himself: everything's fine. The light was left on by mistake, surely. The car is always there, right, right. The door is not open, but only seemed to be so. He steps out of the car and approaches the house. He prepares himself for whatever awaits him inside. He clenches his fists. He removes his knife, and puts it in his back pocket where, if necessary, he can reach it again.

Turns out, everything is fine.

The door is locked, and no one is inside. Gad finds the key and enters.

The interior of the house looks like it's underwater. It gives him the feeling of swimming, struggling to catch his breath. The walls are painted a weird blue, almost green, and the carpet is blue too, though much darker in tone, and the windows are dark, though the color is difficult to determine, and when the starlight shines through, they look blue, black, gray. The house is full of potted plants and cacti and framed paintings of the desert, constant reminders of what is still there, right outside,

surrounding the house. There are also three large paintings of the house itself, but at different times of day.

Gad breathes. He removes a bottle of whiskey from his backpack and sips from the bottle. Most of the cupboards in the kitchen are empty, but he finds a collection of glassware in one of the drawers. He pulls out a tumbler, and rinses it out in the sink, and sets it on the counter, and fills it to the rim with whiskey. Then he sips from the bottle and sets it on the kitchen table—a worn and pale and thin table on which rests an empty glass bowl. He tries to watch a film on the laptop, but the house has no internet. No internet and no cellphone service. He downs his glass of whiskey and pours another. He paces around the living room. The drink is hard to swallow—feels like he’s drowning in it. He takes out his notebook and begins to write. Nothing. Nothing again.

What Gad wants is to shift into a default state of being, a primitive mode: no thinking. A state of being—pure being—so irreducible that no thought could describe it, no concept.

That night, Gad orbits sleep, but never enters it. He remains in a dream-like state of agitation and half-conciseness, at once with himself, and with someone else. He tosses and turns and floats around the room. There is an image he cannot see. A face appears in the window. The shape of a human body in the folds of the curtain.

Then his body senses movement outside the house. He startles. He hears the rushing of a train passing. The room shakes and quivers. The moonlight falls through the window and fills the room. His phone, when he looks at it, reads 3:30.

It's late enough to rise, he thinks. To rise and begin to work.

He sits up, and his eyes are drawn to the doorframe—now outlined by a sharp light on the other side.

Had he forgotten to turn off the lights?

Now he's wide awake. Now he's up and moving. After putting on his clothes, Gad unsheathes his knife and tucks it into his back pocket. Then, still trembling, he removes the blade and clutches it with his good hand. He opens the door slowly and walks into the living room and hears a voice muttering to itself—a private language, answering itself with itself. The ramblings of a madman. The voice is a familiar one, deep and gritty.

When Gad turns the corner, Blue is there. He sits. He drinks a dark liquid. He's almost completely naked—he wears nothing but a pair of old gym shorts and tube socks pulled up to the middle of his shins. He holds a large hunting knife with an orange handle and a serrated blade. His tongue is red.

Gad staggers and halts at the bright light. What are you drinking? he says, though it was not the question he meant to ask.

Blue seems not to recognize Gad. He twitches. He jumps up and stumbles backward and bends his knees. Who the fuck are you? He's yelling now. Fuck, fuck. What are you doing in my house!

Gad steps back and crouches. You're drunk, he says.

Blue crouches too, as if to engage in some bizarre and exaggerated choreography. He raises his arms and swings the knife in the air to the right and the left and makes a jabbing motion with it. Get out of my house. Get the fuck out.

Gad's voice is quivering, and he struggles to spit out the words. It's me. Don't you remember? You told me I could stay here. I'm here to finish my novel, remember?

Blue swings his knife again and lowers his body to stabilize his stance.

Gad stutters, trying to reason with Blue—to explain who he is, and why he's there. He recounts the narrative of his novel. Don't you remember? I came here to write the ending, he says. To finish the story.

Blue sways and wobbles a little and grins to show his teeth and laughs with his mouth open in a way that indicates both courage and fear. He steps forward.

Gad steps back. He holds his knife up in the air to match his.

And just then, in the exchange between them, Gad sees something in Blue, something he might not have noticed had the circumstances not been so strange. He sees that Blue is not quite smiling, not grinning exactly, but smirking—the corner of his lip curls up just so. It exudes deliberation and craft.

This is it. This is how my novel will end. Of course, Blue remembers me. He must remember. And if he does remember, then, here and now, he is offering me an opportunity to end my novel. The situation is contrived, fictional, yes, but its outcomes, its consequences are true. Fact produces fiction, and fiction becomes fact. The stakes are real. Bloodshed or cowardice. Yes, this must be the case. Anything else

is unbelievable. No one would believe this, and so Blue—yes, it must be—is staging reality for my sake.

Now, he thinks, the novel ends. Here.

Gad draws his knife. This is his chance to win his life back. To reclaim what he believed was lost in his divorce—his dignity, his self-worth, his art. This is his chance to tell his story, beautiful and true.

What should he do?

Maybe he runs out to his car and drives away, leaving behind all his belongings—his clothes and his computer and his notebook. Maybe he drops to his knees and begs Blue to let him go. Maybe he asks, gently as he can, to gather his possessions. Maybe he promises to leave in peace, says: this has all been a mistake. Maybe Blue lets him go, maybe not. Maybe he fights. Maybe he wins, maybe loses. Maybe they wrestle brutally—symbolic of strife and war and glory and defeat, microcosmic of our struggle with God and angels and demons and death—all of it reduced, here in the living room, to a meaningless game: a random encounter between two men to whom the world remains indifferent.

When I finished my story, Janice stopped and made a thinking face, and then began to walk again. Then she stopped walking again and stepped back and looked down, up. I understand, she said.

Understand what?

Your story, she said. Your long story. You are a storyteller. You don't speak much unless you're telling your stories. But I understand what you mean to say.

I don't understand.

It's an allegory, she said. Gad is an observer in his own life. A tourist inside it, a consumer of it. And what he consumes is experience. But he wants something bigger. He wants a narrative.

I hummed.

But the problem is that narratives are dead, she said. That's what Gad's book is about, isn't it? The existential fatigue of stories. Gad's tries to turn his life into a story—he lives out a plot of adventure. A quest narrative.

Now Janice paused and looked at me, as if suddenly recognizing a stranger. Her face lit up. Big eyes.

Now, she said, I know why you joined our community. This is why you're here, why you joined our community. To reclaim the narrative. She laughed.

I wanted to tell her that I didn't know anything about her community, but I was afraid of how she might react; and I wanted to tell that I had pulled Gad's Book out of my ass, that it meant—as far as I could say—nothing to me.

Gad wants intensity and adventure and violence.

Violence? No. That's not it at all.

It's true what they say. The poet does not know from whence he speaks, dude. You cannot hear what your own story is saying.

It's just a story.

Everyone wants violence at some point in their lives, real violence. Real violence is a necessity, a lifeblood. And that's the decision Gad must make.

I had a feeling like I needed to take a shower.

Violence is how we reclaim our reality, he said. Our narrative. How we burn away the self and end the struggle to be whoever we have spent our lives failing to become.

Now the sun was set and the streetlights clicked and darkness came on.

You're going to the protest tomorrow, right? she asked in a way that indicated I was supposed to know what she was talking about. I think you should come.

She looked at me and leaned in as if to kiss me but did not. Her eyes were deep-set and dark—so dark they mirrored the object of their looking. I could see a glossy version of myself there, contained and shrunken down. She smelled like something familiar. Something simple. Dirt. He smelled like dirt. Not soil or soot or loam, no—not the smell of dirt. More like dust. Or not dust, but sand. Dry and grainy sand. The sand at the bottom of the ocean. Desert sand, I could taste it—dry and coarse. And when I tasted it, I wondered whether it was my own mouth that I was smelling.

Yeah, I said. Yeah. Okay. I'll be there.

*

Next day Janice showed up in black—black jeans and a Fall Out Boy t-shirt.

You listen to that crap?

What crap?

I pointed to her shirt.

She looked down. This? This's Julio's. It's all I have that's black. She looked at me. Why aren't you wearing black?

I didn't want to arrive too soon—didn't want to spend any time at the protest before the protest began. I walked slowly, slower than walking, and feigned interest in the shops on Telegraph, pretending to investigate windows. I pointed at a row of pewter miniatures: wizards, trolls, skulls, and soldiers. Look at this, I said.

She looked.

And look at this. I pointed to a mural painted on a narrow door between two brick buildings. The scene depicted a man trapped inside a shower. The shower head squirted out cartoonishly large drops of water. Was it water? He was fully clothed, the man—shoes, socks, suit and tie. He wore glasses. He held himself up precariously in the tight space—his legs pushed up against one wall, and his hands pressed against the other to keep his feet off the ground. He contorted his body, away from the running water to keep himself dry. The situation was absurd. And not only absurd, but inconsequential, and therefore ridiculous. I'd seen the mural hundreds of times. I'd walked past it nearly every day, going one direction or the other, and yet, I hadn't

regarded it until now. I hadn't understood it until I pretended to understand it, and then I did.

I said, you'd think he could just reach out and turn the shower off, right? See, there is the knob. I pointed. Why doesn't he turn it off? The knob is right there. Maybe he can't see it. Maybe it doesn't work. Or maybe, for some reason, he doesn't want to do it.

Janice was looking down at her phone smiling at whatever she was seeing on the screen.

The sidewalks on campus were covered in chalk drawings, peace and love signs, suns and flowers, trees and stick figures holding hands and coffee cups and heart-shapes. It was written *nobody tells the truth, vote for nobody, nobody for president, we are nobody*. Someone else wrote *hope for hope for hope*.

We wandered among the mob of protesters or counter-protestors. The mob grew. It spilled over the public square and into the walkways and the terraces and grass plots. Many protesters were, as before, outfitted in the garbs of anonymity: black pants, hoodies, masks, bandannas, and brand name jackets. Columbia, North Face and Nike. Biker helmets and paintball helmets and snorkeling goggles and aviator sunglasses. Sports gear, too. Yankees, Real Madrid, Steelers, Pirates, Penguins. A rise and fall of bodies—a singular body swaying in all directions, bounding and flowing, loud and louder, waiting for the protest to begin.

They marched in circles and chanted their mantras and slogans—banners, posters, flags bounded up and down, rippling lightly in the vague sea breeze.

Just then, I was called. Someone called my name.

I saw him: a menacing figure dressed in a single black jump suit and a scream mask. Ten or twelve stood around him, almost a complete circle, as if performing a ritual. Some of them nodded. Some watched stoically—they seemed to watch, sizing us up—behind their enormous sunglasses and masks. We walked closer.

And that's when I saw him. The man.

He pulled off his mask so that it sat on top of his head. I recognized him immediately. It was him. From the bookstore. Ezekiel. There he was, making a face like he wanted to have sex. He huffed and hiccupped and seemed out of breath. Man, he said. I remember you. From the bookstore.

Janice looked at each of us in turn. You know each other?

From the bookstore, I said. Yeah.

We all shook hands—good to see you, what a coincidence, etc.

A crippling awkwardness took control of my brain. There was too much to think about and thinking, in that loud place, was hard to do. Was Zeke Janice's partner?

Zeke kept looking at me, up and down. Where is your uniform? he said. Where is your black?

I looked down at myself to see what I was wearing. Jeans and a dark green over shirt. I forgot, I lied. I just forgot. I ran my hands down my chest and grabbed

my shirt by the hem and tugged it, as if to show how the shirt was good. Good enough.

Janice poked me in the chest. I tried to tell him, she said.

Zeke put his mask back on. This isn't going to work, he said. That's not our uniform, you look like an outsider. We don't know what's going to happen and trust me, you don't want anyone to be able to identify you.

The crowd was getting larger—larger and more restless. Police officers, carrying shields, wearing helmets, rode bikes toward the front of the group.

I have some extra clothes in my backpack, he said. Simple clothes. Non-identifying.

Maybe I should go home, I said, mostly out of frustration about the situation.

Zeke gestured for me to follow him. You can change in the bathroom, he said.

It's fine, I said. Really, I don't care.

Before I could refuse again, Zeke grabbed Janice's hand, and Janice grabbed mine, and we pushed our way through the compact crowd into the student union, packed in with protestors—it pushed down on me. Body heat and forearms. Animalistic grunts, groans, and exhalations—words crashed into other words that passed over like fragmenting clouds. We went into the gender-neutral bathroom. Janice waited outside. Zeke elbowed his way through the long line of people waiting to use the stalls, and the even longer line for the urinals. He stopped on the far end of the sinks and turned to face the crowd. Sorry, he said to no one in particular. We're not here for the toilet, we just need to change into new clothes. He pulled his mask up

again and opened his backpack and removed from it a pair of black sweatpants and a black apron. Put these on, he said.

Now? Right here?

Yes, he said. We don't have time to wait for a stall. Do it here.

What are these? They smell terrible.

My work clothes, he said.

I held the sweatpants up by the waist. What work?

I'm a butcher.

You butcher meat in this? I can't wear these. Look at them. They're enormous.

Just tighten the drawstring and roll up the legs, he said. It doesn't matter what you look like. It only matters that you look like no one.

I'll look like a child, I said. I'll be easy to identify like that. The child, that's what people will say. Look at that child.

A child among children! he said and held out his backpack and shook it and pulled it open. Here. You can put your clothes in her.

I took off my shirt, button by button. I worked my way down. As I began to unfasten my belt, I suddenly remembered: underwear, I wasn't wearing any. I froze.

I wanted my eyes to disappear.

Zeke shook the bag in front of my face and stomped his foot and looked over his shoulder. Why'd you stop? he said. Hurry.

Can you hold up a towel or something? What else do you have in that bag?

Nothing, man. Just hurry. No one cares about your body.

I clenched my jaw and put on the long-sleeve shirt and threw the apron around my neck and tied a knot with the straps together at the back. It was huge, and the bib hung past my knees. It fit like a nightgown or a rain poncho—a Halloween costume of a butcher.

I leaned farther forward, hunched lower, causing the bib to drape down, and I undid my belt and let my pants fall to the floor. Zeke watched, as if to monitor my progress, or ensure I fulfilled his orders. I surveyed the crowd in my peripheral vision, to see whether anyone else was looking at me. Everyone was. An entire group of strangers, their identities safely masked, watched me undress, naked.

I felt hot and cold intermittently, and I squirmed and struggled to pull Zeke's sweatpants around my waist. I pulled tight the draw string and folded the waistband into itself, and I rolled up the legs three times in loose folds that bunched around my ankles.

I stood up and looked around and gave Zeke the thumbs up and put his hand on my shoulder and held me still. Wait, he said. He handed me a pair of aviator sunglasses. Put these on.

You're kidding, I said.

He wasn't kidding.

I put them on and looked at myself in the mirror. I resembled a child wearing his father's outfit—pretending to be an adult in oversized work clothes.

I waddled toward the exit, all suited up.

Janice looked up from her phone and saw me and laughed hard through her nose. Zeke reached into his bag again, pulled out a black bandanna and gave it to Janice. Here. This is for you. Here.

Janice put the bandanna over her mouth and handed me her phone. Let's take a selfie, she said. And we did.

While he was talking to someone else, I turned to Janice and mouth the words: Who is this guy?

What? Janice yelled.

I grabbed her shoulder. Who is this guy?

Zeke? She smiled. He's crazy.

Is he your partner? I asked.

What?

Is he your partner?

She must have misunderstood me, because she simply repeated herself. He's crazy, she said. Totally crazy.

She said it like that it was a good thing.

As the sun set, moonlight fell on the black bloc. A deluge of shadows descending over the structures of academia. Signs and banners led the way, followed by a slew of disembodied arms waving their phones in the air, taking videos and shining

flashlights. Several photographers and cameramen stood outside the mass, and each time one of them tried to follow, or infiltrate, they were held off, pushed back.

Someone said, don't let that fucking photographer in.

There's a plan, Zeke was telling me now, rally together at Sather Gate, chant and confront the enemy, the non-protestors, counter-protestors, the police.

Then what?

Then we march into campus toward the Sproul Plaza, where we'll shut down the event. We'll barricade the doors. Won't let anyone inside. Won't let them speak. By any means necessary.

We were in the middle of the crowd, tossed here and there by the gyrations of the mass, bodies on all sides. Someone toward the front of the crowd lit a flare—the kind you see on the side of the highway at night, surrounding an accident—that threw up a distressed signal into the sky. Everything was red.

Zeke again reached into his backpack, and removed a plastic water bottle, half-empty with a clear, thick liquid, around which was a strip of duct tape and the letters L-A-W written in black. Hold this, he said.

I held it. What is it?

Antacid and water, he said.

I stepped back. Is this a bomb?

Zeke showed his teeth. No, man. It's to repel pepper spray. If they get you, if they spray you, put this on your eyes. It'll help. He reached again into the bag—what seemed like an endless supply source—and removed a pair of weighted-knuckle

gloves and slipped them on, the right and then the left, He clenched his fists and the gloves stretched and formed around his knuckles, and he fixed his eyes forward and started chanting. He pulled his mask down over his face and his voice became muffled and obscure.

What are you going to do with those?

He didn't answer but went on chanting.

We marched.

Zeke's clothes consumed me and concealed every contour of my being. They caused me to feel anonymous even to myself. I was small, smaller than usual. But it felt proper to wear it there, righteously, in my uniform among others. The uniform gave me an authentic and genuine feeling. I was there. I was willfully present.

Zeke yelled, We can't give the police a monopoly on violence!

I nodded and looked over at Janice, who walked stride for stride with Zeke on his right side. She was chanting, too. She had a lightness, a springiness that distinguished her from the other protestors, and her skin wrinkled beneath her eyes.

Tighten up! Someone yelled from the back.

How could we be tighter? But we did get tighter. We were. We closed in, closer together, skin on skin, pressing into a single body as if by some outside strength. Then something started to happen at the front—a conflux, a clash. From the front: Stick together! From the back: Stand your ground! Now folks threw down their street signs. As some protestors moved laterally, one way or the other, the crowd was loosening up. Now it became less aimed and organized and more oblique, moving

crabwise and flanking outward—off the sidewalks and the pathways. I moved with them, by them, and saw the cause of the sidelong reaction—policemen in full riot gear formed a line lengthwise, locking their bikes together to barricade the main pathway like Roman Legionnaires.

The crowd, now thinner at the front, pushed back against the row of bikes, provoking police to push back. Don't do it, kid, said one officer, gripping his bike harder, resetting its upright position. Behind him, another police officer twirled his nightstick. He looked ahead, not at any one person, and seemed not to see anything at all.

Behind the row of cops was another group—much fewer in numbers than our own—of counter-protesters. Their faces were exposed, out in the open. They even seemed underdressed, animalistic, practically naked. They wore red hats and jorts and Fred Perry polos and t-shirts with the sleeves cut off.

The two crowds pushing toward the police officers, the only blockade between them. It was at this point—the point at which three distinctive bodies, each with a sense of righteousness and overconfidence—that the protest veered into a different kind of wave. A distinctive and pointed action. Us against others.

And now, almost immediately, there was a change in tone, a collapse into an archaic contest. Two lanky hooded figures wrestled a bike from a police officer, freeing up his hands to reach for his nightstick. He pulled it from his belt and began to swing aimlessly at the crowd like a man hacking through brush. Several others swarmed the officer, causing him to stagger and sway and fall. I stumbled and moved

out of the way. Two thieves carried the bike toward the back of the crowd. A few other cops ran to defend the now bike-less officer, flat on his back, from the sudden barrage of anonymous punches. Jab, jab, hook, jab. This caused the once-firm unit of armored authorities to sever, to break into clusters of two or three. Some officers teamed up to grab individual protesters. A police officer from the back of the unit: Get the fuck back! He threw a smoke bomb, which skidded along the ground in a semi-circle, popping like a firework, expelling red fog that swept across the scene, a cloud of haze and sightlessness obscured the already-obscure figures, obfuscating the outlines between things. I ran to the side, trying again to get out of the way. More smoke bombs. I was running in circles, avoiding contact with other people. The chanting turned incoherent, and the crowds intermingled and dispersed and scattered like the unweaving of a blanket, fraying in every direction. Some people ran away, some ran toward their opponents. It was awkward and ugly and primitive and blunt. Gang-up. Sucker punch. Cheap shot. Headlock. A swarm of undifferentiated bodies, arms and legs, writhing and pulling and dragging each other down. Every sound was a shout or an explosion, echoing and doubling over and blending into other eruptions and cries.

Someone yelled: *Get off the planet, you killed God!*

You killed God.

Now we are God.

I backpedaled and sidestepped and put my arms out to hold myself upright in the air. I looked around for Janice, but she was nowhere. Gone. I ran to look for her. Left and right. I ran back to where I was.

Perception was no longer a matter of simply seeing or hearing, but of moving and being moved—and sensing one’s position, one’s skin, in a larger act of push and pull, moved by an energy stronger than the sum of actors causing it. It would be wrong to say that I *did* anything. Something was being done.

Zeke was easy to find. He was visibly personified, a whole heap of general rage. He was running, front to back, from one brawl to another. He swung and ran and swung again. He cried out. He moved nimbly, like a trained fighter—light on his feet, throwing punches, quick jabs, without committing to any one specific scuffle. He vanished into a swarm of body parts, and I did not see him again. Behind me, I felt an intense heat on the back of my legs. Still backpedaling, I tripped and stumbled and turned around: the police officer’s stolen bike was burning. Not more than ten feet from me. The flames billowed up and the smoke went up—like a sacrificial ceremony. One man punched another in the back of the head, who was, in turn, punched in the back of the head himself, and one threw a rock into a window, and a counter-protester hit him in the back with a stick, and one dropped a match into a trashcan, and the trashcan lit up like a face, and there was another broken window, and another, and the police were handcuffing people and throwing them to the ground, face-down, policemen everywhere with nightsticks and face shields and helmets, and another fire, an eruption of smoke that continued to ring and echo after

the initial blast, and I looked and saw: the student union was burning—the flames and the shape of the flames twisted and turned up in the shape of the building they consumed, and smoke billowed out of the open windows and doors and unfolded again and again, doubling over and growing widthwise and laterally along the plane of vision: an eruption of smoke that continued to ring after the initial burst, burning and burned. People were running now, a horde, into and out of the smoke. It was almost impossible to tell who was on which side, and I was among them—running.

I remember punching someone. I hit him because he was there—right in front of me, where I happened to be going. And when he stood up, he hit me back. Right in the jaw. He was a just boy. Tall and hairless, head shaved, dark eyes. I saw him clearly. I would remember his face.

When I couldn't find Janice, I gave up. I ran away. I felt a certain clarity, true or not—a sudden ability to distinguish right from wrong. Everything was easy and light. Even as Zeke's clothing dragged me down, I kept running. Forward, away from the noise, holding the sweatpants up with one hand as I went.

When I was far enough from campus, I took off Zeke's apron and dropped it there, on the street, and I ran—down Bancroft and over and north on Shattuck, east on Allston, past the high school, then north, east on University, then south again, and farther south. I went until I couldn't feel my legs.

The night felt boundless around me, my ears still murmuring smoke and explosion.

Back home, ran into my room. I got into bed. I covered my naked body in the sheets. My muscles tensed up and I felt a series of rhythmic contractions, a gentle current, building into a quickening pulse and then into a sudden unmissable release of pressure. The adrenaline rush was therapeutic, sacramental. Briefly I lost all control of my senses, surrendering my body to some higher being.

3.

The first novel I ever tried to write went like this.

A man—barely a man, not much older than a boy—moves to New York City to pursue what he imagines to be the writer’s life. It’s the life he has read about in magazine articles and novels and biographies about novelists.

In the beginning, he is a cliché of the idealistic artist type, driven to make art by the economy of modern feelings—anxiety, paranoia, compulsion. Eager to express the self as a way of being himself.

His first week in the city, he is consumed by the idea of it—the elusive and mythical labyrinth, the mysterious cityscape he encounters in films and paintings and books. He wants to discover something beautiful and new—but remains vaguely exhausted, dogged by some unspeakable sense of unreality and inauthenticity. In Central Park, he thinks *Taxi Driver*, *Manhattan*, *Annie Hall*, *The French Connection*, *Serpico*. Looking up at the Empire State Building, he thinks: *The Godfather*, *American Psycho*, *Man on Wire*. In SoHo and Chelsea and Greenwich Village, he remembers Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks*, *Night Windows*, and *New York Office*. He recounts the plots of *Invisible Man*, *Washington Square*, *Jazz*, *Great Jones Street*, *Money*. The whole city is dense and mapped and shot through with readymade memory—not a blank page, but a page on which everything is already written. He buys his groceries at Whole Foods, for example.

The man is Jed, short for Jedidiah. Jed needs money, so decides to quit writing—temporarily and with the faint assumption that someday he will begin again.

But he never does—what is quit is quit forever.

After a few weeks hunting, he takes a low-paying job as a copyeditor for manuscripts at a major publishing house, vetting manuscripts for a senior editor. How does he get this job? He knows someone who knows someone, that's how.

He is poor, but from the moment he takes employment, he becomes poorer.

At first, Jed struggles to complete the basic requirements of his job. He reads manuscript after manuscript but cannot catch even the most apparent typo or grammatical error. He cannot see, for example, that from should be form, that lay should be lie. He makes almost no comments in the texts he reads.

And that's precisely his problem. He reads in all the ways that he should not: too close to the plot, too attached to characters and action. He is moved even by the most predictable stories: he weeps and laughs. He "suspends disbelief," as they used to say, and gives himself over to the magic, the illusion of a text.

He reads and thinks: This is what it means to be a person.

What does he mean by this?

Months pass. The weather changes.

One morning, an intern summons Jed into the office of his superior, who expresses dissatisfaction with his work performance.

I've seen your edits, he says. They're empty. Unmarked. Either you're not reading the manuscripts or you're not paying attention. Either you're lazy or you're bad. Either you're bad or you're naive. If you can't read more critically, says the superior, you're done. Your career in publishing is over.

Of course, the senior editor tells him all of this with the necessary degree of politeness, maintaining a passive-aggressive, pissed-off but technically delicate tone.

I read the stories carefully, Jed says. I don't know. I become enchanted.

You get distracted, you mean.

I love literature, says Jed. That's all.

The superior leans in and whispers now. You're not allowed just to love literature.

In time, Jed trains himself to read in different ways—to ignore the things which had brought him to the world of books in the first place. He localizes his reading, focusing his attention on individual words—words in and of and for themselves—words at the surface level. He does not think about irony, paradox, complexity, form, tone, meaning. He begins to understand everything literally. He learns to see only errors, scanning full manuscripts without reading them. Such is his concentration focused at the level of the word that, in time, he can scour entire documents without even noticing the events therein—words without language, grammar without writing, syntax without communication, character without context.

Yes, he thinks, a book is a vast field of objects under which have been buried an untold number of dead bodies. I must dig them up. I must cleanse the field of them.

This becomes his life's greatest pleasure: to be a corrector, a proper user of words. To be the first person in his cohort to point out the failures of a given text. To add a missing apostrophe, to unsplice a comma. To change can't to cannot and *to* to

too. He thinks, semicolon. He thinks, changes and change is. He thinks, who's and whose.

Here Jed feels more like a type than a person, more like a symbol and a character. Yes, and that is how he experiences himself without knowing why. But what does he typify? Maybe he stands for individuality as such. Or maybe the loss of individuality, the disappearance of religion and art, the ubiquitous disdain for difficult depth in the era of instant gratification, the disappearance of literature. Maybe the synthesis of work and life. Life and art. Art and work. Work and politics. Politics and daily routine. Life or the withdrawal from life. Maybe the absence of a collective reality. Maybe memory without experience. Maybe the collapsing of love and duty and kindness into labor. Maybe a fragile social life. Maybe the reactionary return to the authority of facts, the ubiquitous and wide-spread addiction to information. Maybe the tyranny of presentism. Maybe the end of facts as such. Maybe the informationization of everything.

Now Summer is over, and autumn is about to begin. Already the days are getting shorter. Jed has his thirty-three without anyone else around to celebrate with him.

When the publishing house promotes him to an editorial position, Jed decides to take a vacation to Europe. I don't know why he does it. He's always wanted to do it but previously lacked courage. Some readers might wonder: What makes him summon the courage now? Maybe he does because he is supposed to want it. Maybe

he harbors a mimetic obsession with Europe and hopes to find there what he could not find in New York.

He decides to spend two weeks in Barcelona. Why Barcelona? Because he considers it both romantic and authentic. Both magical and real. Paris is too romantic, he thinks. Berlin is too real. Prague, too romantic. Brussels, too real. Rome is a cliché, and also too romantic. London is commercial and fake-feeling, and too similar to New York. Also, too romantic. Unless you're in the southern part of London, in which case: too real. Madrid is boring. Lisbon is romantic. Dublin is real. Venice, romantic. Moscow, real.

He rents an Airbnb two blocks away from La Rambla Del Raval.

At first, his trip is uneventful and lonely. He wanders the city without direction, as he used to do in New York. He reads no books. He eats in dark restaurants lit by candlelight, and drinks until he's tired enough to sleep.

Many afternoons he sits alone in the pews of small churches. Not the cathedrals. Not the grand houses of God, but the inconspicuous and neglected shrines that God has never seen. The dark and empty ones, where no prayers are said.

One day, in a trance of boredom, he walks into a library and wanders up and down the long aisles, occasionally pausing to select a book and flip through its pages. He locates a copy of *Don Quixote*, he almost doesn't recognize it. He cracks the spine a few times, breaking it altogether in one place. He runs his fingers over the words, turns the pages deliberately, so they make a crisp clicking sound.

He cannot help but see his particular relationship to this book as universal. He feels the memory of a pleasure whose source is loss itself—the memory of his own death.

A few days later, he meets a woman. He sees her at a café, hunched over an American publication of Roberto Bolaño's 2666, which she holds loosely in one hand, letting the top of the book drop to the table, over and over, that makes a redundant, impatient tap. Appearing to use the novel as a prop, she frequently looks up to scan the room.

Jed approaches casually, en route to the bathroom, pretending not to notice her until that ultimate moment when he stands directly in front of her. He asks whether she happens to have an iPhone charger.

She does not.

Have you read the murder descriptions yet? Jed says. The Part about the Crimes?

I'm dead in the middle of it, she says. She drops the book on the table. Bolaño is a terrible writer, she says. He's all bad sentences. And he's overly academic, too. She flicks the cover of the book with her middle finger. One, two. Insufferable, she says.

He does not tell her that he finds her assessment of Bolaño to be itself overly academic. He does not ask her to explain what's so academic about the depraved characters who inhabit the derelict landscapes of Bolaño's novels: lonesome

gangsters, degenerate police officers, drugged-out detectives, apathetic scholars, impoverished poets, moralistic murders, schizophrenic sex workers.

The woman is Maggie—an American graduate student from Brown University studying literature. She has black hair and wears a blue and white striped long-sleeve shirt—typical of our idea of old sailors and painters in the 1940s and ‘50s. She carries a tiny backpack slung over one shoulder from which she produces a green bottle of sparkling mineral water.

She, like Jed, also reads books to expose their underlying failures. She reads people this way, too.

For three consecutive days, they meet: drink coffee, go for walks, discuss books, music, pop culture, politics. Jed agrees with almost everything she says. Yes, he says. Yes.

But each day, around three o’clock, Maggie looks at her phone and tells Jed to go home. I need to work now, she says. I need you to leave.

