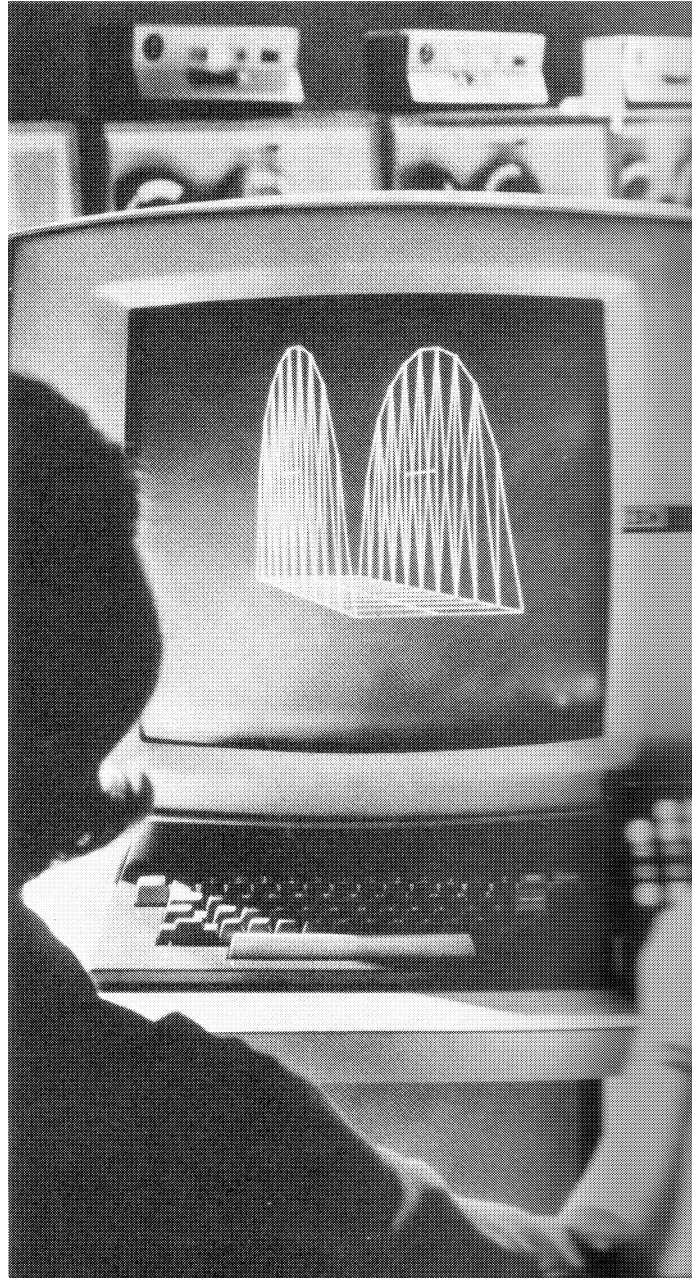


DISCLAIMER

While this printer queue might seem to be some kind of clunky and poorly construed technology, I assure you that it is quite advanced on my end and is the only way I could find of coming to you. The documents you'll be reading today have been in transit for nearly a year and have arrived (I hope) in an order which the spool process can give to you quickly and with some clarity. Please forgive any distortion in the text, it is quite perilous to communicate this way.

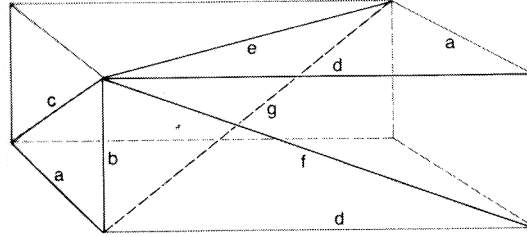
Now I want to make it perfectly clear that these papers and all my other works in life belong to the general public. In fact, I also would like to turn myself over to all of you as well. This was actually done several years ago, but in an embarrassingly disorganized manner. I like what you've done with the character, but I'd like to step into his tattered suit for the next hundred pages and a day. And after that, I'm yours again. Do what you must do! I always enjoy seeing what happens to me.



2 29 1

À Chris, Erik, "Friendola", Ed, Nathan.

Toutes les grandes amis que je n'ai jamais pu avoir.



Many, many years ago, so long ago that it's a real stretch to find anyone else who can remember this, on the old Oprah show, she did a feature on individuals who had left society and, in the process, had eliminated every trace of themselves. She had like three or four guests up on stage, if I recall correctly, and they had all gone back and diligently destroyed every little bit of information previously known about them. Burning birth certificates and ID cards, canceling bank accounts. Stealing photos out of family member's albums and destroying them. They had hired hackers to break into schools and erase their records. In fact, each of these persons had done such a bang-up job that all that was known about each of them was their social security numbers. (Although Oprah's researchers were unable to say which social belonged to which person; these numbers were only known because of the noticeable gaps that were left in the government's records.) On the program, these people sat in the dark; nameless and unsorted. No one knew who they were.

Nowadays we would label this kind of act as “information suicide” or something very sophisticated, because people are much more aware of the importance of ones’ identities, but in those days we simply called it “jerktoasting” and these people on the stage were just a few jerktoasters who got caught. We were fascinated by them, because no one of us had ever thought of deleting ourselves. It seemed futuristic to do so and it seemed to exhibit willful antipathy to do so, which, in a way, somehow seems quite futuristic as well. (We were all so worried about a dystopian future at the time, a future of assimilation or a future of surveillance, and these people had assimilated themselves, lost themselves, in a style far more effective than the government could dream.)

Of course, Oprah wanted to cut right to the bottom of things and she straight up asked them, “Why do this? Why do all this work, this is years and years of work, why do this just to erase yourselves from society?”

The people in the dark shifted a bit, considering the question, and, from the movement of their silhouettes, you could see that they were motioning to each other and consulting. After a time, a woman in the group spoke and said, “We don't want to answer that question.”

The audience gave a rumble of discontent.

“Okaaay,” said Oprah. “But this is kind of a key question here! Let’s get real, I’m not going to just let you out of this question.”

The audience laughed, female laughter. Incidentally, the videotape of this program can be seen at http://youtube.com/watch?v=ShpcjWG_Meo. (I don't know if it is proper to dump a YouTube address here. It feels like I have maybe just gone ahead and ruined what I am writing by doing that. Has all of this writing lost its timelessness, to have this relic here? But maybe this link will never break, maybe it will stay there for all time. Maybe it's me. I'm a relic which is already out of his time in the present age. Maybe I am what is holding things back, maybe I am already not of any relevance. Good things to consider.)

Allow me to leave the jerktoasters on Oprah's darkened stage while I drop a name. Any of you happened to read the work of Dr. Emery Pestus? I can't go on with this story until you've read him, he's a big name in -nymity. Knows everything about it. Naturally, he goes on about all the things you know already: that anonymity obscures the truth, that it opens a vent for hatred, basically that it turns people into vile and slanderous beasts. But too often we let disguised persons slide when it comes to little poems or donations.

On that point of Anonymous donations, he writes:

Where one sees Anonymous etched, one witnesses the spoil of all the other names etched on the stone beneath it. In many cases, the gift of each part is the same, but the gift of Anonymous seems somehow the more virtuous. This lie speaks to the cynicism of our time! Where is the real man in all of this? Where has he hidden? We hate the man who is good and who is himself.

Finding myself very impressed by Dr. Pestus' writings, having dabbled in pseudonymity from time to time, I dashed him off a letter:

Dr. Pestus, good afternoon.

I am a fellow, a professor of sorts, who is doing work under an anonymous guise and I have just finished reading your book "Kill Yourself! The Terrible Things People Say and Do When They Aren't Themselves." Now, before you start to usher a reply, I am not writing to disagree with you.

My complaint is that my real name is very plain and I prefer to have a fictional one. You don't seem to suffer this problem, since your real name is quite fictional-sounding on its own.

I do realize that having a fictional name makes me a bad person, but how bad of a person does it make me? Please rate on the scale of John Q. Public to Mister X.

Also, is it too late to be real?

_why

His reply came in a few days:

Dear Mr. Jonathan Gillette,

Yes, it's true! I know your real name! I asked a few of my experts to trace back the little e-mail you sent and it lined up with the coordinates of one Pirate O's General Store in Draper, Utah. It seems that you composed the e-mail while you were plugged into their connection, enjoying a Sangria Señorial it seems. A quick call to store owner Chase McGuinn sorted all of this out. Now

please tell me the point to this ridiculous anonymity exercise,
hmm?

As it turns out, oddly enough, it seems that your real self is just an unknown programmer from Utah. The myth is that easily dispelled. Why not make something of your real self? (Of course I know why and can tell you: Because your fear of the world has clouded your ability to *do things to improve your situation*. You are stuck there in Draper, Utah, until you can cut through the paranoia!)

Please, Mr. Gillette, come on in. The water's fine. ;)

Best,
Emery Pestus

Now, clearly this letter brought me no end of astonishment. Pirate O's General Store? Could there really be such a place? It seemed miraculous that a store by that name could exist!

I raced to open a browser, my first reaction being to look up Pirate O's and I slammed it into Google, only to be met with a list of garbage: links to a bar "Pirate Oars" in Cincinnati, Ohio; lyrics to the song "Pour, Oh Pour the Pirate Sherry"; nothing about such a pirate general store. From there, I moved on to Googling for "Pirate store draper" and "Chase McGuinn" and "Sangria Señorial", unable to find anything, although a search for "McGuinn Senorial" did turn up a poem entitled "Un espacio señorial donde" by Cezar McGuinn. (I didn't need to search for Jonathan Gillette, because I knew who that was.)

I wrote back to Dr. Pestus:

Dearest Doctor,

Thank you for the letter. Sorry to bother you again, but can you tell me anything else about this place Pirate O's? Just an address is fine.

_why

And then, well, the e-mail bounced.

TRIALS

ONCE A YEAR, I TAKE A MONTH & I READ EVERYTHING I CAN BY ONE AUTHOR.

THIS YEAR I READ 4 BOOKS BY THOMAS BERNHARD IN ONE MONTH.

AND THE YEAR BEFORE THAT, IT WAS EVERYTHING BY DENTON WELCH IN ONE MONTH.

BUT - IN 2009 - SEE, THIS WAS VERY VERY DANGEROUS - I READ EVERYTHING BY FRANZ KAFKA IN ONE MONTH.

I STARTED WITH "AMERIKA."

IT WAS AUGUST.

I READ THE CASTLE.

I READ THE TRIAL.

I READ ALL THE SHORT STORIES.

I READ THE STOKER, EVEN
THOUGH IT'S (VERBATIM) THE
1ST CHAPTER OF AMERIKA-
BECAUSE I REALLY ENJOYED
AMERIKA.

I READ ALL THE DELETED
STUFF.

ALL THE BLUE OCTAVO NOTEBOOKS.

THE BURROWS AND SO ON.

I SKIMPED ON THE LETTERS.

(DON'T CARE WHO HE WAS OUTSIDE
OF HIS OWN IMAGINATION.)

AND WHEN I WAS FINISHED,
I FELT DONE.

IT WENT QUICK.

I FINISHED EARLY.

I WAS DONE.

I WAS DECIMATED.

TO PROGRAM ANY MORE
WAS POINTLESS.

MY PROGRAMS WOULD NEVER
LIVE AS LONG AS THE TRIAL.

A COMPUTER WILL NEVER LIVE
AS LONG AS THE TRIAL.

HADN'T HE TOLD MAY BROD
TO DESTROY ALL OF THOSE
BOOKS?

HE HAD SAID TO BURN THEM,
MY FRIEND, TO BURN THESE
BOOKS.

BUT LOOK, HERE WAS AMERIKA,
THOROUGHLY RECONSTRUCTED

AND YET COMPLETELY UNFINISHED,
IN MY HANDS.

WHAT IF AMERIKA WAS ONLY
WRITTEN FOR 32-BIT POWER PC?

CAN AN UNFINISHED PROGRAM
BE RECONSTRUCTED??

CAN I WRITE A PROGRAM
AND GO, "AH, WELL, YOU
GET THE GIST OF IT."

IF THE TRIAL WAS WRITTEN
FOR 32-BIT POWER PC,
MAX BROD WOULDN'T HAVE
TO BURN THEM! HE WOULD
JUST BE LIKE, "HOW DO I
EVEN GET THIS THING OFF
THE HARD DRIVE?"

BUT NO.

IT WASN'T WRITTEN FOR 32-BIT
POWER PC.

IT WAS WRITTEN FOR EYES.

AT THE END OF AMERIKA, WE
DON'T EVEN KNOW HOW KARL
GETS TO OKLAHOMA.

WHO CARES - HE'S IN AMERIKA
AND HE GOES TO OKLAHOMA.

IN THAT LAST CHAPTER, THEY
SAY, "DOES EVERYONE HAVE
THEIR IDENTIFICATION PAPERS?"

AND A WOMAN PULLS A LARGE
BUNDLE OF PAPERS OUT OF
HER BABY CARRIAGE - HER PER-
AMBULATOR - AND RAISES THEM.

KARL HAS NO PAPERS, HE SIMPLY
RAISES HIS HAND.

THIS IS GOOD ENOUGH, SO
THEY LET HIM BY.

WHAT IF HE HAD NOT TOLD
MAX BROD TO BURN THEM?

WHAT IF HE HAD JUST NOT
SAID ANYTHING TO MAX
BROD EXCEPT, "THANKS A
LOT," AND, "A FOND FAREWELL
TO YOU!"

IN FACT, SEEMS WEIRD HE
DIDN'T BURN THEM HIMSELF.

TUBERCULOSIS DOESN'T STOP
YOU FROM BURNING PAPER, RIGHT?

