

HANG ON ST. CHRISTOPHER / BABEL OF THE APES

by

Eric Botts

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Graduate Faculty

of

George Mason University

in Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

Creative Writing

Committee:

_____ Director

_____ Department Chairperson

_____ Dean, College of Humanities and Social
Sciences

Date: _____ Spring Semester 2016
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Hang on St. Christopher / Babel of the Apes

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

Eric Botts
Bachelor of Fine Arts
The Pennsylvania State University, 2012

Director: Kyoko Mori, Professor
Department of English

Spring Semester 2016
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA



THIS WORK IS LICENSED UNDER A [CREATIVE COMMONS
ATTRIBUTION-NONCOMMERICALS 3.0 UNPORTED LICENSE](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/).

DEDICATION

The first part of this thesis, “Hang on St. Christopher,” is dedicated to Meg, whose love, support, and graciousness have allowed me to write about her and about our relationship honestly and, for the most part, guilt-free; to my father, whose sense of social independence, love for music, wanderlust, and generally down-to-earth attitude have informed my writing and approach to life immeasurably; and to my late brother Greg, about whose memory I remain woefully inarticulate.

The second part, “Babel of the Apes,” I dedicate to my mother, who instilled in me the skepticism, incisiveness, and ethics that led to my concern for animal rights and to my desire to write about science, even if I was too mathematically inept to conduct or learn it properly.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks, first, to Meg, my mother, and my father for all of your support, in all of its many, many forms. Thanks also to my thesis advisor Kyoko Mori, without whose guidance and insight these essays would never have come to life, and to Kim Todd, my undergraduate professor who not only first taught me that facts and arguments could be rendered artfully, but who also gave me invaluable advice on much of my research for “Babel of the Apes.” My gratitude to the rest of my thesis committee, Tim Denevi and Eric Pankey. And finally, thanks to my fellow writers at George Mason’s MFA program, most notably Robbie Maakestad, Kerry Folan, Rajpreet Heir, Amanda Canupp-Mendoza, Merrill Sunderland, Jeffrey Allen, Monica Booth, and PJ Majellan, all of whom offered indispensable feedback, both in and out of class, on one or both of the projects contained herein.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	vii
Hang on St. Christopher	1
Prelude	2
Love Letter in the Form of a Theme Song	2
Life in the City of Ghosts	9
Imposter.....	21
Leaving the City of Ghosts.....	25
Out from the Cave.....	25
Love Song.....	32
People Are Strange (& So Are We).....	40
The Vengeful Martyr	40
Holey Jacket.....	46
Joie d'Amor.....	48
Interlude.....	55
Clutch. Release.	55
Corn & Porn & Sweet Mary Jane.....	61
Corn & Porn.....	61
Kindness in the Land of Bud.....	63
Garden of the Gods	69
Pocket Rockets	70
Free Money	75
We Don't Take <i>Those</i> Here	75
Delicate Lyrics.....	81
Hang on St. Christopher	99
Not Unlike Tom Thumb's Blues.....	99

It's More Than Rain	110
Harry Potter & the Escape from Consumer Culture	113
South of the Rising Sun.....	115
Epilogue	140
Like a Rolling Fucking Cliché.....	140
Babel of the Apes	143
The Speaking Shall Inherit the Earth.....	144
“An Intelligent, Personable Center of a Scientific Project”	144
“The Victims of Our Injustice”	147
Some Necessarily Inadequate & Self-Contradictory Definitions from the <i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>	149
The Speaking Shall Inherit the Earth.....	151
Monkey-See-Monkey-Do	154
The End of Nim.....	158
A Somewhat Slogging & Righteously Angry Argument Against Animal Cruelty That You Could Skip to the Last Paragraph of, but I'd Rather You Didn't Because It's Kind of the Emotional & Intellectual Crux of This Essay	160
Babel of the Apes: Humanity as God.....	166
Charmed, I'm Sure	169
Through an Uncanny Mirror, Darkly	173
Celebrity & Controversy	176
Names & Knowledge	179
Trust in a Name	181
Contact.....	185
“No Trespassing”	186
“HELLO, MY NAME IS KANZI”	189
“Creative Elements”	196
Carefully Chosen Words	198
Notes	214
Bibliography.....	216
Biography	219

ABSTRACT

HANG ON ST. CHRISTOPHER / BABEL OF THE APES

Eric Botts,

George Mason University, 2016

Thesis Director: Kyoko Mori

This thesis consists of two long essays. The first, “Hang on St. Christopher,” tells the story of a cross-continental roadtrip that I took with my girlfriend Meg before I moved away from her in Pennsylvania to attend graduate school at George Mason in Northern Virginia. We had wanted to share an adventure before my leaving as a way of building a stronger foundation so that we could better stand the separation of a long-distance relationship. But I had been concerned that the trip, for which Meg was footing most of the bill, would end up highlighting our class differences to the point that our relationship would fall apart entirely. The essay examines those class differences, the ways in which they manifest, and how they affected our relationship over the course of the roadtrip.

The second essay, “Babel of the Apes,” details and discusses the fraught history of language-research on great-apes, specifically on the chimpanzee, Nim, and the bonobo, Kanzi. The essay focuses on researchers’ and the public’s susceptibility to both ends of the anthropomorphic/-centric spectrum. In the case of ape-language research, researchers who have indulged some degree of anthropomorphism have often made, at first, scientific breakthroughs over the nature of language and other animals’ capacity for it. Years and sometimes decades later, though, those researchers would have swung so far into one or the other end of that spectrum that they would find themselves accused of animal mistreatment, conducting “bad science,” or both. At the heart of the essay is the question of how to navigate the murky waters that this spectrum represents as scientists, essayists, animal lovers, and most of all, as human beings trying our best to understand our relationship to other species.

HANG ON ST. CHRISTOPHER

On Home & the Road

PRELUDE

LOVE LETTER IN THE FORM OF A THEME SONG

In 2013's Erie, Pennsylvania, Poet's Hall huddled on East Lake Road amid rundown bars and laundromats, mini-grocers and convenience stores, three- and four-level apartment buildings, and Ultimate Warrior Martial Arts. In one of the city's less affluent eastern suburbs, black-curtained windows guarded against the outside world while yellow bulbs strung together like Christmas lights invited it in. Travel a bit farther down East Lake Road, and you'll hit Erie's East Side, the part of the city that, in the past few years, has become locally infamous for its shootings, vandalism, and other crimes so horrifying that I have trouble reconciling them with my childhood and teenage memories of Erie.

I'd grown up in Harborcreek, one of the city's middle-to-upper-middle-class suburbs, sheltered from this sort of thing. Only I'd also spent a great deal of my time, since I was fifteen, in the city proper. My Erie had been cold, impoverished, and run through with potholes and dilapidated factories, but I'd had no fear, for instance, when I was sixteen, and my friend and I walked almost two hours from Harborcreek, through the East Side, to attend the final poetry reading that Poe's Café would have before it closed in 2002.

So when I talk about Erie, it's with a mix of nostalgia—for the poetry readings, punk and hardcore shows, and art shows that characterized my teens—and sadness for the downward spiral it's been in since long before then. And when I talk about Poet's Hall as it was in 2013, I think of the people there who characterize that blend of emotions for me. My girlfriend Meg and I would later refer to Poet's Hall as Erie's Island of Misfit Toys. Eventually, she'd write fiction about it bearing that same title. And indeed, in this perpetually dying city, Poet's Hall was not just an island of poetry; it was also a small haven for at least a few of the city's poor, its mentally and emotionally and physically challenged, its social outcasts—a place of welcome for poets, misfits, and everyone between.

Poet's Hall has since moved to the city proper. The current décor present a more welcoming ethos, but in 2013, it was the epitome of black. The stage was black. The podium, black. The stool where readers would sit, the floor, the scattered metal folding chairs, all black. And to light it all, strings of lights spiraled around curtain rods and microphone stands, and they framed the podium and stage-front. For readings and open mics, attendees brought their own booze, filling a dark, scuffed wooden table with boxed wines, Yeungling, Mr. Pibb, and Kraken rum. Next to the booze, a fishbowl half-filled with small-denomination bills received donations to help the owner, Cee, cover the venue's overhead.

On the night that I want to tell you about, even the weather spoke a great deal of my Erie. Sheets of ice blanketed the windows of cars, and the snow reached well past my brown workboots. At 6'3", this wasn't so much a problem for me, but for Meg, at

5'1" (and a *half*, she likes to remind me), the block spent trudging through snow and ice presented more of a problem, especially given the shallow tread of her boots. More than once, I'd had to take her by the hand to help her through a snowmound, and at one point, I caught her by the arm to keep her from falling after her foot had slipped straight out from under her.

That night's featured reader—a middle-aged man with lightly salted hair, a five o'clock shadow, and mild pudg—read in a way meant to echo the 1950s and 60s beat poet scene. Each poem's speaker was a character from a classic film or TV show—*Cool Hand Luke*, *M*A*S*H*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The poems were funny and had some vivid and insightful moments, but that's not the point. You can't judge readings at Poet's Hall on any but its own terms, which can be understood only from the kind of perspective with which Erie, isolating and dark and economically depressed, fills its artists.

Here's what I mean: After maybe a dozen persona poems, he thanked everyone and cracked a couple of jokes. His exit from the stage met sizeable applause—even for this place, which has always been of the sort where the audience applauds after every poem. That is, Poet's Hall can be judged only in terms of community and support.

In fifteen minutes, the open mic would begin. Meanwhile, a coterie rushed for jackets, gloves, scarves, hats, and Camel Lights. They funneled out the door, rubbing and huffing into their hands, lipping their cigarettes. Meg knew a couple of these people well, and a few others vaguely. But I knew most of them at least on a surface

level because, since I'd been going to Poe's Café, back in '02, and some even before then, they'd been floating from Cuppacino's to Poe's to Mooncents to Papa Joe's.

Over the years, all of those coffee shops had closed. Poet's Hall, though, had survived because its singular mission had always been to support local poetry. It's never sold coffee or booze—or anything more than a t-shirt now and then. The coffee shops had shared that mission, but most of Erie's poets and poetry enthusiasts are poor and have never been able to offer the customer base needed to keep those businesses open. Cutting out the retail and service negates space requirements, utilities, and other overhead, to the point that Poet's Hall can run on donations and other small incomes.

During the fifteen-minute break, Meg and I headed to the booze table, where I cracked open one of the Yeungling Black & Tans that we'd brought. Meg stared through strands of dyed-red hair at the rest of the spread: "I just can't do it. I can't drink boxed wine. It's against my nature." Her dad had taught her, at eight years old, how to sip and smell wine. Then he'd quiz her on the scents and flavors that came to mind. For him, this wasn't about letting his daughter taste alcohol now and then; it was about educating her on how to drink good wine. So her refusal of boxed wine is rooted in her relationship with her father. Over the two years that we'd been together, she'd developed a taste for beer too. Yeungling B&T might not exactly be the *crème de la crème*, but it's decent for a mass-produced beer, and it's certainly more drinkable than Franzia, so I cracked another one open and handed it to her.

She sighed and took a sip as the owner, Cee, whom I'd known since the old days of Poe's Café, approached. He'd emerged from the back room smelling of weed. Threads

of smoke crawled from door to ceiling. “Mr. Botts.” He nodded and waved his hand out as he gave a slight bow.

“What’s up, Cee?”

“Oh, you know, chilling. You sticking around for the open mic? Got a little something to read, maybe?”

I didn’t. I’d come because the faculty in the creative writing program that I’d graduated from and that Meg still attended at Behrend, a branch campus of Penn State in Erie, had been talking up the movie persona guy. I hadn’t been here in a while and didn’t even know about the post-reading open mic. “Sorry, man. I’m unprepared.” Then I realized, “Shit! I don’t think you guys have met. This is Meg, my girlfriend. She’s in the writing program at Behrend.” I turned to Meg. “Cee’s from way back. I’ve known him since I was like fifteen.”

“No shit?” he asked. “Damn, I’m getting old.”

Meg shook his hand. “Hi—so it’s ‘Cee’, like the letter, right?”

“That’s right, that’s right.” He poured a drink and looked at his phone. “Gotta get things moving.” Then he jogged to the front door, yanked it open, and called out, “Yo, poetry in five minutes!” Then he slipped into the back again.

The readings that night were the usual fare: Confessions, rants, raves, rambles, and fantasies. Then a guy I’d seen around for years but had never talked to for more than an introduction took the stage. There’s something shameful in the fact that I couldn’t, and still can’t, remember his name—or for that matter, the names of half the

people there, whom I'd seen a thousand times—but I'm going to call him Aaron because I need to call him something, and Aaron's as good a name as any.

With his characteristic hunch, shaking body, and generally nervous affect, he stepped onto the stage and glanced around the room before taking the podium. Someone hooted and called out an inside joke at which a third of the room, including Aaron, chuckled. "So-ssso-s-s-so," he began, eventually powering through his persistent stutter to explain that he didn't have a poem to read, but he had something else for us. The earnestness in his eyes didn't match the next sentence: "D-d-does anyone rrr-re-mmber the show *Cheers*?" Most of us gave quiet but encouraging *uh-huhs*, a couple of people exclaimed that they *loved* the show, and one guy hooted (I think the same one as before). Aaron had always liked *Cheers* because the characters accepted and appreciated each other. For that reason, they reminded of him of this community of Erie poets, so he wanted to sing the theme song for us. His stutter disappeared, but his voice still quaked:

Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got.
Taking a break from all your worries sure would help a lot.
Wouldn't you like to get away?

I fancy myself an analytical person, someone who patterns in objects and events as symbolic and meaningful. I'm not talking about new-agey mysticism. I mean that I try to inductively read meaning into the world and my life because it helps me work through the questions that keep me up at night—about personal ethics, about my relationships with others, about my tendency to estrange myself from loved ones I don't see on a regular basis; we all have questions that dog our sleep. But I'm not sure

what I should make of this moment. It seems too easy to read it to mean, simply, that I should feel bad for not knowing his name while he sang,

Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name,
and they're always glad you came."

He worked through the song off-key, off-rhythm, and generally off-. It was beautiful in the way that damaged, limping things can sometimes be beautiful, in a sort of painful, heart-rending way. Who cares that I can't remember his name? This was a love letter to his audience, to his community, to Poet's Hall, to the city of Erie, which seemed remarkably like my Erie.

At the end of the song, his voice faded out, as if he were a ghost being pulled back to the underworld while he repeated to inaudibility:

You wanna go where everybody knows your name.
You wanna go where everybody knows your name.
You wanna go where everybody knows your name.
You wanna go where everybody knows your name.

The usual polite clappers started, but then two audience members shot up and clapped with genuine enthusiasm, spurring others to rise, some lifting themselves by the arms of chairs, some by canes and walkers, some by the hands of young friends and lovers, but most looked around uncertainly for a while and then, with an air of pity or of giving in to the crowd, stood slowly. But there was no room for modest clapping. Soon the pity gave way to genuine applause, a standing ovation to the theme song from *Cheers*.

LIFE IN THE CITY OF GHOSTS

When I was eight and my brother eleven, our parents asked how we'd feel leaving our home in Tampa, Florida to live in Erie, Pennsylvania. A strange move, people told us—perpetual warmth to perpetual precipitation—but our mother had gotten a tenure-track job teaching biology at Behrend. Or at least that was the narrative for the first twenty years of my life, after which my mother told me that we'd moved because the Botts family business, IDOD (pronounced *eye-dod*), had been swallowing my father limb-by-limb. Along with his sister, brothers, parents, and a few employees outside the family, he shipped and traded industrial materials to other companies internationally. My father had destroyed his back trying to keep IDOD afloat with his family, but it had been limping along since long before I was born and was neither about to revive itself nor kick off any time soon. He'd told my mother that we needed to escape and that she should take the first job she could find.

Maybe that need to escape is hereditary; the word “move” sparked in me (strangely, for an eight-year-old) an urge toward a new beginning, a reset button on life. Of course, as a child, I didn't know how Erie could trap its residents under mountains and floods of precipitation and poverty. I wouldn't see that for another seven or eight years, when my father lost his job and my parents divorced. Then he began jumping from motel to trailer to dingy apartment, from unemployment to telemarketing, from barstool to barstool. Even then, I still wouldn't fully recognize Erie as the sinkhole that it is until I started scraping in money from jobs at restaurants,

grocery stores, and gas stations. Eventually, the bleakness of those jobs pushed me to pursue higher education.

Before Behrend, I earned my associate's degree in graphic design at the Erie Institute of Technology (EIT). While there, I interned at a local TV station, erasing backgrounds from celebrity photos, adding bevels and glows to onscreen text, and making the ring around the station's logo spin every few seconds during the morning news. My supervisor once raved over the quality of my logo spinning. Emboldened, I asked what the chances were of a job after the internship. She stared a moment and then burst into laughter. I'd missed the joke. The corners of her eyes dropped, and her brow lifted. "Oh, honey, if it were up to me, I'd hire you in a heartbeat. Believe me, I could use the help. But do you know what they pay *me* here? The chances they'd hire anyone new— You don't wanna work here anyway. Trust me."

That conversation echoes off of every crumbling brick from Erie's crumbling factories. It hangs from the exposed and abandoned skeleton of the Hammermill Paper Company off the Bayfront Connector highway. It cracks through the historic Colt Station Restaurant's white paint now grayed and browned with age. It rattles in old men's duct-taped cups on State Street, their bodies slumped, waiting for enough change to drag themselves to Dominic's Eatery for a bottomless cup of burnt coffee and a ham sandwich.

During my time at EIT, my father fled Erie's economic and climatic oppression—and more tellingly, he fled my brother Greg's slow death from lifelong heart disease and kidney failure. He escaped right back to Florida and the same, still-failing family

business. I gave up resenting him when, having flown back as Greg's dying came on, he entered the hospital room in the last few minutes.

I'd rather spare you, and myself, the scene that I've written countless times with overwrought, inadequate language and, instead, say only that my brother died just before the sun rose, that I went back with my father to his room at the Lighthouse Inn, and that, just as we'd done with Greg when he was alive, we smoked weed, got drunk, watched Comedy Central, and played chess until everything went a little mute.

When I started at Behrend in 2008, I was twenty-three—just old enough that I struggled to relate to my eighteen- and nineteen-year-old classmates. Every year, I befriended the graduating class, and the next year, I found myself newly friendless—no one stays in Erie if they can help it. Just before my junior year in 2011, I celebrated the graduations of the few friends who'd been closer to my age when I started. A fellow leftover, John, exclaimed with a bit of mock drama, "What am I gonna do without you guys? It's like the Beatles splitting up!" He had one more year. I had two-&-a-half. I cycled through a mental list of who'd be left after John, and came up with about six names. Even outside of Behrend, I really only had two friends who'd stuck around Erie. Add to those eight Meg, whom I'd meet later that year. By 2012, I was down to about five, including Meg.

Erie makes moping, bitter assholes of us all. It's the snow. The rain. The fog. Whatever precipitation oppresses the city at whatever God-forsaken moment.

Early in 2013, after I'd graduated, but before we'd decided on the roadtrip, that oppression took the form of some two feet of snow. Ice layered the roads so thick it'd be a week before the salt trucks had any real effect. From every stop, I had to feather-pump the gas, coaxing Alexander—the little Hyundai I'd inherited from Greg and dubbed with his middle name—into a sad crawl by languorous degrees.

Meg was visiting her mother in Zelienople, a suburb of Pittsburgh. Of my four other friends, two lived across town, where my car would never reach in that weather, one was studying for an exam, and one was under house arrest for violating his probation by catching yet another DUI after having killed a motorcyclist in a previous drunk-driving incident two years ago. I couldn't bring myself to visit him.

Sitting in the parking lot of my apartment complex, Northview Heights, I took my key from the ignition and stewed a moment on the past week, which I'd spent entirely by myself, in my almost completely unfurnished apartment, getting drunk and stoned while playing videogames and watching *The Princess Bride*, *Wall-E*, and endless episodes of *Arrested Development*. I pressed my head against the seatback and stared into the fresh case of Yeungling on the passenger seat. Already, the snow had begun to cake my windshield and to gather in its own slow melt. My throat clenched. My face burned. My fingers ached from their grip on the base of the steering wheel. I screamed a rush of obscenities and smacked the wheel with the heel of my wrist until my muscles shuddered.

I sat a quiet moment longer, climbed out of the car, and brought the beer inside for a night spent sloshing into my apartment walls, spilling now and then into the

kitchen to slop and eat undercooked rice and lentils, and wash them down between hits of weed with warm Yeungling in front of *The Man with the Screaming Brain*, a less-than-B Bruce Campbell movie I'd watched at least six times before.

At 4am, my fermenting gut sent groans through my whole body, aching me awake. By the time I found my bearings, my throat already burned acidic. I charged across the hall to the bathroom and slung myself over the toilet. Nothing in my life inspires greater pity than the violence of my drunken vomiting. The force of it leaves my muscles limp for days afterward, wracks my chest with whoop-clattering, bronchitic coughs, and lodges bits of half-digested food in my nasal cavities. That night, after the vomiting and subsequent cleaning, I wept madly from the pain and loneliness and for the weakness that I saw in myself.

The next day, I dragged my body into a sitting position at 2pm and indulged my old videogame addiction as I hadn't done since I'd moved, three years earlier, out of the basement bedroom that Greg used to inhabit in our mom's suburban home. For almost twelve hours straight, I played *Arc the Lad*—a role-playing game originally made for the little-known TurboGrafx-16 gaming console and later ported to Sony's original PlayStation console. I paused only to use the restroom, pack weed into my bowl, and snack on the unrefrigerated rice and lentils from the night before.

In December of 2012, about two weeks before my first anniversary with Meg, I graduated from Behrend. January through March, my monthly electric bills grew from

their temperate-weather average of \$40-80 to a staggering winter high of \$250-350—nearly the cost of rent, which was \$480. But no matter how incessant the blast from my heating vents, no matter my cocoon of clothing and comforters and sleeping bags, the cold ached deep into my marrow. I'd lay there, shaking so hard that I'd become both physically and emotionally exhausted, and I would think of my father's having lived in this very same apartment complex, two floors up, just three years before me.

Once, when Greg and I were around eighteen and fifteen, respectively, we were leaving from a visit with our dad. We climbed into Greg's car, and as he reached to turn the ignition and crank the heat, he exposed his meatless arm, not just shivering, but quaking, as if he were a frail old man. Born with a weak heart, which led to further complications with his kidneys, Greg lived through back-to-back surgeries, mountains of pills, in-home and on-site dialysis, and long stays in Intensive Care. He said that, in the cold, movement was difficult and painful because he'd developed rheumatoid arthritis from, I don't know, his medications or dialysis or whatever else might somehow spur the immune system into self-destructive overdrive. But even worse, he said, he could actually feel his blood slowing, like it was freezing in his veins.

Living at Northview, I grew to understand, though to a far lesser extent than Greg would have known, the sort of pain that comes with unrelenting cold. When Meg stayed with me, we'd crush ourselves into each other's body, drawing close as our muscles ached for warmth and the furnace strained to work my 850-ft² apartment to 68°, managing what felt closer to 45° between walls utterly hollowed of insulation. Within them lived an animal. It scuttled and scratched in the night, tossed and thumped

throughout the walls and ceiling. Maybe a possum or raccoon, it would sometimes growl, hiss, and tumble with a second body. After the rumble and a frantic skittering away, at last came a quiet sigh as the victor settled in for sleep. Some nights I half-expected them to drop through the drywall and onto my lap, biting and clawing at each other, tearing my face into fleshy confetti.

Once, I reported the situation to Emilee, the office manager at Northview. She said she'd have a maintenance guy find the animal's entryway and "either set a bit of poison or some of that hormone spray to draw whatever it is out. Then he can trap it, kill it, and patch the hole." I stared at her, trying not to betray my ethical pangs at this thought because I'd realized in that moment that, to most people, I'd be silly to expect anything other than Emilee's solution.

Over the next month, I hardly slept, waiting each night to hear life between my home's borders. And each night, when the scuffling resumed, I thanked whatever had stopped the operation—poor office communication, laziness, a lost work order. Whatever. I'd only wanted them to lure the animal out and patch the hole to reduce my heating costs. But I'd rather endure the cold and procure government aid to pay my bills than have to hear or imagine the terminal squirms and squeals of a poisoned raccoon.

Economically and emotionally depressed, I clung to what had been my student job as "lead tutor" at Behrend's Learning Resource Center, despite having graduated in December. There, I scraped in \$15/hr at twenty hours a week. Despite my degrees in

graphic design and creative writing, I'd have been lucky to earn, at any of Erie's maybe ten design jobs, what I was making as a tutor, and the chances of any smalltime ad company or smaller-time Erie publisher giving me more than an unpaid internship were slim-to-nil, especially given my plans to move to Virginia come mid-summer to attend grad school at George Mason University.

Most days, after tutoring, I'd walk a half-mile from campus to Meg's place at University Gates Apartments. During my fourth undergraduate year, we'd met in a global literature class. I was immediately drawn to her for reasons that I can explain only in part. She hardly spoke in or out of class, but her facial expressions, especially in her eyes and brow, spoke volumes about her skepticism and wry humor, two traits that I find irresistible. And she had a sort of misfit quality to her, as if she felt constantly out of place, mirroring the feelings of isolation that defined my life in Erie.

I'd park at U-Gates, which never enforced their parking regulations, to avoid buying a campus permit. We'd stay a couple hours, watching *Doctor Who* or whatever streaming video held her screen-addicted roommate's glazed attention just then.

(Usually, I jest you not, it was the newly rebooted *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*.)

I'd brood over what to do when my job dissolved at the schoolyear's end and how to afford my new VA apartment while in grad school. Meg, who would graduate in May, had started picking fights over that move, confronting my evasiveness on the future of our relationship. I'd ask her to come with me, and she'd argue that she couldn't leave her family without good reason—a job, further education, or marriage,

which was the beating heart of the issue. Our relationship at the time was just over a year old, too young, in my view, to warrant a marriage proposal.

Meg didn't have that reservation, and her divorced Irish Catholic mother April not only disapproved of premarital cohabitation, but she also had a serious case of empty-nest syndrome, a constant source of guilt for Meg, who often closed off discussions with, "I can't leave my mom all alone." Her mother's side of the family also subscribed to a brand of Catholic teachings that were stuck on the idea, more so than most Catholics these days, that women needed husbands to take care of them, in effect saying that they can't take care of themselves. On top of that, both her mother and father were hard-bound to the particularly American ideas of work and education that undermine the value of the fine arts, which Meg seemed to internalize in spite of her talent as a writer. The result was her persistent belief, no matter what I or anyone else said, that her writing and GPA were nowhere near good enough to get her into any graduate writing program and that she had no marketable job skills. So the idea of moving even a mere five-hour drive from her mother, and her familial support system, inspired tear-inducing guilt and crippling fear.

On the other hand, because my brother had spent so much of his life in hospitals, my parents spent a significant portion of their time and attention on him, causing me to develop a fierce independence and a distancing loner's temperament. This is why, ever since I moved out at twenty-three, I'd been dismantling what remained of my financial dependence on my mother. I'd even hidden my post-graduation financial struggles so that she wouldn't feel obligated to help. My

independent streak had led me to wonder whether I even wanted to get married to anyone, ever.

Add to all of that April's quiet disapproval of my poverty and atheism, and you should have a pretty full sense of why marriage was such a serious issue for Meg and me.

After a couple of hours spent brooding and fighting and watching TV, we'd dig my car from the snow and drive wordlessly to my dank basement apartment while Tom Waits graveled through the stereo.

Meg didn't share my love for Waits' ravaged voice. She'd grown up singing along with her dad's vocal-piano covers of Billy Joel songs. She'd grown up training to sing and dance and act and improv at an after-school theatre program, in which she'd had roles in musicals like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Peter Pan*, and *Alice in Wonderland*. That is, her notions of good singing did not accommodate the male voices that I most love—ravaged, warbling, deep, and unsettling voices that shudder the bones. (Though she does like, even loves, Patti Smith, one of the somewhat rarer women whose voices fit similar descriptions.) She preferred Elton John, Broadway soundtracks, and of course, the Piano Man himself, Billy Joel.

Fair enough, but Waits' paradox had fascinated me for years—a ragged voice that could rip the flesh from my bones and yet leave me with a feeling of comfort. In spite of his way of warping sweet melodies into tooth-cracking maladies, a dogged sense of hope and love fills his ballads, marking him forever as a symbol of my Erie:

The only way to live with that city's dilapidated factories and cold, homeless bodies is to believe deeply in a kindness beneath the tortured surface.

At my apartment, we'd scrounge a paltry meal of grains and beans, and we'd smoke weed and chow down in front of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which Meg had introduced me to somewhere around our third or fourth date. One of her, and subsequently my, favorite episodes was "Hush," in which a group of ghouls known as the Gentlemen, bearing old-style black leather medical bags, come to Sunnydale, California. One night, as the city sleeps, they steal its inhabitants' voices, muting their screams as the Gentlemen carve out their hearts. Amid the silent terror, the city tumbles into riot and chaos as its communities crumble without voices to bind them.

To avoid arguments over the marriage issue, we resorted to a silence of our own, filling the void with music and television. And without voices to bind us, we began to resent each other, our relationship buckling under the weight of our mutual, and mutually damaging, coping mechanism. So when one of us broke the silence, the other rarely listened, because listening would force us to trace back to the root of the marriage issue, my moving and what would become of us. Somehow, the vagueness of wait-&-see felt more bearable than the half-certainty of an answer to that question.

One night, though, after watching an episode or two of *Buffy* while curled up on my futon, I started tickling her. Nowhere on Meg's body is immune to this torture, so of course, subjecting her to it is among my favorite pastimes. She began cackling and squealing: "No! No! Shit! Damn you, stop!" She tried to retaliate, but I was stronger and better at resisting the torment, so she tried to lick me instead. Eventually, as she

straddled my ribs, her tongue less than an inch from my face, I yelled, “Okay, okay, truce! Don’t fucking lick me! Truce dammit!” Panting, she slowly withdrew her tongue behind her lips and laid her head on my chest. Looking up at me, she said, “You know, in Europe, people usually ride trains across the continent for a year after they graduate.”

This was her oblique lead-in to a discussion of traveling the US and Canada with me before I moved. “That sounds amazing,” I said, “but there’s no way I can afford the trip.”

She began drawing circles with her index finger on my shoulder. “Well, if I paid for most of it... ?”

“Seriously? That’s nuts, Meg. I can’t let you do that.”

“Well, you’ll just have to pay for our trip across Europe when you graduate.”

Of course, within this deal was an implied long-term commitment, which was what I wanted, so long as it didn’t also necessitate marriage in the near future.

The trouble, though, was that the deal wasn’t really fair to either of us. I was pretty certain that I wouldn’t be able to afford a trip to Europe straight out of grad school. Nonetheless, quietly, I agreed: “Okay. If you cover most of this trip, I’ll cover one after I finish school.” So, regardless of our her intentions, Meg had lain on me the future promise of an untenable financial burden, and I couldn’t help feeling that I had taken advantage of her by agreeing to it. We had each placed the other into opposing positions of class guilt.

Ultimately, though, it seems important to recognize that none of this was really about mutual giving. We were using the roadtrip and the Europe deal as makeshift bindings until we could build a more stable foundation for our relationship.

So be it. We'd move my possessions to my new Virginia home in July and leave them while we trekked the US and Canada through to early August.

IMPOSTER

As my move and our cross-continental adventure approached, I became fixated on Meg's and my vastly different experiences in both financial and social class. My mother was a college professor, which helped advance my social class, and I grew up with plenty of middle-class comforts, but my father's career in personal counseling never panned out. My mother had helped get him a job in Behrend's human resources department, but while their marriage was approaching its end, he let his anger take over at work one day and lost his job. Since then, he'd gone back and forth between menial jobs and unemployment. So my class was relatively mixed. Meg's father is squarely upper class with his career as a legal adviser, and her mother, even after their divorce, remained at least in the upper echelons of the middle class by virtue of alimony, child support, and some well-planned stocks.

For me, the roadtrip may have been a source of excitement and romantic symbolism, but it was also a source of anxiety and a deeply felt imposterism.

In the week before the roadtrip began, I'd met up with Joyce, a mutual friend of Meg's and mine in Erie who also happens to be my former girlfriend. She packed a

bowl, cracked me what was probably my fifth or sixth Southern Tier 2xIPA, turned on a playlist of bands covering Pixies' songs—several versions of “Where Is My Mind,” among other tunes. She asked me to walk her through the general route again, so I explained: We would move my life from here to Burke, Virginia, then escape higher north into Ontario, west and south through Nebraska, Colorado, and Texas, east to Florida, and back north to Virginia, where I would stay to start my first year at George Mason. Meg, though, would return to living with her mom in Zelienople because she wouldn't be “one of those girls who just follows her boyfriend around the country” unless she had a good reason to do so—career, school, marriage proposal—because, “What would happen if we broke up?” She didn't want to end up professionally, academically, financially, and emotionally stranded.

I tried not to linger on this point and instead told Joyce about the stops we'd planned out: Wineries, brewpubs, weed in Colorado (where it had just become legal), some Canadian landmarks, Harry Potter Land at Universal Studios, Meg's father in Texas, and mine in Florida.

But then, after a long pause, I slurred, “I don't know if it's gonna work. She's never had to worry about money, and she's inherited and saved like twenty-grand from her family. She doesn't wanna sleep in dingy motels or pass out in my car. She wants fancy rooms with Jacuzzis and shit.” I said we couldn't afford the expense and relative luxury that Meg was used to—which, in fairness, she only ever indulged on occasion, and for the most part, only on good food and wine, which I really can't complain about since I often blow the first chunk of my meagre paychecks on craft beer and a bag of

weed. Nonetheless, I had a romantically Spartan attitude toward travel that stood, from my perspective, in direct opposition to hers, which favored upper-crust luxury and accommodations.

I explained all of this and confided that I didn't know if our relationship would fare well against, in so many words, our class differences.

Joyce's jaw dropped, her eyes grew, and she cut me off: "Hey asshole, don't you fucking—" She pointed the mouthpiece of her pipe at me like an angry finger. "I like Meg, so you'd better not fucking use this trip to sabotage your relationship. It's gonna be fine, so chill the fuck out, and shut the fuck up." She lowered the pipe and stared at me a moment. Then, like a foul-mouthed, punked-out mother scolding her son for being petty and small-minded toward a girlfriend she finally approved of, she added, "I mean it. I like this one, you fucker. Don't be a dick." Then she shrugged gingerly, hit the pipe, and handed it my way.

I hadn't meant what I'd said as Joyce had taken it, but still, point made. What kind of prick says, "Our relationship might not fare well against our class differences"? Not to mention that I'm a white boy from the suburbs, so what kind of weight does my voice hold on the subject anyway? And what's more—drunk, stoned, or sober—who talks to their ex about current relationship woes, especially when said ex is also friends with their current lover? I had no defense, but my anxiety remained, as did the sense that, by not talking openly about it with Meg, I was an imposter, a lowlife posing as a lover for a free vacation. No matter that I really did love her, my class is as much a part of my identity as my atheism and vegetarianism. The thought of living above that class,

through my girlfriend's money, inspired feelings I couldn't even begin to process rationally at the time.

LEAVING THE CITY OF GHOSTS

OUT FROM THE CAVE

Even in context with Erie's general bleakness, my apartment at Northview was isolated, dark, and depressing. My windows were roughly the size of two adjacent sheets of computer paper turned landscape orientation. They peered out at ground level, grass and bushes occluding their views. Every time a tenant moved out, which was often, maintenance repainted the apartment, leaving eggshell white splattered over wooden trim and doorframes.

A thin carpet stretched tightly across the concrete foundation. When I first moved there, in 2010, I had no bed. Even padded with every comforter, blanket, towel, and pillow that I owned, the floor forgave no hip, shoulder, knee, or elbow for resting on it. In those first two weeks, I alternately hunched or limped, depending on how I'd lain the night before, in which I might have slept three hours. When I left, in 2013, one could easily mistake the boxes and boxes stacked in the living room to mean that this place had been well-furnished. But they held little more than books and cooking utensils.