Day four is Sunday. They eat ice cream and drink espresso. They ride bikes to the Picasso Museum, and, when faced with the ticket prices, decide that “once you’ve seen one Picasso, you’ve seen them all.”

They ride bikes to La Sagrada Familia just to take pictures from the outside.

It looks like a giant spaceship, she says. He makes an alien face, but she accuses him of being a racist.

Later, they walk along the Platja de la Nova Icària. They drink more espresso. They drink beer. They drink more espresso. My body wants another ice cream, she

says. They eat another ice cream. They do things lovers do, as in a cinematic montage. Then, slowly and without looking down, she reaches over to touch, only slightly at first, and then firmly later, his hand.

Briefly, he is happy. Maybe he's in love.

The sun sets and casts a long shadow over their faces, intensifying their expressions. He wants to kiss her but doesn't want to impose himself, doesn't want to play the role of a stereotypical man, eager to get what he wants and fast. These thoughts inhibit him. He stiffens up.

This has been a perfect day, Maggie says, leaning into him.

She looks up and focuses her eyes on his lips, and he takes this as an invitation. He kisses her and feels like he is kissing the entirety of his lost ambition, the floating signifier of youth and freedom.

Only one thing is missing, she says.

What's that?

Loving making, she says. That would make this a perfect day.

He thinks she has committed the cardinal sin of hooking up: announcing the hook up before it happens, as in saying, right before touching someone: "Now we are going to touch."

But I must tell you, she says. We can't. We just can't.

Okay. Jed is relieved. For him, anything else might have ruined the day. Who knows? No problem, he says this a little too quickly, pretending earnestness. No problem at all.

I want to, she says, but we cannot be in a romantic relationship.

You don't have to explain, Maggie.

Maggie explains. I have a boyfriend back in the states. He's a political scientist at Stanford. An assistant professor.

Look at Jed now. He is inadequate. He is small. Getting smaller. On the one hand, he wonders whether Maggie is lying about having a boyfriend—using him as a convenient excuse to end the date. Maybe he has said something offensive to her. Maybe she has some physical abnormality of which she is ashamed, a defect which would be exposed when naked. Maybe she is ashamed to admit that sex is, for her, unappealing. Or, that she prefers the emotional, rather than the physical, attention of another. Maybe, she prefers the romantic buildup to sex, the verbal games of suggestion and anticipation and the erotic delay, more than copulation itself. Or maybe, he thinks, she wants him to fight for her, to win her over despite the “boyfriend.” On the other hand, he feels relieved and relaxed. The pressure is off. Now he breathes and leans back.

They sit for a long time looking out at the water. The waves lap against the nearby dock—they chase each other down.

That night, just before Jed goes to bed, Maggie texts him:

I have good news. I talked to my boyfriend. I told him that I met you and that we have developed a relationship. He said he wants me to have sex with you. He said he wants net happiness. He wants all good things for everyone. It's great news.

Liberation and honesty. He's such a great boyfriend. He wants us to be open and free. Let's meet tomorrow.

After changing his mind many times, writing in his journal, looking up some definitions of various human emotions on the internet, Jed texts her back an eggplant emoji and a smiley face.

The next morning, he masturbates, but without porn, to extend his stamina but not overload his brain with serotonin. He takes a shower, puts on his best shirt, and prepares to leave his apartment.

Just before he slips on his sandals, someone knocks on the door. It must be the landlord or the cleaner.

He opens it without looking through the viewer. There, standing at the threshold, are two large men. He looks at them, his mouth slightly open in confusion. They are dressed inconspicuously in jeans and t-shirts. They are wearing sunglasses.

Both enter the apartment uninvited.

Jed stumbles.

Have you been sleeping with Maggie?

What? I just met her. No.

The two men speak interchangeably, in turn, as if reading a script. That's not what we heard, says one, and the other repeats it.

I swear to God, Jed says. Look at my phone if you want. Here it is. She told me she had a boyfriend, so we didn't have sex, and then she said to me that her

boyfriend was cool with everything. He said we had his permission to have sex. But I haven't done anything.

But you thought about it. The men step forward. You wanted it.

Now Jed's back is against the wall. What? No. So what?

Thinking is the same as doing, says one. Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart, says the other.

One man steps forward and punches Jed in the jaw, knocking him to the floor. The other man stomps on his stomach.

Jed cries out. He cries.

The first man throws another punch to the face, hitting Jed in the nose. The second man holds him down by the back, while the first man repeatedly kicks him in the head and ribs. Over and over. Already he is bruised and bleeding from the nose and mouth.

While they beat him, Jed thinks about Maggie. Specifically, he is thinking about having sex with her on her apartment balcony, overlooking the city and the sea. He has no control over his thoughts. He imagines her naked body, her dark hair. He can hear her screaming his name. He sees her shoulders and neck dripping with sweat. He can see her clearly, more clearly now than before. Her absence makes her somehow more real. The sun is getting hotter. The sun draws closer and intensifies and grows. The sun overtakes him—a flame white disc. Now the world disappears and all there is to see is light, and out of the light appears an enormous angel holding a great spear at the tip of which burns a small fire, and the angel plunges the spear

several times into Jed's heart and stomach, and Jed moans in agony and ecstasy.

When the angel finally pulls the spear away and departs, Jed feels utterly consumed by what he can only call the love of God—cold and hot, gentle and violent.

So palpable is Jed's fantasy that, even while the men continue to punch and kick him in the chest and face, he feels an internal orgasmic climax, an elemental discharge—the immediate release of something more profound than blood or bodily fluid, something more primal, holy, and immaterial. He feels a spiritual longing so pure and sweet that he begins to weep with joy.

The men are pounding and pounding until—when their work is done, when Jed is sufficiently beaten—they leave.

Look. Jed is alone on the floor. At first, he feels euphoria and transcendence. A spiritual glory. A holy pain so extreme that he wished for it to go on forever. Now what does he feel? Relief, maybe. Gratitude. And now what? Now, pain, loneliness, confusion, shame, discontentment with anything less than the unconditional love of God.

Jed calls his landlord, and his landlord calls an ambulance. It turns out, Jed has five cracked ribs, three broken teeth, a broken nose, and a fractured collarbone. Also, he has a severe concussion, and his eyesight is irreparably damaged. He stays in the hospital for several days and thinks, for the first time in a long time, that he is truly alive.

He never hears from Maggie again. He texts her once, twice—but no response.

When his condition is stable, Jed returns to the US; but because of his damaged eyes, he can no longer work as an editor. For the next few years, he will take on various odd jobs around the city: a grocer, a doorman, a professional dog walker.

Now he sits alone in his apartment, looking out of the window. The sun has not yet risen. The air smells like burnt milk and fried food. He's unsure how to occupy his free time. He thinks about what to think about and keeps coming back to the same thing. His religious experience. He realizes that he wants nothing more than to feel it again—to see, if only once more, the face of that terrifying angel.

Soon Jed sets out on a mission to replicate the out-of-body experience he had in Barcelona. He goes into bars and provokes fights. Regularly men much larger than him beat and brutalize him—a chipped tooth here and there, a few bruises, a cut lip, a black eye. But he never approximates transcendence. He feels only pain.

Eventually, he places advertisements on Craig's List, offering cash for specific types of violence. He pays other men to punch him in the stomach, kick him in the chest, cut him a little, choke him, spit in his eyes, piss in his face.

More years pass. Jed's search for transcendence becomes unsustainable and detrimental to his long-term health. Some of his beatings get out of hand and send him to the hospital. He struggles to hold regular employment because he cannot physically work. His life spirals down and down. He cannot pay his rent or hospital bills. And he returns home to live with his mother.

At the end of the novel, it occurs to him: the thing that made the initial beating so euphoric was its ambiguity—its inherent mystery. Why exactly did those men beat him in Barcelona? Because of Maggie? Had they said anything about staying away from her? No, they hadn't. They simply asked him a question and then beat him. Who were they to Maggie, and Maggie to them? Did they even know her? Did she send them? Did her boyfriend send them? Wasn't Maggie's boyfriend an academic? A political scientist? Wasn't he a respectable assistant professor at Stanford University? Had Maggie invented her boyfriend? Had she planned to hurt him all along? Was it a game? Why hadn't she ever called or texted? Was she even studying literature at Brown University? Had she even read *2666*? He looks out of the window and feels blood coursing toward his core. He hears an espresso machine in the distance, tastes beer and espresso and ice cream and blood.

4.

In the opening stanzas of *Inferno*, Dante describes, for me, what it feels like to wake from a seizure. Completely alone. Disoriented. Reborn. *In the middle of this thing called life, I found myself lost in a dark forest. Savage, arduous, extreme. The way was blotted out. There was no sky.*

This is what it feels like, except worse. Worse because momentarily, after a seizure, you have no concept of yourself—you cannot say, *myself*. You cannot say *lost* because you do not know what it means. Cannot say *in a forest* because you have no concept of being somewhere that is not somewhere else. You are thrown by a cruel god into a place that is no place.

The day after the protest, I woke in my own dried blood. And not only blood, but also piss and shit. I had never had a seizure like that. I'd never shat myself. I'd never even wet the bed. I woke up smelling like milk rot and mucus. My face was bruised. My tongue was split.

I sat up and looked around and waited for a few minutes, allowing my eyesight to adjust and my mind to cohere and, when it did, cleaned myself up and thought about Janice.

Janice wouldn't be ashamed of me. Why should I be ashamed? I shouldn't. I should be proud. And for a moment I was. I was a new man.

I reached for my phone, but it wasn't there. I looked in my backpack and under my pillow and inside my pants and shoes and realized that I had left it in the pocket of my overshirt, and my overshirt was in Zeke's bag. I opened my laptop and

used it to text Janice. When I didn't get a response, I called her. She didn't answer. I called again.

The wind blew in waves against the window and the window rattled periodically. A brownish light slanted across the room in the shape of the room, and dust hung stubbornly in the air, drifting in conflicting angles so that all I saw was dust. I pulled the blanket over my head, and slept, and, for the first time in years, I dreamed. In my dreams, I saw alternative versions of the protest. I saw everything that could have gone differently. Some versions were more violent. In one version, I saw myself attacked, ambushed, mugged from behind. In another version, I became the aggressor, throwing punches and smoke bombs. In one version, I was completely naked and couldn't find my clothes.

When I woke, I ate a vegan burrito that wasn't really vegan. I made a cup of tea and stood by the window and pretended to smoke and felt ridiculous and so I started to smoke in truth, to inhale and exhale and let the smoke into my throat.

I was living twice.

The traffic outside my window was unusually busy; cars and trucks passed quickly, and the speed of all that traffic instilled a worry in me that it was somehow later in the day that I believed it was—that my clocks were wrong, that I was falling behind the time, that I had missed the news of some important event, and I was now doomed to experience its aftermath.

Once I settled back into myself and remembered everything that had happening the night before. I could think more clearly. I thought about my thinking.

Was Zeke Janice's partner? Why hadn't she introduced him as such? Was she keeping it a secret? What else was she hiding from me? And also: Had I done enough to say I belonged to Antifa? Had I earned my tote bag? Had I sufficiently turned my lie into life?

From my laptop, I called Janice again. Nothing. I thought to call Zeke, but didn't know his number.

I waited.

The internet was there to distract me. Images and headlines and memes. I saw videos of airplanes bombing villages in Iraq and Turkey. I saw videos of protesters in Iraq breaking into the US Embassy. Another drone killing civilians. Another bum fight. I read articles, too—not full articles, but headlines. I was bombarded with a relentless stream of outrageous headlines. How is it, I wondered, that we can go on living—working, studying, writing poems and novels after this and this and this? So much to protest, it was hard to keep up. I watched videos of the protests in D.C. over and over. In one video: burning trashcans. In another: screaming, crying, and indiscriminate gunshots. As I watched the video clips. The pain and suffering of others flickered before me, on the screen, as version my own memories, as past events of which I possessed a vague recollection.

*

Three days passed and still no word from Janice and now I was getting anxious, and I needed to talk to someone. I called Parker on FaceTime but when he answered his voice sounded faraway like an echo travelling across a lake.

Can you sit closer to the screen? I can't hear you at all.

Dude, he said. Come to a party tonight. Let's catch up.

I made a thinking sound. I was thinking of something else: Janice and what I was going to do next. I sucked air between my teeth and repeated the sound. I don't think I can make it, I said. I'm writing. I'm working on my novel. Things are finally starting to happen.

I didn't go to the party but went out looking for Janice. If she wasn't going to come to me, I'd go to her. Also, I needed my phone back.

I went where I expected her to be—the café, the overpriced Mexican restaurant, and the officially unofficial Marxist bar called The Proletariat, where I knew Janice liked to hang out—hoping to bump into her. I went to campus, too, but the entrances were shut down and populated with police. I went back to Writer's Block. I waited for her while I sat flipping through a book, looking at the pages without reading.

I decided, finally, to go to her apartment.

I went trekking down Telegraph, striding it out with conviction, jaunting, about to break into a sprint. I kept my head down, weaving—turning my shoulders to

make myself narrow—between and through and past the crowd, bounding by sheer intuition so as narrowly to miss the other walkers, occasionally grazing an item of clothing, a shirt sleeve or the corner of an open jacket, but never making physical contact with anyone. The street was vibrant and busy and packed with people, but I went faster. A body sensing other bodies. I went faster, pushing myself to an uncomfortable level. Soon, fast became too fast and I couldn't maintain that level of fluidity, and I bumped into someone—a man. I ran into him. He stepped into my path. I knocked him backward a step.

The man was dressed in uniform, a police officer.

Had he been standing there already? Had he seen me from a distance and—displeased with the pace of my almost-running—decided to slow me down? Was I breaking the law? My mind conjured memories real and unreal, memories of the protest and the police.

I admit I hit the officer. I knocked him off balance; and he stumbled to such a degree that, if you saw it from the periphery, it must've looked as if I'd pushed him. Had I pushed him?

The sun was hot. It was not a good position I was in. A small crowd began to congregate around the officer and me—seemingly eager to see why I had done it, and how the officer would retaliate.

One bystander reached into his pocket, took out his phone and, as if anticipating conflict, held it up to eye-level to film. Another bystander, when he saw the first, took out his phone, too, and held it up.

The policeman stepped forward. He lunged a single stride in the semblance of my own striding, and looked down on me with his oversized sunglasses, the kind that cover the space between the eyes and the temple, the eyes and the cheekbones, the eyes and the forehead. No light gets through.

I could see myself reflected in the sunglasses, too, standing there beneath him, looking at myself but seeming to look at him, where the eyes would be.

Unthinkingly, I apologized to him; and when he did not respond, I apologized again and gave him my name, though he had not asked for it.

The dry afternoon air made my lips crack.

The officer still hadn't said a word, so I explained myself in a way that might account for his silence. I was on my way to work, I said. Second work, I said. I mean, second job. I was coming from my first job on campus. I'm a web designer, at the university, and I was headed south, I said now, to my second job. And I was running late and had to walk faster than usual. Faster than normal. You know, I said. It's not usually like this. Normally I walk like everyone else.

I saw myself in his glasses. I was talking fast, I knew that, and I worried that I was undermining my cause—that the form of my speech might subvert its message. So, I began to counterbalance my speech by speaking slowly.

I usually take my time, I said, slow. I listen to news podcasts. I'm a good person.

He remained expressionless, mouth flat, jaw pulsating. His face was blank and vacant—a reflective surface onto which I was called to project myself. His nostrils flared in and out.

The surrounding crowd seemed to be growing. People were saying things to each other. I heard them but couldn't process their words—their words were not words at all but jumbled, unintelligible mouth-noises. Hissing, grunting, exhalation turning into static, white noise, random electrical signals, fluctuating voltages.

Sense seemed to dissipate, and an imaginary weight pressed down on me. I put my finger to my lips and did not answer again to that blank visage.

Finally, the policeman spoke. He lifted his arm and pointed his finger in the direction I had been going. Run, he said.

Run?

Run.

I went on, turning and proceeding slowly, unsure whether to take his command seriously.

No, he said. Run.

I picked up the pace, speed walking now.

Run, he cried.

I ran.

Run!

I went faster and soon I couldn't feel my legs, my chest. I ran past the chained-up bikes, the trashcans and the accompanying recycling bins, the “exotic

gift” store, the Kathmandu imports, the coffee nook and the sock shop and the hat store, past the Berkeley autocrat, and the gas station, and the nondenominational Christian church, past the redwood forest mural, the ocean mural, the mural commemorating the settling of Berkeley, the mural of the arrival of immigrants in Berkeley after the great San Francisco earthquake of 1906, past Oregon and Russel and Ashby Ave. I had a mind to walk all the way to Oakland, and I almost did—walking south again, in the rhythm of sidewalk trees, Chinese Tallows and Ginkgo, so redundant they were almost impossible to see, thin and leafless. People walked past me. They looked at me. They smoked cigarettes with their headphones in. I was humiliated, ashamed to be seen. I felt myself resistant though I couldn’t name the thing I was resisting. I thought about the policeman. I hated him and the fact that he, by saying nothing, seemed to expect my confession, and I resented that confession—vulnerability, honesty—was, I thought, the ontological mode of the mainstream, of the internet, of Instagram poetry, of therapy, of religion. Tell everyone everything. Explain yourself. Emotions are public events. Self-expression is a spectacle. Suddenly I felt justified in participating in the protest the previous night, justified in my aggression toward the police.

I walked on. I had already long passed the Janice’s apartment. All that mattered now was my freedom—to get as far away as possible. The moonlight was chalk. It blurred everything it touched.

*

The sunrise backlit the hills, causing them to appear two-dimensional, surface level and flat, like cardboard cutouts, and cast an array of pale lights into the sky, the color of pus. Someone was sawing down a tree near my window.

More and more days were spent looking and not looking for Janice, though I slowed down to avoid the police. I went to her apartment daily. She was nowhere.

I continued to do my work, my writing and not writing, but my entire conception of time and space was dictated by searching for Janice—the arc of time progressed as a plot, determined by a sequence of cause-and-effect events, points, false climaxes, dead ends, dreams inside dreams. This happened each time I went looking for her—when I wasn't looking for her, I was thinking of new ways to find for her, new strategies and places to look. Everything that wasn't an event was idle waiting. I brushed my teeth four, five times a day.

I had a bad intuition that Janice had been seriously hurt or arrested. That she had been taken by the police for disturbing the peace, breach of the peace, public intoxication, unruly public behavior, excessively loud noise, assault. I went down, down to the police station, the courthouse, the county detention center, the jail, the prison. I inquired whether a certain prisoner had been brought in, arrested, tried, or convicted. I didn't say that word, prisoner, of course, because of its archaic tone, its implication of guilt—I knew how to use my words—but used, in its place, the more official-sounding “detainee,” and the neutral terms “citizen” and “person.”

Everywhere I was told the same no. No such person had not been arrested, they said.

I didn't believe them. At home, I called again—down to the police station, the courthouse, the detention center, the jail, the prison. And I asked a second time: has there been a certain citizen, civilian, person placed under arrest?

To change my mood, I decided to do something Janice would do: to cook a proper meal, something from scratch, something warm and whole and real. Power curry soup.

I rode my bike to the grocery store—the one that advertised itself as a health food market, stocked with overpriced health, unfiltered or hyper-filtered, a parody of eco-friendly marketing, plant sausage, sausage plants, beacon extract, lard lotion, rutabaga candy, zero-chocolate chocolate bar, spruce juice, raw milk—and bought what my phone told me what to buy: lentils, kale, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, celery, carrots, curry, rice. It pleased me to touch real food.

At home, I laid out the ingredients on my bed and saw that I had a problem: in a moment of shortsightedness, I'd forgotten that I would need to use the communal kitchen to cook. And not only that, but also there was the problem of kitchenware. I owned nothing—neither cutting knife nor board to cut on. I opened my bedroom door just enough to hear whether anyone was nearby, waited a minute and hurried into the kitchen, carrying everything I could. I dropped the carrots in the hallway and had to go back for them once I set the remaining ingredients on the counter. I followed the directions—pulled the kale leaves from the stem and diced them. I chopped the

carrots. I moved quickly, eager to finish the job before anyone came into the kitchen. I was chopping faster than my hands could move, and almost cut myself—twice the knife grazed my skin without breaking it. And I saw in my mind: myself cut, being cut, whether by my own hand or another.

My eye moved and fixed on the finger—my finger, there: flat on the cutting board, next to the carrot, holding the carrot in place.

And then it happened: I cut the finger.

I did it on purpose this time, though I couldn't say what the purpose was. It happened so fast that, at first, I wasn't sure whether the cut was real, or whether it was merely part of that long sequence of chopping vegetables. But soon I knew. It was more than a cut, more than a blade piercing the skin. I knew it. I cut the tip of the finger completely off, away from the hand, as if the finger had been part of the carrot it held.

Blood jumped out and ran and ran across the kitchen counter. And my first fear was not for the finger itself, the loss of finger, but for the blood: I worried I would be caught bleeding in the kitchen, and that this would be my long-anticipated introduction to the household.

I grabbed a paper towel and wrapped it around my finger to stop the bleeding, but the blood soaked through.

Is the finger worth saving?

I examined the cut-off flesh, the smallest tip of my finger, now laying on the floor where it had fallen. It was too small to sew back on and too small to make any functional difference for me anyway.

There was so much blood that I began to see it as someone else's blood. I wrapped my finger in another paper towel and, with my free hand, squeezed the finger as hard as I could. I grabbed a wad of dish rags and papers towels and began to scrub the blood on the counter, but my scrubbing served only to smear the blood around in large circular patterns. I wet the rags and wrung them out and scrubbed again and looked under the sink and found bottles of disinfectant and stain-remover. I took the two bottles and doused the entire countertop with them. I was quick, frantic, wiping and wiping again, aware that at any moment someone might come and that I would have to explain to them who I was, where I had been, and why now—now, of all places and times—I bled in the kitchen.

But my actions canceled themselves out. For even as I cleaned up the blood, my finger continued to bleed. As I wiped away blood here, my finger cast new blood there.

I placed all my food into the communal refrigerator. Then I grabbed the knife I had used to cut myself, marked with my blood, and ran into my room and closed the door and stood by the window, still clutching the knife in one hand and my cut finger in the other.

Slowly I unwrapped my finger to see whether the bleeding had stopped.

Not yet.

Overwhelmed by dizziness, I staggered and fell. My vision blurred, and a sudden headache weighted me down.

I looked down at the knife and thought, stupidly, that I could do more than cut my finger: I could take that very same knife and finish myself. And I had the knife in the proper place, a few inches from my neck, and from my heart. I pointed it toward me and drew the blade closer to myself. I shocked myself doing it—how close I got to the flesh. Nothing could be easier.

I looked down at my broken wristwatch.

I thought about my mother.

What was I living for?

*

I went to my appointment with the therapist. I kept my finger wrapped in gauze and kept my hand in my pocket so that he couldn't see it.

The therapist didn't greet me in his usual way—didn't say hello, didn't ask how our week was, how our work was going, or what do we feel like talking about. Today he went to the point. Maybe he sensed that we were running out of time. That we hadn't made any progress in the five previous meetings.

How's our writing? he asked. Our novel?

We quit that novel, I said.

The novel about Simon? Why did we quit? Are we quitting writing forever?

We want to quit.

We want to, or we will?

We want to, but we can't, not now. Not yet.

Why can't we?

Because what else would we do?

We could do anything, we're still young.

We're not that young.

We're not that young, he said. It's true. But we're not that old either. Not yet.

Maybe.

We'll keep writing.

We'll keep trying.

Do we have a new idea?

There's always a new story.

Do we want to talk about it?

The story?

Right, the story.

Fine.

Tell me.

I felt my finger throbbing in my pocket. I thought about the blood and knife, and I made up a new story. The story came out of me as if told by another. This was it:

Franz, I said, a middle-aged banker, wakes up one morning paralyzed with a sense of remorse and guilt. Maybe it's the feeling that he's wasted his life. He gets out of bed and makes lemon tea in a pot, pours it into a porcelain mug and adds milk. As he sips, his head becomes clearer, and he remembers what in sleep he was able to forget—the night before, in a fit of rage, he killed a man. He murdered Vernon, his childhood friend. A sense of horror takes him over. He's racked with guilt and regret. It's killing him, yes, those are his exact words. It's killing me. He repeats them like a prayer. I'm already dead. Franz decides to confess to the murder and liberate his soul. That's what he says. To release my soul, whatever that is. As he's walking to the police station to confess, Franz plays and replays, in specific detail, the method by which he killed the man, how he beat him to a pulp, stabbed him three times in the abdomen, cut his hair off, clipped his fingernails, and put him in the bathtub to bleed. He rehearses the killing in his mind over and over so that, when called upon, he can accurately represent the event in language. When Franz gets to the police station, he

confesses without hesitation. He repeats again in painstaking detail how he killed his friend. He even notes the exact direction the blood went when it hit the ground, and how it indicated to him a slight tilt in the floor. But the police don't believe him. In turns out, they have no report of any such murder. And not only that. They can't even find a record of anyone named Vernon Rodgers in the entire city. No such person even exists. They check to see whether Franz's confession matches any other recent murders in the area, but no. Nothing. Franz remembers committing a crime that never happened. He proceeds to wander the city aimlessly, enumerating the details of his crime repeatedly. Everything is vivid and real; his sorrow is undeniable. He cries for his lost friend, sure, but he cries harder—he weeps—for the inability to atone for his sins. For hundreds of pages, he talks to himself about the nature of his guilt. Is it personal, social, political, spiritual? He does everything he can think of, but there is no escape from it. He confesses to a priest. He sees a therapist. But no. No single institution can assuage his pain. No confession either. He wonders whether it was all a bad dream. He calls Vernon, but Vernon's number is disconnected. He searches for Vernon's email, but there is no such email in his inbox or list of contacts. Eventually, Franz concludes that Vernon never existed, that the murder was a dream, a vision. But for how long had he imagined Vernon to be real? Franz goes on trying to interpret his dream, but he cannot. There is no fully adequate interpretation. All interpretations bear some merit. There are good interpretations and bad interpretations. Correct ones and incorrect ones. For example: Is Vernon the embodiment of a lost future? An alternative life? Franz tries to induce dreaming—to

have the same dream again. Night after night, he takes drugs. He drinks heavily, mixing liquor with red wine. He watches horror movies right before falling asleep, turns up the heat, wears socks to bed, swallows pain pills, estrogen pills, Chinese fertility pills—everything the internet recommends. Nothing works. He has all the wrong dreams, all the wrong nightmares. Soon, he comes to the inevitable conclusion that Vernon is a version of himself. But which version? Why should he be murdered? Why should Franz be the one to murder him?

How does it end? asked the therapist in a voice suddenly deep.

I pressed my cut finger into my palm. You can probably guess how it ends, I said. Franz kills himself in the exact manner that he dreamed of killing Vernon. Three times in the chest. Haircut. Fingernails. Bathtub. The whole scene.

The therapist paused and looked at his watch and ran his fingers through his hair. So, he said. He shuffled loose sheets of different colored paper around on his lap in such a way that made his question seem offhanded. So, he said again. In this version of the story, are we Vernon or Franz?

*

It happened like I thought it would. As soon as I stopped looking for Janice, she found me. It was Thursday. I didn't notice the rain until it had stopped raining. I went out and rode my bike. Light reflected off the scattered pools of rainwater like parts of a broken tool. There was a book sale at Writer's Block, and the store was unusually crowded and muggy. Poets, people who looked like poets in leather jackets. Students in flannel shirts and white linen pants and white socks and see-through tops and low-cut V-necks. More people poured in. The front door slammed shut again and again and the little bell tied to the handle banged repeatedly against the door, like the chirp of a smoke detector.

Then I felt someone's fingers pressing down on the back of my neck. I stood up and shook her hand businesslike. I thought you'd been arrested, I said, almost whispering, so as neither to be overheard nor to seem sharing private information.

Janice pressed her mouth close to my ear. Arrested?

Or hurt, I said. I don't know.

She smiled and lifted my phone out of her pocket and slapped me in the chest with it and waved it in front of my face. No way, she said. They didn't get me. Not yet.

He handed me the phone. *The social upheaval of the 60s meets the political polarization and institutional dysfunction of the present.*

It turned out, disappearing was what Janice tended to do, and she knew how to do it. She explained that, after a run-in with the police—after any form of public

unrest in which she may become implicated—she'd leave town. Men do it all the time, she said. Why can't I?

When I asked her where she'd gone, she responded: High and dry. To hide for a while. Recharge.

I nodded. Okay.

Okay.

Okay.

Holy fuck, she said.

What?

Janice reached out and grabbed my finger and pulled it up to her face.

I let out a little whimper.

What happened to your finger? Someone cut you.

No, it was an accident.

Jesus Christ.

Forget it. Want to do something? Should we get lunch, or what?

Let's go hiking, she said. Let's go up to the mountains.

Right now?

Next thing was, we were hiking. Took my car and drove east of town, west of the San Pablo Reservoir. We walked a narrow hiking trail, thinning down to a ghost trail—barely one—that meandered and rose along the ridge and down again into the ravine.

Weeds and tall grass grew across the way we went. The thunder clapped and the sky darkened, and a light swept across the surface of the reservoir.

The man moved fast, and I struggled to keep pace. I stopped to breathe and wiped sweat from my forehead and placed my hands on my knees and bent my elbows and leaned onto them.

Janice was talking about something; I couldn't hear what. She ran ahead and then stopped and turned around and shouted: Let's go. Come on now!

Now came the rain, slowly at first and then faster: very soon the trail was muddy, and I had to exert more effort than I wanted to lift my foot with each step, so that walking was labored and awkward. I heard a sound that resembled laughter, like I was being laughed at.

This rain, I said. It's crazy. Maybe we should turn around?

Janice ignored my question. She pushed on, against what felt like a growing wind.

Sorry, I said, louder now. Sorry. Maybe we should head back!

Janice tamped down the mud as he went, and I fit my feet into her footprints, though I had to extend my stride to keep up with her, and for several minutes I walked with myself. The wind was louder and faster. I lost Janice's voice inside the noise of it, gargled and faint now. And as the wind quickened, Janice did too. She lengthened his stride so that now it was too long for me to follow, and I had to trudge across the untouched mud on my own.

The trail turned from the vista and dropped down and around, across a field of boulders. It went further down, and I could not see in front of me. We were moving downhill. It felt that way. Down a ledge and past a cluster of burned land, charred and brittle trees and grass and brush. I called out to him. I slipped on an errant root and fell, face first into the trail, and extended my arm to brace myself and cut the palm of my hand on a rock which was hidden beneath fallen leaves. Help, I cried out. Help. I stood up and wiped my bloody palm against my jeans, and it hurt. My blood was beating faster now, darker. I looked down at my hand which seemed not to belong to me, for it was swollen, enlarged and dirty.

I cried out again, and a voice in the distance cried out in response. Jesus! said the voice, which I now recognized as Janice's. Jesus!

I went down, and father down, and followed the trail another twenty yards through a dry meadow and down to the edge of the reservoir. I couldn't say how Janice got so far ahead of me.

She stood over what I immediately identified to be a carcass, though couldn't tell right away what the thing was, had been.

Come look.

I couldn't look.

Come on, she said. This is insane. She pointed down. Look.