A THOUSAND PAGES.

TWO THOUSAND PAGES.

MAYBE THREE THOUSAND PAGES.

THAT'S A LOT, BUT I THINK
HE COULD HAVE DONE IT, EVEN
ALONE, EVEN WITH TUBERCULOSIS.

IMAGINE KAFKA'S FIENDISH LITTLE
FACE RUBBING HIS HANDS OVER
THAT FIRE!

SEEMS FUN.

OR HE COULD HAVE HIDDEN IT INSIDE
AN OLD 32-BIT POWER PC.

NO ONE'S GOING TO LOOK THERE.

JUST GOES TO SHOW THAT YOU CAN'T
TRUST PEOPLE WHO AREN'T YOU.

OF COURSE HE DIDN'T WANT THEM
BURNED.

THIS WAS JUST KAFKA, WRITING
HIS OWN DEATH.

THIS ENDING HAS HIS SIGNATURE
ON IT.

REALITY'S KIND OF A MEDIUM,
MAYBE GREATER THAN PAPER.

WE ALL WANT LIFE TO HAVE
THE SAME TEXTURE THAT WE
READ ABOUT IN NOVELS.

PROMISE ME YOU'LL NEVER
READ ALL 3 KAFKA NOVELS
IN A MONTH.

After I deleted everything, I went to lunch with Amanda.

We went to a diner and had coffee. I had an omelette and I think she had a sandwich. I don't think we had coffee, either, strictly speaking, I think we had something else. I think I had grapefruit juice and she had, maybe she had water.

I do know that she had on a striped hoodie, it was a short-sleeved hoodie. Purple mostly. I don't recall what shoes she had on.

"Should we wait until the food comes," she said, "before we talk about The Happening?" or should we just get started?"

Oh, yeah, so we weren't meeting to talk about me deleting anything, neither of us knew that I was going to be deleting anything when we set up this lunch, and she had (still has) no idea, I suspect, that I am even a computer programmer, we had arranged this the night before and the whole reason for the lunch was to contemplate our viewing of M. Night Shyamalan's The Happening.

"Should we start?"

"Do you have a lot to ~~stay~~ say?" I said.

"Not really," she said.

"We can reschedule," I said. "If you need extra time.#

"The trees!" she cried. "It was the trees!"

"Oh we're starting with the end then."

"Are we sure we want to talk about this one?"

"I want to," I said. "I liked it."

"You always like the worst things," she said. "You couldn't have liked it, you were laughing at it the whole time."

"Well, okay," I said. "Before we talk about the movie--"

"The film--"

"Right, before we get into the film, I feel like we need to talk about laughing during the movie."

"Uh huh," she said.

"I need to condemn my laughter and the heckling that I was party to."

"Ohhh," she grabbed her face. "No! So I'm left as the cynical hateful heckler." She tipped over until I couldn't see her.

Not that I don't want her to know, it's just never
her come up.

during this section

She popped up. "Come on," she said. "The people walking backwards?"

"I know--"

"The old lady walking backwards?"

"Yep--"

"Am I supposed to be freaked out that there's an old lady walking backwards?"

"I don't know."

"And the old lady starts to smash her head through all those windows." She shook her head. "It's The Happening, though. It's this scary thing and, you never know, an old lady might start to walk backwards."

"Look," I said. "I don't expect you to do anything, I don't hold you to the rules that I hold myself to. And it's not that I'm having pity on this poor, poor, well-meaning director just because the whole world hates him right now."

"So, time has passed and you've changed."

"That's right."

"You're a better person now," she said. "You're seeing things clearly now."

"I can really say it now, can't I?"

"The trees!" she said. "And she's pregnant. Isn't that awesome? Life begins."

"I think that was an homage," I said.

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, to films that end with the lady getting pregnant." homage to

"I need to stay away from that genre."

"You didn't like The Sixth Sense, right?"

"No, I thought it was pretty good."

"So you thought it was a quality film, but it just frightened you."

"Yeah, it had some jumpy parts."

I said, "I didn't like The Sixth Sense, but I kind of liked Lady in the Water."

"Don't remember that one," she said. "Did we watch that one?"

Amada then said, "Well if it was an homage to b-movies, then why not go ALL IN on the camp and have the United States declare war on the plants? But I'm fuzzy on this and I think I lean toward the conversation going the other way."

the people at the next table got to go. This was like 10:45 when the place is most empty.

I think I might have said that it was an homage to b-movies, because I was regurgitating something that someone else had told me. And it seems like

"I think I watched it by myself."
 "I remember Signs being good."
 "It's fine," I said. "It has a good part where Joaquin Phoenix is ranting about baby monitors--"
 "That does NOT sound familiar."
 "Yeah, they hear these kinds of transmissions coming through the baby monitors, like the aliens are licking their chops and really salivating big time on the other end. And then Joaquin Phoenix goes off. All this stuff about how it's just a bunch of nerds out there, who don't have girlfriends and so they spend their time messing around with baby monitors."
 My juice came and I took a sip. "But you can tell he's really scared."
 "That sounds great," she said.
 "Who else was in that?" she said.
 I unfolded my napkin and got the silverware out. "I don't remember."
 She got out her phone.
 "No, don't go there."
 "I. M. D. B." Her fingers.
 "Oh, Cristian Douglas," I said. "It was Cristian Douglas." Still typing, head leaned back, under the spell of her phone.
 "Yeah, Cristian Douglas and Bob Willis."
 She said nothing.
 "Sheila McIntyre."
 "Yep," she said.
 "Dougie Monns."
 And then, after a minute of watching her lit-up knuckle slide around, past the side of her phone, she said, "Mel Gibson."
 I put my hand over the phone. "Stop."
 She looked around my hand.
 "And-- and---"
 I slammed the phone down and her hand-- I slammed them down on the counter.
 "My phone!" she cried.
 "Stop it."
 "Just naming things: have you heard this? Sounds like this. No, you should listen to this. Perhaps the greatest pain of it is how shallow it is compared to the actual experience of watching the movie/song/etc."

the whole time I was having this conversation, I was mildly enjoying it but I was bothered by how little substance I always feel during these conversations, and music and movie that it's extremely shallow.

"You're no fun."

Me: "You're no fun!"

Her: "That was really rude."

Me: "Don't look things up while I'm talking!"

She was wriggling her phone out from under my hand, but I held it tight. For a second, I was tempted to yank her out from the booth and twist her arm behind her back, but instead I just let go.

She looked closely at her phone, tilting it in the light. She took the case off to examine it all over.

"Gee whiz," she said, ominously and quietly. "These things are expensive."

"I know," I said. "It's an iPhone."

"So you don't like iPhones and now you're going to take it out on my iPhone."

"When are you going to accept that I just don't get along with it?"

"Don't make me choose," she said, in a pleasantly threatening way.

When the jerktoasters remained silent, Oprah proceeded to wear them down, to get them to spill, using all the familiar tactics. An appeal to their egos, reminding them that this would be the perfect time to lay out their platform. A vow of confidence, that no one was at risk, that this was the safe forum that they craved. Finally, she resorted to shame, that they would need to go to a commercial, in order to consult with her producer how to proceed.

But it wasn't a particularly long commercial break.

"We're talking to an elusive group," she said, "that calls themselves the jerktoasters." The camera panned the dim characters. "Men and women, eahh of whom has decided, one their own and independent~~ly~~, to erase themselves from society."

The camera returned to Ms. Winfrey. "We're back from the break now and we've decided to turn the stage lights back on, to give you at home a peek into who these real ~~a~~ jerktoasters really are. Scott--"

A man with a headset walked to stage right and flipped the switch.

Don't become too fixated on this opinion. I don't like iPhones, but that could change. My opinions are worthless.

The audience gasped.

At first, when I saw this video, I thought this was a bit of unnecessary drama, as if the GASP light had gone off in the studio audience. But as the camera lowered on to the row of jerktoasters, pouring over each of their faces, I could see that these people were slumped in their chairs, some of their heads had fallen back, some had fallen to the side. And right between the middle two chairs was a machine, a kind of pump, with fluids in separate bags, and tubes ran between the machine and each of these men and women sitting on stage.

The man with the headsat moved rapidly and gracefully from person to person, checking them. He touched the first two. "I think they're dead," he said, in a Texas drawl. He went right down the line, the third, the fourth. "Yep, they are." He had checked them all and now he went to the machine, kneeling to look at it, and craning ~~hee~~ his neck to see the back of it.

He stood up and turned to Oprah. "It had a light sensor on it."

The food came.

"Oh good," Amanda said. "Now we can talk about The Happening."

I laughed, but then I said, "Oh, I seriously do still want to talk about it." And she might have tuned me out at that point and started cutting her sandwich (yes, that's right! I remember now, it was an open-faced turkey sandwich! I do remember it sitting there, because I could see the bread, it was all mashed potatoes underneath and I said, "Where's your sandwich?" And she said, "This is all of it." And she said, "There's bread under there." And she lifted it up so I could see, because I didn't believe her at first.)

"All I think is," I said, "if you take The Happening as it's presented, and you simply believe what the characters are telling you, then I agree that it's an awful film. The trees are stupid and the people running through the grass are stupid."

"Then, I started to think, while I was in bed, that maybe the characters in the film were misled. Maybe it was something else, something impossible to explain, perhaps a phenomenon in a dimension that we're unaware of, like a kind of unseen presence that is killing everyone, not just unseen, but completely out of our abilities to sense it. Something we could never guess, never presume to guess, something science would never point to.

"And, so, reaching futilely for answers, they blame the trees!

"Like the whole movie, people think they are figuring it out. But they're not, they're not. They're just going insane. And, in their desperation, in their hopeless effort to make sense of the world, they blame the trees."

"I guess," she said. "If you want to have your own alternate plot line."

"See, this seems much truer to our condition. We think we can figure these things out, we think we can control things. And now I think about the people running through the grass, running away from the wind-- and, shoot, that's just a beautiful image right there."

"You said that like Matthew McConaughey." She smirked at me.

"Who's that?" I said.

"Shyeeoot, that's a beautiful image raht theya."

↙ This conversation is supposed to be the anti-thesis of the shallow movie conversation I was decrying earlier, but how is this any better? I'm spotting these ridiculous opinions — maybe it's just difficult to communicate and to listen/hear/all of that stuff.

Holy Bible



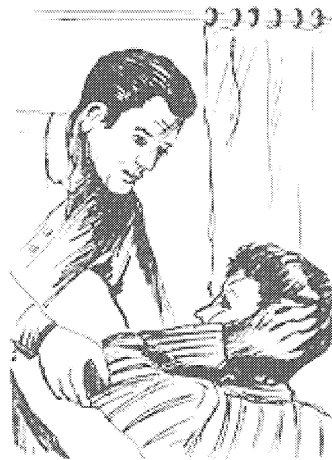
"Darling,
you're hurt!"



"What have they
done to you?"



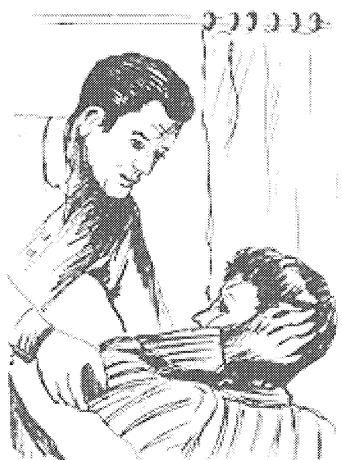
"Or is it just
psychological again?"



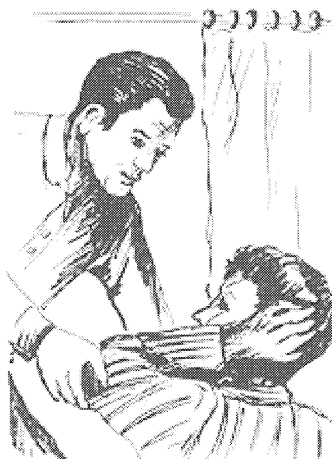
"Or perhaps..."



"I'M the one having
the episode here..."



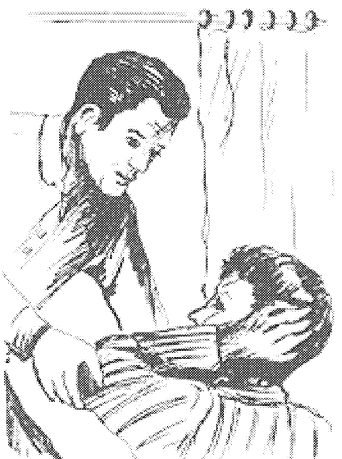
"You're an incredible
rendering, kitten."



"Wait a minute!
Are people watching
us on TV right now?"



"Psychological tele-
vision? You can see
people's episodes??"



"Your hand is
that of a teenage
wolf."



The next week I went to Dr. Bloodcastle.

He's my dentist and he's my father's dentist and my sister's dentist, too, and I know one other person who went to him: a girl that I went to school with, but who died in a car accident with one of her children. And there are only two reasons that I really ever knew her: the first is because I saw her waiting in Dr. Bloodcastle's office about ten years ago, I came out one time and my face was puffy; and the second is because I sat right behind her in Social Studies and one time I idiotically flicked her bra strap, because it was slightly visible through the back of her t-shirt (and because I had a friend who rated highly the flicking of bra straps) and she jumped up and said something like, "Hey." No one noticed, so she just slunk down in her seat.