I'd sold my younger self's collections of videogames and music to lighten the burden of the move and to stir up some cash. The cashier at the Exchange offered no sympathy, only about \$1,200 store credit or \$750 cash. When I said, in a rare moment of naked public emotion, "I feel like I'm selling my childhood," he replied coldly, "You

could get more on eBay.” He was right. Many of the roughly 150 games that I owned would’ve sold easily for \$80-200, but I had less than a month before the move. I took the \$750 and left quietly.

Now, I would leave my home and childhood with: A futon that would fall apart six months later, an armchair and papasan, an endtable, a dining table and chairs, a bookshelf and floorlamp and large but stylish glass-&-aluminum desk, a bag of toiletries, a shaving kit, a suitcase and garbage bag of clothes, a few pairs of shoes, a tattered canvas sport coat and scuffed leather jacket, an acoustic guitar and acoustic bass guitar, a string dulcimer and banjo, some kitchenware and pottery, a box of videogames and CDs and movies that collector’s sentimentality forbade me to sell, an eight-year-old desktop computer that would die within months, and a three-year-old laptop that would become obsolete within two more.

I’d packed too many books in too few boxes, all large and too flimsy to bear the weight. While Doug, my mother’s husband of about ten years, prepped the moving trailer, my mother reminded me, twice, that she’d told me that overpacked books are cumbersome and the worst to carry. Cumbersome, sure, but my other packing jobs showed that plenty of other items could be far worse to carry—the plastic tote bin with my desktop computer and peripherals, for instance, or the one with most of my kitchen supplies, both of which were so heavy that they cracked when we picked them up, forcing us to carry them from the bottom (which, albeit, was much easier). I’d packed horribly but had no more boxes or totes, and it was much too late to get more and repack, so we carried with care.

By the time we finished loading the trailer, my mother and I both had to change our sweatlogged shirts. Meg and Doug didn't fare much better. We needed breakfast.

After many a drunken night in Erie, Meg and I used to recuperate in the morning at the Breakfast Place, a diner within a half-mile of Northview. As connoisseurs of greasy breakfast diners, throughout the roadtrip, we would seek them out in Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, Ontario, Nebraska, Illinois, Colorado, Texas, and Florida. Chalk it up to hometown bias, but the Breakfast Place on East 38th in Erie, PA is the best breakfast diner in America. Eating elsewhere on our last day in town would have been unconscionable.

When we arrived, Terri poured coffee for Meg and me without having to ask. "How's it going guys? And who are these lovely folks?"

"Well, this is my mom," I explained, "and that's her husband Doug."

Terri was certain that she'd met them before, and yes, Doug said, "Sometimes we come in with my daughter and granddaughters."

"That's it! I knew I'd seen you here!" She poured their coffee, asked if they wanted anything else, then turned back to Meg and me. "I'll bring your waters—and I know, no ice in yours," she said to me.

When she returned for our orders, a couple of minutes later, she looked at Meg and rattled out, "Eastside eggs over well extra bacon no sausage and... rye toast?"

Meg laughed. "White."

"Shoot, I never remember the toast." Then to me, "Veggie omelet with cheddar potato cakes instead of homefries and.. you get the rye?"

“That *is* my usual,” I said, “but I’m going to switch it up with a frittata, no sausage, extra veggies, and yes, rye toast.”

“Whole or half?”

“Whole order. It’s moving day, and we have a seven-hour drive ahead of us.”

This was the first Terri’d heard of my move. She wanted details: Virginia, grad school, three years, not sure after that. “Oh! Well, we’re gonna miss you guys.”

A slight chill passed between Meg and me. It was true that she wouldn’t be around either because she’d be back in Zelienople, but Terri’s apparent assumption that Meg was moving with me lingered in the air.

This point seemed to miss my mother, though, whose eyes had grown wide with bemusement at the order recitation. She cropped her silver hair to what was very short for a woman but might be slightly long for a man. Her circular glasses further highlighted her persona—which has always matched her job as professor of biology at Behrend—slightly reserved but unable to resist the temptation to teach those around her. From her, I inherited my own teacherly tendencies, along with the environmental and ethical concerns that, in part, led to my becoming a vegetarian at twenty-two. She avoids giving advice directly and instead focuses on openly approving of plans that sound likely to make me happy and, posing questions to get me to reconsider plans that might be less fruitful. You could call this the parental version of the Socratic teaching method.

In contrast to my mother’s scholarliness, Doug has always been down-to-Earth and practical. My mother refers to him as the Swedish Chef because of his uncanny

resemblance to the Muppet—a round, jolly face, cheeks that squeeze his eyes when he smiles, and a thick, full mustache. He spent most of breakfast telling me the best routes to take on this or that part of the trip, what to do if we got a flat tire, and he asked whether I'd changed my oil recently and gotten a general inspection. He questioned our decision to take my car instead of Meg's since she couldn't drive stick.

As I explained that I'd been teaching her, Meg slid the sunglasses from her head down over her eyes as she seeped to a slump in her chair. She and Doug shared a knowing look and laugh, to which my mother responded, "I take it that these lessons haven't been going so well?"

"Well, um..." Meg hemmed and hawed for a minute, then she laughed as she said, "I keep stalling out."

"Oh, that's normal. Everybody stalls when they first start driving stick."

"Yeah, but I keep grinding gears too."

I chimed in that she'd only done so once or twice and that we'd find empty parking lots to practice in.

Again, she and Doug shared a look of incredulity, mixed on Meg's end with a degree of shame.

As we decided on a route, I explained that I wanted to avoid tolls in my car, but that Doug and my mother could take the trailer whatever way they thought best. Doug asked whether the toll-less route went over any questionable roads or steep inclines.

“I’ve never had any trouble. It’s maybe fifteen minutes longer than the Turnpike—mostly highway, a couple of state routes.”

“Okay, what way is that then?” he asked, sighing down at his GPS, an older, standalone device, less reliable than what should have been on his smartphone, but he wasn’t quite up to savvy on all that. As I rattled off the directions from my GPS, he smacked the screen.

My mother, a self-proclaimed and proud luddite, leaned over to look.

“Can’t get the damn thing to pull up the—“

“Well,” my mother asked, “can’t you just tell it you don’t want to take the Turnpike?”

“No, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. I can’t tell it anything.”

“Take whatever route works,” I suggested.

“It’s fine,” Doug said. “Let’s get moving.”

During the drive, I asked Meg to text my mother from my phone to say that we were about to split away from the route to the Turnpike. My mother responded only, “Okay, we’re good.”

Then we hit a series of much steeper hills, sharper curves, and bumpier roads than I’d remembered, so the next time my phone buzzed, Meg read out, “Who the hell wanted to go this way???”

Several hours later, when we finally arrived at my new apartment, a townhouse in Burke, Virginia four miles from George Mason, I blocked traffic and guided Doug as

he backed a sixteen-foot trailer into a dead-end tributary street. It was like talking a blindfolded surgeon through an appendectomy with a machete, but Doug maneuvered the trailer with more precision than I'd thought possible.

One of my new housemates, Christina, came out to help. While Doug, still dealing with back pain, unpacked the trailer, she and Meg brought in the desk chairs and musical instruments. My mother and I took on the heavy furniture, this time moving at twice the speed, in a race against the dark clouds gathering above. We managed to finish the last of it just as the rain came on.

We stood in the living room, admiring the size of the haul that we'd stacked so quickly. "You know," Doug said, "we damn near lost everything you own." He explained that they were approaching the on-ramp to I-495 and, "The guy in front of me, he's going like 45, so I'm doing about the same like four carlengths back, and outta nowhere, he slams his breaks, and there's this whole line of cars. So I'm trying to stop, and the trailer's fishtailing, and the idiot in front of me starts to pull off to the one place I can go without hitting anyone. I end up swerving way past the rumble strip." He started laughing. "I swear, my whole life flashed in front of me."

"I was too busy gripping the ceiling handle," my mother added, "and squeezing my eyes shut, so I didn't see anything."

After a litany of gasps and oh-my-gods, Doug concluded, "Good thing I wasn't any closer to that guy. I'd have creamed him."

"Well," I asked, "can I take you guys out for dinner?"

“Oh baby, I’m glad you’re here with your self and your stuff intact, and I love you very much, but I need a shower and a bed. And, only after both of those things, food.”

And, aside from some good-byes and I-love-yous, that was it. They headed out to find a hotel and returned home the next morning.

Meg and I stayed to have a beer with Christina and another housemate, Billy. Then we left for our own hotel.

LOVE SONG

In the morning, we started back north, almost ready for the roadtrip proper. But first, we stopped to see Meg’s mother April in Zelienople. Hers was the sort of neighborhood that always has a name (Abbey Woods), the sort in which houses have repeating design patterns. Every fourth or fifth house looked like the one you passed a block ago. The townhouses, like the one in which April lived, were all white brick and siding with French windows, a cramped but immaculate lawn, and a wide driveway to a two-car garage with a security keypad.

As a girl, Meg lived in at least five such copy/paste neighborhoods—first with both parents; then, after their divorce when she was eight, with her mother; and, for a brief stint here and there as a teen, with her father. Though she’s never been in the basement of an Abbey Woods house or townhouse besides her mother’s, she’s remarked that homes in these neighborhoods always have finished basements.

April's basement was bigger than any apartment I'd ever inhabited and sported a plush, green carpet. Echoing the lawn outside, it also matched water-color paintings of golfers teeing off on their own emerald fairways, and it contrasted well with the white oaken wet bar by the eastern wall. This main room gave mixed messages about its nature as a second living room, bar, playroom, or exercise room. On the opposite side of the room from the wet bar clustered the combination pool-&-ping-pong table, widescreen TV circa early 2000s, and exercise machine that may have come from a NordicTrac or Gazelle infomercial.

Generally, the basement is where our friendliest interactions with April took place—mostly either watching movies or playing pool. But on this visit, we sat in the upstairs living room, watching reruns of *Bing Bang Theory* in relative silence. During commercial breaks, April's eyes drifted toward Meg and began to well. Eventually, she disappeared into her bedroom, emerging a few minutes later in full make-up, her dyed blond hair teased out, her dangling, turquoise earrings matched to her blouse. In a controlled, formal voice, she asked if we'd like to have dinner at Chen's, a local generic Asian restaurant. (A couple of steps up from standard American Chinese buffets, they do make killer kimchi.)

At dinner, April's side of the conversation fixated on the dangers of travel and what disasters might befall us, as she recited stories she'd read about someone getting mugged or lost in this or that city on our route.

Meg waved her fork at one point, laughing shyly as she said, amid recitation of other stops on the trip, "... and then we're going to Casa Loma and the CN Tower! *Casa*

Loma!" She'd explained to me weeks ago that Casa Loma, a mansion built in the 1800s as a medieval Spanish castle, was her girlhood wedding-fantasy—the whole princess ordeal, complete with her riding in on a Friesian horse. (This struck me as odd since Meg has never really been a princessy kind of woman. But I guess we're never who we were as children.)

April responded briefly about how Meg, when they've gone to Toronto for a family vacation, had loved both Casa Loma and the CN Tower—which looks similar to the Seattle Space Needle but has a circular restaurant near the top that rotates to give eaters a 360° bird's-eye view of the city. Then she reverted to how dangerous Toronto could be if we stayed in the wrong area.

Though it may have been unfair of me, I found it hard to remember, in the face of her negativity, that April was a mother concerned for her daughter. To me, the dangers that she brought up were simple facts of any life lived beyond the bounds of white, middle-class comfort zones. I'd been mugged in Erie, had my car forced into oncoming traffic by a city bus in New York, and felt physically threatened in many, many places. Of course dangerous things happen in cities, but to fear the cities where they might occur and to cancel this trip and to live only in suburban neighborhoods for the rest of our lives felt like an arrogant bourgeois perspective that was desperate to shut out certain realities of the rest of human existence.

Meg later pointed out that, yes, April probably was legitimately concerned for Meg's safety, but that her behavior had less to do with *that* than with her concern that the roadtrip would lead to Meg's abandoning her. Her focus on the dangers of travel

was another manifestation of her fear that, soon, her daughter would leave her for the outside world.

The anxiety didn't abate overnight. In the morning, after I'd reloaded our suitcases in the car, I lingered a bit before shutting the trunk, having noticed April pull Meg into a smothering hug. When I approached a few moments later, as Meg stepped back, April's fingers hung protectively on her shoulders. Then she wiped her eyes and said to me, "You'd better take good care of her."

"Don't worry, April. We'll be fine. We'll watch out for each other."

She asked if we had everything we needed, and it seems worthwhile, reader, to detail for you the contents of my trunk:

- Chef's knife, spatula, metal spoon, ladle, frying and sauce pans, various herbs and spices and dried beans, canola oil, red onions, garlic, potatoes.
 - We'd planned to use most of this at Extended Stay Americas, which offer kitchenettes in their rooms but not much cookware. I also had a vague notion of camping out and cooking over a fire. When I brought this up with Meg, though, she stared at me like I'd suggested walking into the Canadian wilderness buck naked.
- Hammer, some stray nails, pliers, crescent wrench, a screwdriver with two sets of interchangeable heads, tire iron, a small and a full-sized spare tire.
 - In retrospect, I can't stop fixating on the lack of jumper cables.
- Suitcase, overnight bag, jackets and coats, shoes and boots, blankets and pillows, towels, shaving kit, camera bag that was actually my weed bag with an empty tin and a glass pipe, two messenger bags with a laptop and two books each—Foster Wallace's *Consider the Lobster*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Rushdie's *East, West*, and a collection of folk- and fairytales.
 - One of my favorite shared interests with Meg is our love for folklore and Greco-Roman myth. On many nights during this roadtrip, we would fall asleep reading to each other from the *Metamorphoses*.
- My acoustic Fender guitar, which my mother gave me for Christmas when I was nineteen. Its mahogany bridge sits atop a sunburst gradient on the body. The black at the sunburst's outer edge matches the pick-guard and the four circles that encompass the sound hole. At the sound hole's edge, the wood is chipped. I'm not sure how or when this happened.

- I didn't play my guitar once on the roadtrip, but we were forced to take it into every hotel room along the way because the temperature changes outside would have warped the neck and body. There was almost an air of self-martyrdom in this act, hauling my guitar in and out on every stop but never using it. The romantic in me had envisioned long evenings wherein we would learn old folk songs, but contrary to popular depictions of guitarists on roadtrips, travel drained me of all desire to play.

So, when April asked if we had everything we needed, I smiled and said, "I think we're good."

At first, we kept hitting these fits of laughter as we took in the whole freedom-of-the-Road thing, but after an hour or so, it hit us that we didn't know how to treat the roadtrip. As a long, slow goodbye? As a test of our relationship? As a kind of honeymoon that would lead to, rather than married life, a committed long-distance relationship? Engrossed in the freedom of being temporarily detached from a physical home, we found our relationship in a constant state of flux.

There was, though, an excitement about it, almost akin to what we'd felt when we first started dating. On our toes all the time, we developed a hyper-awareness of the Road's electric intimacy. Every moment induced at once the romance of adventure and of being on our own together, of being in it together. Amid all that high-romantic energy, how fitting that Patti Smith's wild, celebratory cover of Van Morrison's "Gloria" swaggered onto the car's soundtrack somewhere in New York state.

It's contextually important to understand how this song first entered our lives. Prior to the first day I'd heard it, I had taken to borrowing CDs from the Erie County Public Library, ripping them onto my computer, and burning them to new CDs for my

car. I could have found everything online, but even though I always returned the originals to the library, those physical copies satisfied my collector's instinct in a way that BitTorrented MP3s couldn't. When I stumbled on Patti Smith's greatest hits, I knew little of her, except that she'd been an important figure in the 1970s New York punk and art rock scenes, alongside other bands—like Television, the Talking Heads, and the New York Dolls—who collectively represented much of what I loved in music—playfulness, structural looseness, sloppy-sounding but evocative and often challenging instrumentation, and singers with off-kilter voices.

I brought the CD to the front desk amid an eclectic stack of David Byrne, Roy Orbison, Charlie Parker, Sarah Vaughn, and Nina Simone albums. On my way out, I texted Meg to let her know that I was on my way to her apartment.

During the drive, snow was still falling and melting, and the wind kicked like a wild horse. I slipped Smith into the CD player, and on the very first track, her voice crawled slowly from behind a looming, primitive intro. She offered, as her first line, an almost imperceptible, languorous harmony to the piano and guitar: "Jesus died for somebody's sins but not mine," she uttered, her voice pulling forward slowly by lashing tongue and lilting tone, by spiked pitch and warbled timbre. Alongside the guitar, her vocal chords swayed at first, then began to walk in strut before tearing full-force into an unhinged punk rock epic, in which Smith tore up the original song and started all over, repiecing it with safety pins and duct tape and guitar strings repurposed as thread.

She added new intro lyrics that described fractured images of the song's androgynous narrator strutting into a party. "People say beware," Smith snarls, "Oh but I don't care. / The words are just rules and regulations to me." As the rhythm picks up, out a window, she sees "a sweet young thing" in a red dress, "humping on the parking meter, leaning on the parking meter." The song crescendos, first when the woman walks in, then again and again, in celebrations of hyper-romanticized sexuality.

Smith gives a prog rock treatment to this punk rendition of a garage rock anthem, launching it into the relentlessly high-energy tradition of Queen and Meat Loaf epics. After two minutes of slow build, the chorus bursts forth, in that first crescendo, with Smith's signature squeal, proclaiming: "G-L-O-R-I-Aee!" A male vocal posse shouts back, "Glo---ria!" Each time the call-&-response recurs, Smith varies her wails and squeals, alternately slurring the letters and annunciating them with precision.

That night, on my drive to Meg's apartment, when the song ended, I skipped back to hear it again. On my third time through, I pulled into the parking lot and sat, waiting for it to finish before I went in and told Meg that she had to hear it. We went back to her bedroom, and I slid the CD into her laptop. At first annoyed with my pushiness, her irritation quickly gave way to a wide grin and what's best characterized as *the* 90s grunge dance move with a touch of 80s metal, in which she'd lower her head so that her hair covered her face while she threw devil horns and nodded to the rhythm.

Since then, Smith's "Gloria" has worked us into hurricanes of flailing hair, raised fists, and grooving hips on many, many occasions.

Now, on our drive into the unknowns of our relationship, away from the realities of impending futures, Smith delivered that killer first line somewhere close to the Pennsylvania/New York border. While I drummed the steering wheel, Meg closed her eyes and rolled into her slow-motion headbang. Approaching the anthemic chorus, Smith started in:

I said darling, tell me your name. She told me her name.
She whispered to me. She told me her name.
And her name is— And her name is— And her name is— And her name is—
G- L- O- R- I- I- I-I-I-I-I-I- G-L-O-R-I-Aeeee!

Here, Meg joined in, spelling out the title in a manic, whirling yell, and I belted it back: “Gloria!”

Repeat, repeat to sweet catharsis.

We felt at one with each other and the song’s spirit, like we too were tearing it all up and starting all over again. What *it* was, we weren’t sure: Our relationship? Our views on what it meant to be in a relationship? Maybe there were multiple *its*, some mine, some hers. Regardless, this was a fresh start.

On this adventure, nobody would know our names. We had no bar or poetry house to feed stasis and nostalgia. No Breakfast Place where servers could recite our orders verbatim. No family to whom we could turn for safety and comfort.

We were strange bodies in strange cities, wondering at the newness of it all, reveling in the newness of each familiar other.

PEOPLE ARE STRANGE (& SO ARE WE)

THE VENGEFUL MARTYR

We set off for Niagara-on-the-Lake—which wine lovers might know for its ice wine, produced only in very specific climatic regions that get sudden frosts, freezing the water inside the grapes while they’re still on the vine. Because the sugars and other solids remain unfrozen, the grapes offer less, but more concentrated, juice than they would otherwise, making for a very sweet dessert wine. Wineries and vineyards filled the entire region and defined its entire ethos. Wine tourists from the US and cross-country commuters comprised so much of the traffic that most businesses took our US dollars at face value, ignoring exchange rates, which made it more economical to wait before switching out our technically less valuable US bills for Canadian ones.

When we arrived at our bed-&-breakfast, around 4 or 5pm, we learned that the woman Meg had spoken with on the phone was an agent in charge of lodging rentals at this and other properties in the area. The homeowner lived alone downstairs. She might say hi, but we should have plenty of privacy. The house glowed with varnished hardwood. Its hallways, stairwell, and our bedroom fit snugly together compared to the enormous kitchen and the homeowner’s living space downstairs. Left alone in the bedroom, we collapsed onto the bed, wrapped our arms around each other and pressed our foreheads together.

“What should we do now?” I asked.

Meg slid down and burrowed into my chest. “Lay here.”

So we did for about an hour, not reading or talking or watching or listening to anything. Just enjoying the stillness of the moment. Eventually, I took my guitar from its case, but rather than playing, I leaned it against the wall and suggested that we head into town to see what we could find to eat.

On our way out the door, a middle-aged woman with a Sicilian accent, called out, “Hello! Hi! You must be the new guests!” She power-walked down the hall in a blue tracksuit. “You’re going out? Where are you headed?”

Meg responded first, “Oh, hi! Yeah, we were thinking about dinner.”

“I’m Eric, by the way,” I added, “and this is Meg.”

“Oh yes, yes, I know about Megan, but I didn’t know your name. I am Natalia,” she said, reaching out to shake each of our hands. “Where are you going to eat?” She suggested a seafood place. When I explained that I didn’t eat meat, she looked perplexed as she listed several other restaurants, looking at Meg while she talked about the meat, then at me to say, for each place, something to the effect of, “I don’t know if they have anything vegetarian.” Then she asked what we did for work, where we were from, what we were doing in Canada. When she learned about my plans to get an MFA in nonfiction writing, her eyes lit up.

“Oh, do you think we could sit down to talk before you leave? I mean, not tonight, just before you *leave* leave.” She didn’t wait for an answer and had this way of lunging forward on certain words and then settling back again, as if winding up for the next lunge forward: “I have a *book* that I’m working on, but I’m not so good with

English. I need a *ghostwriter*. Do you think we could maybe, *before you go*, just sit down to *talk* about— You see, my *children*, well my daughter she's with this *guy*. He won't let me *see* her. Well, my *grandchildren*— I mean *she*, my *daughter*, won't see me or let me or— But I didn't do *anything*, and I just think, *you know*, I have to get this *story* out... Well, I don't want to keep you. I'm sorry to bother! You must be hungry. But we'll talk tomorrow? Yes, we'll talk tomorrow.”

Not quite able to process what she'd said (or hadn't), I agreed out of politeness. “Sure, tomorrow. We'll talk. I don't know that I'm the kind of writer you're—”

“Oh but we can *talk* about it though?”

“Yes. Yeah, sure.”

“What time?”

“Oh, uh...” I looked to Meg, who shrugged, somewhat amused. I said we'd probably get up a bit late, but if she'd be around then...

“Yes, okay, so 11am.”

“Um. Sure.”

The next morning, we told Natalia, who now wore a lavender tracksuit, about the Irish pub that we ended up at and about our plans for the day—a guided wine tour, some in-town wandering, dinner, and a production of a 1979 Brian Friel play called *Faith Healer*—during which I was enthralled, despite Meg's barely audible snoring next to me. The Shaw Theatre Festival brochures billed the play as a “mesmerizing tale” about a traveling faith healer. After his opening monologue, a woman who might be

either his wife or mistress tells a different story, as does the third and final speaker, the Faith Healer's manager.

Natalia cut me off mid-plot-description. All revved up, she described her real-life narrative, more involved, less cerebral, and with a larger cast of characters than the play that I was describing. Her story brimmed with conspiracies, back-stabbing relatives, and a nefarious stranger who'd come to town and taken her daughter away. The story began with Natalia's life and family in Sicily and ended here. She spoke vaguely, rapidly, locking her intense and desperate eyes with us, as if constantly trying to read how we were reading her.

She laced her language with such pathos that Meg and I shared questioning, uncomfortable glances in the rare moments when Natalia broke eye contact after, for instance, "I *worked* and I did some, well I did *some things*, to get *my kids* everything, absolutely *everything* they had, and they *betrayed* me."

Large gaps and inconsistencies began to emerge. For one thing, the stranger who'd come to town began to sound more like a normal, decent guy whom her daughter had met in college. And it started to sound like Natalia had a violent and vengeful streak that had pushed her daughter away—she even mentioned, quite casually, pulling a knife on her daughter and then brushed it off immediately, suggesting that she'd done so for her daughter's own good. But her vengefulness shone most in how she talked about the book that she wanted me to ghostwrite as a record of events that would vindicate her and shame her children and her daughter's husband.

Faith Healer, like Natalia's story, gives little in the way of facts. Instead, it demands that audiences give deference and empathy to each character despite the audiences' legitimate doubts, disbelief, and the growing understanding that none of these characters is a particularly "good" person. There's no question, the Faith Healer himself is a conman—miracles, in the play's reality, are clearly not real—but his marks, who seem to recognize his falseness, nonetheless eagerly empty their wallets so that he will "seal their anguish," as he intimates in his monologue.

Meg and I both understood, however, that Natalia was in a deep and relentless state of pain over whatever had actually happened, regardless of who was at fault. We continued to sit and listen, partly because the drama was, I feel ashamed to admit, entertaining. But we also gave Natalia our attention out of empathy. We couldn't sympathize—not trusting her version of events made it impossible for us to even begin to feel what she felt—but we could try to empathize by recognizing and interpreting at least the emotional honesty of her story. And in doing so, maybe we could, if not seal, then momentarily soothe her anguish.

It didn't matter whether she was the martyr that she wanted us to see or, as we actually saw her, the villain of her own story. It seemed to me that she either had tried to do what she had believed to be right and gone way too far, or she had tried desperately to hold onto her daughter and lost control of herself. In either case, she needed our ears.

Unfortunately, she mistook our attempts at empathy for interest in her ghostwriting proposal, and when that mistake finally dawned on her, Natalia's face

contorted. Mortified, she repeated again and again that she was sorry and embarrassed, that she'd wasted our time, that she'd been completely rude and "unpleasant."

Meg tried to soften her realization: "It's fine. You're fine. We enjoyed talking to you."

"Yeah," I agreed. "You didn't waste our time."

"We're really sorry," Meg added, "to hear about everything with your kids."

She stood, though, and insisted that we stop humoring her and, "Please, *go* enjoy your vacation."

An hour later, we struggled to recount her story. The names and events had congealed into a rant that we couldn't unravel. But the narrative, we decided, was less important than the character. Meg intimated that Natalia reminded her, in many ways, of an exaggerated version of her mother, who harbored the martyr complex that worms its way into so many Catholic psyches and who, throughout much of Meg's life, had tried to do what she thought right but, in one way or another, had gone too far.

April was not the vengeful character that we had seen in Natalia, but she often tried so hard to keep Meg around that we had begun to regard every action, every word, with suspicion. For Meg, that suspicion went so deep that she'd often meet even the gentlest "Hey babe..." with gritted teeth and a barbed "What?"

So why could we give Natalia, a stranger, so much empathy and April so little? Maybe precisely *because* Natalia was a stranger, it was easy, as the detached audience of her drama, to think of her more as a character than a person. Her actions seemed, in a way, less consequential and troubling. April, though, was a real person to us—and

Meg's mother at that—so her behavior had real, felt impact on our lives. Not only could she herself see the negativity of that impact, but she had quite intentionally brought it about. In the face of that reality and the baldness of her intentions, any attempt to empathize would have felt like approval, like we were giving her permission to manipulate us.

The morning after our second night in Natalia's home, as we packed the car, she came out in a pink tracksuit. (I like to imagine her closet as a perfectly organized, shimmering polyester rainbow.) While I organized the trunk, she reiterated to Meg her apologies from the day before. When I approached, she looked at me with that same mortified expression, as if her face had frozen permanently in its contortions. "I'm so sorry to have bothered you. You came here for a *vacation*, not to listen to some— Not to hear *me go on and on*." She took a scrap of paper from her pocket and handed it to me. "*Just in case* though, you *can* contact me here." She pointed to the phone number and email that she'd written. "That's me." Then she took a step back and wrung her hands a moment. As we thanked her and climbed into my car, she ducked away, throwing her hand back in an awkward wave good-bye and calling over her shoulder, "Have a good rest of your trip."

HOLEY JACKET

Even in my childhood and adolescence, growing up in a family of decent means, I had a disinterest in, maybe even a distrust of, luxury. In the fourth grade, I'd caught

my winter coat on some thorns in the woods near my house and torn a hole that may as well have been a second pocket. Every time I put it on, I had to shove the cotton back inside. Because my parents would head off to work before I went out to catch the schoolbus, and because I got home a good five hours before them, and because I favored videogames over the outdoors, neither of them saw me wearing the coat very often, so they didn't know about the hole for a good two months. One day, when my mother took me to Media Play to pick up a copy of *Final Fantasy III* for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, she noticed the cotton splaying out.

“When did that happen?” she asked as we headed back to the car.

I shrugged.

“How long has your jacket been like that?”

“I don't know.” I shrugged again and stared down at the cardboard box, far more interested in the game's artwork and story synopsis than some stupid hole in my jacket.

We climbed into the car. My mother turned the ignition, put the car in neutral, and set the parking break. “I think we should get you a new jacket.”

“Why?”

She stared at me for a few seconds, her brow furrowed, as if she were trying to figure out whether to be concerned about my apathy. Then she smiled slightly and said, with an element of pride in her voice, “You don't care much about this sort of thing, do you? Long as you're not freezing or starving or hurt, you're perfectly happy with whatever you have, aren't you?” After another shrug and a moment of silence, she

unset the parking break, and drove us to JC Penny. We returned home with a new coat, new gloves, and two new pairs of jeans.

JOIE D'AMOR

In the 500-some words on its homepage, the Old Mill Toronto employs the word “luxury” six times and the word “elegant” or “elegance” four. Other prominent terms and phrases include “timeless style,” “grand,” “picturesque,” “of your dreams,” “historical sophistication with well-appointed high-tech amenities,” “distinctly decorated,” “exclusive,” “classic,” and “unique.” A soft white floral print adorns the website’s background—the sort of print that you might find wallpapered in any of its “57 beautifully appointed and individually unique hotel rooms and suites.”

When Meg told me that we would lodge here during our stay in Toronto—where we would visit Casa Loma, the mansion/castle of her childhood wedding fantasy, and eat at the CN Tower, whose 360° God’s-eye view of the city bolstered its 4-star rating as a restaurant—something in me balked. Even though I wasn’t paying for any of it, all that elegant, grand, exclusive luxury felt anathema to my sense of self and, even more so, to my Spartan ideas about life on the road. The bed-&-breakfast, the wine tour, and the general touristy-ness of Niagara-on-the-Lake had just about maxed out my capacity for bourgeois living.

Phillip Lopate, in his essay, “Against Joie de Vivre,” writes:

Although I have traveled a long way from my proletarian origins and talk, dress, act, and spend money like a perfect little bourgeois, I hold onto my poor-boy’s outrage at the “decadence” (meaning dull entertainment style) of the middle and upper-middle classes; or, like a model Soviet moviegoer watching scenes of

prerevolutionary capitalists gorging themselves on caviar, I am appalled, but I dig in with the rest.

I had no such “proletarian origins.” It would be inaccurate to describe even my impoverished twenties as anything less than middle-class because, the fluctuating financial status of my adulthood aside, my life has afforded me plenty of privilege and social safety nets unavailable to wide swaths of people throughout the US. And yet, I’ve inherited from my parents a social indignance that mirrors Lopate’s “poor boy’s outrage.” Until I’d started dating Meg, though, whose parents seem to regard decadence and material goods not as luxuries but as essential to their identities, I’d managed not to “dig in with the rest,” which had allowed me to maintain what you could call a reverse snobbishness, a snubbing of all things upper-crust that required money or friends in high places.

Canada had brought me face-to-face with exactly the fear that I had articulated to Joyce less than a week earlier.

As we crossed the threshold into our “distinctly decorated” room at the end of the long, “elegant” hallway on the second floor of this “grand” hotel with its “picturesque” window-views, I tossed my suitcase on the floor, sloughed off my messenger bag and Meg’s overnight bag, and laid my guitar on the ottoman at the foot of the bed. Exhausted from the drive and the days and days of drinking, I kicked my shoes across the room. The carpet, at least two-inches thick and full of plush bounce, hugged my feet briefly before I collapsed on the white, cajillion-thread-count sheets and downy, gold-on-earth, paisley-print comforter.

Meg crossed the room, her arms raised about 45° from her sides, fingers splayed out, mouth and eyes agape, taking in the sleek leather chair and oaken furniture, the coffee table and white-&-gold couch. She spun around and exclaimed, “Holy shit, Eric!”

“Yeah, it’s nice,” I replied.

She rushed into the bathroom and then back out. It’s hard to describe the simultaneously over- and under-played expression on Meg’s face when something excites her. She makes a show of it, putting herself in my sightline, but she also seems to suppress her glee, fighting its tendency to crinkle her eyes.

This was her expression as she waited patiently for my part of this script that we seem to have subconsciously devised for such moments: “Yes, dear? Go ahead.”

“They have a Jacuzzi.”

“Oh yeah? And does that make you happy?”

She climbed into bed and nestled under my arm before she replied simply, “Yes.”

“Good.” I kissed her head.

This might come across as patronizing on my part, and to some extent it is, but it’s important to understand that, in moments like this, we’re each playing a part. A good portion of our relationship is based on a kind of mutually self-aware role-playing, in which we perform caricatures of ourselves—me a snobbish and ironic prig, Meg a wide-eyed and overly indulgent child. And these are not the only characters we play. At other times, I might indulge the four-year-old clown in me, to which Meg responds as an aristocrat, high above my buffoonery. All of it, though, contains an air of intentional self-satire.

So we lay there, pressing each to the other's body in the warm comforts of sleepy love.

Toronto stands out, in this roadtrip, as a confusing wash of luxury and dinge.

On our way to Casa Loma the next day, we stopped for lunch at a vegan diner of the sort that always seems to be staffed by punk-looking women decked out in tattoos and facial piercings who, contrary to their physical appearance, always seem to pump a steady stream of soft folk music through the restaurant speakers. This punkish folky server greeted us, the only patrons at the time, with, "Hey. Uh, grab a seat wherever." She swept her hand across the tiny diner as if it were a grand ballroom.

Black-&-white fliers for local music acts flapped against the pale yellow walls as we passed. The table that we chose sat atop a raised platform surrounded by a metal rail, the chips in its plum-colored paint revealing a dull gray splotched with bits of rust and tarnish. Cracked tile floors; a cracked, hollow, flimsy, wooden bathroom door; bare, flickering lightbulbs; cheap but delicious food: For the first time all week, I felt at ease, comfortable.

Casa Loma, on the other hand, presented a grandiose unreality. According to Wikipedia, its original owner, Henry Pellatt, hired three-hundred workers to labor three years to build the \$3.5-million home and garden in 1911. The equivalent to that amount of money today would be somewhere in the vicinity of \$84 million. Due to the mounting property taxes that accompanied the depression after World War I, Pellatt

had to give up his home after less than ten years. What better symbol of upper-class gratuity and the flimsy foundations upon which it's so often built?

Maybe it was my suppressed but nonetheless apparent negativity, maybe it was the 90° heat or the 110-stair climb to reach the house, maybe it was the annoyingly fluffy language of the tourist brochure, or maybe it was the ant-colony crowd, but Meg seemed almost immediately disenchanted. It was as if I could see the eight-year-old, who'd fantasized about riding a gleaming Frisian horse down her wedding aisle, dying.

"I fucking hate this," she said, dodging and juking her way through the other human ants. "It was *not* like this when I came here before."

After negotiating the crowd on our way to the major rooms listed in the brochure, we slipped outside and found our way to the garden. (By garden, I mean massive man-made jungle cut through with cobblestone walkways and stone benches.) We moved far from the swarms of sweaty tourists, and found ourselves a bench. That day, in total, we'd probably walked a good ten miles, including the 110 stairs, so the bench may as well have been a pile of feathers.

I leaned back with my hands planted behind me and turned to Meg. "I'm sorry this isn't what you'd hoped for."

She shrugged. "It's fine."

On some level, I was sure that my utter lack of enthusiasm—first at the hotel and now here—had, if not seeded, then at least exacerbated her frustration. It all must have felt like an omen of a fading romance, the looming end of our relationship.