I looked and saw the carcass of that unidentifiable animal, which had been, she said again, a goat, though it had no distinguishing shape. The torso had been split open, disfigured and mutilated and contorted unnaturally, as if having been pulled in

two opposing directions. Flesh hung there. The skull was detached from the spine and broken along the crown, and its intestines and viscera spilled onto the dirt the color of the dirt itself. As I looked, the entrails and innards seemed to move closer to my eyes, so close that I could not see it, or see past it. And it seemed, as I saw it, to become coextensive with what felt like the inside of my own body. Everything amassed together into a single wreck of unholy gum, viscous and waxy with itself. I understood on some level below language that what I saw there were the mechanisms of existence, the raw thingliness, the constituents, the protoplasm and meaty stuff of life without the thing called living, without the being, the soul, the otherworldliness inherent to the world. The closest thing to real. I was neither sick nor well—but absorbed into an absolute, something holy but absent of holiness, implicated in a palpable displacement. Some presence that resembled absence. A death that resembled life. It is a universal law—of course—that one thing should resemble another, and that the chain of resemblance should lead back to some original, some genuine thing.

My head was lifted toward at the sky, and it was then that I began to experience a sudden ingestion and subsequent digestion, as if I had been eating the thing I looked at.

It's a good omen, Janice said. Very good.

Now I began to heave uncontrollably. I stumbled away and vomited just off the trail, angling my mouth away from my body so that I wouldn't spit up anything

onto my pants. I had to sit down. A voice said my name. Voices. Buzzing. Ringing.

Great War drums beating in the distance.

Janice was laughing like a god.

*

After that, weeks passed in frenzy and love, in righteous anger, in mania and compulsion. What happened on Monday happened on Wednesday and Friday—a different action in the same place, suspended in eminence, between pleasure and death, nearing the end of something, but not too soon.

I attended all the rallies, whatever their cause. I went with Janice and sometimes Julio came, too. I wore my own black clothes and cried out and chanted and held my own homemade sign and marched with the masses and danced with them and sang their songs. It felt right to be there—to feel myself lost among something relevant and communal, to hear my voice blend and fade into a collective prayer—to let it blend. I carried my tote bag proudly: three arrows pointing down.

And I went to Antifa gatherings, unofficially. I *assumed* they were gatherings, but Janice called them *parties*. Janice introduced me to some of the others. A tall man with burned face. A horse's face. A short guy with green and silver hair. A man dressed up like a baby. A college student in leather pants. A mohawk. A mullet. Nice to meet you. Welcome. Welcome. Nice to meet you. I met Eliot, who studied film at Harvard, and Ryan, who studied theater at UC Santa Cruz, and Lisa who studied philosophy at Stanford, and Kenneth, who went to Yale, and Hannah and Terry and Gloria and Lawrence, who all studied Comparative Literature at UCLA, and Marilyn and Roy and Alan and Beverly and Sophia and James, who had attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop. (Janice introduced me as a writer, but none of the other writers seemed to care.) All of them had something to say, and they said it with the same voice. They spoke the language of revolution. I was a *comrade*. The police were fuzz,

pigs, bacon, fat hogs. The enemy was the facho or fash. They talked about their guns. They said, if the government gets to have them have something, we get to have them, too. We don't rely on the cops or courts. They talked about their love and their hatred. One said, I hate this goddamned country and that's what makes me a patriot. Another said, only when you hate America are you truly American. They told stories of violence and victory. They told me about fires and pipe bombs and tear gas and pepper spray. They enumerated their run-ins with the fuzz, the bacon. Unlawful entry at a protest at a school. Unlawful assembly during the National Convention. Unlawful possession. Assaulting a police officer at a World Bank protest. Assaulting a police officer at an IMF protest. Punching a Nazi. Kicking a Nazi in his mouth. We are prepared to put our bodies on the line. I listened. I was happy to listen. I believed everything. I wanted everything. I inserted myself into their stories and saw myself there, among the righteous, the indignant, the militia of justice and progress. I wanted to hear, to listen, and to try to understand. I felt I was at the center of the world. I felt a mixture of dread and excitement: the unfolding of a youthful fantasy. A lizard thrill. Adrenal toxins flowing through the bloodstream. A series of flashing and visions and images and abstracted bodies. The sexual self seeing itself as in a dream. The scent of bodies lingering and laying together—vinegar and onions. Then another wave, overwhelming intoxication. Breathing fast. Then a gaping hole opening in the floor.

All this newfound confidence was productive. Sleep came easily.

Wakefulness, too. I ate healthy foods like kombucha and kimchi and kale chips. I ate five or six meals a day, trying to satisfy some vague, spiritual vague hunger, a hunger

for nothing and everything at once. A hunger for experience and the experience of experience. A hunger to live again. I worked and watched the internet. I rode my bike to see and be seen. I did what people do. There was always that noise, noise within noise—construction and conversation, breaking down and building.

In the news: police brutality and violent uprisings. Fires in the Santa Cruz mountains. Earthquakes in Los Angeles. Riots in Sacramento. Government surveillance. Wars and rumors of wars. In town, excitement and rage and sex and signs and flags and picks. The people were everywhere, out in the light, men and women and children in the streets and the quads and the public spaces, campaigning and marching and picketing, threatening to shut down any dissenting voice. We agreed with each other. We seemed to agree. We touched hands and took pictures. Cars honked. Drum circles formed on campus and downtown, on the steps of city hall and the public libraries. The whole town vibrated with intensity and movement, and I saw myself at the center of it.

I hummed around the town with my head up, believing myself to be, at last, myself. The person I was supposed to be. I sat in public places, on park benches and on the patios of cafes and bars. I ate expensive pastries, sandwiches and cakes. I wanted to be seen, to be noticed. I walked around and around, in crowds of people at the grocery store and the park and, though I didn't know anyone, I felt that I recognized everyone. I waved to them, the burly men and the athletic women, the hippie-looking teenagers and the leather-skin rock climbers and mountain bikers and rancher-lookalikes. I clicked my teeth and hummed a generic tune. Everything had its

soul. Everything its spirit. I was living twice. And then, when alone, I was visited by inescapable daydreams of being with Janice—stupid but vivid hallucinations of running away with her, living in a little house somewhere else, cooking and cleaning and waking up together.

*

Being Friday, I met Parker at McDonald's. We sat in the usual booth, but on opposite sides. I faced the door, and Parker faced the cash registers and kiosks. He wore a neon green jacket, the kind that swooshes every time you move inside it.

I looked around for The Shepherd. Are those new glasses? I said, though I knew they weren't.

No.

I felt a quiet hostility between us and didn't know whether it came from me or him.

What happened to your finger?

Cut myself.

Doing what?

Cooking.

Idiot.

The fluorescent lights pointed down as on a stage. The man behind Parker was gnashing his teeth, mashing over and over shreds of food that already looked fully digested. He smacked his lips and his tongue flittered, and he licked his lips, and licked past his lips, down to his chin, and smacked again. Chomped and clicked his tongue, teeth, and jaw. He was murmuring words under his breath, too, uttering a prayer. He looked out the window, watching, as if there was something to see. I watched him watching long enough that I also looked out—but there was nothing, nothing I could see. Just an ordinary street and its sidewalk, an intersection, stoplights, students with leather satchels, the unhoused.

Parker asked me why I hadn't gone to the party. I explained to him that I hadn't been feeling well.

We endured a pause. A menacing silence.

I leaned across the table and placed my elbows on the surface of it. I saw myself: I was wearing black—a Nike hoodie. One that I'd owned for years, but rarely wore.

Parker reached underneath the table and took up his backpack, and, from his backpack, removed his book. Some novel. He threw it open and dropped his head. Maybe we should just read today, he said.

I slurped coffee, sucking the cup without lifting it off the table—it was hot, and I cooled it sloshing it between my lips before swallowing.

Parker looked up. I'm surprised you still drink coffee, he said. Didn't you see the New York Times article about coffee?

The one about hot drinks and stomach cancer?

He nodded and grinned.

You're eating fake meat, I said. You don't think that gives you cancer?

He laughed and leaned back and extended his arms to push his Big Mac wrapper away from his body. Everything gives you cancer, he said. Even the stuff that prevents cancer gives you cancer. You might have cancer right now and you don't even know it. I might get cancer in two weeks. You could smoke cigarettes your whole life, drink a bottle of wine every goddamned day, eat at McDonald's and never get cancer. Or maybe you eat healthy your whole life, and you get cancer at age

thirty-five just because. Maybe you never wear sunscreen, and the sun gives cancer. Maybe you wear sunscreen and the chemicals in the sunscreen give you cancer. Maybe you get cancer because you drink too much alcohol and maybe you get cancer because you stop drinking alcohol. It's completely arbitrary. The secular gods of late capitalism decide.

I sucked from the top of the cup again. Okay, so we're both going to die of cancer, like everyone else.

But my point isn't about the coffee, Parker said. My point is about you. I can't believe *you* still drink it. You, who fears everything.

That's not true, I said. Not anymore.

He made a look.

I joined Antifa, I heard myself say. I marched with them at the protest the other day.

He laughed again. Antifa?

Yeah.

Antifa isn't a real thing. You know that, right?

Immediately I wondered whether this was one of those "Fight Club" type of situations. Parker is denying the existence of Antifa, I thought, because he *belongs* to Antifa, because he's upholding some code of conduct. He's testing me, I thought. Maybe he thinks me unworthy. Of course, Antifa is a real thing, but it must deny its own existence, I think I thought, in order to remain real. A secret organization can only remain real as long as it maintains its secret.

Suddenly I imagined all the potential secrets that Parker wasn't telling me about Antifa: plots to undermine the police, overthrow the nation-state. A montage of images I had seen on the internet.

Sure, I said.

He looked at me like I'd just pissed on his shoe. Antifa is not an organization. There are no leaders, no membership and no meetings. It's a secret that's not a secret. A rightwing bogymen. A leftwing fantasy. A mask.

Parker didn't know what he was talking about. Or maybe he did. I didn't know then and I don't know now.

What I do know is this. Later that night, something terrible happened. And it happened, I think, because Antifa was or was not real.

It happened with Zeke.

*

Janice called me and asked whether I wanted to have drinks with Zeke. I wanted to say no but didn't want Janice to think me jealous or unsupportive of her polyamory.

From Zeke's we can hit The Proletariat or whatever, she said.

This would prove to be a major milestone in our relationship. I was being invited to hang out with Janice's other lovers and for that I was—or felt I should be—grateful.

We took an Uber to Zeke's butcher shop. From there, we would walk over to his apartment through the park. Janice wore a weird buffalo plaid dress-thing that cut off at the knees—wool, thick, double-breasted, vague animal costume, and beneath it: black stockings that covered up her legs.

First thing, Zeke opened the door, and pointed at me. What's wrong with your finger?

I looked down.

You get cut?

I cut myself.

Why'd you do it?

It was an accident, I said.

Zeke gave me a look. Doesn't look like an accident, he said. You practically cut off your whole finger.

He was dressed in jean shorts and a flannel shirt with a similar black and red tartan pattern to Janice's bathrobe-thing, which he left unbuttoned to show his usual black t-shirt beneath. He wore stainless-steel butcher gloves that clicked when he used his hands.

He started closing shop, wiping down the counters and putting away everything small enough to fit inside a drawer. Then he asked me whether I wanted to see the meats.

The meats?

He took me in the back where he showed me what he cut and how he cut it: huge slabs of flesh that hung from hooks like dark raincoats in the walk-in freezer. He pointed to the right and to the left. Pigs, he said. Cows. Zeke prodded them. He said this is good and put his palm flat on a heaping block of meat and it swayed and rocked—red and white. He wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve, and he pushed his hair back and scratched his nose. He hiccupped. He tightened the muscles on his neck and flexed his jaw. Then he leaned in, toward me, as if waiting to hear what I had to say.

I cleared my throat.

He pointed again. This is the round, he said. And there is the oyster steak. This is called the Aitch bone, and here the tendons. He pointed and jabbed. Here is the shank, and more tendons and ligaments. A tough bundle of muscles, he said. Good for brazing. I'll unbundle the top round and seam the muscles apart tomorrow. He ran his finger down the carcass. Here the femur bone. Great winter meal, he

grinned. Good marrow there. And here the knuckle. He pointed. Here the sirloin tip. Here's the eye round, the heel, and the knee. And there is the bottom round for roast beef.

I didn't recognize these clumsy shapes as animals at all. Meat abstracted from its body.

He pointed. Say it, he said.

Say what?

That, he said. Aitch bone.

Aitch bone, I said.

He pointed. Shank.

Shank, I said.

Say it.

Shank, I said.

Shank, he said. That's right.

What about that? I pointed.

That? That's just the connective tissue. Some blood, there. There. I'll cut it out later, for presentation. It's all about presentation, my work. Making the carcass look like an ordinary grocery item. And look at the pigs, he said. Over here. He pointed and stepped and looked back. Look here. He put his hand flat against it. The leaf lard. No taste in it, he said. I'll cut it. Cut it right off. Here the flank section. The sirloin. The tenderloin. The kidney. For sausage, he said. He knocked the swollen mass. The

shoulder. The rib, there. The elongated muscles, see. There. More flank. The skin is dry, you see. The ham and the joints. The belly, there. Here. The whole thing.

When we got to Zeke's apartment, he told us to shut up and have a seat and stomped into the kitchen and removed three small glasses—foggy, smudged with fingerprints—from the cupboard and set them on the coffee table in front of us and poured a splash of something green and hot into each.

Grass, he said.

Grass?

Grass tea, yeah. He stomped around, arranging things, tidying up. He wore Dr. Martens combat boots.

Janice lifted the glass to her nose and sniffed the drink, and she pulled back hand dropped her chin and scrunched her face and silently screamed. Gross, she said.

It's just grass. It's literal grass.

It's too masculine, she said. Makes me hot. It makes my face hot.

Sorry, it's all I have. He sat down on the floor, spread his legs out so that I could see the outline of his crotch—the shape of a fist.

He gulped.

I could tell that Zeke was excited. His manners were bad. He got brash, showing off. He didn't know how to do polite talk, so he ranted about this and that, and he waved his hands around like a European. He sounded like a European, too,

speaking with a certain exigency, a somber morality about the state of things: universal theories of being, theories of the universe, heaps of second-hand knowledge and useless information.

Janice looked at him sideways. What's wrong with you tonight?

He slapped himself in the face and smiled. I'm hyped up, he said. I need to get out.

Janice, with a little smirk on her face, told him to show me his paintings.

You're a painter? I asked.

I used to be, he said.

Show me.

He stood up erect and reached beneath his bed and produced an elongated canvas—a painting. This is the only one I still have.

The painting was—I don't know what. It was garden, maybe, but too messy to be a garden. A patch of earth. A thicket of tangled lines. Verdant, ornate. An overgrowth of interweaving vines, branches, bramble, grasses and weeds—in shades of green and brown, clumped and combed in layers, inhibiting the possibility of movement. And in this way, the perspective was unnatural: too close or too far to see what it meant to show—too focused, not focused enough, too intimate, too detached. It looked more like the detail of a painting than a painting itself. It seemed to hide something rather than show it. And the brushstrokes were crude and sweeping so that each shape—each leaf and fond and petal, every limb and stalk and needle—only consisted of a single stroke, so that it all blended into a singular plot. The painting

surprised me. On one hand, I thought it spiritual and sad—beautiful maybe, or not quite beautiful. On the other hand, it wasn't beautiful at all. It was the opposite of beautiful. And the longer I looked the less I knew what I was looking at. The technique was sloppy and careless, obscene even, and for this reason I was overwhelmed with embarrassment. It felt as if I had walked in on someone taking a shit.

After I had looked at it for a long time and began to feel confused and nauseous. I said something vague but praiseful: great technique, very interesting.

Zeke put the canvas back where he got it. He lifted his mug and drank the grass tea entire and set the mug down in the exact ring of moisture it had vacated.

Why'd you quit painting?

It's a long story, he said.

Tell him, said Janice.

Tell me.

Zeke told his story, and it went like this: When I'm young, they told me that I can be whatever I want. They tell me, express yourself. And I do. I did. I study art. I became a painter. I'm trying to have my vision. After grad school, art school, I moved to Los Angeles. Lots of artists are moving there. I'm nostalgic for California. I have an idea of it and what it means. And I have a plan. You know how it goes, one takes a shitty job and works up into a given profession. I paint on the side. Neh. I get a studio apartment with the money I'd saved working at a grocery store in college. I eat the same thing every day, he said. Instant oatmeal in the morning, two bananas and

peanut butter for lunch, and four packets of ramen noodles with three cans of tuna for dinner. I do five hundred pushups and seventy-five pull ups every morning. Without question. I spend a few hours looking for a job. And in the afternoon, I paint. I painted. I am never a more productive painter. Two months later, I've run out of money. I eventually take a job as a meat handler at a local grocery store. My commute is long, over an hour, extending my workday by two hours. Sometimes more. I don't have time to make friends. I don't have time to paint. I don't have time even to live. I'm not living at all. I hate my job. I'm restless, always looking for something else. Something better. When I'm not working, I'm looking for more work, better work. Twenty-four-seven. No sleep. Neh. So, I quit the job and I'm out of money, losing my mind. What else can I do? What should I have done? I have no choice. I am so unhappy I couldn't stand it. Aren't I supposed to be happy? But I can't get another job, man. Nothing. Losing money. I am possessed by an impulse to break things. To ruin everything. To destroy objects and break rules. At first, it was small things. I go into corporate elevators to fart. That kind of thing. Nasty. I scream at strangers in the street. I piss in public spaces—parking lots and restaurant patios. But it gets worse. Neh. I pretend to rob grocery stores, gas stations, banks. I start to masturbate in churches, right there, during the Sunday service. Right there. In the middle of the sermon. The preacher would be saying something about Jesus and the resurrection and I'm beating off in the congregation.

Did anyone notice you?

I'm losing my identity. Zeke went on without answering the question. And I start having recurring dreams. Dreams on a loop, night after night, dreams of trash. Landscapes of litter and waste. Mountains and oceans of debris and detritus. Plastic bottles, boxes, and wrappers. Tuna cans and beer kegs. Amazon packaging, grocery bags, plastic straws.

Did anyone notice you? I asked again. Did anyone see you in the churches?

He went on. So, one day, my landlord comes in and tells me that he's kicking me out, he said. No explanation. Get out, he says. Neh. And I'm hysterical. I'm wandering the streets at midnight. No sleep. So, I up my workout regimen. More pull-ups and pushups. No rest. A sense of failure grows inside of me. No friends, no job, no place to live. Nothing. Nobody.

Zeke paused and inhaled and exhaled and removed a cigarette from his pocket. He slipped the cigarette into his mouth and held it loosely between his lips.

He went on: For a long time, I'm possessed. I'm not in control of my own actions, haunted by rage and violence. All-encompassing hatred. So, it comes to me: a plan. I'm going to hurt that fucker. I'm going to fuck up that landlord's whole life. This is the plan. Neh. My landlord lives four blocks away. So, I bike over three days in a row. Just to check on his house, see what's going on and all that. I find out that he has a dog, a Great Pyrenees. Massive white thing. The dog is mostly okay. He doesn't bark, mostly. Good dog. And he's outside in the back yard most of the day when the landlord is away. Neh. I execute the plan to perfection. I ride my bike down the road to his house. I have all my keys in my pocket—two apartment keys, the key

to the mailbox. That's three keys, man. That's perfect. The number of perfection. As I pull up, I take out my keys, place them in the palm of my hand and make a fist around them so one key protrudes out between two fingers. Like this. You see. A fist with three keys sticking out. One key for every finger hole. You know what I do. I walked right up to that dog. He's barking crazy, losing his mind. I start punching him in the face. Hard as I can. And the dog is squealing and crying so badly you'd think he was a human crying, like a little boy. I keep punching him over and over, hitting him in the eye and the mouth. Neh. He's bleeding everywhere. Cuts all over his face, and he can't see. And he can't fight back because he's blind now. His face is pulp.

As Zeke spoke, I had the distinct feeling that it was raining, but when I looked at the window, it was not.

Zeke took out a lighter, and lit his cigarette, and puffed and exhaled into my face. A blue layer of smoke grew.

He went on: That was the night that I pack up and left. Heading north. Nowhere. Nothing but my shitty car and the clothes on my body. I drive up highway one. I sleep by the side of the road. I scavenge for food in dumpsters outside of restaurants and bakeries in Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Big Sur, Carmel, Monterey, Santa Cruz. Neh. I stay in Santa Cruz for a few months—pitched a tent near the highway with the rest of the drifters. We are all scavenging. The community of tents grows bigger and bigger by the week. During that time I see horrible things. I see grown men sexually molested, see them stabbed with shards of plastic and glass. And I see good things, too. Homeless folks pulling people out of burning cars, and

sharing food, and carrying signs to protest the government. But here's the thing. This is the point. This is important. This is what you need to understand. Neh. I am not unhappy there. I am not exactly happy either, but that's because happiness is a factory-made emotion. I know that now. But I was fulfilled. Fulfilled because my life was finally my own. Do you understand? I lived the way I'd always wanted to live.

I had wanted to stop Zeke and ask questions, but his story did not lend itself to interruption; and he seemed not to care whether I was listening. The purpose of his story, it seemed, was cathartic, rather than informative. My suspicion was confirmed when, at this point in the story, he started talking faster as if approaching some climax, some extremity—an exhausted half-orgasm.

And I realize, he said, that the source of my depression, my shame, guilt, frustration wasn't inside of me. It's out there, in the culture of machines and men—in cheap architecture and environmental collapse and addictive politics. It's a goofy thing about depression. Everyone says depression is a chemical imbalance in our brains, in our whole bodies. Something is wrong with us, they say. They use words like disorder and disease and sickness. They give us pills that make us complacent and unconcerned. But they've got it wrong. We're not sick. The world is sick, and anxiety is its product.

I looked at my broken wristwatch.

Then came the election, four years ago, the police riots started. The people are marching and rioting in public, protesting government policy, police brutality, democracy itself. The air is hot with anger. And I feel drawn to this kind of life, this

vigor—an anti-political activism in the service of instability. My life had purpose then, free from our sterile, optimistic, comfort-seeking life.

I tugged at my cut finger.

He went on. My rage used to be undirected and unproductive, misguided, but now I know where to aim it. I have the gift of rage. The power and mysticism of negativity. Do you understand what I'm telling you, he said. Neh. Wrath is wiser than instruction.

But what about the dog? I asked.

A cover band played Joy Division at The Proletariat.

As soon as we walked in, some at the bar lifted their heads to watch us and nodded or didn't nod. Someone said Zeke's name. Someone shook his hand, and I noticed he was still wearing his work gloves. He introduced us to Billy and Roman and Angie and Nathan and Calvin and Paul. We went on and sat in a back booth—the cushions were small and firm and unusually close to the table. Zeke sat facing the entrance. Never face away from the entrance, he said. I sat across from him, next to the wall, and Janice slid in next to me.

A pendant light fixture swung low over the table.

I looked over my shoulder and saw two men looking back at me. I looked away and back and away again. I recognized one of them right away. I thought I did. It was the kid from the protest on campus. The boy. Tall and hairless, head shaved,

dark eyes. It was him. And now he was with another guy (another boy, I thought), short and bearded.

A sense of dread shot through my spine. My stomach contracted. I looked back to make sure I had seen what I saw. There they were—the same look as before, looking back.

I think I know those guys, I said.

Zeke nodded. I see them. I saw them when we walked in.

The waiter came by and called us comrades.

We ordered beers, and, trying to ignore the man-boys, we let our conversation turned to more mundane topics. We talked about whether we enjoyed living in the Bay Area. Janice said yes, but, she added, it's all become a little sterile. You know, losing its character. Like a giant strip mall. Everything looks the same.

Zeke agreed. He was severe and jagged where the light cast a shadow over the lower half of his face. He said yes, he mostly liked living here. Berkeley and San Francisco have always been on the cutting edge of politics, he said. But there are so many, how should I say it, milksops, pantywaists, posies. All of them with their heads down. And their world fits onto small screens. And they think small. Small as children. The men are castigated and impotent, and the women stressed out and neurotic.

I started to look over my shoulder, but Zeke stopped me. Don't look. They're still there. I got eyes on them.

We ordered another round.

Beads of precipitation run slantwise down the glass of beer in front of me, collecting at the base in a perfect ring of moisture.

We stayed for another few hours at the bar, and when the man-boys finally left, we left, too. We meandered across the street to a bookstore, and then walked to other bars, The White Horse and The Dirty Bird and The Do-Over. Around three in the morning, everything was closed.

I think I'm going to be sick, I said.

Yeah, said Janice. I quit, too.

Zeke spoke in his deepest voice. Let's walk it off.

And we did walk. Zeke lifted his finger and pointed forward and we followed. Janice walked in long strides, almost lunging, the way one walks downhill, not so much walking as preventing oneself from falling.

Zeke went ahead of us, humming something low and guttural. His stride was long, a soldier's stride—mechanical and automatic, he brought his knees up to his waist, almost marching.

I felt like I was inside Zeke's painting: figures and objects flattened against black and grey swirls of painted wind, still wet, slowly spinning, circles within circles, thicker and thinner intermittently, and textured with eggshell and sand, twirling in directional strokes, pressing counterclockwise against us as we walked. The houses leaned forward into the streets, and the streets were glazed with an

underpainting of darkness, coated in blue shadows that fell from the objects they failed to copy. For a briefest of moments, I thought I saw a man behind Zeke, a man larger even than himself.

The phone vibrated. *A shadowy science institute, funded by food and drug industry giants, has been quietly infiltrating government agencies around the world. A 10-year-old Texas girl who contracted a brain-eating amoeba swimming in a lake and river near Waco has died. A new group of extremists who are venturing out of chat rooms and into the real world with firearms defy easy categorization.*

The streetlights were becoming less frequent now, and there were only occasional patches of light into which the surrounding cityscape appeared and disappeared, like a puzzle with missing pieces.

Zeke was still wearing his stainless-steel butcher gloves—he hadn't taken them off, not once, and he clapped them together as he sang: I saw ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken, I saw guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children.

We moved with our heads down, almost marching, following the sound of Zeke's voice. Janice occasionally leaned over and bumped into me, a little harder each time—once almost knocking me completely off balance. She was flirting, I think, reminding me that she was still there. Or else she was genuinely stumbling, struggling to stay upright.

Zeke went on and on singing about the apocalypse. And I wondered whether he really wanted the world to end—to abolish borders and burn cities—or whether he

presented the most extreme possible versions of his politics to hyperbolize his commitment. He sang louder and louder, as if to announce himself to the surrounding darkness: *I heard thunder, it roared out a warning. Heard the roar of a wave that could drown the whole world.*

A long time passed. Already an acute feeling of despair came over me. Apprehension preceded experience. And I would struggle, in the days to come, to sort out the following events.

Here it happened.

I heard someone walking close to us, closer, coming from behind. The distance between us seemed to collapse and I turned to see what was there. I saw them: two large figures running toward us. It was them, the same kids from the bar. One tall, one short.

They were moving faster now, heads down, shoulders forward, arms out.

I cried out. I yelled. And just as Zeke turned around, the tall man jumped on his back, and wrapped his arms around Zeke's neck and his legs around his waist and dragged him down to the ground. The short man bent over and hit him and kicked him in the face until he was bleeding from his mouth and nose. Zeke struggled and flailed and tried to wrestle free, but the tall one was holding him down still.

I was suspended, frozen— mind-locked and receding further into paralysis.

Janice was backpedaling. She looked me. Do something!

The tall man stood up now, and Zeke curled into a fetal position on the ground, still wearing his backpack. The men were hitting and hitting. One punched him in the back and the other kicked him and his head bounced on the asphalt.

Do something!

It was then that I felt seized by something outside myself—an libidinal rush, a spasm that passed through my skeleton. And I felt that everything had been decided before me, my whole life: I could not be held accountable for what I was doing. I had the urge to destroy something. I ran forward and jumped up and raised my fist over my head—the way one holds a hammer—and brought it down on the back of his head, knocking him to the ground.

The tall man turned to face me and shoved me backwards and now—while the men were briefly occupied—Zeke freed himself. He rolled over and staggered to his feet and held himself upright. He moved to stand next to me. Janice stood behind us, yelling, backpedaling still.

The two men recomposed themselves. They moved in closer, bouncing, the way boxers move before they strike.

Zeke stood unmoved, flatfooted. He was panting. With the back of his wrists, he wiped blood from his mouth, then wiped his wrists against his back pockets. He took off his backpack, reached into it, and pulled something out a dark and sleek object. At first it looked like a cellphone, but when Zeke rotated the object in his hand and lifted it up into the gritty streetlight, I could see it was a gun. A handgun. He held

the gun up. He pointed it, angled it sideways at the men, who put their hands in the air, as one does in the presence of a police officer.

Do it, Janice said. Fucking do it.

Don't, I said. Please. Don't.

The man yelled something. Zeke told him to shut up. Shut the fuck up, he said. He adjusted his grip on the gun and lifted it to eye level. He shifted his aim from one man to the other, and back to the first. Without taking his eyes off them, he said my name slowly. He said Janice's name and he said my name again. Now he pointed the gun and mumbled something, I don't remember what. He mumbled it again. He mumbled and muttered and moaned. He was moaning and he got louder. He moaned wordlessly now with the intensity of a powerlifter. Then his grunt turned into a screech or a wail, and he yelled so loudly that, for a moment, I thought someone else had shot him—that someone else, someone unseen, behind a tree or inside a parked car, had had been watching, waiting to kill. He yelled so loudly that I yelled, too, and when I yelled, Janice yelled, and soon we were all yelling. All three of us. Yelling and hooting and screeching and wailing and speaking in tongue. In a fit of solidarity, or mimesis, or madness, or thoughtless celebration, we cried out senseless and stupid together. We moaned and howled like soldiers about to destroy or be destroyed. Like animals captured or liberated. We made a cacophony of barely human voices: the sound of pain, begging for more pain, afraid and fearless at once. A collective and primitive keening. A protest or incantation. An almost-hymn.

Before long, Zeke was waving the gun loosely around in the air and yelling something else, something new. I started waving my hands in the air, too. I was mimicking him, or he was controlling me. Janice was doing it, too. Waving her arms and yelling. We looked like lunatic dancers, damned to hell or saved for heaven.

Zeke told them men to run home—just as the police officer, weeks earlier, had told me to run. And they did. We watched them run. We went on howling and shrieking and dancing.

My body became suddenly warm. My thoughts slowed down.

Next thing I could tell, we were running, too—sprinting through backyards and alleyways, jumping over gates and piles of trash. Janice took us. She pointed here and there. Now we walked. Now we ran again. Now we were flying—below the freeways and into the foothills and through neighborhoods.

Suddenly I was sober.

Janice, I said, sucking the air to breathe, where are we going?

It's time to disappear again. Time to get out. Are you coming with me?

Already we were in Janice's dark green Subaru Forester going south on the 5 toward Bakersfield with the windows down, toward the Mojave Desert.

The road went down against the arch of the sun and the sky was cloudless—the color of stagnant water. Slowly the trees disappeared, and the verdant expanse of the mountains turned into barren plains, harsh and jagged. It was a place where other places end. An omission, an erasure, a signifier in flux. The landscape was wide, pulled taught in every direction along the earth. It was the landscape of an ancient apocalypse. A visual suppression of sound.