So I think about her when I go to Dr. Bloodcastle's. And I also think about her on June 3rd which was her birthday. Hers is one of the only birthdays that I remember on the day that it is happening. Sometimes I see it coming days in advance. I know it's her birthday because I asked the Social Studies teacher. I wanted to apologize to the girl, but I didn't have the guts to tell her right then, so I asked the Social Studies teacher when her birthday was and, unbelievably, he looked it up in his book. But I never got the chance to apologize for flicking her bra strap because we weren't in social studies together any more when June 3rd rolled around. And, on top of it, now she's dead.

I asked Dr. Bloodcastle once if he remembered her and he said she was an amazing person. I asked if she had any other children, and he said he didn't know,

The 3 Best Parts of the Mabinogion are:

Firstly, "I will give you a cauldron with a special property : should a man of yours be killed today, cast him into the cauldron, and by tomorrow he will be good as ever—but he will be without speech."

Then, "He came here from Ireland with Cymeidi Cymeinfoll, his wife; they had escaped from the iron house in Ireland when it was made white-hot around them." (By the way, these two are giants. :P)

The other one is the incident of Branwn's Slap, which was one of three unfortunate slaps on that island.

maybe for a minute perhaps I had the idea that maybe I would call the kid some day and say, “You know—funny story—” and maybe he or she would be glad to hear what I had to say—but that’s the funny thing about our imagination, is that we think people will always be glad to hear from us. I imagined myself getting serious, winding the conversation down, and saying, gravely, that I never got to apologize for flicking her bra strap and then, just letting the kid talk, the poor orphan, just to see what would transpire. Healing, talk about it.

I didn’t bring her up that next week when I went to Dr. Bloodcastle. It seems creepy to continually bring her up. (This is the first time, in fact, that I’ve been able to discuss this at all since many years ago when I first asked the dentist if she had kids—which is why it’s pouring out like this. Although I can say that I have scheduled quite a lot of my appointments on June 3rd as a thoughtful gesture.)

Dr. Bloodcastle talks softly, but he talks very quickly—so I have to take notes at the end and I often have to tell him to go back and say it again because I’ve missed something. The nice thing about taking notes is that I have a whole journal full of prescriptive advice from my dentist over the years—I can look back and see what I was dealing with (orally) when I was fifteen years old. How many people can say that?

At this point, I think a lot of people might get a kick out of seeing some of those journal entries—I mean we live in this candid culture, one which aims for transparency—this sharing is what we do now. But I just can’t do it. My dad would say it’s because I’m a “private” person (“I’m private—your brother is very private—my father was—your grandfather wasn’t as much—although he drank in private—generally all our men are—this is a strong trait in your blood—”) but I’m not a private person. Can anyone that has had a blog be called “private”? (Anyway, where ARE all the introverts these days? Technology has upgraded introverts into—soft extroverts I guess.)

I’m not private. Dental information is just insanely mundane. It’s boredom incarnate—measurements, phone numbers, addresses, names.

I don’t know. Maybe it’s fun to withhold. I do enjoy it. We wouldn’t want the government to withhold—but it seems forgivable for a person to withhold a bit. I greatly appreciate the withholding of mundane information.

Dr. Bloodcastle doesn’t have an assistant. I don’t know if this is legal, but he does all the flossing and scraping and all the fussing himself. In a way, it’s as if his

hands are the assistants and he is merely supervising. He is very aloof and his hands are very involved. His face looms large in the great magnifying lens cast over the proceedings. He holds his head far back, farther than seems sound. The light on his brow is very strong and he spends quite a bit of time reeling it in or extending it—it's on a kind of armature. He also has a great deal of other kinds of equipment and sometimes he is trimming bonsai trees when I enter, which he does with his hands further inside the foliage than seems sound.

As he worked on my teeth, (and I have told him that I find the dental work relaxing, so he can take his time and answer the phone if he needs—in fact, once he left me in the dam to go snip a bonsai tree thing that was bothering him—I looked up and felt great pleasure that he felt at ease to travel around the room if he wanted—when I laid back down, I could see how content I was in the overhead mirror) as he worked on my teeth, I became very melancholy that I wasn't a computer programmer any longer and I started to tear up even.

You see, I had very flippantly deleted everything. My programs, (my code,) my blogs, my accounts, my words and stories. And what for? Oh, just because it was time to move on. Right?

I stared at the overhead mirror.

Boy, this is feeling manipulative. I should write like this. This isn't as important as all that. Tearing up—what a bunch of heart string manipulation. This is why I didn't like *The Book Thief*. What does an Australian guy know about living under the Nazis? (Gah, I don't want to be cynical. You can't call everything "cheesy," something has to effect you.)

Dr. Bloodcastle clicked off the light and I was done. He sat me up and said looks good. I took out my notebook. Wasn't much to write down this time. I asked him a question about mouthwash. Nothing big.

Then, he goes, "What's happening with the island?"

Hah. Well, okay.

So—since 1998, I have operated a private e-mail listserv from a machine called "georgie" which has lived its life in a number of unfinished basements across the United States. I know this machine well. It is an old, stalwart Pentium II in a battle-worn and unmarked grey metal box. Were the machine at hand right now, I think I could push the button on the 3.5" floppy drive, ejecting a beige disk labelled

"FreeBSD 4.4 Kernel" in permanent marker; however, I'd wager that Old Georgie took something like a FreeBSD 2 into memory on his maiden voyage.

This fine little box has given its life to passing internal communique between the members of a certain branch of my extended family: The Holyoaks. This is the rich side of the family. The side with the jetskis. The side of the family that has the tarmac. The side with the helmet cams. I have seen a garage full of skurfs and kiteskis and wetboards and other miraculous innovations of sport that no one cares about any more.

Always weary of the rich, and possibly due in grand measure to my experiences with this particular bunch, I try to keep out of their business and do other things that are, well, free. However, from time to time, I can't help but get very engrossed in the intrigue and drama of the Holyoak dynasty.

For example, the island.

On the listserv, every once in a while the old timers will slip and still call it Peanut Island. But a few years ago there was a vote and it was changed to Finger Island and most people on the list actively call it Finger Island.

Chuck West, however, makes a point to call it Peanut Island, he didn't even bother to vote, no one would have let him anyway, and there are really a lot of threads on the old mailing list where Chuck is calling it Peanut Island and everyone else is calling Finger Island and it goes on like that for pages and pages without any one directly bringing up the incongruity. He calls it Peanut, they call it Finger, and this is just one of the many wars over the island.

I don't want to take a side, so I just say The Island. Hope that's okay.

The Island has been around in my family for like seventy years now. It is somewhere in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, lost in among the spray of the San Juan Islands, hanging out in the currents of the upper coast of Washington state. It was bought

Home Remedies That People I Know Are Enthusiastic About

Snorting cayenne pepper.

Tinctures. ("Parasite-zapping.")

Shining a fluorescent light on someone in the dark and saying the problem's name many, many times.

Rolling.

Spraying cold air from a can.

Putting tongue depressors between your toes and lying on your stomach.

Medicinal tuning forks.

Duct tape (for insanely dry skin).

Cold showers (for mental illness).

by my great-grandfather and his brother, who both worked and made their money in the aerospace industry. The brother went on to start a chain of gas pumps. See, that's who Flying J was. This guy, the brother, Jay. He was a recreational pilot and he died in a plane crash a few years ago. So now Flying J is no longer both a man and a gas station, he's just a gas station.

From what I've heard, read, and been told, I guess The Island was a very nice and very secluded family getaway in the 1950s. And my great-grandfather and his brother probably called it Peanut Island back then. But usually they just said The Eleventh Estate, since this was the eleventh property they had bought together and because it was just one in a series of elegant-sounding, exclusive and somewhat palatial estates, dotting the international map, each with its own set of trampolines and gardens and horses and probably the trademark garage full of wooden kiteskis.

Now, when my dentist asks about The Island, he's not asking about The Island or about The Eleventh Estate. Though I suppose there's a certain glamour to those things, I can see the look of mirth with just a touch of very loving condescension in Dr. Bloodcastle's eyes. You see, he's asking about Chuck West.

Chuck is Jay's son and he moved on to the island in the seventies. Of course, The Eleventh Estate was never meant to be anyone's permanent home, although it was cared for year-round by hired help, various housesitters and locals from the neighboring islands. But that all changed when Chuck moved in. He was going to care for the house year after year, as the steward of The Eleventh Estate. A full-time caretaker, who had wasted away his youthful summers on the island and knew, I gather, all of its secrets.

I should point out at this time that there were never eleven simultaneous estates. The peak was when the estate count hit five altogether. So estates came in and out. But still, why did Chuck choose the Eleventh when there are so many? And why is it such a point of feuding and debacle?

Because it was the only estate that had its own island. And what could anyone want more than their own island? Their own city. Their own country, almost. Their own untouchable sovereignty!

And so, Chuck proceeded to, with great care and devotion, drive that island into the quagmire. It became not just his home, but the home of every friend and lover and college buddy that Chuck could collect. You know, not family. Other people. For a little while, family vacations to The Island continued as normal. It took

some time for The Holyoaks to embrace how unlivable Chuck had made The Island.

My Aunt Sara especially just hates the guy. “He’s just filthy,” she once told me. We were swimming and she said, “He’s just disgusting, just a gross, gross man. We were there for one day and then I was like, ‘I’ve had enough,’ and we went and stayed in Port Angeles.”

I try to be honest with these relations, just to see how they take it and I said, “I kind of like that he just, you know, took over The Island.” I waited for a second and she just shrugged, which wasn’t a bad thing for her to do and very understandable given her age, so I said, “I just think it’s remarkable that you have this island, which is like the crown jewel of The Whole Holyoak Plan for Things and here it is, it’s this guy who somehow is in control of it.”

My Aunt Sara shuddered. “See, that just makes me want to kick the guy out of there. Huh, the crown jewel. You really think it’s the crown jewel?”

And I was there when my Uncle Jeff ranted, “I don’t know how he’s still alive. When I was last out there, all he had was honey! Honey, man, yeah, just honey! I looked through the whole house and the only thing I could find was a single little bear of honey. We had to go over to Friday Harbor.”

“Wow, living on honey and locusts,” I said and Uncle Jeff laughed like I really understood, but honestly I really thought fondly of Uncle Chuck eating his honey and locusts, not in the crazy sense by any stretch. In an admirable, historical sense. I’ve always wondered if there was something to that diet. It seems like they go together; like you would dip locusts into honey and have as a snack. Like ants on a log.

So, yeah, Chuck was like, “Girl at the store: come check out my island.” And, “Hey, guy at the bus stop: come see my island.” (At least, that’s how my uncles paint him.) There is a rumor in the family that he had signs out in Poulsbo, just permanent marker taped to a stop sign, something about real estate by phone, one-hundred-thirty grand a year, and a phone number that we all recognized.

So Old Georgie, our faithful little UNIX box, has spent all of his days in the fight for Peanut, I mean Finger, Island. And you can usually count on him carrying the load of an e-mail blast for at least one major battle, but sometimes two if we’re lucky, each year, and it almost always comes down in the winter time, when stasis is

disrupted and both sides awake in fury. The Holyoaks over the lost years their children could have had on The Island. And Chuck, because The Island was his.

“Anything going on with The Island?” asks Dr. Bloodcastle, getting comfortable in his chair.

“Well, kind of,” I say, and then I go into the story, which most recently has to do with a terrible winter in which the snow got to the point where it brought some of the trees down, which did damage to the garage and to the fence that keeps the horses in. As a result, all the horses got out and ended up swimming to the next island over. Anyway, I hope to get further into this story if I can find some time, but I did tell the doctor the whole thing and at the end, he was very satisfied with it and felt it was one of the best.

“Things just get better and better over on that island,” he said. “I love to hear about. I think it’s one of my favorite things I’ve ever heard.”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s very interesting.”

“But you’ve never been out there?” he said. “I just can’t believe it.”

“Never have.” I crossed my legs. I was still sitting on the dental chair. The giant magnifying lens was above me. “It’s not really my side of the family.”

“You said it’s your grandfather,” he said. “It’s just as much yours.” He rocked back and forth in his chair pleasantly. “I’m starting to think you’ve made all this up,” he said. “I hope you didn’t, but I just can’t help it. I can’t shake the feeling.”

“I guess I don’t have any proof,” I said, even though it immediately occurred to me that I could log in to my e-mail from his computer and show him years and years of messages. But it still seemed wrong. What if there was some detail in there that would throw him off? I needed to try to stay in control of this. Who knows, maybe he didn’t need me to curate the story for him. Maybe it would be better if he read it all himself. Wasn’t it true that I well enjoyed my access to the full history?

“I think you like the story more than I do,” I said. “Like I’ve never wanted to go out

Detective

My ideal detective is named Winston Swanless.

He is 5’9” and he wears Crocs all the time, even in the snow.

there to the island at all. But you've said you would--"

"Oh, I would," he said. "Right now, sitting here, I want to go. Like I want to go now."

I laughed hard at that, and shook my head in disbelief. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, see that's perfect," I said. "See, but I worry too much that I'd get out there and it'd be something else. Like what if he was really disgusting like Aunt Sara says. Like if he was up to things out there, you know?"

"Like what? Like up to stuff--"

"Oh, you know," I said. "Like up to things like up to bestiality or something."

"Oh, sure, sure," he said. "Yeah if he was up to bestiality that'd be pretty bad. Especially if you found out like if you accidentally walked in or something."

"See," I said, pointing. "Yes, that's exactly what I worry about is that I'd have to confront the reality of it. So that, if I found out he was up to some bestiality, I mean that's bad enough, but then what do I do? Do I call the cops? Do I just blow it off, like, 'Oh, no, no, go right ahead, I get it, I totally get it.' What do you do?"

"Calling the cops seems fine," he said.