On our last night at the Old Mill, we opened a bottle of wine that we'd picked up in Niagara-on-the-Lake and curled up on the couch while we watched TV and ate dark chocolate. Eventually, bored by the normalcy, I stood and stripped, throwing my clothes all across the room. Over a lampshade hung my shirt, atop the desk crumpled one sock, on the floor the other, around the leg of the coffee table wrapped my jeans, and finally, over Meg's lap, slung my boxers.

"What are you doing?" she asked in mock disdain.

"Nakies is fun! Nakies is free!" I shouted, recalling the line from a classic episode of Nickelodeon's *Rugrats*, as I leapt and danced across the room, flailing my pale, lanky limbs like a manic toddler.

"Really, Eric?"

I stopped in front of her, planted my foot on the arm of the couch, thrust my pelvis forward, and said, in an exaggerated baritone, "Does this turn you on?"

Meg crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows, hardly able to suppress her laughter. "Are you done?"

"No!" I pulled her to her feet and into the only proper dance I knew—just some swing rudiments I'd learned in a college ballroom dance class: "Tap-step," we stepped left, "tap-step," then right, "tap-back, tap-in." We repeated this a couple of times, laughing and butchering the whole routine with all four of our left feet. I spun her out and pulled her back in close. She turned her head against my chest, and I lowered my face into her hair, and we just swayed for a minute. Then I stepped back and said again, "Nakies is fun?"

She peeled off her clothes and set them in a neat pile at the foot of the bed.

“Unacceptable!” I yelled, throwing her carefully placed clothes into disarray across the room. I picked her up and threw her on the bed, both of us laughing and wrestling like children. Then we dropped the routine, ran our fingers through each other’s hair, grazed them over each other’s skin, and made love for what felt, at once, like the briefest eternity and an endless instant.

Lying on our sides, facing each other, I asked, “You know what we haven’t done since we’ve been here?”

She shook her head.

“Hot tub.”

“That’s true.”

“But this is our last night of ridiculous luxury. We need to indulge.” I hauled the leather desk chair into the bathroom, set my laptop on it, and started Netflix while Meg opened a bottle of port wine and set it, our glasses, and the chocolate on the side of the tub.

After an hour of bubbling, steamy water pruning our flesh and clouding our glasses and sucking every ounce of sweat from our bodies until we were panting, drunk, and dehydrated, we dragged ourselves from the tub, laughing at the wonderful idiocy of this indulgence that had left us physically miserable. After we each chugged down three glasses of water, streams running over our chins and necks and chests, I swept Meg off her feet, in classic Hollywood fashion, and I carried her out the door and to the bed, where we slept some ten hours until 6am the next day.

INTERLUDE

CLUTCH. RELEASE.

Of the \$5,000 that Meg had set aside for this roadtrip, our week in Canada had consumed \$3,000. Such over-the-top spending was uncharacteristic for her. Her father, the son of Depression-era Syrian immigrants, earned his fortune as a legal adviser and instilled in her the same dogged saving habits that his parents had instilled in him. The idea of dropping more than \$100 in a week, even on necessities, pocks her palms with fingernail crescents. In fact, she often seems more willing to splurge on recreation than to pay for gas or food.

It's important to remember, though, in her defense, that she paid for the vast (very vast) majority of this roadtrip. And except for one short-lived fight about who was to pay for most of the gas, our surprisingly few money arguments emerged from our mutually bizarre and (let's face it) irresponsible spending habits: On the one hand was Meg's recreational splurging in Canada and, later, at Florida's Universal Studios to visit Harry Potter Land, contrasted with her almost Scroogean money guarding on the rest of our US tour; on the other hand was my insistence on drinking only craft beer, quality wine, and top-shelf liquor, despite hardly being able to cover what we had decided, after the brief argument, would be my share of gas costs.

(My elitism when it comes to food and drink is a part of my personality that I've managed to compartmentalize and guard from my disdain for decadence, distinguishing

me, in a way that feels important, from Lopate and his unrelenting rage against said decadence. Maybe it feels important because, whereas Lopate's narrator, in "Against Joie de Vivre," seems to begrudgingly fold under social pressure, explaining, "I am appalled, but I dig in with the rest," my hypocrisy is rooted in aesthetic appreciation, which I've at least convinced myself is ideologically better.)

So the most significant tension of our bi-country roadtrip wasn't the actual spending of money, but which aspects of which parts of the trip warranted such spending. The result: Meg would splurge on her quests (general extravagance in Canada and a return to our twelve-year-old selves at Universal), I would splurge my significantly skimpier budget on my quests (weed in Colorado and craft beer everywhere else we went), Meg's dad would splurge for us when we visited him in Texas, and my dad and I would break what remained of our banks when we visited him in Florida.

All of these looping financial negotiations left us, after crossing back into the US, to my devices as we passed through the Midwest, deadbolted inside of Super 8s and Red Roof Inns and Best Westerns; passing out under cigarette-burned sheets to the lullabies of peeling tires, drunken catcalls, and slamming doors; and spending my foodstamps at grocery store delis, not necessarily because we couldn't afford to do otherwise, but more so that we could afford to get drunk and baked in relative comfort once we hit Colorado.

I had to hand it to Meg. Despite all of this, and despite my expectations, the only time that she made any sort of fuss about any of it was when, at an Illinois Red Roof

Inn, the doorknob started to jiggle as someone unlocked it and then tried to enter our room without knocking. As they tried to push the door open, I shoved it back to close, and they left without a word before I could catch a glimpse through the peephole. The guy at the front desk assured us that it was one of the cleaning ladies. I expressed my annoyance at this, especially given that we'd hung the do-not-disturb sign, but decided it wasn't worth getting worked up over.

Meg, however... "I mean, seriously, *what the fuck?*"

"Yeah, it's frustrating."

"Like, whatever, the guy said the cleaning staff don't speak much English, but the *fuckin*g sign was on the *fuckin*g door!"

"Right, I know."

"Why would anyone just try to walk in like that when there's a sign on the door?"

"Sweetheart, I understand, but—"

"We had the sign *up*, goddammit!"

Meg had fallen into a tendency that her sister Lindsey and I refer to as "looping," in which she repeats the same point again and again in slightly different language. Meg's sister Lindsey and I call this "looping," in which Meg states the same idea over and over with minor variations in phrasing. The only way to stop her looping is to either call her out on it—*Honey, you're looping, and I love you, but it's getting annoying—* or to distract her with another topic or task. I chose the latter: "Hey, so you got to nap all the way to the border, and I'm like ready to pass out right now." We hadn't had a

chance to practice her driving my stick-shift since the roadtrip had started, but, I reminded her, “You were doing really well. You *know* how to drive my car. You just have to *not* psyche yourself out.”

She crossed her arms, and her leg started shaking, as it does when anxiety strikes her.

“Please, sweetheart?” I continued, “I’m really not comfortable driving right now.” It was true. I could hardly keep my bloodshot eyes open.

“But last time,” she said, “I couldn’t even get the car to move.” This was also true. In the lot behind a Tops grocery store, her anxiety had caused her leg to shake so hard that she couldn’t move the clutch smoothly, causing the car to stall again and again. She’d gotten so worked up over this that she’d broken into tears.

“Yeah,” I answered, “but you were awesome before that. Like, you had the starting and stopping *down*, and you were getting better at timing the clutch. I mean, you drove us at least a good ten miles around Erie without stalling, and you only bucked the car like two or three times. You just got really anxious in that lot for whatever reason.”

Staring out the window, her arms still crossed and knee still shaking, she replied curtly, “Fine.” Then, after a brief pause, “But you have to shift for me.”

When I’d first started teaching her, I’d wanted Meg to get used to the clutch without having to worry about the stick, so I would shift for her. Ill-advised as we both now recognize the plan have been in any place but an empty parking lot—let alone on the highway—and despite my need for sleep, I decided that this would at least get me

out from behind the wheel. So I pulled into a dirt lot, where Meg practiced with the clutch briefly before pulling back onto the highway as I directed her, “Clutch. Release. Clutch. Release.”

Once I got her up to fifth gear, I checked my GPS. “It looks like smooth sailing now,” meaning that she shouldn’t have to shift again, “for at least fifty miles. Do you mind if I just nap a little?”

“What if we hit construction?” she asked. “Or traffic? What if I get pulled over?”

“It’ll be fine, sweetheart. You know how to shift. But if you get freaked out, just wake me up, and I’ll handle it.”

But when, just as she’d feared, we hit a traffic jam and my GPS took us on a detour that required shifting, Meg woke me up, gripping the wheel hard and saying, “I can’t do this, Eric. I can’t do this.”

The first place to safely pull off didn’t come for another few miles. I shifted for her, repeating “clutch” and “release,” “clutch” and “release,” and in between, I kept repeating that she was doing fine and not to worry and, most importantly, just calm down.

When we finally found a place to stop, we sat for several minutes, Meg breathing hard through her nose and gripping my hand hard while I caressed hers with my thumb. In retrospect, I don’t think her reaction really was, at its core, about the driving. Meg is, by nature, an anxious person, but this seemed excessive, even for her. Maybe she hadn’t handled the dingy motels and the urban clamor that had assaulted our sleep as well as I’d thought. Maybe the incident with the cleaning lady at that Red

Roof Inn had set her on edge, and driving stick had sent her over that edge. Maybe I'd been too pushy or dismissive of her fears.

I'd asked her to drive because I needed sleep, but I'd also wanted her to do this thing that she was anxious about and have it all be okay so that she would *see* that it would all be okay, so that she'd see that she could trust me and herself, so that she'd see that the world wouldn't fall apart just because she'd stepped outside of her comfort zone.

Instead, I'd pressured her into going so far beyond her boundaries that even the familiar act of managing the pedals and steering wheel had become foreign, and then I'd abandoned her by falling asleep.

It doesn't seem like a stretch to say that I'd thrown her into a symbolic version of the fears that had kept her from agreeing to move with me to Virginia in the first place: She'd follow her noncommittal boyfriend across state lines, be unable to find a job or get into grad school, and then he'd leave her, and she'd be left to fend for herself until she had to crawl out from the car wreck that her life had become and back to her mother in Pennsylvania, who would never let her forget how stupid and selfish she'd been for leaving in the first place.

CORN & PORN & SWEET MARY JANE

CORN & PORN

Meg and I had had enough of Iowa. There was something utterly depressing about driving through 315 miles of corn looming parallel on either side of a nearly barren road on a mid-summer's mid-day. Maybe that something has to do with the plant's inability to proliferate without a helping human hand: As autumn dampens, farmers harvest the ears, peel back the husks, and hang the corn; once it's dried, they roll and twist the ears by hand to remove the seeds (kernels), and pluck the most stubborn of them individually. That is to say, seeds *can* wriggle free from cob and husk, or a persistent animal with grasping hands, such as a raccoon, *could* peel its way to the seeds, but otherwise, corn is practically sterile without humanity to break its prudishness. Yet it's ubiquitous throughout Iowa—breeding ground of agricultural eunuchs.

All that expansive drab studded with the Earth's most co-dependent crop—it was just too much for us to bear. So we decided to pass straight through the Corn State.

Plus, weed had just become legal in Colorado, so we wanted to get there as soon as possible to enjoy the symbolic act of blazing top-notch bud in righteous legality.

Before it was real, the roadtrip had been a series of dreams both vague and vivid. The road to Colorado would be paved with resin scraped from old pipes. Drinking fountains would spout stoner tea. All brownies would be green—so green that bakers

would rechristen them greenies. Weed itself would live up to its name, sprouting through cracked concrete, creeping up the walls of City Hall, overtaking lawns. Gardeners' hands would ache relentlessly from the incessant weeding of weed. At every bus stop, we'd find a vaporizer station tentacled with hoses for public transit patrons to imbibe as they waited. Muggings would cease with the smoking of peace pipes. In fact, there'd be no muggings because pot would replace the dollar as currency, and thus, money would literally sprout from the Earth. Violence would cease with the blazing of bud, the breaking of bread, and the munching of munchies.

In short, Colorado would be an Oz-ian technicolor fantasy.

But first, corn. And, apparently, porn.

In addition to its endless acres of maize, Iowa had a surprisingly high density of sex shops. We briefly considered visiting a Lion's Den or Romantix Pleasure Palace just for the sake of doing so. But like any self-respecting millennial, we had both made our requisite visits to one porn store or another when we were eighteen; we knew that, rather than the excitement one anticipates, questionable smells and characters and a general awkwardness define porn store visits. Mostly, it seems, bearded men who crack uncomfortable jokes and level uncomfortable stares tend to run such stores, not the nymphomaniacal Ron Jeremy/Jenna Jameson lookalikes one hopes for. No, the porn store would only delay our quest for Colorado ganja and punctuate the sad emptiness of this limp phallus of a state.

KINDNESS IN THE LAND OF BUD

By the time we hit Colorado Springs (or simply, the Springs), we were both on edge. Too much touristy bullshit. Too many people in places too small to fit them, clamoring for lo-res smartphone pics of the same lovely goddamned view as the hi-res one on three different postcards in each of the five-hundred also overcrowded souvenir shops in a ten-mile radius. Too many motels with greasy floors and bathtubs black from the feet of guest after guest after guest, their grime left over and made slick with the once-over-spray-&-smears of underpaid housekeepers. Too many restaurants whose menus don't even offer salads without meat—because roadtripping, for vegetarians, involves far too much, *Excuse me, would it be possible to order your carnivore salad, um, but instead of bacon and chicken and taco meat, could you substitute, um vegetables?* to which the oh-so-friendly servers at TGI Friday's reply, *I'm sorry, no substitutions, but we have a lovely seafood menu.* (And while I'm on this rant, who, at what point in history, decided that sea-faring animal flesh isn't meat?) Too much recognition of the realities that this trip was designed to ignore: My small budget, Meg's fear of change, and both of our downright scary post-undergraduate decisions.

Goddamned real life, man.

We needed to do some re-forgetting. We needed to befriend some locals. We needed to gulp beer and burn bud.

There were, however, complications to the pot plan. Weed, in 2013, was not yet fully legal in Colorado. The pot shops for mass consumption wouldn't open til January

2014. You could get medical-grade bud with a medical card (known locally as a red card), but otherwise, purchasing was illegal.

Everyone in the Springs said that everyone in the Springs had a red card—excluding, of course, everyone we asked who said that everyone else had a red card. But, though illegal for non-red-card-ers to buy, pot was entirely legal to possess and receive so long as no money exchanged hands. A kind-hearted resident could have legally *given* us a few nugs. WWe could have legally picked a bag up from the ground and put it in our pockets. And in a private residence, we could have legally smoked it. Thus, we would have to find someone to “give” us weed, and in a completely unrelated act, we might pay them for, say, directions to a good hiking trail.

But where to find such a benefactor?

Meg slumped onto our cigarette-burned Best Western bed. The question, with all its variables, was too much after so much too-much-ness (tourist crowds and greasy motels and so forth). Would cops really ignore this non-transaction? Would potential benefactors suspect *us* of being cops? (Probably not Meg; later, though, a bartender told me that my moustache looked unsettlingly cop-ish.) How would one broach such a topic? *Excuse us, but do you have a medical marijuana card? If so, might you have some medical marijuana with which you’d willingly part for a handshake and a thank-you? Also, we’d pay good money for directions to a hiking trail!*

The answers, to me, seemed obvious: Go to bar (since at least *part* of our search involved craft beer anyway), make friends, slyly mention legalized pot, ask for help

obtaining said pot. As for cops, their existence had never stopped us from buying weed before, so why should it now?

At the first bar we hit, Trinity Brewing, Meg gushed over their exceptionally smooth and malty Awaken Stout (which got its head, as all stouts should, from nitrogenation, thereby offering less head and a silkier texture than carbonation), and I indulged their Slap Your Mammy Double IPA (which got its head from cask brewing, in which the brew's own yeast and bacteria do the gassy work, giving a rich, almost cheesy musk). Alas, though, the bartender said he sticks to beer and leaves "pot to the potheads." He knew people with red cards but, understandably, wouldn't call them for a couple of strange (and premature) pot-tourists.

On top of that, the bar closed at 8pm. (This, we later discovered, was their summer closing time. In the winter, they closed at 7pm. On Fridays... Mind-boggling.) He suggested that we try the Brewer's Republic, a small bar downtown, relatively unknown to tourists, but well-loved by local beer aficionados, many of whom seemed the types to blaze up now and then. And even if the trip ended decidedly ungreen, good beer would be at least moderately acceptable consolation.

As far as malt and hops, the Brewer's Republic didn't disappoint. Meg and I gushed over Uncle Jacob's Stout (a hefty spike of bourbon in the brewing process made up for its unfortunately carbonated head), and the bartender had the kind of mountain-man beard that suggests, if not cannabis-benefactorial potential, then at least an

appreciation for the greener things in life. But no, like our bartender at Trinity, he too preferred suds to bud.

Still, the beer was good, and we had arrived just in time for the answers to that night's trivia, which we *totally* would have won:

Who sang "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'?"

"Nancy Sinatra!" I shouted.

In what popular television show did James Van Der Beek get his start?

"*Dawson's Creek!*" chirped Meg.

Who directed *Adaptation* and *Being John Malkovich*?

"Spike Jonze!!!" we exclaimed in unison.

Unofficially, we scored much higher than the winning team, whose prize was a free bar tab of \$25 and a local artist's caricature of somebody famous. (Neil Patrick Harris, maybe?)

The announcer stepped from behind the bar and sat next to me. Sahara was younger than me, older than Meg (maybe twenty-five), short, stocky, dark-skinned. At first, she was a bit standoffish and, continuing her announcer persona, too cool for this world or anyone in it. But soon enough, she rolled her shoulders back, lit a smoke, rested her hand easily on the bar, and warmed to small-talk.

We chatted beer and pop-culture for a while, and Meg asked about the rainbow-colored fliers on the bar that mentioned poker tomorrow night at someplace called the Underground.

“Oh yeah, the Underground. You guys into that?” she asked peripherally as she raised her hand to the bartender. Sahara was slightly nerve-ridden because she hadn’t eaten since this morning. She needed food, but the kitchen was closed, so a Mountain Brewery Smoked Brown Ale would have to do. She toasted our unofficial trivial victory and returned to the question: “Yeah, looks like there’s a poker game tomorrow. Can’t tell you shit about it though, except that the Underground’s in the basement here.” She didn’t actually work at the Brewer’s Republic and was filling in as trivia announcer for a friend, so she asked the bartender, who knew only that they played on the roof—which seemed odd for a place called the Underground. After that, Sahara slugged back her beer and collected her purse.

Dammit! My most budding prospect, and I had delayed too long! I stopped her with one of the worst non-sequiturs in the history of language: “So, weed’s legal here. Pretty sweet!”

She agreed with said sweetness and asked if we had red cards. “Nah, we’re from out of town—Pennsylvania—which sucks since the regular stores don’t open til January.” This surprised her. Over the past few days, we’d found that few Coloradans knew the actual details of the Great Legalization. She’d thought the stores were already open but said she wouldn’t know anyway, being a card-carrying prescription stoner.

“No, it’s weak,” I said. “We can’t find any.”

“Is that right?” she asked, relaxing into her seat. “None at *all*?”

We explained about the bartenders here and at Trinity.

“Man!” She hung her purse on the barhook and lit another smoke. “That’s *so sad*.” She slipped the lighter back in her purse and guided a large, fluffy nug into my hand. Despite her exaggerated expressions, I hadn’t expected this at all, and she basically had to pry my fingers open because I didn’t know what was going on.

Once I realized what had happened, I stared at her for a moment, dumbfounded, even a little choked up.

She poked at her phone a bit, stood up, and said, “Don’t worry about it. Hope you find what you’re looking for.”

“Do you want—”

“No worries,” and out the door she popped.

Over the next several days, we rationed the gift with intense frugality and still got very baked, very frequently. Real two-hitter stuff.

I kept thinking of that exchange, so generous, so friendly, so simple and comic. So strange to have felt the need to keep it on the down-low when the hand-off was, as I understood, entirely legal. (That sense of secrecy, I suppose, has engrained itself in stoners throughout the US. I wonder, if bud were legalized nationwide, as the most optimistic of pot pundits believe will happen, would I still instinctively hide a legally purchased bag under the car seat? Blazing up on my front porch, would I palm the joint as a cop drove by?)

I hope you find what you're looking for. A sentence like that lingers in the bowls of your ears for years to come. What were we looking for in the Southwest's new weed country? For that matter, what were we looking for on this whole roadtrip?

Sahara had spoken ironically, but there was more to that sentence than she probably knew. What I sought in Colorado wasn't so much the escapism of weed and beer—which I could have gotten cheaper and, strangely, with greater ease in Erie. Rather, I needed some small but genuine kindness to counter the sustained pessimism and depression that poverty and loneliness in Erie had embossed under my eyes.

Meg, though, had hardly even noticed my exchange with Sahara. She, it seems, needed something else from this adventure. Canada had offered diversions via booze, fancy hotels, and tourist attractions. And it offered the joy of the unfamiliar with its kilometric road signs and bilingual French/English menus. But this trip was never about such tangible *things*.

GARDEN OF THE GODS

The next day, we wake-&-baked before hiking the Garden of the Gods, where I became a child energized by the sun and mountain air and so, so much climbing. I scaled every hill and rock. I carried walking sticks because that's what boys do in nature—we find and throw and carry and hit things with sticks.

Meg was quieter, less climby, and required coaxing toward the beautiful vantages high off the path, where the signs, she frequently reminded me, said poisonous snakes dwell. Her concern wasn't so much for the snakes as it was for the

signs. I inferred this by her refrain, which was mostly variations on, “Please don’t get us in trouble, Eric.” Meg has always fixated on rules and authority. Her father has, on more than one occasion, described himself to me as a Boy Scout—even though I’m pretty sure he was never actually in the Boy Scouts—and has, since I’ve known him, always fostered the image of the Benevolent Patriarch. What’s more, need I remind you, reader, that Meg was raised Catholic—by far the most authority-figure-oriented sect of Christianity that I know of? I sometimes wonder how much of her attraction to me is a sort of rebellion against her upbringing, given my nonconformist leanings, my atheism, and my general resistance against authority.

We trekked for miles and hours, again in search of something *more*—in this case, more than warm, dry air and beautiful vistas. And we returned to the Best Western with the particular sense of freedom that only physical exhaustion brings, our limbs dangling like strands of spaghetti. To feel this kind of bodily weakness, knowing that we had done it to ourselves by expending every ounce of energy—imagine Atlas, after eons of burden, dropping the world from his shoulders. We had, after twenty-some years, simply dropped our lives.

POCKET ROCKETS

After another toke and a shower, we ate the mac-&-cheese that we’d bought on my food stamps from a grocery store deli. The cheese sauce was syrupy and sweet, nothing like mac-&-cheese should taste, so sweet I had to flood it with hot sauce to make it edible, and just barely at that. But we scarfed it down because we’d brought no

food on the hike. We were sun-burnt and starved, and if we were going to drink and play poker, then we needed to pad our bellies and load up on long-lasting carbo-energy.

Come evening, we parked a block from the Brewer's Republic. Out front, a row of rainbow flags that we hadn't noticed yesterday greeted us, and inside, the same bartender from before directed us to the roof, where we waited, looking over another rainbow flier on the table. Across the way, two men chatted over a beer. After a while, they asked if we were there for poker and explained that, given the dark clouds, it would probably be downstairs, in the Underground proper.

We wandered through the labyrinthine basement until we stumbled into the hidden bar. As we stared at yet another rainbow flag, this one enormous and hanging over the bar, a late-twenties-early-thirties, balding white guy with trendy, thin-framed glasses inferred that we'd come for poker and called us over. Dan would be our dealer. He introduced the dark-skinned, self-assured woman across from him as Terry. The game, Texas hold 'em, was free to join and offered bar-tab prizes of \$20, \$40, and \$60. We'd begin with 1,000 in chips and play til the bar closed.

Slowly, the table filled with faces obviously more familiar to the bar. Even more slowly, so slowly that it's embarrassing to admit, we came to understand the rainbow flags, the smattering of masculine lisps, the decidedly butch and femme women, and the amused sideways glances at us, the bar's only unquestioning heteros. (I've been told that the common term in queer communities is "normies." I can't say how widespread, if at all, that term is, but it amuses me for the way that it implies an embracing of the word "queer," the only derogatory name I know of that a marginalized group has

successfully co-opted as a badge of honor and simultaneously deflated as a term of hatred and discrimination.) Of course, our newly recognized status as temporary minorities didn't matter in the least. Life and conversation filled the game.

Because Meg and I were more experienced in variations of five- and seven-card poker, we asked Dan to remind us of the rules and gameplay. This added to the false impression that Meg gave, without saying so, that she'd only played poker of any kind a handful of times in her twenty-three years. Conversely, I gave the false impression, without saying so, that I was nearly an expert. So players took pity on Meg, who would call a bet only when she knew she had a strong hand and almost never raised with less than four of a kind. They all but gave her small pots here and there to keep her afloat while they attacked me with bluffs and tried to goad me into raising foolishly.

But with a couple of lucky hands early on, I had become what the table referred to as a big-stack bully. Those lucky hands gave the sense that, if I raised a bet, my cards would inevitably win the pot, and I played up this perception with a bluster that would have made Donald Trump cower. In doing so, I quickly drove out the most aggressive players at the table while Meg's stack began to dwindle. When a thin, white man who looked to be in his fifties said I'd have to use some of my prize to buy a round of drinks, I smiled arrogantly and said, "We'll see." Of course I'd have bought him a drink, but I suppose the persona was too off-putting because, two hands later, he lost all his chips, threw down his cards, and stormed out, cursing me under his breath.

With each hour that passed, the minimum bet doubled, eventually reaching into the thousands and putting Meg all-in on nearly every hand. But because she'd been so

timid before, this forced risk-taking actually worked in her favor by throwing off the game's rhythm for everyone else. She nearly quadrupled her stack some three or four hands in a row.

Advancing the beginner's luck routine, after Dan applauded someone for winning a hand with pocket rockets, Meg nudged me and asked, "What are 'pocket rockets'?"

Laughing, Dan yelled, "Did you just ask, 'What are "pocket rockets"?"

"Aces, honey," said Terry politely. "It's when you're holding two aces."

After I folded, that little show drew another player all-in. Meg took his chips with (you guessed it) pocket rockets and found herself essentially tied with Terry at the top and me at the bottom of what had become a three-person battle of will and risk-taking.

This has been the arc of nearly every Texas hold 'em game that Meg and I have played together. My betting and persona strategies set me quickly in the lead, but Meg almost always lasts to the bitter end and often wins, as she did this night, taking first place from Terry within two hands after I'd lost the last of my chips.

By now, the booze had turned us—me, Meg, Terry, and Dan—into loose tangles of thread. Frayed and unraveling, we each turned limply to the other in conversation and flopped our hands in the air to call for more beer, more whiskey, more rum, more fruity shots. Thousands of miles from the future, we indulged this, our temporarily shrunken world, this obscure gay bar in an urban cave in the Springs, where booze and free poker chips gently gripped us like Odyssean lotus flowers.

We could have stayed forever, laughing and drinking, but the bar closed at 4am, and we would leave for Austin, Texas two days later, where we would enter another small world as temporary nomads, taking in the constant variations in our physical surroundings, measuring days by the mile and distances by the hour, changing our home with every stop on the highway, relishing the sense of never leaving any place because we'd never planned to stay.

FREE MONEY

WE DON'T TAKE *THOSE* HERE

Since we'd been back in the States, we'd been relying on my foodstamps. If we were staying at a hotel with a kitchenette, we could buy fresh produce and other groceries to get us through a night or two without having to eat at restaurants. In most places, though, we'd pick up frozen dinners or some kind of pre-made deli food. Foodstamps beneficiaries get what's called an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card that cashiers swipe through their stores' EBT readers. Neither the cards nor the readers work very well. Some 40% of the time, cashiers have to type the card number manually, which can really slow things down and reveal some rather telling class dynamics.

In Erie, I worked at a chain of gas stations called Country Fair. Because Erie is a largely impoverished city, many of my customers used EBT. But when I transferred from a store in Harborcreek, a middle- to upper-middle-class suburb, to Lawrence Park, a significantly less advantaged suburb, my average number of EBT transactions ratcheted up at least ten-fold. I became a savant, typing in card numbers one-handed without looking while using the other hand to scan items for another customer on the adjacent register so that I could keep the line moving, even when I was the only cashier.

I could easily tell the EBT veterans from the rookies. A veteran would tell me if their card would scan, or if I would need to put the card in a plastic bag to run it (I don't know why this worked, but it did), or if I'd have to type in the card number, or if it

wouldn't scan in the reader on *this* register, but it would on *that* one. And none of this bothered them—unless there was a new cashier on staff who didn't know the bag trick or was too slow at typing the numbers. An EBT rookie, though, might present in a few different ways. Sometimes they wouldn't make eye contact. Sometimes they'd fold their arms indignantly. Sometimes they'd apologize for the inconvenience. Sometimes they'd get angry for no discernable reason. But almost all of them had the same look underneath, even if only slightly, of shame, sometimes even humiliation. The rookies, presumably, had never had to ask for government aid to fill that most basic human need, to eat. They'd never had to face the judgment that accompanies such need for help in a country that prides itself on bootstrapping and rugged individualism.

In Lawrence Park, almost everyone lived on foodstamps. In Harborcreek, though, the judgment from other customers sometimes hung in the air like stale gasoline: "Excuse me, I have *cash*. Can't you put their transaction on *hold* so I can get going?" More than once, customers in suits reached past the person in front of them, smacked their money on the counter, held up their coffee so that I could see it, and before storming out, barked, "\$20 on two." Once, someone did this with such arrogance and entitlement that I put their money in the Make-a-Wish Foundation charity fund, wrote down their license plate, and reported them as having stolen the gas. I do not regret this and would gladly do it again.

According to the USDA's Food and Nutrition Services, EBT customers cannot buy:

- Beer, wine, liquor, cigarettes or tobacco
- Any nonfood items, such as:
 - pet foods
 - soaps, paper products
 - household supplies
- Vitamins and medicines
- Food that will be eaten in the store
- Hot foods

Some of my customers and coworkers used to complain when people bought chips and Swiss Cake Rolls on EBT. These complaints generally grounded themselves in the assumption that government aid recipients were “working the system” and should only be allowed to buy foods of reasonable nutritional value.

That assumption, though, is problematic for a couple of reasons: First, “working the system” would be far more trouble than it’s worth. Applying for and keeping many forms of government aid is a relentless hassle that requires repeated phone calls with long wait times and applications and re-applications that sometimes can be done online but often must be done on paper and sometimes must be submitted in person.

And the idea that EBT customers should only be allowed to buy nutritional foods troubles me in a number of ways. First, “nutritional” is a very relative term. Animal products, for instance, are linked to all kinds of health problems from heart and kidney and vascular diseases to various forms of cancer to obesity, not to mention the bacterial and viral epidemics that have broken out as a result of industrialized meat production; using this logic, one could reasonably argue that EBT customers should only be allowed to buy vegan food. Second, the idea that someone shouldn’t be allowed junkfood because they can’t afford it on their own dime, on some level, presumes that, by spending a couple of bucks on junk, they’ve drained their budget for healthy food, in

which case, it would be unclear how that person is actually surviving. And finally, that whole line of thinking advocates a parental approach to government aid in which the government punishes its poor children for their poverty by saying that they can't eat the ice cream that their rich siblings are eating.

In spite of the small portion of people who do work the system, and in spite of what might feel like reasonable concern for human health, it's better to assume that people on foodstamps really do need help, and it's better to let people watch out for their own nutritional wellbeing, rather than hovering over their shoulders until they finish their peas. The shame of poverty in this country is painful enough without the demeaning judgment that such restrictions would imply.

I applied for foodstamps in the spring of 2013, the semester after I'd graduated. I cried on the phone with the person who would become my caseworker when he told me that I qualified for almost \$300 a week. I told him that this was excessive, that I'd never be able to spend that much. He told me that he'd done what he could to max out my benefits because I'd be moving soon and moving was expensive and, even though I'd no longer be eligible to receive aid from the state of Pennsylvania, what remained on my EBT card was mine to spend in any part of the US.

It's difficult to describe the mix of gratitude and shame that I'd felt, as well as the fear that, somehow, I'd be told that I had to pay it all back. After that phone call, though, I remembered my time at Country Fair, understanding, better than I had before, all of those EBT rookies whom I'd dealt with in my five years there. I decided that this

conversation would be the last time that I would let anyone see or hear that kind of shame in me for needing to eat.

As Meg and I passed through New Mexico on our way to see her father in Austin, we stopped at a Love's gas station. After I'd filled my tank using Meg's credit card, I asked if she wanted anything from inside. "Nothing in particular, but if you see something..."

A ding from the front door and a warm southern "Hi there! Welcome to Love's" greeted me as I entered the store. The forty-something woman behind the register was full-bodied. Her hair, bleached with about two inches of brunette roots, hung greasily to her shoulders. Despite the air conditioned store, she had light sweat marks on the pits and neck of her shirt.

I didn't look much better. I never looked much better on this roadtrip. I had my shaving kit but didn't bother to shave once in our five weeks of travel. My beard tends to grow thick on my neck, chin, and jawline, and my ("cop-ish") moustache comes in very full. My cheeks, however, sprout sparsely on the left and almost not at all on the right. Plus, my clothes had started to hang off me from the heat, which was unusually damp for the American South-West. It would have been pretty easy to read me as a homeless vagabond—which, technically, I suppose I was, not yet having payed rent or signed the lease on my new apartment.

Once the woman at the register took stock of all this, her welcoming tone gave way to stony silence as she hawkishly watched me peruse the aisles. As a teen with

brightly colored hair gelled into thick goth-punk spikes and chains hanging from my neck and wide-legged jeans, I'd never gotten used to other people's suspicions that I would rob their stores blind, but I had gotten good at ignoring it. On this roadtrip, I'd become even more keenly aware of it and even more aggravated at the presumption. Aside from Country Fair, I'd worked other retail jobs and had always felt the same resentment toward coworkers who made such assumptions about blacks and Hispanics and poor whites.

I approached the register with a pack of two cream cheese churros and set them on the counter. "Man, it's friggin muggy out there."

She scanned the churros and said nothing until I pulled out my EBT card. Before I could even hand it to her, she asked, "*What is that?*"

"EBT—it's my EBT card. Foodstamps."

Her face hardened. She took a step back from the register, looked me up and down, scoffed, and said, "We don't take *those* here."

In all our travels, throughout the American Northeast and Midwest, every gas station, convenience store, and grocery store we'd hit accepted foodstamps. I had noticed that, the farther southwest we went, the more cashiers would sigh or roll their eyes when they saw the pale green card, but they'd never actually said anything or been so openly contemptuous. I suddenly felt the urge to rant at this woman, to tell her that I was college educated, that in two months I'd be a graduate student, that I was a writer, that I'd grown up in a working-class city, and who the hell was she to pass judgment on me? Instead, I snapped back, "Well then I guess I can't buy them."

She slid the churros to her side of the counter and, keeping her hand on them, shrugged, as if to say, “Not my problem, leach.”

I had money in my wallet and on my debit card, but this wasn’t about whether I had \$1.40 for some junky roadfood. This was about rejecting the shame that she’d wanted me to feel. It was small and petty and not worth my anger, but right then, I wanted to lay into her, I wanted her to feel my rage, clean and articulate and barbed as fucking hell.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, I don’t maintain my faculties well in such situations. The only words I managed to get out were, “Whatever, you—” before my tongue caught in my throat and I stormed out with her suddenly chipper, “Have a nice day,” trailing behind me.

DELICATE LYRICS

I’d met Meg’s father twice. Both times were over dinner during the winter holidays at restaurants in Pittsburgh. Now, we’d be spending a week in his mini-mansion. To reach it, we had to enter a code into a keypad that let us into his gated community. Nearly every house in that community had a long, winding driveway leading to a four-car (and in a few cases, eight-car) garage. They all fit within a limited palate of beige-to-suede, as did all the stores and restaurants in the area, to ensure that everything matched the natural color spectrum of Texas’ topography.

We were back in the spiritual domain of Meg’s childhood. (For a short while, she insisted that her childhood home wasn’t all that extravagant. When she let slip that she

used to get out of her bunkbed by going down a slide, all I had to do was look at her and smile, a bit smugly, for her to realize that a bunkbed with a slide might be a good indication of extravagance.) And I, once more, felt very out of place, to a much greater extent now than I had in Canada. At least there I could reason that the luxury was for tourism, that people were splurging with vacation money, like we were, that maybe theirs had been scraped together over the course of a full year, maybe even years. Here, though, we were witnessing people's day-in-day-out superfluity.