We had decided to escape for a week and stay in a hotel outside of Las Vegas. We might as well vacation while we're hiding out, Janice had said.

Janice had invited Zeke to join us, but he said he wasn't scared and that he needed to stay and hold strong and be responsible.

Before we'd left, I had sent all the necessary emails from my phone. I emailed Parker to let him know I wouldn't be at the McDonald's this week, and I emailed the therapist to cancel our appointment. I made something up: I had to leave town suddenly and tend to a family emergency. I immediately regretted this decision, though, and feared that the therapist would try to reschedule the appointment—that he might be interested in my “family emergency” and want to understand its relationship to my mental health. But it didn't matter. I never saw the therapist again.

For the first time since my accident, my finger felt good. The cut was healed. I took off the bandages. I threw them out.

Janice kept the cruise control set exactly at the speed limit—seventy miles per hour, and it felt like we were barely moving., like I'd been looking at the same mountain for the last thirty minutes, the same dirt mounds, the same shrubs, the same road reaching out endlessly in front of us.

“The Future’s Not What It Used to Be” by Mickey Newbury played on the radio.

Why are we listening to this trash?

Janice hit the off button and the car went silent. We listened now to the tires humming against the hot asphalt.

You don’t have to keep it like that, I said. The cruise control. You can legally go up to ten miles over it.

She looked at me and made that lemon-sucking face. Legally?

Legally, I said.

Then why isn’t the speed limit ten miles faster than what it is?

Because then people would drive five or ten miles per hour faster than that limit.

She squinted.

Seriously, I said. It’s not worth it for cops to pull you over unless you’re flying down the highway. At least thirteen miles per hour over the limit, I said. The ticket just isn’t worth as much to the city. It’s better for them to wait for someone going faster.

In the near distance was a cluster of small buildings—not buildings, but trailers, sheds, U-Haul trucks—above which a tattered American flag rippled in the dry breeze. A hand-written sidewalk sign had been placed by the side of the road. As we approached, I read it aloud: Gas, Liquor, and Grocery. There were other signs, too: ATM. 24 Packs \$14.99. Picnic Area in Back.

Janice pulled through the parking lot—a smoothed-over plot of gravel where there were parked two white F-150s with lift kits and an old blue Ford Aerostar. She pulled up so close to the pump that she could not open her door fully without banging it into the concrete pole next to it. She cracked the door and made herself small, sucked in her stomach and pressed herself through the open crack.

The gas station was a trailer with no windows, a false, rickety structure that looked like a portable classroom. We walked up the moveable steel staircase into the container. The smell was overwhelming: burning plastic and dust. Cold air blew through an overheating air conditioner.

The words “liquor” and “grocery” on the outdoor sign proved to be a lure, as there was no liquor and no beer even, except for six packs of Bud Light. Two small shelves were thinly stocked with a below-average snack selections: Lays Potato Chips, Flaming Hot Cheetos, Rold Gold Pretzels, Hostess Powdered Mini Donuts, Nature Valley Granola Bars, SlimJims, Grandma’s Cookies, Ho Hos, Hot Fries, Chex Mix, and Pringles. There was also a shelf of pre-made food: frozen burritos, breakfast sandwiches, microwavable cheesy pockets, microwavable hotdogs, Taquitos, yogurt, hard boiled eggs, and cheese sticks with beef jerky.

I thumbed through the frozen food. Do you want anything?

Janice walked over to the shelf and grabbed a Nature Valley bar, two hard-boiled eggs and a cheese stick. I grabbed a frozen burrito and a bag of popcorn.

We approached the cash register.

Can I also get, um, fifty on the pump—what is it—two? Janice said to the cashier.

Fifty on two. The cashier fumbled at the register, pounding the buttons with her index finger, like a blind typist. She couldn't have been older than fifteen years, and she wore an oversized coat that made her look like a floating head. Her dark hair fell to her waist.

Fifty-eight twenty-eight, she said.

Janice handed her the money.

I'm going to heat up this burrito, I said to Janice, but she had already walked out the door. I turned and headed to the back of the trailer where a microwave sat next to a grimy coffee maker.

Actually, I turned around again and walked to the counter, can I have a cup of coffee, too?

The cashier smiled. Her teeth were gray. That's one dollar, she said.

I handed her my credit card.

You got no cash?

No cash, I said.

There's a five-dollar minimum charge.

Never mind, I said.

Wait. She reached out, as if to touch me. Just take a cup, she said. It's on me.

I thanked her and went to the back and removed the burrito from its plastic wrapper, soaked a paper towel in the rusted steel sink, wrapped the towel gently around the burrito, set the burrito onto one of the available paper plates, and put it in the microwave for three minutes. During those three minutes, I poured coffee from the cloudy glass pot into a Styrofoam cup and added three packets of Sweet'n Low and three cups of Carnation Half and Half Liquid Creamer and went back outside.

She removed the pump from the gas tank and shut the fuel door. Let's eat this food in the picnic area. I hate eating and driving.

Behind the trailer was a combed patch of dirt on which sat two picnic tables beneath a blue canopy. Two families huddled together at the tables. They shared a pack of BudLight—two couples, man and woman, woman man, each with one child. Six of them. They halted their conversations and watched us situate ourselves in the picnic area. I wanted to watch them, too, but their eyes outnumbered mine and I couldn't sustain my look. I walked over to a mound of dirt beneath a scrawny desert tree that made no shade and crouched down and brushed away from twigs and small rocks and smoothed out the dust.

I waved Janice over.

We sat on the hot dirt and ate. Janice looked down at the ground, chewing.

From where I was, I could see the families. The men faced me. I listened to their conversation:

Joel, said the first man, tell them what you told me yesterday. That's how the first man spoke, in a nasally voice, breathing forcefully out of his mouth. You tell them, said the second man—a scraggly, skinny, rat-looking guy with a cowboy hat and a thin mustache. He spat tobacco into a plastic water bottle, and the spit hit the bottle's rim and trickled down the side into a pool of dark liquid. The man looked too overtly derelict to be so negligent, and I wondered whether and to what degree he'd cultivated that lowlife look.

(Here I wondered, also, whether this might also be true of Janice, the cultivation of a look—whether she had some facade that I failed to notice the first time I met her, and which was too late to notice now.)

The first man nudged the second. Come on you tell it better, he said.

One of the women reached over and took out a can of beer and cracked it open and poured it slowly into a red plastic cup that she held at an angle, allowing the beer to hit the side of the cup.

Fine. The skinny one spat into the bottle again and smiled in an exaggerated way. He spoke in a low, reverent voice like he was in the presence of authority. So, me and Robby come out here the other night, he said. And Robby is a mess after the whole deal with Cindy and all that, how she'd been fucking whatshisname. Anyway, we're in his wagon, and he's just shooting shit and he's got that look in his eye like he's gone do something. I don't know what, but he had that crazy look, you know, that one. The one gets when he's been drinking. And I say, Robby, you've been drinking? He said, my heart's gone, and everything feels about the same as the day

before. And I'm like, Robby, let me out of this goddamn wagon right now. He shakes his head like no, but his eyes are still locked onto the road ahead. I'm trying to calm him down, but he won't have it. He's saying some crazy shit now like I'm going to kill someone and fuck this and fuck that and fuck it all.

The women are laughing in a way that indicates familiarity.

And I'm starting to freak, he says. This idiot hits the gas as hard as he can. Just floors the bitch. So, we're going now, really going, and thank god there's no one else on the road because we're hauling. Flying. Off the ground, it feels like. And I'm looking at the speedometer. And Mother God, we're going eighty, ninety, a hundred, one ten. No lie.

Now the man lowers his voice even more, cupping his mouth so the children can't hear. I can read his lips: I'm screaming my head off, you bastard mutherfucker you're going to kill us! We're riding like that for God I don't know how long and finally he slows down and down and down, and we stop a few miles up the road. I'm not sure if I should beat his ass or kiss him. And then he starts laughing like he's psycho. He starts saying that he thinks he ejaculated. His pants're wet, too. Piss and maybe something else too. He said, this is better than getting your dick sucked. I said, what? And he said, better than getting your goddamned dick sucked.

The first man was laughing, but the storyteller was not. He repeated his final sentence again. Better than getting your dick sucked.

*

For a long time, everywhere was nothing to see. No houses. No buildings. Only a procession of cars retreating into the desert. Mountains rose and fell, and new mountains rose to take their place, sun-bleached and bare. There was a primordial monotony to the landscape, a redundancy that made you wonder who you were and what your life meant.

I wanted to ask Janice about Zeke—whether he was her partner—but I didn't want to seem jealous or obsessive, so I let it go.

The road dropped down and rose again and wound around a dry ravine and through a windgap where there was no wind and straightened out and went flat. Hours and hours. We could see for miles ahead—and because everything was visible, it felt like nothing was. The world seemed hidden, closed off behind its own image. The clouds drifted like dead things in water.

Janice seemed too relaxed, consider what had just happened the night before. She relaxed her shoulders and let them back. She slouched.

Should we talk about last night? I said.

What about it?

It's crazy, right?

No, she said. There nothing crazy about it. Violence is the life we are unafraid to live. This is what freedom feels like.

The car seemed to float down a dark river. The mountains overtook the sun—and the sky turned dull white to red, red to blue, blue to blue-turning-black.

It was full dark by the time we saw Las Vegas. No stars except the one on the ground, the glowing valley: a pointillated constellation flickering on and off.

The road went down. We exited the 95 onto 215, took it to Charleston, and drove west until Charleston became the 159, and led us to a small town in a valley nested between a cluster of red mountains.

When we got into town, the sight of an illuminated strip mall was enough to make me cry. It was as ordinary as any strip mall I'd seen before, lined with the most generic establishments: Great Clips, Dollar Tree, Subway, Euro Tanning Salon, Hobby Lobby and a standalone Starbucks in the parking lot. As soon as I saw it, I started to weep. Humiliated, ashamed, confused, I turned my head to the side and moved closer to the window. I watched myself crying, reflected against the glass, superimposed against the fictional city behind it—into and out of the linked streetlights, so that my image was visible and invisible as we passed from dark to light, then dark again. We went into Las Vegas—past the sprawl of identical housing developments, and more stucco strip malls, past the keno lounges and the golf courses—and then out again.

We drove back into the primitive, elemental landscape of rocks, and sand, and shrubs, into what felt like the future, barren and empty and dead.

For a moment I was alone.

The car slowed on the dirt road and the tires crunched against the gravel. It pulled up to a house that seemed, in the dark, much larger than the houses around it.

Janice turned onto the driveway and turned the car off. The keys hung from the ignition and rattled.

We're here, she said.

Where?

*

The hotel was different from the places we usually went. It was a serious place, a real place, a place where people go to be in love.

Our room was practically two rooms. The walls were thick adobe. A desert aesthetic. There were exotic plants that looked like light fixtures and light fixtures that looked like exotic plants. There was a painting of the desert next to a giant window looking out onto a view of the same desert. On the table, there was a large wooden bowl on the table with fruit inside. I focused on it. Even here—in what felt like palace or paradise—there were these grotesquely long, green grapes, a withered banana, shrunken mangos and peaches. I saw it as a kind of still life—the banana was the sickly brain, and the grapes were the impotent genitals. There was something surreal about it, something repulsive and sickening. I thought the exhibit of abject art at SFMOMA—the bodies and shit and vomit. There was something in this reversal, something there in the fact that the phenomenological world appeared always secondary, derivative.

Janice unpacked her suitcase. She took out a pile of clothes and began throwing them into the air, one by one, which lost their shape as they fell lifeless onto the floor in a heap of disorder—faux fur vests, zig zag leggings, bright crop tops, sweat pants, tie-dye tank tops. She threw everything out until her suitcase was completely empty and then she got on her knees and began throwing the clothes all over again, tossing them up to create a mess.

I laughed. What are you doing?

Try it, she said. Make yourself at home.

I tried it. I went to my backpack and took out my clothes and threw them around. I threw my jeans onto the television. I threw my shirts onto the floor and my socks onto the dresser.

Feels good, right?

Feels great.

Janice took off the clothes she was wearing and turned on the shower and invited me to join her and I did and after the shower we fooled around. Our bodies blended, in the same place, same heat, same sweat, fully present, attentive to what was there. I went slower, containing the wave rising inside of me, unafraid, clueless and curious and mad, pulsing with tension and instinct, desiring to keep what I already had—to have more of what was given. I wanted more of Janice, more to touch—to touch more of her body than was.

Afterwards, we sat in place for a long time wrapped in each other. Janice looked at me and breathed hard and closed her eyes. Then she rolled away and sat back in and propped herself up on her forearms and elbows. She tilted her neck back so that her face was pointed at the ceiling. The overhead lights reflected against her black hair and her sweaty skin like broken glass.

Maybe I was swept up in the luxury and newness of our present circumstances, but now, here, was the first time I thought: this is a person I could be in love with. I opened my mouth to say it. But I didn't.

*

Janice slept in. I woke and had some alone time to think about nothing in particular—or maybe not to think, to think of nothing, to be free from thinking and being thought. I went down to the lobby to have breakfast I drank two cups of coffee ate toast and fruit and didn't think about anything.

I took out my phone and checked the news. Local news and national news and whatever else passed for a credible source of information, the Daily Californian and the New York Times and the UC Police Report, everything—to see whether there had been any reports about guns, fights, protests, riots, civil unrest, Antifa. Anything. As far as the internet was concerned, there were no such events.

I went upstairs and turned off my phone and hid in in a drawer. The sun was up now, and the room was so bright that I wanted Janice to see it. I woke up her up and said look, look at the light on the floor and the walls. Look at how much light.

Janice and I enjoyed a version of domestic, monogamous love. We never left the hotel. We swam in the pool and napped in the sun and swam again. We sunbathed on the balcony. We drank coffee in the morning and wine in the afternoon. We ate fresh salad with goat cheese and beats, we ate fresh bread with butter and honey, and we read books. That's right. I read a book for the first time in—how long? Years, maybe. *Don Quixote*. (The hotel had a copy.) Janice read something, too—something about mythology and sex and the “failed absolute,” whatever that was. We talked about what we read. (I still didn't understand what the “failed absolute” was.) And we

talked about whatever else. Janice told stories. She told a story about her first polyamorous partner—a white guy with a thirteen-inch cock. Thirteen inches, she said again, when it was limp. Limp! It was too big, she said. We couldn't even have sex because it wouldn't fit inside me. It wouldn't even fit inside my mouth. I had to had to use both hands to jack him off. He believed God had cursed him—played a sick joke on him so that his gift was also his curse. A gift so great that it became a form of torture. Some nights he cried over his huge penis. I asked her to tell more stories and she did. She told me a story—about the first time she came to San Francisco—how she got drunk and stoned and got lost on Valencia—how she loved that feeling: being lost. How she missed that feeling these days, how she had been trying to recreate it for years. She told me about getting her first tattoo. She told me about her first gay encounter (her words) which had been a failure because, halfway through it, she fell asleep. She laughed and I laughed with her. We played board games and watched black and white films and listened to music. We touched each other's faces and massaged each other's hands. You have these freckles, I touched her. You have crooked nose, she poked me. You're adventurous. You're easy-going. You're outspoken. You're pious. Pious? Like, you could have been an old Catholic. A monk, or something. Don't deny it.

It felt like we were hiding out—escaping the tedium and banal terrors and stresses of the world. Everything was easy. I had nothing to pretend. And I felt, for the first time since graduate school, a sense of freedom and openness to my immediate surroundings, to the world. I listened to the breeze. I felt sweat running

down my forehead. I let it run. I was being baptized in the heat of the desert: sinless, kept away, unburdened by thoughts except to think about my own thoughtlessness. And that thoughtlessness occurred to me as a kind of wisdom. Something religious, maybe. I was experiencing what a saint might call an *epiphany*, or a therapist might call *recovering*, or a writer might call *character development*, though, for once, the language of experience did not prevent me from experiencing what the language meant. Instead, I felt myself part of some great tradition of becoming. Of self-possession.

We had sex and went to the pool again, drank wine again, and read our books, occasionally glancing up at each other to see whether the other might be glancing back.

The sky was empty, and the sun was up, and no shadows fell.

I watched Janice as she fiddled with the bottom button of her sundress, her fingernails clicked softly against it. This is our sexcapade, she said.

Let's never go back.

Let's move to Las Vegas and become pornstars.

Sure, I said, why not?

Do you think you could do it?

Probably not, I said. I think my cock is too small.

Some guys like to watch porn with small cocks, she said. It's good for their self-esteem.

Yeah.

So, *would* you do it?

Would *you*?

Why not?

I don't know, there's the whole staged aspect of it. I can't get over that. I spent too much of my life feeling like I'm on a stage, like I'm being watched by God or Google or some version of myself in the future, and more than anything I want to get rid of that feeling.

There's nothing more real than what people do in front of a camera, Janice said. What you do on a stage is the most real thing you can do.

Maybe.

Those cheesy movies about love and sorrow, those dramas and corny romantic comedies about close relationships and personal experience—those are way more scandalous than porn. More revealing. More personal, that's the word I mean to say. Personal. Porn is a kind of censorship. What's censored in porn is the personal narrative. That's the most embarrassing, humiliating thing, too. Feelings. Porn censors out human feelings. The way people used to flash their tits and dicks, now they flash their feelings. It's all over the internet and it's disgusting. Porn is a rare universal truth.

I couldn't tell whether she was serious, but I told her she had a point, and we went on like that for hours talking and saying things we didn't necessarily believe, or used to believe, or might believe in the future. We joked about buying a virtual yacht in the metaverse. About writing erotic novels and releasing them as NFTs. About

starting an ironic OnlyFans page for men to look at other men's small cocks and feel better about themselves.

We talked about "post-wokism" and "queer coding" and "yassification" and "demisexuality" and the "ace umbrella" and the return of Victorian sexual codes disguised as hyper-specific, new-age sexual orientations.

And then, something changed. I made a mistake. It was night. Late, I had just finished and then Janice finished, and we looked at each other. I made a face, although I can't say what the face was or what it meant. I didn't mean to make it, but I knew I had because, when I did, Janice's eyebrows flared up like tiny bat wings. Her freckles were bright, more visible and numerous than usual. She stood up and looked at herself in the mirror for a long time and then turned back to me and said, you love me. You love me, she said again.

I didn't answer.

I can tell, she said. I can tell by the way you look at me. Like that. That way. Like the world is ending.

Why are you saying this?

See, she said. See? That's it. That look.

What look?

That look. Like that.

This is just my face, I said.

She paced the room, possessed by a sudden intensity, and then walked into the bathroom. I didn't know what to do or where to go, so I didn't go anywhere. When

she came out again, a few minutes later, she sat down at the edge of the bed and took her phone out of her pocket and began to scroll with the middle finger. You're too deep now, she said. You want to get inside me, like all the way inside. You think your cock is more than your cock.

What?

You think your cock is a metaphor or something, she said.

What the hell are you talking about?

You think your cock is an idea, a symbol. But it's not. It's just a cock.

She stood up again and started getting ready for bed. She put on her sweatpants and started brushing her teeth. Toothpaste foamed around her lips. She spit into the sink, and a line of toothpaste ran down her chin.

I'm going to read in the lobby, I said.

She nodded and made a face like she was sucking a lemon and said, I'm going to bed.

*

I walked through the lobby and went into the pool which was lit up by underwater lights. I sat on a lounge chair and read my *Quixote*. I wasn't reading the novel in any linear kind of way. I jumped around from episode to episode, settling here and there when I felt inclined to do so, hoping to find something useful or moving or applicable to my own life.

I was struck by one scene. It went like this:

Quixote sends Sancho off to deliver a letter to his lover, Dulcinea. Sancho knows his task is impossible because Dulcinea, of course, is an illusion of Quixote's chivalric imagination. She is a fantasy—and more than that, she is the center of Quixote's entire worldview. This is why Dulcinea matters in Quixote's fantasy—she both exists and does not exist. She is the god of love or desire or passion. She is real because Quixote will never find her.

How will Sancho deliver the letter to Dulcinea without demystifying Quixote's vision of her?

Now, here come three peasant women riding by on donkeys.

Sancho rushes to tell Quixote. Dulcinea is coming. Look.

No, says Quixote. Those are peasants on donkeys. None is Dulcinea.

Sancho falls on his knees before one of the women. He praises her beauty and glory and fame. We have found Dulcinea!

Quixote is confused. Dulciana—now he sees her—is repulsive. She stinks. She's dirty. Quixote's fantasy is on the verge of collapse—his worldview is cracking. All of it threatens to crumble.

But here Sancho intervenes. This *is* Dulcinea, he insists. She is beautiful, but her beauty has been obstructed by a dark magic that seeks to delay your satisfaction. You cannot see her because the universe does not want her to be seen. But I assure you, Sir, this is your Lady.

The scene is profound as it is comedic. What matters is that Sancho's intervention is not pathetic or bathetic or compassionate. His intervention is heroic. For he intuitively understands that without a fantasy—a third thing, an invisible other to mediate the perceiver and the perceived—one is reduced to a hyper-conscious organism, a meaningless life doomed to contemplate its own meaninglessness. With his fantasy, Don Quixote is not insane. He is merely typographic. Sancho, perhaps, sees in Quixote a kind of psychological symbol: a stage on which fantasies—of good and evil, right and wrong, beauty and suffering, love and hate—serve to stay off pessimism and despair. The playacting of Quixote's life is all the more important for its hyperbole. There is a road that must be travelled, but there is no traveler.

Although, at the end of the novel, Quixote does eventually lose his fantasy—and although the loss of that fantasy results both in his metaphoric and physical death—Sancho is, I thought, the novel's unironic hero.

*

Next morning, we ate breakfast on the patio and went swimming and read our books and talked about nothing significant. The sunlight made it hard to see, and I couldn't keep my eyes open, and when I closed them, everything went red.

Janice had an idea. Want to spend our last day in the city?

In Vegas?

We could go downtown and checkout the bars and whatever. We could stay on Fremont Street.

Now the windows were down, and I was driving, and Janice was fumbling with the radio dial. Now she stopped fumbling. She turned up the volume. Country music blasted from the speakers.

I hate country music, I said, reaching to change the station.

Janice slapped my hand away and rolled down her window and her hair blew everywhere and briefly she had no face to see.

The Subaru pushed through the winding roads and the city rose out of the valley and sprawled out across the expanse of desert. The sky was impossible to see—pocked with long thin clouds and drifted against our driving.

I parked the car where she told me to park it, near a row of old shipping containers: brick, characterless factory-type structures which had been transformed into breweries, bars, and boutique restaurants in a gentrification effort disguised as a revitalization project. From the parking garage, we checked into our hotel, the Golden

Spike, (back to the motel style, the kind we were accustomed to visiting in the East Bay) and threw down our bags and went out again.

We walked southwest along Las Vegas Boulevard, surrounded by a barrage of images—billboards and lights, advertisements for law firms and local political candidates and strip clubs—half-naked women and old men. The sunlight fell crimson across the valley and the desert appeared to burn. Red mountains rose in distance beyond the intersection of highways and a faint moon materialized into view. We ate lunch at a cheap buffet, for the experience, not the food. It's an experience, Janice said. A real Vegas buffet. And we loaded our trays with way more food than one could possibly eat—baked potatoes, steak, pepperoni pizza, enchiladas, French fries, soft-serve ice cream, and cookies. Every cuisine was represented, anything one might crave to eat. It was there to have it. And we were, I think, meant to enjoy the contradictions there, the shapelessness of the buffet experience—the exaggerations and excesses, the vanities and varieties.

When we were finished and full and done, we threw what was left away. And we went again and wandered up and down the casino floors at the Golden Nugget and the D and the California and the Golden Gate—a horizontal spiral of mirrors and staining lights, where each new space meant a further disappearance, where each room was nearly identical to the one before it, fast food courts, rows of slot machines, nightclubs, poker tables, blowing allies and lobby entrances. We watched sad gamblers as they mindlessly pulled and pushed at the slot machines, and I watched

the cocktail waitresses, middle aged women clad in tight-fitting dresses, and the drunkards stumbling their way through the lobby, worn out, almost sleeping.

Fremont Street is where the music was. We trekked beneath the giant canopy ceiling that spanned the length of an entire block. A light show was in progress and the screen-sky flashed with geometric shapes and digital fireworks, choreographed to the rock and rap and country music playing too loudly from the surrounding, oversized speakers disguised as gigantic rocks or treasure box. For a moment, everyone, all of us, paused and looked up, shock still in awe or boredom, as if before some great, stupid god. The great microcosm of being, the digital simulation, overflowing with abstractions, no distinction between the artificial and the authentic. Janice's face was exploding with brightness.

This was the historic version of the myth of Las Vegas, anachronistically futuristic. The streets were lined with revitalized images from the glittery 1940's and 50s, the Vegas of Elvis and Frank Sinatra and the Golden Nugget. The old neon signs were back and lit up in augmented reality: the Golden Spike, Chinese Lucky Cat, Lucky Lady, the revolving Ruby Slipper, Binion's giant horseshoe, the crouching cowgirl, Vegas Vic and his pot of gold. I was overwhelmed by a sense of nostalgia for a past I never knew—a world that never belonged to me. It was a paradox, a puzzle, a lost future.

We stopped to get a few drinks and talked about the “mole people”—a desperate community of hundreds of folks living in flood tunnels directly below the Las Vegas Strip.

We went to another bar and then another. She posted a photo of her drink on Instagram. She tweeted something. We walked again, swept in by the carnival of Fremont Street, past the live bands and the street performers and “midget orchestra” and the Nude guitarist and the whole cast of adult characters—the Tarzan lookalike, the Old-Vegas showgirls, totally nude except for the huge feather headdresses and gold stars covering their nipples and crotch area. There was a fat man in a giant baby mask. There were two men dressed in Mario Brothers costumes with a Vegas twist: holding beer bottles and heroine needles. A homeless man held a cardboard box over his head on which he had written “Fuck You.” Two men dressed up like Jedi Knights fought each other with plastic lightsabers. Two women dressed in devil costumes—with red sequin dresses, horns, arrow-headed tails—who, they said, would whip me for a small fee. And for a small fee, three women dressed like angels in white thongs, would let me take a photo. I walked past kiosks selling faux-silk scarves, cellulite cellphone accessories, Mardi Gras beads, disco ball necklaces, and bobbleheads of famous politicians; past the street bars and the bar carts and the ABC stores selling mostly alcohol; past the sale reps, who lured streetwalkers into their nightclubs and strip clubs with discount cards; past more half-naked people, dancing drunk in the street—kissing and fondling each other’s private parts; past Heart Attack Grill where patrons over three hundred and fifty pounds were promised a free meal, past sleazy bars and lounges; past the dark shopping malls, the giant metal sculpture of a praying mantis that blew fire from its antennae, past the “interactive pop-up experience” and its papier-mâché polar bear sculptures made for taking Instagram photos with.

Las Vegas, I thought, was not so much a city as an homage, a model, an outline of cities in general. A map of another city—the essence of a city without the city itself, an amalgamation of cities—superimposed onto an otherwise blank valley of rocks and dirt. The whole history of human civilization was there and not there, simultaneously, in the plastic models of Rome and Paris and New York City. We were witnesses the erosion of meaning and depth, a world surrendering to a reality of lookalikes, where lust is indistinguishable from ordinary existence. The last remnants of the wild west.

We headed back to the hotel and sat for a while, but soon it was late. Janice was getting ready for bed. She put on her pajamas. She brushed her teeth. Toothpaste foamed around her lips. She spit into the sink and a line of toothpaste ran down her chin.

A green light poured in through the window, a faux-neon sign that blinked on and off, so that our room went light then dark again.

I felt a sudden agitation, a restlessness, and knew I wouldn't sleep. I scrolled through my phone in a frantic, annoyed kind of way.

I'm going back out, I said.

Now? You're going out now? (Because her mouth was full of toothpaste, it sounded more like "wow.") She brushed furiously, scrubbing her gums and tongue,

faster. She shoved the toothbrush down her throat and gagged. She spit. Toothpaste ran her chin. Want company? she said.

Probably not. I just feel gross. Legs are a restless and need to move again.

Sure, she said. Text me if you change your mind.

*

I shared the elevator down with a leathery man in a white cowboy hat. He wore a Canadian tuxedo, holes in his denim jacket. A tobacco-stained mustache. He leaned against the side of the elevator and, rejecting conventional elevator etiquette, faced me. He handled his star-shaped belt buckle and smacked his lips and flicked his tongue against his teeth. With both hands, he reached into his back pocket, and removed a small black comb, and stroked his mustache with it. He was still looking at me. He took off his hat and scratched his head. He sighed a second time and cleared his throat like he was about to speak. He put his hands in his pocket and seemed to fiddle with himself through it.

“Happiness is a Warm Gun” played on the speakers.

Outside, I walked away from the lights, through the little side streets and back allies, down one byway and another and another.

My face was still numb from all the alcohol. I found a small bar and went in. I didn't feel like drinking. Didn't feel like much of anything. But I had nothing else to do.

Inside was red. The décor, all of it. Dark red. The walls were covered with velvet crimson curtains. Four booths. Upholstered red. The carpet was a disorienting zigzag pattern.

The place was empty save three drunks at the bar. One couple—woman and man who sat at the front, nearer the entrance, and a man hunched over his drink toward the back. No music played and I heard my own footsteps, awkward and uneven. I sat in the middle.

The bartender was there. A young woman, all bones. Her arms were covered in nondescript tattoos that looked more like bruises than anything else, blotches of purple and grey. Maybe an elephant? Maybe a jellyfish? Her tangled itself in knots around her shoulders.

Whiskey with ice, please and thank you.

She lifted her chin and tossed a napkin in front of me and took the scoop shovel and held it loosely—keeping her fingers straight, wrapping her thumb around the handle and pressed it into her palm—and from the freezer lifted more ice than was necessary and dumped it into a tumbler.

Local? she said.

Not really.

She poured the whiskey and set the glass in front of me and drew a rag from her pocket and wiped circles on the surface of the bar. Whereabouts?

San Francisco area.

She shook her head. I don't know why y'all leave California to come out here. If I could get out, I'd never leave. Fuck, I'd walk there if I could afford to stay.

I drank and looked around—there were plush velvet couches, cherry wood chairs and tables and a faux fireplace in the corner.

The couple at the end of the bar stood up and stumbled their way out of the bar, laughing about something.

I'm not here on vacation, I said.

She hummed and continued polishing the bar. Business?

Research.

Research. Huh.

I'm trying to write a novel, I heard myself say. But I don't have a story.

She blew air out of her nose as if imitating laughter.

The silence—absence of music—seemed to be growing louder.

Now the man to my right moved over several seat and sat next to me. He hunched over the bar and rested on his elbows and looked me up and down and took a drink from his glass. He wore a fedora and a blue and yellow Tommy Bahamas button-up. An unlit cigarette hung loosely in the corner of his mouth. Sorry, he said. Don't mean to bother. You say you're a writer, is at right?

Yeah.

He could have been a used-car-salesman, smiling with half of his mouth to keep the other half firmly clenched down on his cigarette. Perfect, he said. I've been looking for a writer. I have a good story to tell. It's a great story. Maybe you'll want to write it.

His breath was a mild rot. He produced a lighter from his pocket and lit up his cigarette. It's a good story, he said again. People need to hear it.

Tell it.

What, now?

Sure.