"Professor without
a cause"



I didn't realize this at first, but there is an enormous temptation (when you're completely disenfranchised from society) to write a manifesto, a scathing one, that shreds apart all the fixations of that society (both real and imagined) and attempts to predict that society's demise or to deliver up a host of cryptic and/or seemingly lucid stuff as a challenge for that society to live the way I do.

I'm sure you expect (perhaps desperately WANT) me to sport off incendiary things. And I am tempted to: I'm totally disillusioned, I feel betrayed by computers, and, on one hand: yes, I wrote hideous code for years. On the other hand: almost all code - IF NOT ALL CODE - is hideous!

Sadly, this isn't as incendiary as it sounds. Nothing can be incendiary or iconoclastic

in the face of the Internet. There is no manifesto that I can write which will not be dwarfed by the scalding, devouring Leviathan.

I once thought the Internet was just a game, did you ever see it that way? But we all believe it too much. We really think it's us up there! We're those twinkling lights.

It is strange - I felt a great relief in those days, to no longer be programming. During this time, I took Sound Transit trains quite often. If I could, I always took the seat by the door, a bench behind a sheet of plexiglass with a stencil fastened into it. Many people avoided this seat because the view opposed the flow of traffic, meaning that you would see cars moving past you on the freeway, giving the appearance of tremendous forward momentum. While watching traffic pass, I also could simultaneously observe the stream of traffic on the other side of the freeway, the reflection in the door window superimposed this image over the real view. This had a dizzying effect, especially when the two traffics

lined up during a turn and created a horizontal blur of cars driving over cars over roads, colliding but colliding peacefully.

On top of these two images was a third, the reflection of other passengers in the plexiglass shield that was close to my face. Sometimes I'd see my face in this, too. The tunnel of the interior of the train as it bent and shook. I would rest my eyes on these juxtapositions and let my eyes coalesce the images into a broad, warping, rushing single view of ghastly violent mechanisms thrashing apart still figures and heads.

Often, as I held this world together, a fourth image would appear: the tops of the trees looming over it all. In this mirage, I was moving toward the trees, approaching them, they were magnifying and embracing everything. I don't know where this image reflected from, perhaps some double pane or odd angle in the glass. I don't know, but it was hard to hold onto, it would move past me and I would see the ordinary, lazy flow of traffic again.

I was aimless, but it felt fine. (This is not what I wanted to feel though. I wanted to feel a great absence, a longing, a distance that would finally inspire.)

I felt happy to no longer be loading Windows Vista and testing.

To no longer be loading Ubuntu 10.04 and testing.

To be loading OS X Leopard and testing.

To not be scanning hundreds of pages listing out Cocoa delegates.

To not be looking at MSDN's giant list of ERROR codes, separated into groups of 500, each with tiny, repetitive and opaque one-line descriptions.

To not be fighting NULL.

To not be downloading Code Project sample projects which illustrated custom WinProc-style callbacks, but not in the way I was looking for.

To not be studying source files in an old CVS directory tree for their use of

Pango API calls, only to discover that the code was completely broken and that I had just perpetrated these lies into my own source tree for someone else to do the same, an unintentional virus that would infect three or four of us for several days.

To not be using SDL only to find out the antialiasing looks wrong to me on OS X.

To not be using OpenGL only to find out that I wasn't using the more portable OpenGL ES.

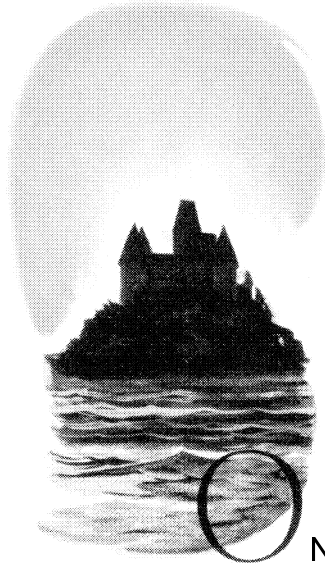
And to not be using ES only to find out that there is an ES 2 around the corner.

To not be using HTML5 only to find that the canvas API or the event API or the appearance of 'floats' just doesn't fly for 70% of the human race.

Nothing could be more pleasant than to write to you here, in a language which hasn't budged for hundreds of years and which was used to write "Tristram Shandy" and which I think you will understand. And if you don't understand

Some of my language, things like "Open GL" and "fighting NULL" and so on, you can skip it and be fine I think.

I'm not saying that software is terrible, though. On the contrary, people do amazing things. I was just glad to not be fighting NULL. (To me, fighting NULL is the epitome of why I struggled as a programmer. I am not a natural at it, but I wanted very much to be — and I found no use for NULL. I never needed it, but it was always there. I kept pushing it down, painting over it, shutting it up, constantly checking for it — "Are you NULL? are you NULL? what about you?" — and sometimes I would deceive myself that my problems were other things, but then NULL would pop up, I would find that it was the cause — however, NULL is never really the cause. It is someone you always run into in bad situations, someone you never want to see. NULL penetrates all the layers to find you, and can only say, helplessly, "looks like you're having a problem." Endemic to the problem, not the problem, complicit, and might be the problem.)



THE PROFESSOR
LEAPS
INTO AN OBSTRUCTION

ON JULY 10TH, 2010, I threw a pack of cards in my suitcase. (This was a double deck branded "Regency Playing Cards," a red and a blue deck of European-sized cards with two stiff, foppishly dressed individuals on the backs.) I brought two issues of GAMES magazine in a concealed pocket of the suitcase, which was presumably designed for carrying personal documents. These I put with the cards in a large plastic bag. I made sure they were two issues with the cryptograms left undone. I already had some pencils in the narrow slots inside the secondmost pocket on the front of the pack. (Just Dixon No. 2s.)

I hadn't made any solid decision to go find the island. But these things are so impulsive that I don't ever feel that I make a decision at all. Sometimes I do believe in predestination. I feel helpless to do anything but what I am compelled to do.

I also threw in a copy of *Frances Johnson* by Stacey Levine. And also *The Unconsoled* by Kazuo Ishiguro. I put these in plastic bags.

In retrospect, I can now see that I was unconsciously doing a desert island selection here. What interests me is that I lunged immediately for two authors

that are contemporary. That isn't what I would have expected. I'm a little saddened that Flann O'Brien or Jane Bowles didn't come up at all in that moment. Or Cervantes, really. I think I would have taken *Don Quixote*, had I been packing in the other room instead.

In fact, I think these two books are among the only two contemporary books that I really enjoy! I mean I like *2666* and I like *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, but they don't quite melt me away like *Frances Johnson* does. And I definitely don't enjoy McSweeney's books or Neal Stephenson or, I know this is terrible, David Foster Wallace. I'm supposed to like these books, but I just don't.

Strangely enough, I have trouble with them because their author's personalities are so strong, above their characters, something which is a major problem with what I am writing to you right now! It seems like the only appeal of these words would be to get inside the mind of its author, is that true for you?

And this is something I struggled with immensely when reading Neil Gaiman. I stopped reading *American Gods*, because it was hard to read without feeling that Gaiman was whispering in all of the characters' ears. With *Frances Johnson*, I have such a hard time separating Frances from Stacey Levine, that I can't help but picture that it is a dressed-up, exaggerated Stacey that is wandering around Little Munson. Similarly, with Ishiguro, I feel like Ishiguro is the pianist, wandering around, oblivious to what happens next to him.

These are ridiculous criticisms of any of these books, though. To criticize that a book's author is present in one way but not the way you like? Even to bring up these criticisms is more than a bit pathetic, do I want to take up precious time in this candid biographical scene by complaining about what popular books have failed to bring me full enjoyment?

Yes, it is pathetic. In a way I feel that's the point of being candid. To expose how shameful I am. You won't feel bad for me for not enjoying Gaiman. You will just feel that I am being petty. Thus, you will feel superior to me. If you enjoy Gaiman, then you will know that you have found enjoyment where I was unable to, and this is my own fault. And if you dislike Gaiman, then you will feel that you can express your dislike using a criteria which is more precise and true than mine. I simply do not like the book because of his authorial *whispering*. This is an imprecise and illogical criteria.

In a way, I am criticizing Gaiman so that I will feel superior to Gaiman. I said I disliked his book, and now I am writing my own thing. I must feel that it is better than Gaiman's, yes? Would I purposefully write a book worse than Gaiman's? And now you are discovering that I am worse than you, so you are superior to me in your tastes, and, by extension, you are possibly superior to Gaiman! Simply by reading, you have discovered this. (That "simply by reading" phrase is perhaps a subtle dig at you, and was probably a last-ditch effort to regain my superiority. :D)

However, we really do weigh all these things as real measures of quality. Recently I was arguing with a friend that contemporary literature is very "jokey." Because a lot of books setup certain scenes so that they can produce a kind of punchline, maybe even a specific one-liner. My friend was taking me very seriously, believing that maybe I had a point, maybe contemporary authors, especially American ones, are influenced by TV to the point that they've incorporated many of the cadences of joke-telling into their novels.

But then, later, I was telling someone else that I loved the old Winnie-the-Pooh books, especially how Piglet lived under the name of Trespassers W. Which is short for Trespassers Will (which, in turn, is short for Trespassers William.) And I said that it was amazing that this joke still felt very fresh and funny after a

hundred years. In fact, I felt that it was one of my favorite parts of the whole Winnie-the-Pooh series.

At the time, I didn't realize that I was holding very strongly to two ideas that were completely contradictory. How could I decry the presence of joking in literature and then turn around and vaunt one single joke from some old novel?

I took the train to Everett, sitting in the crossfire of the many window reflections, then I walked to the bus stop and bought a ticket to Mt. Vernon. From there, I had to switch to Skagit Transit, to take some transfers to Anacortes.

I had spent some money on bus tickets. I was at \$2400 in my account. And, if I was careful, I thought this could last me about a year. I usually spent \$50 per week at the grocery store, but I felt I could thin this down to \$30. Clothing I usually picked up second-hand. People will give you clothes. Most people like to go to a garage sale at the beginning when you can get anything you want, but I like to go at the end, when the leftovers are being thrown away. Men's apparel is always last to go anyway.

I usually afforded myself about \$100 in spending money, which I usually spent on stuff like card games, guitar strings, theatre tickets and Mongolian BBQ. In recent months, though, I had simply been storing this money. I had enough card games for now and there hadn't been any films that had interested me in a while. Okay, so I had another \$640 in savings.

I needed to pay \$150 to the dentist for the cleaning. I would need to buy a water filtration system (this I purchased for \$170 at a sporting outlet store in Anacortes, I put it in a bunch of plastic bags.) I had taken four buses that day, which cost me about \$12. I stopped at the market in Anacortes to get a week's worth of food. Nothing is worse than having to repurchase all of your spices on extended vacation, so I had already packed some spices in my suitcase: black lava salt,

cumin and chili powder. I had also brought a small skillet with a white, non-stick, porcelain coating which I thought I might use over a fire. (However, this never came up and I ended up throwing out the skillet on Tautbridge Island, although I'm not planning to specifically go out of my way to mention it in that section.)

Here's what I bought at the store:

1.02 lb of black forest ham at the deli, sliced at a "1" thickness for sandwiches	. . .	\$4.23
1.42 lb of havarti, sliced same	. . .	\$6.37
One baguette	. . .	\$1.29
One loaf of sunflower seed bread	. . .	\$3.29
Four plums	. . .	\$1.45
One clasp-shut plastic tupperware-like container, listed on the receipt as "POLY BOX"	. . .	\$1.39
Two cans, garbanzo beans	. . .	\$1.09
Two cloves garlic (on sale)	. . .	\$0.79
One bread tin	. . .	\$3.99
Three cucumbers	. . .	\$1.89
Sales tax (8.2%)	. . .	\$2.12

Which comes to	. . .	\$27.90

The plastic container was a last minute idea, something I just saw hanging from the hooks as I was on my way to the beans. It was a box made of translucent peach-colored plastic with rounded corners and a tight clasp. This item proved to be indispensable in keeping my lunch meat and cheese cold. It was just big enough to house the two bags from the deli and was able to seal tight so that I could keep it underwater without worry of a leak. Although I quickly ran out of

sliced meat, the little box continued to hold plums, cucumber slices, blackberries and smoked fish. I used it perpetually. One time I kept two slices of Hawaiian-topped pizza in it. I don't know if it was absolute necessary to put them in there, the point is: I used it perpetually!

The bread tin I placed the loaf in, to keep it from getting crushed in my suitcase. I also used this to great effect throughout my journey. I don't mention this in any of the forthcoming tales, but during my stay on The Isle of May, I had an arrangement with a man who I met that I would make bread for him if I could use his oven, his flour and his yeast to also make bread for myself as well. For him I made rosemary focaccia and for myself I made white bread. A few times I made potato bread for myself and a few times I made rosemary focaccia for myself as well. Once on The Isle of May I made bagels for the man and his friends, since they had caught quite a lot of salmon in The Sound. The white bread, the potato bread and the donuts that I make follow the style of my mother, which she taught me growing up.

The rosemary focaccia and the bagels that I make are my own, though, based on conversations I had with a friend named Hailey who was a baker and who told me roughly how to go about making these. From there, I made a slight innovation, in that I like to heat up a pot of sea water on the stove while I make the dough. Once the sea water is boiling, I stick it in the cold oven and let it steam up for a minute. Then I stick the dough in and let it rise with the steaming sea water. Then I take the bread out, punch it down, and stick it back in to rise again. I almost always forget about it and let it rise more than I should.

After buying the food, I packed it into my suitcase, which also involved cutting the baguette into halves and putting them together into a ziploc bag, I boarded the ferry to Friday Harbor. Twenty minutes later, when Obstruction Island came into view, I jumped off the side.