When we pulled into Larry's driveway, he directed us into his garage. After the greetings, his first comment was that if we wanted to go anywhere, we could take his car. I didn't understand why until just now, years later, as I'm piecing that comment together with the one he made a few minutes later: "Eric, I think maybe you need to get your car washed while you're here."

When she's around her mother, Meg seems constantly on edge, but with Larry, she becomes girlish and bubbly, a personality shift that his referring to her only as "Meggy" reinforces. She gets quieter than usual. (For Meg, though, this isn't really a sign of discomfort. Most of the time, she actually seems *more* comfortable when other people do the talking. The exception is when she's drinking, at which point absolutely anything is an excuse to ramble.) And she becomes completely and utterly agreeable in her father's presence. This, I'm certain, is the result of Larry's persona as Benevolent Patriarch.

I'm not sure how he'd react that description. On the one hand, it is, in today's cultural climate, ironic in a derogatory way, which I'm sure he would recognize

because, well, Larry is deeply perceptive. On the other hand, he has described himself to me, more than once, as a “dominant” and “generous” person who needs “to control people and situations”—which probably explains his career in law and his loves for chess and golf, both games that have domineering aspects: In chess, the goal is to defeat the opponent’s king and, as any skilled player knows, you do that by getting into a position where you can essentially dictate your opponent’s moves; and golf grants players expansive views of magnificent landscapes, giving the sense that they own the world while a caddie drives them from destination to destination.

In his somewhat nasally lilt, Larry said, “Well, you two must be just exhausted from the road. Come on in, I’ll show you around.” He then took the bags from my hands, looked to make sure that Meg wasn’t carrying anything (he is an oldschool patriarch, after all), and led us into the house, where stone tiles and walls threw our voices and the clapping of his sandals back and forth in a resonant chorus all the way to the ceiling some twenty-to-thirty feet above us. Dark-chocolate-colored leather furniture and plush rugs filled the living room. The kitchen contained two dishwashers, and he explained that he had another one upstairs. When I asked why, he replied, simply, “Why not?”

I don’t recall the number of bathrooms in the house, but I can say that the master bath—made entirely of stone, with a walk-in shower, also made of stone—had two toilets. This, he told us, was at Laurie’s insistence. Larry had designed this house with his second wife, who had left him just three days after the house’s construction. (Not to make light of what must have been a deeply hurtful experience for him, but I

can't resist: What post-1950s Benevolent Patriarch has had less than two wives?) She'd insisted on two toilets because, Larry said, "What if we both woke up in the middle of the night having to go to the bathroom at the same time?" Of course, there's also a half-bathroom in the hall right outside the master bedroom, but... Actually I have no idea how to justify Laurie's point. The idea that any private bathroom would need two toilets seems utterly absurd.

I could go on, describing the pool and the hottub and the music room and the bar upstairs (with the third dishwasher) and the wine room and the office with its two enormous mahogany desks and the outdoor "living room" with its flatscreen TV embedded in the wall and... But the point, really, is that all of this had the dual effect of being very impressive and also deeply appalling.

That's not to say that I was unhappy. I like Larry. He's sharp and thoughtful and genuinely benevolent. But he and I come from distinctly different worlds. What I found appalling was how all of this—the gated community and the gigantic matching houses and the three dishwashers and the twin toilets—struck him as utterly normal. What I found appalling was how One-Percent-ish this all felt, how disconnected from and disinterested in the everyday difficulties of the rest of the human race, how far removed from the values that he so proudly claimed that his Depression-era immigrant parents had instilled in him. The community, of course, sat at a higher elevation than the surrounding landscape—beautiful vistas signifying world ownership. And to further drive that point home, stray golf balls from the course directly behind his house littered

his backyard. He and his fellow social elites lived, quite literally, fenced off from the clamoring paupers beyond their twenty-foot gate.

Larry spent the next week feeding us booze and food. Every morning, he offered mimosas—I never took him up on this because I have no interest in carbonated orange juice—and then took us out for breakfast or lunch or brunch, depending on when we woke up, because his refrigerator was empty save for some eggs, deli meats, condiments, and about six bottles of white wine, at least two of which were always open. He spent most afternoons working in his office while Meg and I visited nearby wineries and drove a half-hour into the city to go exploring. And each evening, he'd bring along one of about three different women, whom he'd met on Match.com and was currently deciding whether to date seriously and consider for wife #3, as he took us bar-hopping around, he said, "the places you just have to see while you're in Austin."

We wouldn't stay in any bar—the Elephant Room, the Red Room, the Driskel—for more than about fifteen minutes, at which point Larry would start asking whether we'd finished our drinks every repeatedly until we chugged them down, and then he would drive us to our next destination. On the third or fourth night, we parked on 6th Street, which Larry had been raving about since we'd arrived and which the city authorities block off at night for massive block parties full of writhing twentysomethings: Muscle-bound men and short-short-skirted women in stilettos or platforms or wedges angled at damn-near 90°. We kept up the pattern of get-in-get-a-drink-get-out until we reached Pete's Dueling Piano Bar.

Moving through the crowd in Pete's felt how I imagine a too-big-to-swallow-properly hunk of food must feel going down a person's esophagus. When we finally pushed our way to the bar, Larry wedged himself in and ordered our drinks for us.

In case you've never been to a dueling piano bar, the premise is this: Two pianists sit, facing each other, at what are usually baby grand pianos. Sometimes they take turns playing entire songs. Sometimes they play duets. Sometimes they go at it rap-battle-style, each trying to outdo the other in terms of technical skill, comedic insults, and most importantly, riling the crowd. As you can imagine, all of this feeds into a grander plan to squeeze as much tip money from the crowd as possible. Each side of the room is supposed to support their pianist and boo the hell out of the opposition. If you've ever been to a jousting competition at a medieval festival, the concept is similar, but with music and vulgar comedy instead of lances and horses. Pianists at dueling piano bars, it seems, have a set of rules, known and religiously observed throughout the United States:

- 1) They take requests. No matter how ear-bleedingly overplayed a song might be, they will play it. They might refuse a request for, say, "(I Just) Died in Your Arms" by Cutting Crew because they can't stomach playing it. (If that title is unfamiliar, add the word "tonight" to the end and imagine how the chorus of a song with such a title might go. Add to that knowledge the fact that lead singer Nick Van Eede came up with the title after some particularly inspiring sex with his girlfriend. If you still can't recall the song, thank your unconscious for blocking it out.) But overplayed? No problem. Loud and obnoxious? They'd love to bang it out. Full of dirty lyrics? That's sort of their shtick, their *raison d'être*. So they'll gladly sing all about AC/DC's "Big Balls." And the audience, invariably, will scream along, "But I've got the biggest / balls of them all!"
- 2) No more than two songs in a row may be played without mention of sex, sexuality, and/or genitalia. This rule is of particular importance at Pete's (after all, people come here to watch pianists publicly prove their prowess), a fact that made this visit, with Meg and her rich, upstanding, and self-

described “boy scout” father more than a little awkward. The first few manifestations of the sex rule led to some mockingly indignant glances among the three of us, and more than once, Larry cupped his hands over Meg’s ears: “Don’t listen, Meggy!” he shouted, looking at me and grinning as if to say, “Golly, these fellas are risqué, but goshdarnit, they know do how to have fun, don’t they!?” I would then force myself to return the grin: “Wowie, Mr. Sipos, you sure got that right!” and Meg would raise her eyebrows: “Oh my!”

- 3) I swear, this final rule is engraved on a plaque somewhere: “Over the course of any given night, the audience shall be treated to at least two songs each by Elton John, Billy Joel, and Queen. Furthermore, ‘Rocket Man,’ ‘Piano Man,’ and ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ *shall be heard*. Of these, the lyrics of the first two can and must be altered to make explicit reference to genitalia, but the lyrics of the third must remain *absolutely unadulterated*. Should the audience decline to sing along, it is because the performers have failed to evoke the requisite humorous or emotive qualities of the songs and of their trade, and they shall immediately be replaced by more capable pianists.”

This third rule delighted Meg and Larry, both of whom enjoy Queen, are crazed Elton John fans, and utterly froth at the mouth over Billy Joel. In contrast to the younger crowd outside, the bar was sardined with men and women mostly over the age of forty who also delighted in rule number three.

I have to admit, I was surprised and a bit baffled at this choice of destination. Larry is, by and large, pretty bent on, not exactly prudishness, but definitely propriety. If Meg lets slip a “shit” or even a “hell,” his eyes saucer, and he scolds, “Meggy! I understand that you’re a grown woman, and I respect that, but I’m your *father*. I don’t *ever* want to hear that word come out of my little girl ever again.” While he did seem slightly taken aback at the degree of vulgarity and sex-based humor, at no point did he suggest that we leave. In fact, he seemed downright enthralled by the whole show.

Above the pianos hung a sign: "Sing Loud, Laugh Hard, and Dance." A loud-singing, hard-laughing, much-dancing woman pressed herself up to the bar, between Larry and some other person she didn't know. As she did this, Larry turned to look at her. He turned back, his eyes growing large with indignance, and pulled his drinking arm away from her as if she'd almost forced him to spill. For the next half-hour or so, he leaned frequently into Meg's ear to yell something that, in this place, might as well have been a whisper. Sometimes Meg would force a laugh; sometimes she'd yell something equally inaudible back; other times she just nodded; but every time, it was clear that Larry had said something about the woman.

At one point, perhaps realizing that he'd left me out of the fun, he waved me in to say, "Can you believe this woman? She keeps shaking her butt and backing into me! I wouldn't mind if she were thinner and more attractive, but this," he gestures to her with his head, "this is ridiculous." Misogyny is par for the course at this sort of performance, and Larry is of a generation that doesn't even think twice at such comments, but when he said this, Meg and I shared a look of sheer disappointment.

One of the pianists held up a scrap of paper as if it were a bag of dog shit. "Who requested Melissa fucking Etheridge? Jesus! Do I look like I have a vagina? Well, fuck, I guess I'd better shit this one out."

"Waitwaitwait!" The other interrupted, leaping to his feet. "I have a very important request here." He held up a ten-dollar bill. "And I have *ten* very good reasons to play it!" He turned to the crowd behind him. "Where's Monica? Monica, where are you, sweetheart?"

A table full of sorority girls stood up, waiving their arms and hollering the “Woooooo!” as if to say, “We are having a particularly enjoyable time and wish to consume more alcohol while dancing provocatively to songs about sex and the objectification of young women.” They pointed betrayingly at Monica, who buried her face in her hands before they pulled her up by the elbows.

“Come on up here, Monica, sweetheart,” said the pianist as his comrade at the other baby grand crumbled up the offending request and tossed it behind him. Monica Sweetheart’s cohort shoved her forward. He took her hand, guided her to the center of the stage, hurried back to the bench, and tapped out a scale. “And how old are you today, Monica?”

She turned and told him.

“Hole-lee shit! Today’s your twenty-first? Who the fuck brought you *here*?”

She gestured toward the sorority girls who let out another resounding “Woooooo!”

“Are those your *friends*? Man, what a bunch of bitches!” He turned to the sorority. “Just kidding, ladies.” He turned away, cupped his hands over the mic, and muttered into it, “Bitches.” Then back to Monica Sweetheart, “So who’s the lucky guy who’s gonna stuff you tonight, sweetheart? ... Not here? Quick! Somebody get this slut a drink! Just kidding sweetheart. I know you get paid. Okay, Monica, why don’t you hop on the piano for us?”

She shot him a look, laying her hands on her very, very short skirt. A barback ran onstage with a step-ladder and a beer. He set the beer on the piano and took her

hand to help her up the stepladder. She paused on the top step, working out the logistics of her skirt. Crossing her legs, she grabbed the piano behind her and boosted herself up, careful to keep her legs tight.

“Okay. Now, Monica, I want you to take a drink of that beer.” She raised it to her lips. “Hold up, hold up! Now, I know how much you want to put that in your mouth, Monica, but just settle down a second. When you do it, I want you to do it *right*. So, when I start to play your birthday song, I want you to drink that beer. But *really* drink it. I want you to wrap your lips around it. Can you do that for me, sweetheart? Why don’t you give it a shot right now?”

Larry threw his hands over Meg’s eyes. “Don’t look, Meggy! Don’t look!” Then he laughed and took his hands away.

Meg’s face tightened with discomfort, but she chuckled anyway.

Monica Sweetheart stretched a laugh out to stall, but (“Oh, come on, Monica, I know you know how to do this”) eventually she gave in. Quickly, her face blazing red in the yellow light, she lifted the bottle and wrapped her lips around it. She’d been too fast, though, and the beer started to foam.

“Oh, shit! Uh-oh Monica, you’d better suck that head.”

Instead, she held it away from her and let the foam spill to the floor.

The woman who had wedged her way up to the bar was gone now, and a young, college-aged couple approached, trying to find a way in. Larry looked at the brunette, then took the clean-cut young man by the shoulder. “I’ll give you my spot if you

promise—and I’m doing this because I feel I can trust you—to give it back after you get your drinks and not to let anyone else in here. Deal?”

They shook hands.

“I’m putting my faith in you here, okay?”

The guy nodded and guided the woman to the tight spot beside him at the bar.

After they left, Larry took his spot back, and another young woman, a blond, sidled in beside him. The space was still tight. He turned and looked her up and down. This time, he didn’t object.

The pianist played something for Monica Sweetheart’s birthday. I don’t recall the title, but the refrain was something like, “This is what I have, and this is what you have, so let’s have sex.”

The whole time, Monica Sweetheart hid her face, pulled her skirt down, and on occasion, laughed out of discomfort.

“Wow,” Larry said to Meg, “I’m sure glad that’s not you up there. That poor girl. Cover your ears, Meggy.” He turned to me. “You though, I’m sure you’ve heard all this before.”

I didn’t know how to read that. Of course, it was true, but what was his point exactly? And of course, he was teasing, but there was an element of sincere judgment in his voice. Did he mean that, as a young man, I was like other young men who objectify women? Or did he mean that I have a blunt and vulgar way of speaking? Either way, the more I thought about it, the more it irked me. Meg would later tell me that this

comment, joke or not, took her by surprise too, especially given the different ways that he'd talked to and about the women and the couple who'd come up to the bar.

On our last night in Austin, Larry sat at his baby grand in the livingroom. For the next half-hour or so, he jumped back and forth between Billy Joel and Elton John tunes and songs from *Jesus Christ, Superstar* while Meg stood next to him, singing along:

Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, who are you? What have you sacrificed?
Jesus Christ, superstar, do you think you're what they say you are?

The tableau simultaneously moved and discomfited me. I'd spent two years trying to get Meg to sing with me, and now her voice next to her father's voice and playing filled me with a kind of admiration. It struck me that Larry and the architect whom he'd hired to design his home had crafted the twenty-to-thirty-foot ceiling specifically for moments like this, when the acoustics would swallow the room with a warmth and depth of sound that wouldn't be possible without that high ceiling. Meg's low soprano and Larry's high tenor interacted in ways that only the voices of family and lovers can. It's more than harmonizing. There's a playfulness to it. Think of the Beach Boys, Johnny Cash and June Carter, Sonny and Cher before they split, or the Gallagher brothers from Oasis. Those voices interact in ways that I find deeply intimate and moving, as if each note held layers of conversation that listeners can perceive but never fully understand. At the same time, I felt as if, by my very presence, I were disturbing their intimacy.

After a while, we moved to the outdoor “living space”—with the flatscreen TV embedded in the wall—and opened one of the Bordeaux blends from Larry’s wine collection. He turned on a playlist of 70s and 80s soft rock, 90s alt rock, and a smattering of coffee-shop singer-songwriters from various time periods. I don’t *intend* to be a snob, but as the saying goes, “If the shoe fits...” right? It’s important to understand, though, that my nitpicking here isn’t about criticizing Larry so much as it’s about considering my internal reaction to the music itself. Nothing from the speakers really bothered me, but I have to say, for music coming from what I think of as being three very distinct eras of pop music, the playlist was incredibly single-minded. The songs almost all fit into one of two modes: Sticky-sweet-&-syrupy saccharine or weepy-woe-is-me maudlin.

Every once in a while though, some aggressive, hard-hitting hip hop that Larry’s son and Meg’s half-brother Luke had added would break the mood, much to my amusement and Larry’s annoyance. “You know, I told him not to put anymore of this, um, these selections on my playlist. I don’t even want him listening to Biggie Smalls or Tupac or whoever going on about bitches and hoes.” He got up to skip whatever song it was. (Since this was 2013, I doubt that it was Biggie or Tupac—probably Kanye West or Drake.) I was a little taken aback. This was the first time I’d ever heard Larry curse, something that only happens, I’ve learned in the years following, when he’s drunk and when he likes the people he’s with.

“Yeah, it’s good to mix things up though, right?” I said.

Larry shrugged with his hands up at his shoulders and shook his head while he sat back down. “At least he’s showing an interest in something.”

When Damien Rice’s “Delicate Lyrics” came on, I commented that I’d always been impressed at the song’s vocal and emotional range. In truth, I still couldn’t get past the repetitiveness of the playlist, but we’d hit an awkward silence after the hip hop stuff, and Meg had entered her second phase of drunkenness, in which her rambling ceases and she just sort of sways in a wide pendulum arc with her head down and her hair hanging over her face. We needed something to talk about.

Larry asked if this was what I normally listened to.

“A little, but I’m really more into...” I paused to think of artists he’d be familiar with, “... Bob Dylan, Nirvana, Tom Waits. I like a lot of different stuff though.”

“Well, I can get behind Tom Waits, at least.”

“Really? He’s like the last of those three I would have pegged you for. No Dylan?”

“Ugh! That voice! It’s terrible, like someone falling down a well!”

I said that totally depended on what era of Dylan he meant. “Tom Waits gets pretty weird too. I mean *Swordfishtrombones* is kind of the point where a lot of his original fans said enough was enough.”

Larry hadn’t heard anything beyond his third release, 1976’s *Small Change*.

“Hm,” I said, “I don’t know if you’d like his later stuff.”

“Why not?”

“Well, he’s pretty clean up to *Small Change*, and even up to *Heart Attack and Vine*, he doesn’t get too weird, but a lot of people hate his voice on the later recordings. I mean, it is kind of Cookie Monster-ish.”

At this, Meg perked up a bit and started laughing and nodding her head.

“Can you give an example?” Larry asked, “Like, can you sing something?”

Meg laughed even harder.

I said, “I don’t know if you really—”

“Oh, come on, don’t be such a pansy.”

“It’s not that I’m nervous, it’s more that I really don’t think—”

“Just sing it.”

“Okay, man.” I hesitated a moment while I thought of what to sing, deciding finally on my personal favorite, “You’re Innocent When You Dream.”

To achieve the right timbre on a Cookie-Monster-voice Tom Waits song is not easy. To many listeners, particularly singers trained in traditional Western styles, it sounds like obnoxious and physically painful screaming because, they assume, it all comes from the throat. Done right, though, the sound draws on the volume and ragged power of the “false” vocal folds. It *feels*, while singing, as if the sound comes from the chest, but this is probably because, to get these folds to vibrate, which are thicker and less delicate than the “true” folds, singers like Waits and death metal vocalists have to stretch their tracheas by straightening their backs and necks, the way that bass and baritone singers do to hit lower notes, and open their throats wider than high-range singers, resulting in what’s sometimes called a “chest voice.” It’s only painful when you

don't make these physical adjustments, sending the "true" folds into uncontrolled and physically damaging vibrations.

I started in, "The bats are in the belfry. / The dew is—"

"Okay okay! Enough! Stop! I can't take it!"

"I told you, man."

"What the hell was that?"

"That was Tom Waits, dude."

"No, that was— I don't know *what* that was. *Inhuman* is what it was!"

Meg, by this point, was exploding with laughter at the clashing of our two worlds. And that, I guess was the conflict at the center of this whole week. Not an aggressive or disrespectful conflict, but in a variety of subtle and overt ways, my social liberalism and generally blunt way of speaking butted hard against Larry's conservatism and propriety. And the music felt like a microcosm of all that.

Waits and Dylan and Kurt Cobain (and Patti Smith and Nick Cave and almost every musician I love) all rejected or continue to reject the status quo. The same could be said, to some degree, of Billy Joel and Elton John, but they both have a consistency of style that, even if somewhat revolutionary in the 70s and 80s, by now feels musically conservative. They've always courted an aesthetic with broad, mainstream appeal that Waits et al have rejected, through elusive, shape-shifting, often abrasive personas and musical styles.

This is not to dismiss or discredit the powerful vocal ranges or musical diversity or melodic and harmonic geniuses of Joel and John. In fact, *The Stranger* and *Goodbye*

Yellow Brick Road stand out to me as musical masterpieces. But that's because those two albums are, musically, among their weirdest and most aesthetically ambitious albums—the albums in which Joel and John seem least like themselves.

Larry had had no idea how vulgar Pete's Dueling Piano Bar would be, and that, it turned out, was the most outrageous part for him. It didn't upset him, but he clearly could have done without it. For Meg and me, that was irrelevant, a harmless aspect of the show. Our outrage, which we suppressed but felt nonetheless, was with the sheer and relentless misogyny of the show. Larry didn't even seem to notice it. He'd cupped his hands (albeit jokingly) over Meg's eyes when "Monica Sweetheart" (which, by the way, a quick Google search reveals to be the name of a retired pornstar from the 2000s) wrapped her lips around the beer bottle not because she was being objectified and sexualized, but because she was performing a public sex act on a prop.

Beyond that, even though Billy Joel came from a working class background and is often regarded as a champion of the working class, his aesthetic, like Elton John's, draws heavily on Broadway musicals, another of Larry's favorite genres, and one rooted in a world that has traditionally aimed for the most extravagant and expensive performances possible. So, working class guy or not, Joel does, in his way, endorse and represent a degree of bourgeois culture that, as I hope I've established by now, rubs me the wrong way.

But what's interesting about all of this, and what's maybe more important, too, is the way that, person-to-person, none of this mattered. The reason that my relationship with Meg works is that our differences are fickle and surface-level. Had I

known that she came from money when we met, I might have regarded her with petty suspicion. I'm grateful that she didn't hold the opposite bias against me for living in my shithole of an apartment.

I'd approached Larry with that suspicion from the start, and I'd taken his gated community and mini-mansion and unwitting sexism as justification for that perspective. I still think that my criticisms are well-founded, but I never voiced them to him, and I no longer see them as criticisms of *him*. Rather, they're criticisms of a culture that enables and feeds those aspects of him. The fact is that Larry grew up poor and worked hard to get where he is. That 20th-century America's culture of white-male supremacy afforded him certain privileges that allowed his hard work to pay off in ways that it might not for most women or minorities is not his fault. That 21st-century conservative America's culture discourages him from thinking critically about this fact is also not his fault. What matters, face-to-face, person-to-person, is that he regards others with a level of respect that these cultures have taught him are appropriate and right. Beyond that, all anyone can expect is that he should listen and think critically when his assumptions and privileges are challenged.

HANG ON ST. CHRISTOPHER

NOT UNLIKE TOM THUMB'S BLUES

Meg had been sleeping since about halfway through Louisiana. Strands of hair stuck to a spot of saliva at the corner of her mouth. She becomes remarkably small when she sleeps, especially in the car, huddling her knees tight to her chest. Head down and cocked to the side, she nestled into the fleece ball of her blue-&-black plaid zipper-hoodie.

In memory, I want my favorite Tom Waits album, *Frank's Wild Years*, to be rasping quietly through my car stereo, but it could just as easily be a Billy Joel ballad or an Irish drinking song performed by the Clancy Brothers or the male-female wailing punk harmonies of X. Whatever though; if you know it, *Frank's Wild Years* is the album to imagine for this scene. In a documentary film about this roadtrip, I would stare hazily ahead, my eyes hung over a satisfied grin, Meg curled up in the passenger seat, "You're Innocent When You Dream" filling the car with sleep:

It's such a sad old feeling.
The fields are soft and green.
It's memories that I'm stealing,
but you're innocent when you dream.

That aching, grunting ballad will forever reflect my memory of this roadtrip, lost as it is in the smoke of dreams and nostalgia. Its drunken barroom chorus circles groggily back, after each verse, to that refrain about the irretrievable, irreparable past lingering in these innocent dreams of unattainable fields, perfectly "soft and green."

At 4am, it had been ten hours since we left Austin, and the night was slowly giving way to slivers of sunlight. We'd been rolling nonstop except for gas, bathrooms, coffee, and roadfood. I'd given up on teaching Meg to drive stick way back in Illinois, so by this point, I was the sole driver. We'd passed through Mississippi and Alabama and were nearing Tallahassee, Florida. Each time we cut through a brief fury of rain, Meg moaned and huffed in her sleep. My eyes bleared, and the coffee could handle only so much heavy lifting before the weight of my lids had grown unbearable.

The next rain-battered border waited fifty yards ahead. I hoped the impending clatter would pull Meg from her sleep so that she could help keep me awake. As we approached the crossing from navy-blue sky to frantic rain, I dragged out my yawns, sucking in as much oxygen as I could, drumming the steering wheel, cracking my neck, slapping myself sharply until we finally crossed into that mad patter of frog-sized droplets drowning out "I'll Be Gone."

At the rush of sound, Meg slurped up a long, sharp breath and spat out, "What?"

"It's just rain. We're in Florida," I told her, grateful for someone to talk to but also suddenly aware that I was too tired to have anything more to say. I turned up the stereo to overcome the wet smacking and slowed the car to a crawl because the wipers, even at full speed, offered only fickle glimpses of the world ahead.

"Florida? When did that happen?"

"Roundabout 3:00, I think. You hungry or gotta pee or anything?"

She said no, asked if *I* was okay, did *I* need to stop? But I had determined to push on through to morning and hit Orlando by 8am. This, I knew even then, was futile and

foolish. Maybe that stereotype about men not asking for directions holds some truth, but in me on this night, that stubbornness took the form of relentlessly, stupidly, and dangerously powering through hunger and sleep-deprivation.

The torrent dispersed into a light mist that faded with the sun's slow rise. I still can't recall what was playing, and it couldn't have still been *Frank's Wild Years*, but in my soundtrack, we return to the start of the album: "Hang on St. Christopher" lurks in the background while the camera profiles our loose-skinned faces in the refracted pre-morning light. Waits rasps a mutilated country twang along a hungover guitar. The lyrics implore Christopher, patron saint of travel, to hang on

through the smoke and the oil.
Buckle down the rumble seat;
let the radiator boil.

The song celebrates, like so many of Waits' post-70s music, rust and rot and dirt and decrepitude with a sandpaper voice amid a melodrama of rattling cans and barrels banged like bass drums—what he dubbed, in the 80s, the "junkyard orchestra." It venerates the filth, fear, and danger of the road as symbols of its freedom and romance.

As I've said before, Meg has never shared my love for Tom Waits. I suspect, though, that if I were to drag her to one of his concerts or find a video of one of his plays from the 80s or 90s, she might come to appreciate his dedication to character and performance. And she can't argue when I proclaim that Waits and Bob Dylan are perfect roadtripping music, especially in this raunchy heat.

We rolled down our windows to circulate just enough air without drowning the music and conversation in the roaring wind. Meg kept asking if I needed to stop. Was I okay? Was I sure? Did I want more chips? Did I still have coffee? Because, she said, I could drink hers if I wanted some.

“I’m fine,” I said, and “No thanks,” and “Let’s keep rolling,” and I repeated variations on these themes for a good fifteen minutes.

We’d had only sweet onion potato chips, coffee, and Hostess’ chocolate Donettes for about six hours. I’d gotten Meg’s hopes up when I pointed out the Donettes. This was around when Hostess had gone briefly bankrupt and closed its doors. Meg searched desperately for Hostess’ cupcakes—those cream-filled chocolate cakes topped with chocolate icing and a curly-Q of white. (She seemed to be channeling Woody Harrelson in *Zombie Land* as he scoured zombie-infested grocery stores for the world’s last Twinkie.) Alas, the gas station had only the Donettes, and we’d ravished the bag empty. Wallowing in a quease of sugary caffeine churning with ten hours on the road and a mist that had heated to a swampy steam of 90+°, I muttered finally, “I need to stop.”

In a rest area off of I-10, some twenty miles past Tallahassee, the humidity had stickied our skins with road-sweat. Throwing the car into neutral and coasting off the interstate, I rolled my window the rest of the way down and propped my elbow out of it in true man-driving fashion. But as we slowed and the wind died, the influx of swelter oppressed us. I dragged my body from the car and walked quickly with my arms out,

drying the pit stains on the white t-shirt that I'd picked up in Chicago some four years ago:

CrossRoads Bar & Grill

CHICAGO

I've always liked the design, which is surprising because, having earned my associate's degree in graphic design, I have serious typographical bias against Papyrus, the font used for the bar's name. It's the Comic Sans of decorative fonts—an obnoxious cliché slapped onto any design that doesn't have enough “grit” or “edge” or whatever you want to call it. But in this case, the type and layout work brilliantly. The bar's name acts as a simulacrum of Chicago's skyscraper topography, and the all-caps, white-on-black “CHICAGO,” in Copperplate Gothic Bold, sits like a line of brightly lit cars on a night street. In this subtle way, the shirt embodies my nostalgia for travel and has long been my favorite for roadtripping.

But this is not what I thought about as I ventilated my armpits on my way to the bathroom. I thought, instead, of how I'd have killed to shower in all that hard rain we'd been driving in. I went down to my tanktop, peeling off the sweat-logged tee and slinging it over my shoulder. In the men's room, I blotted my skin dry-ish with paper towels, washed my face in the sink, and slicked back my dirty-blond hair into a mussed-up spike. This I pushed back down into my usual messy side-part before I filled our metal water bottles and returned to the car to pass out like the other travelers in this rest area, our vehicles huddled around streetlights and building lights for the safety of visibility and loose-knit, temporary community.

Meg had stayed in the car. When I handed her the copper-colored, sixteen-ounce bottle, she chugged half the water, letting it slop down her cheeks and chin. She was wearing one of those short-sleeve tops with a fake zipper and fake white tee underneath. Normally, water would have been invisible on the the fabric (except for the fake tee) with its thin, multi-shaded green stripes and ribbed texture. At the moment, though, sweat drenched the shirt so thoroughly that the darkest of the stripes appeared black and the lightest a rich jungle green, so the waterfall, rather than absorbing invisibly into it, ran straight down and spilled onto seat beneath her.

She slumped back, panting. I turned the car back on and ran the A/C for fifteen minutes, hoping to cool the interior long enough to resist the outside temperature for a short while as we slept. I passed out quickly, but my half-waking dreams were feverish, warped by the occasional yarn of a passing voice and the openings and closings of car doors, flooded with nonsense impressions of bodies passing in the dark.

Torridity oozed in, dragged me awake after a twenty-minute half-sleep—what psychologists call stage one in the sleep cycle, when you're still in the real world, but it's dreamy and confusing. Meg sank into her seat, her limbs spreading like shadows at sunset, her head drooping down like the sun.

I turned the car back on but didn't fully start it so we could run the fan and crack the windows. If we slept with an alarm set for thirty minutes, we could wake up, shut off the fan to save the battery, pass out again, and hope we were knocked out enough not to feel the heat.

Alas, another twenty minutes, and that heat woke us again. Figuring no one would rob us in this crowded, well-lit lot, we rolled our windows all the way down, reset the alarm for another thirty minutes and kept the fan cranking. Before we went to sleep, I slowly turned the stereo down to a low murmur of Nina Simone singing “Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues”:

When you're lost in Juarez,
And it's Easter time too,
And your gravity fails,
And negativity don't pull you through,
Don't put on any airs
When you're down on Rue Morgue Avenue.
They got some hungry women there,
And, man, they'll really make a mess outta you.

When my phone sounded its alarm, the fan and music had ceased. Figuring that I must have shut the car off in my delirium, I passed back out.

The 6:30 sun glared horizontally through Meg’s window. Ants under a magnifying glass, we woke facing one another, trying to smile, but our cheeks drooped, thick with underslept weakness. We sat a few minutes until our eyes pulled fully awake, and we climbed into the morning light, pulling at our wrists and ankles and twisting our backs to spread apart our waking bones.

Meg waited outside the car as I headed to the bathroom to clean up. I blotted my skin with paper towels again and changed into a clean shirt. I tried to dry my tanktop, but the World Dryer managed only to warm the damp fabric in my hand.

On my return, Meg headed off to clean herself up.

I turned on the now super-heated car to charge my dying phone, but the screen remained black and the charge light off. Then it struck me that my key had already been in the ignition when I turned it. “Shit,” I muttered, turning off every switch and dial, “Shit,” hoping that I could pull enough juice to start the car, “Fuck shit goddammit,” and get the alternator to start recharging the battery.

I meditated briefly on imagined troubles-to-come: Hours spent waiting at this rest area with people ignoring me as I asked them to jump my car until I’d be forced to ask Meg to pay for an overpriced towtruck and new battery because I killed the old one with my unmanly idiocy. In particular, I couldn’t stomach this thought that I might have to ask for money; having to ask for help of any kind is bad enough, but asking for money because I’d ignored good sense would have been downright shameful. Keys in my right, I pressed the heels of my hands against the wheel, stretched my fingers wide, breathed deeply, and turned the ignition.

My car mewed, moaned, keened, and died. I imagined speaking at his funeral: “My car’s name was Alexander. I inherited him from my brother and gave him Greg’s middle name.” I stopped, though, when I got to the part about how this was also the name of one of our cats in Florida and of the first cat whom I had owned in Pennsylvania.

When Meg returned, I explained as calmly as possible, “Um, I— That is, we killed the, um, the battery.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“The air conditioning.”

Confused at my vague answer, she reminded me that I'd shut it off before we went to sleep, that all we'd had on was the fan, and that I'd shut that off after, like, a half hour.

I told her that this plan might not have actually worked, that when the alarm sounded, everything was already off.

"But," she asked, "isn't that good? If the fan and stereo were off?"

I explained that it would have been good, except that I was pretty sure that *I* didn't shut them off. "Like, the battery died, and that's why the fan and stereo were off when I woke up."

She stared at me, afraid, underslept, dumbfounded, and totally white-knuckle pissed off. "So, what do we do? Call a towtruck?"

"Well, if it comes to that, I guess, but..." I slipped into defensive sarcasm and gestured to the other cars in the lot. "We should probably try asking for a jump first."

Meg, too tired to take offense at my tone, nodded and leaned back on the car.

You may recall, reader, that I brought along cookware and bags of spices and my guitar, which I never played, and a litany of other nonessential, trunk-consuming items, and yet I brought no jumper cables for this cross-country adventure. Thus, I found myself in the awkward position of having to find someone who'd give us a jump with their own cables. About four people were doing their morning stretches outside their vehicles. The first man I asked spoke no English except, "No." This he repeated nervously with a Hispanic accent while shaking his head and shrugging at my idiotic attempts to mime the jumping of a car until I gave up and waved him off, saying,

“Thanks anyway. Thank you. Gracias. Graci— Um, thanks.” He kept his eyes on me as I walked off to find someone else. Two of the others had entered the building, and at 6:30am, I fully understood why the pregnant woman leaning into the backseat of her Chevy SUV startled when I called from a slight distance, “Excuse me. Ma’am?” Grabbing her belly and floppy straw hat, she composed herself quickly but stepped back from the strange man—from me. After I explained our situation from that safe distance and asked whether she might give my girlfriend and me a jump, she said that her husband would be right out, that he could probably help.

Thinking of my bag-hung, probably bloodshot eyes and cowlicked hair and hoarsely baritone morning voice, I realized that I should have brought Meg with me. A female presence would have set the situation at ease, made me seem less parking-lot-predatorial. At the moment, I felt unreasonably embarrassed of my gender. Then the woman’s husband arrived, and we repeated the distance precautions of stranger-danger while I re-explained the problem, during which I felt unrelenting shame: For being a man, for being unprepared, and in turn, for being unmasculine—a vicious cycle of shame paradox.

After I convinced the couple that my battery really was dead and told them the overview of our roadtrip, I shook hands with John and Anne, who brought their SUV over to Alexander. I kept hanging back as John got the jumper cables from his trunk and explained, “Sorry about all that. It’s just, I didn’t know if you were gonna, like, club me with a tire iron and rob us when my back was turned.”