He puffed his cigarette and blew smoke in my direction. The smoke lingered and covered his face in a coil of haze. I'm Benici, he said.

Benici?

Benici, he said. It's Italian, I think.

I said my name and shook his hand. His skin was taugth, like an over-inflated balloon.

The bartender leaned in and folded her arms.

It goes like this, said Benici. I had this friend, let's call him Joe. He's a freckled boy. Dark hair. He played baseball in high school. And he's okay, too. Not great, but okay. He's sad but doesn't know why. As an adult, he's drugged up day and night. Anti-pain drugs and antidepressants. And he has one blue eye. Just one.

Is that supposed to be a metaphor?

Is what?

The eye.

You're asking me if the eye is a metaphor?

The blue one. The single blue eye.

Joe is a real person. This is a true story I'm telling.

I understand. But if we're going to write this story, Joe can't just happen to have one eye.

That's horse shit, he said. In this story, you hear me, everything is exactly what it is, and nothing else.

I thought about that. But things only become themselves in relation to other things, I said.

I'm not trying to make some statement. A thing is a thing.

I gestured for him to continue.

Joe, let me say from the start, is the devil. The devil. In the flesh. Satan himself. Lucifer. Beelzebub. The Antichrist. One night, he's drunk and coked-up and he's speaking unintelligibly about this or that. Mostly he's ranting about the Dodgers, how they've blown the world series two years in a row. I should've mentioned that. That's where the book must begin, if you choose to write it. The devil loves the Dodgers. There's your opening line. Anyway, I say to him, Joe, I say, you're acting like the devil. And he looked me in the eyes all serious and he says, I am the fucking devil, don't you know it. And from then on, it was like the sun was shining on him, and I could see him—the devil. Son of the morning star.

But what makes him the devil?

Ben paused and rubbed his chin. Lots, he said. So much. For one thing, he buys cigarettes for children and all that. He sells meth to his cousins. That type of deal. Also, he has voices in his head. Sick voices.

I know a guy like that, I said.

One day, Joe wakes in the middle of the night, he said, and walks to the bathroom to piss. But he can't piss. He stands there and pushes and pushes, but nothing. He can't pee. His stomach cramps and he wants to vomit. He tries to go back to sleep, but it doesn't work. He can't piss. Hours pass. By morning, he starts drinking and drinking water. More and more of it. Finally, he goes outside and stands in the front lawn and does it. He releases everything. And as he's pissing, he says out loud, as if there's someone there with him: Thank God. And it occurs to him that this

has been the purpose of his life—to reach the end of something. He realizes—he told me this, keep in mind, these are his words—that he is only ever in pursuit of ends, ends in themselves, goals and results extracted from their processes. Knowledge without study. Insight without experience. Sex without love. Sweetness without suckle. But there’s never an end to this end-seeking, and he perpetually seeks the end to what never ends. He’s telling me all this one afternoon, drunk by the pool. He grabs his cellphone, like this, and holds it up to the light, and says, this has no past. He said it just like that. This has no past. This is our uniform and our body. I tell him to shut the fuck up, I say you’re drunk and talking like a donkey. He says, if we all have the same body, then our body does not belong to us, and the only way to differentiate the body is to mark it. Cut it up, he says. Scar it. Disfigure it to reclaim whatever it was. And that was that. Three days later the devil kills himself, alone in a motel room, somewhere in Carson City, hopped up on meth and cocaine and whatever else. He shoots the devil right in the face. Square in the middle of it, where the brain used to be. No more brain. No more face. No head. I don’t know why he did it. I don’t think he knew why he did it. He’s tired of living with the devil, I guess. But you see where I’m headed. The devil isn’t dead. Not for me. The devil is well and breathing. The story is what takes place after he kills himself. This is a true story, mind you. Every word. After Joe kills himself, one of his friends kills himself, too. And then another. All these men are killing themselves.

What men?

It doesn't matter. You don't know them anyway. Point is, Joe's life and his death had aftereffects. Unintended results. The end of Joe for him was not the end of him for those who knew him. Even in death he couldn't end it. Your life doesn't belong to you.

How does it end?

It doesn't end, he said.

I mean, how does the story end?

I've told it to you and so there it ends, he said. It ends tonight. It's over. I told it and it's over. Tonight is the end.

And that was it.

He took his wallet from his coat pocket, removed a wad of cash, much more than would have been necessary to cover for a few drinks and a tip, threw it down on the bar, and shook my hand, and told me good luck, and nodded, and walked out.

The bartender and I made eye contact. She paced and then stood on the opposite end of the bar and leaned her hip into it and started to polish glasses.

I sat for a while and tried to think. What do you make of that story? I asked

She shrugged and stacked the glasses and, when she was finished, stood upright again and looked down at her phone.

Hey, I said, why don't you play music here?

She walked over to me. This is how a bar is supposed to be, she said. No music. Only the sound of human interaction.

What if there's no interaction?

Then there's nothing.

The lights were off when I got back to the hotel room. I changed into my sweatpants and crawled into bed without brushing my teeth and rolled over three or four times to get comfortable. Janice turned toward me, half-awake. She reached down and grabbed my hand and pulled it into her crotch and placed my finger against her clitoris. Now she pressed her finger into mine so that her hand dictated how I touched her, and she fingered herself with my finger. Faster and slower and faster. Now she exhaled dramatically and rolled away.

In that bare hotel room, I hovered around sleep, never quite reaching it. I turned side to side, overcome by the onset of a quietude that seemed inherent to a place like that. The sign outside our window blinked on and off. EXIT. It made the whole room green. Even when I closed my eyes, I could still see it.

6.

When we got back to California, a forest fire was burning in the hills. It happened, they said, because the soil moisture was totally depleted in that part of California; or because unusually warm temperatures dried out the vegetation, making it prone combustion; or because of greenhouse gas emissions and the accompanying dying landscape; or because of unattended campfires and equipment malfunctions and negligently discarded cigarettes and unruly engine sparks and gender reveal parties; or because every time we fought a fire in the past, we inadvertently preserved a heap of burnable vegetation that nature or God intended to burn.

For days, the fire tore through the mountains from Grizzly Peak to William Rust and our streets were glazed with an overlay of gray, a grainy film. Smoke settled the valley and the Bay, and ash fell like rain. The sky was sick—an alien color of orange and crimson. And from anywhere in town, one could hear a cacophony of ordinary life that reverberated through the crowded streets and alleyways and coffee shops. It was what progress wrought on this place: a countdown. Drilling and hammering and breaking down; combustion and mechanical equipment; jackhammers and wheel tractors and bulldozers and cars and trucks. Scaffolding protruded here and there. Everywhere was the noise, a buzzing of thermal energy, pure matter and material, building or rebuilding, renovating and remodeling and casual haste: the wiry textures of systematizing and assemblage and erection. And the periodicity of noise produced more noise—an echo doubling over, into and after itself, and the noise began to feel natural, necessary even.

It was a November. All things were coming to completion. The world was almost finished dying.

I spent my time thinking about Janice, wishing to replicate or solidify what happened in the desert. She didn't call. She didn't text unless I texted first. In time, I saw her less and less.

ME: today is my day, right?

JANICE: my work schedule is changing

ME: okay

ME: i'm free anytime

ME: tomorrow?

In the news, a cathedral was bombed in Italy. A school was bombed in Ireland. School was shot up in Texas. Several dissenters were hanged in Pakistan. A right-wing candidate was attacked at his first campaign rally in France. A volcano destroyed several villages in Indonesia. Russian troops gathered at the Ukrainian Border. The US carried out an airstrike against an Iranian-backed militia in Syria. Surging refugee numbers in Syria lead to a spike in terrorism. Thousands of Sudanese took to the streets in the capital of Khartoum to protest a recent military coup.

In the desert, I hadn't thought once about the presidential election, but as soon as we were home—if I could call Berkeley home—it was thrust to the forefront of every aspect of my life. I couldn't not think about it. I watched the final presidential

debate: Candidate A accused Candidate B of trying to start a war to get reelected. Candidate A said: Iran appears to be standing down. And then: No Americans were harmed. Candidate B said: We need a new Green Deal, and if we don't get one the future of our planet is in jeopardy; in ten years, certain parts of our planet will be unsustainable. Candidate A said: We're looking at sinks and showers and other bathroom regulations. Some people are turning on the faucet and they don't get any water. People turn on their showers and water comes trickling out. People are flushing the toilet ten times, fifteen times. They end up using more water than they would otherwise. These new light bulbs, have you seen them? They don't work as well as the old ones. They're more expensive, people can't even afford them. With his pointer finger he pointed at the pulpit. Then he raised both arms in the air and, holding his hands above his head, imitated a lightbulb flickering with his fingers. Candidate B said, We need not fear the future. Candidate A said. It's not the future we fear, but that we won't make it there. That there won't be any future. Candidate B said, We need fear machines of tomorrow. We should see the purpose of machines as a human purpose. Their project is our project.

In Berkeley, we were hotly invented in making sure our candidate won. And so, by myself, I continued attending to the rallies, the protests, the walk outs, the marches, and whatever else people were calling them. All of it was ongoing, daily. Both celebration and lamentation. We marched for justice, equality, the end of war, economic freedom. Power in numbers. The streets were loud and teeming with cops. We demanded accountability. Crowded gathered and sprawled out across the streets

and moved as a collective body, a hive mind, a giant first-person plural. I wore my tote bag tightly around my arm. I wore black. I admit, it was easy enough for me to go. Work had slowed down and my motivation was as much social as it was political. I wanted to do the right thing, of course, but also, I wanted to be around people.

Most of all, I wanted to run into Janice or Zeke or, even Julio.

But I did not.

On what was supposed to be one of my days with Janice, Parker texted me about a house party and—since I hadn't heard from Janice—I went.

I had planned to get there early, to see Parker, catch up, and leave before a crowd had gathered, but the house was already full of people I didn't recognize. I walked around the living room, dodging, shifting from one side to the other, half-dancing to the music. I went into the kitchen and recognized Khushal from a previous party. He saw me, too—gave me a head nod and returned to his conversation.

Have you seen Parker? I asked him, but he didn't hear me, or pretended not to.

I opened the refrigerator and crouched down as if looking for something. There was a twenty-four pack of cheap beer, and I reached into the box and grabbed a can, cracked it, and stood in the corner and sipped and looked at the phone to hide my face.

I texted Parker to tell him I was here and then walked into the backyard and there (I don't know why the possibility hadn't occurred to me before) was Janice, sitting alone in a lounge patio chair, facing away. My jaw clenched itself shut.

Instantly I resented that Janice hadn't invited me to the party. I knew she often went to parties without telling me. She did almost everything without telling me. I knew it—of course I knew that we were only partners, that she had other lives, lives to which I was not granted access.

We are entitled to other lives.

Just then, two men approached and spoke to her. Two men. Both older than us, I thought, her and me. One of the men—the taller one, gym-goer, I guessed, with a mildly receding hairline—put his hand on Janice's forehead, as if to check her temperature. They laughed, the three of them. And the other man—shorter, scruffy, bearded, dressed in leather sandals—sat and made a pouty face, and stuck his lip out.

I didn't want to think about what was going on, how they all knew each other, but I couldn't stop it. They are her ex-lovers, new lovers, future lovers. She knew them from long ago, when Janice was first testing out polyamory. Look at them, how open they seem with each other, the casual intimacy, the natural volume of their words.

The backyard was illuminated only by the dim kitchen light, and in that residual glow, everything and everyone seemed to move in slow motion.

I sat on an empty lawn chair and looked at my phone: still nothing from Parker.

Should I go to Janice? Should I wait for the men to leave?

The light was moving, and the people were moving in it. I tried to tune myself to the kitchen conversations but couldn't make out the words. A wave of meaningless noise.

Now the two men were saying goodbye. The taller kissed Janice on the forehead; and she stood and hugged them longer than seemed necessary, and I could see now that she had a bottle of wine. She held it up and seemed to offer the men a drink; and, when they refused, she thrust the bottle up to her mouth, almost play acting, and locked her lips around the rim and threw back her head to let the wine go down.

I remembered my first night with her. I thought about how our then-potential relationship had turned into an actual one—how the gap between potential and actual had widened, continued to widen.

Now Janice was alone.

I walked up to her and put my arm on her shoulder. I said hello. Hi. She startled and turned. Her face tensed. Hey, she mouthed the word without saying it. She crossed her arms like she was covering herself up. She cleared her throat and looked up at me and raised her eyebrows.

I asked if she was okay.

She didn't like that. She leaned into the chair and closed her eyes. She exhaled to communicate—I don't know what—annoyance, maybe.

I pulled up a chair next to her and sat. The chair was flimsy and unstable, and I nearly fell off and struggled to right myself.

Did I do something wrong?

You idiot, she said, not everything is about you. She sounded different. Her voice was deeper. She dragged out her vowels.

Just then, my name. Someone said my name.

The voice was Parker's. He said Janice's name, too. He smiled and rubbed his hands together and touched me. Janice acted happy to see him, I knew she was pretending. I knew that smile: showing too many teeth.

Janice stood and said she needed to go to the bathroom. I'll be right back, she said. She took the green bottle with her, and that's how I knew she wasn't coming back. I watched her go.

Parker was watching me watch her. He reeked of whiskey.

What the hell was that about? he said.

What?

That. Whatever just happened. Did you piss her off?

I shrugged. Do you have any more of that whiskey?

He reached into his backpack and pulled out a bottle, twisted off the lid and handed it to me.

Answer the question, he said.

I drank. What question?

That, he said again. That, with Janice. That whole thing.

I don't know.

Are you guys dating?

She doesn't date, I said.

I know she doesn't date. You clown. Have you been hooking up with her? Did you sleep with her?

I couldn't decipher his tone—was he upset? Had he also been sleeping with her? Had he slept with her? Or wanted to? Yeah, I said. Yeah, so what?

You fucked up, he grinned. You should have told me. I could've warned you.

I'm in love with her, I said.

Parker made the sound a pig makes right before you feed it. She's poly, idiot.

I know she's poly.

She's a yes-sayer. Yes to a world of yeses. Is that what you want? Yes yes yes?

I don't know, sure.

Do you want to take up another consumeristic mantle?

Shut up.

Desire is an outward swinging door, he said. And when that door opens, what we find is that we have been inside all along, that what we wanted is to want. We find that the struggle to get what we want is what we really need. The act, not the outcome. Yes, he said. Yes is another post-material wish. The human body transforms itself into an object of consumption.

It's fine, I said. Whatever happens happens and whatever doesn't happen is fodder for my novel. It doesn't matter what I think.

We moved on to other subjects. We talked about social awkwardness and distraction and spectacle. We talked about writing and I admitted that I wasn't writing, and he admitted that he wasn't writing either.

We should be writing right now, I said.

Fuck that.

We're failures, I said.

Who cares, he said. We chose this life. It's more Romantic to be a failure, anyway. A starving artist who dies alone in obscurity. Sign me up for that.

We talked about how our lives were getting smaller and smaller and soon, very soon, they would be too small for us to do anything about it. That's what Parker said. He said, Soon, our lives will be so small we won't be able to see outside them.

Finally, we talked about going home, and how lame it was to go home before it was even dark, and then—when there wasn't anything else to talk about—we did go home, each our own way.

*

The curtains were shut and the wind was blowing and the evening sunlight was the shape of the window on the floor. Someone knocked on the glass.

I startled and, when I looked, Janice was there—her dark silhouette shifted and shuffled past the frame, and I went to the window and drew back the curtain and pointed to the front door. Front door, I said. Come in.

She walked away and, for a moment, I worried that she had interpreted my gesture as a negative one, and that she had read my lips incorrectly, go home maybe, or get out. I reached for my phone and called her. I heard her phone ring as she walked into the room.

Were you just trying to call me?

I took in Janice's appearance, noting possible differences in her demeanor or attire—anything to clue me into what she wasn't telling me. She wore slacks and heels, what one might wear to an event, and I worried that she was setting a formal tone for whatever was happening, or about to happen.

She took off her shoes. You look like you're about to cry, she said.

And I did cry. I threw my arms around her.

You're suffocating me, she said. Jesus, you're suffocating me.

I apologized and told her I was happy to see her—that I'd had a few miserable days, that I missed her, that I'd been thinking about Las Vegas, that I hadn't slept well and that I'd gotten wasted the night before and that my head was foggy, that I'd been attending rallies and evens. I put my hand around my throat, as if attending to

pain. I told her that maybe I did love her, and so what. I wasn't afraid of that possibility. I cried again, or was still crying, and it felt good to do.

By now, the sunlight was gone. The room was blue. Janice's hair seemed darker than usual. It fell across her eyes.

Why wasn't she responding?

Aren't you going to say something?

Nothing. Now she leaned over and kissed me. She breathed deeply and said okay, okay, okay. She reiterated to me how she didn't believe in romantic love—only desire. Only desire and sex. Only desire as rebellion and ecstasy and transcendence and political currency. Everything but love. Love is the child of illusion and the parent of disillusion.

What the hell does that mean?

Love or whatever is not a biological reality. Look it up. Google it. Love is a cultural construct that makes us feel better about how sad and boring our lives really are. To distract us from the fact that we're all just decaying flesh. It's fiction, love is.

Fine, I said, but everyone needs a fiction. A fantasy. A third thing. Nothing works unless you buy into the fantasy of the thing. You have to believe in something before you can see it.

My voice went up now and I felt that for the first time in a long time I was saying what I wanted to say, what I meant to say, without fear and inhibition.

What you want is love without falling in love, I said. Without the contingencies and the attachment and the uncertainty and the risk of losing yourself.

Janice's arms were crossed. She said my name. She said it again. And then, after a long silence, she spoke to me the way one speaks to a child, the way one breaks news of tragedy. Maybe you're right, she said. But it is an ancient truth that to love another is to die. To lose the life you have. In the future, there is no need for love.

What do you know about the future?

Soon life extension will be possible, and we'll be living for hundreds of years. Everyone in Silicon Valley is talking about it. All the investors and the startups. Soon we'll all be able to live longer. Our lives will be double their current expectancy at least.

Silicon Valley is full of shit.

If life extension is possible, she said, then we need to think differently about love. About sex, too. Monogamy will be one of the first things to go. We can't be expected to love one person for hundreds of years.

More and more silence. What was I supposed to say now? I couldn't disagree with the future.

Have you taken new lovers? I asked.

That's a funny way of putting it.

Have you?

Two, she said. Then, unbidden, she named them: Roman and Jack. And then she described them: short, tall, fat, skinny, blonde, brunette, rich and poor, smarter and funnier. I don't remember what else she said about them. I didn't like what she

was saying, and a sickness arose in me—a sequence of sharp pangs which started in my thighs and shot up my whole torso, pointing toward my stomach. Janice was not mine. Not then, and not ever again. She flicked her tongue around her mouth.

Night came on. Something clicked. I heard cars driving in the distance. I stood and turned off the light and lay down again next to Janice. Softly she stroked the wrinkles on my forehead with her thumbs. Your eyebrows look so crazy at night, she said, with the hairs going in all directions. She touched my cheekbones, the edges of my jaw.

Now Janice fell asleep—though I don't think she meant to—and I was awake, left to experience wakefulness: Janice and I, there, side by side, but in two different places.

Hours passed in darkness. I slept or didn't sleep or almost did, and suddenly there was a light on in the room and then in the hallway. A vague glow. I tried to sit up, to crank my neck and see where the light was coming from, but my body was weak and wouldn't rise. I tried again, caught in a continuous loop of effort and failure, perceiving and failing to perceive. Again, the train horn rang.

Now Janice stood in front of me. This is how I knew she was going, gone. I tried to speak to her, but I couldn't. Couldn't move my lips. Couldn't but exhale the most minimal breath. Where are you going? I wanted to say. Don't leave. Not yet.

*

I must have fallen asleep because there it was, the moon in the window like a searchlight. It pointed down. It was so pale that I thought of snow—was it snowing?

Yes and no.

The phone was vibrating, a call, and I reached for it and answered. I raised my voice to speak clearly. Hello?

The voice on the other line said my name.

For a moment, I thought it was my voice, echoing back at me in the receiver.

It said my name again.

It's the middle of the night, I said.

My name again.

Who is this?

It's me, said the voice. Lawson.

Lawson?

Lawson, it said. Ezekiel.

(I had forgotten Lawson was Zeke's name.)

But you don't have a phone, I said. That's what you told me. You don't have a phone, didn't you tell me that?

The voice didn't answer. Where are you? it said.

Where am I? Where's Janice?

Are you home?

It's the middle of the night. Where's Janice?

I'm coming over, it said. I'm close by. Unlock the door. I don't want to have to knock. I don't want to wake anyone.

I sat up and pressed the machine closer to my mouth. How do you know where I live?

It did not answer.

I pivoted and put my feet flat on the ground. Whose phone is this? I said.

Zeke had already hung up.

I stood and steadied myself and extended my hand and placed it against the wall and held myself up. I stumbled to the front door and reached out to unlock it, but it was already unlocked. It was always unlocked. I shuffled back to my room and turned on the light. I dressed and got back in bed.

When Zeke came into my room, he went and sat at the desk chair. He did not speak, not yet. He was out of breath, and it worried me to see him like that. He cupped his hands and blew into them.

The smoke detector chirped in the hallway. Voices outside my window grunted incoherently, imitating speech.

He placed himself in a thinking position.

What are you doing here? Is Janice here?

If he was breathing, I couldn't tell. He looked more like a photograph than a man.

I tried to keep it cool. What's up? I said.

He answered my question with a question. Can I trust you?

I thought I understood him. Yes, I said. I won't tell anyone about what happened. I swear, I'd never tell anyone.

He lifted his chin and the light hit him directly and I saw something in him I recognized. I knew what it was—something he had, perhaps, unconsciously repressed, or had deliberately concealed until now. I knew what it was because I lived it almost every day of my life. Fear. I knew it when I went to sleep, when I woke. I knew so well that I had stopped experiencing it as fear and had come to understand it as something more ordinary—stress or purposelessness. But now that I saw it in him, I felt an intensification of it, an old fear that sat and sunk into me.

I need you do something.

Do what?

Those guys, they're trying to intimidate us. Those same guys. We can't allow that. We can't back down.

Did something happen?

He put his hands up to his face and rubbed his cheeks and forehead and under his chin and around the back of his neck. Then he pulled off his hood and leaned back and crossed his legs. Neh, he went. Neh. Now he adjusted himself, fidgeting, and sat forward and leaned to the side and reached across his body into his back pocket, and pulled it out slowly, the gun. It was a small gun, smaller than I remembered it. It was angular and chrome almost like a toy.

Looking beyond me, toward the window, Zeke leaned back again and passed the gun from hand to hand and rotated it and spun it around his palm. He took the gun in his one hand and rested it on his knee. It pointed at me.

I shifted and turned away from his aim. Don't point that fucking thing at me.

He set the gun on the floor and took off his sweatshirt. Then he picked up the gun again and held it loosely and set his hand on his knee. Listen, he said. Listen. I need to know, are you on our side. Things are going to get worse. I need to know.

Things?

He picked up the gun again and pointed. And it was then that he did it. He pulled the trigger. The gun clicked. He pulled it again. The gun clicked again. There was nothing more than that click, but when I heard it, I collapsed. I jolted back and surged forward. The blank gunshot injected into me some shameful pleasure—some humiliating delight. The air was palpable now, and I felt myself inside the dream I'd been wanting to have for years, but now couldn't wake up from.

What came out of my mouth was not a word but a terrible laughter. I heard it before I recognized it, although I didn't so much *recognize* it as feel it pushing itself out of my throat. It was completely involuntary. When I realized that I was laughing, I tried to stop it, but my efforts to stop it only produced more laughter. I was hysterical. I fell back onto the bed and let it all out.

What are you laughing at?

My chest hurt, my face. When I pulled myself together, we sat in silence for a moment, and then Zeke said what was obvious. The gun's empty, he said. It's always been empty.

What was I supposed to say?

I need you to keep and carry this for me, he said. I'm telling you that you don't need to worry about it, you don't need to be scared. The gun isn't real. It's a prop.

He tossed the thing at me, and I turned to the side and let it fall beside me on the bed. It bounced and flipped and fell flat. When I told him that he was being ridiculous, he told me that I was being ridiculous. Take responsibility, he said, for yourself and your community. For the future.

The future? All everyone talks about is the future.

Zeke explained to me, in a voice that was serious and firm, that I didn't need to *use* the gun, but that I needed simply to carry it, to be seen carrying it, to be known as someone who carries it. We must show them who we are. They ought to know we're not fucking around. We're not afraid. They won't fuck with us if they're afraid we'll fuck back. The beauty of what we do, he said, lies in secrecy. It's quiet. It's steady. We take no satisfaction in talking about it. It doesn't need to be talked about, and it doesn't need to be explained. It needs to be imagined by others.

I noted his use of the word "we." I thought about the therapist--was this the same we? We. I was surprised to be included, implicitly, in that we. I was part of a new collective. That's what I had wanted, wasn't it? It happened so fast that I

couldn't understand how it happened, and I realized that I wasn't even completely sure who "we" were and what we were doing and why. And whether I wanted to go on being part of "we" seemed—here and now—beyond my control. I was "we" whether I liked it or not.

Antifa, I said. That's what you're talking about, right?

Zeke scrunched up his face like someone trying to wring water out of a sponge. Antifa? Antifa, no. Antifa is nothing, he said.

I didn't understand.

He pointed his finger at me. Now he pointed at the gun on the bed. Take it, he said. Pick it up.

I picked it up, the gun. I felt my hand fading beneath it, so that gun became a surrogate hand, a new means of touching the world. I gripped it. I pointed it at Zeke.

He liked that. He was pleased and he showed his teeth. Do it, he said. Pull it.

My grip on the gun tightened and I squeezed the trigger slowly until I heard it click. I pulled again. It felt like nothing. It felt as natural and normal as lifting a glass of water to drink. I pulled it again and again and again. Over and over. So on and so forth. So many times, I lost count.

Zeke didn't flinch, didn't blink even. There, he said. Do you understand now? This is what it means to be with us.

Before I could disagree, he stood up and wiped his hands together, and told me again that I needed to keep the gun and carry it with me. He told me that there was going to be a gathering at The Proletariat later that night and I ought to be there.

When we shook hands goodbye, my pinky slipped between his pinky and his ring, and my thumb likewise slipped and landed in the divot between his pointer and his middle and made a tangle of fingers.

After he left, I turned off the light, and the room was dark again. The mini refrigerator clicked. Water sloshed inside the plastic jug.

*

I changed my clothes—jeans and an old North Face jacket with big pockets inside the zipper than was unnecessarily thick for the lukewarm weather—and paced the room with the gun still in my hand. I turned it over and over and tossed it around for a while and it scared me to be so casual. I stopped and started again.

Coffee was percolating in the machine.

That today was the Election Day suddenly occurred to me. Soon the country would gather to vote to contribute to a future it may or may be able to understand.

The phone went. *Several people are trapped after a “major explosion” in Baltimore. The Great California Exodus: A look at why droves are leaving the state. Protests explode across the country; police declare several dead in Seattle and Portland, The US imposes its global “Do Not Travel” advisory.*

I flipped the switch and the overhead lights clicked on. The coffee settled. I rinsed my thermos out with what water I had left in the mini fridge and poured the coffee into it. Before I walked out of my room, I tucked the gun into my jacket pocket and waited until I couldn't hear my roommates and then opened my door to leave.

Turned out, I hadn't waited long enough because now, there, standing at the threshold was a woman I had never seen before. She was tall and her neck was long and she had a shaved head. She looked at me and smiled. Hi, her voice was small. Hi, she said again. She pointed to my room. Do you live in there? In that room?

Me? Yeah.

We've been wanting to meet you, she said without hesitation.

She reached out to embrace me and we hugged the way strangers do, with the hips pulled back, leaning in with our shoulders so that our chests did not touch.

I'm Sam, she said. Listen, we're having a big breakfast today. It starts in about an hour. Big election day and all. For friends. You should come, yeah? People will be showing up in about two hours. There's a great community here. Lots of good people. There'll be mimosas and breakfast burritos and everything.

I told her I'd be there. Looking forward to it, I said. It will be great to meet you all, finally.

She agreed and went her way down the hall and looked back and nodded.

Alone again, I looked at the floor. Of course, I wanted to join. I think I wanted it. But I couldn't, I thought. Not right now. The timing was bad, unlucky. My mind was somewhere else, my body. I turned and shut the door and did not bother to lock it.

Outside, the streets were empty, and my footsteps echoed against the sidewalk so that for a moment I thought it was being followed.

I was going nowhere. Nowhere to go. I supposed I went out because I wanted to see whether I could do it—whether I could be in public with the gun in my pocket, whether I had will power for it. And now, as I walked, I thought about whether this walk alone could determine the strength of my stomach, or whether any amount of time could determine it.

I took Telegraph. I knew where I was because of the smell. A thick, cool sea-mist infused with the stench of evaporating urine and asparagus and skunky, heady marijuana; the body odor of the now-invisible masses mingling with the tropical sweetness of surf wax—coconut and pineapple—and sunscreen and mandarin and rosemary leaf soap and fallen eucalyptus leaves and burning wood. I took a right on Bancroft and walked until I got to Piedmont and pushed on further past the football stadium onto Centennial Dr. and up into the hills. Finally, I stopped at the botanical gardens, which, other than a man sleeping beneath a row of scrawny bushes, were empty and quiet and still dark in the morning shade.

I sat for a long time thinking. About love and guns and good causes, sex and politics, robots and suicide. I thought about Parker and Josh, the shepherd, and Benici and the therapist and Sam. I thought about the clown artist from the first novel I wasn't writing. I thought about Vernon. Franz. Simon. Jed. Gad.

Would *you* do this?

The phone went. *Russia is sounding the drumbeats of war, amassing troops near southern Ukrainian. The scientists behind the Doomsday Clock have warned, as the clock's 'time' was set for next year. India and China fail to defuse deadly border tensions. 'We thought that was the end': Afghan woman relives abduction by Taliban as she tried to flee the country. After too much chaos, one man packed his bags, quit his job, left the US, and moved to Mexico. Will others follow?*

Could I?

I would, yes. I would dedicate myself to a cause, even if I didn't fully understand what the cause was—does anyone? It was better, I think I thought, to live for something bigger than yourself than to live for yourself alone. I would be, therefore, Don Quixote. I would convince myself to be convinced. I would sustain a fantasy about the world, about my singular struggle, a heroic battle between them and us. I could carry the gun. Yes, I would. And I did. I would go on fighting with Janice and Zeke and the community. Whatever I believed, or would believe, would vanish in time. In the future. And I would gain, eventually, some sense of fulfillment, some gratification in the fact that my life was spent in service, not of my own identity and appetite, but in the identity and appetites of a collective person who did not yet exist, of that yet-unmanifested first-person plural. And I would find meaning in resistance, even resistance for its own sake. And I would find friendship and inner peace. Maybe I would find love, if not with Janice, then with someone new.

From that vantage, I saw the entire Bay Area sprawling out across the brown, charred hills. The city undulated and rose—the steelwork and the clocktower and the ranks of dilapidated buildings were reduced to a single cluster of debris. Rows of highways wound themselves around and surged up and along and down again, dropping into the valley where a thin layer of fog and smoke still sat low. I saw Berkeley, a microscopic version of me, trivial and small, drifting from my room to the bookstore to the bar. I saw myself riding the bus and walking down Telegraph. And I saw myself wasting time thinking and talking about a novel I would never write.