"HELLO?"

"So what's your plan?"

"It doesn't matter at this point what the plan is."

"Who are you going to claim to be, though?"

"Well, it doesn't matter—no one's going to listen to either of us. I can say whatever I want at this point. You can tell the truth and no one would care."

"That's amazing."

"I'm going to change my story weekly—the more confusion the better. The Jonathan story is locked."

"Who does the reporter cite, though? How do you get past that?"

"She says, 'An anonymous programmer from Salt Lake City.' I'm looking at it right here."

"Hahaha! Wow! Man oh man! You are amazing! Who believes an anonymous programmer from Salt Lake City any more? That's so you."

"But it's not! It's not even me."

"What, some other—why?? Krikey..."

I came ashore onto what I thought would be Orcas Island, but which turned out to be something else entirely.

I walked inland, with water pouring out of my suitcase. It was heavy, so I dumped it out and stuck all the plastic bags back in. The time was probably around two. I had spent quite a while trying to decide on the water filtration system.

Only about a hundred and fifty feet into the woods there, I found a very old gas station. It was one of those gas stations where the lights were in the sign, but the sign wasn't in the sign. I went into the bathrooms and changed into pants and a jacket. I put the wet clothes into a plastic bag and spent some time using towels to wipe down the interior of the suitcase.

Then I walked around the gas station, perusing the shelves. It's always interesting what they have in these places. Especially in the way of books and tapes. I was glad to see a rack of paperbacks, really old ones with the puffy gold letters.

On the rack was a book called SACRED CLOWNS.

The text on the jacket read:

SACRED CLOWNS

AN ANCIENT TRUST IS BROKEN

During a Tano kachina ceremony something in the antics of the dancing koshare fills the air with tension. Moments later the clown is found brutally bludgeoned in the same manner that a reservation schoolteacher was killed just days before.

In true Navajo style, Officer Jim Chee and Lieutenant Leaphorn of the Tribal Police go back to the beginning to decipher the sacred clown's message to the people of the Tano pueblo. Amid guarded tribal secrets and crooked Indian traders, they find a trail of blood that links a runaway schoolboy, two dead bodies, and the mysterious presence of a sacred artifact.

I must strictly require you that, if you are to continue reading and go with me on this sally, that you resist from looking up anything to do with the book SACRED CLOWNS. This is paramount. I know the urge must be incredible to go out with your smartphones and to find out if the book is real and if this is what the jacket truly read, but I must INSIST that you just let it be. I don't know if it's possible for you to exercise that kind of self-restraint in this modern age, but you must. Of all the things I could ask of you, this seems so small and simple. Can you do this for me?

I have good reason for doing this, too. Because I'd like for you to experience SACRED CLOWNS as I experienced it. And my experience went like this: I picked it up. I read the title. I savored it for a moment. I turned it around. I read the jacket copy. I savored that for a moment. And then I placed the book down again.

I didn't buy it. I couldn't buy it. I felt barred from doing anything further. Perhaps this seemed the only way to keep the clowns sacred. To me, SACRED CLOWNS was not a book to be read. Why don't I want you to look it up and to find out if it's real? Well, quite simply because it CAN'T have been real. I

felt an undeniable surge of realization in that moment: that if I opened the book that it would be a solid brick of blank pages.

So let's agree on this: SACRED CLOWNS is not real. And if you see it in some fellow's library, just say, "Ah, SACRED CLOWNS. Nice try!"

And let's say the fellow goes, "Oh, you know that one? Well I forgot it was there."

Then you must be very grave about this and you must say, "I happen to know that it's a blank book. The book is entirely blank."

He might go, "No, I don't think so," and he might reach for the book and you must say, "Stop! I beg of you. The book is blank. Just leave it!"

And you must do everything in your power to stop him from opening that book. Please just promise me you will. I don't ask much, but I do ask this.

I ventured through the forest and came upon a meadow which led me to another forest at the base of a cliff. I headed north from there, knowing that south was surely all water, and I ran into a wire fence winding through the forest. I circled around the wire fence and it ended at a row of blackberry bushes, which I followed into another meadow.

As I ate the blackberries at their conclusion, I saw a man hailing me from across the field. He was a lone fellow, moving briskly with a tall walking stick, light flashing across his glasses as he trod along. He motioned to me many times, each time I looked at him he made a friendly wave or a nod of the head. As he came closer, I could see that he had a pipe in his mouth and the beginnings of a pointed brown beard. Slender white smoke issued from the corner of his mouth.

"Ho!" he said, as he took his stance before me, breathing considerably. "Never did I expect to meet another adventurer in all my travels! Where do you call home, friend?"

I ate blackberries, taking him in, observing his uniform and varied patches, leather tools carefully inserted into slots in his belt. "Just south of here," I said and waved my hand north just for fun. I spat on the ground and rubbed it in with my foot. I said, "So what sort of adventure are you on?"

"Oh, many adventures, of any and all kinds," he said, speaking with great conviction, exhaling deeply and unable to look at me for long, very much caught in wonder over the great earth all around us. "Surely you must see what a wondrous land this is? Well, of course it is." He looked around himself wistfully. He had a pack on with a bed roll under it. "I have quested here three months now, and it's only just begun. I am a conservation scientist, a forester and an adventureman." (He said this 'adventuremin' as if he were British.) "My dream is to never stop learning, to never shy away from a pursuit, to engage the whole world directly, and that's precisely what I'm doing! I left the hubbub of city life, with its distractions and its women, and have supplanted myself in this fine, bounteous land of secrets." He beamed at me, a brave smile, and his glasses were bright white.

I said nothing and he didn't wait for me to reply, he just said, "This land doesn't give up its secrets easily. In fact, I would say they are totally sealed off! But if you find the right spot and you give it a little tickle, why it's like an orchid that opens right up! Don't you think that's an apt description?"

"It's not bad," I said.

"Not quite, it's spot on!" he cried. "Don't give me that! Don't you give me that, why when I was in the city, they used

to call it a worldly pursuit when we'd go chasing after the women, but, just look out there and see, the *real* worldly pursuits are out here, are they not? We're out pursuing the world here, are we not??" He rattled this off so quickly that it sounded entirely scripted. Then he dusted his hands together slowly and looked around meaningfully. "You can chase the world as long as you like. You can chase it your whole life and you'll *never* catch up!" He exclaimed this very gently, with breath. "It's like the gingerbread man, isn't it?" He toked his pipe, holding his gaze against the sky. He let a string of smoke fly out the side and said, thoughtfully, "It's like the bloody gingerbread man out here, isn't it?"

Don't get me wrong, I thoroughly enjoyed this guy. He had a performance of some kind that he was walking through and I took it as my duty to stick to observing.

"So," he said to me, withdrawing his pipe and using it to point down, "what's in the suitcase?"

I didn't look at it. "Nothing."

"Sure," he said. "Well, what kind of, what kind of explorer are you then?"

"I'm *not* an explorer," I said, "Not anything at all right now."

"Not anything?" he said. "That can't be right. You don't have a trade at all or a craft or some kind? I'll bet you that suitcase is full of all your crafts."

I held to a branch of the blackberry bush and shook it from side to side. "I'm a former freelance professor, but not anymore." That came out sadder than I'd have liked.

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"Freelance professor, eh?" he said, sticking the pipe back in. "Interesting you should say that, since I'm one of those, too. Exploring, educating folks in all of these parts, I'm sure that counts. By George, it's true. Look at me! I've got freelance professor written all over me! I'm definitely of that breed. You should go back to it, it's a fine profession. You know what I flew here on?" He smacked his knee. "A fiberglass balloon? Ever heard of them? I flew it from the city! You should have seen it!" He laughed heartily, slamming the pipe loudly against the butt of his fist. "You would have loved it, mate! I think I'll go to the Sahara next, though I'd like to take a microlight, if you know what I mean, if I'm headed that way." He darted his head up, suspiciously, "Dusk is coming on. Say, don't look like that, you just need some confidence, that's all." He put his hand on my shoulder. "You need to believe in yourself, try and see yourself in the light that only you were made to live in. Don't just wallow in self-pity, that's not what it's all about, is it? Is it?" He held my shoulder firmly, sometimes shaking it, sometimes pushing it rhythmically, sometimes taking his hand off to gesture quickly before slapping it down on me again, saying, "Is it? Is it? It is? It is? It is?" He let go of me. "We freelance professors need to stick together, am I right?" He winked. "Aw, it's a big world, but make of it what you will."

"So you're really a freelance professor, too?" I said. "I thought I made that up."

"No way," he said. "I've been a freelance professor for a long time, mate. Remember when I said I was back in the city, chasing girls, you remember? I was freelance professorin' as far back as then, actually!"

"Oh, wow," I said. "Well that's longer than I have." This was probably unnecessarily sarcastic. There's no reason to talk like this. "What's your name?"

"Danny Douglas," he said, holding his hand out. "What's yours?"

We shook. "Why the lucky stiff?"

"Eh?" he said, turning his head, but keeping his eyes on me.

"Why the lucky stiff," I said.

"No, come off," he said, "that's not your name. What's your real name?"

"Oh, that's not any fun," I said.

"You gotta be who you are, mate. Now what's your name? Go on, just say it."

"Nah," I said. "You don't need it."

"See, now I wish had my smartphone here," he said. "I bet I could just look that one *right* up. Yeah, that's annoying. It ain't right. It really ain't right. You have to be yourself. Who else you gonna be?"

I shrugged and said, "It's getting dark. I need to go." I started across the field.

He yelled, "I'm going to look it up and I'm going to come find you, mate! Heck, I don't even need to find you. Once I get my phone back, I'm going to know! I basically know already!"

"Oh, yeah?" I yelled, turning around as I walked. "You know it already?"

"Yeah!" he yelled. "I already know it right now! It's obvious! It's just a name, mate! Doesn't mean anything to hide it!"

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"It doesn't mean anything to say it!" I yelled.

"Well then just say it!" he yelled.

I didn't need to deal with any of that, so I ran off through the meadow. A minute later, I heard clomping of feet and looked behind me and I saw a shadow running up behind me and I could smell the pipe smoke. He grabbed my arm and said, "Hold up now, mate, hold up."

I tried to shake his hand off my arm, but it was on tight, so I turned back the other way and ran in a very quick circle. He wouldn't let go! I swung my suitcase around and clubbed him.

"Fine, whatever!" he yelled. I slowed down for a moment, feeling tired, and he bear-hugged me around the waist, pinning my arms against my side and lifting me up.

"Stop!" I yelled. "Uncle, uncle!"

"No, no," he said. "I'm not doing a thing until you tell me what you're up to. Who are you?"

He had his arms around me and his hands were clenched together, with his pipe held in his hands. I moved my hand up and grabbed the pipe and flung it as hard as I could. My arms were pinned, so it was only a few feet, but he let go and yelled, "Hey! Hey! That's irresponsible!"

I bolted off. I made it easily into the forest and my arm was tired from the suitcase, so I switched it to the other arm, but I ran deep into the forest and sat under a log once I was away in, laying on the ground and I thought, "How difficult this is going to be if there's just a bunch of know-it-all do-gooder types out here!"

I tried to breathe very quietly, tried to not even breathe at all, and then went back to thinking, "What a bad spot I've gotten myself into. Couldn't I have just said my name is 'Rex Reynolds' and been done with it? What would be the problem with that? Why didn't I just start going by 'Rex Reynolds' from the very beginning??"

Well I knew that there were reasons I liked "why the lucky stiff", but I couldn't think of what they were. The name was a load of nonsense. Maybe that's why I liked it. But wasn't "Rex Reynolds" a load of nonsense? What does "Rex" mean anyway? The name "why" is introspective. It lends itself to profundity. Rex doesn't!

"Maybe that's better," I thought. "I don't know. How do I tell which name is better? It's a good thing people don't name themselves or they'd never come to a conclusion."

I picked up my suitcase again and went on walking through the forest.

The forest is a region. The night sky is a backdrop. This section of trees is a room. Tall, imposing trees are in this section of trees.

Alder is a kind of thing. The trees are alder. Up from this section of trees is the tiny opening in the trees through which I could see the stars.

The tiny opening in the trees through which I could see the stars is a room. Cassiopeia is here.

The night sky is in the forest. This section of trees is in the forest. The drainage is in the forest. The drainage is a room. The drainage is west of this section of trees.

Dozens of bricks in two parallel lines are here. The angle of the bricks is a direction that varies. In the dozens of bricks in two parallel lines is no water. In the dozens of bricks in two parallel lines are dry reeds. Some fallen trees, some abandoned equipment, some discarded cans, and some old PVC pipe are scenery in the drainage.

The night sky is a backdrop. It is everywhere.

Perhaps the fallen tree is a door. Perhaps the fallen tree is west of the drainage and east of an area where I didn't go. Perhaps the fallen tree is not openable. An area where I didn't go is a dark room. My suitcase is a thing and pushable between rooms.

The collection of small graves is south of the drainage. The trail is south of the collection of small graves. The edge of the forest is west of the trail.

The brambles are north of the trail. Density is a kind of value. The densities are unencumbered, easy to brush aside, somewhat dense and impenetrable. The brambles has a density. The brambles are impenetrable. The timber-lined cottage is south of the edge of the forest. Instead of examining the timber-lined cottage: move the player to the red shed.

A shed is a kind of room. A shed is usually dark. The red shed is a shed. A rake is a kind of thing. A rake is in every shed. Sleep relates a man to one shed.

And, that night, sleep related me to a shed, as I am a man, and one who slept in the shed.