The bluntness of this acknowledgment relaxed me. I'd been accepted as unthreatening—which, irrationally, I internalized as another emasculating slight. I introduced Meg as John handed me one end of the cables. Then I clamped them to my battery, proud that I at least knew how to do *this*, and climbed into the driver's seat. With the ignition, Alex mewed and faded again. I pulled the key, stepped out, waited a couple minutes, and tried once more, invoking a weak but sufficient growl. I got out and thanked John while his SUV charged Alex for a few more minutes.

He asked how far we had to go.

"Maybe two-hundred miles til Orlando. Then off to St. Pete and back north to Virginia."

Each of us unclamped our end, and I handed him mine, but he pushed the cables back into my hands, saying, "I think you might need these more than us."

I'm a sucker for the kindness of strangers. What is it that we exchange when jumping a car or changing a tire? Such simple acts of communalism show the presence of grace in humanity. My throat caught, and I was, in this moment, at my most unmanly, but I no longer cared. (Well, I cared enough to not let myself *actually* tear up in front of John.) "Thank you so much. I really appreciate your help. What can I do to repay you?"

"Just remember it the next time you meet someone who needs help. Maybe down the road, someone else will do the same for me."

I file this moment away, gladly stacking it with the debt of good deeds I owe to anyone in need. I try to make payments on this debt as often as I can.

IT'S MORE THAN RAIN

Having turned around to see as I backed out of the parking space, I fumbled, blindly smacking at the controls to raise my window. Meg reached for hers, but it wouldn't move, and my switch for it wouldn't work either. Thinking the extra juice from the jump might have blown a fuse, I stopped the car, opened the fuse box below the steering wheel, and used the plastic yellow pliers inside to pull out the passenger window fuse and spare. I had no clue whether a jump could actually blow a fuse. What's more, I didn't even know what a blown car fuse might look like, and these two looked identical. I decided to switch them anyway.

When the window still wouldn't budge, I suggested, "Maybe they're both blown? We'll pick up another one somewhere."

Meg looked more worried, but we started on toward Orlando, hoping to spot a place along the way. And we did—about ten minutes after a light rain started. And at 65mph, even that was enough to soak Meg's pants and seat.

At the next gas station, I handed the fuse in question to the cashier, hoping to match it to a new one. The store didn't carry fuses, and he couldn't say whether mine was blown because, he said, he knew no more about fuses than me, but I could probably find one at the Wal-Mart about five miles down the interstate.

The rain had intensified by the time we pulled into Wal-Mart. I asked Meg to stay in the car while I ran in as fast as possible and headed for the automotive section.

Inside, an employee helped me find the right aisle, but we couldn't find a replacement fuse. "Um... Trash bags? Duct tape?"

He pointed me to them and, two minutes later, I was bolting back across the lot.

Inside the car, Meg had pressed herself against the driver's door because, of course, I had neglected to park with the closed window against the now horizontal rain. She climbed out of the car, and I handed her the tape. "No fuse!" I shouted over the clatter. "I need you to rip off pieces of tape for me while I get these over the window!"

Miraculously, the tape stuck, despite the wet glass, plastic, and metal. We climbed back in through the driver's side to avoid ripping the bags off the passenger door by opening it. Between panting and gasping "Holy shit" and "Jesus fucking Christ," I asked Meg to look up an AutoZone or any place that might carry fuses. The closest she could find on her phone was twenty miles out.

I climbed toward the back of the car and pulled a couple of towels from a suitcase. Meg put one on her seat, dried off with the other, and handed it to me. I did the same and then set it on the soaked part of my seat before we started back toward the road.

As the bags flapped, rattled, and smacked, Meg kept adding duct tape to hold them, but at the onramp, they started to rip away. She grabbed and hung on as tight as she could, but in seconds, the tape tore clean off, and the bags were gone.

I pulled off the highway again and stopped in a dirt lot. The rain let up to a drizzle while we tried again, but now the residual tape glue was slick with water. So Meg did her best to dry the surfaces with one of the towels as I piled on more bags,

more tape. And again, when we hit the onramp, even faster than before, the bags flew off. Meg held my jacket against the window, but by now, the effort was gestural, as the rain had utterly soaked everything.

Mired in misery, we drove on in silence.

Several miles later, I noticed a button on the window controls that I'd never seen before. On it was a car window silhouetted in white with up- and down-arrows cut out of it.

In my periphery, Meg panted and shivered. She'd given up on the jacket-as-shield plan and had draped it over her body.

Saying nothing, I pressed the button and tried the passenger window switch again.

"What the hell?" Cartoonishly, she flipped her head to face me and then the window and then me again. "How'd you do that?!"

I said nothing.

"Did it just work all of the sudden?"

Drumming the steering wheel, debating whether and how to lie, clearing my throat, all I could say was, "Don't be mad."

Her eyes burned into the side of my head. "What. Did. You. Do?"

"Well, I think I might have accidentally put what might have been the child safety lock on—you know, for the, um, the passenger window?"

“You. Fucking. Asshole!” And then, two octaves higher, “You’re such a fucking asshole!” she said, hitting me in the shoulder again and again, causing me to swerve onto the rumble strip.

“I’m sorry! Fuck, I’m sorry, sweetheart! What else can I say?”

Finally, she let up and sat back, her arms folded in helpless rage.

After several moments of silence, I couldn’t hold it in any longer. My entire body launched into wild, convulsive laughter.

Meg tried to keep a straight face, but a smirk crept in, and soon we were both cackling like idiots, free of anger or judgment. Instead, the comedy of the situation sent us into ecstatic hilarity.

Of course, shortly after the window rose, the sun overtook the rain. In the light glinting off the beads of water that clung to every surface in my car and flashed over Meg’s cheeks as they pressed her eyes into slits of joy, I saw something that had, up to that point, been obscured to me: “Just think how funny for when we tell our kids.”

“She took my hand, and we rolled on for Orlando, soaked and cackling, steaming the windows as we dried in the sun.

HARRY POTTER & THE ESCAPE FROM CONSUMER CULTURE

There is, of Harry Potter Land, little worth telling. It was a miserable experience that I would prefer not to relive. Even Meg, in retrospect, is not surprised at how disappointing the experience was. In the end, though, it’s hard to blame a theme park for, well, being a theme park—a celebration of commodity culture and pre-packaged,

linearized chunks of fun, which I differentiate from the free-form, nonlinear experiences of creative play that children engage in when they invent games and imagined worlds to explore in whatever real-world settings are available. If anything, the park reminded us that Harry Potter is only secondarily a series of books and films that inspire the imaginations of children. It is, first and foremost, a franchise—a popular franchise in a consumer culture. And theme parks are nothing if not distillations of that culture: Escapist fantasies meant to lull visitors into a state of mindless spending. Harry Potter offers precisely the sort of vehicle that theme parks need to engage the consumerist parts of our twentieth- and twenty-first-century brains: Grandeur and fantasy, a dissociation from practical reality.

Let us not dwell on this except to describe my most vivid memory, the one that encapsulates the whole purgatorial experience. By far, the best part of the park was Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey, a simulator ride that made use of suspended, pivoting seats, screens, holograms, and animatronics to take visitors on a broomstick ride that involved the Whomping Willow, dementors, and a quidditch match. The ride itself was fun, but this memory is not about fun. It's about goddamned misery: When the Forbidden Journey ended, we found ourselves confronted first with a series of screens, one of which showed a picture of our group in mid-ride, which we could purchase with a specialized frame in the store, into which we were quickly funneled. The layout of the store demanded that we walk its entirety, in roughly linear fashion, to reach the exit. Children, small enough to slip past the legs of adults, were the only ones able to move at anything beyond a *step-excuse-me-step-wait-pardon-me-step-wait* pace.

But of course, they were also the ones most unable to separate the ride from the shop, the fantasy from the consumption. They dashed through the sardined adults, shrieking with delight at \$75 boardgames and \$60 plastic wands.

We took two steps, excused ourselves past a purple-haired teen, took another step, and slowly waded through the pulsating crowd, our eyes locked on the EXIT sign twenty-feet-and-forever in the distance.

SOUTH OF THE RISING SUN

I'd been raving to Meg since we left Austin about the sunrise where my father lived in Saint Petersburg, on the western side of the Florida panhandle. Fleeing Erie's icy poverty in 2005, he'd moved in with his mother Rose. They still lived together in her small, aging house along a peninsula in Tampa Bay—the actual bay, not the city. My grandmother had been living alone there since her husband's fatal heart attack in the mid-90s.

I explained to Meg that we wouldn't be able to go out on my grandmother's dock, though, because a hurricane had destroyed it years ago, and she'd never had it repaired. Her neighbor, however, would always let Greg and me use her dock. On occasion, when we'd visit our father in Florida, Greg would sit out there, sometimes with a rod, sometimes with binoculars, often with a joint, while I sat inside, playing videogames, until he nagged me into coming out. I would never fish with him, though, because the whole concept of luring a fish into hooking its lip on barbed metal disturbed me even before college, when I stopped eating meat, but I'd still sit and smoke

weed with him while he cast out. He rarely reeled in more than seaweed or a tire. The last couple of times we visited, he'd gotten me to wake early for the sunrise, and the last time was also the last that I saw him outside of a hospital room.

I didn't bring any of that up with Meg at the time because it felt like too much to get into and because whenever, I talk about Greg at length, I find it difficult not to choke up, especially when I talk about his last days. It's not that I'm still grieving—he's been dead for ten years now. Rather, what gets caught in my throat is a difficulty of articulation. Somehow, I lack the language to explain certain aspects of my relationship with Greg. The word "brother," for instance, feels inadequate. It fails to capture the fact that I grew up with the knowledge that he would die young, that he should have died younger, that I was angry at him for dying, that I was angry at him for living beyond expectation, thereby forcing me to live with this knowledge from the day that I understood what death was to the age of twenty that I was kin to a ghost. It fails also to capture the intimacy of helping a ghost prepare his home dialysis machine night after night when I was a teenager, the intimacy of bringing him water when he couldn't unhook himself from that machine while it dehydrated him and then replaced his bodily fluids. It fails to account for the alienness of his scarred body, of the W stretching from pec to pec, of the angry red flesh piled atop itself in an old incision here and a new one there, of the permanent catheter tube dangling from his torso, of the click-clicking buried in his chest from whatever strange machine told his heart the time, second by second. It cannot possibly explain how it feels to watch your ghost brother lying in a hospital bed, deep in the hallucinations of his coming death, as, silently and

with his eyes shut, he moves his hands as if tying bait to a fishing line and casting it out to sea and holding it there for several minutes before reeling it back in and checking and rebaiting the hook and casting it out again.

There is no language to explain this. And if there is, I do not want it because to articulate with words is to give, and I wish to keep this, all of it.

So I made no effort to discuss this with Meg right then, but that's what I had in mind while I was telling her about the dock. She seemed intrigued, but as she often does, she refrained from expressing it with more than a head tilt, raised eyebrows, and a rising "Hm↗." Behind her thick-framed, black, prescription sunglasses, this response comes across as even more detached and noncommittal. I've learned not to take it personally when Meg slips into her habit of showing only blunted interest. It has to do with the way her mom's side of the family thrives on teasing and competition—fun for the right personality type, but Meg's an introvert, and was even moreso when she was a girl. The teasing must have felt more like an attack. It seems to me that's how Meg learned to clam up and resist showing emotion or interest. It's a passivity that, even though I still try to draw her out when it shrouds her, I've come also accept as part of her identity.

Her family's emotional prodding and personal boundary pushing caused her to feel that her interests were either foolish or boring, sending her into a stoic asceticism that emerges from time to time regardless of whether she feels teased, and especially when she feels stressed or, as she did at this point on the roadtrip, very tired, making her tough to read. Coming from a similarly prodding family, I too have a habit of

teasing the people I love. Maybe because I used to react just like Meg when my brother would go overboard with his teasing, I'm better at intuiting what actually bothers her, so my prodding doesn't strike the same nerves.

All said, though, I've learned to take even the slightest "Hm↗" as a good sign.

Continuing down I-75, I reached across the stickshift for her knee, where she laced her fingers with mine. I squeezed a bit and said that we could get up early, make some coffee, sit on the neighbor's dock, and watch the sunrise. "You know, all romantic-like."

This last bit of intentionally stereotypical maleness was a way to undercut some of the pressure that I'd built up around the whole matter. Meg smirked. "How early would we have to get up?"

"Like 6, 6:30."

For a brief stretch, Meg looked silently ahead, then turned to the land on her right as it opened to Bay, a wide blue thrusting the sky back at the watching world. "That sounds nice... I guess."

We pulled into my father and grandmother's driveway on St. Pete's stretch of the Bay around 4pm on a middle-weekday. Florida's muggy early-August cast a damp net over everyone and -thing on this thick, hot day after the previous night's rain. My father came through the black gate on the gravel walkway to greet us. I hadn't seen him in two years. He was still the same, broad-shouldered man with subtle jowls and a nose ever-swollen from having broken it numerous times as a kid, but the salt always seems

to be overtaking the pepper in his hair and mustache, his hunch and limp appear exaggerated, and his voice suddenly caricaturizes its former self, soft and gruff in its deep baritone.

The small leaps in age throw me off balance. But at this point, I hadn't cut my hair or tended my beard in a month, and Meg and I had both underslept the past week. Maybe our appearance on this roadtrip suggests how we'll look in thirty-five years as aging romantics who take to the bottle and party like both our fathers before us.

"Hey, Rick!" My father's the only person who calls me Rick—though sometimes my mother calls me Ricky. Both have a comforting intimacy that, from anyone else, would feel alienating to me.

I climbed from my low-seated car and called back, "Hiya, Pop!"

As I introduced Meg and my father for the first time in person, my grandmother came out, dressed in a floral button-down blouse, her hair the same 70s-style dyed-red perm that it's been since I was a boy—almost like an Irish variant of the Afro. This was the first I'd seen her in probably four years, and I was shocked that doing so still inspired the opposite effect of seeing my father. No matter how many years go by, she looks perpetually sixty. Now into her nineties, she looked the same as she did a decade earlier and a decade before that and, probably, another before that.

Introductions were made. Hugs exchanged and cheeks kissed. Bags hauled and deposited in the foyer. Questions were answered regarding the weather so far on our trip and my mother's side of the family and our visit to Universal Studios.

On the inside, my grandmother's house, like her person, is unchanging: 70s shag carpet, pea-green armchairs, defunct mini-organ, old exercise bike, pale pink porcelain in the main bathroom. The rest of the house affects mostly tones of sepia and split pea soup with muted paisley prints and window curtains of some kind of canvas material. The outside of her house is an ecosystem in constant flux with its untamed lawn and ferns and grasses wedging gates shut and blocking paths around the house. An old metal canoe rests vertically against a tall wooden fence. The coast behind her house throbs with the tides, just a ten-foot drop down from her crumbling seawall.

At low tide, corpses of jellyfish and crabs and smooth bits of beach glass and beach wood remain as the water floods out. You can walk and wade to the pillars of calcified wood that once held the dock. Swim out a few yards, and you'll come to the one square of it that's left. Off in the near distance, gulls dive, dolphins breach, and boats and skiers motor past.

As we stood in the foyer of this glimpse back into the 70s, my grandmother asked if we were hungry. Not really. "Well," she said, "we have leftover" this and that, some potatoes or green beans or beef stew, and she caught herself: "Oh, but you're vegetarian! Are both of you?"

I—and then I noticed *we*—smiled and nodded and, "Yeah," said Meg. This, of course, wasn't really true, but there was some degree of truth to it. Even though Meg did eat meat at the time, she tried to limit the quantity. I wonder, though, looking back, if this was more of a show of solidarity, especially after her father had taken us to a steakhouse, knowing that my options would be limited to penne pasta—the third most

boring of vegetarian options, right behind the veggie burger and, at the top of the list, the salad.

“I don’t even know what you eat. What do you eat?”

Still smiling, still nodding, I said, “Oh, you know, vegetables,” and Meg chimed in, “And, I mean, grains and beans and nuts and stuff too. And cheese and eggs.”

My grandmother started listing animals: “No chicken?” “Oh, but you eat fish, right?” “Or pork or venison?”

“The easiest way to think of it,” I said, “is that we don’t eat animals.”

This baffled her, but it would have to do: “Well, I guess there’s always salad.” She has a way of really stressing sharp, American vowel sounds for emphasis. It doesn’t quite sound Southern. She grew up in Ohio, but it’s not quite any Midwestern or Northeastern accent that I can recognize either. Regardless, when she said “salad,” she really hit that first syllable hard and softened the second: “SAL-luhd.”

She set us up in the guestroom, which looked like it could be a room in a giant thrift store with walls of old furniture and computer paraphernalia and a disconnected fax and a foldout couch. The stacks of stuff blocked all paths to the windows, making it difficult to bring light into the room. Left alone to settle in, Meg and I laughed about the food discussion while we positioned our bags among the decades of stacked belongings and rested briefly on the foldout.

The whole house had a darkness about it while we were there that I’d never noticed before. It was just as oppressive and depressing as my apartment in Erie. The

only difference, on the inside, was the presence of furniture and other human beings to take up some of the cave-like interior. The overgrown yard outside threw shadows over the windows, casting a constant indoor twilight that felt like it must have been at least partly responsible for everyone's excess sleep.

Throughout the course of any given day, my grandmother and my father each rested their eyes, snoozed, napped, and took breathers more times than we could count, and Meg and I, having learned in Erie to sleep through darkneses and depressions, didn't fare much better.

In the hours when we were all awake, the conversation centered almost always around food, what to have for breakfast or lunch or dinner, what to get at the store, where to get takeout—I half expected someone to start asking about second breakfast.

One evening, we all piled into the guestroom (or thriftroom, as I've come to think of it), and we crowded around the cream-colored Gateway CRT monitor circa 1990s to decide on a Chinese restaurant. The trouble was that my father and grandmother couldn't agree on which was closest and of the highest quality: China One, Mini Chinese, or China Star. Google Maps showed that China One was the closest, but there remained the debate over quality.

Soon, the argument turned to the kind of bickering that a person can only experience and understand within their own family: "No, we can't order there! Don't you remember last time? The pork had all that gristle! Goodness knows you don't need the extra fat!"

"Well gee, Mom, that wasn't very nice."

“Oh settle down, we both need to go on a diet, me worse than you, and you know it!”

Meg and I glanced at each other and chuckled silently.

These fights that galvanize and vanish in a moment, no more affecting than passing rain, demonstrate a particular kind of love within a bickering family.

“Mom, will you please just listen? I’m telling you, China Star’s the place on the news all the time that has cockroaches! Every time they’re on the news, it’s because of bugs! I don’t want to eat there! Do you like eating bugs?”

“Well, we’re not eating it there, we’re eating it here,” my grandmother shot back, though she knew that this wasn’t the point, and my father reminded her of this, to which she said, “I just know that China One— That’s the place that— Didn’t they mess up your order once? You got the, the shrimp instead of the pork, remember?”

“No, that was the other place, the one up on 4th. Anyway it’s not China One, and it wasn’t shrimp. I ordered the shrimp, and they gave me beef.”

“Oh, it wasn’t China One? Well what are we going on about?” She started to laugh, which was good because by this point, Meg and I were no longer able to stifle our own laughter. “Well why don’t you go there then?”

He muttered back that that’s what he was planning on doing, but he wanted to find the best route. “Google says to take Martin Luther King.”

This matter of opinion presented another debate platform for my grandmother: “Oh that’s just— Why not take 4th?”

“Because, Mom, I don’t like 4th street.”

This continued for a good ten minutes, until I stepped in to say, “Open their menu, Pop, so we can call our order in.”

“I want eggrolls,” proclaimed my grandmother.

And yet another debate ensued. After another good ten minutes of this *Seinfeld* routine, my father said he wasn’t sure what he wanted. “We should just drive out,” he suggested, “and I’ll place my order there.” My grandmother said that would be a waste of time. “No,” he replied, “it’ll be good because I’ll get to smoke a cigarette while I wait.”

Meg and I agreed to whatever they could agree on and offered to ride along with my father.

My father’s Ford truck wouldn’t fit the three of us, so we took my car. Meg, being much smaller than my father, curled into the cramped back seat, and he sat up front. Just as we were about to leave, I realized that I needed to run back inside and, in a few seconds, returned with my camera bag

As we headed down 4th Street to China One, Igor Yuzov sang:

Remember night in ’85,
you gave me records by police?
You didn’t know that next day,
I traded them for new Bee Gees.

Yuzov goes on to explain that, tonight, he’s “gonna tell the truth.” He’s “a closet disco dancer” who loves “to dance all night.” My father had grown up staunchly in 1960s and 70s classic rock with the Beatles, Deep Purple, and the Doors, so I understood why he asked, “What the *hell* are we listening to?” The Red Elvises were too goofy, flaunting caricaturized versions of their Russian-American identities and throbbing along to the

song's disco beat. It didn't matter that the album is laden with rockabilly and jazz melodies too; disco was the deal-breaker. I put on Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds instead, having sent him one of their albums, *Dig, Lazarus, Dig!!!*, for his birthday a couple of years ago. He's been a fan of Cave's gnashing punk outbursts and mourning gothic ballads ever since. This seemed to satisfy him.

We reached China One around 8pm. (One of the results I've found from living in dark places, like all of my previous apartments, and like my grandmother's house, is that you end up eating very late meals. Second dinner? Maybe the energy drain of all that darkness slows your metabolism.) I told my dad that I wanted Szechuan tofu, but that I would stay in the car. He and Meg climbed out and headed for the restaurant.

Meanwhile, I pulled from my camera bag a glass pipe and what I'd saved from the nugget that Sahara had tucked into my palm back in Colorado Springs. Ever since then, I'd been rationing it carefully, drawing a hit here and there.

I hadn't smoked with my father in two years, but doing so is what you might call a bonding ritual for us. Greg and I used to visit him every Thursday, back when he still lived in Erie. Sometimes he'd pick us up from our mother's to take us to whatever restaurant we could agree upon, often fast food, but also whatever dive bars supposedly had the best wings or burgers or Rubens in Erie. But Greg and I would always bicker over this discussion. Eventually we became polarized on every restaurant in Erie. After that, Greg would drive us to our father's place—some apartment or trailer or, when he

was between homes, the Light House Inn—where we would watch a movie from the video store and eat homemade white chili or small filets or cheeseburgers.

On the first day that we all smoked weed together, Greg and I visited him at Northview Heights. When we walked through his door, he was laying out meats, cheeses, veggies, and condiments for deli sandwiches. The sun that day was uncharacteristically bright through the sliding glass door to his deck. Even on a mid-summer day like that one, Erie's weather is, by and large, overcast; but on that day, the sunlight spilled around the cigarette smoke, highlighting trails as they drifted slowly apart.

We'd been to the video store to rent a copy of some Eddie Murphy movie or maybe one of the sequels to *Police Academy*. Having turned that on in the background, we stood outside the kitchen section of the apartment—you couldn't really call it a room since the dining, living, kitchen, and foyer areas were all essentially the same room. We talked movies and school and music until our father left for the restroom. While he was gone, Greg sat down on the couch and packed Darth Bowl, the black pipe he'd christened while the second *Star Wars* trilogy was surging. Greg had always reveled in breaking rules and ruffling feathers, an attention-seeking behavior that made him at once immensely fun and irritating. Flaunting the self-satisfied grin of knowing that he'd get away with it because, by this point, we both knew that our father smoked bud, Greg took a lungful and held it as the toilet flushed.

I helped put together some sandwiches while Greg stood in front of us, on the other side of the low wall dividing the kitchen from the living area, his face slowly

reddening. When our father asked if he wanted horseradish, Greg burst into a laughing cloud of smoke that, inexplicably, our father failed to notice, asking only, “What’s so funny?”

Greg hit the pipe again and passed it none-too-stealthily to me.

I hit and passed it back.

Greg asked, “Dad, don’t you smell anything?”

With his apartment so constantly smoky, our dad had rendered himself unable to detect even the freshest burning of weed. “Smell what?” he asked.

“Something burning, maybe?” Greg prodded.

“What? Where?” He started into a mini-panic, looking rapidly from the oven to the toaster to the microwave.

“Dad, just hit this!” Greg thrust the pipe at him.

Still reeling from the panic of what he had thought must have been a fire that he could not smell or see, my father spun back to Greg. He looked at the pipe and, in a mix of shock and anger followed by latent amusement, he coughed out, “Jesus! What the hell are you doing? I can’t do that with you.”

Greg explained that we’d been smoking for the past five minutes, and he hadn’t noticed. It couldn’t be that big a deal.

Our father snatched the pipe from Greg, muttered “Jesus,” under his breath, took a hit, and passed it to me. In that moment, something happened to our relationship. It wasn’t just that we were breaking some taboo about smoking weed with parents. And it wasn’t just about being on the same level with him, though that was important too.

Weed, like alcohol and cigarettes, but also like food and coffee and tea, is a social tool. It's something that people do together that signifies a kind of bonding—breaking bud, as it were. I haven't always had that kind of common ground with my father. I can't say what this meant for Greg, but for me, a socio-familial door had been opened.

Ever since that day, the three of us would blaze on almost every visit. A few years later, though, when Greg was dying of peritonitis after a lifetime of heart, kidney, and immune disorders, it was just my father and me smoking after visiting Greg in the hospital in Florida, during what should have been a calm holiday visit. After Greg had managed to fly back to Erie, by himself because I didn't understand what was happening, he went straight into Hamot Hospital and stayed there. Then it was no longer *our*, but *my* father and me smoking after the last time we saw him there, waiting for the weed to numb our perceptions and memories.

So smoking weed with my father, you have to understand, has much to do with nostalgia, with remembrance for Greg, as well as with the effort to blunt the ache of that same nostalgia. It occurs to me now, as I write this, that the pantomimed baiting of a fishhook would not look so different from the pantomimed packing of a pipe, nor the reeling in of a rod from the lighting of a bowl.

When my father and Meg returned to the car, I gave him the pipe, exclaiming that he should take the greens—the first hit, the freshly packed, unburnt, and best tasting weed.

“Oh, no no. I don’t do that anymore. I, uh, I got into some harder stuff about a year ago, and I just decided to give it all up. I mean, well, sometimes I’ll smoke a joint on, you know, on a rare occasion, but I don’t get heavy into it anymore.”

“Oh come on, Pop! Is this not a rare occasion? Besides, this is the last of what I have, and we haven’t seen each other in like two years. You have to blaze. You don’t have a choice.” I thrust the pipe at him. He gave in, hit the pipe, and passed it to Meg.

The late meals and the constant sleeping had completely dismantled Meg’s and my sleep schedule and, in turn, our ability to get up early to watch the sunrise. We emerged from our room each day at noon in a haze of surreality, drifting from one daytime TV show to the next: *The Price Is Right!*, *Days of Our Lives*, *Judge Joe Brown*, something on the Home Shopping Network.

On day three, I could handle the misery and confinement no longer. While Meg channel-surfed, I dragged the canoe down to the seawall.

My grandmother came out and said I’d need a lifejacket.

“We’ll need two—one for me and one for Meg.”

“Oh, is Meg going with you?”

“I’ll convince her.”

I’d been working on Meg for the past day or two, trying to get her to go out on the Bay with me. She’d been so noncommittal about it one way or another that I decided I could only make it happen by putting the canoe and lifejacket right in front of her.

Having been around for some of these efforts, my grandmother looked incredulously at me, no doubt assuming that the noncommittal responses were really Meg's way of saying no. I knew from past experience that this may or may not have been the case. My grandmother responded only, "Okay, I'll grab two jackets then." She walked off and, a few minutes later, returned with two orange vests.

All that was left was to convince Meg that canoeing into the Bay was a good idea. In general, when it comes to convincing Meg to do anything mildly adventurous, my primary rhetorical strategy is to affirm that, indeed, she's totally capable of canoeing or climbing a few rocks or driving a stickshift. Sometimes this strategy succeeds (climbing rocks in Colorado), and sometimes it fails miserably (driving stick), but even in failure, she'd never gotten hurt or stayed upset for more than a short while.

"What if we get attacked by sharks?" she asked when I proposed a trip into the bay.

"There's no sharks out there," I said. "Water's too shallow." I had no clue whether sharks swam in shallow waters, nor did I have any idea how deep the bay was. I did, however, know that people went canoeing out there all the time, often with small children aboard. A better rhetorician might have made this point instead.

"What if we can't get back?"

I explained that I'd be at the front of the canoe to steer it, that we wouldn't have a problem getting back. (A quick Google search would have revealed that, in fact, the primary steering is done from the stern, or rear, of the canoe. So, apparently, I was an asshole for saying this without really knowing.)

She retorted that she didn't believe me about the sharks. But, I reminded her, we hadn't seen any sharks. We'd seen dolphins, though, and dolphins have been known to protect people from sharks. We couldn't have been safer. While there was some truth to this, the debate had turned into playful banter. This was bald-faced bullshit, and Meg knew it, which is probably why she laughed and rolled her eyes.

She returned the conversation to our ability to get back, what with her having no canoeing experience, and with her lack of upper-body strength. This was, she reminded me, a windy day on which surely one needed upper-body strength. Eventually, though, when my grandmother joined in, Meg accepted our entreaties that the Bay wasn't dangerous.

And ultimately, that was what mattered. As a kid, I'd canoed out there with my parents, with Greg, and with my grandfather plenty of times. Meg's reservations had far less to do with actual dangers than they did with personal insecurity and lack of self-confidence. I was being pushy, and I didn't want this to end up the way that her driving my stickshift on the highway had, but I knew that I could get us back on my own if I had to, and what I really wanted, as with driving stick, was to show her that she could do this thing that she was nervous about, that we could take this minor risk, and that not only would we come out okay but that we'd come out better people for having taken this (very small) adventure together.

We headed back inside to change.

By habit I whistle, and I hum, and on occasion, I regale Meg with song. While we took our swimsuits from our bags, I sang Johnny Cash's "Walk the Line." Somewhere in the second verse, as I stripped and pulled on my swimtrunks, I adlibbed, "What the fuck! Goddamn it! Fuck!"

"What's wrong?" Meg asked. "Are you okay?"

I threw my trunks to the floor and pointed at the scorpion that had stowed away in them when we left Austin almost a week ago and that had just stung me in the tailbone. "That little fucker!"

Before I continue this story, I feel compelled to remind you, reader, that I've been a vegetarian since I was twenty-three, that I try my damndest to treat other animals with respect, that I'm not an angry or cruel person. Still, after that scorpion pinched me, I lost it.

"What are you doing?" Meg asked.

I said nothing and ran into the bathroom for a pair of surgical scissors, which had been among Greg's belongings when he died and which I've since used to trim my hair and beard. Then I charged back in, buck naked, caught the scorpion as it scuttled toward the bed, and snipped its tail right off.

"Holy shit, Eric! What the fuck?!"

As it tried to escape, I suddenly realized the wrath of my actions. Not knowing what else to do, I aimed for its thorax, wanting to kill it quickly, but ended up hacking off its claws before I managed to cut it in half.

"Jesus, Eric! Stop torturing it and kill it already!"

“That’s what I’m trying to do! Fuck! I’m sorry!” Slowly, I reached forward and snipped its head down the middle.

After a moment of silence, Meg asked again, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It just stings a little.”

“What the hell was that?”

I knew what she meant, but I didn’t want to face it just then. “A scorpion.”

“I know, but... What the hell, Eric?”

Looking at the pieces of the body, I realize how small the scorpion had been, just over an inch from head to rear. Fully grown, a striped bark scorpion like this one would have been around 2.5”. Human morality about the killing of an adult animal being more acceptable than the killing of a young one doesn’t line up with current ecological views. To kill an adult is to kill a being that families might rely on; in effect, doing so has the potential to kill untold numbers of offspring. Still, there’s something about killing a baby animal that feels especially wrong. Maybe it has to do with power differentials. The very young are essentially defenseless when compared to the fully grown—though, even an adult striped bark scorpion would have caused, at worst, minor swelling and some mild, lingering pain. This scorpion’s best defense was to pinch and sting me with enough venom to cause a bump like a mosquito bite, and I had just sliced it mercilessly to bits.

We stared at the pieces for a few moments before I collected them in a piece of toilet paper and flushed them down the toilet.

Are my pangs of guilt over this excessively tree-hugger-ish. Just generally silly? Maybe. But there's a larger ethic at work here. The way we treat other animals, no matter how small, signifies the degree to which we value life. Consider that, according to the National Museum of Crime and Punishment:

Children who torture or kill small animals like squirrels, birds, cats, and dogs without showing remorse are highly likely to be sociopaths. Many serial killers kill to control others' lives, and as children, small animals are the only lives they have the power to control.

I don't think it's a stretch to say that, serial killer or not, to take another animal's life without considering the life taken, even that of an insect or arachnid, demonstrates what should be an ethical concern.

I finished changing into my trunks, and we returned to the canoe. No matter how steady I held it, waiting for her to climb in, Meg still didn't trust our vessel.

"What if it tips?"

"It's not gonna tip. Here look." I stood up, rocked slightly, and sat back down.

"See, it's not gonna tip."

"That doesn't really make me feel better, Eric."

After much coaxing, Meg finally climbed in, and we started rowing into the bay, my grandmother watching from the neighbor's dock.

When we stopped paddling, we were a few miles out, far enough that we could no longer tell which house was my grandmother's.

Meg started again on the subject of sharks.

If she thought that sharks really might be in these waters, she would start panicking, so I reiterated, “I told you, the waters here are too shallow for sharks.” Again, though, I had absolutely no knowledge as to the veracity of this claim.

She asked about stingrays. Then alligators. Then again about the boat tipping.

I explained that stingrays almost never bother people (which I knew to be true), that alligators live in freshwater (which I also knew to be true), and, “Look, I’m telling you, the boat isn’t gonna tip.” In what I now see as an ill-advised attempt to demonstrate this point, I stood, and, like I did when it was just me in the canoe, I rocked it slightly.

Meg white-knuckled the canoe walls.

Even through her sunglasses, I could see that this was the wrong course of action. Gently, I sat back down and said that we should head back.

Still gripping the metal, tightening her jaw, Meg asked, “Which way?”

“That way.” I swept my finger across the general direction of the houses on the Bay.

“That’s not very specific.”

“We’ll be fine.” I said this over and over the whole trip back in response to her anxiety.

I felt awful for not having realized that her fear, opposite my expectations, increased as we’d continued paddling, and Meg made no small show of her dissatisfaction. “I can’t believe you just stood up like that. And now we’re gonna get

lost because you don't know where you're going. And we're gonna get attacked by sharks. And it's all your fault. And I have to suffer the consequences."

As we approached, we had little trouble spotting the house, and when we got to shore, my grandmother helped us back up the seawall. "Wow, you guys really got out there! At one point, I couldn't even see you. I just gave up looking."

"The whole time we were out there," Meg said, now trying to cover her fear with a bit of laughter, "I kept telling Eric that if we get attacked by sharks, it'll be all his fault. He says there are no sharks out there."

"Sharks?" asked my grandmother.

"Yeah, Grandma, sharks," I replied. "There's no sharks out there, right?"

"Well sure there are. That's the Bay. Don't you know it goes straight to the ocean?"

Meg glared at me.

"Okay, I'm an asshole, but is it really that big a deal? I mean, we're fine. We had no problem getting back. No sharks."

"That's not the point, Eric."

I was on fire that day. First the scorpion and now this. I knew that the sharks and the fact that we were okay wasn't the point. I hadn't listened to Meg enough to realize that what had started as concern had become genuine fear and instead had pushed my own agenda. Even if that agenda was intended for both of our benefit—to show that she could do this thing, that it would all be okay, that we would be okay—I just hadn't been listening.

About half of Meg's anger after the canoe, she later told me, actually had less to do with my behavior, though, than it did with her own. She was upset with herself for not being able to get over what she knew to be an irrational fear. Unlike driving stick, here was a situation where, even if she couldn't physically get us back, we weren't doomed because she knew that I could; and she knew that, even if the canoe tipped, she had a life jacket (and besides that, it's not as if she couldn't swim). So, in addition to my pushiness and being emotionally obtuse, she was upset because she couldn't manage her anxiety for a simple canoe trip.