Up ahead of me now: flashing and flickering lights. Heavy drums.

Buzzing insects.

It was a familiar feeling.

A halo was coming on.

I looked at my broken wristwatch. But it was gone. Where was it? I must have had it taken from me. I hadn't taken it off. Not that I remembered. I began to panic. I thought to run home, but remembered I had a gun in my pocket and should calm down. Stay calm.

Now the halo intensified. My face was getting hot.

More drums.

More buzzing insects.

The taste of metal.

The smell of rotting meat, which was my own mouth.

The sky was getting brighter. Now darker. Now brighter.

And I had something like a vision. It happened slowly. I saw myself. I was getting out. Leaving the world behind. I saw myself throwing away everything I could lift to throw. All my possessions. My books and notebooks, pen and paper, photographs and prints, computer and phone, clothing and collectables, whatever they were. My trash—mouthwash and body wash and aftershave and deodorant and cologne. I saw it. Now I was in my truck, retreating into the desert, back to Las Vegas, maybe, or farther down. Back to some crude origination. A sun-drunk nowhere. The air was clear. I saw my truck drifting along the empty highway. The

desert around it proliferated, repeated. No sound. No buildings or cars. No evidence of civilization whatsoever. Nothing but the road. Dust and dirt. Sagebrush and mountains. The clouds billowed and unfurled and lured me on toward a single point, out there, where the road seemed never to end. And there was—I thought—a universal truth available to me here. A truth in the impoverishment of that nowhere. In the failure of the imagination there. I was smoking a cigarette, really smoking it. A second life. The sky was so bright I couldn't see the sky.

Section Two: Supplemental Materials

Works in Progress: Autofiction and the Conditions of Composition

Every artistic movement from the beginning of time is an attempt to figure out a way to smuggle more of what the artist thinks is reality into the work of art.

—David Shields

Autofiction showcases the material and psychological conditions of literary composition. This is to say, it takes as its subject matter the material details of literary production—the tangible, material *work* and *practice* of writing. It chronicles, to put it yet another way, how the writer (as distinguished from the author, narrator, storyteller, speaker, etc.) acts as both an aestheticized and ontological (material) position within the text. Autofiction’s mode of storytelling, then, is metafictional. It chronicles a story about how, when, why, and where the writer writes her story. What Steven Meyer wrote about Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans* might be said of all autofiction: “the novel...tells a twofold story: the story of the *writing* of the story—the account of her own ‘progress’ as a writer—and the story she *tells*.”¹ In autofiction, the writer becomes a narrative fixture whose writing process is rendered transparent for the reader within the story itself: to tell a story is to tell a story about the material conditions that make storytelling possible. As we will see, there are

¹ Steven Meyer, “Introduction,” *The Making of Americans* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), p. xxvii.

political and cultural reasons for this shift away from an authorial relationship with literature to a writerly one.

The author was already dead at the end of the nineteenth century, long before Roland Barthes wrote *La mort de l'auteur*, but the writer—whose role I will define later—was only just coming into existence. Of course, discursively we use these terms interchangeably, but the distinction between them, I argue, has aesthetic and ethical implications in the early twentieth century. Unlike the nineteenth-century “author” of fiction, the “writer,” for one reason or another, does not stand outside the act of storytelling; neither does she separate the artistic product from the act of creating it. Whereas the author claims authority over the text, the writer puts herself, a priori, inside of it—collapsing the space between process and product.

Paul Celan belatedly articulates reasons why. In the first few paragraphs of his “Meridian” speech, Celan disturbs traditional ways of thinking about art. He says that where once art was made to interrupt life, now—in the twentieth century and beyond—art must allow itself to be interrupted by life, culture, current events, media. Art, Celan says, is no longer made in a room, secluded from interruption. Instead, he claims the opposite: Something must interrupt art. Art only has a future if it allows itself to be disrupted by outside forces, influences, images, language, etc. Here, Celan articulates the difficulties of telling a story in the contemporary world. How does a story allow itself to be interrupted? How does a story go on in the wake of political crises? We might, I argue, take Autofiction as one possible answer to these questions.

In *Works in Progress*, I attempt to perform two tasks, one theoretical, one historical-cultural. I aim, first, to outline a working theory of autofiction: to illuminate its most fundamental and common features, formal mechanisms, and narrative techniques; and to show how autofiction has less to do with the amount of biographical information contained within a given novel, and more to do with the relationship between the process of *writing* and the *written* product. In this relationship, we find what I will name a modernist materialism; as modernist novels (and novels after them, directly influenced by them or otherwise) inscribe within them the process of their own creation, they lay bare the material labor of creation and demystify ancient, medieval, and Romantic images of artistic inspiration. Secondly, I demonstrate how these features are not merely generic gestures, but aesthetic responses to social and artistic challenges. So, I aim both to define a form and to historicize it for contemporary purposes. Indeed, I argue, to see autofiction as part of a Modernist lineage is to understand it not only as avant-garde experimentalism, but as a diverse reaction both to the problematic art of the nineteenth century and to the increasingly complicated geopolitical realities of the twentieth (and eventually the twenty-first). An extensive study of autofiction from Modernism to the Program Era yields a plethora of insights and strategies for writing and reading in times of political and aesthetic crises.

It is no coincidence that the major figures in this study are necessarily queer women writers: Gertrude Stein, H.D., and Djuna Barnes. Queer writing locates itself at the center of the Modernist literary tradition and, as we will see, the genesis of

autofiction in English specifically. What follows here is therefore a study of autofiction as a queering literature; for autofiction constructs a project both revisionary and messianic: by literary means, it valorizes and legitimizes marginal “selves.” Its mood is iconoclastic—it necessarily rejects conventionality (literary, social, aesthetic, sexual) and insists that the paradigm of human experience is aesthetic experience. With this in mind, I illustrate how these writers eschew conventional writing and reading techniques of novels and autobiography alike: If, as I argue, autofiction is not only formal play, but an ethical imperative, then indeed it should be read as an ethical hybridization that reimagines the novel as an ontological guide for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Autofiction—whenever it appears, in whatever language—showcases a reaction against the inherited aesthetic demands of its immediate past. Indeed, contemporary autofiction reacts against both postmodernism and “program era” dogma just as modernist autofiction reacts against Romanticism and mainstream, popular, and sentimental literature, or what Virginia Woolf called, “those sleek, smooth novels, those portentous and ridiculous biographies, that milk and watery criticism, those poems melodiously celebrating the innocence of roses and sheep which pass so plausibly for literature at the present time.”² It is useful, then, to sketch a historical/theoretical study of autofiction in the present before delving into modernism.

² Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*. (London: Hogarth, 1924), pp. 23.

On the Name and Nature of Autofiction

There is a meta-fictional scene in Ben Lerner's novel, *10:04*, which registers what I consider to be a fundamental impulse of autofiction as a materialist intervention. When the novel begins, the unnamed author (and literal real-world writer of the novel *10:04*) is at dinner with his literary agent. The dinner is a celebratory one. The agent tells the author that he will receive a six-figure advance from a major New York publishing house to write a novel. After dinner, the agent asks the author what will become the novel's catalyzing dilemma: how will you write your novel? The author does not respond to the agent, but he tells the read what his answer *should* have been: "... I'll work my way from irony to sincerity in the sinking city, a would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid."³ As a technical matter, the author's comment is decidedly poetic; it constitutes an example of the poetic apologia, or *reason for writing*. It functions textually as an *arse poetica*: a description or explanation of poetry with poetic means, methods, and techniques. This moment might also be taken as a *novelistic* Parabasis. Parabasis—an integral part of Greek Old Comedy—is the dramatic intermission wherein the chorus or actor turns toward the audience to explain the play morally, politically, and contextually. The parabasis is more than just "breaking of the fourth wall." More than simply turning to speak to the audience directly, the parabolic moment is one in which the chorus completely abandons its dramatic role and ruptures the readerly contract in order to address both

³ Ben Lerner, *10:04* (New York, NY: Picador, 2015), p. 4.

the technical aspects of the completed performance or its ethical, religious, or social implications. The discourse of the parabasis is explanatory and interpretive; and it is the means by which a playwright inserts themselves into the play, into its text and formal production. We can see how, in *10:04*, then, the author's utterance is parabolic—how it explains, and begins to contextualize, the novel we are reading. The answer to the agent's question—how will you write your novel?—becomes a central subject and drama of the writing. Only in the form of the novel, it turns out, can the author really answer that question. For as the novel plays out, the novelist-protagonist explains to the reader how he had gone about writing it.

There are several other scenes in *10:04* that also resist the social and material conditions of novel writing. In one such scene, the author attends the “Institute for Totaled Art,” a private collection of damaged, incomplete, and otherwise “worthless” artworks, where he meditates on the cultural and economic value of art. He examines a range of paintings, photographs, and sculptures representative of various avant-garde moments—works by Henri Cartier-Bresson, Jeff Koons, Jim Dine, Damien Hirst, and others. Here, the author observes the ruins of twentieth-century art, now “legally declared worthless”—irrelevant, broken, and stripped from context. “Some works were obviously compromised—badly torn or stained... damaged,” Lerner writes.⁴ What the protagonist sees, however, is not the degradation of art generally, but of art of the immediate past—l'art du père. The author does not lament this degradation; instead, he celebrates it. For amid “the living

⁴ Ben Lerner, *10:04* (New York, NY: Picador, 2015), p. 132.

dead” artwork, he envisions a possible future—a future in which art might be “redeemed...in the messianic sense of being saved *from* something, saved *for* something.” Lerner calls this damaged art collection “a reversal of the kind of recontextualization associated with the tutelary spirit of the art world ... and it is much more powerful than what it reversed.” It is not without irony that Learner (who feels himself “transported to a not-so-distant reality”) meditates on the future of art within a heavily commodified art form: the novel. This irony affirms the dialectical method which autofiction embodies.

I argue that we might understand the “Institute for Totalized Art” as a representation of the conditions that give rise to the recent flourishing of autofiction in the English-speaking world—for it displays the cultural objects of postmodernism as relics, stripped of all cultural cachet and prestige. I also want to argue that we might see autofiction, in Lerner’s words, as a kind of “reversal” of the bygone contexts and conditions—which are here both economic and aesthetic. I submit, then, that we can read autofiction as a reclamation of individual artistic practices, techniques, concerns, and narratives. Some of these concerns include sincerity, closure, confession, authenticity, depth, originality, autonomy, and self-actualization. In short, autofiction constitutes a quest for the truth of subjectivity (the self) in the very historical moments when the very concept of the self has been called into question. It is my goal in this topic, and in my research generally, to name the conditions—historical, social, political, and economic—that have produced autofictional novels in the last twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries. I also hope

to underscore the formal techniques of autofiction in English—to name it as a distinctive form with a fluid politics.

Origins and Terms

Although there is no singular definition of autofiction in English, I will try to define it here, briefly, for our purposes, as a metafictional novel in which the author herself acts as the protagonist, and in which the author-protagonist records herself writing the novel in question. Some examples of such novels include Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief*, Rachel Cusk's *Outline*, Shela Heti's *Motherhood*, Megan Boyle's *LIVEBLOG*, Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick*, and Olivia Laing's *Crudo*.

There exist fundamental formal differences between auto- and autobiographical fiction. Also, I do not mean to argue that autofiction is an exclusively contemporary trend. However, few would disagree that, 1) although autobiographical writing has occupied a place in many literary traditions for hundreds of years, there has been a spike in the publication of so-called autofictional novels, primarily by women authors and authors diverse backgrounds and disparate communities; and, 2) autofiction is formally different from autobiography, memoir, “life writing,” and fiction which happens to include autobiographical truths. Autofiction, therefore, requires additional descriptive criticism. This is especially true in the program era, when autofiction has become economically successful within the institutions and markets of creative writing.

It should first be noted that the term autofiction is recently contested in English-speaking literary circles. At least since the publication and worldwide commercial success of Karl Ove Knausgaard’s autofictional work, *My Struggle*, critics and writers alike have reason to debate the definition of the category. What is autofiction? What methods of interpretation do we use? What are the readerly expectations of reading fiction and autobiography? Although it is not the primary goal of this topic, I hope to elucidate the debates surrounding the term and acknowledge some of its historical usages.

In recent years, critics and scholars—both in university journals and periodicals such as *The New Yorker* and *The Times Literary Supplement*—feel the need to remind readers that autofiction is nothing more than a resurgence of autobiographical experimentation. With great satisfaction, some critics call the term tautological, if not altogether meaningless. Some critics have already declared autofiction to be over and done. Lyren Oyler, for example, writes: “Autofiction was fun, while it lasted, but a self-conscious movement based on the lives and reading lists of young urban artists was never going to break new ground.”⁵ Many novelists similarly reject autofiction as a redundant, pedantic, self-serving, or sexist category (i.e., a “less serious” kind of novel, often associated with women authors).⁶ Other writers insist that the genre is nothing more than a rebranding—whether academic or

⁵ Lauren Oyler, “The Screwer and the Screwed,” *The Baffler*, May 2018, <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/screwer-and-screwed-oyler>.

⁶ Rebecca Van Laer, “How We Read Autofiction,” *Ploughshares*, 1 July 2018, <https://blog.pshares.org/how-we-read-autofiction>.

commercial—of the autobiographical novel to create new readerships and markets. (Such a rebranding benefits not only the commercial enterprise of literature but also the industry of higher education, which requires new research fields, conference topics, academic journals, websites, and course materials to maintain its relevance.) All novelists, some writers argue, draw on personal experience. So aren't all novels autofictional?

These arguments are easy enough to make, for there is no shortage of novels that prioritize autobiographical confession and personal introspection. Rebecca van Laer makes this point when she asks, “why do we even need a unique term for this movement in contemporary literature if authors have always used their own lives as inspiration for their work?”⁷ If we take autofiction as an umbrella term that encompasses all things autobiographical, then yes, the category of autofiction could quickly produce an exhaustive list of world literatures that could include authors such as Beckett, Bernhard, Dickens, Dostoevsky, George Eliot, Ellison, Falconer, Hemingway, Joyce, Morrison, Proust, Roth, Richard Wright, Woolf, and dozens more. Such an all-inclusive category, according to van Laer, remains unhelpful, if not entirely useless for the critic and historian alike. Still, I want to maintain a more robust and functional theory of autofiction, particular in its more recent iterations. So I submit here that autofiction problematizes the interpretive expectations of

⁷ Rebecca Van Laer, “How We Read Autofiction,” *Ploughshares*, 1 July 2018, <https://blog.pshares.org/how-we-read-autofiction>.

autobiography and literary fiction—calling into question the writerly and readerly experiences of each—in ways that autobiographical fiction does not.

Some disagreements about autofiction stem from a fundamental confusion about its origin. Although autofiction is relatively recent in English-language literary studies, it needs to be mentioned that in Francophone literature and literary criticism, the genre has been well established and refined since the 1970s, and refers to a long list of French-language writers, including Emmanuel Carrère, Marguerite Duras, Annie Ernaux, Hervé Guibert, Catherine Millet, and Chloé Delaume. Serge Doubrovsky first coined the term autofiction in 1977 while describing his novel, *Fils*. On the back cover of the book, he writes:

Autobiographie? Non, c'est un privilège réservé aux importants de ce monde, au soir de leur vie, et dans un beau style. Fiction, d'évènements et de faits strictement réels; si l'on veut autofiction, d'avoir confié le langage d'une aventure à l'aventure d'un langage en liberté.⁸

(Autobiography? No, that is a privilege reserved for the important people of this world, at the end of their lives, in a refined style. This is fiction of events and facts strictly real; autofiction, if you will, to have entrusted the language of an adventure to the adventure in language.)

Here, Doubrovsky distinguishes autofiction from autobiography in two distinct ways. Firstly, it thematizes the life of a non-important (i.e., lower class, historically powerless) subject, in contrast to the well-known public figure whose biography is

⁸ Serge Doubrovsky, *Fils*, (Paris: Folio ed. Gallimard, 2001), pp. 10.

privileged and influential. Secondly, autofiction stages a poetic event or “adventure in language.” In other words, autofiction prioritizes the aesthetics of reportage over its content, or the arrangement of language over its ability to communicate. We might say that it values the particular affect of language over its claim to truth. It is also worth mentioning that in *Fils*, Doubrovsky recounts events from his own life while employing the techniques of the Nouveau Roman (stylized syntax, non-linear narration, associative logic, depersonalize first-person narrators, and mise en abyme) so as to thwart the readerly expectations of autobiography and memoir (authorial reliability, verifiability, authentic confession). The project of autofiction, then, as we see in Doubrovsky’s work, is to disrupt established contracts between the reader and the writer regarding truth and artistic intentionality, therefore encouraging a more dynamic interpretive relationship to the text—i.e., a writerly, rather than readerly, experience.

In subsequent decades, autofiction became a distinguished genre with a set of recognizable criteria in France. There, critics published numerous essays and articles on the subject to refine its definition. This contributed, of course, to its inevitable institutionalization in Francophone letters. In the first comprehensive study of autofiction, *Autofiction: Une Aventure Du Langage*, Philippe Gasparini gathers a list of the ten central tenets of autofiction, according to Doubrovsky:

1. l’identité onomastique de l’auteur et du héros-narrateur
2. le sous-titre:« roman »
3. le primat du récit

4. la recherche d'une forme originale
 5. une écriture visant la «verbalisation immédiate »
 6. la reconfiguration du temps linéaire (par sélection, intensification, stratification, fragmentation, brouillages)
 7. un large emploi du présent de narration
 8. un engagement à ne relater que des « faits et événements strictements réels »
 9. la pulsion de « se révéler dans sa vérité »
 10. une stratégie d'emprise du lecteur.⁹
- (1. The onomastic identity of the author and hero-narrator.
 2. The subtitle “novel.”
 3. The primacy of narration.
 4. The pursuit of original forms.
 5. The immediacy of articulation.
 6. The reconfiguration of linear time (selection, intensification, stratification, fragmentation, disorientation).
 7. The use of the present tense.
 8. The commitment to tell “events and facts strictly real.”
 9. The revelation of “one’s true self.”
 10. Active engagement from the reader.)

⁹ Philippe Gasparini, *Autofiction: Une Aventure Du Langage*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008), pp. 209.

While this list appears programmatic, it provides a useful guide in determining how autofiction differentiates from autobiography, autobiographical fiction, and more mainstream literary traditions, at least according to the people who write it. Similarly, Philippe Vilain gives the following definition: “autofiction plays upon its generic ambiguity, on its contradictory pact, on presenting itself as both absolutely referential and nonreferential.”¹⁰ Autofiction blends autobiography and fiction, aggregating a necessarily incongruous project. This incongruity—the paradox of being factual and imaginary simultaneously—perplexes readymade interpretive paradigms, not only of literature but also of the autonomous self. It is a paradox that asks the reader to consider personal experience as fiction and (literary) fiction as a social fact.

Jonathon Sturgeon has situated the contemporary autofictional novel within the tradition of the *künstlerroman*—or the fictionalized account of an artist’s maturation.¹¹ This connection is obvious enough. All autofiction writers are, of course, artists, so an artist who happens to write about themselves necessarily writes, it would seem, in the vein of the *künstlerroman*. Thus, I would append to Sturgeon’s observation the following description: the most distinguishing feature of the contemporary autofictional novel is not that it chronicles the life of the artist, but rather, the life of the novel at hand—the experience of language as it comes into being. Therefore, to write an autofictional novel is to write about writing an

¹⁰ Philippe Vilain, “Autofiction,” *The Novelist's Lexicon*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 5-6.

¹¹ Jonathon Sturgeon, “The Death of the Postmodern Novel and the Rise of Autofiction,” *Flavorwire*, 31 Dec. 2014, <https://www.flavorwire.com/496570/2014-the-death-of-the-postmodern-novel-and-the-rise-of-autofiction>.

autofictional novel—to write an account of writing. Autofiction inscribes the process of making the art at hand. It presents an inscription about the process of inscribing itself. Thus it necessarily traces the process by which autobiographical events become fictionalized—by which “facts strictly real” become aestheticized. In other words, the autofictional novel renders visible the process of its own creation—the creation of the text, the self, and the self-as-text. Similar to the *ars poetica* and the *künstlerroman*, autofiction outlines not only the act of writing a novel, but also the process of forming one’s identity. And herein lies its foremost contribution to contemporary letters: autofiction attempts to reclaim the metanarratives of subjecthood, originality, and poetic creation.

Autofiction as Auto-Discourse

We might better understand the social, cultural, and aesthetic conditions that produce the recent wave of autofiction by examining the rise of auto-discourses more generally. After all, recent autofiction, as I’ve argued, is part and parcel with broader contemporary academic and political trends. Perhaps the greatest irony of our post-postmodern moment, in all its offshoots, is that our cultural mechanisms reinforce the narrative of the autonomous subject—a narrative that many poststructural thinkers aimed to squelch. This is increasingly clear in the recent addition of the prefix “auto” to already-extant disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. These disciplines include, but are not limited to auto-ethnography, auto-anthropology, auto-theory, auto-criticism, auto-history, auto-geography, and auto-mythography. In each of these disciplines, the writer or researcher is tasked not only with scholarly/creative labor

but also with the work of self-discovery. She is required to blend scholarship with self-inquiry in order to situate the self within a broader set of political, social, anthropological, and cultural contexts and meanings. Thus, the auto-researcher or auto-writer works double time. She participates in academic/critical/creative practices of interpretation, analysis, and representation while also performing the act of self-actualization and -affirmation. Within these auto-disciplines, the identity of the researcher/writer is as central as the research itself—any auto-project renders visible the subjectivity of its creator and the methods of its creation. Identification includes self-identification. Classification necessitates self-classification. The lines between self-analysis and criticism, scholarship, field research, and political action are now thoroughly blurred. Indeed, the erosion of now-passé beliefs in objective analysis and impartial methodology have laid the ground for these self-oriented discourses; and the risk of these auto-disciplines is that they, as Mark Lilla has it, “give an intellectual patina to the radical individualism that virtually everything else in our society encourages.”¹²

There are many ways to theorize the rise of these auto-discourses—too many to discuss here. It is important to note, however, that auto-discourses react against poststructural theory insofar as it dissipates and fractures the self. If poststructuralism asserts that the self is “not as the speaker of language, but its creation,” then auto-

¹² Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2017), pp. 85-87.

discourse presents the opposite: the self speaks a language of/about/for the self. Thus auto-discourse showcases the reconstruction, not the deconstruction of selfhood.

I have been arguing that autofiction, as a presently flourishing literary movement, is a conditional genre dependent on broad, external social and political circumstances. The first of these conditions, as mentioned, is an existential exhaustion of postmodernism and its narratives. I mean exhaustion in both senses of the word. Firstly, the aesthetic tendencies of what has been called “postmodern fiction” are expended and have long ago ossified into institutional dogma, no longer capable of sustaining subversive cultural critiques. And secondly, that many writers are themselves exhausted by the postmodern—they are fatigued and worn out by its now doctrinal methods, and feel that it no longer speaks to the geopolitical realities of the present day. Fredric Jameson famously characterizes postmodernism as the rejection of grand narratives and fixed identities, and links it with “the death of the subject” and “the end of individualism as such.”¹³ The modes and practices of postmodernism are well documented; they include pastiche, collage, temporal distortion, hyperreality, perspectivism, and de-centralized narration. Thus, if we understand contemporary autofiction as the discontented offspring of modern fiction, we begin to see it as a dialectical project—for it uncomfortably (re)asserts the life of the subject and, more specifically, the life of the author herself. Indeed, we might yet come to associate autofiction with the reemergence of authorial presence and intentionality. As it turns

¹³ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster, (New York, NY: The New Press, 2001), pp. 127–44.

out, what might be at stake in recent autofiction is not only the life of the author but also the death of the text as an object independent of its author's will. In this way, autofiction ushers in a reversal of Barthes's "death of the author." What is "dead" in our autofiction might be the text as an unlimited field or non-human actor.

Indeed autofiction seems to manifest widespread disdain for what had been called "the literary." It presents an aversion for artifice, and a contempt for the formal techniques which have been associated with the "literary" genres generally: metaphor, symbolism, foreshadowing, narrative arc (all of which, it must be said, are present, albeit often ironically, in postmodern literature). David Shields articulates this disdain when he describes the "intimate literature" of our current moment. He writes that this new literature (i.e., autofiction), embodies

a deliberate unartiness: "raw" material, seemingly unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored, and unprofessional. Randomness, openness to accident and serendipity, spontaneity; risk, emotional urgency and intensity, reader/viewer participation; an overly literal tone, as if a reporter were viewing a strange culture; plasticity of form, pointillism; criticism as autobiography; self-reflexivity, self-ethnography, anthropological autobiography; a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real.¹⁴

The "raw," "unprocessed," and immediate quality of auto fiction limits the possibilities of craft—of irony, motif, allegory, etc.. Similarly, and somewhat

¹⁴ David Shields, *Reality Hunger*, (New York, NY: Vintage, 2011), pp. 3.

uncannily, Jameson's characterization of Modernism might provide an anachronistic description of autofiction-after-postmodernism, for both are:

predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your fingerprint, as incomparable as your own body... organically linked to the conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unmistakable style.¹⁵

With this in mind, it is easy to see how autofiction attempts—to echo Lerner—a “reversal,” turning back to an interiority wholly unique. Its investment in the personal narrative shifts the artistic focus back onto a singular perspective and belief in individualism, however convoluted, aestheticized, or narrativized that individualism may be.

The second condition of our current wave of autofiction is more overtly socio-political. To describe this condition, I take for granted Jameson's idea that all literature bears a neo-Lacanian “political unconscious,” and is therefore shaped in and against its imminent political milieu. Thus I submit that the context of our autofiction is what political theorist Hans Sluga has called “the landscape of disorientation.”

Sluga describes this disorientation accordingly:

Our world has become so complicated so quickly that we can't understand it. We're dealing with so many political, economic, and ecological crises

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster, (New York, NY: The New Press, 2001), pp. 129.

that we can't properly analyze and interpret them. Population growth, waves of refugees, suicide bombs, globalization with its side effects. We have affected our natural and cultural environment in deep and irreparable ways, and we can't fathom the long-term effect of this change. We find ourselves acting in a situation where we don't know where we are or what we want.¹⁶

The importance of Sluga's insight is not in his description of the geopolitical world, but of our response to it—a response which is fundamentally misinformed, uncertain, and distracted. This condition produces a dissonance between our digital selves and our analog bodies, “between what we see on the news and what we experience in the physical world.”¹⁷ This dissonance, Sluga argues, ensures a constant state of anxiety, in which we are no longer able to distinguish between physical and artificial realities. Our perception of the physical world is predetermined on digital platforms by social and news media syndicates. Outrage, disgust, and fear are manufactured affects in the economy of modern feeling. The irony of the twenty-first century is that the technologies of connection have disconnected us from the present in unprecedented ways. The destructive byproducts of this moment are manifold: data mining, fake news, media oversaturation, attention deficiency, filter bubbles, feedback loops, deepfake apps, meme culture, and rogue journalism. This “present shock,” as Douglas

¹⁶ Hans Sluga, “On Trump's ‘Empire of Disorientation,’” interview by Robert Harrison. *Entitled Opinions*, May 20, 2017.

¹⁷ Douglas Rushkoff, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*, (New York, NY: Current, 2014), pp. 24.

Rushkoff names it, produces an obsession with authenticity—a need to ask again and again: *what is real?* I submit that it is within this state of shock that autofictional writers aim to narrativize the self, for the landscape of disorientation necessitates ongoing self-discovery.

In his essay, “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin foretells of the fraught relationship between the novel and its cultural media counterparts. Benjamin writes about how the rise of mass media and the dissemination of information undermine the future of the novel. Easily accessible information, says Benjamin, threatens novelistic claims to truth and meaning. Whereas the novel provides “spatial amplitude” and “temporal intelligence,” information “lays claims to prompt verifiability and immediate truth,” which is “complete upon arrival” and “understandable in itself.”¹⁸ Unlike the novel, information is already interpreted, overdetermined, and “factual.” As information becomes the dominant source of knowledge production, the novel recedes into the realm of the “merely interesting” and the quaint. Although Benjamin’s forecast has proven to be accurate enough, what threatens the novel now, I argue,—and what has been threatening the novel at least since the era of Ronald Regan’s “perception management” project—is not the dissemination of information, but of *misinformation*. The autofictional novel—in the program era—comes both as an offshoot of, and response to the conditions of political misinformation, fake news, and virtual reality. In this way, autofiction offers a twofold description of our post-

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller.” *Theory of the Novel*, edited by Michael McKeon, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2000), pp. 77–93.

truth era: it 1) registers the difficulties of describing “the truth” in a world where truth no longer occupies a position of primacy in public discourse, and thus 2) performs the plight of the increasingly secluded and abstracted subject in the post-truth social world—a subject removed from truth sources.

While the novel has always been the product of the isolated individual, it is a more recent phenomenon that the novel has taken the isolation of the self as its imminent crisis. Whereas previously the novelist wrote *in* solitude, now the autofictioner can only write *about* contemporary forms of solitude. To write about the world is, in some ways, to write about a private world, a world cloistered and determined by virtual pathways, selective algorithms, marketing schemes, and political programs aimed at impairing community and solidarity. The autofictional novel is the genre of solipsism par excellence, presenting the conclusion of neoliberal autonomy and its echo chambers. To be sure, the autofictional novel need not be formally closed off or coded to achieve this end. What’s significant, however, is that autofictional forms struggle to overcome, cope with, or otherwise understand the limitations of individual perspective, even as they insist on the legitimacy and singularity of that perspective. In this way, autofiction bears witness to a world of loneliness and isolation. It is yet another stage in the long trajectory of the novel’s history—the increasing atomization, isolation, and abstraction of the individual from more community-oriented ontologies.

Autofiction thus traces, in concrete terms, how our fiction sustains our experience of reality. If postmodernism asserts that truth is constructed fiction, then

autofiction openly explores how fiction produces our experience of material and affective conditions. All of the faculties that constitute a self—memory, action, etc.—subsume various fictions to augment reality, offering a composite view of the world. As Ben Lerner puts it: “My concern is how fictions have real effects, become facts in that sense, and how our experience of the world changes depending on its arrangement into one narrative or another.”¹⁹ In an interview with *The Guardian*, Karl Ove Knausgaard echoes Lerner’s idea:

For me, there has been no difference in remembering something and creating something. When I wrote my fictional novels, they always had a starting point of something real. Those images that are not real are exactly the same strength and power of the real ones, and the line between them is completely blurred. When I write something, I can’t remember in the end whether this is a memory or if it’s not. For me, it is the same thing.²⁰

In this vein, Shaj Mathew has called this new coterie of influential autofiction novelists the “reality hungry generation,” calling attention to the thematic tendencies to seek out or, in some cases, to fabricate authenticity, whether in art or in lived

¹⁹ Ben Lerner, “The Flickering Edge,” interview by Tao Lin, *The Believer*, 1 Sep. 2014, <https://believermag.com/an-interview-with-ben-lerner>.