I thought there might be hay in here, but there wasn't. Just a whole lot of tools. I laid down on the floor and tried to sleep. It wasn't so cold really. The door was coming off its

hinges and I thought to myself, sleepily, "I should float on that door, across to the next island."

I woke the next morning to sounds coming from the timber-lined cottage. I heard voices coming from it, in an upper pitch that pierced right to my ear. It was like a television was on in the yard. Maybe someone was washing the car and had brought a radio outside. I got up and brushed my pants off. I stood still and listened. It sounded like dead air, like static.

I got my suitcase, preparing to leave, figuring I could stop by the house to see what was up. I didn't care much if anyone saw me, they could drive me away, but I was going away regardless. As I walked nearer and nearer, I could tell that it was an intercom on the porch through which someone was breathing and sighing.

"Hello?" I said, looking around the porch at the decorative broom and rocking chair. The intercom continued with its breathing, which filled the sky with noise and static.

I pressed the button on the intercom. "Hello?" I yelled up at the house. "Hello?"

The breathing and sighing continued. I walked around the house and came back to the front. The breathing continued for a moment and then it stopped. I pressed the button again, "Hello? Can you hear me?"

The voice returned to breathing again. I stopped caring at that point and went to walk away.

I got halfway across the lawn and the voice stopped breathing and said, "I'm bored." It was a woman's voice.

I turned around and looked up at the house. Looked at all the windows, but didn't see anyone.

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"I'm so bored," said the woman's voice, adding a very knowing and superior-sounding laugh to the end. "I just have nothing to do in here."

I brought my suitcase back to the porch and set it down. I pressed the button. "Say, do you know where Eleanor Island is?"

Her voice was loud. "Come inside and I'll show you." She laughed.

While I admit to being curious, there was something repulsive about the way she said this.

"I don't want to take your time," I said, but was cut off by her yelling through the speaker, "Ohh! But I have nothing to do! I'm a bored housewife, stuck at home all alone!" She paused and then laughed darkly, in a deep tone for a woman. "You must be so tired, Mr. Traveler. You should come inside for a drink." She paused again and then released the button. The intercom squeaked and I thought, "My she takes a long time to think about what she's going to say and, strangely, none of it is very difficult to say." She continued, "I'm not wearing much, but I hope that won't bother you. There's no one ever out here, so I never wear very much." She paused again. Then simply said, "A bored housewife."

I pressed the button. "You know, a bored housewife isn't a very appealing thing. I don't think I'll be coming up."

She replied, "Oh? Why not?"

I pressed the button. "Well, come on, surely you can think of something to do in your spare time. I just don't find idleness appealing at all. Your mind is wasting away up there."

There was a pause, of course. Then her voice returned, "Just come up and show me what you mean."

I pressed the button. "See, this is the other thing. I mean I understand that you probably would like some human contact, lady, but you should be able to understand what I mean without me needing to walk you through it in person."

"Fine," she said. "I'm not bored. I was just teasing. I'm very occupied." She paused. "I'm thinking a thousand interesting facts and things. Come up, come up, hurry. I want to show you."

I pressed the button. "I have places to be, lady."

"Oh, really?" she said. "Who are you? Another conservation scientist out making the rounds, taking advantage of poor, defenseless housewives?"

I pressed the button. "No!"

"Are you Johnny Appleseed?" she asked, her voice echoing over the field. "Out sprinkling your seeds?" The house shook with hysterical laughter. "Oh, Johnny, Johnny, Johnny!"

I looked back at the shed.

I pressed the button. "Hun, I need to head across the strait here. I'm going to take the door with me, but I'll be back someday."

"What door?" she answered. "You can't take anything!"

I pressed the button. "The door on the shed, miss."

I pointed to the shed door and then I walked out on the lawn while I held the arm out. I saw a shadow run to the window, the outline of an unkempt triangle of curly hair. The

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shadow spread across the windows before focusing into a single frail shape of a woman.

I walked to the door and pulled at it. It came right off, save for a few nails in the hinges. I pull again.

The shadow banged at the window with both fists.

I pulled the door again and again until it released itself. The woman banged in repetition. I looked back at the house. The shadow ran to one end of the house and then the other. The shadow split and magnified as she moved. I took the door down to the bay and floated it out into the sound.

THE PROFESSOR VS THE INHABITANTS OF FLUTE ISLAND



Waking in a foreign country is never as disorienting as one would presume it to be, in large part due to that familiar texture that is common to reality, wherever it may be happening. I felt like Huck Finn setting out, going out on the sly like this, on my new door, thinking less about arriving somewhere and more about getting away from somewhere. I set my suitcase on the door and pushed off. I had dug up a long branch near the shore and, while it wasn't very straight, it was mighty long.

Good old Huck Finn. I must idolize him. He's stuck somewhere deep. I could never get my engines going to be a rich guy. I stayed right at freelance professor.

You see, it was common practice among all of the nerds of the 80s to see in themselves either a Bill Gates or a Steve Jobs. And even all the adults would go on about this, too, "Hey, are you going to be the next Bill Gates?" They saw it as the two extremes: Gates, intrepid, brilliant, conniving—a programmer and a businessman; and, well, on the other side, was Jobs: handsome, classy, passionate, counterculture even—being friends with that old hacker-whistler Cap'n Crunch.

These two weren't but two sides of the same coin. The Rich Computer Guys Of The Late Twentieth-Century Commemorative Coin. They

represented that old rags-to-riches ideal that's so intoxicating to our society. At the same time, there was a torment I could see that those thrones held.

With Gates, it was that no one really liked his software. Sorry, but at least among his peers—the other bright minds and innovators—Windows was a kind of curse that he'd blighted us with. People who liked Windows didn't really like Windows—they were just demonstrating how pragmatic and down-to-earth they were.

And in Jobs' case, here's a guy who just couldn't get along with anyone. When you look at it, who really wanted to be either of these guys? The ego on these two capitalists was breathtaking! Old Steve Jobs had himself a doozie of a God complex, coming down from the mount to give us our new set of tablets before riding back into the sky on a brushed steel chariot of fire.

Nah, I liked Huck Finn. He flew by the seat of his pants. Even after he and Tom Sawyer struck it rich, his drunk dad was still stealing through the window to breathe on him. Even with the niceties of the Widow Douglas, Huck gets an itch and he gets *outta there!*

It took many hours to reach the next island to the west. Doors just don't move very fast. *And* my stick sucked. It was late evening when I arrived. I hammered my frustrations on the door, but nobody answered. I hauled it ashore and made a lean-to just inside the forest.

It was actually very nice under the door. It made a nice roof, but not a nice floor.

I set out again the next morning, collecting blackberries. I ate as many as I could. I hardly put a dent in the whole crop. And then my eye caught something through the space in leaves. A stagnant lake sat behind this corridor of berries, and a hill went up from it, and a number of men were gathering around a hole halfway up the hill. There were about seven of them, Frenchmen by the look of it. I only say that because they wore black turtlenecks and blue jeans and because they looked quite emaciated and

appeared to be old. They had a way of hunching over, but maybe that was because of the hole, it was awkwardly placed halfway up the hill on an incline. Then they all came out of the hole and closed it off with a wooden lid.

They wound their way around the hill and I followed them, moving along the lines of blackberry bushes, which made a concentric circle around the hill. Once I caught up with them, maybe thirty yards off to their side, they started to sense me and a few looked at me, I thought I was well concealed, but they could clearly see me through the bushes, and made no motions to me, so I continued walking and looking at them, making no sign to them either. For some reason, it felt that they should say hi to me, you'd think the burden of introduction would be on the larger group rather than one person, but I had forgotten that I could play the role of the lost individual, simply looking for directions, instead I followed along as they walked down the hill. In a short time, they were all looking at me, walking at my same pace, and they were hunched over, something simian about this. They had an inscrutable look in their eyes, like animals. Then they wound around the hill again and their path went down a dark ravine and they disappeared from view.

I hurried to follow them. I went down the dark ravine and went into a cave at the end. The men were gathered inside, standing in a circle with their heads together. There was little light and no sense of human presence. It was cold and they stood like stones. One man who had a ripped sleeve turned to me and said harshly, "Shut the door." He held a metal tube in his hand.

I stepped back. "You want me to shut the door?"

It turned out that I had misheard him because the man with the ripped sleeve repeated himself and it was in French, "C'est de dore."

I didn't know, still don't, what "de dore" would mean.

I departed the cave and walked on the pathway. I left the ravine and stood aside. I thought of going back in, maybe that was rude to run away. But

I had the feeling they didn't want me in there. Maybe that was just me being insecure, I feel like people don't naturally like me. If I was wrong, maybe one of them would come out and get me. Maybe they did like me, because they had looked at me for a long time while we were walking.

I thought of those old French street signs that I had seen out on the coast. Was there an old guard of misplaced Frenchmen living out here, surviving in this wild? And then a detail of their clothing came to me as I stood there. New Balance. They had all been wearing identical shoes. I hadn't seen it in the cave, but as they walked, it was the tips of their shoes that gave it away, the tips of their shoes went up, like New Balance. And then I thought, so these weren't Frenchies at all, but some kind of a group or a clan that followed Steve Jobs, all dressed the same.

I went back into the cave and I stopped short, for it was empty. I walked slowly inside, but there was nothing there. My eyes adjusted, though, and fell upon a wooden lid in the middle of the cave wall on the side. I lifted it and climbed inside the tunnel behind it. I kept my foot in the lid for a moment to make a light inside, but the tunnel turned off so that I couldn't see where it went. I let the lid close and climbed on.

In a while, I reached another lid, so I pushed it open. I had come out on the side of the hill where I had first seen them sniffing around. There was no one here and it was still gray and murky all around me.

I walked back to my door and laid underneath it. I wondered if I should have run around the hill one more time, to see if they had gone back to the cave. But then I thought that, if they wanted to avoid me, they would have just crawled back into the hole again, and we could have been doing that over and over for some time. So it was better to just read my book and rest up. I could try to find them again tomorrow. I got out *Frances Johnson* and read about five pages before I fell asleep.

I had a dream that I was taking pictures of a piece of rope. And the rope was positioning itself in a lot of slinky positions. As I took photographs, I felt

somewhat surprised that a fuss hasn't been made about *Frances Johnson* at all. You never hear anyone talking about. Sure I've mentioned it a few times so far, because it was in my suitcase, but that's not quite enough, I'd say, because it's probably the greatest book to come out of this century so far. People will not agree with that, of course, because *Frances* doesn't tackle any big issues that we like to think about. But there are a lot of adults acting like children in Stacey Levine books. Maybe we'll look back and see that adults acting like children was a major issue that we were dealing with at the turn of the century. Maybe over-seriousness is a really big issue we're dealing with. Come to think of it, I don't know what we're dealing with actually, especially since everyone is dealing with such different things than what I'm dealing with. For instance, many people struggle with acceptance, feeling like they aren't accepted by other people. But what I deal with is primarily hatred of entrepreneurs. But it's something that I'm always working on and I've gotten much better.

I woke up from under the door and went back out to take a stroll through the woods. I lived here now and felt it was time to find my place. I started by heading down to the blackberry bushes to gas up. I felt I would never tire of them, in fact, I like to eat blackberries because one time I was at Red Apple Market and they had a giant blackboard out front with the top ten best fruits that you can eat and the first one was blackberries. I guess they're the best. I ate a few more and, again, spotted the Frenchmen through that space in the branches, all gathered around their hole. Holy cow, I had forgotten about them already!

I ran out, but wanted to come up on them quietly, so I padded softly, but determinedly, up the hill until I stood by them.

“So what's this old hole about?” I said with my arms crossed.

They looked up at me in surprise, holding their hands up. Again I saw the one with the ripped sleeve, holding his metal tube, cowering next to the hole. He gave me a perturbed look. They shook their heads when they saw that it was me and turned back to the hole. One of the men was flipping up

the lid of the hole and commenting on it, as if to say something was broken about it, though the hinge seemed sturdy and the wood thick.

Trying to instigate them a little further, I cleared my throat and said, “So why do all of you look like Steve Jobs?”

They paid no notice to me and I tried saying again, “Steve Jobs, right? Steve Jobs?” Trying to say it in a French way even, to try and coax some recognition out of them, but they made no connection and went right on motioning at the door and flipping its lid up.

I tried a bit of my own French at this point, wondering if that might catch them. “Qu’est ce que vous ferez... vous fais?” I said, not too sure. But I was basically trying to say, “What are you guys doing?”

They looked around and one of them hummed a little and said, “C’est que faites-vous?” Which I didn’t understand and which didn’t even seem like correct French to me.

I tried again. “Qu’est ce que... err, how would you say, ‘What’s going on?’ Uhh... ça va?” I said, which I knew meant, “How’s it going.”

The man speaking to me stood up. He repeated “ça va” as if he didn’t understand and said something else in French that seemed to mean, “What are you going?” I asked him if he spoke English and he said something like, “Do you speak French?” but he used the term “Franchais” for “French”.

I tried some numbers with him and said, “Un. Deux. Trois.” He said, “Oui. Un. Deux. Trois.” I did the next few numbers and he understood those. Then I said, “Seven.” And he didn’t know that one. I said “sept” again, maybe I had pronounced it wrong. He said, “Non.” I said, “There are seven men here.” He said, “No, there are eleven (onze) men here.” I looked around, to be sure, but there were only seven. I said, “Seven.” And then he flashed his fingers at me to count them out and I saw that he only had three fingers on each hand.

What kind of derelicts were these Steve Jobs? I said again, “Steve Jobs? Savez-vous Steve Jobs?” All he said was, “Que’st ce que? Hein?” I didn’t have anything else to say, so we looked around at everyone else for a little while and then I shrugged and motioned to him and he did likewise and we sat down.