Realizing that we'd have only one more chance to do so while we were here, I decided that we needed to see the sunrise together—no matter how painful it might be to get up before the crack of dawn. So, on our last day at the house, I awoke to my alarm at 5:45am. I grabbed my camera bag—I was out of weed but still had some resin, the stuff that gets baked into the pipe when you smoke—then I brewed some coffee and dragged Meg out of bed to the neighbor's dock in front of the ocean's pre-dawn glow.

While we sat there, I pulled the flame through the glass pipe and held it, waiting for the resin to sizzle so I could pull just a bit more smoke.

Meg turned it down when I passed the bowl her way. She's never liked resin, which is understandable because it's essentially tar, and that's exactly what it tastes like; I don't even smoke it for the high but, rather, just for the sake of smoking something because, since giving up cigarettes shortly after we'd started dating, I've realized that I don't miss the nicotine so much as the simple act, the ritual of smoking.

Meg focused on her coffee and the horizon.

According to my memory at the time of having watched it on previous visits, the sun should have risen straight ahead from the dock. Strangely, though, the sky seemed to be brightening, but the sun was nowhere to be seen. After probably twenty minutes, far off to the left (north), I saw it slip from behind my grandmother's column of shoreline houses, well above the horizon. Occluded by fog, even the sunrise felt heavy and dark.

The popular claim that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west is only accurate in general terms. Prior to the autumnal equinox, the sun rises northeast to southwest, and before the vernal equinox, it rises southeast to northwest. On each occasion, the sun rises due east and sets due west. I had failed to consider that every visit I remembered to my grandmother's house as a teen or twenty-something had been between November and January, when the sun would rise almost straight in front of the dock. This was August 5. It had risen already from behind the north-east-reaching column of houses. There was no technicolor orange-and-violet glow, just a hazy ball of yellow hanging behind blue clouds.

After I explained our astronomical miss to Meg, I took a couple more resin hits, and we sipped our coffee for about ten more minutes, arms wrapped around each other's waist. We reentered the house through the screened-in back deck, disappointed.

Inside, we found my dad pouring a cup of coffee and picking at the leftover pepperoni pizza from the night before. He hacked a cough that sounded like a train with an engine full of sludge. When we told him that the sun had risen in the wrong

spot, he seemed surprised, as if he'd never realized that the sun changes its path in the course of a year.

Having missed this fact myself, the only reason it seemed odd in this case was that he lived where he could watch the sunrise most days of the year, but clearly he'd watched it very little or not at all, and he'd never thought about the changing position of the sunrise. It struck me that he'd not sought out this daily rebirth more than a few times over the past eight years. Then again, maybe that's not so strange. Having spent most of my childhood and adolescence in Erie, the lack of sun had manifested in me a desperate longing for it, a desire to bask in it as it returned each day. He'd spent plenty of his life in Florida, so I guess a sunrise would have been less eventful.

That was the oddity of our visit. Every place on this roadtrip had expectation built into it. In Niagara-on-the-Lake and Toronto, we'd expected fancy wine and upscale lodging. In Colorado Springs, we'd expected weed and dry heat and hiking. In Austin, we'd expected the extravagant and indulgent lifestyle of Meg's father. And in Florida, we'd expected sun and outdoor bars. Instead, we'd found darkness and sleep. In many ways, it felt as if we'd returned to Erie, as if we'd never get fully away from it. We'd come, without having gone, full-circle.

EPILOGUE

LIKE A ROLLING FUCKING CLICHÉ

We had a thirteen hour drive back to Zelienople that we'd decided to split into two days. We left at 10am, taking I-275 north across the vast Tampa Bay, where it became the Sunshine Skyway Bridge. Two massive poles, each with an array of cables extending out at wider and wider angles, made it seem almost as if two invisible hands were pulling the bridge up, bending it at its midpoint just high enough for a cruise ship to pass underneath. As the skyway curved right, the late-morning sun webbed the windshield in circular scratches. We flipped down our visors and donned our sunglasses. The lenses on mine were held on by small screws, all but one of which had fallen out of the left lens, which now dangled loose, though it rested on my nose when I wore them.

Maybe, like Patti Smith's "Gloria," we did tear it all up and start over again when we launched this roadtrip. Each stop had been, I guess you could say, a reflection of some part of each of our psychologies. It's not that we came, spiritually, full-circle when we stopped in St. Pete. To do that, we would have had to leave Pennsylvania spiritually in the first place, and I don't know that we ever did.

Whatever darkness in my grandmother's house, whatever banter or bickering or fighting, whatever narcoleptic zombie-ism: We indulged it. What few times Meg and I did suggest going out, we almost always suggested bars, at night. We are the products

of Northwestern Pennsylvania's drinking culture. To get what we had expected out of Florida would have been to go against our natural inclinations—not that it would have been so bad to go against those inclinations.

The air conditioning was just low enough to reach equilibrium between keeping us cool and letting us feel the sun's intense heat. We bathed in it like lizards, recharging ourselves, preparing for the journey ahead. Not the drive, but the separation to come. Meg would return to live with her mother, back in a nest that had become far too small for her, and I would live with three strangers, having thrust myself into a greater and more imposing independence than I'd known previously. It'd be another six months until, unable to stand the separation any longer, the constant driving back and forth, Meg would come to live with me, having been accepted into the same graduate program for the following year.

But long before that, by the time I made it back to Virginia, Alexander would need new tires, a new battery, and a full burden of other repairs that would take weeks to finish. During that time, I would walk the four miles to campus on an almost daily basis. On my way home one day, a strap of sweat formed on my shirt beneath the strap of my messenger bag in the 90° heat. Approaching a gas station, exhausted and alone and ready to lie down in the grass and just fucking quit, I would hear through the speakers at the pumps in the distance, growing louder with each step:

There's all this time, there's the time you got it made,
exchanging all precious gifts,
but you better take your diamond ring, you better pawn it babe.
You used to be so amused
at Napoleon in rags and the language that he used.
Go to him he calls you. You can't refuse.
When you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose.
You're invisible now. You've got no secrets to conceal

How does it feel, how does it feel
to be on your own, with no direction home,

like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone?

And at that, I would think, *How fucking cliché. My life is a Bob Dylan song.*

But, cliché aside, convenience aside, all things aside, I would continue rolling forward, uphill, creating my own momentum, no matter how unbearable, until finally, six months later I found that home was not a place.

BABEL OF THE APES

*On Great Apes, Language, & the Human Tendency to
Think Way Too Highly of Ourselves*

THE SPEAKING SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH

“AN INTELLIGENT, PERSONABLE CENTER OF A SCIENTIFIC PROJECT”

Neam “Nim” Chimpsky was born in 1973.¹ A linguist by the name of Herbert Terrace named the newborn chimpanzee, in one of the most pleasing puns and petty academic jabs I’ve ever heard, after Noam Chomsky, who argued that only humans are intellectually capable of language and that grammar is hardwired into our biology. He first articulated this view in, by all accounts, an aggressively scathing review of famed psychologist BF Skinner’s *Verbal Behavior*. Aggressive because it not only attacked Skinner’s ideas and methodologies and underlying assumptions, but also his intellect and fitness as a scientist.

By Chomsky’s reading, Skinner had argued that external stimuli, not emotional or intellectual processing, drive behavior—in this case, learning and use of language. Thus, Skinner had applied the behavioral sciences “to complex human behavior only in the most gross and superficial way.”² Skinner had neglected, according to Chomsky, the complexities of internal human processes. But the problem with Chomsky’s problem with Skinner is that he had oversimplified and essentially missed Skinner’s purpose. As an empiricist, Skinner focused on external stimuli and behavior because these were the only aspects of language learning that he could objectively observe. He made no claims regarding the relevance or functionality of internal processes like intellect and emotion.

What's more, Chomsky seemed to have intentionally misread Skinner to bolster his own rhetoric. As David Palmer puts it in an article for *The Behavior Analyst*, "... Skinner often left the task of supplying obvious qualifiers and conditions as exercises for the reader, and part of the force of Chomsky's review rests on his refusal to participate in such exercises. If Skinner's prose permitted an absurd interpretation, then Chomsky embraced it."³

Chomsky's ideas, from that point forward, get too mired in academic infighting and controversy, and in their own conceptual evolution, to sort with any efficiency, but in many ways, the entire field of ape-language studies has been in response to and rebellion against his claim that language is unique to humans. His shadow has loomed over researchers in that field since the 1960s. Only in the past twenty or thirty years has it begun to recede. Terrace was among the many linguists who wanted to rebel, specifically, against Chomsky's claim that only humans were capable of language. Hence, he named the subject who symbolized his rebellion by one of the most petty puns and pleasing academic jabs I've ever heard, "Nim Chimpsky."

When Nim was two weeks old, researchers tranquilized his mother, and ("Quick, get him before she falls on top of him!"⁴) they tore him from her arms and, thereby, orphaned him. Thus began Project Nim as he entered the arms of a bewildered Stephanie LaFarge, graduate student under Terrace and Nim's new mother. He would never see his biological mother again. LaFarge was to teach him American Sign Language under Terrace's direction, for the purpose of disproving Chomsky's claim

that only humans were capable of language. From there on out, Terrace bounced Nim from teacher to teacher, sometimes because the teachers, many of whom were Terrace's students, would simply move on to other stages of their lives. Other times, Nim seemed to dislike them and wouldn't cooperate, occasionally to the extent that he would bite or otherwise attack them. Regardless, the perpetually new faces—LaFarge to Laura Ann-Petitto to Bill Tynan to Joyce Butler to Renee Falitz and on down a stream of sixty-some names in just four years—never gave Nim the chance to form stable attachments.

But Terrace never thought of Nim as an orphan. As he says in James Marsh's 2011 documentary, *Project Nim*, "For better or worse, I never really thought of him as a child. I regarded him as an intelligent, personable center of a scientific project." That sentiment echoes Terrace's writing in his 1979 book, *Nim*: "From the very start of the project friends kidded me about being Nim's 'daddy.' After all, I had no children of my own. But whatever pleasure I derived from spending time with so appealing a creature as Nim, I always regarded him primarily as the subject of an experimental study."⁵

Those words muddy in the context of his more equivocal introduction to the book: "I felt that it would be foolhardy to overlook the obvious fact that a human child learns language as a byproduct of its socialization. ... [The details of Nim's socialization] require some understanding of Nim's personality, as elusive and complicated as that of any human child."⁶ So, Nim was "personable," in that Terrace expected him to learn through socialization as a human child would and in that he had a personality similar to "that of any human child." And yet, he was neither child nor person to Terrace.

Terrace's use of the term "personable" in Marsh's documentary implies the problem of his project. To be personable is not *to be a person*, but *to be likeable*, or perhaps in this case, *to have some person-like qualities*. He speaks of the necessity of understanding Nim's personality, yet floats him over some sixty teachers and caretakers in four years. Given those circumstances, how well could anyone expect to understand his personality, let alone recognize his personhood? The same kind of contradictory language, methodology, and analysis might explain the ultimate (or Terrace's perceived) failure of Project Nim, and they might explain its greater tragedy and the thruline of Marsh's documentary: Nim's repeated orphaning and abandonment.

"THE VICTIMS OF OUR INJUSTICE"

In 1892, author, essayist, and social reformer Henry Salt wrote what has since become a core text of modern animal rights discussions, *Animal Rights: Considered in Relation to Social Progress*.⁷ The book has influenced countless writers, intellectuals, and activists, not least among them philosopher Peter Singer, who wrote *Animal Liberation*—to which I owe my own vegetarianism, having stopped eating meat after reading an excerpt for a college ethics class. Singer's intro to the 1980 reprint of *Animal Rights* credits Salt as having articulated every core debate regarding animal-human relations. Others have named him as the first writer to address animal rights explicitly—though discussions of animal *welfare* in the West trace at least as far back as Pythagoras, and Salt himself notes a number of authors behind those discussions. (The semantic difference here is that "welfare" refers to human "stewardship" and

responsibility toward animals, whereas “rights” suggests that animals have certain inalienable rights—for example, to life and liberty—whether humans recognize them or not.)

One of Salt’s recurring critiques is that humans are conveniently “deaf to the entreaties of the victims of our injustice [i.e. other animals].”⁸ Funny, he thinks, how we assume that they’re simply “dumb animals,” even though “they have innumerable ways, often quite human in variety and suggestiveness, of uttering their thoughts and emotions.”⁹ Salt’s point here applies to humans as much as to other animals. The most marginalized of humans can’t speak (grammatical language), lack voices of political and public influence (like the right to vote), or don’t speak in dominant languages or dialects (like what English grammatocrats have called, over the evolution of political correctness and language politics, “Standard English,” “Educated English,” “Standard Edited English,” and “Standard Written English,” or as David Foster Wallace used to tell his students, “Standard White English”¹⁰). These varieties of muteness often become barriers to proper education, jobs, companionship, self-care, and self-governance.

Indeed, dominant forms of language hold sway among our most primary markers of status, power, and basic rights. But what about other forms of communication that, though often equally and sometimes *more* meaningful than sentences with subjects and verbs, aren’t grammatical? What of gesture, eye contact, facial expression, nonverbal utterance? It’s important to note, also, that many utterances in American and other varieties of Sign Language, though unquestionably

meaningful and complex, do not use grammar to construct their meaning but rely on context to do so.

Many animals communicate through smell, taste, and other chemical signals. Still others communicate through electro-magnetic fields and waveforms. Is it accurate to call such forms of communication “language”? If not, then at what point does communication qualify as language? And if so, then what do we make of the animals who use these languages?

Maybe, as Salt suggests, other animals aren’t mute. Maybe we just haven’t been listening. If the body’s a voice, if chemicals are words, if electro-magnetic waves are sentences, then maybe we should better our hearing by learning to see, smell, taste, and feel differently.

But first, maybe we need to change how we think of animals.

SOME NECESSARILY INADEQUATE & SELF-CONTRADICTIONARY DEFINITIONS FROM
THE *OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY*

- a. The system of spoken or written communication used by a particular country, people, community, etc., typically consisting of words used within a regular grammatical and syntactic structure.
- b. The vocal sounds by which mammals and birds communicate; (in extended use) any other signals used by animals to communicate.
- c. A means of communicating other than by the use of words, as gesture, facial expression, etc.; non-verbal communication.
- d. *Computing*. Any of numerous systems of precisely defined symbols and rules devised for writing programs or representing instructions and data that can be processed and executed by a computer.

What fascinates me about these definitions is that each, depending on your perspective, either contradicts or meaningfully expands upon some aspect of the

preceding one. Definition **a.** is Chomskian through and through, from its implication that only humans have the capacity for language right down to its focus on “spoken or written” words, grammar, and syntax. The decision to build in a small degree of wiggle-room with the word “typically,” becomes beautifully or (again, depending on your perspective) annoyingly tricky when we move on to **b.**, which jettisons words, grammar, and syntax for the much more ambiguous “vocal sounds.” And it further expands (or undercuts) **a.** by including “mammals and birds,” but no other animals. Then “in extended use,” it folds in “any other signals” and uses the general term “animals” instead of only “mammals and birds.” Definition **c.** goes on to include *all* “non-verbal communication,” and **d.** completely explodes the whole issue by reminding readers that computer languages (like HTML and Java) are, in fact, *actual languages* that hold complex instructions, which are one form of complex meaning.

If you’re on the annoying-contradictions side of the fence here, then you’re probably ready to give up on the whole project of pinning down a definition. If, however, you’re on the meaningful-expansions side of the fence, then you’re probably either deep in brow-furrowing contemplation, or you’re having a good laugh at the annoying-contradictionists. But what’s really important to understand is that there is no clear, singular definition of language, and when intellectuals engage in that debate, what they’re really talking about depends entirely on their field (linguistics, biology, computer sciences, etc.) and the degree to which they regard humans as the center of that field.

If it's not clear by now, I'm a meaningful-expansionist, furrowing my brow, having a good laugh, and always, always, always, trying to decenter humans. The problem is that decentering humans, *as a human*, is really hard because, well, I'm aware that this debate wouldn't exist here and now without humans and, for that matter, language wouldn't exist as an abstract concept without humans. Like the realities that mathematical formulas describe, language would not be "language." It would simply *be*.

THE SPEAKING SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH

It may seem too easy or unthoughtful to bring up *Planet of the Apes* in this essay, but the connections are deeper than they seem. The original *POA* franchise of five films inflates language/power dynamics to absurd proportions. The first in the series hit theaters in 1973—coincidentally, the same year as Nim's birth. Directed by Franklin J. Shaffner and written by the *Twilight Zone*'s Rod Serling, the film follows Charleton Heston (Taylor in the film, but Charleton Heston is always and only Charleton Heston). He and two fellow astronauts crashland on a strange planet, which they later discover is actually the distant-future Earth. Humans have lost the ability to speak (a phenomenon the series never fully explains), and apes have taken power and enslaved humanity, having "acquired" the "power of language."

Thus, the films suggest, the speaking shall inherit the Earth—and subsequently blow each other to smithereens. (Even if you haven't seen the first *POA*, you must have encountered the now-clichéd image of Heston at Lady Liberty's crumbled remains: "You Maniacs! You blew it up! Ah, damn you! God damn you all to hell!"¹¹ In case you

never got the context, allow me to spoil the film for you: While at war with the apes, we blew up the statue and most of humanity in a nuclear holocaust.)

In the direct sequel, *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*, Heston himself blows up the rest of the world, pressing the activation switch for the “Divine Bomb,” which a group of humans, having escaped underground from the apes, built as a “last resort.” In his dying breath, Heston sets off the bomb, as if to say, *If we can’t have this planet, no one can*. Then, over a black screen, a disembodied voice speaks: “In one of the countless billions of galaxies in the universe, lies a medium-sized star, and one of its satellites, a green and insignificant planet, is now dead.”¹² That moment of (perhaps unintentional—I’m not entirely sure) dark, stark humor precedes equally stark, white, sans-serif credits and utter silence, protracting the moment until the humor becomes something much colder, much darker, and much heavier.

The following three films, *Escape from ...*, *Conquest of ...*, and *Battle for ...*, treat viewers to a time-paradoxizing adventure through Earth’s future history. In *Escape*, three ape scientists from the original *POA* travel back to 1973 Los Angeles, where they must hide their ability to speak. Two of them birth a child, Caesar, who becomes the apes’ leader in Lee Thompson’s *Conquest* (the film that kick-starts the otherwise brilliant series’ descent into unwatchability).

In the eighteen-year span between *Escape* and *Conquest*, a virus has killed off the world’s dogs and cats, leaving humans petless—which we are to understand is very, very sad. So humans decide to keep apes as pets. Then, once we realize that they’re smart enough to learn more than “shake” and “roll over,” we train them to perform

household tasks, which eventually leads us to enslave them. This is the point from which *Conquest* picks up. In facilities where trainers lead the apes by chain, cuff, and collar, we train them for menial jobs by, in one instance, exposing them to blaring club music as we force them to learn how to mix and serve drinks. Every bad pour or spilled drink triggers a barrage of flame throwers, cattle prods, and a booming *No!* By way of this Skinner-esque operant conditioning, the slaves learn to perform the tasks and to remain servile under the agonizing physical illness that they suffer at the sound of the word “no.”

Eventually, viewers are given to understand that apes in the series acquired the “power of language” when, after his parents travelled back in time and gave birth to him, Caesar eventually mated with the primitive twentieth-century apes. In doing so, he spreads his more “highly evolved” and language-capable genes, effectively leap-frogging centuries of evolution.

Chicken/egg paradox aside, this logic rests on a couple of assumptions about language and evolution. First, it assumes a “language gene,” an idea that Chomsky once proposed might exist but later abandoned. Second, the conception of language here is very much in line with the *OED*’s definition **a.**, the Chomskian one that calls language, “The system of spoken or written communication used by a particular country, people, community, etc., typically consisting of words used within a regular grammatical and syntactic structure,” but it posits that, given enough time (and paradox), other animals (or at least other great apes) might develop this “language gene.”

But what strikes me as even more interesting is the series' representation of evolution as a linear path from primitive-and-languageless to modern-and-language-capable, which further suggests that humans have reached the top of the assumed evolutionary ladder. Evolution, though, is not linear, and to use the words "highly evolved" to describe humans as opposed to other animals is deeply flawed. It would be more accurate to say that species X is *better adapted to its environment* than other species in that same environment. In the environmental context of, for instance, along the Antarctic coastline, emperor penguins are better adapted than humans, even when you take into consideration all of the technological capabilities afforded us by our larger brains and by our hands with opposable thumbs; we still can't, in large numbers, inhabit that environment.

Of course, I'm talking about a fictional universe here, and it's wouldn't be fair to hold fiction to the rigid standards of scientific inquiry. I'm not evaluating *POA* on those or any other grounds—except *Conquest* and *Battle*, which are just plain bad. Rather, I'm pointing to the series as an example, first, of our confusing thoughts on what language is and how it works and, second, of the way in which, even when we make a film about apes taking over the Earth, we still place humans at the center of existence.

MONKEY-SEE-MONKEY-DO

Terrace writes that, in 1977, when he and his team painstakingly analyzed heaps of data and video documentation, they saw "a solid basis for demonstrating that a chimpanzee can create a sentence."¹³ In the end, though, he would argue that Nim did

not have language. Rather, all Terrace claims to have seen was Nim signing and behaving in ways that would get him what he wanted. On the one hand, this reinforced Skinner's focus on external stimuli as the primary driver of an organism's behavior. And that point, Terrace could rationalize, at least demonstrated that his methodology, essentially a form of operant conditioning, was sound. On the other hand, Terrace had finally succumbed to Chomsky's claim that only humans have the capacity for language, and in every instance that he says so, he seems defeated, forced to concede that he was wrong and Chomsky right. At the same time, though, he also seems defensive, as if he doesn't quite believe his new position but is too proud to admit that he was far worse than wrong: He had conducted bad science.

"Ironically," he writes, "the only reason I found the time to study the videotapes was a sad one: it was no longer possible to keep Project Nim going, and Nim himself had to be returned" to the Institute for Primate Studies in Oklahoma, where Terrace had first "adopted" him.¹⁴ He admits that he never "found the time" to do the scientific analysis to evaluate his methods and results until the project had reached its dubious end and gives a variety of reasons for the "return": He couldn't find reliable caretakers whom Nim liked, couldn't devote energy to a project that he came to believe was a failure, couldn't procure sufficient funding, couldn't find time to analyze the ever-growing mounds of data. One point that he doesn't mention—strangely, given that it would have made his explanation more sympathetic—is that, at the time, Nim had been growing into maturity and, as a result, had become increasingly violent and dangerous, biting and otherwise injuring some of his teachers and caretakers.

Ape-language researcher Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, whose ideas took on serious weight in the 1990s, argued, contrary to Chomsky, that other animals could indeed acquire language. She claimed to have taught a version of English to Kanzi, a member of an endangered ape species known as bonobo. (Much more on Savage-Rumbaugh and Kanzi to come later.) In the now unmaintained, but as of this writing still extant, Kanzi.BVU.edu, Savage-Rumbaugh offers video documentation and analysis of training sessions and language demonstrations with Nim, Kanzi, and a pair of chimps named Sherman and Austin, who'd been separated from their mothers at birth, as Nim had. Sherman and Austin had been having trouble bonding with caretakers and other chimps, and their sign vocabularies weren't up to par with other chimps their age. When she started her work with Sherman and Austin, Savage-Rumbaugh set the pair on a rehab routine of "intense social interaction, bonding and inter-species (human and chimpanzee) bicultural engagement."¹⁵

In contrast, Nim's trainers had, some twenty years earlier, divorced his learning of American Sign Language (ASL) from his social life, and their teaching methods could be described as decontextualized demonstration and imitation. His trainers expected monkey-see-monkey-do, thus they taught m-s-m-d, ergo Nim responded m-s-m-d. Analyzing Nim's classroom videos, Savage-Rumbaugh points out that his teachers copied *him* too, and thus, they built a redundancy-and-imitation model that could produce only m-s-m-d. When he acted up—that is, when he played or got annoyed or bored with m-s-m-d and, in protest, gave signs that didn't move the class forward—the

trainers scolded him, which in turn discouraged creativity and hindered language and abstract thought.

Perhaps learning from Terrace's mistakes, perhaps just taking seriously the notion that learning happens in social and environmental contexts, Savage-Rumbaugh's rehab of empathy worked. She says that, with Sherman and Austin, communication (utterance + understanding) mattered above all else in social settings, and their training sessions were dedicated to nailing down the symbols they'd first seen in social contexts.

To clarify Savage-Rumbaugh's methods:

- In social settings, *Do stuff, encounter things, and play with humans using ASL*
- During training sessions, *Go over stuff learned while doing, encountering, and playing with humans using ASL.*

These “didacticism” and “repetition” methods, as Savage-Rumbaugh calls them, are commonly used to teach foreign languages to humans. With them, she found precisely what other researchers had said that other apes couldn't do: In addition to simply imitating, they paid actual regard to and would cooperate and share with other humans; when a human looked at something, they too would look; they would work with humans on tasks to achieve mutual goals; they shared communicative and meaningful gestures; and they engaged in “spontaneous creative behaviors entailing all of these capacities.”

All of that is to say that these two chimps, who clearly were not socializing or communicating with other chimps or humans, became fully sociable: They'd imitate, show consideration, communicate meaningfully, and follow general rules within a bi-

species chimp/human culture. This is not the end of Savage-Rumbaugh's story—more of a prelude, really—but as I mentioned earlier, more on that soon. First, though...

THE END OF NIM

Terrace's reasons for ending Project Nim—caregiving, time, money, workload—amount to a message that I find hard to read any other way than this: He (or his career) couldn't handle the responsibility of raising a child. Terrace became a parent when he orphaned Nim, regardless of whether he realized it, and regardless of whether he saw Nim as a child, as a person who *could* be orphaned. At least during the project, Nim had *some* degree of stability: He had a relatively consistent routine, even if that routine was enforced by a constantly rotating staff of teachers and caretakers. By sending him back to the Institute at Oklahoma, though, Terrace set off a chain of foster moves and miseries, subjecting Nim to what I can only describe as constant culture shock, social disconnect far beyond that brought on by the rotating staff of caretakers, and physical suffering.

At one point, Nim joined a group of chimp test subjects for sexually transmitted disease vaccines. It's unclear whether any of the chimps in the scenes of James Marsh's documentary, *Project Nim*, at this point are actually Nim, but the footage, taken from facilities of the type that held him, is heart-breaking, full of chimps screaming, struggling, curling into the corners of their cages, and sprawling limply over metal carts.

At this stage in Nim's timeline, Marsh's documentary leans heavily on reenactments and ambiguous footage, making it hard to decide what is exaggerated for emotional effect from what is true. Nonetheless, in these facilities, even at the animal sanctuary that eventually rescued him from them, almost no one could sign. Therefore, almost no one could speak with Nim—who must have tried to sign to his cellmates and the researchers who handled him. He was once more orphaned and virtually friendless, and his hands were often the lone voice in crowds of deaf eyes.

But while in the Oklahoma facility where he was born and to which Terrace had returned him, Nim had managed to find and befriend one person who spoke ASL, a primatologist named Bob Ingersoll—the one human hero in Marsh's documentary. Ingersoll would play and walk with Nim, even smoke pot with him upon request. (Nim had learned the joys of weed from his first caretaker, Stephanie LaFarge, and according to Ingersoll, would sign the words “Stone,” “Now,” and “Smoke.”) The footage with Ingersoll is genuinely moving, but when the Institute at Oklahoma closes and Nim passes through the other facilities to eventually land at the sanctuary, the owners won't allow Ingersoll to visit, for reasons that the film does not explain.

Nonetheless, after a new owner takes control, Ingersoll finds his way in and manages to move Nim, one last time, to a proper ape sanctuary. By this point, Nim is old and his eyesight nearly gone, but he lives out the remainder of his time with Ingersoll and with other chimps, which, though not a happy ending, at least lent Nim some final dignity.

A SOMEWHAT SLOGGING & RIGHTEOUSLY ANGRY ARGUMENT AGAINST ANIMAL
CRUELTY THAT YOU COULD SKIP TO THE LAST PARAGRAPH OF, BUT I'D RATHER
YOU DIDN'T BECAUSE IT'S KIND OF THE EMOTIONAL & INTELLECTUAL CRUX OF
THIS ESSAY

There are lessons to be learned here. About language. About animal welfare and rights. About personhood. And perhaps most importantly, about basic empathy.

Terrace's conclusion that Nim did not "have language" troubles me. The idea that to "have language" must necessarily mean something more than, as I paraphrased Terrace earlier, "signing and behaving in ways that would get him what he wanted" feels to me like a failure to comprehend the multi-faceted nature of what language is. Even the *OED*'s basic attempts to define language, which are in no way exhaustive, inherently acknowledge language's paradox of deceptive simplicity ("non-verbal communication") and, when those definitions are taken together, magnificent complexity:

The system of spoken or written [or vocally sounded or non-verbally expressed] communication used by a particular country, people, community, [species, machine,] etc., typically consisting of words [or vocal sounds, gestures, facial expressions, or any of numerous systems of precisely defined symbols and rules] used within a regular grammatical and syntactic structure [or not, since we're also talking about mammals and birds and all other animals in this definition, so really, I guess language can include all and more of these things].

This definition, contrary to what definitions are *supposed* to do, actually seems to keep opening up new possible meanings. It's more than "communication," but any efforts to elaborate upon a highly ambiguous explanation like "communication between two or more beings" seems to close off an aspect of language that one field of thought or

another regards as absolutely essential to it. Language, by its very nature, demands ambiguity and rejects precision.

Now, let's break down this whole "signing and behaving in ways that would get him what he wanted" issue. Communication exists because beings want to convey their desires to other beings: "Back off, I'm dangerous," "This is mine," "Look there." One could even argue that more complex notions like "I love you," "To be, or not to be," and "I think, therefore I am" convey some sort of desire: "I want you love me back" or at least "to feel my love," "I want to know whether I should live or kill myself," "I want to assert my existence."

Certainly, though, these last three examples are more than simple communications of desire. They represent varying degrees of self-awareness, audience-awareness, and abstract thought. Fair enough. But when Nim signs "Stone now smoke" to Bob for the first time, never having smoked with him before, Nim too is demonstrating some degree of self-awareness—as do the simpler examples above, with the implied "I want to..." or "can we...?" or "let's..." He also demonstrates audience-awareness simply by directing the utterance *at* Bob, probably because Bob has shown that he can sign back and, maybe, because he's seen Bob rolling a joint and *understood* what he was doing. Finally, he demonstrates abstract thought (which, by the way, is another massively difficult term to define precisely) by saying specifically *when* he wants to smoke and, also, because he realized that Bob would understand and respond to the utterance.

I find it hard to believe that, during his time as Terrace's "intelligent, personable" subject, Nim never made utterances that conveyed such nuances. My analysis here is brief, simple, and by no means perfect, but it at least demonstrates some of the underlying problems with the assumption that clear communication of desire, especially via ASL or any other recognized language, is not language.

Far more troubling, though, are the implications that Nim's story presents for discussions animal welfare and rights and empathy.

Assume, for now, that humans really are the center of all things, that we really are the master race that so many of us have claimed for so long. (Yes, I use "master race," with all of its politically charged connotations quite intentionally because, frankly, Nim's story makes me angry and self-righteous, and I have neither the patience nor the emotional energy at this point in the essay to subdue that anger for the sake of pandering to unsympathetic readers.) Being superior to other species, having the power to subject them to our will, having the power to wipe them from the face of the Earth, even unintentionally, even unwittingly, humans should be charged with the task of stewardship, of protecting those species who cannot defend themselves in the wake of our godlike capacities. This is at least part of the logic by which we condemn institutional neglect and abuse of the mentally and physically disabled.

To have stolen an infant from its mother—whose fate, by the way, remains unknown—and then to force that infant into a world where it would be expected to learn the language, and therefore the culture, of its natural superiors is problematic enough. But then, because that infant grows up and fails to meet our simultaneously

vague and exacting expectations, to send it into a living hell—and religious terms are essential here, since the human-as-center-of-existence argument is inherently religious—is the epitome of reprehensible ethics.

Now, relinquish that assumption for a more nuanced set of other assumptions, which I'll pull from philosopher Peter Singer's "All Animals Are Equal": Assume that the assertion for the equality of humans regardless of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and so forth does not extend from the mere fact that we are all human. Such a claim would allow for parallel claims that support racism—"White people are equal because they are white, and therefore anyone who is not white is not equal to white people"—and it would allow for claims that support all kinds of other supremacist views. Nor does the assertion for equality extend from equal intellect, physiology, social skills, or any other such measure because humans of different cultures have accomplished varying levels of "civilization"; because men, on average, are physically stronger than women; because the rich are more capable of social advancement than the poor. As Singer puts it, "Equality is a moral ideal, not a simple assertion of fact."¹⁶

For Singer, and others before him, when we say "equality," we really mean "equal consideration of interests."¹⁷ This, he claims, is the one basis on which we can argue for the equality of humans, regardless of race, gender, etc., because all other bases would allow for the exclusion of one or another group of humans. By extension, says Singer, we must also consider equally the interests of nonhuman animals because, if we do not, then by extension, we undermine the entire basis for an egalitarian society.

He then outlines the problem of determining whether an animal has interests and what those interests might be. Without a shared language, I can't say with utter certainty whether my cat—I don't have a cat, but stay with me—is interested in, say, the music that I choose to play. (In fact, it's probably safe to assume that my cat would rather not listen to, say, Iggy Pop screaming "Raw power!" so loudly into his microphone that my speakers, forty years later, crackle electric and shudder at his brutality.) However, and this is where Singer's argument really picks up, I can say with certainty that my cat has an interest in avoiding pain and, more importantly for the matter at hand, suffering. What's more, I, like any person with even the most miniscule capacity for empathy, should not need to cut off my cat's ear to understand that she would have a keen interest in avoiding that particular brand of suffering.

I could push this toward an argument for vegetarianism, as Singer does convincingly enough to have converted me seven years ago—or even veganism—but that's beside the point. The point is that Nim was a being with a capacity for physical suffering and, quite clearly, one with a greater capacity for emotional suffering than my hypothetical cat. Terrace knew this. How could he not? Hence his frequent comparisons of Nim to human children.

I do not think that Terrace was a monster for orphaning Nim. I don't even think he was a monster for later abandoning Nim. Humans are foolish, vain, self-centered creatures who, all too frequently and repeatedly, do not consider the longterm consequences of their actions. Indeed, Terrace's actions did not make him a monster. They made him human. And, as his emotional affect in Marsh's documentary reveals,

he grieved, like a human, for the cruel and terrible consequences of foolish, vain, self-centered actions that he could never take back. At least this is my hope. The alternate reading, for me, is too upsetting: That he grieved only over the failure of his project, which in fact would not be grief but merely a bruised ego.

I, for one, cannot accept that reading because it means that Terrace, whom I've come to regard as a stand-in for that portion of the human race that holds power over the powerless, is beyond redemption.

So in my narrative, he lies in his bed every night, sleepless, stuck on some image of Nim. At first, a nostalgic one: Nim pets a kitten or bounds through an open field or claps emphatically or leaps into Terrace's arms. Then nostalgia gives way, as it so often does, to sorrow and, in this case, guilt: Nim sprawls, like the chimps in Marsh's documentary, over a metal cart, his rib cage clearly visible through taught flesh, his arms hung over the sides as a lab technician wheels him along. The tips of his fingers graze the cold tile beneath him.

BABEL OF THE APES: HUMANITY AS GOD

In 2001, bioethicist and eco-philosopher Pär Segerdahl visited Georgia State University's Language Research Center (LRC) in Atlanta to learn more about a dwindling ape species from Congo known as bonobos.¹⁸ Specifically, he'd wanted to meet their poster-boy Kanzi—"the world's undisputed ape-language superstar,"¹⁹ as the Iowa Primate Learning Sanctuary (IPLS) would later dub him—and he wanted to meet Kanzi's half-sister Panbanisha, as well as her sons Nyota (pronounced *En Yota*) and Nathan.

This visit sparks *Kanzi's Primal Language*, a book co-authored by Segerdahl, Bill Fields, and Sue Savage-Rumbaugh—the latter two being a researcher and the lead researcher at the LRC prior to the book's release in 2006. The impetus for Segerdahl's attention, though, was his desire to see and decide whether, as rumors suggest, Kanzi and family "have language," in the big sense, in the way that Chomskian conventional wisdom argues, even to this day, that only humans have it.