²⁰ Karl Ove Knausgaard, “Writing is a way of getting rid of shame,” interview by Andrew Anthony, *The Guardian*, 1 March 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/01/karl-ove-knausgaard-interview-shame-dancing-in-the-dark>.

experience.²¹ Mathew argues that, for writers of autofiction, traditional conventions of narration, plot, and story are not only out of fashion, but also incomprehensible. We live in a world so chaotic and strange that narratives no longer make any sense. It is in this senselessness that autofiction emerges to seek out or make up new “realities”—new possibilities for the self in a world where the self has been, paradoxically, both denied and predetermined. The “reality-hungry” artist is eager to reassert herself as a fixed self—a thing in the world, an authentic being with a unique perspective and experience, who is worthy of being heard. Autofiction, then, as David Wallace has it, “tells a new kind of story, about how we arrange our lives for public inspection. It pushes that inspection to an extreme, in the hopes that, by choosing to give over everything, it might be possible, for a moment, to regain a sliver of agency.”²²

Going Back: Autofiction as Paradox

In the chapters that follow, I address the central paradox of autofiction: the fact that telling a coherent narrative, particularly a literary narrative, in the centuries of technological and political distraction is simultaneously impossible and necessary. This is to say that autofictional novels are both potentially-reactionary—retreating from more socially-curious fiction—and important modes of self preservation and

²¹ Shaj Mathew, “Welcome to Literature’s Duchamp Moment: Avant-garde fiction is starting to resemble conceptual art,” *The New Republic*, 18 May 2015, <https://newrepublic.com/article/121603/avant-garde-literature-starting-resemble-conceptual-art>.

²² David Wallace, “‘Liveblog’ and the Limits of Autofiction.” *The New Yorker*, 29 Nov, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/liveblog-and-the-limits-of-autofiction>.

legitimization. Indeed, as I already suggested, we might read autofiction as a response to the politics of personal experience insofar as it rejects the representation of otherness as a primary objective of fiction. Autofiction jettisons the formal presumptions of earlier kinds of fictional writing (i.e., omniscient narration, the universalization of the particular, etc.) so as 1) not to write outside of the boundaries of personal experience, and 2) not to presume to understand, represent, or contain another's experience. In this way, autofiction might not be, as the adage goes, "the lie that tells the truth," but rather, an exercise in Oprah Winfrey's admonition to "tell your truth."

Of self-expressive forms of fiction, Zadie Smith writes:

We're eager to speak for ourselves. But in our justified desire to level or even obliterate the old power structures—to reclaim our agency when it comes to the representation of selves—we can, sometimes, forget the mystery that lies at the heart of all selfhood. Of what a self may contain that is both unseen and ultimately unknowable. Of what invisible griefs we might share, over and above our many manifest and significant differences.²³

Smith implies multiple potential limitations of autofiction: 1) the presumption of a knowable self, 2) the collapsing of personal truth and shared reality, and 3) the belief that self-expression is without ethical and political risk. To be sure, I want to make it

²³ Zadie Smith, "Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction," *The New York Review of Books*, 24 October, 2019, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/10/24/zadie-smith-in-defense-of-fiction>.

clear that I see these as *potential* risks of autofiction, and not its inherent features. But as potential risks, they need to be considered. And so, with these questions and paradoxes in mind, we return to the past—to the origins of autofiction as I have attempted to define it in the United States. In doing so, I hope to present a case for autofiction and its modes of intimacy, confession, and self-representation as artifice, which both illuminate and obscure the relationship between narrative and experience, life and literature.

Before I begin, I want to make what is probably an obvious statement: just as critical theory cannot account for every possible human interaction, neither can the program of literary theory claim to describe every individual text. This, of course, is also true for literary history. Literary theorists and historians have inevitably excluded individual texts from their canons. The reasons for this are often but not always deliberate. Often exclusion occurs because of scarcity. Theorists and historians, for a number of reason, cannot read every text which might fall into a given category, movement, school, form, or genre. More often than not, I suggest, is that they must narrow their focus for the sake of saying something insightful or, at the very least, helpful—though not always universal. I suggest that the projects of literary theory and history are not exclusive, but merely tragic. They cannot, by definition, see everything. It seems important to demarcate categorical distinctions for the sake of understanding a very particular trend in literary history and, therefore, human history itself. Indeed, there will be individual works of autofiction that do not conform to my own theories and histories. I take this study of autofiction, then, not as an attempt to

exclude novels that might differ from my own descriptions of it, but rather, I hope to provide a functional, useful, working description of the history autofiction in the American literary tradition.

The Making of Americans and the Sincerity Paradox

At the end of the nineteenth century in the Anglophone sphere, literature became, for many writers, problematic. The tense relationship many writers had toward the industry, enterprise, and creative act of storytelling itself can be divided into two philosophical (and sometimes political) paradoxes: 1) the paradox of sincerity, and 2) the paradox of production. In this chapter, I show how Gertrude Stein created what we now call autofiction as a dramatic (rather than polemical or critical) response to these challenges. What's more, I also claim that *The Making of Americans* was to use Stein's own words, "the beginning, really the beginning" of a strictly American genealogy of autofiction.

Among the many projects of modernism was a rejection of sincerity as a legitimate mode and source of artistic value. To clarify, I mean to use the word "sincerity" to evoke at least two of its valences. The word suggests earnest intent (meaning what one says), but also connotes the stripping away of artifice and complexity (fictitious or otherwise). To use the phrase "sincerity" in this context, then, is only to highlight a mode of speaking directly, shorn of artifice and complication, void of unintentional density, ornamentation, paradox, and irony. The modernists begin to ask questions about the relationship between expression and authenticity, and authenticity and craft. How is sincerity measured? What is a reader's interpretive relationship to sincere expression? How is a reader (or writer for that matter) supposed to value personal expression from fictional expression? How do we

distinguish between art and emotion? If art is equal to authenticity, how are we supposed to learn the techniques for making it?

But before I can explain Modernist responses to these questions, however, I must try, as quickly as I can, to illuminate how they understood the challenges of Romanticism. In order to do this, I must examine the paradoxes of sincerity and production, in turn, and proceed to show how Stein aims to address them, I begin with a very crude description of certain concepts and attitudes in Anglophone Romanticism, the literary products of which Modernism will theoretically—though not always practically—reject. In the following sections, I will discuss Romantic literature both in terms of poetry and fiction, since it was the poets—as is often the case—that define the literary ethos of their age; and what has been said of the Romantic poem might also be said of Romantic art generally.

The Sincerity Paradox

Broadly speaking, the various iterations of European Romanticism held artistic practice to be prophetic—spiritual, inspired, spontaneous—rather than technical. There was an assumption, then, that the prerequisite for making art was an earnest desire to express oneself: to showcase a personal vision. Art, in other words, becomes a quasi-spiritual practice, even to the point of becoming a surrogate religion whose object (and means) of worship was personal experience. This kind of art also values “innocence,” “naturalness,” “the sublime,” and sincere recollection. In Romanticism, then, there was an important conflation between literature and identity.

True identity, as we will see, was to be found in psychological and emotional autobiography, and art needed to become an uninhibited, unconstrained articulation of that autobiography. Literature, in other words—and poetry in particular—begins to become more *expressive*. I will, therefore, refer to Romanticism and “expressivist poetics” interchangeably. By contrast, literature of strict form and conventionality was politicized as a product of social orders and codes. Such conventions pose threats to free expression, desire, and, by extension, identity itself.²⁴

These developments in expressivist literature are important for two reasons. First, the developments mark a shift toward understand about the project of literature as inherently political—even liberating and revolutionary. Poets, as Shelley puts in, are “the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” and as such, they bear a responsibility to expose that which threatens individual freedom. Writers, then, take upon themselves a mantle of ethical superiority—a self-claimed ordination that distinguishes them, as it were, from society: from industry, urbanity, mass culture, organized religion, and “the common good.” Second, they demonstrate a shift in thinking about artistic authority. The question of authority—which might seem anachronistic in the twenty-first century—belonged to the discourses of political, religious, and aesthetic philosophy. In Romanticism, the source of writerly authority comes neither from a sense of shared morality (as in Plato), nor from educative value, nor from aesthetic principles, nor patronage, nor divine right. Instead, as I have

²⁴ See Menand, especially 13-18, for more on Romantic conceptions of sincerity and “literary honesty.”

already suggested, authority derives from individual insight—from the power of expression, inward emotions, and sincerity. Wordsworth, for example, writes that the purpose of poetry is to describe feelings “in a state of excitement.” He further argues that a poet, unlike a historian or biographer, is not limited or constrained by “historical exactitude.” Whereas a historian, politician, or lawyer might concern herself with events, facts, dates, etc., the poet, “writes under one restriction only, namely, that of the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human being.”²⁵ What matters in poetry, to paraphrase, is the unfiltered experience of the poet and her freedom to express herself. In Shelley’s words, “the expression of the imagination...is connate with the origin of man.”²⁶

In his book, *Discovering Modernism*, Louis Menand points out that there is indeed an irony between how the Romantics *wrote* literature and how they *theorized* literature. It is important here to note that many of the Romantics—like other writers throughout history who have claimed to adhere to poetic manifestos or codes of a self-named coterie—do not conform to their own poetic theories. Still, Menand is clear when he describes how many Romantic writers thought about themselves. The Romantic argument, in Menand’s words, is that “a work of art exerts a claim on its audience to the extent that it is the genuine and uncompromised expression of the

²⁵ William Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 7.

²⁶ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry*, (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1904), pp. 13.

inner life of the artist who produced it.”²⁷ Art is defined as the outward expression of an inner reality. And Carl Trueman has called this expressivist aesthetic the great “inward turn” of western civilization.²⁸ But if expressivism is a turn inward, what is the “outward” from which it turns?

To answer this question, I offer two excerpts from the writing of William Wordsworth. The first comes from his autobiographical epic poem, *The Prelude*. In book twelve we read:

Among the close and overcrowded haunts
Of cities, where the human heart is sick,
And the eye feeds it not, and cannot feed.
—Yes, in those wanderings deeply did I feel
How we mislead each other; above all,
How books mislead us, seeking their reward
From judgments of the wealthy Few, who see
By artificial lights; how they debase
The Many for the pleasure of those Few;
Effeminately level down the truth
To certain general notions, for the sake
Of being understood at once, or else

²⁷ Louis Menand, *Discovering Modernism: T.S. Eliot and His Context*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 14.

²⁸ See Trueman, especially 129-161, on the relationship between Romantic literature and the rise of the “modern individual.”

Through want of better knowledge in the heads
That framed them; flattering self-conceit with words,
That, while they most ambitiously set forth
Extrinsic differences, the outward marks
Whereby society has parted man
From man, neglect the universal heart.²⁹

That the authoritative speaker rejects the constructed customs of cities, culture, and sophisticated society is predictable, considering that we might define Romanticism as a reaction against industrialization. But what is surprising in this passage is the poet's ontological critique. The poem indeed attacks pursuit of knowledge as a unified system—a system that neglects both individual expression and the universality of the right of expression. Knowledge, the poem suggests, serves not only to flatter and please the cultural elites (“those Few”), but also to falsify human experience, to obfuscate individual identity, and, therefore to isolate “man / From man.” Systematic ontology—as an enterprise aimed to produce rationality, reason, and historical accuracy—breeds conflict, pride, strife, competition. It is the source of social suffering. The expressivist project is, therefore, a reversal of Plato's critique of poetry as emotional corruption. Now, in the age of Enlightenment and progress, poetry is not what *corrupts* citizens, but what *purifies* them. We might say, on one hand, that the inward turn is a turn away from systemic ontologies—it functions as a critique of

²⁹ William Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 375.

scientism, technologism, historicism, and rationality. And, in this way, expressivist literature asserts itself as a hermeneutical ontology whose methods are experiential rather than methodological.

The second excerpt is the possibly most frequently cited description of Romantic poetry. In his *Preface to the Lyric Ballads*, Wordsworth writes:

... Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin in emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.³⁰

Samuel Coleridge provides a simpler version of the same sentiment. He defines poetry as “what comes from the heart and goes to the heart.”³¹ What expressivism turns away from, then, is rationality, reason, and “historical exactitude.” Reality, it follows, is a question of experience. Poetry and its subject matter are necessarily individualized. When “powerful feelings” become the subject and substance of the expressivism, personality and authentic expression take the place of technique, irony, wit, and allusion as the criteria of making and understanding art. Lionel Trilling summarizes this phenomenon when he writes: “What the audience demands of the artist—really demands, in its unconscious desire—and what the artist thinks ought to

³⁰ William Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 595.

³¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Seven lectures on Shakespeare and Milton*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1856), pp. 45.

be given turns out to be the sentiment of being.”³² Authentic sentiment (feeling, attitude, thought) stands to serve as a readymade verification, confirmation, and apologia of the emotional resonances in a work of literature. (Already in Romanticism we see the seeds of our contemporary literary culture, invested in the spectacle of public emoting, personal truth-telling, and confession.) Sincerity, sentiment, feeling, experience—these are the muses of expressivism. These are its source of inspiration and authority. And so, if sincerity precedes form, then, it would seem, eventually the opposite becomes true: form foregrounds sincerity. Thus, literature may be said to *fabricate* feeling. This was the modernist skepticism.

T.S. Eliot summarizes what would become the modernist attitude toward sentimental literature in his essay, *The Metaphysical Poets*, where he distinguishes between “intellectual” and “reflective” (or “feeling”) poets. The passage is worth quoting at length:

The difference is not a simple difference of degree between poets. It is something which had happened to the mind of England between the time of Dunn or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning; it is the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet’s

³² Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1972), p 99.

mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary ... The sentimental age began early in the eighteenth century, and continued. The poets revolted against the ratiocinative, the descriptive; they reflected... In one or two passages of Shelley's *Triumph of Life*, in the *Hyperion* there are traces of a struggle toward unification of sensibility. But Keats and Shelley died, and Tennyson and Browning merely *ruminated*.³³

Thus, couched in Eliot's critique is a simple but powerful claim that would become modernist dogma: The central literary values of literature are lost in an eccentric, decadent, and aberrant counter tradition, that originates with the Romans and finds new iterations among the Romantics. It is useful for us to think about Eliot here because—in some ways—his distinction between Romanticism and its predecessors is simple, perhaps even polemically simplistic. Thought versus feeling. Whereas the Metaphysical Poets—whose predecessors are Dante, Guido Cavalcanti, Guinizelli, and Cino—were fiercely intellectual, the Romantic poets—descending Longinus and Dryden and Milton—are “merely” reflective and brooding. They do not, in other words, create worlds, concepts, or experiences, but rather *re*-create them. (Surely William Blake must be an exception to Eliot's critique.) Another way to understand the distinction between these poetries might be in the difference between *thinking* and

³³ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Writings*, (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2002), pp. 231-32.

thinking about. A Metaphysical poem doesn't merely think, but enacts thinking as a violent and radical process of juxtaposition and superimposition, so that the poet and reader are themselves *being thought*. The Romantic poet, on the other hand, is passive—a bystander who watches the world happening as if on a stage. The Metaphysical (and by extension, the Modernist) poet is a forceful actor who creates the world in language.

What Eliot says of poetry, Virginia Woolf says of the novel. In 1924, Woolf wrote an essay titled, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," in which she both retorts Arnold Bennett's review of her novel, *Jacob's Room*, and describes a theory of realism in literature that would ultimately become known as "relativism." She sets herself (and her readers) the task of writing about a fictional character named "Mrs. Brown." In characteristic Modernist polemical style, it attacks popular literature and directly addresses the reader of such writing:

In your modesty you seem to consider that writers are of different blood and bone from yourselves; that they know more of Mrs. Brown than you do. Never was there a more fatal mistake. It is this division between reader and writer, this humility on your part, these professional airs and graces on ours, that corrupt and emasculate the books which should be the healthy offspring of a close and equal alliance between us.³⁴

If the problem for Eliot with expressionism was decadence and passivity, then the problem for Woolf is what she perceives to be the author's apparent claim to

³⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, (London: Hogarth, 1924), pp. 23.

emotional, intellectual, and moral superiority over the reader. The relationship between the author and the reader, in popular literature, is infantilizing, condescending, even—the word is surprising—“emasculating” to the reader. At the center of Woolf’s criticism is the idea that the writer (the self) is the source of preceptive and experiential authority. Expressivist writers, the argument goes, cannot be trusted insofar as they claim to possess heightened powers of perception and truth-telling. (Of course, this criticism, somewhat ironically, is both a reaction against and an extension of the expressivism it claims to repudiate.)

It should also be noted quickly that these critiques of expressivism were foregrounded and shaped by the rise of widespread philosophical suspicion. Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx had already contributed to the uprooting of the individual as a unified subject—both provided theories of false consciousness that would render genuine sincerity impossible. But it was Sigmund Freud who directly called into question the legitimacy—intentionally or otherwise—of a continuous self. Knowledge and experience, for Freud, are coded, forbidden to us, and even prohibited from us by our own minds. This undercuts the expressivist project in a profound way. It was Freud, therefore, who directly—albeit unwittingly—undermined the project of sincerity on behalf of Modernism. Psychoanalysis and the theory of unconsciousness, in other words, posed a radically new thesis about human life: you are unknowable even (or perhaps especially) to yourself. What’s more, to dispute this claim becomes essentially impossible insofar as the claim undermines the very structures that form any dispute. The theory of the unconscious, in other words, conflated the symptoms

with the sources of all cultural attitudes and believes. After Freud, one cannot not know for certain whether experience is always already culturally framed at best, or altogether predetermined at worst. Thus, Freudian theories of the unconscious produce an insecurity that even sincerity itself might be a cultural mechanism.

Not all of the Modernists read Freud, of course, but his ideas were part and parcel of the then-present zeitgeist; and so—when the subject and subjective experience became the primary object of suspicion—artists were faced the problems of the *possibility* of sincerity. How can the writer say what she means when *she* doesn't even know what she means? Or, what's more difficult to answer: How can the writer say what she means when she is not a coherent source of self-knowledge? These questions, and questions like them, will propel a literary movement whose ethos is instability, and whose mood is uncertainty, disorientation, confusion.

The Paradox of Production

Long before Peter Bürger wrote *Theory of the Avant-Garde*—which demonstrated how the experimental art is perpetually coopted into the logic of capitalist consumerism—some modernists saw a problematic relationship between literature and its mainstream market. Indeed the Modernists were among the first coherent constituency to recognize—collectively, and in various ways—the coextensive relationship between literature, economic market demands, and social values. To use more contemporary language than the Modernists themselves used: the literature of sincerity risks becoming appropriated (commodified, codified) by external power machines. The result of this appropriation is obfuscation and

marginalization of vulgar realities, inhibiting our ability to see them clearly. The literary text risks representing a given event or context by aesthetic means, thereby taming it—framing it in palatable terms. The poetic impulse to describe the world, then, dilutes the world’s indescribable realities. Indeed, there are things we cannot see, not because they are unclear to us, but because they have been made too clear by aesthetic means. Mimesis, therefore, has a beclouding effect that perpetuates the closed epistemological loop between feeling and reality.

Simply put, Modernist writers noticed how market trends could determine the production of literature and how, in turn, literature determines (or at least shapes) public feeling and experience. Sincerity ossifies into received literary forms and thematic cliché. The result of this reification is problematic in at least two ways: 1) feelings become manufactured—always-already public things, social conventions, cultural products; and 2) each new generation of writers is tasked with the production of new feelings. Indeed literary sincerity becomes a paradox in which literature derives its authority from the very thing that makes it seem artificial. Feelings, in other words, are manufactured by literary means. And so, in the modernist era, writers begin to distrust their own feelings because they suspect those feelings to be artistic products—particularly so-called “literary” feelings such as romantic love, spiritual experience, national pride, social identification, etc. The fundamental disposition of the modernist, then, is artistic and emotional insecurity.

One of Eliot’s early poems, “Portrait of a Lady,” renders this self-doubt in aesthetic terms:

I keep my countenance
I remain self-possessed
Except when a street-piano, mechanical and tired
Reiterates some worn-out common song
With the smell of hyacinths across the garden
Recalling things other people have desired.
Are these ideas right or wrong?³⁵

It is also worth looking at “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock,” an anti-hero whose desire remains ambiguous, but whose hesitation and insecurity surpasses even Hamlet’s. Prufrock’s indecision displaces the original object of his desire to the extent overcoming that his hesitation becomes itself his singular desire.

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?”
...
Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.³⁶

³⁵ T.S. Eliot, *T.S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950*, (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1971), pp. 10.

³⁶ T.S. Eliot, *T.S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950*, (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1971), pp. 4.

Eliot showcases the inhibitions of the poet—hesitation of the poet to speak, to name his feelings in the poem itself. What’s at stake in this poem is the source of artistic authority. With this in mind, it’s easy for us to understand modernism on the whole as an aesthetic performance of skepticism surrounding artistic authority. This performance produced diverse aesthetic modes and forms, all of which, in one way or another, expressed and enacted insecurity. Like other artistic moments before and after it, Modernism stages an exploration of the contemporary cultural condition.

In this vein, Joseph Frank points out that, if there is a dominant mood in modernism, “it is precisely that of insecurity, instability, the feeling of loss of control over the meaning and purpose of life amidst the continuing triumphs of science and technics.”³⁷ Louis Menand similarly explains that modernism is a moment when “what had been trusted begins to seem fickle or ingratiating.”³⁸ The insecurity and mistrust of the moment, of course, is not only social but also artistic—the insecurity of the modernist artist manifests itself as a debilitating self-awareness vis-à-vis her artistic creation. And indeed, one major theme of modernist literature is the irony of self-expression by means of literary form. It turns out, as we will see, that preventing personal feelings from becoming literary clichés requires the artist to develop new formal techniques.

After Expressivism

³⁷ Joseph Frank, *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 55.

³⁸ Louis Menand, *Discovering Modernism: T.S. Eliot and His Context*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 13.

I have stated that Modernist literature might be understood as an eclectic response to various socio-aesthetic literary challenges, but I wish to illuminate these responses more concretely. The simplest way for me to do this is to refer back to the “Metaphysical Poets.” Here, Eliot gives his own answer:

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate, if necessary, language into his meaning.³⁹

The first and foremost value of Metaphysical (and therefore of Modernist) poetry is intellectual and formal rigor. Eliot’s response to the problem of sincerity, then, is *difficulty*. Forms of difficulty (complexity, allusion, formal incongruence, spacio-temporal juxtaposition, irony, wit) will serve as the foundation for Modernist aesthetic critique of Romanticism.

Here it must be said: even as Woolf, Eliot and other Modernists lament the shifting literary values of their time, their literary responses are radically new. While their criticisms might seem reactionary, their literary output was definitively otherwise. The point I am trying to make here, from the onset, is that modernism provided eclectic aesthetic solutions to broad sociological and philosophical

³⁹ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Writings*, (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2002), pp. 232.

questions. We might even understand the common features of modernism (fragmentation, nonlinearity, hybridity, collage, montage, spatial textuality, archival play, etc.) as parts of the same project: to map the uneasy relationship between free self-expression and original art. That the modernists prioritize form over content and space over temporality suggests Each modernist writer, each in their own way, will attempt to answer these questions in the wake of what Virginia Woolf calls “literature of the present”: Eliot uses citation as a means of coopting sincerity of the past to perform his own sincerity. Pound aims to transform contemporary literature into a translation of past literature (and therefore “make it new”). Joyce’s and Eliot’s solution is found in an inundating archive of allusions, symbols, and networks. Conversely, American writers, such as Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, and Jean Toomer turn away from European literary history and aim to define an inherently American poetics. William Faulkner, similarly, turns toward a hyper-locality—American landscapes, imagery, mythologies. Hemmingway strips language down to its bare-most constituents.

Gertrude Stein’s response—well ahead of her time—is to dramatize the position of the writer herself in autobiographic metafiction. And it is her response that interests me the most; for it neither rejects nor reclaims, neither repurposes nor subverts bygone literary trends. Eliding obsessions with literary history and social aesthetics, Stein answers the call to “make it new” by taking as her subject matter the psychological and material conditions of writing itself. More concretely, she introduces “the writer” as a central fixture in the written text. A description of Stein’s

writer requires a Steinian grammatical formulation: The writer writes about writing about the writing at hand; and, therefore, the writing is not a product, but a procedure—a becoming. The writer is a figure both inside and outside of the text. Thus the writer presents her (sincere) feelings inside the text, but not as the text. Sincerity also becomes procedural. It serves as an evolving theme, rather than an end in itself—it is the subject of Stein’s work, but not its substance. Stein addresses directly the anxiety of writing a novel:

... you write a book and while you write it you are ashamed for every one must think you are a silly or a crazy one and yet you write it and you are ashamed, you know you will be laughed at or pitied by every one and you have a queer feeling and you are not very certain and you go on writing.⁴⁰

In the following sections, I aim to explore exactly how Stein manages to transform the impulse to “go on writing” into an aesthetic movement.

The Making of Americans

To explain how Stein introduces the figure of the writer, I should historicize and describe her autofictional novel, *The Making of Americans*. Written between 1903-1911 and published in 1925, *Americans* is Stein’s first attempt to write a novel in the traditions of the nineteenth-century: the bildungsroman, the sentimental novel, the moral novel. In other words, Stein set to write a novel of progress and self-

⁴⁰ Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans*, (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), pp. 485.

actualization: the ideals of western culture. We will see soon, however, that this aim becomes increasingly ironic as the novel “progresses.” That her novel fails to uphold the values of nineteenth-century novels proves the anachronistic and impossibility of such a novel in an increasingly complex present.

Formally, *Americans* is an epic work of fiction and, Janet Malcolm puts it, “a near-impossible feat of reading.” Stein herself compared the text to Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, though, like those works, *Americans* also remains completely original. For this reason, the book is difficult to describe: it is not only verbose and discursive, but also tautological, meandering, and inchoate. Edmund Wilson writes of the novel: “It is here carried to such immoderate lengths as finally to suggest some technique of mesmerism. With sentences so regularly rhythmical, so needlessly prolix, so many times repeated and ending so often in present participles, the reader is all too soon in a state, not to follow the slow becoming of life, but simply to fall asleep.”⁴¹ Though Wilson writes critically of the novel, his description is useful to understand how the novel *works*. The book is performative, rather than communicative—it often enacts, rather than narrates. On a fundamental narrative level, the novel traces the lives of individual members, one by one, of the Hersland and Dehning families under the pretenses of the Nineteenth-century novel. But this narrative is interrupted—and eventually overtaken—by frequent metafictional descriptions and meditations on the process of writing the novel (more on this later).

⁴¹ Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930*, (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), pp. 240.

In this way, the narrator's story is twofold: the primary narrative (the story of two families and their "progress") and the story of the writing itself—the account and musing of Stein's own progress as writer. Janet Malcolm describes the novel like this:

Hovering over the work is an image of a woman sitting at a desk stubbornly performing her daily task of covering blank pieces of paper with words; and this woman is the real heroine of the book ... other characters come and go; but the writer figure remains. The jolts and lurches of her engagement with writing are the book's plot. The reader never really cares what happens to the characters but becomes increasingly curious about what their author is up to.⁴²

If the Romantics saw the writer as a prophet who could access the divine via the powers of perception and individual imagination, then the Modernists see the writer as a craftsman: a figure hunched over a worktable, sounded by tools-at-hand, and meticulously sculpting or shaping out some minuscule detail. Not only does the artist lose her divine status in the modernist world, but so does the author lose her authority; and an author without authority is just a writer. Perhaps it is obvious to say that Gertrude Stein's writer embodies the craftsman of the day—the image of intellectual labor and unromantic, tedious artistic struggle. This is what distinguishes the author from the writer (and why, it turns out, the author may have died, but the

⁴² Janet Malcom, "Someone Says Yes to It," *The New Yorker*, 20 June 2005, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/06/13/someone-says-yes-to-it>.

writer certainly never has): the writer is always at work. This is a deeply anti-romantic image. Whereas the author dictates or tells a story, the writer writes a book. The difference is in the hyper self-awareness brought on by the problem of sincerity. The true protagonist of *The Making of Americans* is not only the biographical heroine, but the writer herself. Thus the subplot becomes the plot: the inscription of the act writing itself—the craft, composition, organization, and technical processes by which the writer writes. What makes the novel uniquely autofictional is that it renders transparent the process of its own creating. In other words, it makes clear to the reader how it is *being written*.

An important, albeit obvious, distinction needs to be made here: it is not the characters of Stein's novel who hesitate, but rather the creator of those characters. In Stein's paradigm, it is not Hamlet who hesitates, but Shakespeare. And so the modus operandi of *Americans* is interruption, rupture, and hesitation. Gertrude Stein thus showcases the paralysis of her present moment. As we will see, Stein interrupts the narration of the novel to confess her insecurities about narration. Stein—in the narrator's voice—admits doubts about her ability to know anything well enough to describe it. Her insecurity and doubt, she tells us, produces an anxiety that inhibits storytelling. Thus, her story enshrines a struggle to tell a story—the struggle to speak:

Sometimes I am almost despairing ... I know the being in Miss Dounor that I am beginning describing, I know the being in Miss Charles that I am soon going to be beginning describing, I know the being in Mrs. Redfern, I have been describing the being in that one. I know the being in each one of

these three of them and I am almost despairing for I am doubting if I am knowing it poignantly enough to be really knowing it, to be really knowing the being in any one of the three of them. Always now I am despairing. It is a very melancholy feeling I have in me now I am despairing about really knowing the complete being of any one of each one of these three of them Miss Dounor and Miss Charles and Mrs. Redfern.⁴³

Stein's confession does not merely concern the difficulty of artistic invention. In other words, her artistic struggle is not technical. That would be too simplistic. Stein would likely not disagree that writing a novel or a poem requires hard work and induces self-doubt, but what she says here is more profound. Her anxiety is epistemological. It derives from the self-psychologizing and hyper self-awareness of the post-Romantic era and produces the impossibility of knowing what one knows well enough to claim to know it. By interrupting the act of narration, the text performs the condition of hesitation, of doubt, of inhibition.

This is how Stein approaches the paradoxes of literature: she ironizes the relationships between personal feeling and literary production, rendering visible how each shapes the other. In other words, Stein exhibits how experience, as the perquisite to artistic creation, predetermines invention. It turns out that, for Stein, "saying what you mean" is more complicated than it seems. Indeed, the novel shows readers how

⁴³ Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans*, (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), pp. 485.

the formal production of literature is often at odds with the desire of a writer herself. Reading *Americans*, we learn how textual materials of the novel contradict the apparent teleology therein. In other words, we see the degree to which the novel's formal outcomes betray the Stein's own authorial desire (i.e. form *betrays* content), thereby undermining the relationship between feeling and form. Stein's insight is proleptic: it foregrounds the poststructural theory to come half a century later. But Stein's novel is more performative—and perhaps more useful for writers—than the postmodern theories of literature that follow it, not only because it showcases the breakdown between meaning and understanding, but because it stages what that particular crisis means—and literally looks like—for an actual writer of literature.

If the authority of the Romantic writing comes from a belief that personal experience is exclusively personal—and, by nature of being personal, experience is sufficient grounds to locate truth—then as soon as the Modernist writer realizes that personal experience is filtered through aesthetic, cultural, and political frameworks, she must question whether what one experiences is a symptom or a cause.