I looked around at all of these old guys with great interest. They said nothing, but seemed to be surveying the hill intently around. Whereas they had seemed like primates as they loped about earlier, they began to look positively avian as they squatted on the hill and peered about them. They were universally thin and grey, with hair in disarray, some were shorter, most had fascinating crooked noses, maybe this is what had made me think of birds, and, again, they all wore the black turtleneck and the jeans. They were certainly disheveled, but the attire had such an air of practicality and nonchalance that I couldn’t help but wonder if maybe Jobs had struck gold with this, had discovered the universal fashion.

I felt no discomfort or desire to leave, but felt immense curiosity about this group and was possessed by a desire to blend in. For me, old men are very appealing, much in the same way that children are very appealing to many people. Actually, I see very little difference between old men and little children. Well, no, that’s not quite right, I feel a difference, but I feel the same air from these two groups. Neither group is entangled at all, in the ridiculous seriousness, in the business and economics, in the urgency of time. However, if a child or an elderly person IS caught up in these things, it is fantastic to see, it is hugely comical, especially when done earnestly, how it mocks the adult world, how satirical it is! (This reminds me of a time when I came upon a set of brothers who had a drink stand, and it turned out they were selling Arnold Palmers, in polo shirts no less, but they and the other children were calling them “Amora Palmers” which sounded fiendishly delicious: lemonade and iced tea and an aphrodisiac.) And so I find old men to be a great delight and I think fondly of the times when I would chat on the lawn with my neighbor many years ago, a German man, and he would tell me stories of being drafted in the German army, of fighting the Poles up and

down the buildings, of losing his town to the same Poles, of hating the Poles and leaving everything behind, of the bombing of Dresden. When I think of it, I feel such a pang of regret that I never recorded it all down and that he is assuredly lost now and that we never skimmed the surface of what he could have told me. I think of riding in my grandfather's MG. I think of the times that I have squeezed an old person's hand and they haven't let go. One time a woman squeezed my hand and wouldn't let go and she was young but I despised it. But when an old woman squeezes my hand, I wait to see if she will let go and I hope she doesn't let go. Now I sat on the hill among these old men, I had no concept of time, perhaps it was 11, or perhaps it was 3 in the afternoon. I looked back at the one who had been speaking with me, I had already begun to mentally call him "Herbert" for some reason, he seemed to be very aware of me and was uncomfortably darting his eyes back to me, and even looked at me imploringly, as one who is helpless and impatient. "Herbert" held his hands like a praying mantis, not tightly though, but at the sides of his chest, while the others held their arms limply at their sides. Their skin was filthy.

I ventured away, to eat blackberries again, still keeping an eye on the flock. I don't know how I had gotten into this habit of eating so frequently. I was dependent on this nervous habit all of the sudden, or maybe the blackberries just weren't hitting the spot. I couldn't get enough. I realized this and I stopped immediately, then meandered slowly up the hill again. I sat in the midst of the Jobsian derelicts. I watched the man with the ripped sleeve, he put the metal tube to his mouth and made noises with it from time to time, it was a piccolo. It seemed to have three holes along the top and one near the thumb, which he covered with the flap of skin between thumb and forefinger. He played short, quick songs, all of which seemed very off-key and absurd, like free jazz sped up. Some of the other men took out piccolos of their own, though they didn't make any effort to play them, but were content to flutter their fingers over the holes and only chime in after each song, saying, "Dune." After a few minutes of this, the man with the ripped sleeve seemed to enter an extended piccolo tirade, playing for what must have been twenty minutes, thirty minutes, perhaps more, breaking occasionally to breathe, but then getting right back to it, hammering out the trills, piping

until I got the giggles, was this how Alzheimer's patients would live in the wild?? I tried to find a way to enjoy this music, but it was so random and hermetic, high, flinty, and impossible to predict, it felt anthropologically valuable, sure, but that's it, I couldn't kick the feeling that it was too primitive a kind of world music, too low in its evolution, devoid of important nuance and dynamic. In short, my American disdain was hearing its name called, and I got annoyed with the laborsome tune. I was past this kind of thing. And when it really got to me, I closed my eyes to shut it out but only found it closer there, I was unable to escape the piercing inanity of the piccolo's perpetual climb and fall until it was done. Again, it was probably thirty or forty minutes in total, and the other men said, "Dune," which I can translate to you now as, "Acknowledged." Then the men waited again and, in just moments, the wooden lid over the hole began to clatter something fierce, as if a terrible wind was speaking through it. The man with the ripped sleeve turned to the hole and opened the lid and wind came through the tunnel and hit the man, shooting his hair back and tossing itself through his clothes with abandon. Now here's what happened: something spilled out of the hole, at first I thought it was a large rotisserie chicken, but the wind died down and they picked the thing up, a man slung the thing over his shoulder, it was a young boy, naked, holding his eyes shut, with his legs kicking a little, a boy streaked with dirt stains and rocks in his skin that I had taken to be a rub. They carried him down the hill and one of these Jobsian derelicts, a man with a pith helmet on, came running ahead with a folded set of clothes under his arm, a small black turtleneck and jeans for the boy. They put the kid down and dressed him, guiding his legs, for he was suffering from exhaustion. The boy had his arms by his side and I could see he had three fingers. They also put New Balance on him and then he was put over the shoulder again and carried. They were leaving, I ran back to my camp, the space under the propped-up door, and grabbed my suitcase.

When I caught up with them, they were standing in the trailway. The boy was still being held and the men had pooled together. On the side of the trail, the man with the ripped sleeve had collapsed and "Herbert" was stooped down over him with another man. They were holding the hand of the man with the ripped shirt and listening to his chest. I knelt down by the

collapsed man and looked over him. He was motionless. I said, “Il est fatigue?”

“Herbert” said to me, “C’est mort.” (“It is dead.”) I put my hand over my mouth. “Herbert” shrugged.

I checked the man’s neck, but felt nothing. Maybe I was doing it wrong. I checked a few times. “Comment?” I said.

The other man who knelt with us began taking the collapsed man’s pants off. “Herbert” took the piccolo out of the man’s pocket and got up. He offered the piccolo to another man in the group. This man took the piccolo and shrugged, patting his head and laughing. The group seemed relieved, many were swinging their arms and laughing.

This disturbed me very much and I walked away from the group. Where did this boy come from? He seemed impaired. What if he was crippled? I felt very troubled and watched the group from afar. “Herbert” walked over to me, humming pleasantly and snapping his fingers. He said, in French, “It is fine. It returns.”

I said, “Non, non. C’est mort. Tu sais.”

He said, “No, it is not there. It returns tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow morning?” I said.

“Oui,” he said. “On y va.”

He walked on, fanning the entire group ahead with his hands. They moved on through the woods, the sun beginning to peek out for the first time in my travels.

I continued to follow them and thought, “I’m not responsible for this group. In fact, they’re much older than me, so they know what they’re doing.

Who am I to tell a bunch of old men what to do?" But then I thought of Uncle Chuck on the island and my conversation with the dentist.

"Well, this isn't bestiality," I said to myself. "This is just a kid who can't walk and a man who died. These aren't crimes. I should learn to be more accepting. I've just been on my computer for too long."

The forest was very large. We walked for many hours. We must have been on part of Eleanor Island. And Eleanor must extend into a much larger peninsula, because there's no way that it just ends in half of a mile. The day was very beautiful and we followed a cluster of trees that had been razed in many parts, so that a trail kept the sky in view and, in some places, a slender stream interacted with the trail, and we walked over it many times. We stopped a few times during our journey, once at an hour and a half, another time at nearly four hours. The men would relieve themselves at these stops and the boy, too, was taught to relieve himself. This was simpler than expected. The man with the pith helmet simply pointed at the edges of the woods, where several other men were urinating. The kid walked over and stood by the edge of the forest. He stood there for maybe fifteen minutes and then we could hear the sound of water on leaves. The man with the pith helmet smiled at me. I couldn't help smiling as well and I gave the man with the pith helmet a thumbs up. He gave the same sign back to me.

The second time we stopped, they began to play some piccolo music for the boy. One of the men, a very average-looking man from the group, sat on the ground and played a short song for the boy. Then he said, in French, "It is understood." The other men said, "Dune." He played it again and said, "It is understood." The other men said, again, "Dune." The average-looking man motioned to the boy. He waited and then he motioned again and then he said, "Dune." I could tell they wanted the boy to say it, too, so I sat next to the boy and said, "Dune," then pointed to him. I said it again and pointed to him. The boy said, "Dune."

The average-looking man played the song again. And then we all said, "Dune." The next song was all numbers. They went through each note and

each note matched with one of the six numbers. Then he would play through the song and the numbers would add up. (I don't remember all of the notes, but number songs always started with C#-F.) We got through the numbers and said, "Dune." Then they taught a story with a song and it went like this: The sky was a note and the forest was a note and the ground was a note and a man was a note. Then he glued these things together using the same addition he used with numbers. So he had a skyman and a forestman and a groundman.

His song went on, saying that the skyman was equal to one and the forestman was equal to two and the groundman was equal to three. I envisioned costumes for each of these characters. I couldn't decide with the groundman if he was made of ground or if he had a canvas sack on. I pictured him coming up from under the ground and taking a drink from the stream. Then the song said that the difference between the skyman and the groundman was eighty-six. This puzzled me and I looked at the boy. His eyes were open and he said, "Dune," when the song ended.

I thought, "This must be an allegory for how the math works here." And I left it to my subconscious to sort it out.

The hike took us to a valley where another group was camping. It was a kind of bowl that had been dug up, perhaps by lumberjacks. The night was growing stormy and the men hid away under boards that were lodged in the dirt over small, shallow foxholes. The man with the pith helmet took me and the boy down to a set of boards toward the bottom of the pit. We sat on piles of telephone books. (I say these were telephone books, but they were more like magazines, they dated back to the 1980s and were labelled, "Port Frampton, Washington," they had no telephone numbers, just lists of names and corresponding ham radio call signs, I looked through quite a number of these, the names and call signs never seemed to change, from year to year.)

I was distracted from looking at the phone books once I realized that the boy was playing a piccolo. The man in the pith helmet had given it to him and was saying, "Dune," and smiling after each little song. I sat there and ate

my cold cuts. The boy went through the numbers and we said, “Dune.” He went through the sky and the forest and the ground again and we said, “Dune,” and he brought us all the way to 86. Then the man in the pith helmet took back the flute and taught us a few more things, including how to convey shapes and sizes, whether a person is old or young, sick or dead, and how to warn someone about an evil presence.

As we did this, “Herbert” came around and stood aside while we listened. At first I had thought he had come to see the man with the pith helmet, but when the lesson had ended, “Herbert” tapped my arm and said, “It is seeing,” and he took me outside.

The night was clear and I pointed up. “La lune!” And I looked at him and he smiled. “La nuit! Avec les étoiles!” But as I looked closer, I could see in the moonlight all the pores on his skin and his face looked very gaunt. I stood back in horror and peered at him, he was somehow smaller.

“Herbert,” I said (with a silent tee and in a voice of awe), “C’est vieillesse?” (Which is to say, “Are you old?” in what I approximated his language to be.)

He said, “64? 65?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Yes?”

“Oui,” he said. “64. 65.”

He took me down to a cave with lights within. I came to know this room as the “flute box”. It was a place where the men came to mold the new piccolos and it was often crammed with men of all ages. Even the boy came down to work here the next morning. The men had collected some old flutes and melted them down, they would go into newer molds, adding holes and attachments in the process. That night, the recent innovation was a slender point on the open end of the piccolo. In time I learned that this was used to spear fish and carve trees and replaced the jagged metal (usually cut from

can lids) that some of the men carried around. They were happily ditching their old can lids into the fire and finishing a new flute.

I sat against the side of the cave, talking to “Herbert” as well as I could, marveling to him about the utility of these flutes. I asked him who had invented the flute. He said that it was a man called “Trepite” who came through there very often.

“Is he one of you?” I asked.

He said, “Yes, he is a man from here.”

“The flute is very clever,” I said. “I am starting to understand.”

He said, “That is how we know to make flutes.”

“How?” I said.

He said, “We play the flute to teach how to make a flute.”

I took this to mean that the flute could be used to teach someone else how to make a flute. I found this quite amazing, that the device could perpetuate itself in this way.

“Does it teach anything else?” I said.

“Oh, how to walk the area,” he said. “And how to raise children.”

“Really?” I said. It occurred to me that they could use the flutes to describe a whole landscape, to transfer a map from one man’s mind to another.

I wondered that I had not seen them eating at all. I asked him what they did for food.

“We do not eat,” he said.

“No,” I said. “You must!”

“No,” he laughed. “It is not necessary.”

In the light, it was clear that he was running very ragged. He looked very depleted, in comparison to earlier, so much that I could hardly believe it was the same man. I tried to get him to come back with me to eat some of the food in my suitcase, but he only laughed. His hands sat at his side like a praying mantis, though he turned them over as he talked.

The next morning I woke up and the man with the pith helmet and the boy were gone. I got right out of bed and went outside, where it was overcast, and some of the men were loitering about, pondering their flutes. I walked from hovel to hovel, seeing only empty holes. I went further up the pit and eventually discovered a young guy in his twenties who was wearing the pith helmet.

I asked him, “Where is the old man?” I pointed to his hat.

He looked all around and then at me again. He was smiling.

I said, “The old man.” I pointed at his hat again. “That’s the old man’s hat.”

The guy said, “Dune,” and smiled.

I felt a bit perturbed that he couldn’t see that I was a little impatient, but I stopped myself and tried to settle down. Clearly this guy couldn’t understand me.

I whistled a series. “1. 2. 3.”