This point, that we inherit our perceptions of language from Chomsky matters because, with the forceful rhetoric that he carried into psychology and linguistics from a background in philosophy, Chomsky reinforced the unrelenting cultural assumption that humans are supreme to all other animals, that indeed, we are not animals but are quite above them. If language is hardwired into human biology, then language separates us from them, in which case, we are special, the chosen center of the universe. But to the collective human ego's chagrin, the universe, the galaxy, the solar

system, and (despite appearances) even the Earth's biosphere do not revolve around us. Only our own silly little egos.

Using language to re-center, or keep centered, the human species does figurative violence to other animals by denying their significance, giving us permission to do literal violence in denying their agency.

This is the Biblical Babel myth made manifest: When we all spoke a single language, we built a city and a tower, and we named ourselves. The tower would reach into the Heavens, and we would transcend our mortal boundaries. In punishment and to demonstrate His power, God scattered us across the Earth and babbled our language. In the human-as-center myth, though, which is at least as old as Babel, God doesn't merely favor humans; He seems almost subservient to us, casting us as the universal gravity, as the real Gods who need no towers because everything already hangs low to our grasp.

Chomsky's biological hardwiring of language feeds that subconscious worldview and regards language as a the realm of everyday deities. Perhaps there's an alternate reading of Babel, one in which humanity is actually God and other animals take on what had been our role in the myth. And We cannot tolerate the hubristic notion that some lowly animal would dare catch a glimpse of Us.




Segerdahl's stated question, whether Savage-Rumbaugh's bonobos had language, doesn't interest me much. Language is a slippery term that often succumbs to the non-definition, "You know it when you see it." Unfortunately, people see

differently, so we rarely agree on what language is, making Segerdahl's question unfruitful.

More interesting to me is this, How does the story unfold if animals *do* have what humans have tended to see as our divine power, our birthright? If Nim is any indication, then maybe we just ignore that ability and cast them aside. Or maybe we recognize and attempt to foster their language, using it as a psychological and social tool in animal rehabilitation, as Savage-Rumbaugh claims to have done with some chimpanzees, like Sherman and Austin. If Kanzi, though, is the "the world's undisputed ape-language superstar," then he stands at the top of the tower. I want to know how his story unfolds.

Still, though, it's important to show what Segerdahl had been after, this much-desired evidence of bonobos' capacity for language.

As Segerdahl's host at the LRC, Fields asked him to sit quietly and simply observe on the first day of his visit. He asked this in front of the apes because, as he explains in the book, they needed to know that Segerdahl, a guest in their home, was under Fields' control and would be polite during his stay. So Segerdahl sat quietly as Panbanisha laid a blanket for herself and as her boys played in the yard.²⁰

One of the Center's former caretakers came to visit and needed a keyboard to communicate with the bonobos. Each key on these boards contains a symbol called a lexigram that corresponds to an English word:  or  or  for example.²¹ In total, the authors claim, the apes and researchers would use roughly six-hundred

lexigrams to communicate with each other.²² The former caretaker had trouble finding a keyboard, so Segerdahl called out that there was one in the corner. At this, Panbanisha sat up and glared. She snatched her keyboard and pointed:



Her first word to Segerdahl. Adequately shamed, he sat down silently.

Later that day, though, as he watched Nyota and Nathan through a window, he noticed a plastic tube by his knees, connecting the room that he was in to theirs, so he started a game of peek-a-boo with Nyota, alternating tube-window-tube-window. Getting in on the action, his little brother Nathan reached through the tube. The urge was irresistible—that tiny brown hand curling its chubby toddler fingers: Segerdahl kneeled, reached slowly forward, and touched a digit. In a flash, the hand vanished, and Nathan fled to the other room.

Out charged Panbanisha, brandishing her keyboard like an axe. She banged the window with her fist and smacked one of the keys. The keyboard was a new language to Segerdahl, so he took a bit of time to translate the symbol into English. But Panbanisha waited, finger fixed, until Segerdahl shouted to Fields in shock, “She is calling me a [] MONSTER!”



Having once more shamed Segerdahl, Panbanisha turned and left.

CHARMED, I’M SURE

It’s hard to say whether this or any other story from *Kanzi’s Primal Language* is true or mostly true or partly true or not true at all. Savage-Rumbaugh, Fields, and Segerdahl never published any scientific articles to back up the anecdotal claims, whose

anthropomorphism impels a charming pathos. And they do offer some video documentation of moments when Kanzi seems to show clearly his capacities with the keyboard and English comprehension. It's easy to trust video. And to some extent, I still do trust the old videos of Kanzi building a campfire or taking verbal instruction to put a t-shirt in a refrigerator. But on legal and animal rights and scientific levels, these videos aren't much use without academic writing and demonstrable research results to back them up.

In 2013, when I started researching animal intelligence, in addition to scouring books, web, and radio, I watched countless documentaries about Phoenix and Akeakamai (Ake), bottlenose dolphins who improvise performances in sync, suggesting that they communicate specific instructions to each other; about elephants who recognize their reflections and appear to venerate their dead; about Alex, a parrot who, until his death in 2007, seemed to understand a wide variety of English words, along with a grammar that you could, ironically or unironically, call pidgin; and about apes used for language studies, most intriguingly, Kanzi and Panbanisha.

I kept circling back to human-animal communication and language. My research began to focus specifically on the history of ape-language research. Savage-Rumbaugh came up again and again. In the 1990s, she'd taught-without-teaching Kanzi to speak using abstract symbols assigned to English words. So when I read *Kanzi's Primal Language* and watched documentaries about him, the videos and the above story with Panbanisha and Segerdahl and the whole narrative surrounding bonobos left me utterly charmed.

And when it comes to bonobos, people are easily charmed, even more so than with chimps, who've been charming us since long before Barnum & Bailey's Circus. Probably the most common perception of bonobos is that they seem always in search of reasons to have sex, which they do far more often and for a wider variety of reasons than most non-human animals. Of course, people love this fact—it offers a primal (and steamy) example of bonobos' similarity to us. According to famed primatologist Frans de Waal, their sex takes many forms: Female+male, male+male, female+female, adult+juvenile, genital, oral, vulva-to-vulva, and something de Waal calls “penis fencing.” No anal though.²³ In addition to breeding, bonobos screw for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to: Conflict resolution, affection, social status, and a good old-fashioned good time.

Adding to their relatability, bonobos bear an uncanny resemblance to images of “primitive” humans, and they're highly social and communicative. They don't necessarily mate for life, the span of which is roughly forty years, but they generally prefer to stay with a chosen mate—though sex doesn't seem so essential to their monogamy as it is to ours. They share food, make sacrifices for one another, and mourn their dead. In many ways, learning about bonobos can feel like learning about the origins of humanity. And we're not wrong to feel that way. We learn immensely of our physio-, psycho-, and sociological evolutions by investigating those of bonobos.

However, pushing that line of thinking—that bonobos are us from eons past—to a literal or otherwise extreme level, is problematic in several ways, all of which extend from the problem of anthropomorphism in ape research. First, by connecting human

and ape behaviors in a one-to-one relationship, we dismiss important differences between our species, which demonstrates a vision as narrow as one that dismisses important similarities. (Interestingly, this point mirrors criticisms of color-blind race politics.) Second, when we expect human behaviors in other apes, we see human behaviors that may or may not be present in those apes. These two problems combine to form a more tangible third, wherein we treat other apes as if they *were* human, neglecting their species-specific needs and, as a result, endangering their health and safety.

It may be tempting to argue, as Savage-Rumbaugh implied, that Herbert Terrace's failure with Nim was his inability to recognize Nim's personhood—what you could call the problem of Terrace's anthropocentrism. Certainly, this argument has its appeal: Terrace as failed father-figure, Nim as *person* stripped of his agency; Terrace as the Babel myth's God and Nim as humanity, not punished but neglected into a life of tragedy. That argument though, for the same reasons that it corresponds with the Babel myth, overindulges the binary assumption of anthropomorphism as opposite to Terrace's anthropocentric sin.

As a vegetarian, a sometimes vegan, a science nerd, a language nerd, the son of a biologist, and a person generally concerned with ethics and philosophy, I fell for *Kanzi's Primal Language*, excited at the implications for animal rights, linguistics, evolutionary biology, and philosophy. Here was a group of researchers studying a family of apes in what they described as a bi-species culture that had established a shared language through English-based symbols and gestures. As described on the no-

longer-extant IPLS website (the homepage of which I fortunately saved copies of during my initial research), the bonobos had acquired some human mannerisms, and the humans had acquired some bonobo mannerisms. Thus, they mirrored each other in a shared culture.²⁴

The whole story has the simultaneous allures of scientific credibility and feel-good pathos. Sadly, as I would come to find over the next two years, researchers at the facility, specifically Savage-Rumbaugh, exaggerated that story and manipulated their science to tell of larger and more scientific leaps than were probably true. In reality, Savage-Rumbaugh had recorded very little scientific data, let alone analyzed it, after she joined the Great Ape Trust (which later became the IPLS) in 2005, and as I'll get to a bit later, a group of colleagues accused her publically of mistreating, and even causing the deaths of, the apes under her care. Nonetheless, she managed to ride her 1980s scientific work well into the 2010s, all the while bolstering her status as celebrity scientist.

THROUGH AN UNCANNY MIRROR, DARKLY

To understand the anthropomorphic tendency that humans have with bonobos, you have to first understand what they look like and how we're related to them. Compared to humans, bonobos are very muscular. At about 2½–3' from nose to rump, the males weigh between 75-130lbs and the females generally fall close to 65lbs, making bonobos roughly ¾ the weight of chimps. Thus, until the 1990s, we called them pygmy chimpanzees. Scientists eventually dropped that term because it wrongly implied a closer familial relationship between bonobos and chimps than was accurate. On the

great ape family tree, bonobos are our first, chimps and gorillas our second, and orangutans our third cousins.

This closer-than-we-thought relationship has, of course, led to a great deal of personification. Though much of it comes from people outside of scientific communities, some of the most prominent voices that anthropomorphize bonobos and other great apes are the researchers themselves. One could even argue that the most notable instances of radical anthropomorphism have come out of—and it seems so obvious when you think about it—studies focused on great apes and language, wherein not only do popular media distort the science, but the scientists themselves overstate their findings, likening animal and human behaviors in a kind of one-to-one relationship.

It all starts with appearances. Bonobos' faces are shorter and flatter than those of chimps, and their heads are rounder and larger. At first, they appear taller, but this is because, whereas chimps almost always knuckle-walk, bonobos walk upright a bit more frequently. This tendency explains part of their odd, somewhat difficult to pinpoint, resemblance to humans. Nonetheless, there's a toddler-ness to their bipedal gait, and most of the time, they still prefer all fours. Unlike ours, their hip bone's connected to their thigh bone with more pivot than hinge, preventing their legs from swinging forward when they step, making it more difficult for them to walk upright and, at the same time, creating a *Twilight Zone*-esque, something's-not-quite-right tinge to what one could call their "humanness."

In 1970, Japanese robotics professor Masashiro Mori referred to a similar tinge in robot design when he coined the term “uncanny valley” (不気味の谷現象 – *Bukimi no Tani Gensho*). “[I]n climbing toward the goal of making robots appear human,”

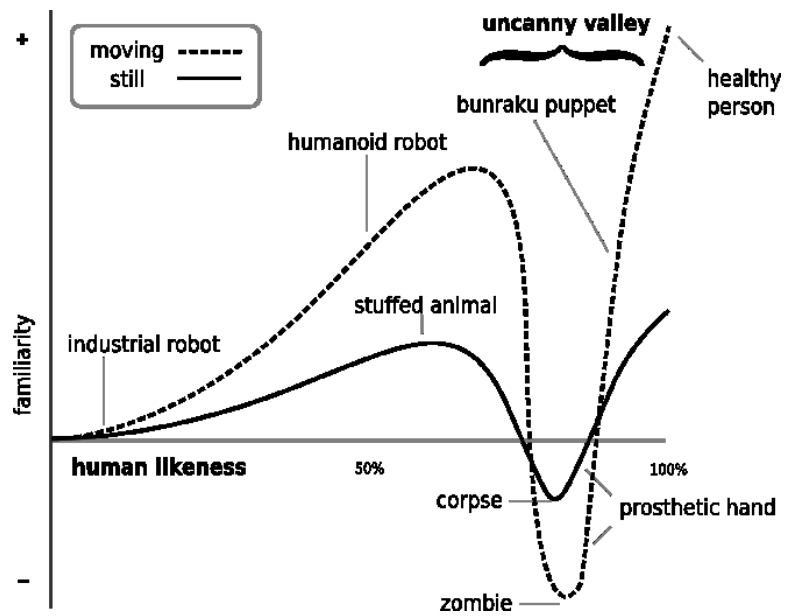


Figure 1: Mori Uncanny Valley

writes Mori, “our affinity for them increases until we come to a valley.”^{25,26} That is to say, once a thing crosses a certain threshold in the path toward human likeness, somewhere in the vicinity of a humanoid robot, it begins to repulse us by exponents. This, theorized Mori, explains the extreme discomfort that most people feel upon seeing a human corpse. (And, exquisitely, Mori chooses to include zombies at the valley’s base.) But, at a second threshold, right around bunraku puppets—over-sized human puppets from traditional Japanese theatre whose meticulously crafted faces and gracefully managed movements are indeed uncanny—our empathy reamplifies.

Bonobos, it seems to me, reside somewhere beyond the second threshold, in the upslope of the uncanny valley. Like bunraku puppets, they’re clearly not *human*, but there’s something undeniably *human-like* about them. The ease with which we liken bonobos to ourselves, as with other great apes, leads us to expect humanity out of them,

so we treat their behaviors as human, and we neglect that they are, biologically and spiritually, bonobos. For brief periods of time, though, it seems as if our expectation for humanness actually enables substantial scientific breakthroughs. (Think of Nim Chimpsky and Koko the Gorilla at the beginnings of the language studies on them.)

The implication is that a scientist's willingness to see inter-species symmetries, at first, reveals what should have been obvious patterns between human and other ape behaviors, which thereby inspires explosive moments of scientific insight. We've been pondering other apes for a very long time. Only now, having shifted our scientific ponderings to allow for some humanizing, are we able to see real, significant instances of shared biology and psychology. But when we allow that humanizing tendency to take over, it threatens potentially good science and, worse, endangers the research subjects' health and well-being.

CELEBRITY & CONTROVERSY

Savage-Rumbaugh's breakthrough stories of cross-species communication began in 1982 at the University of Georgia's Language Research Center (LRC).²⁷ She had been trying to train Matata, a bonobo taken from the jungles of Congo to the LRC when she was six years old, to use the lexigram system (the keyboards with symbols that stand for English words explained above). To date, she'd learned to recognize a few symbols, but as far as Savage-Rumbaugh and colleagues could tell, none of them held abstract meaning to her. When her son Kanzi, two years old at the time, found himself alone

with Savage-Rumbaugh one day, he picked up the keyboard and began pointing to specific lexigrams.

No one had ever taught Kanzi to use the keyboard. He'd learned it by watching researchers try to train Matata. Realizing this, they stopped training with the keyboards and began simply to use them more naturally, expecting the apes to pick up language with age and experience, much in the way that human parents would speak around their children.

In the years following, Kanzi has indeed become a superstar of ape-language. He's been a focal point in several film, radio, and television documentaries,²⁸ he and his family have met and "played piano with Paul McCartney and Peter Gabriel,"²⁹ and he's judged a dessert contest at the Iowa State Fair by pointing to his favorite ingredient, grapes, while being videocast from his enclosure at the research facility.³⁰ He is almost always at the center of publicity and fundraising campaigns for what became his home as of 2005: The Great Ape Trust, AKA Bonobo Hope, AKA the IPLS, and currently known as (CKA?) the Ape Cognition and Conservation Initiative (ACCI)—more on that mess of names to come.

Surpassing every ape celebrity from Nim to Koko, Kanzi has reached the top of the media mountain as an emblem for the history of ape-language research. His fame has come, in part, from the LRC's scientific breakthroughs in which he began to form grammatical sentences using the lexigram keyboards and, in part, from humanity's fascination with other apes and their resemblance to ourselves. But in essence, it was

Savage-Rumbaugh's and the Great Ape Trust's relentless promotion of Kanzi as a media personality that rocketed him into world renown.

This final point marks him and Panbanisha as prime representatives of the history of ape-language research: Their stories exemplify the ways in which so many humans have used their research on chimps, gorillas, orangutans, and now bonobos to achieve celebrity status through pathos-inspiring anthropomorphism. Humans thirst after pathos, and the anthropomorph offers it in spades, enabling us to sympathize with more beings and helping to alleviate the loneliness that intellectuals and philosophers since the Industrial Revolution have read into the human condition.

And that's the key. The loneliness that, once told of it, so many of us agree that we feel, also makes us vulnerable to emotional manipulation. Told that a scientist has drawn a closer link between us and an animal, we launch that scientist into celebrity status because, suddenly, the world seems smaller, more familiar, and therefore less lonely, but at the same time, it seems larger and more mysterious. The personable behaviors of other apes dismantles our loneliness and opens up possibilities.

I suppose that, rather than "lonely," one could frame all of this positively by using the word "unique": Language's exclusiveness to our species makes us *special*, not lonely.

But these are not mutually exclusive framings. To be unique is to be alone.

Thus we are charmed. Thus we celebrate the scientists who come to us with this great news that we are not alone.

NAMES & KNOWLEDGE

The best way I can think to explain this loneliness and mystery is with the story of Ildefonso. There's a moment, I think, that all language-capable human toddlers must go through, when the world drastically, suddenly inflates as we realize that objects and beings have names, which give the world a life that exceeds the concrete and immediate. Linguistic abstraction grants endless opportunities for connections, ponderings, and questions—for philosophy and art, science and mathematics, for access to millennia of cultural history.

Susan Schaller, in her 1991 book, *A Man Without Words*, describes her work with a twenty-seven-year-old man, whom she refers to by the pseudonym Ildefonso. Ildefonso was born deaf.³¹ When she met him, she signed, "Hello my name is Susan," and he replied, "Hello my name is Susan." The human-see-human-do went on for some time. He wasn't, she says, mentally disabled or unintelligent. On the contrary, and despite the h-s-h-d, Schaller claims to have seen in his eyes a good deal of intelligence. But during this initial meeting, she explains, it struck her: "This man doesn't have language."³²

She came to realize later that, having been born deaf and having lived all his life without language, as she puts it in a 2010 episode of *Radiolab*, "He didn't know there was sound."³³ He saw "mouths moving" and "people responding" and "thought we figured all this stuff out visually. And he thought, 'I must be stupid.'"

When she started working with him, their interactions amounted to imitation and misunderstanding. Holding a book, she would sign, "Book." But the sign for "book"

looks like a person opening a book, so he would retrieve one because he had assumed that this was what she'd wanted him to do. This proceeded for weeks before Schaller had a moment of genius. She began to ignore him: "I taught an invisible student. I stopped talking to him, and I stopped having eye contact. And I set up an empty chair." To teach her invisible student the word for cat, she would mime as if she were a cat and as if she were petting a cat, and then she'd sign, "Cat." Then, still ignoring her real student, she'd switch roles, jump to the other chair, and act like the invisible student "getting it." She performed the student-teacher relationship in an effort to explain the roles that each of them was to play.

This method went on and on, Ildefonso often looking bored and confused. Then one day, it was like the first person to make fire noticing sparks and then clack-clack-clacking the rocks together until one of the sparks flashed into flames over some dry weeds and *Bam!* "He slaps his hands on the table. *Oh! Everything has a name!*" Suddenly he started demanding names and names and names: Table, door, clock, Susan.

But when the realization settled in, Schaller explains, "He just collapsed, and he started crying." At twenty-seven, his world suddenly, drastically inflated, and he saw the smallness of his place in it: A lone deaf-mute stumbling aimlessly through Babel's ruins. If Nim's philosophical tragedy—and that's not to disregard the tragedy of his physical suffering—was of a world gone from meaningful to meaningless, dragging his moments into days, weeks, months, years; then Ildefonso's tragedy was of a world gone from concrete immediacy to unfathomably deep and horrifyingly profound meaning.

Fortunately, Ildefonso's tragedy was brief. He moved beyond the initial fear and shock and perhaps even shame, that he must have felt. As Susan puts it, soon "[h]e was in love" with words and naming and knowing all that he'd never known before. He must have felt suddenly like the Biblical Adam, full of names and wonder and the newness of every, single thing.

At some point, we must have all had an experience in which the recognition of language transformed our entire worldview. That transformation is wonderful to watch in others—consider the fascination with which we watch infants as they quickly and simultaneously learn language and expand their perspectives, their awareness of others, their comprehension of environment, their recognition of self as separate from other. Being able to project it onto another species can feel irresistible.

But the possibilities of ape-language research offer an even greater gift. Humanity is lonely. This is a part of our condition. To be united with another species through language would give us a companion species. Watching another species learn a language that they could share with us, experiencing that transformation, would in turn expand our own world, giving us a species with which to share it. At least, this notion seems like it might well be at the heart of our fascination with ape-language studies.

TRUST IN A NAME

In 2005, the year before publication of *Kanzi's Primal Language*, Savage-Rumbaugh moved her research, along with Kanzi and family, to the Great Ape Trust in Des Moines, Iowa. From that point on, the story becomes dicey. Look into the Trust's

history—beyond the feel-good stories from the *Iowa Register*—and you’ll quickly find a confusing series of name changes (the AKAs from the “Celebrity & Controversy” section of this essay). It’s not difficult to relate these identity shifts to the controversies that have plagued the Trust since just a few years after Des Moines businessman Ted Townsend began its construction in 2003.³⁴ Townsend continued funneling money into it for years, but in 2011, the same year that *Time Magazine* named Savage-Rumbaugh one of the world’s most influential people (which she’s pointed out repeatedly in media appearances ever since), Townsend cut its funding.³⁵

In the wake of the good publicity from *Time*, his decision is striking. Fraught with allegations of animal mistreatment, scientific dishonesty, and organizational infighting, this stage of the facility’s history—like so many stages in the history of ape-language research—is downright Shakespearean in its intrigue and misdirection. It seems likely that Townsend pulled funding, at least in part, because of these controversies.

In that same year, 2011, nearly every employee at the Trust resigned because, according to a group of twelve volunteers known as the Bonobo Twelve, the board of directors had repeatedly ignored their concerns “about both ape care and institutional management.”³⁶ That quote appears in an open letter to the public, issued by the Twelve in 2012. The letter states that Savage-Rumbaugh had become mentally unstable and unfit to manage the Trust or care for its resident apes. The letter levels an array of allegations, among them that Savage-Rumbaugh had a habit of,

forgetting where she left the apes, locking them outdoors without access to water for several hours, placing young puppies in enclosures with adult apes

and leaving them unsupervised, and exposing apes to visitors who did not have the proper vaccinations.³⁷

The board started an official investigation into Savage-Rumbaugh and, in the interim, placed her on administrative leave. This left a skeletal staff of almost entirely volunteers, most of whom had no backgrounds in primatology or primate care, to look after a family of apes who, during the investigation, showed symptoms of what sources refer to, alternately, as pneumonia or a “common cold,” probably the result of their exposure to the unvaccinated visitors mentioned in the Twelve’s letter.

On the evening of November 6, 2012, Panbanisha died of respiratory illness.³⁸ And yet, two weeks after her death, the board of directors announced that the investigative committee had found no evidence for the Twelve’s claims and that they would reinstate Savage-Rumbaugh as resident scientist under the guidance of the new executive director, local veterinarian Julie Gilmore, who’d been treating Panbanisha at the time of her death.³⁹

Throughout much of 2013, during its transition into the ACCI, and as it happens, when I started my research on this project, I could find very little reporting on the facility. All I could find were the facility’s own websites, seemingly thrown together to mitigate the damage of all the drama. I had missed Panbanisha’s death in the local papers, and it hadn’t appeared elsewhere, except on what, on first read, seemed like a fringe blog by someone calling herself Chimp Trainer’s Daughter.

Later on, that blog became my first source to state that Kanzi had grown obese because his handlers and Savage-Rumbaugh had fed him marshmallows, M&Ms, and other human foods. I found other information there too, filling in the gaps with

statements about the Bonobo Twelve, Savage-Rumbaugh's scandal, and the announcement of new researchers—all of which I later confirmed from magazine articles, local news, and court documents. Prior to *Chimp Trainer's Daughter*, most of what I had found read like sunshine and rainbows, offering constant reminders that Savage-Rumbaugh's work was "groundbreaking," that she was one of *Time Magazine's* most influential people of 2011. But none of it contained clear references to current, real-world events surrounding the facility beyond its daily routine.

Not long after Panbanisha, more apes died; Savage-Rumbaugh was pushed out of the facility; and the underfunded home of this family of an endangered great ape species needed someone to keep it from crumbling entirely, to keep anyone from splitting the apes apart and selling them to separate zoos, and most importantly, to keep them from dying. In 2014, the ACCI offered the position of scientific program manager to a former graduate student of Savage-Rumbaugh's, Dr. Jared Taglialatela, who had worked with some of the bonobos since they were born.

It may seem troubling to enlist a former student of the researcher who just scandalized an entire facility—not to mention several other organizations—to run that very same facility. However, the ACCI wanted a head researcher who had worked with the bonobos, and Taglialatela's research, as an assistant professor of biology at Kennesaw State University, on chimpanzee vocalizations and communicative gestures had been fruitful. His academic career demonstrated every indication of competence and no signs of corruption.

CONTACT

My 2015 visit to the ACCI, the Great Ape Trust's name since 2013 under its new ownership and management, stood in stark contrast against Segerdahl's visit to the LRC in 2001. Gone were the days when visitors could enter "ape space," as Taglialatela and the entirely new staff and volunteers called it. Gone also were Savage-Rumbaugh and Bill Fields and every other person who used to work for the Trust. In 2014, Bill Hopkins, formerly of Yerkes National Primate Research Center at Emory University, joined Taglialatela at the ACCI as its new scientific director.

At first, I struggled to make contact with the ACCI. After two weeks of unanswered phone calls and emails, I tried a Facebook message, explaining for the fourth time that I was writing an essay about animal intelligence, human-animal relations, and how the history of ape-language research fits into those discussions. I requested a tour of the facility and an interview with Taglialatela and/or Hopkins, and I asked whether the phone number and email address that I had for them were up-to-date.

In the meantime, I planned a trip to Des Moines for June 22-26. Finally, on June 1, someone named Natalie called me back. She told me that, unlike the organization that previously ran the facility, the Great Ape Trust/IPLS, they didn't give public tours except to educational groups. She stressed the point about being an entirely *new* organization under *new* management and *new* administration. Then she repeated, *only educational groups*.

Again, I explained that I was doing graduate thesis research, so my goals were educational.

Finally, she put me in contact with Sara, the ACCI's research coordinator, who on June 7, scheduled a tour and an interview with Taglialatela to take place on June 23.

On June 15, Sara emailed me again to reschedule for Wednesday, June 24, because an elementary school had requested a tour on Tuesday. She and the rest of the staff would be too busy to accommodate me. Besides, she added, "It will also be a more productive visit on Wednesday since our Director of Research, Dr. Jared Taglialatela will be in town that day."⁴⁰

According to our previous correspondence, she should have already lined up an interview with Taglialatela. But I kept this to myself and agreed that Wednesday would work even better. I asked whether I might also be able to look through their archives, assuming that they and the Trust before them would have kept data on their studies. That email received no response. I decided to ask again, in person, once I got there.

"NO TRESPASSING"

Google Maps had estimated the drive from my home in Fairfax, Virginia to the ACCI (still listed as the IPLS) in Des Moines to be fifteen hours. In reality, because the only sensible route goes through the congested traffic outside of Washington, DC and Baltimore, Maryland, the drive was more like eighteen or nineteen hours. I decided to stay for a full five days, which I'd hoped would lead to more opportunities for me to

observe the ACCI's daily routine, since Sara had told me over the phone that, in addition to the tour and interview, I was welcome to stop by anytime.

My hotel was a Days Inn on Hackley Avenue, just outside of downtown Des Moines and about seven miles from the ACCI. I arrived Monday evening, two days before my scheduled visit. Tuesday morning, I drove out to get the lay of the ACCI's property, which Google's satellite view shows to be enormous.

According to the ACCI website, twenty of its 230 acres are "ape-accessible outdoor space."⁴¹ My drive around the perimeter, though, revealed little more than what Google's street view showed: Barbed fences peppered with "No Trespassing" signs and a closed section of Route 45. Beyond the fence were land and trees and a large-ish lake that divided the facility's major structures from the rest of the property. The front (south side) of the property and entrance to the facility proper were on Evergreen Avenue. A railroad track edged along the western side. I couldn't see the north side from my car, but the satellite view showed the Des Moines River wrapping around lush foliage.

Driving up 45, I found an open gate with a "Road Closed" sign, so I drove through and headed about a quarter-mile, tracing the ACCI's east perimeter on my left. From there, one could have easily, though incorrectly, guessed that the structures inside the fence were abandoned. The land after the fencing appeared devoid of humans and bonobos, the land before it overgrown with grasses and bushes and small trees, and before those, a precarious-looking ditch carved out the side of the road. The signage there was much larger and more prevalent than on Evergreen Avenue.

Over the course of this whole stakeout, I'd begun to feel a bit like a child playing a journalist, like I was going through the motions without any real idea of what I was doing. "Investigative journalism" began to feel like an overstatement. I was an MFA student in a creative writing program who'd been writing about himself for years, occasionally doing library and online research, and who now wanted to write about the outside world and play like he was the next Sarah Koenig. So far, I'd found an organization that seemed to be guarding itself from outside visitors. So far, I'd striven not to offend or alarm my hosts to keep this opportunity open. So far, my most daring act had been driving past a "Road Closed" sign.

I reached the end of 45. Off in the distance flowed the Des Moines River. I turned the car around on a dirt road, also closed, and headed back toward Evergreen, driving slowly, passing the ACCI entrance, crossing the railroad track on the western side, and I was struck by how residential the area was. Several pockets of houses revealed themselves as I headed back toward the city. Part of me had, despite seeing the houses in satellite imagery before driving out here, expected some top-secret research lab in the middle of nowhere. My phone and email correspondence had led me to imagine everything to be entirely closed off, so I'd come prepared to have to push for information.

Nonetheless, it seemed to me that, if I could interview Taglialatela or science director Bill Hopkins, and if I could convince someone to let me hang out at the facility, I'd learn everything I wanted to know. But now, looking through this electrified chain-link fence at a seemingly abandoned 230 acres, I began to question that possibility.

“HELLO, MY NAME IS KANZI”

I pulled up to the facility the next day, just before 11am. The gate was open, but I noticed a piece of stationary duct-taped to the window of an old gatekeeper’s booth. At the top of the page was the ACCI’s new logo, created pro bono by their new ad agency, Red Dot Advertising, who explained, “Not only does the new logo match the new name, but Kanzi – ACCI’s star bonobo – is the focal point of the identity system, and has been carried throughout brochures and other marketing materials.”⁴²⁴³ And this is absolutely the case. Kanzi appears on nearly every promotional material associated with the ACCI, often alongside the words, “HELLO, MY NAME IS KANZI.”



I was, at first, tempted to dismiss this as yet more capitalizing on Kanzi’s ape-language superstardom—the commandeering and reconstruction of his identity to bolster the reputations of the humans studying him. And if there’s one thing I’ve learned in researching this facility and the history of ape-language research, it’s that hyper-ambitious ape researchers often have scientifically and ethically questionable aims.

The following point, however, gives me pause when I want to dismiss the ACCI: While they do acknowledge Kanzi’s language skills in their promotional materials, I have yet to read, hear, or watch any piece of media in which they cast their work as groundbreaking. This is good because it rejects the manipulative rhetoric of the Great Ape Trust/IPLS/Bonobo Hope. In fact, almost all of their public relations work goes into

Des Moines' local media. What's more, they actively discourage treatment of the facility as a zoo in their new visitation policy, but they have agreed to let me come for educational reasons.

Thus, I wanted to approach the ACCI as Sara and Natalie had characterized it over the phone. Both of them had come across as distraught, even indignant, over their inherent association with the Trust et al. Natalie, for instance, was adamant that they no longer gave public tours: "The previous organization—you probably heard of the IPLS, right?—they did that. We don't do that anymore. It's stressful for the bonobos, and we just don't do it."

I didn't want to put off my hosts by simply driving on up after Natalie and Sara had both told me that they no longer conduct public tours, so I stopped to read the stationary—"For entrance into the facility, please call [() ____ - ____]." ⁴⁴ When I called the number, someone named Liz answered. When I told her that I was at the gate, she sounded surprised.

"Hang on." Through what I assume was her hand on the receiver, I heard her say, "That guy, um... What's your name again?"

"Eric Botts. I'm here for a tour at 11."

"Eric Botts. He's at the gate. ... Yeah. ... I don't know. Um, yeah, someone will be right there."

Thirty seconds later, an SUV came speeding down the dirt road from the main structure to the front gate with a young woman in her early twenties in the driver's seat. She pulled through the gate and slung the SUV around in an abrupt K-turn at the end of the drive.

I pulled up a bit. There were two sides to the gate—what appeared to have once been an entrance on the right and an exit on the left. If that day was any indication, though, the right side had entered into disuse, and the left served as both entrance and exit. I was on the right. The young woman who'd come to fetch me pulled up on my left and lowered the passenger window. Behind her dark glasses, I'm certain that she rolled her eyes as she leaned across her center console and whipped her hand through the air to point at the gate, gesturing for me to follow, but also, perhaps, gesturing to indicate that the gate was already open and that I should have driven through instead of needing someone to come fetch me.

I followed her up to the parking lot. When I exited my car, she was already standing in the lot, waiting for me. Rapid greetings and handshakes:

“Hi, I'm Eric.”

“Elizabeth. Um, so it's this building.” She guided me in.

The double doors led to another set of double doors, between which stood a very large terra cotta bust of what appeared to be an Eastern religious figure—Buddhist, I think. Inside, the walls were lined with some abstract paintings and several naturalistic portraits of the bonobos who lived or used to live there, several of Kanzi.

Elizabeth introduced me to a young, athletic woman of average build. Maybe one-to-three years older than Elizabeth, Natalie seemed more comfortable around people, or at least around me—probably because she didn't have to drive out to get me.

As I introduced myself, Natalie noted that she was the one who'd answered my Facebook message and called me back, and she introduced me to Sara, who booked this

visit. Sara had a smaller build and darker hair, and everyone wore green or blue scrubs with masks hung around their necks. She shook my hand limply and dodged eye contact. Then she told me about the “green house” that ran into the main room, divided from it by several panes of heavily reinforced glass. The main room itself was sort of a foyer doubling as an observation room.

While the ACCI’s policies clearly emphasized that the facility is not run as a zoo, there’s not much to do about the fact that it was originally built to accommodate frequent visitors. The best way to describe the design, unfortunately, is zoo-like, in that it presents the observation area to guests in the main building. Still, the vast majority of ape space lies out of visitors’ view—twenty of its 230 acres are ape space, and this observation area was small, a negligible fraction of an acre. And the researchers avoid setting foot in any of those twenty acres. Nowadays, it’s important that I reiterate, visitors never step into ape space.

While Sara explained all about the tuberculosis and other inoculations that the staff, including volunteers, had to receive, one of the younger bonobos at the facility, Teco, decided to enter the testing area.

The only volunteer in the room whom I haven’t met said to no one in particular, “He loves showing off for visitors.” This volunteer’s name, I gathered, was Liz—not the Elizabeth from earlier.

“And for us,” added Natalie. “Little cutie just loves showing off for the ladies.”

Liz knelt down and put her hand to the glass. Teco touched the glass on the other side of her hand briefly, then he climbed onto the sill of one of the floor-to-ceiling

windows and began to bounce and shake his head from side to side. Liz took out her phone and turned the screen toward Teco, who leaned forward, watching her thumb through pictures and “videos of weird animals.”

The other interns laughed and *aww*-ed.

During this whole exchange, I’d been sitting, and when I stood, Teco jumped up, banged a plastic blue chair on the floor, and started shoving it back and forth.

“It’s because you stood up,” said Natalie. “He always gets macho around men, and you’re so tall. He’s showing you how strong he is.”