Throughout her novel, Stein fights against this realization. She admits that she doesn't know how to be sincere—that she doesn't know how to turn experience into fiction: "There are so many complicated kinds ... so many ways of mixing, disguising, complicated writing people, so complicated that mostly it is confusing to me who know it of them that there are these kinds of them and always more and more I know

it of them and always it is confusing.”⁴⁴ There are moments when this confusion becomes an epistemological/ontological lamentation. Here, the writer expresses sadness regarding inability of narrative as a vehicle for representing and acquiring knowledge/experience:

No one knows any one... no one ever gets a complete history of any one. This is very discouraging thinking. I am very sad now in this feeling. Always, hearing something, gives to some a sad feeling of realizing everything they have not been hearing and that they are not knowing and perhaps they can never have really in them the complete writing of any one... I am all unhappy in this writing... I am nervous and driving and unhappy in it.⁴⁵

But shortly after this interjection, Stein resumes the narration of her novel. These interruptions, then, serve as a kind of ironic self-commentary that constantly complicate the desire to make literature. There is an ongoing disconnect between the initial object of art (the primary plot) and the process of inventing it. The text therefore refuses to blur autobiography with fiction and instead allows fiction to be interrupted by autobiography. Thus, Stein provokes her readers to confront their own uncritical readiness to be guided, not by information alone, but by expectations of normal artistic methods of story-telling, whether they be formal, archetypal, or

⁴⁴ Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans*, (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), pp. 184.

⁴⁵ Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans*, (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), pp. 345.

logical. In this way, these moments of anti-narrative prose are not only inherently negative structures but also perform a negative dialectic in which knowledge collapses. Her acknowledgement of the limitations of her own novel arises not from a unification of contending categories in which both categories are transformed in the revelation of a new category, but by the basic and undeniable realization of the limitations of knowledge as a self-sufficient operation.

Stein does not, as cliché descriptions of hybrid writing go, “blend” two genres together. Instead, she writes two genres concurrently, intermittently, so that each acts as supplement, commentary, criticism, and counterpoint to the other. Her (anti-)aesthetic practice stages the moment at which art disappears and life (re)emerges in its place. In order to achieve this end, she will hyperbolically (and, ironically, by means of the novel) usher in the end of the novel (or at least the end of the nineteenth-century novel). But the result of this “end” is productive. Art and life, of course, are not the same. But Stein shows how art and life (life, and all of its desires) are often if not usually at odds.

Stein demonstrates how the Romantic “aesthetics of experience” displace its own referent—leaving nothing for the reader to witness but witness itself. Such representation—which fetishizes the literary product as a form of redemption in itself—merely reproduces the logic of recognition. The insistence upon clear, accurate description dilutes an indescribable reality. As Adorno has it in *Aesthetic Theory*: “artworks that make socially univocal discursive judgments negate art as well

as themselves.”⁴⁶ Indeed, there are things we cannot see, not because they are unclear to us, but because they have been made too clear. Mimesis, then, can have an obfuscating effect that perpetuates the closed epistemological loop between perception and reality, merely confirming already existing social values and political allegiances—which by extension serve as ready-at-hand evidence, either for immediate praise or outright dismissal of a given literary object. Stein’s art, by contrast, is an anti-art—full of boredom, seeming insignificance, tedious repetition and wry playfulness:

Writing ... is like a substance and in some it is as I was saying solid and sensitive all through it to stimulation, in some almost wooden, in some muddy and engulfing, in some thin almost like gruel, in some solid in some parts and in other parts all liquid, in some with holes like air-holes in it, in some a thin layer of it, in some hardened and cracked all through it.⁴⁷

Here, experience is not a catalyst of literature, but a blockage to it. Self-awareness is both the cause and the solution to this barrier.

The Autofictional Turn

To reiterate, I have argued that Autofiction is a form that inscribes and describes the processes by which the self is made into fiction and the ways in which social and cultural and rhetorical fictions shape and codify ones experience of self-hood. In this

⁴⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) pp. 248.

⁴⁷ Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans*. , (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), pp. 345.

way autofiction is, I argue, a form and not a genre. It utilizes techniques and constraints that are unique and consistent to itself. The foremost of these techniques might be called the “autofictional turn.” This turn is definitionally metafictional, but it is more than that: it performs the writer’s struggle to make fiction out of experience. We might think of this Volta as the moment when the writer lays bare either the construction and creation or the collapse and conflation of the self in its surrounding fictions—whether they be cultural, aesthetic or rhetorical. It thus renders transparent the artistic process. Of course, the effects and specificities of the autofictional turn are diverse. Each as particular as a text itself. Still, it is this formal feature that distinguishes autofiction from autobiographical fiction.

The Making of Americans is full of autofictional turning. This first of such moments comes early enough in the novel to establish itself as an ongoing feature of the text. The novel begins, as many Romantic novels do, with conventionally informative exposition. We learn about a young heroine named Julia Dehning, the eldest daughter of a wealthy, first-generation immigrant to America, who is about to enter into an emotionally and financially detrimental marriage. For over thirty pages, Stein describes Julia in typical nineteenth-century fashion. She gives us Julia’s biography. She describes her family and the circumstances of her youth. And then, without warning, the narrator interrupts the norms of novelistic storytelling. It is in this interruption that the narrator announces herself to be *a writer*. In the middle of describing Julia, the writer has it:

Bear it in your mind my reader, but truly I never feel it that there ever can be for me any such a creature, no it is this scribbled and dirty and lined paper that is really to be to me always my receiver,—but anyhow reader, bear it in your mind—will there be for me ever any such a creature,—what I have said always before to you, that this that I write down a little each day here on my scraps of paper for you is not just an ordinary kind of novel with a plot and conversations to amuse you, but a record of a decent family’s progress respectably lived by us and our fathers and our mothers, and our grand-fathers, and grand-mothers, and this is by me carefully a little each day to be written down here. . . . And so listen while I tell you all about us, and wait while I hasten slowly forwards, and love, please, this history of this decent family’s progress.⁴⁸

This interjection, and others like it, concerns itself with the material and psychological conditions of making (fiction, novels, art). It addresses the psychological labor of invention, but more than that it also calls our attention to the practical and physical tools of writing. It is a demystification of artistic inspiration, and so offers up an intrinsically Modernist image of the writer at work. At the onset of modernism, Maurice Denis’s issued a famous provocation: “Remember that a picture, before being a battle horse or a nude, or some anecdote—is essentially a flat

⁴⁸ Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans*. (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), pp. 33.

surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order.”⁴⁹ Stein, the writer of the novel, embodies Denis’s observation. Her novel, laying bare the details of production within the narrative it set out to tell, reveals to us directly how it (and perhaps other novels like it) *makes* Americans. The twofold nature of this turn suggests a conflation between types of making: the material and the psychological are not only mutually coextensive but indistinguishable.

In her psycho-material condition, it is not enough for Stein merely *to write*. She cannot simply tell a story. She must tell a story about telling a story: a story about what can and cannot be told and why. This is how Stein’s novel hyperbolically performs the end of the nineteenth century novel. (Therefore, the autofictional novel might be seen as evidence for what already was being called “the death of the novel.” In the aftermath of the metaphor of a dead novel—reactionary as it may be—might be an opportunity for us to understand autofiction as a potential resurrection or reimagining of the novel.) If Romantic reflection is decadent and ornamental—something enjoyable in itself—then Stein’s reflection can be said to occur as the logical conclusion of that decadence and ornamentation: it is impotent, claustrophobic, stymied. Indeed, her reflection enacts paralysis. Self-awareness can only reproduce itself: it is a perpetual dead end. We see in these dead ends Fredric Jameson’s idea that fragmentation merely reflects the world—and, in this case, a world of bloated excess. It becomes aware of its own awareness, aware of awareness

⁴⁹ Maurice Denis, “New Theories of Modern Art and on Sacred,” *Art et Critique*, 1914.

of awareness, etc. This is how Stein's novel works. It shows us the writer as she fails to write, aware of self-awareness, aware the mutual reification of literature and sincerity.

The metafictional meditations of *Americans* serve not only as formal hybridization of the novel as a received form, but also transform it into a kind of anti-novel. The lines between nonfiction and fiction are not merely blurred, but violently juxtaposed. This juxtaposition reveals an uncomfortable incongruity in which the relationship between the biographical and the fictive is conflicted and even, perhaps, radically incongruent. That the novel fails to become a conventional novel is one of its most original achievements. Its hybridization is therefore illuminating. Its contribution to the lineage of American literature appears as what might be called an aesthetics of incompleteness—a counter-narrative in the American context, to be sure. (And so, it might also be said that *The Making of Americans* is, aesthetically at least, anti-American.) The novel therefore showcases the attempt and failure to write a novel. If one needs to talk about about-ness in prose fiction, then one might say the novel is about the impossibility of writing a novel in a world plagued by the loss of shared narratives, fixed identities, and stable selves.

What is perhaps most striking about Stein's autofictional turning is her tonal ambiguity. At times, to be sure, the writer of the novel seems to be a parody of the writer: an ironic Romantic, who mistakes playful creation for metaphysical, psychological, or political work. Even as the writer confesses her confusions and describes the material obstacles, she seems also to reproach herself—to satirize the

woes and gripes of the starving artist. The generic ambiguity in autofiction foregrounds its interpretive openness. This has a de-centering effect. Most obviously, this negates the self as the center of authority. What's more, however, is that it also disqualifies the reader/interpreter as the center of meaning, too. This too, I argue, is important to autofiction as a literary lineage and as a form.

The Beginning, Really the Beginning

To conclude, *The Making of Americans* marks a significant turning point for the Anglophone novel in general, and the American novel specifically, in at least three ways—all of which are not specific to Stein's novel, but to autofiction more generally. First, *Americans* transforms a cultural attitude into an aesthetic. This aesthetic might be called an aesthetic of interruption. It is an aesthetic—marked by thematic, formal, and temporal rupture, disruption, and meta-analysis—which strips the artist of her certitude, both in regard to her subject and method of creation. It is a form of art that undermines the project of art. Second, *Americans* invents a new type of narrator, namely, “the writer.” I have already suggested how the writer is different from the author or the narrator in all its iterations, but it is useful to enumerate them more concretely now. The Modernist era saw a plethora of new narrators, all of which, to one degree or another, enacts the socio-psychological milieu of the time. The omniscient narrator gave way to the unreliable narrator, the bystander or external witness, the gossip, the “close third person,” and narration of pure consciousness. Like these narrators, the writer is both a symptom and a response to the expressivist movement in nineteenth-century literature. But what the writer brings to the

conversation is a kind of hyper-realism: a form of narration that questions the methods and motivations of narration itself. Third, by extension, *Americans* presents itself as a novel of procedure, process, and praxis. It is a novel about the material and temporal labors of writing a novel and therefore disrupts the fantasies of fiction. It presents a kind of anti-escapism—a type of fiction which undermines certain consumeristic and moral projects of fiction. This, as I will show in subsequent chapters, marks a trend in autofiction that will continue for a century in US letters.

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About Nothing: The Disappearance of Art in Daniil Kharms's *Sluchai*

On September 7, 1938, Daniil Kharms wrote the following in his notebook: “Today I wrote nothing. Doesn’t matter.” This quotation has been interpreted by critics and enthusiasts alike, for better or worse, according to the biographical context in which Kharms wrote it. By this point in his life, Kharms had been arrested and publicly humiliated multiple times at the hands of the NKVD, he was living in total poverty and desolation, prohibited from publishing and performing publicly, struggling to find work, food, and rent money, aware that he might be arrested again at any moment. Consequently, critics are eager to read this entry—“Today I wrote nothing”—as an expression of deprivation and resignation, a confirmation of how poverty hinders productivity and impedes individual progress. The subsequent sentence, according to this biographical reading,—“Doesn’t matter”—enacts the way in which poverty ensures a loss of motivation and willpower. Thus, the tautology of these sentences performs the redundant, inert, cyclical nature of systemic oppression. The broader implication here is obvious enough: the material conditions of life hinder the physical act of making art. In short, living obstructs art.

We might, however, read this quotation as a more active statement—a pronouncement of poetics, or an aesthetic condition—and therefore draw from it a completely different conclusion: namely, it is not life which interrupts artmaking, but that art both retroactively represents and proleptically predetermines life. Thus art, too, obscures the fact of living insofar as it foregrounds the emotional and

psychological conditions of human experience. Therefore, in “Today I wrote nothing”—Kharms proclaims the end of art and the beginning of living. He writes on a separate occasion, “I want my literature to be the end of literature.”⁵⁰ To bring about this end, Kharms writes nothing, about-nothing, thereby revealing what art obscures.

I highlight this quotation (“Today I wrote nothing”) not only to offer an alternative, less biographically-based interpretation of it, but also to show the way in which this quotation serves as a microcosm of a larger (anti-)aesthetic practice, in which Kharms concerns himself both with the inherent impossibility of making art, and the utter uselessness of art as a progressive tool, a source of knowledge, or a site of interpretation, meaning, and truth. Kharms stages the moment at which art disappears and life (re)emerges in its place. To achieve this emergence, he will hyperbolically (and, ironically, by means of art) usher in what could be called the end of art. The end of art is not nihilistic but generative. For the dissolution of art means the beginning of something else. Art ends so we can go on living anew.

To begin, we should note that “Today I wrote nothing” appears in Kharms’s notebook (written for publication) titled, *Sluchai* (meaning “events,” “happenings,” “cases,” and “chances”), a sequence of laconic and tonally ambiguous hybrid texts which are variously categorized as prose poems, aphorisms, fictional vignettes, unfinished dialogues, overheard scenes, and basic journal entries in which Kharms caricatures and ironizes the Realist literature of his time. He employs unemotional

⁵⁰ Daniil Kharms, *I Am a Phenomenon Quite Out of the Ordinary: The Notebooks, Diaries and Letters of Daniil Kharms*, translated and edited by Anthony Anemone and Peter Scotto, (New York, NY: Academic Studies Press, 2013) pp. 382.

reporting of cruel and shocking events, premature endings, false-labeling, reductionist description, metafictional commentary, ironic moral conclusions, false cause and effect reasoning, and incompatible logic. The boundary between parody and farce on the one side, and genuine witness on the other, in *Sluchai*, is permeable if not altogether nonexistent.⁵¹ The work is an ongoing conflation of rumor and direct reportage, satire and sincerity, narrative and the anecdote, testimony and heresy, meaning and nonsense, art and information. We might then read Kharms as anti-Realism, occupying an antagonistic orientation toward art which documents the social world by aesthetic means. As a collection, *Sluchai* painfully anti-escapist, bitterly prosaic, uncomfortably ordinary. It presents a “reality” outside of aestheticization altogether, in which the reader is thrust back into the discomforts, ambiguities, and wonders of lived experience and the pure alterity of ordinary being.

Re-reading Kharms Against Political Aesthetics and Aestheticized Politics

We might better understand Kharms if we examine the critical forces that inadvertently disable close readings of his work. Indeed, the most pointed observations of Kharms tend to defang and whitewash that which is most radical and shocking in his writing. He is generally read at a distance—either as a product of a broader political context or as part of a particular avant-gardism. Both interpretations are incomplete if not altogether misleading. For in both cases, Kharms is rendered

⁵¹ Adrian Wanner, *Russian Minimalism: from the Prose Poem to the Anti-Story*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017) pp. 213.

merely historical. Critics, focused on movements and aesthetic trends, reduce him to the technical and formal elements of his writing within an “Absurdist” genre, thereby placing him neatly within the traditions of Russo-European Modernism, as both an imitator of Russian Futurism and zaum poetry, and as a typological precursor to subsequent iterations of the European avant-garde and the Theater of the Absurd.

At the same time, more politically oriented readers of Kharms tend to ignore the stylistic and formal innovations of his work to highlight the political context into and against which it appears to exist. In this way, it would seem that Kharms writes political allegories, coded social commentaries, and subversive or countercultural, anti-government parables. The interpretation of these allegories, then, can only be interpreted within the context of a given history—namely, the “Terror” of Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union. What matters most in this kind of historicization is the fact that literature, in one way or another, can only reflect the social conditions of its genesis, which, then, merely serves to affirm any preconceptions and suspicions about those conditions. To interpret a text, we are encouraged to look outside of it into its political/historical surround alone. In such a paradigm, Kharms’s work becomes nothing more than a mirror of that already-known.

More significantly to my argument here is that fact that both of these distant readings, inasmuch as they assign a strictly memetic function to Kharms’s texts (i.e. texts reflect either social realities or aesthetic trends) take for granted the (non-)event of the text itself, thereby overlooking in Kharms a general lack of moral closure, a refusal to make political art, a denial of both individual agency and external causality,

and a general debasement of progressive values. What I am trying to say is that historical critics discount in Kharms examples of “bad taste” (banal stories, boring anecdotes, crude jokes, grotesque situations, and even instances of random physical and emotional violence conducted by ordinary people) by framing them only as historically logical or aesthetically programmatic. As we will see, Kharms’s poems need to be seen according to their own vulgarity. We risk silencing Kharms if we minimize his ability to offend neat political and aesthetic sensibilities.

To be clear, I do not mean to reject outright popular biographical and historical readings of Kharms. Nor do I deny the fact that Kharms was, in fact, a political victim. I only mean to illuminate the limitations of those readings and to insist that—in addition to them—we also take Kharms seriously at the level of his word. At this point, then, I want to note how dramatically Kharms clashes with his now-canonical contemporaries. For many political, so-called “counter-revolutionary” Soviet writers in the 1920s and 30s, art served as social documentation—a record of the material and psychological dimensions of society—and a means of delivering overt political quasi-prophetic messages.

It goes without mentioning that in Josef Stalin’s Soviet state, people disappeared without explanation; the state took its own citizens hostage and executed thousands based on verdicts made during sham trials; there were famines, wars, freezing winters, prison of poverty and, with it, the monotony of daily life as a struggle for survival. Many so-called counter-revolutionary writers attempted to document these horrors. Think, for example, of Osip Mandelstam’s “Stalin epigram,”

or Anna Akhmatova's long poem "Requiem." The irony of this kind of artistic socio-poetic record-keeping is that it tends to beautify what is abhorrent, to humanize what is monstrous, and—to one degree or another—render pleasing what is terrifying, painful. Theodor Adorno explains this effect in *Aesthetics and Politics*:

The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people...contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it...The aesthetic principle of stylization... make[s] an unthinkable fate appear to have some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed.⁵²

Adorno flags an ongoing aesthetic challenge: namely the way in which overtly political documentary art tends inadvertently (and ironically) to inhibit our ability to see clearly the subject matter it means to show. It represents the horror of a given event or social context by aesthetic means, thereby taming it—framing it in indigestible, or already-digested images which appear to bear inherent and therefore predestined meaning. The mode of strict docu-poetics, it turns out, might not so different from the localized romanticism of the 19th century, which aimed, in a number of ways, to distill material of pure experience into a single work of art.

Pathos-driven, such a Realist aesthetic of witness displaces its own referent—leaving nothing for the reader to witness but witness itself. Such representation—which fetishizes the literary product as a form of redemption in itself—merely

⁵² Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, (New York, NY: Verso, 2007) pp. 189.

reproduces the logic of recognition. The insistence upon clear, accurate description dilutes an indescribable reality. As Adorno has it in *Aesthetic Theory*: “artworks that make socially univocal discursive judgments negate art as well as themselves.”⁵³ Indeed, there are things we cannot see, not because they are unclear to us, but because they have been made too clear. Mimesis, then, can have an obfuscating effect that perpetuates the closed epistemological loop between perception and reality, merely confirming already existing social values and political allegiances—which by extension serve as ready-at-hand evidence, either for immediate praise or outright dismissal of given literary object. Kharms, by contrast, overthrows the entombment of witness. His art is an anti-art—full of boredom, seeming insignificance, tedious repetition, and crude shenanigans. But rather than absolving the reader of social commitment, his writing about about-nothing highlights the failures of art as a form of seeing clearly. By replacing pathos with bathos, Kharms renders shallow the impulse to witness the social per se and thus moves beyond the subject as the single site of experience, perception, and knowledge. This refusal to make committed, didactic, (re)constructive art constitutes a critique of tidy solidarity, progressive social values, and reactionary romanticism. Kharms attempts to move beyond referentiality, refusing to offer literature as evidence for the juridical reader. That which is ordinary, boring, anticlimactic and usual represents not a limit case of human experience, but its basic material core.

⁵³ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) pp. 248.

Something otherwise hidden or lost in Realist art is revealed and reclaimed in Kharms. The constant refusal of meaning—whether directly in content or implicitly in form—amplifies the impossibility of showing, by artistic means, the literal—further demonstrating how a Realist representation, with its tendencies toward sentimentality, clarity, and truth-telling remains a firm and obfuscating aesthetic mode in its own right. Writing about about-nothing is thus a way of confronting the world without naming the world, of constructing a lexicon of images adequate to the world’s unbearable nature without reliving or repeating the forms of violence therein. Thus, writing about about-nothing provides a way to see beyond a strictly representational mode of documenting, one which may or may not point toward an implicit trauma but, regardless, one which always necessarily gestures beyond it.

“Art takes second place”: Writing about about-nothing and becoming-ordinary-life

It would be too simple to say here that Kharms takes part in the avant-gardist ambition to abolish the barriers between art and life. Whereas the avant-garde sees the collapse of art into life as a political and revolutionary practice, Kharms sees it as a hermeneutic, and by extension, ontological one. In other words, the problem of the relationship between art and life is not, for Kharms, a problem of art’s autonomy from the social sphere. Neither does Kharms seek to disrupt the socioeconomic power structures and class politics which are maintained by the institutions of art. (Kharms, in fact, seems fairly disinterested in the social as such and refers to himself repeatedly

as apolitical. His general lack of political concern is, in part, what prompted a wave of historical readings of him.) Kharms sees art as a barrier to becoming. If art is the foundation of ethics and judgment, provides and perpetuates ready-made experiences, interpretations, desires, expectations, and beliefs, then Kharms must dissolve art in order to explore the ontological possibilities in its residuum.

Kharms conducts this exploration by enacting the sudden absence of art. He writes toward the silence from which art arises, thereby accessing the empty structures therein. Consider the following prose poem, “Blue Notebook #10”:

Once there was a redheaded man who had no eyes or ears. He didn't have hair either, so he was called a redhead arbitrarily.

He couldn't talk because he had no mouth. He didn't have a nose either.

He didn't have arms or legs. He had no stomach, he had no back, no spine, he didn't have any insides at all. There was nothing there. We don't even know who we're talking about.

It's better if we say nothing at all.⁵⁴

Kharms begins in the mode of conventional storytelling (“Once there was”), only to eschew all aesthetic modes of narrative by veering into a structure of negation. Narrative collapses into anecdote, art becomes its own absence on the level of content and form. As the subject himself (the redheaded man) disappears, so too does the narrative structure which invented him. It is not enough, however, simply to say that

⁵⁴ Daniil Kharms, “Sluchai,” *Today I Wrote Nothing: The Selected Writings of Daniil Kharms*, translated by Matvei Yankelevich, (New York, NY: Putnam, 2009) pp. 46.

“Blue Notebooks #10” is “about nothing.” We must also acknowledge the degree to which nothing produces the possibility of becoming something else. For the narrator of the poem is concerned with what is gone, what was never there, to begin with, and what might be there now. The work is not only “about nothing,” but is about about-nothing. In such a work of negation, the reader encounters “nothing to see,” “nothing happening”—the total absence of sensationalization, monumentality and aesthetics—thus finding themselves at the limit of art-as-experience. Kharms not only conducts a critique of language, narrative, and literature more broadly but also allows a space in which the reader might reclaim first-hand, sensory experience. Aesthetic features wane precisely so that being might unfold.

To be sure, Kharms writes about about-nothing in a way that is neither nihilistic nor spiritual. About-nothing does not represent physical death, psychological despair, or religious ecstasy. It is not the apocalyptic nothingness in Samuel Beckett, nor the self-annihilation of mysticism in George Bataille, nor the “blank page” of poetic anxiety. If the nothingness of Kharms is an extinction of any kind, it is an aesthetic, not an ontological extinction. Art must necessarily disappear as quickly as it came. Kharms, then, stages the act of writing as it comes to an end at the moment art proves to be insufficient and vanishes into becoming-ordinary-life.

In the prose poem, “One Man was Chasing Another,” Kharms again spotlights an interpretive/ontological potentiality. Here is the text in its entirety:

One day, a man was chasing another man, and the one running away was, in his turn, chasing a third one who, unaware he was being chased, was

simply striding along on the pavement stones at a generally moderate pace.⁵⁵

It is easy enough to see how this prose poem rejects traditional methods of poetry and prose writing, but we should also examine the way in which it resists falling into a mood of darkness, decay, or melancholy. As exemplified here, Kharms displays a simultaneity of completeness and fragmentation. If this poem is a fragment, it is one from a prospective future rather than from a fractured past (as in, say, Beckett or Eugène Ionesco)—a structural foundation, rather than a ruin. Occupying a condition of open-ended incompleteness, it gestures toward a possibility of meaning and becoming beyond the realm of art in itself. Such a gesture achieves two ends: 1) it calls attention to the unknowability of its own subject matter, thereby also issuing a challenge to the literature of witness and political telos, and 2) it opens a site of potential, both within the narrative (the reader is free to fill in the gaps left by the narrative) and without (the reader is free to move on from the narrative without the traumatic encounter of literature). Kharms frees himself, his characters, and his readers from what Michael Robbins calls the “tyranny of feeling” and “demand of aestheticized totality.”⁵⁶

Similarly, Matvei Yankelevich, a translator of Kharms, elaborates on this feature. He writes, “In Kharms there is still something left for the reader, even though

⁵⁵ Daniil Kharms, “Sluchai,” *Today I Wrote Nothing: The Selected Writings of Daniil Kharms*, translated by Matvei Yankelevich, (New York, NY: Putnam, 2009) pp. 198.

⁵⁶ Michael Robbins, *Equipment for Living*, (New York: NY: Simon & Schuster, 2018) pp. 142.

everything has been taken away. It is not the same as an empty stage. Rather, it is a stage that holds onto the shimmering traces of an event, or something having happened, or almost happened, or will happen ... Kharms moves toward silence—toward the impossibility of writing, toward self-negation and oblivion, in which being is revealed.”⁵⁷ Kharms records the inherently slippery subject/object relationship in art, thus moving away, not only from aesthetics but also, as Yankelevich notes, from the discrete self as a fixed epistemological and ontological unit. In this way, we need not read Kharms as wholly literal (a total destruction) nor as metaphorical (and therefore merely aesthetic), but rather as performative, gestural, discursive. Kharms writes about about-nothing so that we, his readers, might be unbound by historical demands of the something in art which might predetermine behavior and thought.

We might also see Kharms as struggling to occupy a pre-aesthetic moment, a state of ordinary, banal interaction, and interconnectivity with beings in the world. We see such a moment nowhere more clearly than in “The Meeting”:

Once upon a time, a man went to work, and on the way, he met another man, who, having bought a load of Polish bread, was heading back home where he came from. And that’s all there is to say.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Matvei Yankelevich, “Introduction,” *Today I Wrote Nothing: The Selected Writings of Daniil Kharms*, (New York, NY: Putnam, 2009).

⁵⁸ Daniil Kharms, “Sluchai,” *Today I Wrote Nothing: The Selected Writings of Daniil Kharms*, translated by Matvei Yankelevich, (New York, NY: Putnam, 2009) pp. 32.

Like the Haiku, the Modernist image, or the Objectivist's Object, this anti-story offers a non-mimetic encounter, an event in itself, without source, subject, signifier, message, or transformation. The event is stripped of all its social, cultural and political connotations. Nothing happens. The work is transmitted to us without the drudgery of study or the passage of time. The banality of this work is anti-fetishistic, for it remains in a state of what Adorno calls a "non-identical relation without relationally," which overturns the economization of modern feeling.⁵⁹ Its mode is anticlimax—refusing to mediate meditation, to transmit useful information, or, in the most extreme case, to witness the social, to monumentalize the public sphere, or, as the cliché goes, to say the "unsayable."

Even in Kharms's more overtly violent works, we are forced to confront not only the lack of details within the narration but also our own reaction to that lack—and thus to realize that what disgusts us the most is not the fact of violence—but the aesthetic mode which renders it visible. We are able to see how the aesthetic provides a seemingly natural foundation for a morality which, in turn, disguises or neglects actual human suffering. Consider the prose poem, "Events."

One day Orlov stuffed himself with mashed peas and died. Krylov, having heard the news, also died. And Spiridonov died regardless. And Spiridonov's wife fell from the cupboard and also died. And the Spiridonov children drowned in a pond. Spiridonov's grandmother took to

⁵⁹ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E.B. Ashton, (New York, NY: Continuum, 2007) pp. 146.

the bottle and wandered the highways. And Mikhailov stopped combing his hair and came down with mange. And Kruglov sketched a lady holding a whip and went mad. And Perekhryostov received four hundred rubles wired over the telegraph and was so uppity about it that he was forced to leave his job.⁶⁰

Kharms issues a critique of art and aesthetics as the means of judgment. Kharms doesn't allow his reader to make meaning out of suffering because the particulars of suffering remain outside of the poem. He does not speak his subject directly—the cause of suffering remains unspoken, unnamed, un-accused—and it is precisely in the ethics of “not saying” that we experience the shock of a genuine and radical unknowing (not to mention the awkward, nervous humor that accompanies shock). Here we see how judgement itself proves to be an aesthetic phenomenon against which Kharms provokes his readers to confront their own uncritical readiness to be guided, not by information alone, but by expectations of normal artistic methods of storytelling, whether they be formal, archetypal, logical, etc. In this way, Kharms's anti-narrative prose poems are not only inherently negative structures but also perform a negative dialectic in which knowledge collapses. Enlightenment here arises not from a unification of contending categories in which both categories are transformed in the revelation of a new category, but by the basic and undeniable realization of the limitations of knowledge as a self-sufficient operation.

⁶⁰ Daniil Kharms, “Sluchai,” *Today I Wrote Nothing: The Selected Writings of Daniil Kharms*, translated by Matvei Yankelevich, (New York, NY: Putnam, 2009) pp. 46.

In his article, “On Daniil Kharms,” Yakov Druskin, a close friend of Kharms, writes: “Kharms used to say to me, that art is second place, second place to making a life” (italics in the original).⁶¹ However anecdotal that statement may be, it proves itself true in Kharms’s art. For we confront in Kharms discrete moments in time where art necessarily collapses back into the possibility of *making a life*. Kharms offers an ongoing series of beginnings without endings—a network of stoppages and digressions, an endless, repetitive series of pointless interruptions, collisions, disappointments, abrupt and false resolutions which point beyond their artistic origin. Each individual text houses some unfinished potential, each contains the semblance of anonymity and isolation from any aesthetic or political authority. Thus, Kharms resists totality—whether it be the universality of aesthetic experience, the theory of aesthetic composition and encounter, the moral imperatives of Realism, or the sentimentality of political art—to reveal the point at which where aesthetic logic can go no further, where the act of political witness cannot testify. Representation fails to repeat its referent. As Mikhail Yampolsky puts it, “Kharms replaces memory with forgetfulness.”⁶² It is not that he rejects meaning, but that he gestures toward new becomings which occur in the inevitable aftermath of art.

⁶¹ Yakov Druskin in Neil Corwnwell, *Daniil Kharms and the Poetics of the Absurd: Essays and Materials*. (New York: NY: St. Martin’s Press. ed. 1991) pp. 85.

⁶² Makhail Yampolsky, *Bespamiatstvo kak istok: Chitaya Kharmsa*. (Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1997) pp. 82.

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