He said, “Dune.”

I whistled, "The old man."

He nodded. "Dune." And then he whistled, "He is dead."

I said, "Dune?" I whistled, "The little boy."

He said, "Dune." He whistled, "I am the little boy." He was certainly wearing a black turtleneck and jeans and the New Balance, too.

I said, "Dune."

Then I ran down the hill, asking each of the men along the way, "Where's Herbert? Where's Herbert?" No one could tell me. I went back to the cave and took out a sheet of paper and a pen out of a plastic bag. I wrote the date on the top of the paper. I figured it was July 12th, 2010. As I fumbled to write, I noticed that my hands were shaking very badly. And what's more: my hands looked dry and wrinkly. I yelled in horror and closed my eyes. I grabbed my head and sobbed, saying, "There's a disease. They're all sick." I looked again at my hands, taking a chance on them again, and I saw that they weren't that bad.

I stopped shaking and walked into the hazy light outside. Were my hands very old? I couldn't tell. They seemed not too bad. They just seemed dirty.

I went back and began writing again:

Does this look like old man's handwriting? Test. Test.

It wasn't as terribly shaky as I thought. It was just more slanted than I usually write.

I went down to the "flute box" looking for Herbert, but he wasn't there. So I brought my suitcase out of the cave and went walking down the trail that

I had come in on. About two miles along that road, I found another dead man, very old, who had collapsed on the side of the road.

But then I saw that he was still breathing, so I bent down and held his hand. He held my hand tightly. It was like holding a socket wrench.

“It’s alright,” I said.

He whistled to me. “The ground man.”

“Just relax,” I said.

“The ground man,” he whistled. “The ground man.” He did this very faintly and then he stopped moving and I heard no further breaths from him.

I said my dunes.

I walked for a few hours back on the path. It was many hours of walking, many of hours of mundane trail. It didn’t look quite as fascinating as before. The stream looked smaller, I tried to see it as I had seen it yesterday. While looking in the stream, I found a red pencil with a green eraser. Words were embossed on the side of it in gold: THIS IS TIME WELL SPENT. I put the pencil in my coat pocket.

Eventually I arrived at the clearing where the men had all peed the day before. I stopped and ate some bread and hummus. Then I urinated, stocked up on blackberries, and got back on the path.

Just as I was leaving, I saw that a few men were coming toward me. One of them was “Herbert”! On his shoulders was a young man playing the piccolo. I couldn’t understand the tune, as I was too far away, and anyway, it seemed somewhat beyond my level. But it was an exceedingly jubilant group, because they would end each little song with shouts of dune and raised fists.

As they came close, “Herbert” yelled through his cupped hands, “It returns! It returns!” The happiness upon rejoining with him almost recalls to mind a sunny day, but it was just another murky sky around us. I caught up to meet them and straight away I saw “Herbert” to be a very old man now. For when he took the child off his back, it turned out that he was crouched over and his arms wouldn’t go into the praying mantis position as easily. They tilted to the sides, the elbow looked beyond frail.

I put my hands on both sides of him, to steady him, “Herbert! Herbert! Look at you. You’re so old. How did you get so old?”

He said, “No, it’s fine.” He put his hands on my shoulders. “Thank you for holding me up. It’s a heavy boy.”

“No,” I said, grasping him firmly. “You’re dying. You need to eat. You’re all dying of starvation.” I set my suitcase on the ground and got out the bread and hummus again. “Another man died about an hour or two back on the trail. And the man with the pith helmet died. I’m also wondering if I’m getting older, too.”

I handed him some bread smeared with a giant gob of hummus.

“Is this food?” he said. “That’s fine.”

“Eat it,” I said.

I took a bite off and put it on his tongue and slid it into his mouth. He chewed at it, mashing it against his teeth with his tongue, then he spit it on the ground.

“No,” I said. “Eat it or you’re going to die!”

“That’s not very fine,” he said. “It is food?”

“Yes!” I cried.

“Put it away,” he said. “I am going to die.”

“Oh, you *are* going to die?” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “Put it away. I will return just fine.”

All this talk of returning really set me off, too. What if he didn’t return? This was incredibly foolish. To live just to die. And to die so easily.

Blast it. What was going on here? These men were aging before my eyes. These men, these Jobsian derelicts, how could I get them to come around? I thought to get away from this, but then I thought, “It’s only been a day. And it does feel insanely productive, considering that I’ve lived through so much of these men’s lives. I can see all of life this way, not just a few minutes here or there, but years passing all at once.” It was terrifying, but it was hard to tear myself away from.

We trekked back to the camp again and I kept a close eye on my friend, wondering if he would topple over. He talked much about the flutes as we walked together, musing over the little innovations he wanted to add. He talked about a hole he wanted to add. Other men had added holes, but they had never worked, they had always been in the wrong place. He talked about a method of hinging them so they could fold in half and he talked about making flutes out of a paste made of leaves. I asked him what would be the point of leaf-based flutes and he told me that flutes were scarce, so the metal supply was diminishing, making the flutes smaller and smaller. In fact, he had heard that the flutes had once been very large. We arrived at camp and, after all of this talking, he was very short of breath so I asked him if he was alright. He said, “yes,” and he patted my arm and walked down to the flute box.

I stowed my suitcase in the cave again and found the young boy there, now appearing to be in his fifties. I had expected this, and I probably would

have questioned the boy had he not been wearing the pith helmet. He was playing the flute as another man listened and gave his dunes.

I took out a sheet of paper and wrote:

July 12th, 2010, that evening.
Still young? Am I still young?

I was sure that I was getting older. Sometimes I looked at my hands and they were okay, but the skin seemed to be sagging. I pulled up my pantleg. See, it all looked so much older.

I walked down to the flute box to look for Herbert. The room was busy with activity, but I saw him against the side of the wall, where we had sat the night before. I stooped down to check him and he was dead. I stood back up and watched the men intently heating up their cups of hot metal. Slowly turning them in the flame. I sat down by Herb and took his hand very firmly and kissed it. Then I went to bed.

That night, my discussion with Amanda came back to me. How previously I had criticized the kinds of small talk discussions, particularly discussions about music, because they revolved simply around “Did you like this? Have you heard of this?” and how they never went anywhere beyond that, you could never keep track of what you were recommended and there was never anything to talk about, maybe a scene, maybe a lyric. Those pointless discussions that had always left me empty, never able to talk about the beauty of music itself adequately, just the names and the styles.

But now I longed to have this kind of idle discussion. To talk to Amanda about “The Happening”. Maybe there was much more to this kind of talk than I had thought. Why would anyone want to have a deep, meaningful discussion all the time?

The little boy died the next afternoon and I took his pith helmet. I couldn't get myself to wear it so I gave it to a new boy, who asked me, in

French, "Is it yours?" He must have seen that I wasn't wearing it, perhaps noticed how I was holding it.

I said, "No, it's from a man long ago. You want it?"

He said, "That's fine." So I put it on his head and, from then on, I saw him walking all over camp, raising dust in his pith helmet. Whenever I saw him, I laughed and I could hear that my laugh was an old man's.

I felt very feeble, and found myself unable to walk back on the path to my own camp, to the red door I had ripped off the shed. I thought, "I can't be that bad. I'm at least not aging as quickly as the others. And I'm eating fine. Maybe I'm letting all this death and feebleness rub off on me."

I constructed a task for myself, in the form of running from the bottom of the pit to the top, as fast as I could. But I found that I couldn't run at all, nor could I make it to my own cave, which was only about thirty feet up the hill. So I changed the idea: I would try to go from the top of the hill to the bottom and see how that went. I whistled for someone to carry me to the top of the hill. As the man was carrying me up, the red pencil fell out of my coat and began rolling down the hill.

"Wait!" I cried. "Stop!"

He let me down and I spent the rest of the evening working my way down the pit, searching for the pencil, to no avail.

I sat on the side of the flute box that night, again thinking of the time I had sat there, talking to Herb. For the next few nights I would always end my night there, lost in melancholic nostalgia. That particular night, though, my troubled reverie was interrupted by a flurry of activity among the men, along with lights in my peripheral vision.

I looked up and a man in khaki shorts with dark hair was inspecting the flutes with a flashlight and muttering to the men, "None of these look

quite as good..." The man was speaking English. He had glasses and a black moustache. "I feel like the quality on these is going down," he said in a frank tone.

"Hello?" I said to him. "You speak English."

"Sure," he said. "Who are you?" He had his hands full of flutes and he was turning them over, really giving them a thorough look.

"Rex Reynolds," I said, having recently started to think of myself as an older man and the name seemed to be fitting more and more. "I've been stuck here for so long," I said. "How do I get out of here?"

"Well," he said, still consumed with the tiny instruments. "You can go anywhere. Any direction leads away from here."

"But I mean can you give me a ride?" I said.

He gave the flutes back to the men and addressed me directly.

"I'm Paul Allen," he said. "Of Microsoft."

"Hello," I said, feebly.

"I'm a wealthy, powerful man in this region and also in the world. Beloved by some, hated by others." He adjusted his glasses and then took out his wallet. "I am eccentric," he said and gave me two one-hundred dollar bills. "And I spend my money freely and unpredictably, but often on things that improve life for everyone, in ways that are not immediately obvious, but which will ultimately benefit us."

"Why did you give me this?" I said, holding out the bill. "I just need a ride."

“I am usually ten or twenty years ahead of the curve,” he said. “Most people say ‘about thirteen’ and, I won’t lie, that does ring true to me.” He had been motioning with his wallet, but now he put it away. “You are a man who has learned English despite the pressures of the crowd. Consider this me investing in you.”

A roaring sound was heard from outside, a rushing of wind. Could have been a helicopter or a large tractor used to crush hay bales. “Yes, you are old. But maybe this is just what you need to seed your business.” He walked toward the door. “I must go now,” he yelled and ran out.

I struggled to stand up, but was unable to, he was gone and the sounds outside had died away.

Surprisingly, the men around me, these Jobsian derelicts, weren’t very territorial or predatory, not in the least. I often dropped the bills I was carrying, and I would always hear a man whistle at me from behind, someone who was returning one of the hundred-dollar bills to me. They cautioned me gravely, but I didn’t follow any of it. I had dropped my flute studies over a day ago.

Night after night, I sat by the fire, waiting for Herbert to return, until the fifth night. That night, I felt a strong pain in my side, toward the back, maybe near my kidneys and I curled against the wall, trying to control it.

“Oh, blast,” I said. “Oh my.”

I stood up and shook it off and walked around the outside of the flute box. But I could feel it there. Death was in there, waiting to strike again. I walked around the box, holding my side, watching the men hack away at their flutes.

“You idiots!” I yelled at them. “You killed me!”

They looked up at me, but I didn't know any of them. All the men I had cared about were dead. I didn't know any of these, except the guy who had carried me, but he wasn't even here.

"You stupid nitwits!" I yelled. "This is bollocks! I shouldn't be dying! You should be dying! I'm the one eating food!"

Some men came out of their caves and came down into the pit, presumably to see what the fuss was. I cursed at them all, all these derelicts.

"Stop this flute nonsense!" I cried and I collected myself, trying to reason with them, still keeping a lid on the pain in my side. "We could have found a cure. There's a disease out here, all of you. What if there's radiation out here? What if it's the stupid god-forsaken flutes? What if these piccolos speed up your brain?" A crowd had gathered around me and, again, they took the primate form, hanging their arms aside, scratching at their faces. "You aren't thinking!" I yelled. "I figure that most of you only have two days to live. Two days MAXIMUM! Do you realize that? You're going to be groundmen in two days. This is crazy, to be spending all of your time on these blasted..." Someone had got me by the neck and was trying to haul me off, but I clawed at them and shook myself away. "No! No! Listen! You need to start looking around, what could be causing this? Is it the leaves? Is it the trees? What is it?"

The man who had grabbed me came forward again, with a humorous look on his face. "I am Slupchik," he said, patting his chest with one of his club-like hands.

"Now, see. They don't understand you." He pointed around at the men's faces. "They don't understand you any more than you understand them."

I said, "I am one of them. Look at me! I understand them completely." I cried out in pain and fell to the ground. "Gah!" I yelled, in total agony. "Gahhh!" I was disgraceful, writhing, unable to die.

The man Slupchik picked me up and carried me up to a small hovel. “Just calm down,” he said. “It’s no use.”

He set me down in the cave, then walked outside. He came back a little while later with another of the derelicts. He had the derelict sit next to me.

“Now,” Slupchik said, very sternly. “I’m going to leave this one here with you, because I think you need it. But there is no use,” he said, even more critically, “there is no *use* in trying to judge everything by the condition you are in right now. You are absolutely delusional if you think that you know anything right now.” He said goodbye and left.

The man sat next to me. I had him pull me up against the wall and we both slept against the wall. As he slept, I secretly took his hand and held it tight. As I did so, I felt a slender instrument in his hand, a tiny flute. I felt its edges, it was not a flute, it was a pencil, a light, hexagonal tube. I felt along the shaft for the golden words.

“THIS IS,” I cried, softly, trembling, unable to take the pencil from him, but unable to let it go, I cried all the tears that I had and I resolved to say it with conviction, “THIS IS TIME WELL SPENT,” I said and, biting my lip, tasting my own salt, at that point, I must have died.

July 15th 2010 -

I've just come out of that hole
on the hill. What happened was I
was pulling along the ground, not
sliding on the ground, slipped,
my back and hit the ground on
Rough that was right and me
sat down in a stupor making
some noise a lot of noise
tumbling on the hill
(This was the left)

... alive
... shed
... help
... of the
never
Right and
then what happened

I'm not going to the
I got away from the
OR my My suitcase
C