At this point in my research, I had got all kinds of concerns about anthropomorphism swimming in my head, and I was trying to approach the ACCI a little blankly, forgetting my expectations as much as possible and forming my thoughts around what I found. As a result, my demeanor was, perhaps excessively, reserved. I didn’t respond much to Teco until he pointed directly at me, bobbed his head, and gestured in a way that the volunteers told meant chase-&-tickle—the two are sort of taken as one verb. Of course, I couldn’t tickle him through the window, but we could still chase.

He ran to one end of the testing area of the greenhouse, then back out the door to the rest of the greenhouse, and poked his head back in before barreling back to the window and pointing at me again. He repeated the chase-&-tickle gesture, and Elizabeth exclaimed, “What a little cutie! He wants you to chase him.”

I got up and hunched forward, lowering my face to Teco’s height, and I ran with him around the observation windows—a total of about eight feet or so—then I ran back

in the opposite direction. We did this twice before Teco grabbed the chair and shoved it across the floor, squealing loudly, at a timbre and volume similar to, but much higher-pitched than, a chimp's yell. The volunteers started laughing:

"He just showed you!"

"He always does this with guys."

"He's kind of a jerk, but he's a cute jerk."

Taglialatela and a younger guy in his late-twenties/early-thirties walked in from the outdoor ape space, which had been temporarily closed off to Teco and family. They were both wearing suspenders, work boots, and rubber gloves. They nodded their heads in my direction, and I waved back. Taglialatela spoke generally to the volunteers, all of whom were undergraduates in biology, but directed his gaze largely to Sara: "So the powerline's fixed. Just gotta rebury it."

Sara approached him and talked too quietly for me to make out what she was saying, but it was clear that she was, for the first time, telling him who I was and asking if he was willing to do an interview with me.

He nodded, "Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Yeah. We gotta finish up out here though." Then he disappeared down the hall.

The younger guy, apparently waiting for Taglialatela to return, walked by and nodded at me. "What's up, dude?"

I nodded back. "How's it going, man?"

"Good, good. I'm pretty grimy right now, otherwise I'd shake your hand, but..."

He put out his elbow. "... I guess we can do one of these."

I returned his elbow and replied, “Sure thing. I’m Eric.”

Scott was Tag’s graduate research assistant. (Everyone at the ACCI either called Taglialatela Tag or Professor Tag or Dr. Tag, except when they referred to him around the public, when they used only Dr. or Professor Taglialatela.) After that brief exchange, he headed over to talk to Elizabeth and Natalie.

I asked Sara if I’d be able to see more of the facility, or if it would be only this area—which was essentially a hall, an observation room, and a line of three administrative offices, all of which amounted to an area just slightly larger than my very small one-bedroom apartment.

She said that this was it: “We don’t allow visitors into ape space.”

I respected and appreciated her point, but the website claimed only twenty acres of “ape-accessible outdoor space.” It seemed unlikely that, out of the other 210 acres, all of it was indoor ape space except for the observation room, this hallway, and the administrative offices connected to it. I asked if I’d be able to see the archives, as I’d mentioned in my last email.

Sara didn’t think the previous organization kept a research archive. She grew uneasy, looking away from me as she explained that they “didn’t really record very much data.” She pointed to a doorway. It was feeding time, “so you can like stay here and watch us. If you want.”

“Sure,” I said, waiting there while Sara and Natalie put on gloves, boots, and masks, preparing to enter ape space. They went in with a bag. The actual feeding area was just out of my sightline, but I could see them as they approached it.

Also out of sight was Kanzi's bed. He didn't come out during my visit at all. During feeding, though, someone banged the bars and squealed, causing either Sara or Natalie—I couldn't tell which—to yelp.

Soon they were back in the hallway, laughing and removing their gear. "I don't know what happened!" said Natalie. "He just came out of nowhere and scared the shit out of me!"

When I asked what happened, Sara said, "Oh nothing bad! One of the apes just got a little carried away." They laughed a little more about the event, then Natalie walked off, and Sara continued our tour of the hallway. Lining the walls were more paintings, but these were more childlike than the ones in the observation room, not controlled or focused, a bit more random. Taglialatela would later explain to me that these paintings were part of an "enrichment program" that the Trust had started and that the apes seemed to enjoy, so he and the rest of the ACCI had decided to keep it around.

"CREATIVE ELEMENTS"

I recalled the short-lived Art for Bonobo Hope, another of the Great Ape Trust's AKAs. "The United States became a cauldron," claims Bonobo Hope's website, which is still online as of this writing, "of creativity because it was a vast melting pot for different cultures":

What we are becoming at Bonobo Hope is an even more effective melting pot for creativity. We are merging different species as well as different cultures. Our goal is to create a sanctuary for artists, bonobo and human artists – to create

interspecies art, music, and object/habitat construction through interspecies communication.⁴⁵

The website is not entirely clear on how all of this was to work. Would Bonobo Hope be an artist residency? A place for artists to visit during the day? A Mecca for celebrity artists to stop by for publicity? Would the artists work directly with the apes?

Several of the site's pages contain images and videos of artists and scientists alongside brief bios and descriptions of the work they've done and the work they're supposedly doing with the bonobos. Among those included artists is Peter Gabriel, even though his time with the bonobos was brief, and spent at the LRC in Atlanta, Georgia, long prior to 2005 and to the existence of Bonobo Hope:

Accompanying Peter and his associates [presumably other musicians] from the next room [in] the Language Research Center in Atlanta, Kanzi played his keyboard. Gabriel says, "there was clear, sharp, sensitive musical intelligence at work. It [was] almost like meeting your ancestors and playing music with them."⁴⁶

In fact, everyone listed on this page, titled "Creative Elements," either visited the bonobos during their time at the LRC, was working at the Great Ape Trust/IPLS/Bonobo Hope at the time, or bears the last name "Savage" or "Savage-Rumbaugh"—presumably Sue Savage-Rumbaugh's family members.

The one exception is Itai Roffman. His page says only that "His work with the Des Moines bonobos has contributed to videos and an article on humans and chimpanzees as sister species."⁴⁷ Why he worked with bonobos to link humans and chimpanzees is unclear.

As far as I know, Bonobo Hope wasn't really a *thing* so much as another name with a website, added as another layer of "faction" that helped the facility to appear

legitimate during the days of Savage-Rumbaugh. Maybe it was a pipe dream at one point. Other content on the site suggests that this might be the case:

At the Bonobo Hope Sanctuary, bonobos and humans will travel on side-by-side on [sic] paths where they will encounter interactive sculpture and art. These paths will be “separate but equal” and each [presumably, the bonobo and the human] will become more creative as they observe the activities of the other.

I know of no artists outside of Savage-Rumbaugh’s family who were documented as having visited or worked at the facility during this time. I know of no paths with “interactive sculpture and art.” And I can imagine no good reason for this web page’s author to choose the phrase “separate but equal” in describing these paths. Some kind of ironic commentary on the parallels between 1950s race relations and modern-day species relations in the US? If so, then the irony and the significant meaning that it’s supposed to invoke is lost on me.

What I do know is that this was written in roughly the same year that everyone at the Great Ape Trust/IPLS/Bonobo Hope was pushed out and replaced by a group of new faces and names who called themselves the ACCI.

CAREFULLY CHOSEN WORDS

Taglialatela returned to the observation room, still in his gear. Sara approached him, talking as she gestured in my direction. I was glancing warily over the paintings in the hall when she returned to say that he had “agreed to do the interview, but he needs to get cleaned up first.”

Our communications had implied twice before that she'd already scheduled the interview, so her phrasing caught me off guard. I just nodded though. "Oh great!

Thanks so much!"

"Well," she said, "I don't really know what else you want to know or... what you... want... to do... so..."

I explained that I was really interested in their day-to-day activities. She briefly glossed over the whole feeding-testing-cleaning routine. When I asked her to elaborate, she remained brief in her responses, so I suggested that maybe I could just hang out and watch how the day went.

"Um, yeah sure," she replied.

We walked the ten feet back into the observation room, and I found a seat where I could watch and take notes. Teco had returned to the greenhouse and started testing. Each time he tapped one of the lexigrams on a large screen, a male voice said the word it was meant to represent: *Marshmallow. Marshmallow. Try. Wait. Wait. Chalk. Strawberries. Strawberries.* When he touched the symbol displayed on the screen next to the lexigram keyboard, a fifth volunteer, who must have come out of one of the offices during my tour, slipped a grape through a slot as a reward. Apparently, he was to touch the symbol corresponding to the picture of the grape up on the screen.

Teco, who was born in 2010 and hadn't had the same experience with the lexigrams as older members of his family, appeared mostly to be hitting the symbols at random until, seemingly bored but still wanting his treat, he started smacking, over and over again: *Grapes. Grapes. Gra- Gr- G-G-G-Grapes. Grapes.* Occasionally, he also

slipped and hits the symbols around it: *Yesterday. Chicken. Kool-Aid. Perrier.* Eventually, he quit, jumping down from the platform under the screen and bounding back into the larger greenhouse area.

When Taglialatela returned, he was still wearing suspenders and work boots. Sara began to walk toward him, but he approached me with his hand outstretched: “Hi, Eric?”

I stood and shook his hand.

“I’d say we should talk in my office, but it’s a friggin sauna in there right now, so, ah...” He looked around the observation room and invited me to sit with him at the counter that ran along one of the walls. He was, at first, reserved, talking very generally about how the ACCI came to be and about how he became involved with it. He also explained a bit about his research, its focus on what he thought of as precursors to language—non-verbal vocalizations, pointing, and other forms of communication.

When I started asking him about the fraught history behind ape-language research, he seemed at once surprised and excited that I knew more than the surface-level, feel-good parts of Nim’s and Koko’s and Sherman and Austin’s stories. Then he asked about my interest in the facility. Not fully understanding the question, I responded, “I’m interested in animal intelligence, human-animal relations, ape-language research, and you know, just, language in general.”

“Right,” he said, “but are you writing something?”

Again, I thought back to all of my emails and conversations with Sara about this interview, and I wondered how he wouldn’t already know this. I explained that I was

working on my thesis, what I hoped would eventually become a book, or at least a series of articles.

The term “creative nonfiction” came up, and Taglialatela lifted his eyebrows incredulously. “But... those words don’t really go together, so...”

I started dropping names he might know—David Sedaris, John McPhee, Joan Didion. Nothing. So I tried to define the genre quickly and in the simplest terms I could come up with: “So I’m telling true stories—nothing’s made up—but I’m doing so in an artful, literary way.”

Finally, he said, “Oh, you mean like an episode of *Radiolab* or *This American Life*?”

“Yes! Yeah, totally that sort of thing.”

He leaned back in his chair, smiled, and relaxed.

I stopped taking notes all together and tried pitching some questions about the Great Ape Trust that I knew the answers to, testing the boundaries of the interview.

He didn’t tell me anything new, but he did tell me things that I’d expected him to keep under wraps—the controversies of 2012, Kanzi’s obesity from the diet of marshmallows and M&Ms, Panbanisha’s death. He started repeating, over and over for emphasis, “The Trust didn’t produced a *single scientific study* in the *eleven years* that it was open.” He shook his head every time he said this.

When I asked about Savage-Rumbaugh’s work prior to the Trust, he said, “There wasn’t a lot of real science being done,” which we agreed seemed to be much of the story behind the history of ape-language research in general. Of Kanzi, he said, “It’s

obvious, when you interact with him, that there's something going on there. He clearly understands *a lot*." But that has no scientific meaning because, he explained, Kanzi's comprehension of English hadn't been assessed empirically since 1993.

To a certain extent, his point brings this essay back to Skinner and why his observations about language were so important. He emphasized repeatedly the importance of recording observable data in the advancement of science: Without it, there's nothing for other scientists to verify through replicated experiments; and without verifiability, analyses and conclusions can be chalked up to speculation. Without recorded observable data, a hypothesis can never become theory. And without theories to provide frameworks for future studies, scientific knowledge cannot progress.

Part of the goal now, he explained, was to properly test Kanzi's English comprehension, to understand just how much Kanzi understood and to gather actual data for future analysis. Right now, what they knew from their own work with him was that Kanzi could identify fifteen different objects with about 80% accuracy.

Without my asking, Taglialatela stressed, at least four times throughout the interview that all of their research methods were non-invasive and "collaborative," though he never explained what that meant.

About working with Savage-Rumbaugh as a graduate student, his only comment was that it was "an interesting experience." When I pressed him for details, his reservation returned, and he asked again what my interest was in this particular story. I explained again that I was writing what I hoped to be a book about ape-language

research. This answer didn't satisfy him though, so I explained that, because Savage-Rumbaugh has such a prominent position in that history, and because of the controversies surrounding her and her work with these bonobos, she was one of my main focal points. I was asking about their student-teacher relationship because I wanted a clearer sense of what kind of person she was outside of the media spotlight and because, since he had essentially taken over her former position, I wanted to know how their past was affecting his and the bonobos' present.

Taglialatela crossed his arms and sat back. Then he leaned in and quietly asked, "Have you talked to, um, Dr. Savage-Rumbaugh?"

"I haven't been able to contact her, but I plan to. I want to."

"But you know that there's a lawsuit, right? Between us and her?"

I hadn't known this. And in the months following this visit, I didn't find any information about it outside of this interview. I suppose that it may still be unresolved, in which case it would make sense that I couldn't find that information, but still, he seemed surprised that I didn't know.

"I can't go into the details," he said, "but we're involved in a lawsuit, so I don't feel comfortable talking about her until that's sorted out. I think the questions you're asking are great. Really. They're great, and in a few months, when this all blows over, I'd be happy to talk more about everything."

He sat up and points past me to the greenhouse. What at first looked to be another of the young bonobos had started testing at the touchscreen. "Check this out," he said. "This guy like totally tricks out the system." He put up both his hands, index

fingers extended: “He’ll use both hands at the same time and just start *tap-tap-tap-tap-tap* until it crashes.”

Over the speaker system came, *Yesterday. Happy. Happy. Shoe. Hap- Clay.*

“Oh,” I asked, looking back over my shoulder, “is that Nathan?” When I turned back to Taglialatela, his mouth was slightly agape.

He looked at the ground. “No, that’s um, that’s Teco. Nathan died some years ago.” He looked at the ground. “I knew that little guy since he was a baby.”

As if to jar himself out of his head, he sat up again and looked outside. “Oh, look at that.” The sky was dark, and a light drizzle had begun. “Weather’s calling for thunderstorms.”

After this, Taglialatela’s affect became stony, meeting my attempts to reignite the conversation with only brief responses and shrugs.

“Well,” I said, “I guess beyond the interview, I’d really just like to hang out as long as possible and watch you guys do your thing, if that’s okay.”

“Oh yeah, I mean, there’s a tour group coming in at 1:00, but as long as it’s okay with the girls.”

A tour group? We’d rescheduled my visit for today because of a tour with a group of elementary school students yesterday. What happened to “We don’t give public tours?” I didn’t press him on this, though. We both stood and shook hands, and he pointed me to some of their promotional materials and handed me his card and said, if I emailed him, he’d put me in contact with Al Setka, the only person left over from the days of the Trust.

“Okay, man. Sounds good. So it’s cool if I chill for a bit?”

“Right!” He jogged over to talk to Sara and Natalie.

Natalie nodded her head, then looking in my direction, said, “Oh yeah, that’s fine. Just, you know, grab a seat wherever.” She gestured toward the rows of some thirty chairs that she and the others had set up in front of the observation room and greenhouse during our interview.

Natalie, it turned out, would be giving the tour. She turned to Liz and, laughing, asked, “Do I need to like fix my hair? Am I presentable?”

“You have some flyaways,” Liz said, “but that’s about it.”

“Okay, good!”

A few minutes later, a group of about twenty people between the ages of about 40-75 entered. As it turned out, this was not an educational group. They were all members of some bank who, every year, sends its platinum members on a surprise trip—casinos, zoos, and apparently research facilities that no longer give public tours.

Teco hung out atop the structure around the computer, while his brother Nyota (pronounced “En-Yota”) leans against it with his hand stretched up to the top. They watched the group funnel in, studying each face briefly before moving on to the next. None of this seemed new to them. Rather, they seemed to know what was going on. They’d quieted down and were waiting patiently for the demo to start.

“You taking notes on them? Or us?” an elderly gentleman asked as he took the seat directly in front of me.

“Oh, uh. I’m writing an article about this place. So, like, you’re *in* my notes, but...”

“An article, huh? So you’re, what, like a journalist or something?”

I smiled and shrugged. “I’m a graduate student. This is part of my thesis.”

Nyota, now bored, or maybe feeling that he needed to assert his dominance to the group, started pushing the plastic chair back and forth and squealing in his high-pitched register.

As he did this, another man stood and walked toward the glass. He bowed his legs, scratched his head with one hand, and curled the other into his armpit, hopping around in a sort of monkey dance. “Ooh ooh ooh ah ah ooh!” he mocked.

Nyota crashed the chair straight into the window and flung it aside, as if to say that this was what he would do to the man.

The man turned to face the group, laughing and slapping his knees. “Hahaha! Did you see that! Aw, this is great!”

Most everyone in the group laughed.

I did not.

Sara and Liz stared at him, not quite glaring but obviously wanting to.

Natalie forced an awkward smile.

The tour was really more of a presentation. None of the information was new to me except the claim on their PowerPoint that “Kanzi comprehends more than 500 English words.” I look at the brochure from the pile of promotional materials that Tagliatela had pointed me to. Inside was a picture of Kanzi, who I realized for the first

time, had not left his bed during my visit. And to his right: “**Kanzi** is internationally known for his English comprehension and symbol use, and is heralded as the first non-human primate to make stone tools or start a fire.”

The claim about fire refers to a television documentary, made in the 90s for the Japanese network *NHK*, in which Kanzi and Savage-Rumbaugh walk a path in what looks to be a forest. At one point, they stop at a fire pit. Kanzi points to the pit and gestures with both hands. Savage-Rumbaugh asks if he wants to build a fire. He nods emphatically, and she says the lighter is in her pocket. He reaches for it, piles kindling into the pit, and lights the fire. The scene is genuinely fascinating and impressive to watch.

The brochure continues, “Kanzi’s vocabulary is more than 3,000 English words. He even comprehends simple English sentences.”

When I returned to my hotel, I emailed Taglialatela to ask about returning tomorrow or the next day to hang out and watch him and the volunteers in their normal routine, and recalling his previous offer, I also asked for Al Setka’s contact information. And finally, I added, “I can’t tell you how happy I am to see this facility on the up-and-up.”

His response was curt, but he still seemed willing to keep communications open: “It was great to meet you. Unfortunately, we have very full days tomorrow and Friday. Perhaps we can set up a time in the future for a longer visit?”⁴⁸

To date, though, he has not replied to further emails.

At this point, I don't know what to make of the ACCI. I don't know what to make of Taglialatela. What I do know is that his information does not match the information from the tour, which does not match the information in the ACCI's promotional materials. Maybe this is the result of poor communication.

Taglialatela seemed genuinely interested in helping me out during the interview until I brought up Savage-Rumbaugh. It makes sense that he wouldn't want to talk about her, given the lawsuit, but still, I can't help but feel jerked around after all of this, as if they'd conceded to the tour to placate me but never intended to give anything more than surface-level information. Part of me still wants very much to believe in that sentence I'd written about the facility being "on the up-and-up," but it's hard to continue to feel that way about an organization that, after so much controversy, continues to operate behind closed doors.

Despite the controversies of the Great Ape Trust, I'm compelled to accept the essential point of Savage-Rumbaugh's argument, that Kanzi and other bonobos are capable of language far beyond simple "I want..." constructions, which one could claim marked the limit of Nim's capacities. The old videos at Kanzi.BVU.edu are convincing. And *Kanzi's Primal Language* actually describes the structure and logic behind an experiment from one such video.

To demonstrate Kanzi's comprehension of English, Savage-Rumbaugh asks him to do strange tasks like placing a t-shirt in a refrigerator. The idea is that such requests lack the cultural context of, say, "Put on the shirt." There's no established practice of

refrigerating shirts except this one time, so for Kanzi to know what to do, he must understand the sentence itself. In the video, after Savage-Rumbaugh's request, he smiles, rises, takes the shirt, ambles to the fridge, inserts the shirt, ambles back, and awaits further instruction.

Maybe she trained Kanzi to do this, but the fire-building scene gives me pause when I want to reach that conclusion. Additionally, it seems worthwhile to humor Savage-Rumbaugh for the sake of another point from *Kanzi's Primal Language*. We're on shaky ground here, but bear with me. The book claims that, whereas Kanzi seems happy and proud to demonstrate his abilities, Panbanisha, before her death, had been a fussy research subject, often refusing to perform, especially for visitors. About this, the authors argue that respecting her and the other bonobos' interests and wishes, as we would with human research subjects, is key to the success and ethics of their research. Such respect isn't possible without efforts toward empathy and understanding. They explain that visitors generally want the apes to demonstrate their abilities "in their own home, as if they were trained circus performers." That demand for formal tests creates "the tragicomedy of ape language research." It's not enough to simply pay attention as the apes do what they do; skeptics don't see the nuances of their language, how they combine keyboard symbols with gesture, utterance, gaze, and expression to create complex literal and figurative meanings. They want the apes to perform arbitrary and contextless tasks like characters in a play by Samuel Beckett.

Of course, I say "despite the controversies," as if one could simply set them aside, ignoring the lack of published scientific articles, the allegations of the Bonobo

Twelve, Kanzi's obesity, and worst of all, the deaths of Panbanisha and other bonobos who were under Savage-Rumbaugh's care. This is not possible. Indeed, the real tragicomedy of ape-language research is far more tragic and far less comedic than Savage-Rumbaugh and her colleagues would have had us believe. The real tragicomedy is that the supposed scientists who claim also to be advocates for animal rights so often violate exactly the rights for which they advocate. In fact, the word "tragicomedy" fails to capture the malignant and infuriating hypocrisy bulging in tumors just under the soft, fleshy surface of their rhetoric.

So maybe the better way to do this is not to "set aside" those controversies but to hold them, peripherally, while I try to establish the significance of this personhood argument that Savage-Rumbaugh once made for Panbanisha, if only for the sake of further highlighting the hypocrisy and deception behind that argument. After all, the more valid it is, the more egregious Savage-Rumbaugh's transgressions become.

Imagine sitting a three-year-old—let's call her Sally—down to "demonstrate" her language comprehension in a concrete room with a few objects, a fridge, and two chairs. To show that she "has language" and is not simply responding to your unintended non-verbal cues, you wear a mask. Then you say, "Okay Sally, put the shirt in the fridge." Sally's confused. She looks at the shirt. Then the fridge. Then you. She lifts her eyebrows in a non-verbal *Why?* You don't answer but repeat the directive. She does it, and you give her a cookie. Then you give another oddball directive with no social context. Only now, Sally's bored and doesn't want to play with anymore, so she stops listening and does her own thing.

Does Sally have language? A limited capacity for it?

Now imagine a world in which your culture has only ever heard or seen English words, and you, an anthropologist, have discovered an outside group of people who make strange babbling noises. You decide to teach one of them—Tim, as you’ve named him—to speak. After years of teaching, visitors start asking you to demonstrate your results, so you do the shirt/fridge test. Only when you ask Tim to do it, he knows what’s up: You’ll hassle him with senseless tasks, and if he succeeds, you’ll reward him with cookies. But Tim’s not about to be shown off. (He has his dignity.) So he sits, arms crossed, obstinately refusing to perform. Maybe he shakes his head violently, throws down the shirt, and storms off.

Does Tim have language? A limited capacity for it?

Savage-Rumbaugh and her colleagues argue in *Kanzi’s Primal Language* that such tests are generally unnecessary and rather disrespectful. (I imagine Panbanisha snatching her keyboard, smacking symbols, and



gesturing indignantly: That is to say, “*You* put the stinkin’ t-shirt in the damn, dirty fridge!”)

I’m compelled, on some level, to accept this claim about respecting personhood, but on a more practical level, I know that it’s entirely too convenient and that its negative consequences far outweigh the positives. Sure, by treating the apes as sentient beings with individual personalities—as persons who are more than merely “intelligent, personable centers of a scientific projects”—it might be true that researchers get all the evidence they need. But that “evidence” fails to advance either science or the cause for

animal rights, in which many ape-language researchers falsely root their claims, because that “evidence” is limited to the narrow audience of the researchers themselves.

Herbert Terrace’s cold, anthropocentric methodologies and arguments may fail to acknowledge the complexities of language and personhood, they may fail to demonstrate adequate empathy, and they may fail to engage their research subjects on a variety of meaningful levels. But Terrace’s decision to reject his initial hypothesis that a chimpanzee could learn a human language at least demonstrates an understanding that the rigors of empirical data collection and analysis are essential components to the language of science. That language is the only one that can carry adequate meaning in discussions of animal rights within today’s data-obsessed power structures.

The warm anthropomorphism behind Savage-Rumbaugh’s rhetoric is worse than ineffective because it serves as a mask, hiding the pockmarks that riddle her science and ethics. It helps to perpetuate other people’s refusal to think critically about the world and about their place in it alongside other animals because it denies that scientific language that Terrace and others regard so highly.

The case could be made, and I think Savage-Rumbaugh would try to make it, that this language of science is inadequate for the conversation at hand. Maybe that’s true, but it’s the best language that we have for articulating fact-based truths, without which the truths of ethics become hazy, easily manipulated for the sake of personal gain and to the detriment of those beings, those entire species, whose existence we have the power to imprison, to enslave, to wipe from the face of the Earth. Maybe, indeed, we are Gods among simple creatures. Our high levels of linguistic abstraction enable

the science that deifies us in this age of the anthropocene. But if we are omnipotent Gods, then we remain far from omniscient, and the depths of what we do not know, the blind spots of our science, represent our most difficult ethical questions. It is, ultimately, our responsibility to speak clearly of our knowledge—its vistas and its limitations—so that we can engage the world with an effort beyond mere Godliness and toward goodness.

NOTES

¹ Marsh, *Project Nim*.

² Chomsky, "Review of Verbal Behavior," 28.

³ Palmer, "On Chomsky's Appraisal of Skinner's Verbal Behavior," 255.

⁴ Marsh, *Project Nim*.

⁵ Terrace, *Nim*, 126.

⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁷ Salt, *Animal Rights*.

⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Foster Wallace, "Authority and American Usage," 108–9.

¹¹ Shaffner, *Planet of the Apes*.

¹² Post, *Beneath*.

¹³ Terrace, *Nim*, 184.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Savage-Rumbaugh, "Sherman and Austin."

¹⁶ Singer, "All Animals Are Equal," 220.

¹⁷ Ibid., 221.

¹⁸ Segerdahl, Fields, and Savage-Rumbaugh, *Kanzi's Primal Language*, 2, 88–9. – I paraphrased the scene that follows between Segerdahl and Panbanisha, as well as the scene that appears later in this essay, from this book, which serves as my touchstone in relating Savage-Rumbaugh's views on the bonobos, ape-language research, and anthropomorphism in science.

¹⁹ "IPLS Homepage." – This website, like several others associated with Savage-Rumbaugh's work, no longer exists. (Most of those that do still exist are several years out of date.) I managed to save the page's contents, however, so that I could retain access to it. When necessary and possible, I will indicate other such instances.

²⁰ Segerdahl, Fields, and Savage-Rumbaugh, *Kanzi's Primal Language*, 88–9.

²¹ "Lexigram Used by Kanzi." – Using this image for reference, I recreated all lexigrams herein with slight modifications to improve readability. The Great Ape Trust originally provided the image to Mollye Nardi for a biology seminar at Earlham College in 2004.

²² Schweller, "Apes With Apps."

²³ de Waal, *Bonobo*, 4, 103.

²⁴ "IPLS Homepage."

²⁵ Mori, "The Uncanny Valley."

²⁶ (Fig. 1): Smurrayinchester, *Mori Uncanny Valley*.

²⁷ "History." – I summarized the following information about the LRC from this webpage.

-
- 28 Rubin, "Ape Genius"; *Bonobo People; Cousin Bonobo; Kanzi*. – A few examples of Kanzi's film, television, and radio appearances.
- 29 Winter, "Famed 'Talking' Ape Dies."
- 30 Miller, "Bonobo Judge Steals State Fair Show."
- 31 Schaller, *A Man Without Words*.
- 32 Abumrad, "Words."
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 "Construction Begins on Iowa Primate Learning Sanctuary."
- 35 "The 2011 TIME 100"; Botts, "Field Notes."
- 36 Pedersen et al., "We Believe..."
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Winter, "Famed 'Talking' Ape Dies"; "Eulogy for Panbanisha"; Söze, "Panbanisha, Famous 'Talking' Bonobo"; "Statement About Panbanisha's Illness and Treatment."
- 39 Wong, "Troubled Ape Facility."
- 40 Botts to Sikba, "Graduate Student Thesis Research," pt. 6/15/2015.
- 41 "ACCI: Ape Cognition and Conservation Initiative."
- 42 "Pro Bono Bonobos."
- 43 (Fig. 2): Red Dot Advertising, *ACCI Logo*.
- 44 Botts, *Gatekeeper Booth*.
- 45 "Art for Bonobo Hope," "Travel and Creativity."
- 46 Ibid., "Creative Elements."
- 47 Ibid., "Itai Roffman."
- 48 Botts and Taglialatela, "Personal Emails with Taglialatela."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abumrad, Jad. "Words." Web. *Radiolab*. New York: WNYC Radio, August 9, 2010.
http://50.31.154.46/radiolab/radiolab091010.mp3?downloadId=5369b11ab4b02596_ePWYdP3_00000000OzL.
- "ACCI: Ape Cognition and Conservation Initiative." *Ape Cognition and Conservation Initiative*, 2014. <http://apeinitiative.org/>.
- "An Example of a Lexigram Used by Kanzi." Great Ape Trust, December 12, 2004.
<http://legacy.earlham.edu/~chickha/evolution%20of%20language/untitled%20folder/SeniorSemWEB.html>.
- "Art for Bonobo Hope." Accessed March 12, 2015. <http://artforbonobohope.org/>.
Bonobo People, 2010.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxcJSPHHFso&feature=youtube_gdata_player.
- Botts, Eric. "Field Notes from Visit to ACCI," June 24, 2015.
- . *Gatekeeper Booth*. Photograph, June 24, 2015.
- . Letter to Sara Sikba. "Graduate Student Thesis Research," 1-6/15 2015.
- Botts, Eric, and Jared Taglialatela. "Personal Emails with Taglialatela," n.d.
- Chomsky, Noam. Review of *Review of Verbal behavior*, by B. F. Skinner. *Language* 35, no. 1 (1959): 26–58. doi:10.2307/411334.
- "Construction Begins on Iowa Primate Learning Sanctuary." *PR Newswire*, June 11, 2003. <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/construction-begins-on-iowa-primate-learning-sanctuary-71285802.html>.
- Cousin Bonobo*. Films Media Group, 2006.
- de Waal, Frans. *Bonobo: The Forgotten Ape*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- "Eulogy for Panbanisha." *Art for Bonobo Hope*, November 12, 2012.
<http://artforbonobohope.org/iowa-primate-learning-sanctuary-issues-eulogy-for-panbanisha/>.
- Foster Wallace, David. "Authority and American Usage." In *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*, 66–127. New York: Black Bay Books, 2007.
- "History." *Georgia State University: Language Research Center*, August 11, 2011.
<http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwlrc/3476.html>.

"IPLS Homepage." *Iowa Primate Learning Sanctuary*, March 11, 2014.
<http://www.iowaprimatelarning.org/>.

Kanzi. Radio Lab. Accessed March 12, 2015.
http://www.radiolab.org/story/91708-kanzi/?utm_source=sharedUrl&utm_medium=metatag&utm_campaign=sharedUrl.

Marsh, James. *Project Nim*. Lionsgate, 2012.

Miller, Jennifer. "Bonobo Judge Steals State Fair Show." *The Des Moines Register*. August 13, 2014. http://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/local/iowa-state-fair/2014/08/14/kanzi-bonobo-iowa-state-fair-food-judge/14040705/?fb_action_ids=10204611662435603&fb_action_types=og.comments&fb_source=aggregation&fb_aggregation_id=288381481237582.

Mori, Masashiro. "The Uncanny Valley." Translated by Karl F. MacDorman and Nori Kageki. *IEEE Spectrum*, June 12, 1970.
<http://spectrum.ieee.org/automaton/robotics/humanoids/the-uncanny-valley>.

Palmer, David C. "On Chomsky's Appraisal of Skinner's Verbal Behavior: A Half Century of Misunderstanding." *The Behavior Analyst* 29, no. 2 (2006): 253–67.

Pedersen, Janni, Tyler Romine, Andrea Jackson, Jackie Mobley, Stephanie Musgrave, Daniel Musgrave, Jen Draiss, et al. "We Believe... There Is an Immediate Danger to the Apes' Health and Lives." *Chimp Trainer's Daughter*, September 10, 2012.
<http://chimptrainersdaughter.blogspot.com/2012/09/we-believe-there-is-immediate-danger-to.html>.

Post, Ted. *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*. Web, Science Fiction. 20th Century Fox, 1970. www.solarmovie.tl.

"Pro Bono Bonobos." *Red Dot Advertising*. Accessed June 8, 2015.
<http://www.reddotad.com/stream/pro-bono-bonobos/>.

Red Dot Advertising. *ACCI Logo*, n.d.

Rubin, John. "Ape Genius." Web. *Nova*. United States: PBS, July 6, 2011.
pbs.org/wgbh/nova/nature/ape-genius.html.

Salt, Henry. *Animal Rights: Considered in Relation to Social Progress*. Clarks Summit, PA: Society for Animal Rights, Inc., 1892.

Savage-Rumbaugh, Sue. "Sherman and Austin." *Ape Videos*, 1979 1977.
<http://kanzi.bvu.edu/SandAVideos2.html>.

Schaller, Susan. *A Man Without Words*. New York: Summit Books, 1991.

Schweller, Ken. "Apes With Apps." *IEEE Spectrum*, June 29, 2012.
<http://spectrum.ieee.org/computing/software/apes-with-apps/>.

Segerdahl, Pär, William Fields, and Sue Savage-Rumbaugh. *Kanzi's Primal Language: The Cultural Initiation of Primates into Language*. Basingstoke [England]; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Shaffner, Franklin J. *Planet of the Apes*. Web, Science Fiction. 20th Century Fox, 1968. www.solarmovie.tl.

Singer, Peter. "All Animals Are Equal." In *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, 2nd ed.. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989.

Smurrayinchester. *Mori Uncanny Valley*, May 1, 2007. Wikimedia Commons.

Söße, Michael. "Panbanisha, Famous 'Talking' Bonobo Ape, Dies At Iowa Sanctuary." *The Inquisitr News*, November 8, 2012.
<http://www.inquisitr.com/391948/panbanisha-famous-talking-bonobo-ape-dies-at-iowa-sanctuary-2012/>.

"Statement About Panbanisha's Illness and Treatment." *Art for Bonobo Hope*, November 12, 2012. <http://artforbonobohope.org/iowa-primate-learning-sanctuary-issues-statement-about-panbanishas-illness-and-treatment/>.

Terrace, Herbert S. *Nim*. 1st ed.. New York: Knopf, 1979.

"The 2011 TIME 100." *Time*, 2011.
<http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/completelist/0,29569,2066367,00.html>.

Winter, Michael. "Famed 'Talking' Ape Dies at Iowa Sanctuary, Others Sick." *USA TODAY*, December 7, 2012.
<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2012/11/07/bonobo-dies-great-ape-trust-des-moines/1690569/>.

Wong, Kate. "Troubled Ape Facility Reinstates Controversial Researcher." *Scientific American: Observations*, November 21, 2012.
<http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/2012/11/21/troubled-ape-facility-reinstates-controversial-researcher/>.

BIOGRAPHY

Eric Botts grew up in Erie, Pennsylvania, wherein the utterly depressing and oppressive weather helped to hone his sarcastic and cynical outlook on life. He earned his AA in graphic design at the Erie Institute of Technology in 2007. Then in 2012, he earned his BFA in creative writing with honors and a minor in English at Behrend, a branch campus of the Pennsylvania State University in Erie. And in 2016, he earned his MFA in creative nonfiction at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. He is currently taking a break from academia so that he can regather his sanity and work on producing his first podcast, *Bestiary*. The first season of that podcast will be based on his work in the “Babel of the Apes” section of this thesis.